A series of one shots focusing around Bea and her adoptive brother Allister. They're not perfect and don't always get along (what siblings do?), but they try their best with one and other and work towards understanding.

No matter what, they'll always be siblings after all.

Chapter 12:

Burrowing further into a world without rhyme or reason, Allister begins to uncover memories he isn't too fond of.

The ones he's most desperate to remember remain tantalisingly out of reach.

Allister is soon to find out that all actions have consequences.

Notes

As the new games have just dropped, and since I need practice to help my wrist heal I whipped this fic up! Shamelessly based on the Headcannon from EtherealNyx that Bea and Allister are siblings. In this version of events, Bea runs the gym week days and Allister on
the weekends.

See the end of the work for more notes.
"We'll still be siblings after all"

Chapter Summary

When Allister doesn't return home after his first official match as gym leader, Bea knows exactly where he'll be. Leon's terribly decorated gym flyers probably didn't help the situation.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Despite everything that his demeanour would suggest, Allister was someone of habit. Sort of. He liked to do things his way and only his way so when he’d mumbled he’d be back at 8, what he really meant was he’d be back between 7.30 and 8.30.

Bea sighed, allowing herself the loss in composure for a moment. The glance up at the wall clock showed it to be nearly 9pm, clearly well past the 8pm ‘deadline’ Allister had given. It was already getting dark out, and Galar’s ‘daylight saving’ initiative was already working against her. She loved her brother dearly, even though they were not by blood, but she wished he would discipline himself a little more. A cosy nook in a graveyard here, or a comfy crevice in a shack there, his desire to simultaneously explore what he considered beautiful places while also concealing himself as much as possible from the living world did cause Bea a degree of concern. A degree of concern she wouldn’t readily admit.

‘As if the mask he always wears doesn’t conceal himself enough.’

But, of course she wouldn’t say that to him either; he was anxious enough as it was, she reasoned.

The fighting gym leader arose from the cross legged position she’d taken on the floor, motioning her Hitmontop to do the same. Many sessions of meditation had honed her muscles to the point where the sudden contraction in standing didn’t bother her anymore, but she didn’t wish to get up any more because of it. Hitmontop merely shot her a look but complied all the same.

“Don’t give me that, you know we need to go and look for him.”

“Hit, hitmon!”

“Of course I’m worried. Big sister or not he should be back. It never turns out good when he goes off on his own on a whim.”

“Hitmon, hit hit…”

“I suspect the same.” Bea cast her eyes to the kitchen table where a bunch of flyers had been tossed. Some were already making their home in the fruit bowl apparently. Allister hadn’t cared where they went when he’d stomped up to his room the day before, mumbling and jittering something fierce. Walking over, Hitmontop shadowing her as best it could, she thumbed through them briefly.

“A grand spooky spectacle to behold, the gym leader Allister’s debut performance!” Brightly coloured pictures of Mimikyu and Allister’s mask adorned the fronts of them, far too garish for
anything her brother would have liked.

“Hitmon?”

“Yes, what was Chairman Rose thinking? Allister hates flashy things and he knows that, so why have his first ever battle as gym leader be advertised as this…farce?” She let the flyer fall out of her grip, sweeping it under the table with a graceful kick. Bea was known across Galar for her not-quite-frowning, but not-quite-glaring complexion but this just pissed her off. Her frown became an outright glare as she made her way over to the outside door.

Her brother had been so excited for his acceptance into the Pokémon league as a dual-leader alongside herself, and yet the bigshots over in the administration had seen fit to plaster his face on a rainbow (albeit a purple tinted rainbow) holographic set of flyers. Everyone in town had gotten one and Bea would have bet Leon’s title that Allister was beyond embarrassed at how he’d been presented. Truth be told, he hadn’t wanted any fanfare at all, just the chance to show off his ghost types to some strong trainers.

Today had been his first battle, and it was at his own insistence that she not attend. She respected the decision, knowing the value of focus and distraction from a battle, but her heart still had pangs from the rejection. She wanted to be there for him, even if she was an ‘annoying overbearing nuisance’ most of the time.

“Are you coming? You know where he’ll be.” Hitmontop nudged the pokéball hanging at her waist and returned. “Fair enough. If things go south we have Pangoro to deal with any nonsense that comes our way.” The ball vibrated in response.

As Bea crossed the short dirt road connecting their house to the woods outside, she cast her mind back. Though they’d sparred and trained many times in the past, Allister and herself had only seriously battled once. When he’d had a meltdown at being bullied at school, he’d lashed out at her when his hiding place at the edge of the ‘new’ cemetery he thought she didn’t know about had been invaded. Of course she knew, it was her job to know. She’d defeated him easily, if only due to his reckless and unbalanced tactics, and the dark typing Pangoro afforded her team.

It was one of the only times she’d seen him without his mask, tears streaming down his face as the wind howled around them. It was also one of the only times he’d told her to her face that he loved her and was glad she was his sister. He’d apologised of course, and promised he wouldn’t be so uncontrolled again, and in return she’d showed up at the school unannounced to give a ‘special talk’ during assembly about the value of discipline and the strength of fighting types. Allister hadn’t been bothered again, the implication as Bea’s gaze met with the bullies was all too clear to them.

Having your sister being one of the most popular and strongest people in the region had them shitting enough bricks for Allister to build his own abandoned building to explore. While the memory did have Bea purse her lips into a thin smile as she made her way through the undergrowth the woods shoved at her, she hoped they weren’t in for a repeat of last time. The emotional drain on the both of them after that battle was something neither of them were good at dealing with.

There was a fine line between supressing your emotions and being calm, Bea had learned. She hadn’t quite gotten the balance yet even after all of her training. She wasn’t a fool and knew her way was definitely not the ‘right’ way or the only way…but she did just want her brother to come home safe.

A twig snapping beneath her foot brought Bea back to the present. Her feet were tough from her
distinct lack of footwear at any given time, so it wasn’t pain that prompted her to bend down and inspect. The chilling breeze that had stirred up and shifted her headband slightly wasn’t to blame either. The branch was charred. There were several more like it on what passed for a path.

“Fire?” She murmured. Straightening up she narrowed her eyes and surveyed the foliage. It was as dense as she remembered from the last time she’d come by this way, about a week prior. None of the greens had burned away, that much was clear even in the fading light. The thick canopy above her was already blotting out most of it anyway and the air hung still. Bea might have been a trained martial artist but she couldn’t see in the dark. Neither could Allister, she reasoned, but she knew he liked it better that way. The soft glow of a ghost type was more than enough for him. So why was the branch burned?

“Campers? No, they stick to the camping parks.” Bea made her way forward cautiously, brushing away the occasional Joltik that tried to make itself at home on her shoulder. It was another few minutes before she reached the clearing, if the area before her could even qualify. Allister’s favorite graveyard had vines growing everywhere, clinging to the headstones as if trying to drag them under the ground to meet the coffins in person. The area was about the size of a football field, almost the size of her gym (‘their’ gym now, she corrected) and yet she could barely make out anything other than decay and lichen.

“Damn Galarian winter,” she muttered, starting forwards. The moss was nice under her toes but it was a small comfort considering the protruding rocks the unmown grass loved to hide. Treading carefully was the best course of action.

A shuffle and a curse about a hundred metres away confirmed her suspicions that Allister had retreated to his sanctuary; A small rocky outcrop where he could sit underneath out of the rain if needs be. Bea found herself thanking Zacian and Zamazenta that it wasn’t raining, this was already hard enough. She didn’t announce herself, certain Allister would try and run away if he thought he was far enough, instead trying to get as close as possible. In any case he seemed far too focused on his task to notice. Bea’s eyes momentarily widened, then narrowed considerably once she was close enough to make out what he was doing.

‘He’s seriously trying to build himself a campfire. So that’s why the branches back there were charred. He doesn’t know how to do it properly but won’t give up. Idiot!’

“Come on light! Why won’t you light?!” Allister was desperately rubbing two sticks together back and forth in an attempt to get them to light. Alas, either they were too damp or he wasn’t going fast enough but the sticks stubbornly refused to do anything more than smoke.

Bea crept forward some more, now being able to hear her brother’s panicked mumblings.

‘He loves the spooky and otherworldly, hell he lives for it, but that doesn’t mean he enjoys being scared senseless by things jumping out at him. He won’t admit it but he’s scared of the pitch black kind of dark, where there’s no light from even ghost Pokémon. Damned fool, there’s not just Joltik in the woods here he’d have a heart attack if a Galvantula decided to drop on him from above!’

“Allister, seriously?”

“AHHHHHH!!!” The ghost gym leader spun around and instinctively launched the branches in her direction. Bea ducked, having anticipated the reaction.

“You were really planning to stay outside and not come back? You weren’t going to tell me or anything?”
“Bea! I-I…” Allister cut himself off, instead electing to scramble to his feet and hide behind the other side of the rocky outcrop. “D-don’t look a-at me!”

Bea sighed for the third time that day. She kept her distance however, but not enough to allow him to escape to the other side of the woods.

“I’m not mad at you.”

“Liar! I know that t-tone, sis!” He stammered. “That’s the mad tone!”

“Alli, please…” She took a step forward but with just the two of them there he could hear her quite clearly.

“N-no! Please…please don’t…”

“…”

“…”

“…If I promise to not come any closer will you promise to not run away?”

“…Maybe.”

“Allister.”

“F-fine. I promise to stay…for a while.” She could hear him folding his arms as he was prone to do when upset. Whether it was with her or himself she didn’t know. Probably both.

Bea sat herself down at her brother’s sorry attempt at a campfire. A few dozen sticks caked in dirt and greenery were arranged in a tent like formation.

'No wonder they’re not lighting. Hmm…what’s this?’

A glint of purple caught her eye and Bea prized the sticks apart to find what Allister had been using for kindling. At the centre were several fiercely crumpled up pieces of paper. Bea’s face dropped, lips turning downwards and brow furrowing. She didn’t have to unfold them to know what they were but the act was cathartic in a way.

'Those damn flyers.’

“How did it go today?” She asked the air. The air sniffled in response. “It can’t have been that bad. You’re a great trai…”

“It was terrible,” her brother’s voice came. “My first ever gym b-battle and I b-blew it!”

“Did you lose?”

“We DREW!” More sniffling. “How…how does that even h-happen??”

“What DID happen then?” Bea grimaced, poking at the stick tent until the branches fell to the ground.

“Mimikyu…” Allister paused, trying to collect himself. “Mimikyu and the guy’s Cinderace knocked each other out at the same time.”

“That’s rare.”
“You weren’t there!”

“You didn’t want me ther…”

“I-I know, I’m sorry! It’s j-just…” He sighed, one of those small sad sighs he did when conflicted. Despite the mask, Bea almost found it easier to tell his emotions when he was like this.

“I know.”

“You d-don’t!” Allister snapped. Despite her composure Bea still flinched. She wasn’t made of stone and it still hurt when her brother got like this. “It’s so much pressure! E-everyone l-loves you already and you’re s-so great at being a g-gym leader! I froze when we drew…I didn’t know what I was supposed to do…”

“…I’ll admit I don’t know for certain either,” Bea voiced, continuing to poke at the sticks for want of a better activity. “Like I said, that’s very rare that happens.”

“Yeah, you did say that…”

“So what happened then?”

“I froze, a-and said ‘Crumbs, better luck next time!’ and I just sort of patted the guys h-hand instead of shaking it! I patted him, sis! Like the way people do to a Yamper! W-what the heck is wrong with me?”

Bea suppressed a smile. It was no laughing matter in the slightest but it was such an Allister thing to do. So awkward. As if echoing her thoughts he continued.

“It was the m-most awkward thing I’ve ever done! That’s saying something! I haven’t even taken Mimikyu out of its ball since then I’m so a-ashamed.”

*That explains why he’s not using its spectral spheres, or any of his other Pokémon for light.*

“It’s definitely in my top 5 most awkward m-moments.”

“It is. The icecream incident springs to mind.”

“I’d never s-seen a shiny Vanillite, alright?! I didn’t know it was sleeping in that bowl!”

“I remember.” One face full of Frostbreath later and Bea hadn’t seen Allister for the rest of the day.

Deciding enough time had passed, the fighting gym leader decided to venture around to the outcrop’s nether side, the pile of sticks yielding no further truths. When her crawling movements didn’t prompt a response she peered around. “Hey.”

“H-hey.” He still refused to meet her eye, preferring the comfort of the dirt and grass floor. His legs were pulled up to his body, hunched over, and arms linked together around them. His favorite way to lock up.

“I promise I’m not mad at you.”

“…”

“…”

“…Y-you promise?”
“Yeah.” Bea held out her pinky finger out to the younger boy, which he almost snatched up in his own. He still refused to look up at her but the contact was enough.

“Alright…I believe you sis. T-thanks.”

“It’s…fine.” Bea crawled around next to her brother, deciding to sit cross legged next to him and stare straight ahead into the now prevalent darkness. “Just breathe for me, okay?” Allister gave no verbal response, but Bea could hear his breathing slow, becoming rhythmic. They stayed just as they were, side by side and staring off into the night for another few minutes. Once the hyperventilating had stopped, Bea spoke out to the darkness.

“So talk me through this. You weren’t going to come home today?”

“Pretty much.” Allister brushed some of his midnight locks away from his mask.

“Why not?”

“I felt so angry and annoyed I knew I wouldn’t be able to face you. I’d have just snapped and gotten carried away, like I already kinda did.”

“Getting carried away doesn’t include planning to camp outside under a rock in a dangerous forest without letting me know?” It wasn’t an accusation and now that he was calmer Allister didn’t take it as such.

“Yeah, I really lost my head there. I just wanted to prove I could do something big I suppose.”

“This is big as things go.”

“Definitely.” They stayed in a more comfortable silence after the last exchange, though Allister clearly had more he wanted to say. Bea didn’t prompt him, knowing he’d speak at his own pace in time. “Everything…everything felt like it was going wrong. I just wanted to escape for a bit.”

“Too bad you picked the place you usually do.” Allister finally looked over at his sister, lips upturned in the ghost of a smile. He laughed dryly.

“I really didn’t do myself any favours, did I?”

“Not really. I don’t blame you though.”

“You don’t?” He cocked his head.

“Those flyers were pretty terrible, I figured they’d put you in a bad mood. Burning them seems about right.” Allister nodded, shuddering slightly.

“They’re so…happy and quirky. Not me at all. Neither of us has that kind of demeanour regardless of who has the gym so why did they…ugh.” He was right of course, neither of them were sunny people, not like Leon. Bea had the gym on week-days when Allister was in school, and he turned down the lights and added a purple filter on Fridays and weekends when he was free.

“Chairman Rose doesn’t have a clue.”

“I’m glad we’re in agreement on that. I look up to Leon was much as the next guy but I feel like he’s the only one the Chairman cares about! That and the weird new trainer in the purple raincoat…”

“His priorities are skewed,” Bea admitted. “He could have handled your debut better for sure,
letting you design your own flyers and actually telling you all the rules you have to follow.”

“Hey…did you get to do your own flyers?”

“I got Nessa to do mine for me.” Bea could feel her brother’s eyes on her.

“Seriously? Why?”

“I was in my ‘I always have to be training mindset’ at the time. I’m glad I’m more rounded than that now.”

“For what it’s worth…I am too.” The two fell into another comfortable silence. The sky was the darkest of blues now, the stars just beginning to peak out from behind their cover. Allister knew that in there were Pokémon in Alola that apparently had something to do with the moon and stars. The same region Mimikyu was from.

“Hey Bea?”

“Mhmm?”

“Thanks for coming to get me.” Bea allowed a proper smile to grace her features.

“No worries, bro. We’ve got to watch out for each other, right?”

“Y-yeah…it does always feel like I’m a stick up your backside though. We don’t always see eye to eye.”

“If we did then we wouldn’t be siblings.” She ruffled his hair slightly, causing him to giggle.

“I think…I think I can do without this for a minute or two.” Allister ducked his head slightly and allowed his mask to slip off. He turned to look at his sister, grinning awkwardly. “I know you like it when I do.”

“I do, but only when you feel comfortable. I know it’s hard for you.”

“I’m just glad you respect that. I feel the need to hide all the time and you don’t judge me for it.”

“I don’t wear shoes and track mud inside the Pokémon centre whenever we visit. Nurse Joy always gives me an earful.”

“Heh, she sure does.” Bea turned to Allister, allowing him to place his mask back on.

“No ones perfect, Alli, we’ve all got our quirks. I don’t think I’ve ever seen Milo exercise his legs, Nessa is vain, Kabu is old fashioned…you get the idea.”

“Chairman Rose can’t make a decent flyer.” Bea felt the urge to suppress the smile once more but let it slide.

“He really can’t, what a clown. Rainbows aren’t your thing, Alli, anyone with half a brain can see that.”

“Should we be w-worried someone with half a brain runs the league?”

“Probably, but that’s tomorrow’s problem.” She ruffled his hair again. “…Do you want to go back home, bro?”
“Yeah, sis. Thanks for being patient with me. I know it’s not easy on you.”

“Hey, we just have different personalities and things we like to do.” Bea stood, giving a hand up to Allister. “If no one clashed there’d be no fighting spirit!”

“In your own way you got it right. We need our differences to be us.”

“Glad we can agree on it.”

“…”

“…”

“…”

“…”

“…So which way is back to our house, Alli?”

“…That’s a really good question, Bea.” Bea raised an eyebrow but said nothing more. “I’m sure everything will work out. It usually does. When everything’s said and done we’ll still be siblings after all.”

“You’re not wrong, Alli, you’re not wrong at all.”

Chapter End Notes

Bea appears in Allister’s official concept art and I think that’s incredibly wholesome. The only other characters who share concept art like that are Melony and Gordie who are confirmed family :)}
Maths, Milk, and Memories

Chapter Summary

When Allister tries to sneak out to get away from his homework, Bea calls in someone to help. Unconventional but definitely qualified. Meanwhile, Bea is faced with the prospect of not having any milk for cereal which always sends her brother into a sour mood. A trip to the shops leads to a chance encounter with a foreigner.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*Inner peace...I am one with my Pokémon...inner peace...inner p CREEEAAK....inner peace...I am one with the ether...I am strong...I am focuCREEAAAAK...*

“Allister, if you’re going to sneak out of the house you could at least try to be quiet about it.”

Bea didn’t bother to raise her voice, or even to move from her meditation spot in the living room. Allister would always come to her. On cue, the faintest of rustlings could be heard and the masked face of her brother popped around the corner.

“Crumbs, Bea! How do you always know!”

“Because I’m your big sis and it’s my job to know.”

*And because you try this at least once a week.* Bea didn’t say that out loud though or he might try something more rash.

Jumping out of the upstairs window and having Gengar levitate him down was a tried a tested method; they’d both learned that the hard way. One gust of wind and a trip the emergency room later had Bea make Allister promise to never do it again. Of course, Bea trusted him to not, but better to not put more ideas in his head.

“Did you finish your homework?”

“...Mostly.”

“Allister.”

The boy hung his head slightly, slumping down the wall to her sitting level.

“I tried, a-alright? It’s so tough though! A r-right pain up my...” Bea opened her eyes and met his gaze even through his protection. He held up his hands in protest. “...backside. I was gonna say backside! Promise.”

“I believe you, also a promise.” Bea gave Allister a nod to make sure he she was being serious. He straightened up. “No exploring the cemetery until you’ve done all your homework, that’s the rule.”

“Y-yeah...I know. It’s maths though.”
“Ah.” Bea glanced up at the clock. 4:30pm. Plenty of time before the sun set. “I suppose that’s not too unusual, I was never any good at it either.”

“But you don’t have to be good at it anymore,” Allister emphasised, clearly sulking. “You’ve finished school now so you don’t need it!” Bea cocked her head slightly. He wasn’t wrong, but not right either. While it was true she’d been out of school for nearly a year now it wasn’t like basic maths wasn’t important.

“I still need to know it though,” she voiced. “Groceries, train times, how much HP my Pokémon has left and so on. It hasn’t just gone away because I’m not examined on it. It’s a good discipline to have.”

“But exams are hard! Yooouuuu don’t have to sit down in a c-cramped exam hall full of s-strangers!”

“I did at one point. You’ll get there, I believe in you.”

Allister scuffed his trainers on the carpet, abashed.

“T-thanks. I guess.”

Bea patted the carpet next to her, beckoning him over.

“Sit with me, just for a while.” He raised his hand to object but Bea knew it was coming. “You can do it on the sofa if the floor’s too hard for you.” He lowered his hand back down.

“…Okay.” Allister shambled his way through the living room in his usual style, though purposefully ignoring the sofa and instead plopping himself down next to the still cross-legged fighting leader.

“Thank you.”

“S’okay I suppose.”

Good enough.

“Breathe for me…find your peace…find your inner peace…”

It took a few attempts but Allister’s normally shallow, somewhat rapid breathing became more subdued. He closed his eyes under his mask and inhaled as deep as he could

*Things I like, right? Ghosts…I like ghost Pokémon a lot. The places they like are the places I do too. The cemetery, the abandoned hospital, that one hill with the gnarly tree…*

Allister exhaled, peaking his eyes open slightly and stealing a glance at his sister. He could never be too careful and she always seemed to know when he was looking her way. Just an effect of her martial arts training, he supposed.

*I could be wanderin’ through a nice dank forest right about now…enjoying all the things that make me happy. Bea does make me happy though. She really gets me, when…no one else does. She’s all I got now… ‘m glad she’s my sis.*

“This is good, sis, thanks for letting me sit here a while.”

“You’re welcome all of the time, you know that.”
“Heh, I know.”

Bea opened her eyes, looking down to where Allister had parked himself.

“Though you did break the silence by speaking.”

“A-ah…oh…m’ bad”

“It’s alright, Alli, while we’re talking we might as well talk about school. Have you applied for those special circumstances yet?”

He shifted slightly.

“I have…dunno whether I’ll get them though.”

“I’m confident you will. A separate room for tests and exams will be great for you and the school knows that. It’ll really help you excel. I mean, they already let you wear your mask so they definitely take what you need into account.”

Allister grabbed at said mask on reflex. He had over 30 of them, all around the house just in case he lost this one. A couple stashed in his school bag, and one in his locker for good measure, if ever there’d be an incident he’d always be prepared. This one was his favourite he couldn’t lie, even though they all looked pretty much the same. This was his first one so that made it the best, at least in his own mind.

“You’re right, I just like to worry I guess…you know me.” She patted his head lightly.

“I do.” They stayed as they were for another few minutes, each listening to the rhythm of the other’s breaths. “I probably can’t help you with the maths, but I can get you someone who can.”

“S-someone else? Like a…stranger?” Bea shook her head.

“Milo. He’s good with numbers and all of that type of thing.” Allister furrowed his brow, reaching under his mask to scratch an itch.

“Like the gym leader Milo?”

“One and the same.”

“B-but…really? Him?”

“What makes you say that?”

“Well he s-seems…I dunno…carefree I guess? Big and tough too, didn’t peg him for a big thinker, just big muscles.” Bea shook her head.

“We don’t judge based on appearances, Alli.” He shied away from her in response.

“R-right, sorry. I mean l-look at me! Hah…”

“And myself as well, don’t forget. I might be ‘big and tough’ as well,” she said, miming the air quotes with her fingers. “But I like sweets a lot too despite my apparent discipline. Don’t go spreading that around though.”

“I wouldn’t, you know that…”
“I know, it was more a reassurance to myself. Anyway, Milo is a very strong person, but being a farmer takes more than just heaving haybales.”

“It does?” He shuffled back, now more eager to listen.

“Sure it does, you’ve got to be able to calculate prices for fertilisers, things on the market, exchange values and taxes, a whole lot of maths related things. Milo will take over from his parents one day and I know he’s up to the task.”

“…Whoa…sounds hard.”

“Hard but worth it,” she corrected. “I can give him a call and he’ll probably come if he’s free.”

“I…umm…I don’t know…” Allister pondered, crossing his arms under his chin. “I don’t know him all that well. We’ve only met a handful of times, and then when I properly became a gym leader.”

“This will be good practice, trust me. He might be a little boisterous but he’s very easy to get along with. If anyone’s going to get you on the right track in maths it’s him.”

“Well…”

“Alli, trust me.” Allister turned his head and met her gaze. A shared understanding passed through the two, Bea’s unwavering eyes meeting Allister’s hidden stare.

“…Alright. I trust you. I can call him.”

“Thank you for trusting me. I’ll give him a ring.” Bea stood up so Allister followed. “I left my phone on the table.” Allister was glad his mask could hide his smile. His sister might be the most stoic person he knew of but she was pretty poor when it came to technology. “I hope I didn’t delete the number, that’d be embarrassing.” Allister raised an eyebrow.

“Then you’d have to help me yourself.” She turned, raising one of her own back in response.

“Then we’d both fail. Oh, it’s ringing…” Bea held up the Rotom phone to her ear, so Allister shuffled himself into their kitchen and took a look in the fridge. So many vegetables!

“We’re out of milk,” he murmured. “Need cereal to feel awake in the mornings.” Allister sat himself down at the kitchen table, pencil case and bag already there where he’d dumped them earlier. “Stupid maths…why can’t you just make sense?” The numbers were already running off of the page and spilling down to the laminate below. Allister scrunched his hair in frustration; staring at it just made his head worse. Bea popped her head into the room, now off of the phone.

“He’ll be over in 10, did you say we’re out of milk?” Allister jumped slightly.

“Geez, does nothing get by you, sis? You’ve got crazy good ears!”

“Oh-huh, good for hearing you creaking down the stairs too.”

“Aww, c’mon all of the house is creaky…”

“…True. Will you be alright by yourself for a couple of minutes while I run to the shops? I know you like your morning cereal.”

“I’ll be fine, sis. I promise not to bail either.”
“That’s what I like to hear.” Bea let out a rare smile, slinging her satchel over her shoulder. “I shouldn’t be too long but if Milo turns up just let him in. 10 minutes max.”

“…you sure?”

“I’m sure, I trust him and so can you.” As she grabbed her keys and made for the door she called back to her brother. “Just don’t let him get distracted, I know what he’s like.”

“Huh?” The door clicked and she was already gone. “…Sure, I can focus, right?”

“They can’t seriously be out of milk, can they?” Bea looked up and down the aisle. Sure there was lots of different kinds of milk but Allister only liked one specific type. She’d tried to pour some a different, but equally nutritious variety, into an old cartoon in the past but he hadn’t fallen for it. Getting him to try new things was a chore in and of itself. Bea sighed, she wished her own tastebuds would be as sensitive as that. It all tasted pretty much the same to her.

“I’ll just have to find someone who works here. Maybe there’ll be some extra in a back room?” She turned to go but felt a tug at her shirt. A young boy with dirty blonde hair, wide eyes, and a Pokémon that resembled a…weasel with a life preserver? He couldn’t be any older than Allister was.

“Hey lady, you haven’t got any shoes!” Bea raised an eyebrow. That definitely wasn’t a Galarian accent, and neither was the Pokémon. Besides, most everyone in Galar knew she didn’t wear shoes.

“Well noticed. Can I help you with something, young man?”

*I feel old just saying that, I’m not even 20 yet. I sound almost like professor Magnolia…or Opal if she’s feeling polite.*

“Nah I was just curious if you get cold or not.”

“Not so much.” Bea took a look around; apart from her and the boy (and the orange weasel Pokémon) there wasn’t anybody about. “Where are you parents?” He shrugged, clearly unconcerned.

“They’re about. Probably looking at boring things like napkins. You seem way more cool than that!” Bea had to supress a smile at that. Children were so earnest. No filters. “You see it’s just as cold in Sinnoh as here but I like to wrap up warm! You look ready to go out to the beach or something!”

“I think Nessa has that look down better than I do.”

“Ness-a? She a friend of yours?” The name was foreign in his mouth but he managed to get it out. Again, Bea was impressed by his dedication. She crouched down to his height, waving to the Pokémon that was sniffing at the air around her.

“She is, and a gym leader too. Sinnoh has gym leaders don’t they? I know the Alola region doesn’t.” He nodded vigorously, his eyes shining.

“Wooooow, you’re friends with a gym leader? You must be pretty strong then. Don’t you think so, Buizel?”

“Bui, bui!”
“Buizel agrees!”

“He’s right to agree, I won’t boast about my strength but I’m a gym leader here too. My fighting types and I have won and lost our fair share of battles.” If it was possible the boy’s eyes got even wider.

“No wayyyyyy?! You’re like Maylene then!” Bea allowed herself a chuckle, the enthusiasm from someone with so much energy was infectious.

“Is she a gym leader back home?”

“She is, she’s a fighting type leader who walks around barefoot too!” He looked her up and down, and then up once more for good measure. Bea likened him to a bobbing Ducklett. “I think you might be even stronger than her though you’ve got super muscles, lady!”

“Thank you, young man, that’s very kind of you to say.”

“She walks all the way to Snowpoint City and back in the snow, she’s really tough, crazy my mom and dad say!”

“She walks through the snow barefoot?” Bea stashed that information in the back of her mind for later. She’d never considered doing that level of extreme, though it would certainly be a good test of her willpower.

“Yeah, to train and visit the gym leader there! Mum and Dad told me they have ‘something going’ but wouldn’t tell me what that means. Guess privacy is privacy though!” Bea nodded.

“It’s right not to pry into people’s business. I should like to visit this Snowpoint city for myself and meet Maylene. She seems like a strong opponent to train with.” The boy was nearly giddy with excitement at the prospect apparently, the Buizel’s tails had began to twirl around too as if to encourage him.


“I’m sure it would be ‘awesome’. Your Pokémon seems to think so too,” she pondered, reaching her hand out to it. It gave another quick sniff before licking it.

“Aww he likes you! She’s my dad’s really, he says I need to train harder before I can have one of my own…” The boy seemed a little downcast at this, and Bea’s quest for milk was getting pushed further and further out of her mind.

“Don’t worry, you seem capable enough to me. Buizel likes you.”

“Ahhahahaha, it’s Bw-ee-zel, not Boo-ee-zel! Don’t you have them here? Oh and thanks for saying I’m strong, if a gym leader thinks I’ve got what it takes I can’t fail! He’ll be a Floatzel in no time!” Bea shook her head, the boundless enthusiasm catching up to her, keeping one eye out for either the boy’s parents or a shop clerk.

“We don’t have any here, no.” She stopped, an idea popping into her head. “Hey I don’t suppose you have any ghost Pokémon with you do you? My brother really likes them.”

“Your brother must be brave, they’re scary!” The boy patted his pockets and turned them inside out. “I haven’t got any other Pokémon. My parents say ghosts are for more experienced trainers, but maybe they have some you could look at?”
“That sounds like a plan, why don’t we go and look for them? If you tell them you made friends with a gym leader I bet they’ll be impressed with you.” The wide eyes were back, and so was Bea’s grin.

“Wow being friends with a gym leader! I didn’t think that could happen. Like, only in movies or something!” They set off, Bea keeping her eyes peeled for any wayward employees.

_Seriously, are the employees ghost Pokémon too? They always vanish when I need something._

“…I bet they’d be willing to trade something with you too.” Now that caught Bea’s attention.

“Oh, really?”

“Sure, mom and dad were both trainers ages ago, that’s how they met. They do old people things now like mow the lawn and read books. Weird to think of them younger I don’t really get it.”

Bea could relate. Her parents were never anything but strict and one track, it was near impossible for her to imagine them doing…anything in the their younger years. Hence, while they were on civil, good terms even, she’d moved out as soon as she was old enough and taken Allister along with her. Zacian knows that their style of ‘teaching’ would be more like to make him burst into tears than actually make him any stronger.

“We’ve got some Pokémon in Galar you don’t get anywhere else, I’m sure I could find something they like.” As they walked along, the boy looked up at her in what could only be described as adoration (Buizel wagging its tails close behind).

“Lady, you’re just about the coolest person ever. Like seriously!”

“Again that’s very kind of you. I’m just like everyone else though, trust me.”

“Ah you’re being that thing that my parents say…what’s the word?”

“Modest?”

“That’s it! You’re modest too. My parents say that’s the mark of a good trainer and person.”

“Your parents…seem like good people.”

“They’re great! What do I call you anyway?” The boy asked, grinning ear to ear. “Can’t just keep calling you ‘Lady’, right?”

“You may call me Bea.”

“Like a Combee?”

“…Sure, why not?”

“Seriously, what’s taking Bea so long?” Allister was an anxious person by nature, so even though he took his sister’s word when she said she wouldn’t be too long he was beginning to worry. The 10 minutes were nearly up and Milo was going to be here any…

“Hey, hey, anyone home?”

“…Second. Oh no.” A couple of booming knocks at the door sent Allister into a panic. He looked around wildly, recognising the enthusiasm of Tuffield’s resident gym leader anywhere. He had to
get out of here, to escape, to…

A flash of light and Mimikyu was next to him, having released itself from its Pokéball.

“Mimi-miky!”

“Mimikyu? Why’re you…?”

“Kyu, Mimi-kyu!” The black tail-like appendage from under the rag grasped Allister’s hand, holding him in place, rubbing it slightly.

“…” Mimikyu continued for a few seconds before releasing him. Allister heaved a sigh, patting the top of the disguise lightly.

“You’re right, running away won’t help me. I did promise I wouldn’t after all. Thanks for stopping me.”

“Mimik-kyuyu.”

“You can stay out if you want, Milo won’t mind probably.”

As Mimikyu took his hand again and led him towards the door Allister found himself eternally grateful Bea had insisted on getting him what she called a ‘support Pokémon’. Though ghost types were generally unsuited for the task, his naturally high affinity for them made it an easy choice.

Mimikyu particularly made a good partner and he felt they really resonated. He checked off on his fingers their similarities. Both wore disguises because of their anxiety at who they were, both wanted to be loved and supported but didn’t really know how to go about it…Allister stopped himself there before he tipped himself over the edge to becoming sad. The point was him and Mimikyu shared a bond, and for that he was thankful.

Oh…the door is open now. How long has it been open?

“Hey there, little man! For a moment there I thought no one was home!”

Milo towered over the slight form of Allister, again thankful his mask protected him from having to look the grass leader face to face. Milo instinctively thrust his hand out for a handshake but retracted it almost immediately, as if remembering something.

“Ah I remember, not too big on physical contact!” He put his hands behind his head, smiling wide. “Just tell me if I get too close in the old personal space area, I’m a pretty hand’s on guy so just let me know.”

“M’kay…you can come in.”

“Fantastic!” Milo strode in, placing his hat on the side table. “Been a while since I’ve been here, is Bea in?”

“Nah, she said to let you in though. Went out for milk.” At that he raised a finger to his lips.

“Aww shucks, I should’ve brought some with me! Wooloo milk is top grade.”

“Wooloo make milk?”

“They sure do, not just good for wool let me tell you. Finest quality milk you’ll ever have and it keeps forever too.” He placed his hands on his hips, looking over the photos that were hanging on
the walls.

“I…” Allister bit his tongue. He wasn’t going to just straight up tell Milo he only drank Gogoat milk. It’d be an awful blow to his confidence, he reasoned, even if he always acted peppy. His entire livelihood was Wooloo related pretty much. “I respect that.” He shuffled around Milo’s body, gesturing to follow. “Kitchen’s…this way.”

“Oh? Oh!” Milo tore his gaze away from Allister’s League induction photoshoot (Bea’s insistence they hang his achievements where people could see them) and followed. “You do your homework in the kitchen? Smart guy. If you ever get hungry you’re already here!”

“Heh, pretty much!” Compliments, no matter how dumb, always cheered Allister up. Milo had already made himself at home on the other chair, creaking beneath the unfamiliar weight slightly. “It’s got fractions…hope y-you’re ready.” If Milo was perturbed in anyway he didn’t show it, grin still plastered all over his face.

“Great, love a good fraction, they’re pretty top! Or are they bottom?”

“…”

“Because fractions have top and bottom parts, get it?” Milo sat on his hands, prompting another creak from the chair. “I need to work on my delivery.”

“Maybe, I’d say tell it to my sister but…she probably wouldn’t laugh either.”

“That’s true, legend has it she smiled once, can you believe?” At the second blank response he’d gotten, Milo quickly back pedalled. “Not that I haven’t seen her happy I mean, that’s plain as day to see whenever she wins a battle or meets with friends. Or with you, that makes her happy as well! Anyway, let’s take a look at these so called fractions we got here!”

That’s embarrassing, but wholesome. That’s pretty much Milo in a nutshell isn’t it?

Allister looked around as Milo pored over his notes and homework sheet, not seeing Mimikyu anywhere. Allister supressed his panic and instead breathed like he’d learned, and focused himself. He felt his hair spike quiver slightly and projected; calling out to Mimikyu in his mind he found it under the coffee table in the living room. No you can stay there it’s fine, just wanted to make sure you were safe is all. I worry. Allister zoned back in, it having come to his attention that Milo was holding his book upside down.

“…Um…” He tried to reach out, unsuccessfully, to correct him but his confidence faded. Milo took note though, shooting him another smile.

“Don’t worry I know what I’m doing. With fractions though I always liked a new perspective!”

“Perspective?”

“Yeah, reverse the numbers and have the top one on the bottom and bottom on top. Really shakes things up if you ask me.”

“Well…Bea did ask you…so that’s good enough for me!” Milo burst out laughing at that, and Allister was taken aback slightly. Was it really that funny?

“I should be taking notes from you, Allister! My jokes would land far better if I paid more attention to you.”

“Oh…errr…thanks?”
“Welcome, little man!” Milo slapped the book back on the table, then put his hand up to his mouth after noting the flinch. “Ah sorry, no loud noises either! I should be speaking quieter too then?”

“…A little…if it’s alright?”

“Say no more, I’ll be quiet enough to make a Hatterene jealous,” he said, doing his best to whisper. It was…decently effective, Allister decided. He was really trying and that was nice. He didn’t have to come out to Stow-on-Side at all but he did anyway.

“Thanks.”

“I bet you’re wondering what I think of your fractions right?” Allister gave a silent nod. “No idea! Isn’t that great?”

“…I…what?”

“These sorts of fractions aren’t for me, but don’t worry we’re going to change that.”

“…I’m lost. Can you do them or can’t you?” Milo beckoned him over, shrugging his shoulders.

“I can and can’t, but more importantly I can’t do them for you, you won’t learn anything that way. Besides, Bea would be on my case if I did.”

“…I’m more lost.” Allister sat down all the same, careful to hold his mask in place as he did so. Milo puckered his mouth as he considered his words.

“The way you’re taught, I’m going to be honest, isn’t all that helpful. Especially not for you I don’t think. It’s too abstract and not ‘here’, if you get me? We need something more in based in the real world.”

“…”

“I’ll show you, hold on.” Milo stuck his tongue out at an angle as he tried to find a working pen in Allister’s pencil case. It took him a few goes but he was blessed with success in the form of a purple ink pen. “Neat colour!”

“…Thanks…again.” Milo began to draw what looked like clouds. Allister craned his neck to see from the opposite side of the table but all he saw were clouds, some with faces, some without.

“Here we go.” The grass leader turned the paper so Allister could see properly. “What do you see?”

“You…you’ve drawn a lot of Wooloo?”

“Too right,” he announced, entirely too pleased with himself. “The way your teacher’s given the questions to you is too open and lets you overthink things way too much, so then you get worked up and then start flipping, am I right?” Allister did a double take.

“That’s honestly very accurate. How d-did you know?”

“I’ll let you in on a secret.” Milo leaned forwards (with the chair underneath in protest). “I used to be terrible at maths. I couldn’t even add properly without failing miserably.” At that Allister was surprised. After all Bea had said he’d gotten the idea Milo had simply been good at maths to start with.

“Really?”
“Sure as day. Until I sat down and took the numbers and put them on things in the real world. Things I could see and touch, and suddenly all the numbers had meaning. Let’s go through the first one. 17/4 added to 39/2.

“It’s alright so awkward…why can’t they use nicer numbers?”

“Ahaha, I know the feeling, Allister!” Milo cleared his throat. “Right, quiet voice, indoor voice.”

“You can…be passionate. Honestly…it’s nice to see.”

“Oh, really? Neat.” Milo gave him a genuine smile, so of course Allister’s body reacted on its own and turned him away to spare the embarrassment. “Anyway, let’s give our fractions two colours.” Milo took out another pen, this one black. “I put all the Wooloo of one colour in this pen, and all the others in this pen.”

Allister listened in as Milo began to explain his analogies. The ghost gym leader didn’t know a whole lot about the sheep Pokémon, but the numbers on the page were starting to make a whole lot more sense than they were before. The 39 Wooloo needed to double their number to 78 to make sure there were enough to balance the weight of the other, fatter 17 Wooloo.

Once they’d done that, he just needed to add the 17 and the 78 together to make 95. The farmer then decides he wants to sell some as he doesn’t need that many so he divides the Wooloo’s numbers be 4. Of course the remaining 3/4 is just Wooloo wool that was sheared off, as you can’t have less than a whole Wooloo to sell.

“I…wow…okay. Yeah. That’s pretty…neat.”

“Hey you think? Glad to hear it! Wooloo always save me when I’m in a pinch.” Milo leaned back, clearly happy with himself. “You can do the same with grain bags, or Pokéballs, or whatever you feel like. How do you feel about trying the next one?” Allister scanned down the page. There were only 10 questions, and none too crazy by the looks of things.

“Yeah, sounds wizard.”

“That’s my guy!” Milo covered his mouth again. “Whoops, can’t keep myself in check.”

“’m done.” Milo leaned back in.

“That was fast! Let me see what’s going on.” He only drew a couple of sheep before nodding his head in agreement. “You got it! See you’re a fast learner, you just need the right tools! All that wishy-washy theory stuff doesn’t help in the real world, right?”

“Right. Right!” Allister was definitely feeling more confident after getting the next question right and soon the worksheet was filled in. Letting Milo check over it, Allister breathed a sigh of relief. He’d began to sweat slightly under his mask from all the thinking but it was worth it. Mimikyu had wandered back in again and perched itself on his lab, purring in the odd way it did. Growling? Humming? It was always nice whatever it was.

“Well colour me impressed you did them all right! I don’t have a stamp to give you but…here!” Milo reached into his pocket, pulling out a crumpled, slightly stiff piece of paper.

“It’s…a coupon for free icecream?”

“Hah, yeah I’m not too big on the stuff so I figure you earned it. I didn’t do anything other than show you another way of thinking, you did all the real work.” Allister could feel his face heating
I really am bad at taking compliments from people. “Th-thanks. That’s n-nice of you…”

“No worries, little man!” Milo stood and checked the clock in the other room. “Weird the shop isn’t that far away right?”

“S’not, but I’m sure Bea is fine, she always is. Probably snuck some training in or something.”

“Sounds about right for her. Game face always on!” He turned back around, electing to sit on the sofa instead. “Well I’m not just up and leaving you without her around but I’m not just good with fractions you know. Bring your pen and paper and we can go through some other stuff too if you want?” He grinned. “Get ahead of your teacher and show them you can really do it!”

“Oh…hadn’t considered.” While he did still want to go outside, Allister conceded he was honestly having a nice time with Milo around. He could definitely see why he was as popular as he was. Patient but outgoing. “Sure…be nice…to not be confused all the time.”

Outside could be any time, Milo isn’t around all the time.

Allister gathered up his notes and pens and sat near enough to the other gym leader that he could see anything he could write. It wasn’t as close as he would have liked, but he was slowly getting more comfortable around more people. Mimikyu had followed him too so it was all in all a good time.

“Allright, let’s start with something cool, like bar graphs and pie charts.” Milo was already going to town on the piece of paper drawing Zamazenta knows what but Allister found it fun in a way.

Maths? Fun? When did that start happening?

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“And that’s how to find f(x) for definite integrals for elements of the real numbers. Hmmm…” Milo poked his cheek slightly. “I wonder if they’ll ask about that. Probably not but it’s useful to have!”

Allister nodded dumbly. He’d absorbed more information he’d thought was ever possible in the past hour. More maths than he’d ever learned in class and it was actually sticking too. He didn’t think that was possible.

Must be the Tuffield dialect. Makes things easier on my ears. Not like my teacher… Allister shuddered. His teacher was Kalosian, and the snooty type. She wasn’t bad by any means but definitely not his kind of person.

“Ah geez, I’ve filled up most of your pages with Wooloo sketches. I’ll get you a new one.” Milo wasn’t lying when he said he’d filled the pages, there were more sheep than numbers by quite a margin. Still, if Allister understood the maths he’d gladly buy as many notebooks as he needed.

“…Thanks…’re cute.”

The sound of keys brought him back to his senses as Bea stumbled through the door, bag full of items that included, but were certainly not limited to milk cartons.

“I apologise for the delay.”
Milo stopped his doodling on the Wooloo clouds and looked up.

“No bother at all, we’ve actually been having a blast!”

“A blast?” Bea walked past, putting everything she’d bought in the fridge save for a couple of things. “That right, Alli?”

“Yeah, sis, it’s…um…been pretty good honestly. Milo knows his stuff.”

“Aww heck, you’re real nice. Thanks for listening so well!” Milo stood. “It’s getting on though and I’m feeling pretty hungry so I should be…” Bea held up her hand.

“I figured I’d be late back so I got us some extra stuff for dinner. You’re welcome to stay, Milo.”

“Well…sure!” Milo looked down at Allister. “Do you mind if I stay a little longer, little man?”

“Y-you can stay.” He adjusted his mask again. “It’d be…nice having you.”

Bea looked back and forth between the two, somewhat surprised but she made sure to give nothing away. Allister was getting along with another person, as she’d always hoped he would. Granted, Milo was just about the easiest person in the region to talk to but small steps were the best kind of steps.

Really great to build up his confidence.

“Very good. It won’t take too long so I can tell you all about what I’ve been doing.”

“Good point, what have you been doing, Bea?” Milo looked over curiously. “Was the milk really heavy or something?”

“If you’d like to arm wrestle again you’re more than welcome.”

“Hah, I’m kidding I’m kidding. I need my arm tomorrow!” Milo sat down again, giving the books back to Allister. “I do want to see your and Gordie’s rematch though. The last time was wild!”

Bea pursed her lips.

“Wild is one word for it. Sore loser is another.”

“Seriously though…what happened?” Allister mumbled, not paying all that much attention. “You said you’d be 10 minutes tops.”

It was the strangest occurrence to see Bea smile so openly so Milo wasn’t sure it had really happened until it was over. No one would believe him of course and Allister wouldn’t rat his sister out for anything. A shame, he had a bet with Piers that it was possible.

Bea untucked a pokeball, a strange pattern emblazoned on the side of the metal.

“Allister…have you ever seen a Mismagius?”

Chapter End Notes
In Allister's official concept art his tuft of hair (labeled as a hair spike) is able to sense ghost pokemon.

Shamelessly following the Headcannon from EtherealNyx that Mimikyu is Allister's support Pokémon.
Writing British English is something I don't do too often (even though I'm from the UK) so it was pretty fun I'll admit.
Also farming take a lot of brains don't be fooled!

Mismagius can't be caught in Galar and it occasionally blesses it's trainer with good luck. Allister would definitely appreciate!
The Other Side of Glass

Chapter Summary

When Allister is caught out in a rain storm he finds an unlikely ally in Oleana.

They learn a little more about each other and themselves (not that anyone would believe Oleana could be so...human).

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Why did it have to pick today to rain,” Allister uttered simply. “I’m not just soaked I’m like… oozing water. Stupid clouds.”

His eyes remained fixated on the sky above, impassive and moody. They were swirling, howling almost, and churning bucketful after bucketful of nature’s goodness to the ground below. Allister appreciated everyone needed water to live but he preferred to appreciate it from the other side of a window, tucked away under a blanket. Instead here he was. Stranded.

Allister slid his back down the side of the Rose Tower’s inner wall, huffing at his misfortune. The glass awning over the main entrance provided a chic, but more importantly dry, space for him to stand (and definitely not sit awkwardly) while he waited for the downpour to pass.

He’d only been in Wyndon because it was a Saturday, which in Allister’s book meant exploring time. Supposedly there was a neat abandoned research facility somewhere, and while techno type things weren’t usually for him, ruins were ruins.

“Oh they would’ve been had the sky not decided to sneeze!” Allister shook his fist angrily to no one in particular. “You’ve r-ruined my ruin exploring!”

Everyone else was indoors anyway so he didn’t feel nearly as shy voicing his grievances in public. Normally that was just simply not something he’d do. Today was full of things he didn’t expect to do, clearly.

Allister shuffled himself more, reassessing his current hideout; dry was maybe too strong a word. Though the building was modernity at its finest it certainly wasn’t impervious to the elements. The ghost leader had given up trying to wring his sleeves out and instead let them fall limply to his sides, pooling water around himself.

The buffeting wind was making sure a decent portion of the rain was reaching him anyway, and Allister never put energy into anything he considered a waste of time. He was at least grateful his mask was keeping the wind from stealing his breath away. It offered little protection from the wet however, the drips making their way from his sodden, matted hair, down his face and between the gap where his mask ended and skin began.

Biggest waste of time there is.

He didn’t dare take any of his Pokémon out not wanting them to get wet too; Allister bemoaned his lack of a psychic type with teleport to get him home and dry. Bea would be worried sick. He
checked his phone as best he could, the constant water droplets making the touch screen a pain to navigate.

No new messages.

Allister pulled his knees up to his chest. Warmth was out of the question but it made him feel a little more secure. Just a self-comforting manoeuvre if anything. He’d let Bea know where he was and that he was safe and that was the main thing. He really didn’t want her making an enormous fuss or organising a search party. Allister shuddered at the thought.

All those people, all that attention...no thank you.

The severity of the rain had halted the trains, and the Corviknight’s disliked flying in weather where they were liable to be blown off course so the taxi service was out of the question too. That hadn’t stopped his sister from deciding she was going to battle the elements and come to him.

Allister shook his head, spraying water onto himself.

She’s so stubborn! Jus’ gonna get both of us wet now.

Allister knew he was just feeling guilty about making her come and get him, but guilty he felt all the same. He was grateful he mattered to her (not that he’d ever really doubt it despite what some of the voices in the back of his mind would threaten), but this was just absurd. Ever since she’d come back from the shops the day Milo had helped him with his maths, Bea had gotten it into her head that training in the elements was the next step for her.

Where did she get that idea from? She’s nuts! She’s just gonna catch a cold, it’s miles from Stow-on-Side to Wyndon! Either that or I’m gonna get a cold and give it to her later...

Allister found himself banging pathetically on the sliding doors to Rose Tower. Saturday meant Rose Tower wasn’t open: the doors didn’t yield and there wasn’t anyone inside to let him in anyway. It didn’t stop Allister from pressing his hands up to the glass anyway for want of anything better to do. Better to be cold, wet, and active than cold, wet, and bored.

Now I sound like sis. Guess she’d be proud...probs mad that I got stranded though. Not like I control the weather...

Allister gave up on the door, turning his head back towards the darkened sky. He knew from books that there were apparently Pokémon in other regions that could affect the weather at will. He knew it was possible anyway, certain Pokémon like Abomasnow and Pelipper caused things like that if they got worked up. Not on this scale though.

His pen pal had called them ‘The Weather Trio’, though she’d explained there were two Unovan Pokémon that had similar abilities.

I wonder what I’ll tell her? Maybe this is their fault? Or maybe I’ve got crummy luck...she’ll get a good laugh either way.

Despite the chill and damp, Allister found a portion of warmth in his heart when thinking about his pen pal. Or Rotom Phone text pal was maybe a better word.

Too bulky. Pen pal works. How they did it in the olden days just waiting around for a reply sounds like anxiety waiting to happen. Glad I don’t have to deal with that.

There was a certain degree of anxiety for him either way: he hadn’t told Bea about her yet. She was
sure to ask a lot of questions about it either way. He understood his sister was just playing her part and making sure he was safe...but he was still nervous.

He’d only been talking to her for a couple of months and they hadn’t even called properly. Just messages. Heck, they hadn’t even exchanged photos. She could be anyone! It could be a he! Allister sighed, for it was his insistence that he be kept hidden. Sending a photo would inevitably lead to him having to take his mask off at some point even if it didn’t happen right away.

Only Bea and his parents had ever seen him without it. Not even Bea’s parents had in the time he’d lived with them. The idea of showing himself to someone new was terrifying. Allister rocked himself back and forth, listening to the wind screaming through the trees.

*Focus on something happy.*

From what she’d said, his pen pal’s name was Acerola and she was Alolan. Apparently she loved ghosts just like he did, even owning a Mimikyu of her own. She also didn’t have any parents anymore...just like him too.

It had occurred to Allister on numerous occasions the person on the other end of the messages could simply be saying whatever would lure him in. Their stories were similar enough to make Allister wary enough that he felt guilty for not believing what Acerola told him. They could just be words to make him trust them, only to bite back later. Hurt him.

He wasn’t an idiot but he wanted to believe what he was reading from her was true. Bea would probably come to the same conclusions he had about the legitimacy, hence why he was so nervous to confess what he’d been doing.

*Confess... s’not like I’ve been doing anything wrong, right? Bea’s always telling me to work on my trust with people. Figure this is the most trusting thing I could ever do! She’ll probably be happy...*

Allister continued his internal dialogue back and forth, only occasionally tuning in to the outside world. He stopped caring after a while as nothing was changing. Apparently he was wrong.

“Small child, why are you outside of this building?”

“AHHHHHHH?!” Allister leapt back, slick hands trying and failing to grasp his Pokéballs with any precision. Standing before him was none other than Macro Cosmos’s infamous second in command, Oleana. Her bored gaze staring down at his own fearful one, Allister got the feeling she knew exactly what he was thinking despite his face being concealed.

“I don’t like to repeat myself,” the secretary continued, electric green eyes boring into him. “Pick yourself off the floor and explain why you’re here. This is private property.” Oleana hadn’t bothered to step outside into the rain (that hairstyle probably wasn’t cheap), apparently having been inside the building the entire time. Of course she had.

Allister shakily stood, wondering if he was about to be arrested for trespassing. Bea definitely wouldn’t like that. Would his gym leader status be revoked? Would his Pokémon be taken away?? Would he have to go to court and speak to lots of people???

There were too many thoughts and Allister began to sway, nausea overcoming him. If Oleana was...
at all affected by his sorry display she wasn’t letting it show.

“If you haven’t anything to say you can stay out here. I have work to be doing.” She span on her heel, keycard at the ready to reclose the doors.

“…P-please don’t g-go!”

Oleana stopped, but didn’t turn around.

“Out with it, please.”

“ ‘m so-sorry.”

“Louder please, there’s quite a breeze outside.”

“I’m sorry!” Allister yelled, quite a bit louder than he’d meant to. “…I’m sorry for y-yelling too. Didn’t mean to.” He scuffed his feet awkwardly, kicking ripples through the puddles on the tarmac. “I Didn’t mean to bother you either. I…I was just wet and cold and wanted to get out of the rain…”

“…You’re certainly very wet. How long have you been outside?”

“…like 30 minutes? Not too long really…”

Oleana turned back, slower this time, giving him a once over. It was a critical gaze Allister knew that much. Everything she did was deliberate.

“…Come inside if you want, kid. Macro Cosmos is about helping people or so I’m told.”

“R-really?” Allister noted he sounded entirely too hopeful. He’d just expected to be kicked out and have to find somewhere else to be cold and wet.

“What did I tell you?”

“…You don’t like r-repeating yourself?”

“Exactly.” She snapped her fingers and started to walk. “Follow me or be wet. I know what’s it like to be wet so if I were you I’d come along.” Allister needed no further persuasion and hightailed it inside.

Although he’d been here once before, right after he’d become a gym leader, the place still astounded him. White granite, steel beams, tempered glass, the works. Fancy didn’t do it justice and it was only the foyer. Speaking of…

“You’re going to flood the place if you don’t change.” Allister peered down at the floor which he was now dripping all over. Reflective puddles in the halogen lamps. “I’m the only one here today but if you feel more comfortable you may face away to change.” Allister had to remind himself Oleana was talking to him. There wasn’t anyone else around and yet the way she said things never made them sound at all personal. “Or if you want to sit on the sofa you’ll have to change too.”

“O-oh…um…” Allister took note of the very inviting red plush sofa that occupied nearly the entire far wall. Far bigger than his bed at home. Even all of Bea’s training mats wouldn’t stretch that far.

“I can get you clothes, your gym clothes can go over the radiator.”

“I…w-wait you know I’m a gym leader?” Oleana bent down to his level, quite a feat considering
the height disparity. She was very nearly double his height, even without the heels; a scary woman made all the scarier.

“Of course, it’s my job to know. I’d recognise that ridiculous uniform anywhere. Shorts, logos, all of it. Trashy if you ask me…and even if you don’t.”

“…Okay.”

She straightened up, pressing a button on the counter behind her. The reception wasn’t currently being attended but Oleana clearly knew what did what.

“I know who you are specifically too if that was what you actually meant.”

“Y-yeah.” Allister’s attempts to scuff his shoes made a horrible squeaking noise on the polished floor. Oleana raised an eyebrow stiffly but said nothing. “And sorry for the noise.”

“Allister, is it not?” Allister thanked her silently for ignoring the squeak. “The youngest gym leader we’ve ever had by quite a margin. An achievement some might say.”

“Allister.”

Oleana clicked her tongue.

“It’s a fact.”

“O-oh…um, when y-you put it l-like that…thanks.”

“Facts don’t require any thanks. If you have to thank anyone thank the Chairman for seeing your potential.” Before Allister could ask her to pass on anything he said (though he recalled mumbling out a couple of ‘thank you’s’ to Rose during the verification process) a quiet ‘ding’ was heard from the reception counter.

“What was that?”

“Allister, your clothes are ready.”

“Just l-like that?” Allister couldn’t tell the expression Oleana made at his remark, not unsurprising, but it felt somehow…different. More sincere.

“I pressed the buttons that would perform that express purpose.”

“I thought you said you were the only other person here…?”

“I am,” Oleana agreed, turning back to the reception console. She typed another few commands on to the keyboard and Allister knew she could be launching a space shuttle or adjusting the heating and he’d have no way of telling the difference. “Many things at Rose Tower are automated.”

At that a small hiss, and the sound of a vent being open and shut could be heard. Allister watched in awe as a pile of neatly folded white clothes were dumped onto the kiosk from a seemingly invisible overhead duct.

*Technology is great.*

“You approve?” Oleana asked, noticing the ghost leader’s change in posture.

“O-oh…yeah actually. It’s really cool…how that just happened.” The secretary’s face was as
impassive as ever, handing him the uniform silently.

“Change, I will be back in exactly seven minutes.” And then she was gone. Allister wasn’t really sure what to make of the whole situation it’d all happened so fast. Oleana hadn’t really asked permission before doing anything, but then again this was her building and he was a guest so Allister wasn’t about to complain.

Allister stood on tiptoes, craning his neck upwards to where the clothes had come from. It was nearly seamless, and his mask made it a little hard to tell, but there was an opening.

This place really has it all…can see why they’re in charge. A frown crossed his hidden features, noting the towel that had come with the clothes. Allister cast his mind back to his gym debut and the day he’d tried to camp outside. Oleana clearly thinks of everything, I…even got a towel because I’m soaked…so why were my gym flyers so…awful?

Allister tried to put it out of his mind. Advertising probably wasn’t her department, if anything the gaudy hearts, bright clashing colours, and smiling Gengars had all the hallmarks of something Leon would design.

That makes sense…wonder if Bea figured that too?

An involuntary shiver brought him back into the moment. Allister took a look out of the window, much happier to see the raging storm from the other side of the glass this time. However, the storm still had an influence over him whether he liked it or not; the sharp sound of crackling thunder lurched him forward. Allister’s mind immediately went into panic mode and this time when the nausea hit he couldn’t control it. There was no holding back what was to come, even with his mind screaming at him not to.

I’m gonna…I’m gonna…

Though his head was spinning Allister had enough awareness to grab a hold of the counter as best he could, ripping his mask off of his face before he threw up. It made a dull splat of a sound, echoing slightly in the empty hall. Thankfully, it all landed on the floor, not on the kiosk or where his mask had skittered. That would definitely need some explaining.

Allister collapsed, his head ablaze. He could feel himself shaking but it wasn’t something he could feel. It was disconnected as it always was. The acrid taste of sick unfortunately wasn’t.

That was…I was…noise…

He could just about make out that Mimikyu was beside him now, huddling against his now shaking body.

P-pathetic…one sharp noise…and d-down I go.

Allister sat in a daze, propping himself against the side of the counter. Mimikyu had retrieved his mask which was the least but of consolation he could ask for. It sat by him as he hugged his knees, rubbing his back in the way it knew calmed him down. Somewhat.

Oleana…she’s gonna…s-she’s gonna……be mad.

The thought of making the only good luck he’d had today turn bad snapped Allister back to his senses. Whether it was adrenaline, willpower, or his fear of failure (or indeed the notoriously scary secretary who’d let him in) he didn’t know, but he knew he had to act. Letting himself slip into an episode wasn’t a luxury he could afford in a stranger’s place.
He still felt terrible and drained, but clarity was all he needed. Before he potentially lost himself again, Allister flung off his ruined clothes (grateful his Pokémon had the decency to turn its back to him) and hastily dried himself with the towel.

It too was white so it wasn’t too shocking it had blended in so well with the clothes. Fluffy too, Allister found himself wondering if it was a Wooloo product. Milo would be sure to know. The uniform itself was the standard Macro Cosmos style, though big on his slight frame. Baggy was infinitely better than wet, Allister didn’t bother even trying to fold his discarded clothes instead opting to wring them out on to the already wet floor.

’S already got puddles doesn’t matter now.

The clothes were, as Oleana had instructed, placed over the radiator in the far corner of the room. Allister had to stop twice to regain his balance but it was a success at least.

Still can’t…believe…I threw up…on their fancy floor.

It was an effort in and of itself, but Allister was able to trudge over to the sofa that had been pointed out to him, careful to step around the pools of water which were now mixing with his unfortunate discharge. It was spreading it further, he noted dully. Of course it was.

I’ll clean that up…jus’ want to rest…a little first.

Allister climbed on, the size of it providing ample wiggle room to find a comfortable position. Mimikyu leapt up with him, curling up in front of his chest; his arms instinctively wrapped around the disguise Pokémon and pulled it close, hugging it to him as best he could.

No more than 5 minutes…then I’ll clean up.

Allister was out like a light, exhaustion overtaking him at long last.

The click of Oleana’s heels on the granite was lost to him, just another dream from a tired boy.

A sharp snap brought Allister crashing back to the real world, heart beating up a storm. His head turned towards the now sitting secretary though her face was still giving nothing away. Oleana sat fashionably far away, though very much within ear shot.

“You’ve been asleep for an hour and twenty minutes, I’ve decided that you don’t need any more rest. The rain has not stopped.”

“W-what? A-an hour?!” Allister looked towards the glass doors, finding indeed that the downpour had gone nowhere.

“And twenty minutes,” Oleana replied, nodding noncommittally.

“I…oh…that’s…um…”

“Only idiots speak when they have nothing to say.”

“A-Ahhh…s-sorry.” Allister sat himself up, though thankfully not waking his now snoring Mimikyu. “And sorry about…huh?” He scanned the floor of the reception as fast as he could, searching for any trace of the physical result of his anxiety.

“I have cleaned it up.”
It must have been Allister’s imagination but he swore, just for a moment, that Oleana’s features had softened.

“Y-you…did?” She nodded.

“Cleaning up filth is something I’m no stranger to. I don’t mind it at all. A mop and the water you dripped everywhere made it very easy. It was never that easy for me.”

Allister noted her thumb casually stroking the surface of one of her Pokéballs. It looked old. Really old, scratched and dented in places; it had clearly been in her possession for a long time. Her expression was…lost. She was just staring off into space.

Like she’s remembering…something…

“I might have all of the riches in the world now but it hasn’t changed who I am or my roots.”

“…”

“You don’t know what I’m talking about, do you?” Oleana hadn’t turned her head back to him, her gaze still unfocused. Those electric green eyes were more of a rippling pond than anything to him. It was bizarre and he wasn’t sure how to feel. Until then he wasn’t sure that she could feel.

“I…don’t.”

Oleana pursed her lips slightly.

“I didn’t think so. I do understand you, just a little. I don’t like you, or even have any strong opinion at all of you, Allister. I do believe we share some similarities however.” She leaned back on the sofa heavily, running her fingers through her hair. Hair that was now messed up but she obviously wasn’t paying attention to it.

“Similarities?” Allister was almost afraid of the answer. She’d called him by his name which almost felt…wrong. Like it was forbidden. She was the scary second in command of Macro Cosmos, an eye for detail and eye for vengeance in equal measure. Strange didn’t begin to cover it.

“Yes. You don’t have to say anything.” Oleana gave him a brief, bored look. For someone who was always in control she looked exhausted, slumped back like a folded book. “I’ve read your file.”

“I h-have a file?”

“Every gym leader has a file on record. In fact I’m personally in charge of reviewing and editing them.”

That…makes sense. Secretaries do lots of typing…right?

“You have a large amount of anxiety. It almost cripples you. Chairman Rose wasn’t sure if you were ready.”

Hearing that crushed Allister’s small heart. After everything he’d gone through, everything he’d achieved, he still wasn’t good enough?

“I…”

“I get it though. Life hasn’t been kind to you, nor me. We both got our second chance though.” Oleana straightened herself up slightly, crossing her legs. “When I said you should have thanked Chairman Rose for scouting you out that wasn’t the whole story, if you care at all.” She was
clearly going to tell him either way and Allister was curious so he shut up. “Do you remember the
day your letter of approval came in the mail?”

“…I…do?” Allister furrowed his brow, stroking Mimikyu absentmindedly. “It…came a day late.
Bea was livid…she got so worked up over it…crazy.”

“That sounds like your adoptive sister.” It wasn’t a jibe or an insult…more of a blank comment.
“Chairman Rose was on the wall about whether you could be entrusted with running a gym. He
saw you had great potential as a trainer, it was obvious. However in his eyes it was an enormous
step up to being a gym leader from a trainer which is absolutely correct. He was leaning towards
delaying your application until the next challenger season.”

“…Oh…I don’t blame him honestly.”

“I convinced him otherwise.”

Allister’s eyes widened as far as they could go.

“Y-you…you?” It clicked. “You’re the reason my l-letter was late! You told him to…wait another
day and think it over…right?”

“That almost passes for observant.” Oleana hummed slightly, stroking her strange Pokéball again.
“I simply reminded him of what he did for me. He did all the rest of the work on his own.”

“…What…um you don’t have to a-answer actually…but I’m curious. What did he…do for you?”

“As I said, he gave me a second chance.” Oleana sighed. It was unsightly coming from her,
someone usually uptight to the point of inhumanity…but that’s exactly what made it interesting to
see. Oleana was human through and through, just strange. “I suppose I saw some of myself in you
when I was your age. Not a lot mind you, but some.”

“…”

“Bea would do anything for you, you know that do you not?” A ghost of an emotion that could
have passed for a smile had it been on anyone else’s lips flickered across her features.

“I…of course.” Allister hugged his knees. “She’s the best big sis I could ask for. I don’t…tell her
that enough. She got me a ghost Pokémon we don’t even have in Galar recently!” A smile crossed
his face. “Didn’t even tell me what she had to do to get one…I hope it wasn’t too much…”

“Well I’m glad you appreciate that either way.” Oleana stopped, noting his change in demeanour.
“I didn’t have anyone like that growing up. Your adoptive sister is…good for you.”

“…She is? I-I mean I know she is…but like…w-what do you mean?”

“She’s coming here even in the rain just to make sure you’re safe.”

“How did you…?”

“You got a message on your Rotom Phone while you were asleep. I read it because I felt like doing
so.”

“…Okay.”

“I answered it for you, letting her know.” Oleana uncrossed her legs, the click of her heels echoing
as they touched the floor. “She’s coming anyway. Battling through the worst storm Galar has seen
in generations just because she wants to.”

“And for training.”

“Yes that too I’m sure.” Oleana stood. “The Chairman believes it has something to do with ‘The Darkest Day’”.

“The Darkest day?”

“It’s a Galarian folk story. You should read up, diverse education is good for the brain at your age.”

“O-oh…”

“Anyway,” Oleana said dismissively, waving her hand. Whatever she had said clearly warranted no further discussion in her mind. “Would you like tea or coffee?”

“…You can do that?”

“I’m the vice president I can do what I want within reason. I’m also a secretary and know how to make tea and coffee. You still smell of sick and I dislike repeating myself as you know, so would you like tea or coffee?”

“I…would…t-thanks.” The taste of vomit was not something he’d enjoyed waking up to but a drink would be sure to help.

“It will warm us both up. I only came in today to grab a folder and yet the weather has made me tired.” Oleana began to walk off again, this time back to the reception counter. Allister followed her path with his eyes until he came upon a fixture on the end of the desk, resembling a kettle and spout.

*I’m glad Galarian’s like kettles as much as we do. Always on hand…for emergencies.* Mimikyu was awake now, stirred by the sound of the bubbling the kettle like device was beginning to make.

“You don’t drink coffee do you?”

“Kyuu…”

“Didn’t think so, heh. I’ll make sure you get something good when you get home, okay?”

“Mimi-kyu!” The snuggling up to his arm was an indicator in Allister’s book that had been the right thing to say.

“Thanks for being there for me again.”

“Mim-i-mikyu!” His Pokémon nudged his pokéball and returned. Allister found himself stroking its surface, only stopping when he realised he’d been mirroring Oleana’s earlier actions.

*If I’ve learned anything today…she isn’t made of stone…like people think. Whatever that Pokémon is she cares for it dearly.*

Speaking of, the woman in question was returning, two cups in tow. After thanking her (and another rebuttal) Allister lifted his mask and drank as best he could without having to take it off. He was surprised to note what he’d been given tasted neither quite like tea nor coffee, while Oleana sipped at her own cup in silence.
“This…is…?”

“Hot chocolate,” she finished. “That was in your file too. I’m not well versed in sweet things but I have done the best I could with our facilities.”

Allister pondered this for a moment. It definitely wasn’t like any sort of hot chocolate he’d ever drank before, it had a bitterness in its core that was mixed with a sweetness only packet sugar could produce. Whatever it was it was making him more alert than he’d expected, but not to the point of anxiety. More…an awareness of himself.

“Thanks, e-even if you don’t want it…”

“Just because it isn’t necessary doesn’t mean I don’t enjoy being thanked.” Allister tried to gauge the woman’s expression again, drawing a blank. She was staring into her own cup, almost lost as she’d been earlier.

“It’s black coffee with a pinch of sugar,” she answered before Allister could pose the question himself.

“…”

“…”

“…Do you g-get days off?” Allister found himself asking. He wasn’t really sure why he had, only that it had been blurted out to a silent room.

“…”

‘was just curious is all…”

“I get days off, kid, I’m not a slave.” A flicker of annoyance. “Chairman Rose gives me whatever days off I ask for. I just seldom take them. My choice.”

“Oh…yeah that makes sense…I mean everyone knows h-how hard you work.”

Oleana raised an eyebrow, balancing her cup on her knees.

“And here I thought people thought I was a lapdog and a yes-woman.”

“O-oh…um…”

“You can relax, I heard the sincerity in your voice. I’m just not deaf to criticism either.” Whether it was necessary or not Oleana stuck her index finger into the cup and stirred, the heat apparently not bothering her. “I’m a person too with my own skillset. What I want just so happens to be what the Chairman wants. If it weren’t for him I wouldn’t have the chance to do anything at all.”

“Like…at all?”

“At all,” she confirmed. Apparently content with her stirring Oleana downed the remainder of her cup in one fell swoop. Allister found himself mildly impressed with the feat, still sipping tentatively at his not quite coffee, not quite hot chocolate. “I have many skills I didn’t know I had before the Chairman found me. Did you know it was I who developed the Dynamax band prototype?”

“You did?” Allister shook his head, more than a little miffed. “I thought…secretaries didn’t do things…like that?”
“They don’t you’re not wrong. I was a researcher, a scientist if you will believe. I also designed large parts of the system here at Rose Tower.” She deftly pointed a manicured finger in the direction of the reception kiosk. “Including our uniform delivery system.”

“The clothes…,” Allister mumbled, tugging at his uniform.

“When you said you were impressed with the system I designed I was happy if you could tell. It is fine if you couldn’t.”

“…‘m glad it made you happy.”

Oleana ignored him, but then again that was no different to her reaction at being told her clothing delivery was good.

“I gave you the smallest standard size we have but even that is too large for you.” Oleana spared the ghost gym leader a glance. “You’re very thin, Allister.”

“I…that wasn’t a compliment either…was it?”

“You’re learning. I could almost tell you well done.” Oleana’s bored expression had returned, fingers drumming on the soft fabric of the sofa. “If someone were to tell me I was thin too I wouldn’t take it as one either.”

“…”

“I’m aware people see me as attractive I’m not deaf to that either. Whatever man or woman comes my way I turn down, they’re only after my looks…I know what it’s like for people to see right through you…nothing changed except for my looks…and it’s sickening that’s what people value…”

Allister could see her scrunching the fabric with each pause in her sentences, confused. Something was bothering her, that much was obvious even if her face gave nothing away.

“Y-you said we were similar, r-right?”

The look Oleana shot him was nothing short of terrifying in Allister’s book. It had only lasted for a second or so but in that time her entire face had contorted into the most vicious scowl a human face could possibly have produced and then some. Rock would most certainly have turned to magma under the gaze and Allister wanted nothing more than to hide, his heart pounding. This was definitely the Oleana everyone had been whispering about. And then…it was gone.

Oleana’s face softened considerably, taking note of Allister’s recoil.

“I…I apologise. That was not called for. You…are just a child. I shouldn’t direct my anger like that.”

“…That was v-very…”

“Scary, you don’t have to say. Again,” Oleana placed her cup to the floor. “I apologise.”

“It’s…it’s alright. P-people are a-allowed to be mad.” Allister hugged his knees to his chest on reflex. “I’m just jumpy…is all.”

“That much is plain to see.” Oleana slumped back into the confines of the sofa once again. “You’ve had a lot go on in your life even at your age. Due to your file I know more or less what. I
suppose hearing you say what I have been saying to you made me feel angry.”

“At…what?”

“Hmmm, I’m not entirely sure.” The secretary mirrored Allister, pulling her knees up onto the sofa, crossing her arms and placing them on top. “Our childhoods have made us both thin people. Unnaturally so. I was homeless for a very long time, I never ate very much nor had I the opportunity to do so. You…lost a great deal of weight from an already small body because of stress.”

“…Yeah.” Oleana had said she’d spare the details of saying exactly what he’d had to deal with but the reference alone was a feeling in and of itself. Still…there wasn’t a way around it and he appreciated her tact on the matter. He still cried to Bea about it during the nights sometimes.

*Most times.* Allister mentally corrected himself. *She puts up with so much from me. I need to do more for her. More importantly…the vice president was homeless? She’s so…put together. I wouldn’t have guessed that…oh.* Allister put the pieces together. *That’s exactly her point.*

“I suppose…I got annoyed that society sees us both as beautiful…or in your case they will do in time. Our battered bodies are just prizes in the end even though we both have sticks for arms. I’ve already heard comments about you being ‘mysterious’ and ‘charming’ with your demeanour. Still…such is fame, the League, and the public eye. No other way around it.”

Oleana gave Allister a look, and Allister wasn’t sure what it was trying to convey. It was…sympathy almost. Something close anyway.

“I suppose you still don’t know what I’m trying to say, do you?”

“Not…really…” Allister admitted. Oleana slipped further back into the sofa.

“I’m not very good with facial expressions. I try my best but I’m just imitating what I see around me. We both wear masks, kid. However you get to take yours off whenever you feel like even if that’s rare. I don’t emote like regular people. It’s…lost on me.”

“I…” Allister considered the information for a moment. A lot of what Oleana had said rang true, considering what he knew now. “Even if we…both wear our masks. I don’t think we’re lesser for it?”

“…”

“You know about my parents, we don’t have to hide it.” Allister didn’t miss the glance he’d gotten but thankfully she remained silent. “And I’m starting to understand…a little about you. People look at us…seeing what they want to and not w-what we are, right?”

“…Sounds about right. I think…,” Oleana cracked her back unceremoniously. Years of stress could do that apparently, Allister wondered whether Bea could do that too with her training. “…that if more people saw things like you did we might have a better society.”

“Including the s-seeing ghosts part?”

“I…I will make a note of that in your file. Clearly they’re not as complete as I believed.” Oleana paused. “It makes a degree of sense though. Life wasn’t kind to either of us.”

“Still…we both g-good things in our lives right? Goals? We’re people too…”
Oleana wordlessly took Allister’s finished cup from him, her own in the other hand and placed them on the reception desk.

“Indeed. I now have the Chairman and his goals to consider. You have your sister and your responsibilities as a gym leader. Speaking of,” Oleana checked the time at the computer the reception housed. “Significant time has passed. She should be arriving soon. I’m not sure of what her plan is when she arrives. It is still raining.”

She right, Allister knew. What Bea was actually going to do was a mystery but it was the thought that counted. Allister also took note that Oleana was now walking away, heading towards the door she’d initially left by.

“Where are you going?”

“I still have work to do. I’m not entirely sure why I stayed as long as I did, but I must return to my tasks.”

“Y-you’re not gonna stay until my sis arrives?” Olean stopped.

“I don’t think so. You may tell her I said ‘hi’ if you wish. I’ve had enough interactions for one day. I’m sure you can relate.”


“You don’t need to be disappointed in yourself.”

“H-huh?” Allister raised his head again to see Oleana looking back over her shoulder. It was barely perceptible but she was giving him a look that indicated support of a type.

“It is as you said. Neither of us are wrong in the ways we act. We’re people too.”

Allister could feel his face getting hot under the mask, a tiny smile crossing his face.

“Yeah…”

“I think…I needed to hear that, now you need to believe your own words.”

“I will…try. A-and…um…thanks for helping me…become a gym leader.” Allister resisted the urge to fidget, knowing it was just nerves. “I really l-like it, even if…I don’t always win.”

“Good. Trying is all anyone can ask of anyone. No gym leader wins all of the time.” Oleana swiped her keycard to the far door. “You are strong in a way that normal people can’t comprehend, and you will make a fine gym leader. However…don’t hide yourself away. Let your sister and others help you in the ways you struggle with.”

“I understand, t-thanks. Why are you telling me this?”

Oleana shrugged.

“You needed to hear it. I’m a scary woman and I think if you’re not going to listen to me then no one will get through to you.”

“…”

“Also, no one will ever believe I said any of this. Some ‘shit like that’ as kids say these days. I’d apologise for the profanity…but I don’t feel like it.”
“I…h-heh. I understand, Miss Oleana.”

“Good. You may keep the uniform.” And just like that she was gone. The two cups of finished coffee and hot chocolate were the only indicators she’d ever even been here. Allister wondered what had just happened, coming to no solid conclusions. Even the gesture of the coffee itself was not something he’d ever expected to receive.

_Honestly I really did just expect to be kicked out for trespassing. I think I like this better._

His clothes passed for dry now, Macro Cosmos didn’t skip on their heating bill apparently. Allister was all the more grateful but didn’t change back, noting the rain’s adamant refusal to budge even a little. He ran his fingers over the back of his hoodie, reflecting.

_Miss Oleana is not the person I thought she would be. Lots of people judge me based on how I look…I shouldn’t have judged her like that._ Allister then remembered her scary face and shuddered. _Though she can still be a right scary woman if she wants to be…_

Allister sat himself back on the sofa. The floor was completely dry now he noticed. Not a trace of water nor his earlier mishap.

_She’s right no one would believe me if I told them about her. Well…Bea might. Be nice to know I’m not going crazy or imagined the whole thing._

It was another 10 minutes before Bea burst through the front of the Rose Tower building, drenched beyond belief. Wild eyes, windswept hair that was notably missing its usual headband, and panting due to the exertion she made a beeline through reception to Allister. Thankfully she restrained herself on giving him a hug just yet, not even bothering to use the towel he was still in possession of.

“Uh sis, what’s the plan for getting back…?”

The colour drain for her face wasn’t something Allister got to see everyday but at this point today wasn’t all that surprising anymore. Today hadn’t gone at all as he’d planned, heck he could have still been exploring that abandoned building if the rain hadn’t come.

“…I didn’t think that far ahead. I just wanted to make sure you were safe.”

“Thanks, Bea. It’s the thought that counts. Let’s wait this one out.”

Chapter End Notes

This was over 7000 words I went overboard with this one but it was so much fun. There's no beta hope that isn't blatantly obvious heh.

I like how the fandom has collectively given Oleana the backstory she has, and it's one I wholeheartedly subscribe to. It makes a lot of sense with the way she is.

Bea tried her best, can't be mad at her ^_^
Illness (of the Mind?)

Chapter Summary

With Allister falling ill after being out in the storm, Bea decides to take on his gym challenger herself. Calling Melony to look after him while she’s gone leads to some unpleasant emotions emerging.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“The challenger is out of Pokémon! Gym leader Allister is our winner, folks!!!”

Amidst the reverberations of the booming voice around the stadium, Bea could feel her heart swelling with pride. His second ever official battle and he’d aced it, even giving an awkward little wave to the crowd before shambling off the pitch.

“He didn’t even need to dynamax to win. They got tripped up by Mimikyu’s disguise, makes me wonder how they were able to beat my gym so easily…”

Bea turned her head to the man sitting next to her.

“That’s no way to speak, gym leader Kabu. The challenger had a lot of water types.”

Kabu had decided to show up to Stow-on-side’s stadium on a whim, knowing it was the same trainer who had beaten him not a week earlier. He was nothing if not diligent in his learning and Bea found herself admiring the older man. Never giving up nor wavering despite his misfortunes.

“Perhaps.” Kabu was instead focused on the spot where Allister had been standing. “However your brother was not fighting at his best either and still prevailed.”

“Ah…you noticed that?” Bea shook her head. Of course he had, Kabu was a very experienced trainer with a wealth of knowledge. Years ahead in terms of discipline even to herself.

“I did. His movements when giving directions to his Cursola were sluggish.” The fire leader shook his head, resting his chin on his hands. “I hope he hasn’t come down with an illness though it seems likely.”

Bea had to suspend her disbelief; not many things got past Kabu.

“A couple of days ago he was caught in that storm. He might have gotten a cold from it.”

Kabu turned to her, doing his best to ignore the rowdiness of the fans around him. While the din certainly added to the atmosphere of the gym experience it was no place for polite conversation.

“He did? That was certainly the most rain I’ve seen in many years. The only time I’ve ever seen a downpour that severe was when I was still in Hoenn!”

“Aah yes, from ‘those fools’ as you put it?” Bea had heard all of the stories of Team Aqua and Magma’s infamous exploits first hand from Kabu, as had the other gym leaders during their
conferences. To live through events like that and live to tell the tale was certainly something else.

“Quite. Nothing as bad as that here though I hope.” Kabu looked around him. It was best practice to not try to push past people when leaving. His politeness never allowed it, even if meant staying a little longer. “I understand you were caught in the same storm to try and rescue him as well?”

“Voluntarily caught,” Bea corrected. “He got himself stranded outside of Rose Tower so I went to make sure he was safe.”

“Haha!” Bea earned herself a hearty clap on the back. “Truly you have a fiery spirit and indomitable will! Perhaps you should have been a fire type specialist instead?”

Bea found herself smiling, though made sure no one but Kabu had seen. Showing weakness was definitely not something she wanted to make a habit of, especially not in as populated a place as a Pokémon stadium.

“Coming from you, sir, that means the world to me.”

“There’s no need for honorifics like that, I’ve told you.” The older man shook his head, clearly reminiscing. Call me ‘gym leader’ if you must but we share a title, there is no need when we are as equals.”

“I will…try my best. Do know I look up to you, though.”

This prompted another laugh.

“As I do to you! The young and old generations can both learn from each other. Why I remember the days when I had a Blaziken by my side! Both fire and fighting!”

Bea let him continue on, supressing her urge to smile was difficult around Kabu was always difficult but she managed. Listening to him talk about his past days as a gym challenger in Hoenn, his inspiration from the Lavaridge Town gym leader in becoming a solely fire type trainer, his experience with the phenomenon known as mega evolution…he was a true fountain of knowledge and enthusiasm.

She’s even admit later that she’d altered her training regime slightly to incorporate elements of his own. Of course, now wasn’t the time for her to faun over him; the crowd was starting to disperse slightly.

She was glad Allister had allowed her to watch his second match but regretted she’d had to sit so far back in the stands to do so. Fallen trees and branches from the storm had made getting anywhere in Stow-on-side (or indeed anywhere in Galar at the present moment) difficult and she’d been late because of it; having Pangoro and Machamp help her punch aside the trees wasn’t an option now that people were outside again.

“I think we’re in the clear to be going.” Kabu stood, jogging on the spot as he was prone to do. “You had best check up on your brother, given what you said he likely has a cold brewing. He’ll need to take it easy for a quick recovery.”

Bea bowed slightly, clasping her hands.

“I will bear that in mind, gym leader Kabu. I just hope I’m able to persuade him to let me take any challengers if he falls unwell.”

“If anybody can do it, it will be you. Come, let us be off.”
“Quite.”

*I wonder if I will, the success today will have definitely motivated Allister. It’s going to be unfortunate if he has to stop his momentum like this…*

“Allister you’re ill.”

“Mmno…I’m…SNIFF…not.” The great show of sniffling and otherwise throat clearing did nothing to convince Bea otherwise. It was now the morning after his last gym battle and, as Kabu had predicted, Allister had come down with a cold.

*Who knew that being out in the freezing rain was bad for you? Guess I have all my training to thank that I haven’t caught one yet.*

Seeing Allister’s frail body laying on his bed, covers feebly pulled around himself like he was trying to hide from his headache was like a gut punch to Bea. Frail…Bea had no option but to call it frail. She had to be honest with herself about her brother’s body, it was nowhere near in the shape she was in terms of physicality. He could handle stairs and walking, lifting if he had to, but actual illnesses always crippled him.

He was a far sight better than when she’d first met him that was for sure, he could actually move without shaking now. Some ‘meat on his bones’ as Raihan would say but he was still thin. Any less and Marowak would be trying to add him to their collections. Bea found herself thankful that they weren’t Galarian natives or they might be trouble.

*Why he’s suddenly interested in exercise and swimming is beyond me. He’s definitely hiding something from me.* Bea did her best to dispel those thoughts, smoothing the blankets over her brother. *This isn’t the time to bring this up. Right now he needs me.*

“I…I g-got a challenger *cough* this afternoon.” Allister tried and failed to remove the duvet, his strength clearly depleted beyond even that already. “‘m gonna walk it off. Like you do.”

“Alli, please. Don’t hurt yourself. You need rest.” Bea brushed some of her brother’s hair away from the top of his head. He still insisted on wearing his mask even now; no doubt there were germs building up on the side of it. His nose was running if the sniffing was anything to go by which made it all the worse. Allister tried to brush her off. It was like fluttering tissue paper meeting a steel wall but Bea respected the gesture and backed off all the same.

“I need to go…I can be strong…just like you!”

“…” Bea didn’t have a good response to that. Allister was using the only thing she couldn’t refute. As she sat on the edge of his bed Bea took his temperature lightly.

*Burning.*

“I’ll be fine…jus’ gotta be strong…”

“…Do you want your cereal? I can bring it to you?”

“T-thanks, sis.”

Bea said nothing, already knowing his response in advance. Once Allister had an idea it was hard to make him let go of it. She knew she’d have to be subtle if anything was to happen. Bea stood and walked out of the room, taking one last look at her brother before leaving. It was hard on her,
she really wasn’t sure what she could do to persuade him. She wasn’t the sort of person who was good with words.

*Everything I do I just sort of make up as I go along. I never had a good example to follow when I was living at home, compassion and all that. Neither can I just do the opposite of what my parents did. I need…balance.*

Bea returned with his cereal, Allister thanking her through his coughs. Bea didn’t really mind being coughed all over but it still wasn’t ideal. Still, she stayed with him, waiting until he had messily slurped the last of the milk.

“…doesn’t taste of anything today.”

“Your nose is blocked.” Bea took the bowl back, trying not to touch the spoon. She stopped, an idea forming in her head. “How do you think you would get rid of your blocked nose, Alli?”

“By…by fighting it!” Bea gave him a quizzical look.

“Are you just saying that because you think it’s the response you think I want to hear?”

“…I mean…that’s how you usually do it, right?” Bea shook her head.

“Not all of the time. Meditating and waiting is its own skill. You remember?”

“I…” Allister clearly wasn’t in any shape to be thinking hard but he gave it his best shot. “That sounds about right.”

“So if I said waiting your cold out is the best way to fight it, would you believe me?”

“I do, Bea, b-but my gym match…”

“If you expend all your energy fighting your cold you’ll just make it stay for longer.”

“…”

“…Besides you did very well yesterday. I’m very proud of you.”

“T-thanks…*SNIFF…*sis.”

“Gym leader Kabu enjoyed it too, and he agrees that rest is the best course of action from you.” Allister lifted his mask slightly to wipe his nose; Bea caught his hand before it got too far, placing a paper towel into his open palm. “And don’t wipe it on your sleeves.”

“R-right…” Allister snorted into the tissue, a disgusting sound in all honesty but it was better out than in. “Mr. K-Kabu really said that?”

“He did.” Bea always found it humorous how they both had their own way of addressing the older gym leader. He never cared for the honorifics but he received them all the same. “He knows the value of resting your body as much as pushing it. Right now it’s resting time, not fighting time. If you won’t listen to me then try to listen to him.”

Allister shook his head, tossing the dirty tissue in the vague direction of the bin. It landed next to the others, next to it in a pile.

“N’aww I’m listening, sis, don’t worry. I *cough* get it. You don’t meditate for no reason.”
That was…surprisingly easy. The cold has to be clouding his head I’ve never been able to talk him down like that before. Or…maybe I’m just getting better?

“I’m…glad you understand.”

“I’m j-just sad about today’s challenge. I r-really enjoyed yesterday even if it was terrifying. Bein’ a gym leader is tops!” Bea ruffled Allister’s locks slightly, smiling gently.

“I know the feeling. It’s a rush, being out there with your Pokémon feels good doesn’t it?” Allister nodded. “The adrenaline must have been holding back the worst of your cold, huh?” Another nod. “We’re on the same page. I’ve got to say I’m grateful for that.”

“I know…you’ve got my…” Allister almost sounded as if he was falling back to sleep. A full belly of cereal would definitely do that, Bea mused. “…My best interests…at heart. ‘M just bad at showing I understand.”

“You’re doing great today,” Bea reassured, wrapping a lock of hair around her finger. “I’m proud of you. I know I said it already but I’ll never stop saying it.”

“T-thanks…s’nice to hear…” Bea stayed with her brother another few minutes as his stifled breathing became as rhythmic as it could endeavour to be before turning to the door.

“If I take on your challenger today, how about you take mine next week? That way you’ll still get another battle.” Bea felt Allister tense ever so slightly, but was relieved to feel him relax.

“…Alright. You win, I’ll stay and rest. Stupid rain…”

“It was very stupid rain,” Bea agreed. “If I’m going out later I’ll need to find someone to watch over you here.” Allister coughed for the umpteenth time.

“Aww crumbs…guess that makes sense though.”

Bea noted that the cold was also supressing Allister’s natural desire to run and hide, or interact with other people in anyway. It was slightly unfair to him, but it was the only good aspect of him being ill that had presented itself. Bea always took openings when she could get them.

“I’ll give Melony a ring, how about that?”

“…M’kay.”

Bea sincerely hoped he wasn’t just saying that or spacing out. Waking up with someone he wasn’t familiar with in the house was just asking for trouble.

“You know who that is?”

Allister nodded, slower than last time.

“Ice…gym leader. White-ish hair…like snowy mountains.”

“And you know you can trust her? Trusting her is like trusting me, okay?” She posed her last statement as a question too, wanting to make absolutely sure he understood.

“Y-yeah…I know.”

Not the conviction Bea had been hoping for but it was better than the ‘Absolutely no way, sis’ she’d been expecting. Today was definitely a good day.
“Good.” Bea scooped the bowl up, careful not to tread on the pyramid of loose tissues that had accumulated next to the bin. “I’m…” She turned back, unsure of how to phrase herself. “I’m glad you’ve taken to being a gym leader. It means…a lot to me. A whole lot.”

“Heh…d-don’t be gettin’ emotional, sis.” She could feel him smiling under his mask. The warmth in her heart spreading was proof if she ever needed it. Not that she did. “Got a challenger, remember?”

Bea gave him a playful bat around the ear before disappearing off to the kitchen.

_Honestly._ She didn’t bother hiding her smile though. In her own home she could express as much joy as she wanted at her brother’s progress. It was still a mountain to climb but having a basecamp was a victory in its own right.

Melony wasn’t too hard to reach either, contrary to what Bea had expected. Having 5 kids did wonders for sapping her time but the ice type specialist always made time for others. That was just how she was. Some even called her ‘the mother to all the league’ and it was a title she embraced wholeheartedly. Bea hoped she wasn’t taking advantage of that when she called.

“Bea you have the most perfect timing!”

“I do?” Definitely not what she’d been expecting to hear.

“You do, what can I do for you?”

Though the connection was still shaky and crackled due to the storm’s lingering influence, Bea was able to explain the situation with Allister and the gym.

“The poor thing! I’ll be over as soon as I can. Shouldn’t be too long, honey.”

A click and the line went dead.

_That was more abrupt than I’d expected._

Bea frowned slightly. She’s seemed…on edge somehow. For Melony that only ever meant one thing unfortunately.

She had another disagreement with Gordie.

Bea sat herself at the kitchen table, noting the chair Milo had sat on had never been the same. Those creaks definitely hadn’t been there before she’d left for those groceries. Bea didn’t mind, Milo was great to be around and Allister’s grades had never been better. He’d even stuttered out that he was actually **looking forward** to going to school some days. Bea felt the warmth inside her grow even brighter, but judder to a halt as she refocused into the present moment.

_Did I just provide an escape for Melony? I hope I’m not enabling her. It was just a coincidence I called at the time I did. Plus Melony and Gordie fighting is what Circhester is known for anyway, it’s hardly a rare occurrence. She’s the best person to be around Allister right now, I hope he can help her too. People just seem to open up to him for some reason. I wish…_

Bea stopped herself dead. Those were dangerous thoughts and led to nowhere good.

_I’m glad Allister and I don’t have it as bad as Melony and Gordie. Not nearly as bad._

Still, Bea deeply regretted any and all times they fought. It was usually over trivial things but it
always hurt. The major ones were few and far between.

*When we first moved in the house...when he got lost on the way to school...when he was being bullied at school...close when he tried to camp outside for the night but thankfully not.*

“I hope it isn’t just the adrenaline and cold talking that’s made him take to his matches. I know he’s still scared stiff by having to walk out and perform in front of so many people. His masks are all that separates him from them.”

She didn’t have a problem with voicing her thoughts aloud. Her training had taught her that speaking out could bring a new perspective to old problems. Keeping things inside only made them burn hotter and never in the good, wholesome way. Besides, the only ones around were her and Allister, aside from Mimikyu in the living room; Bea poked her head around the corner.

“Hey...do you need me to get anything? I’m going out soon.”

“...kyuuuuuu,” the Pokémon growled. Bea observed it huddled in the corner slowly sewing its busted disguise back together. Having it torn apart in matches came with the territory unfortunately. It always got in a mood after that but Bea understood. Having your one shield from the world cut away by the sword of exposure would put anyone in a bad state. Allister and Mimikyu both.

“I have to keep being the amazing big sister he believes I am. Perfect and unfaltering, the ideal he looks up to...a real role model. Am I...am I really all of that? Do I deserve having him look up to me like that?”

Bea might have been disciplined but that didn’t mean she didn’t have her own insecurities. Even if Allister’s outnumbered hers 10 to 1 she was still human.

*I’m allowed to have feelings. Despite what my parents tried to drill into me. There is no shame...in showing how you feel.*

No matter how many times she repeated it to herself at the end of the day it was just empty words. No oomph or drive to back them up. Hollow. Bea couldn’t bring herself to drop her guard in front of people it was just too ingrained.

Allister would admit to her that she was the only family he had, but in a sense the reverse was true as well. Allister was the only one she could really be herself around. Her whole thought process during his gym match this morning was a good an example as any.

Bea stomped her foot down in mild frustration, though not going as far as to bang her head on the kitchen table. Even letting Kabu see her smile was something incredibly tough for her and she found herself wishing it wasn’t this way.

*There’s no shame in...ugh, why do I bother? Why am I thinking all of these things today? What’s gotten into me?*

Bea shook her head, at a loss. People weren’t totally logical and could just feel things at random whether they made sense or not. She’d been so happy that her brother was taking to the gym as well as he was and now...she didn’t know. She was still happy, the issue wasn’t with him, just herself. Bea shook her head again; now wasn’t the time for self-reflection. Whatever this was could wait.

A burst of knocks at the door startled Bea back to her senses.
That was decidedly quick. I suppose that’s why we use Corviknight’s in the taxi service.”

Bea opened the door, immediately being brought into an enormous hug by the woman outside. Not unexpected but the strength of the embraces always caught her slightly off guard. Her physique really shouldn’t have enabled it but clearly there were gaps in her knowledge.

“Bea, it’s so good to see you again!” Melony released her, wandering into the house of her own accord.

“Ms. Melony, it’s always good to have you here. Please make yourself at home.” Bea knew it was slightly redundant to say such a thing as Melony was always forward enough in her actions but the politeness was still something she felt obligated to do.

“Ohoho, my dear gym leader there’s no need for any of that y’know? Just ‘Melony’ will do as I always say ♪

…”Of course.”

Kabu says the same. I still can’t help it.

“You’re not wearing your headband, honey. Special occasion?” Melony’s back was to her, instead browsing the photos that adorned the living room wall. Still the question was posited to her; Bea’s hand reflexively went to her hair, then let it drop slowly. She’d loved that headband.

“I…lost it. In the storm. It blew away in the winds.”

Melony immediately lost interest in the photos (though Bea noted her gaze lingering on the Galar gym leader photoshoot with Gordie), walking over to her.

“Oh but it looked so good on you!” Melony clasped her hands together, folding them. “Whatever were you out in that awfulness for?”

“Allister was stranded in Wyndon. With the trains and taxi not running I had to go on foot.”

“You’re saying that like it’s no mean feat! Well done to you!” Melony was already patting her on the head so Bea didn’t resist. It was exactly the sort of thing she did with Allister all the time so to be on the receiving end was always an experience. Not a bad one though.

“Thank you…Melony.”

“Heh, look at you trying to be informal. I appreciate that too.” Melony’s mouth opened to a wide grin. “You’re a tough cookie running out through the storm like that. Allister is lucky to have you!”

“He…yeah. I guess.” Melony noted her change in expression, even if it was hidden well. She had enough kids of her own to know when a person was holding back.

“You’re looking a little rough around the edges, Bea. Something on your mind? It isn’t just the headband is it?”

“I…” Bea met the older woman’s gaze. Calming yet discerning. Before she knew what was happening she was sitting down on the sofa next to Melony. “You’re here for Allister, not me. He needs you…”

Melony shook her head, still smiling. It was a different kind of smile now, more wistful.

“Honey, just because one of my kids gets ill doesn’t mean I don’t notice when another is feeling
down. I’ve got time for you, you know that. I’ll always have time.”

It was things like that which made Bea hold the utmost respect for the other woman. She wasn’t just saying it either. Battling through a storm was one thing but having the emotional strength to be there when people need you most was far stronger in her eyes.

“Is that right?”

Bea jolted slightly, realising what had just happened.

“Did I…just say that out loud?” Melony nodded, encouraging her to go on. “It is true though. I don’t know…I do wonder how good I am for Allister. I…don’t ever say so to him because he doesn’t need that in his life right now. Maybe not ever. He needs a calm and strong big sister. I don’t know why these feelings are coming up now, I should be happy right? Alli just won his second gym match today and I definitely am happy for him. I’m really, really proud at how far he’s come and what he’ll go on to do.”

Melony hadn’t interrupted her once during her short monologue, and for that Bea was grateful. She could be strict but there was a certain kind of patience too. One earned from many years of hard slog and discipline that Bea had yet to master.

“Well honey, you wanna talk about progress I think you’ve made much more than you realise.”

“I…hmmm?”

“When I first met you, you tried your best to make me think you were made of stone. Having you be honest and open up to me is a victory in itself. Not just that but opening up and being honest to yourself is something not everyone can do. Gordie……he struggles with that too.”

“Oh…I’m sorry if I brought up some bad memories for you.”

“Hah!” Melony was grinning again. “Don’t think of it like that. We’re always going to have our differences, that’s plain as day, so don’t got worrying about that. If I’m going to be honest though I do worry about you, Bea. There’s an awful lot on your plate right now, same as your brother.”

“…”

“You know he thinks the world of you, right? He’d do anything for you when it comes right down to it.”

“I…know that. Of course I know that.”

“If you can’t convince yourself you’re gonna have a hard time convincing me honey.”

“…”

“It’s true you’re wondering about how much you’re doing for him and whether it’s enough, but I think your real fear is having him grow up and not need you anymore…”

“Enough!” Bea averted her eyes, pulling herself away. Even Mimikyu stopped briefly before continuing. “I…I’m sorry for shouting…but that’s enough.”

Melony always had a way with words. Perceptive to the point of cutting right down to the bone of any issue. Bea could see why someone with a temper, such as Gordie, would lose his cool over that.
“You’re thinking about Gordie, right? Hiding how you’re feeling manifests in different ways from person to person.” Melony sighed, slowly rising from the sofa and returning to look at the photos. “For him it was running away for 2 and a half years and travelling. For you…well your parents built you your own personal stone tower. Battlements, moat, the works. ‘Closed for entry’” She said, miming the air quotes with her fingers.

“…”

“I understand you, Bea, I really do. You think once Allister is ‘better’ he’ll leave you because he won’t ‘need you’. Right?”

“……………………………Yeah.” Bea scrunched up her eyes. Melony definitely did have a way with words. Bea hated, loathed even, thinking this way but she couldn’t help it. “It’s the one part of me I’m genuinely disgusted with. Allister is so much better with people than I am he just doesn’t realise it. When he’s ready I’m scared to lose him, I guess. I might be strong but so is a rock. A rock doesn’t make for a great friend if you don’t need to cling to one for support though. It’s just boring and useless.”

“If things were really like that then we wouldn’t be having this conversation. You care, you’re a human just like everyone else, Bea. You’re allowed to have feelings.”

*I’m allowed to have feelings. It’s good to hear someone else say it too.*

“I…know. I know.” Bea let out a breath she didn’t know she’d been holding. “Why are these feelings coming up now, Melony? Why am I feeling the way I am?” Melony shook her head, humming.

“Couldn’t tell you, honey. If I could then I’d be smartest person in the world. No one knows why anything happens when it comes to emotions. My guess is seeing Allister take to his position so quickly is something you hadn’t expected.”

“It’s true,” Bea admitted. “I’m so glad he likes it but it’s only his second match. I hope he isn’t getting carried away by the adrenaline.”

“Heh, maybe.” Melony rested a finger on a photo of Allister and Bea at the park. Bea’s face impassive, Allister doing his best to hide in plain sight. “You’re the kind of person who lives and dies by routine, meditating and eating at the same times of day every day. Having the status quo change like that was a big shock to your system and you just didn’t realise it.”

“I…”

“And furthermore,” Melony continued, ignoring the attempted butt in with a practiced ease. “You were planning on bottling those feelings up and not sharing them with anyone. In your eyes there isn’t anyone you can share any of this with. It’s just you. Alone.”

“Melony…”

“Well honey, I’m hear to tell you that just isn’t true. You can talk to people about these sorts of issues. Milo would drop everything in heartbeat to come help and you know he would.”

*He would. He has done.*

“Nessa knows how these kind of things work. That girl she’s with, what’s her face…?”

“Sonia?”
“That’s the one. Professor’s granddaughter. Terribly insecure about living in her gran’s shadow so she knows exactly what it’s like to have feelings you can’t control, about things you think no one gets. Nessa might be an ice queen on stage but she’s got a good heart, helping Sonia like she does.”

“…”

“Kabu and I have been around the block a bit, Opal more than a bit ahaha. Between us we’ve seen and heard pretty much everything, honey. Feelings, relationships, kids, fights, the lot. We’ll always be there for you to turn to if you really need us. Even Opal isn’t that cruel to turn someone away who genuinely needs help.”

“…That’s good to hear. All of it.”

“You think Piers doesn’t know about holding back feelings for the sake of family? He never wanted to take on the gym and the kid blames himself for Spikemuth going down the toilet. Not on him, but he shoulders it all for his sister. Remind you of anyone?”

“I…” Bea tried to ignore the pointed look she was getting.

“And Raihan…well he knows how to deal with frustration and negativity better than anyone, losing to Leon at every turn. I’m sure if you spoke to him about what you’re going through he’d be a good shoulder to lean on.”

“I can’t just give my problems to others.”

“Giving and sharing are different.” Melony let her eyes drift back to the photo of the gym leaders gathered in front of Rose tower, the day of the tournament season’s beginning. Gordie at one end, herself at the other. Clicking her tongue, she took note of Bea and Allister at the front on account of their height. “We humans are social creatures, just like Pokémon are. Forgive me for speaking out of turn but…”

Bea hitched a breath. Melony seldom asked for permission to do with anything so whatever she was about to say was beyond serious.

“…I don’t think your parents were right to do what they did with you. They’ve confused you with being stoic and staying strong and a bunch of crap you just don’t need in your life.” Melony looked back to Bea, eyes closed again. “I can’t imagine trying to cut the heart out of one of my kids like that. I…I’m sorry I shouldn’t say things like that about your folks.”

“It’s okay. I can understand your point of view.” Bea opened her eyes again. She didn’t have any tears to give anyway. “I’m not saying I disagree with your views either, but it does me no good to think that way. The past is fixed and I have to deal with the me I am now. I think…I think if I focused on who I might have been if my parents were different it would destroy me from the inside. Maybe I wouldn’t even know Alli if that was true, so I’ve got to believe this was the best way. For me, and for him.”

Melony nodded slowly, coming away from the pictures and facing the fighting type leader head on.

“That’s very mature of you, Bea. Living in the past does no one any good and I’m hardly one to talk. I think about how things could have been different if Gordie and I got along better all the time. Doesn’t do me any good but I think about it all the same. That’s human as well.”

“Being human is a lot of things.”
“Well isn’t that the understatement of the year! Hey…” She lowered her voice slightly. “I’m genuinely sorry for what I said to make you snap at me. I just…”

“You just did it to make me start thinking properly, I know. I forgive you. You’re as blunt as they come and people trust you for it, me included.”

Another round of hair ruffling made Bea almost glad she’d lost her headband. Couldn’t very well have her hair played with with it in the way now could she?

“Bea, Allister won’t ever leave you. He really does think the world of you and it won’t change when he learns to find confidence in himself.”

“He…won’t?”

“He won’t,” Melony echoed. “He won’t suddenly forget all the times you stood by him when he was beaten down and out, all the times you were there for him when no one else could reach him, all the times you made sure he was okay when he didn’t even know he needed it. No, he’s going to look back on those times and appreciate them all the more and be so, so grateful you stuck by him when he thought he didn’t deserve it.” Melony waved her fist to the ceiling to emphasise the point further. “That you invested time and energy into him when he thought he was a lost cause. You’re not just his sister, Bea, you’re his damn hero and nothing will ever change that, you hear me? He wouldn’t trade you for anything in this world…ever.”

“I…thanks.”

“Are you…?” Melony hadn’t immediately realised it (and neither had Bea for that matter) but for the first time in a very very long time…Bea had started to cry.

“I’m fine…I’m just grateful.” Melony decided there and then that Bea had the most wonderful smile when she was being genuine. More radiant than any fire type, and maybe even enough to melt her entire team into mush. It was nothing short of beautiful.

“Oh honey, let me get you a tissue.” Of course, Melony always carried a pack or three at all times, which Bea accepted gratefully. So much for finding her brother’s nose blowing to be unsightly but she didn’t care.

“I really…needed to hear…that. Badly. Thank you, Melony. I wouldn’t trade Allister for anything or anyone in this damn world, I don’t care what’s on offer. He’s my brother… and I love him so…damn much.”

“Hey, those kind of thoughts were always in your head, y’know? They were just being clouded and buried by other, nastier ones that you didn’t have any control over. You letting loose is proof that hiding your emotions away isn’t a good thing, I hope you realise that.”

“Y-yeah, I get it…”

“Let me share a secret with you, Bea,” Melony whispered, leaning in. “That’s the power of opening up to someone.” Melony had never once heard Bea laugh before, so was more than a little surprised at the sounds passing the girls lips. It was definitely laughter though, and it was simply adorable.

“Simply adorable,” she reaffirmed. “When you laugh and smile I see the person you really are, Bea. Not this stuffy lump of playdough that you’ve been forced to imitate your whole life. I’d… well I’d be darn proud if you were my kid. Hope that isn’t going to far to say, but it’s true.”
“Melony,” Bea remarked, wiping her eyes dry with the rest of the tissue. “I’d be honoured if you were my mother. I think anyone would.”

“That’s so sweet of you! Aww c’mere!” This time Bea didn’t resist the hug; Melony was always the best at them, no hard bits just warm soft goodness that even a Stufful would be envious of. She’d always been taught that physical contact was for karate only, or the handshake afterwards but she was slowly starting to realise that simply wasn’t true. Contact made you **more** human, not less.

“Gordie’s honoured too, he’s just bad at showing it.”

“True, you two do have a lot in common with not being able to share your feelings.”

“…” Definitely. I hope we both get better, for the family in our lives that we need.”

“Hey, family is all we got when it comes down to it.”

“…” Bea didn’t want to let go but decided enough was enough. She still wasn’t at the level she could appreciate the gesture fully without feeling awkward but progress was progress.  

*Same as I tell Alli. The little steps are no less important than the big ones. Practicing what I preach and not being a hypocrite is a good start.*

“Thanks for getting me to open up, Melony. I…I really was just going to leave and keep everything to myself.

“I know honey and it’s okay. It’s all you’ve ever known really. I know you called me here to look after Allister but it doesn’t mean you don’t need a mom around either.”

“You’re everyone’s mother, Melony.” Bea let her hair continue to be stroked, vaguely wondering what Melony liked like without her hat on. She’d never actually seen her without it now that she thought about it. “How do you do it? I wish…I wish I had that kind of strength.”

“Shhh…none of that. You do, honey, you do. It’s inside you just waiting to come out. You’ll see.”

“Yeah…I will. I will!”

“That’s the spirit! Honestly,” the ice leader informed, “that’s my strength right there. Seeing people change for the better, however small. Knowing that you can do something to help someone who thinks they’ve got nowhere to go. It’s a great motivator.”

“…” That’s very noble.”

“Oohoho, you say that but I my words weren’t empty, honey. I meant what I said about you having that kind of strength as well. After all haven’t you been doing exactly that with Allister? You’re his sword and shield.”

“…”

“Yeah…just like the legendary Hero?”

“Exactly! Or maybe there’s two?” Melony stuck a finger to her cheek in thought. “No one’s really sure.” She waved the thought away. “Doesn’t matter, the point is that you’re what Allister dearly needs in his life, in the same way you need him. I won’t lie and say you won’t have your ups and downs but when it all comes down to it you’re his sister, even if you’re not blood related. You’re a better family than a lot of the people I see in Motostoke or Spikemuth. Only in it for themselves.”

“Yeah…it kinda makes me sad.”
“Me too. That they don’t have time to stop and think.” Melony pursed her lips. “You need to make time too, for yourself. Constantly worrying and planning for your brother takes a toll on you. You need time for yourself too.”

“Aha…I was putting off doing that as well before you came over.”

“Of course you were, honey, and not planning or telling me or anyone had I not insisted?”

“Yeah.” Bea didn’t want to say the look on Melony’s face was one of triumph but it definitely was.

“I’m glad you stayed. Not everyone does.”

**Gordie.** Unspoken but both thought it.

“I’m glad too. I…nearly didn’t. I was close.”

“Guess that stony discipline is good for something then, right?”

“Yeah. I…I still have a lot things I need to work through, don’t I?”

“You do.” Melony nodded. “If it was as easy as crying once and then you’re fixed I’d be out of a job quicker than a Ninjask race! Still…seeing you cry at all is proof of change. For the better.”

“It feels good. I…don’t think I can still do things like that in public and I’ll still have my guard up there. But here…in privacy…I think I’ll try and be a little more honest.”

“Just hearing you say that does me the world of good. I really needed to hear that today.”

“Is that why you…?”

“It is.” Melony grew pensive as Bea herself was prone to. “I’ll admit I needed some time away from the bustle of the house. My daughter can handle the triplets for a few hours, and it’s Gordie’s week in the gym so that’s covered. A change of scenery really clears the head.”

_Ah, that explains it._ Bea recalled the way the mother and son duo handled the gym was similar but different to how she and her brother did: Bea took the gym week days, barring Wednesday afternoons, and Allister took it Friday and the weekend.

Gordie and Melony on the other hand exchanged the gym week by week with no variation. They had minimal contact, not even being present when the keys were exchanged on Sundays. It was sad in Bea’s eyes, but it was the way things were right now.

Still if today was anything to go by then anything could change. Bea hadn’t thought it within herself to cry at anything, but a simple honesty session with Melony had brought that out clear as day. She was obviously more human than she thought she was, and that was good.

“Oh how is Allister anyway?” Melony was now looking at a portrait of Allister holding his official gym indoctrination later (signed by the chairman and secretary of course).

“Sleeping I should expect. If he has too much cereal it just sits in his stomach and slows him right down.”

“Gotcha. You can go get ready for his challenger if you want, I think I’ve got things covered here.”

“…I believe you.” Bea found herself smiling again as she gathered her Pokéballs from the kitchen
counter. It was becoming a more common occurrence, but she knew that was good. Smiling was good. “Last chance, Mimikyu. Sure you don’t need anything?”

“Mimikyuuyu.” The cloth shook its head.

“Understandable.” Bea turned to the older woman, still enthralled by the many, many photos the wall had claimed as its own. “Melony, thank you for this. Really.”

“It was…”

“I know it was. You’re going to tell me how anybody could have done this and listened to me and gotten me to talk. Well…all the same I’m glad it was you. Thank you. I needed to hear not just myself but you too.”

“Bea, you’re a fine young woman already,” Melony assured, shaking her head. “Guidance is the only thing you really need and you’ve got the rest covered. Still, hearing you say that is very sweet and I’m glad I was able to help. Hey if you still have some steam to blow off today why don’t you challenge Gordie? I’m sure Allister’s challenge won’t be enough to satisfy and he’s in one of his moods. Might be good for both of you to go all out?”

“I’ll definitely consider it. Thanks again, Melony. There’s cocoa in the top cupboard by the sink if Alli asks for it, and soup in the fridge if he gets hungry again.”

“Shoo, don’t make yourself late ♪!” Bea wasn’t used to being hurried out of her own home but at this point she didn’t mind at all. Today was a good day indeed.

Unbeknownst to both Bea or Melony, Allister had fallen asleep nearly as soon as Bea had left the room. However having a somewhat loud conversation mere metres away from his bedroom let some of what was said sink in; dreams are funny things. You’re never sure exactly what you’re going to get or how to interpret it.

Allister’s dreams for the moment were filled with a headbanded figure, sword and shield in hand, fighting off the numerous evils that were trying to devour him.

You’ll always be my hero…even if you don’t believe it.

Though he was dead to the world, Allister’s body smiled all the same.

Today is a good day indeed.

Chapter End Notes

Nearly 7,500 words, whew! I hope people are okay with longer chapters, I know a lot of fics on here are shorter paced! Couldn’t resist when Melony is around! Her name getting autocorrected to Melong over 100 times was fun though. This chapter ended up being so long that I split it in two.

Allister might be the purest and we need to protect him but Bea could use some love
too, life definitely hasn't been easy for her.

Also Kabu gets his first look in at the beginning, love me some Hoenn references. He originally had a larger role but I decided to make that it's own fic so check out 'Burning Passion of a Second Chance' if you like Team Aqua, lore, and Hoenn things ^_^.
Shameless plug aside, thank you so much to everyone who's commented and left kudos, my heart is ever warmer with your kindness. Seriously, you're all brightening my day! See you for the next one!
Icy, Like a Ghost

Chapter Summary

With Bea out handling Allister’s challenger, Allister and Melony take the time to get to know the other better. School, family, relationships, nothing is off limits. Well...except for some things. No one can ever be a 100% open book.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Hey Mimikyu, you remember me right?”

“…Mim…” Allister’s Mimikyu continued ignoring Melony in favour of sewing. Melony didn’t blame it, poor thing.

“That sounds like a yes.”

Bea had only just left to deal with Allister’s challenger and Melony was doing her best to make herself at home; regular home was hectic now and Stow-on-Side was providing a much need calm for the weary mother of five.

“Not that Circhester isn’t peaceful,” the ice type specialist mused. “Objectively it’s the most peaceful place in Galar by a long shot. Still, this place has its charm too. Plus far fewer memories for me here.”

Wonder if it’s the same for Bea?

Melony’s heart really did go out for the girl.

Just a damn kid. Barely older than my eldest, supporting a family all of her own while my kids all have me to rely on.

Her eye was yet again drawn to the pictures on the wall. Bea always seemed to be doing her best to show no emotion at all in them. Even in her own private place where only Allister could see, she hid herself.

“Is she that worried about guests seeing her ‘show weakness’? Like I’m doing now?”

Melony tried to put it out of her mind and busied herself in the kitchen; she hadn’t heard Allister at all and for someone who was apparently ill with a cold it did make her worry. Of course, he’d probably just fallen asleep, just as Bea had told her.

“Still, what better way to wake up to than a nice cup of hot chocolate?”

Melony always found it useful to speak aloud, even when alone. Just habit. Living with three rowdy identical triplets, one daughter being pulled in all directions, and (previously) one moody, argumentative son did drum up quite the noise. Just hearing your own thoughts at all warranted a monologue.
Stir, stir, stir.

Many years of coughs, sniffles, and flu had allowed Melony to have the art of the perfect cup down to a science. Exactly thirty two seconds after the hot water was added did she begin the stir. Too fast and the flavour of the cocoa was lost to the water, too slow and everything became that much grainier.

Of course for someone like Allister she used half water and half milk to bulk it up. More palatable to a picky eater.

And calcium for healthy bones. If he’s anything like when we met the last time, he makes the sticks in my front yard look tough.

“I’m taking this to Allister. Don’t worry it’s just cocoa.”

Mimikyu perked up at the mention of its trainer’s name, but relaxed when Melony dipped the mug to its height and allowed it to peer into the murky chocolate goodness. She always found it good to let Pokémon know what was going on around them. Especially for a support Pokémon like Mimikyu.

Melony clenched her fist around the mug as she made her way upstairs. It made her equal parts sad and troubled that there were still people in the world who thought of Pokémon as mere tools.

That level of selfishness and bullheadedness...can people really be so blind? Even with efforts from the reformed Team Plasma Association, Pokémon were still considered second class citizens rather than partners in many parts of the world.

Melony did wish they’d change their name at least, the connotations of their predecessor’s actions did nothing for their image, if not publicity.

“Allister?” Melony knocked gently on the door with a Gengar poster blutacked to the front. Careful not to step on any creaking floorboards she slowly made her way inside, taking everything in that the room had to offer.

Asleep.

Allister lay on his side, mask precariously balanced on the duvet. His posture was almost a foetal position, curled up to conserve his warmth as he shivered.

He sleeps with it still on? Poor boy.

The room as a lot homelier than Melony had initially expected. Sure there were posters of various supernatural films from the last decade and more figurines of ghost types than real ghost types possibly existed in Galar, but the room itself was nice. Messy, but nice. The spare masks littering nearly every free surface didn’t help.

She did find the Litwick style candles to be cute touch, though. The whole room had a vaguely purple hue to it but she couldn’t tell exactly where it was coming from. Maybe it was just like that? Whatever the reason Allister clearly liked it this way and Melony saw no reason to probe.

Melony set the cup down on the bedside table, clearing some clothes and spare mask to the chair across the room. There were already clothes and masks on the chair so she was sure it could handle another few. She frowned.

I knew he had a lot of masks but this is...oh honey.
Perhaps Melony had understated it when she’d first taking everything in but the masks truly were everywhere. There were even a couple slung over the bed posts.

She, like most people, had never ever seen what he looked like underneath. To her knowledge only Bea had managed that feat, but of course she was curious about it. Everyone was. The nosy mother within her was whispering that he’d never know if she took a peek. The mask he currently had on could slip at any time with him, rolled over as he was. The rational adult slapped the thoughts away with indignation.

_The disgrace, you didn’t come here to violate a boy’s right to privacy. Especially when it’s so clearly tied to his identity._

“Mmmmm.” Allister shifted slightly, tugging the blankets swaddled around him even closer. Even in his sleep he was shaking slightly.

“You poor thing,” Melony whispered slowly. “Illness doesn’t suit you at all.”

Her own kids were a lively bunch so colds didn’t tend to slow them down nearly as much…but Allister was near comatose by the looks of things.

“You sister said you were only outside for 30 minutes or so. Said Oleana made sure you got a change of clothes…didn’t think that woman had it in her. Always pegged her for the flippant type. Maybe I shouldn’t be so judgmental of her and the chairman.”

“Mnnnnnum.” Allister stirred again, stronger this time. Melony quickly clapped a hand over her mouth in response.

“Sorry, I’ll be quieter!” She murmured. “Still…how you go exploring in the woods and come back healthy every time is beyond me.”

Melony took a deep breath in and sighed. She wrinkled her nose slightly, finding a hint of lavender amongst the room’s natural woody smell.

_Aha._ Lavender was often used as a calming agent in many home remedies. Her favourite bubble bath mix was definitive proof of that. _You’re a smart kid, Allister. Having something like that around is great for nerves and panic attacks._

“I’ll be downstairs if you need me.”

As the woman turned to leave she wasn’t sure what was more surprising: that her jumper was being tugged on, or that Allister had grabbed it without waking up.

“…’on’t…mnnngo.” It was barely audible but Melony certainly heard no one else speaking. She looked around, finding no one. “…mnhh…’lease.”

“Me?”

“…” The grip didn’t loosen.

“…I’ll stay. For you.” Melony hooked a foot around the leg of the desk chair and brought it forward so she could sit without Allister’s grip tugging any harder. Her bones weren’t getting any younger. “Are you hearing me in your dreams, Allister? Is that what you’re hearing?”

“S’good. S’nice.”
Melony couldn’t see anything of the boy’s face but got the sense that he was somehow content. His grip on her was very light, barely a featherweight. Hands oh so pale. Melony’s family line had many of the traits of albinism running throughout the generations and yet even they weren’t that pale. Melony ran her thumb over the back of his hand lightly. Oh so pale. Chalky even.

“You grabbing me…was that a reflex?”

Let’s think about it. If he grabs out then he’s used to someone being in his room when he sleeps. Bea’s the only one he lives with so that means it’s her, I’m just a stand in. Which means he’s prone to waking up and needing her. He hides himself away…but he doesn’t want to be alone. So…he has nightmares.

The conclusion her mothering instincts had brought her to wasn’t the most pleasant, and Melony pursed her lips. Nightmares were very common in younger children, as was needing a family member. What wasn’t as common knowledge was Allister’s family history.

Only the gym leaders and higher league officials knew it was Bea’s parents who’d adopted him at a young age. The circumstances behind it were a mystery but Melony’s instincts told her it had been…messy. The nightmares had to be specific enough for him to want Bea and not his support Pokémon.

Thus…his parents seemed a logical conclusion. Melony could feel her expression growing sombre, wanting to believe she was just extrapolating something from nothing. Just meaningless fetishization of a poor boy’s normal problems. She bit her lip, listening to his stilted breathing.

Her instincts were seldom wrong; she’d foreseen the troubles with Gordie long before they’d blossomed spectacularly.

Backfired spectacularly more like. Melony thought bitterly. All that foresight and I still lost him. Lost us both in that stupid, stupid fight. I shouldn’t be reading between the lines with Allister. What am I, trying to make up for my lack of planning with my own kid? Really Melony you should have more…respect for him than that. For yourself.

Allister had relaxed considerably with something (or rather someone) to hang on to. His breathing was becoming deeper and Melony almost wondered if he was slipping further under. She stayed as she was for a good 10 minutes, stroking the back of his hand all the while. Even when her back began to protest at the position she was in she didn’t yield.

Honestly it was rather peaceful. The purple aura, the wood and lavender mixing together in a perfect olfactory harmony; Melony felt content as she was. Alas, fate was not that kind and an unexpected coughing fit saw Allister’s body remind itself that it was indeed ill.

He jolted upright, flailing wildly as his blocked nose prevented him from gasping for air.

“GAAAAAH???!” Allister leapt back, hitting his head on the back wall when he realised he wasn’t alone.

“Sorry, honey, maybe I should’ve…?”

“Mismagius, go!”

“What the…?!?”

His eyes wild, from under the duvet Allister had pulled out a duskball, summoning a ghostly apparition in a witch’s hat.
“D-disable the intruder with t-thunderwave! DO IT!”

“Frosmoth, protect us both!” With lightning fast reflexes that could only be earned after a long history of battling, Melony released her Frosmoth. The barrier was only just in time as the attack connecting, enveloping the room in a yellow glow.; the bulbs in both the side lamp and ceiling light both promptly short-circuited.

With the peace disrupted Allister backed himself into the corner, putting his pokemon between Melony and himself; she noted he was hugging his knees, rocking himself almost. When the glow had died down, Melony spoke, trying to keep her voice level.

“Breathe Allister. I’m a friend. I’m a friend…breathe for me. Bea sent me to look after you while she’s out. You’re safe here, I promise. I’m a friend.”

Allister’s eyes were unfocused, like a Bunnelby caught in the headlines.

“…Friend?”

“Friend.” Melony nodded warmly, though her Frosmoth picked up the subtle cue to be ready to protect again should it be needed. The Mismagius hovered silently, eyeing the other Pokémon warily.

“………MY MASK!” In the rush of it all Allister hadn’t realised that his mask had fallen away, landing on the carpeted floor with a soft ‘plat’ . Melony hadn’t realised it either but got no further possibility for observation as Allister launched himself past her chair to the end of the bed. He grabbed at a hanging mask, fumbling with the strap like a boy possessed.

_He really doesn't like to be seen, does he? Whatever it is…it can’t be just anxiety can it?_

“Bea sent me, Allister. Don’t you remember that? Breathe for me…please, honey.”

“…*sniff*…” The reason for why he’d suddenly snapped awake had caught up to him, and the adrenaline faded as quickly as it had come. Another fit of coughing overcame him and Allister began to shake even harder.

_Oh crumbs don’t throw up in bed!_ Allister started when he felt Melony begin to rub circles on his back but quickly relaxed when he remembered what Bea had told him.

_Oh…right. I got real carried away there._

“I…*cough*…remember.”

“You remember?” Melony echoed, keeping one eye on the opposing Pokémon.

“Y-yeah.” Slightly more confident that his new mask was affixed properly, Allister turned to face her. “I-I…t-thought…*sniff*…”

_Wish my voice didn’t stutter all the time with strangers._

“It’s alright,” the woman encouraged, still rubbing circles on his back. “You take your time now. Breathe deep…and let it flow.”

Allister took that to last part to heart, trying to get his ragged breathing back to some form of normalcy. His breaths were usually shallow enough anyway but with the cold blocking his nose it was a genuine struggle to even breathe at all.
“Drink some of the cocoa. It’ll help, trust me.” It was less of a command and more of an encouragement but it was firm enough for Allister to turn in the direction Melony’s finger was pointing. “On the bedside table.”

“R-right…yeah.”

“It’s hot, honey, don’t go too fast.”

Allister had clearly heard as his initial reaction to gulp the sugary liquid down was stifled by the realisation that a burn to his mouth would definitely not be the best idea.

“S’good…really, r-really good.”

“You’re very welcome, honey.”

“…I don’t…remember how it…g-got there?”

“I made it for you before I came up. You were asleep so I set it there.” Melony waved her arms around noncommittally before a grin overtook her. “Then that whole thing happened and here we are.”

Allister did his job of making himself as small as possible. It was as if he’d already managed to put the experience out of his mind somehow.

His coping mechanism is to forget. Even recent things…his mind shields him from painful experiences.

“O-oh…yeah I thought…” He cleared his throat. “I thought you’d b-broken in o-or…something. I didn’t…um…recognise you…sniff…r-right away.”

“But you recognise me now?” He nodded sheepishly.

“O-of course! Mismagius, return.” The Pokémon nodded, before disappearing in a flash of light. “You’re Ms. Melony…Circhester gym leader. Bea…um…told me you were gonna come.” The boy held his head in his hands, trying to fold himself smaller still. “……A-and I t-totally forgot! Geez, I’m so, so sorry for a-attacking you! It’s um…”

“Say no more, honey,” Melony soothed, recalling her own Pokémon silently. “And just Melony is fine.”

“M-Melony I’m *cough* s-sorry!”

“When you wake up you’re bound to be disoriented. Having someone you don’t normally see in your room must be frightening! You poor thing!”

Allister seemed conflicted by the whole exchange.

“B-but…I…you…how were you so quick??”

“Heh, years of practice.” Melony eyed Allister’s duskball, now resting next to him on the duvet. “Still…you were pretty quick on the draw yourself. Someday you’ll be an even greater trainer than you are now, that’s for sure. I never expected you were hiding him under there!”

Melony saw no reason to let the young boy know that whipping her pokéball out at the speed she’d had to had hurt considerably.
My shoulder is a small price to pay for paralysis protection. Kids got guts.

“H-her,” Allister quickly corrected. “Bea said so… plus Mismagius told me so too. I always sleep with a pokéball in case I get s-scared.”

That was a lot of information to digest so Meloney pulled her chair up closer, taking Allister’s cup from him and placing it back on the bedside table.

“So… you said Mismagius told you it’s gender?”

“Mnhmmm. Jus’ polite really.”

“You can speak to Pokémon?”

“Nah, ghosts only. Lucky, what with them bein’ the best type n’ all.”

Meloney gave a wry smile. She couldn’t even be offended he was so earnest. Had Gordie cockily told her that the rock type was the best then that was grounds for another fight. On a bad day anyway.

“And Bea got you her?” Allister nodded, uncurling himself and flopping back down to face the ceiling. “I should have guessed, you don’t find many Mismagius’s around here.”

“You’ve… seen them before?”

“When you’re my age and starting to collect dust, honey, you get to see a lot of things.” Meloney leaned over and placed her hand gently on Allister’s shoulder, expecting him to flinch or pull away. He did neither, even leaning back into her palm of his own accord. “Something I don’t see all that often in people is the dedication your sister shows toward you.”

“Mhmmm,” Allister hummed listlessly. “She’s the best… sniff… big sis anyone could ever have… n-not just for me.” He turned to face the older woman slightly. “What’d I ever do to… deserve her? She does a lot… all I end up doing… is taking.”

With a practiced mask of her own, Meloney did her best to hide how deeply the words had touched her. Knowing what she did now about how what Bea had said and ultimately how Bea saw herself was a sucker punch she didn’t need.

But… she was invariably right and Allister really didn’t need that sort of pressure on his already weakened shoulders.

“You know Bea would do anything for you, right?”

“Heh… Miss Oleana said something like that. Even made me hot chocolate too. You two are pretty alike.” He cleared his throat again. “But yeah. I do.”

“Then…” Meloney chose her words carefully, stowing the information on Rose’s secretary away for later. “You’ll also know that she needs you just as much as you need her, right?”

“Nah.” The usually anxious Allister hadn’t even hesitated before saying that, and Meloney’s heart tore further. “She’s so strong… c-composed. I know she… cares about me… and all… but she doesn’t need me like I need her. I really do just feel like a thorn *cough* in her side a lot of the time.”

“Well she did tell me that she wouldn’t trade you for anything in the world.” Meloney tried to make
the comment as offhand and natural as possible. Like it had only just come to her. Allister wormed his body into the covers in response.

“She really said that?” He seemed to tense at the thought. “Like about me?”

“Sure she did, Honey. Said you were the only brother she could ever imagine by her side.” A paraphrase but it got the point across.

“Y-you sure you didn’t mishear? She probs meant Hitmontop or something…hah…”

“She was pretty clear, don’t you worry yourself. She…” Melony was cut off by an almighty sniff.

“She lost her headband…sniff…because of me. She loved that headband.” Even without the cold having its unwavering grip over him his voice sounded small.

*Oh so small.*

“Where did come from?” It was half polite conversation, and half curiosity but Melony wasn’t sure which side of her had decided to ask. Allister had mumbled out a response, near inaudible as he pressed his face yet further into the blankets.

“Parents,” he let out, once prompted. “Only thing she…wears from them. Hair in her eyes, a-all that.”

“Well…maybe you can get her another?” The idea was simple and dumb, so much so that Allister let out a mirthless laugh. A laugh which soon turned into another coughing landslide, Melony directed him towards the cocoa a second time.

“S-stupid rain…stupid cold. Stupid me.”

That really wasn’t a path Melony could see Allister going down and coming back unharmed. She could feel the gears turning in her head as an idea began to formulate; a Klingklang would’ve been jealous no doubt.

“Not stupid, honey. Think about it. If she lost one and you want something to give her to show you’re grateful and all, then there’s no better present. With Christmas coming up soon you won’t have a better opportunity.”

The scope of her own genius was too much to bear and Melony could feel herself starting to grin as the boy on the bed rolled himself towards her, humming.

“That…” Allister paused. “…Isn’t the worst idea…ever.”

*Oh to be young and impressionable.*

“She’ll appreciate it dearly,” Melony continued, eager to not let the spark die out. She was quickly learning that Allister’s personality predisposed him towards negativity, ignoring all the good the world had to offer. “A gift of her favourite thing, from her favourite brother? She probably won’t stop smiling until the new year!”

The words continued to have the desired effect, Allister beginning to bounce his leg slightly. A sure sign of excitement in someone with more energy than they realised.

“Y-yeah! She *cough* will! I know she’ll…love somethin’ like that!”

“That’s the spirit! I know you’ll get something she’ll love.”
“Mmhmmm…” Allister said nothing more, content to hum to himself as his mind ran through the possibilities.

_Another one with an orange stripe? Nah that’s too similar. Not too different though or it won’t work._

Melony left him to his own devices as he explored the different avenues, providing input when directed to. It was nice. Simple.

_I needed this break._

“Hey Melony…?”

“Yes, honey?”

“Um…” The rest of what Allister had asked was lost to the fabrics of the bed. They were good confidants, as confidants went. They’d never spill a secret no matter what.

“You’re going to have to speak up, honey. I don’t bite, promise!”

He clearly thought otherwise, despite his apparent relaxation.

“It’s…um…personal is all. Curious.”

“…Then I’ll try and answer as best I can,” the ice leader added carefully. This did little for the boy’s confidence, and though his face was hidden Melony could see him psyching himself up.

“…..WhowonthefightyouandGordiehad?”

“…What?”

Allister grabbed at his pillow, plunging his face deep into its homely quarters. Another round of coughing and it was going in the wash with everything else he’d touched.

“S-sorry. Bit personal…s’ jus’ curious. ‘Bout you and Gordie.”

“Ah.” Melony supposed that made sense. Bea was unlikely to have told him the details behind Gordie’s…holiday.

_Still using that word for it am I? It’s been over a year since he got back, just call it what it is._

Melony exhaled, removing her hat for once. Allister found himself peeking out from behind the pillow just a bit, then more, until he finally let it drop.

“Y-you have very nice hair!”

Melony couldn’t be mad at the honesty, smiling gently despite her heart’s turmoil.

“Thank you, Allister. That’s nice.”

“It’s…” He searched for the word internally, but nothing took the bait. “Snowy, I guess.”

“Hah….fitting for me then right, honey?”

“Heh, y-yeah.” Allister had gone back to pretending the pillow had all the answers. A rhythmic squeezing of Farfetch’d feathers and linen in perfect harmony.
“……………….” Melony wasn’t sure where to begin. Truthfully there hadn’t been a definitive start to the problems her and Gordie had had to endure. It had just crept up on them over time, eating away at their lives until it was already hollow. Hollow and too late.

“Um…you don’t have too. Jus’ that Bea never told me, d-despite…you…sniff…both bein’ great trainers.”

“…I remember being your age, Allister.” Melony rested her chin on her hands, relegating her hat to the confines of her front pocket. “Seeing the world in black and white like that. When things were as simple as ‘who won’ and whatnot.”

“Huh?”

“Honey, as soon as the both of us decided to stop listening to reason and figured that fighting was the only way…then we both lost.” Melony let her hands drop to her sides, leaning back in the chair. “Point of no return on that road in our lives.”

“O-oh…okay. S’making sense I guess.”

“It’s alright to be curious,” she assured. “When Gordie left our whole town was split in two. Our mistake of not listening to rational thoughts didn’t just affect our own lives. The lives of everyone in Circhester was changed because of us.”

*Look at me lecturing. It’s not like either of us had any more maturity than the next person. Here on my high horse, looking down. Shameful really.*

“Ah, you don’t want to listen to an old woman’s tales do you?”

Allister nodded emphatically.

“Course I do!” He began to fidget with his top slightly. “‘N you’re not old, right? Opal’s old, you’re like…middle aged or somethin’.”

“Ohohoho, honey, you do flatter me! Thank you! So young and you already know how to treat a lady.”

“…” Allister seemed abashed at the statement and Melony’s instincts kicked in again. She knew that look from when her eldest got home school, all dreamy and spaced out.

“You have someone in mind?”

Allister flapped his arms in response, as if to fly away from the embarrassment at being caught.

“S-shhhh! B-bea d-doesn’t know.”

Melony almost wished she could’ve swapped places with the pillow; clearly he was used to confiding in it more than an actual person. The way he pressed his face to it, like he wished he could be sucked away to another world.

*He’s incredibly anxious.*

“…You don’t have to tell me. It’s clearly something big if you haven’t told Bea yet.”

“N-no…maybe it’ll be good? To…um…tell someone?” He was looking at her for reassurance now, so of course her heart went out for him.
“Of course, Allister. I’m here, breathe alright?”

“Y-yeah.”

Breathing was something in short supply for the time being but Allister did his best to keep himself in check. He was already lightheaded and warm, anymore inputs and he was going out like a light again.

“So, who is she?” Melony directed him towards the remainder of the cocoa, if nothing else then to give him more time to breathe.

“Online friend,” he admitted between gulps. “S-started a couple months ago…Bea was telling me that makin’ friends was a good idea. B-but…um…” Allister downed the rest of the liquid, not wanting to be patient any longer. “I didn’t have any friends…at school.”

“I understand, honey. School can be scary, and not everyone is nice. Kids can be mean.”

Melony frowned. Her youngest was going through a similar thing, not finding his place yet. He would, she reassured herself, he would. It just took time.

“Y-yeah…they used to steal m-my mask and books.” He looked her dead in the eye. “Y-you didn’t see, did you? When…I wasn’t wearing it…for the couple of seconds earlier?”

“I didn’t.” Melony answered truthfully. With everything else that was going on during the altercation she hadn’t even noticed until he’d whooshed on past and gotten another one.

“G-good. I’m…weird like that.”

“You can be ‘weird like that’, you’re allowed. I cut my toast into squares instead of triangles!”

“B-but…that’s wrong! Tastes odd if it isn’t in triangles,” he muttered, as if another memory was bugging him.

“I do it anyway,” Melony confirmed, nodding. “Just works better for me. If wearing a mask works better for you then that’s okay too, honey.”

“Huh…never thought of it like that…” He cleared his throat again. “B-but yeah, I was…um…bullied pretty bad. Took sis goin’ in and givin’ a talk at the school about…bullying and fighting types. Scared p-people right off!”

Melony had to smile at that.

“Wish I could’ve seen that. I’m sure your sister is very scary when she’s mad.”

“Heh y-you’ve got no idea.” “Milo and Nessa were there if you wanna know.” He seemed happy, proud almost, but the whole statement was tinged with sadness. “B-but I still got no friends there. Now people are s-scared away from me because of that.” He quickly held up his hands in defence. “B-but that’s cool! I’ll t-take that…over gettin’ slammed into lockers and gettin’ bruised. ‘Sides I don’t need people if I got Bea and ghost Pokémon!”

“So you started looking online because school wasn’t being kind to you?”

“…Yeah. That’s…” Allister tried and failed to come up with a decent response. “That’s n-not weird right?”

“No weirder than Gordie liking his toast cut into circles.”
“Oh c’mon! That’s w-way weirder!”

“There you go, honey. You just convinced yourself.”

Allister stopped his fidgeting, cocking his head slightly.

“O-oh…guess I did. Thanks…”

“It’s alright, just remember you’re allowed to do things without fear of retribution. You’re your own person.”

“I know, t-thanks.” Allister lay back on the bed, stretching himself out as he drew the covers back around him. “I g-got…distracted. Sorry…”

“It’s alright, background details give me…a good idea of how things are.”

Allister getting his arm bruised from being shoved into lockers being ‘how things are’, or were, gets me angry. What sort of parents let their kids hurt another so viciously? I’d sooner not have kids then let them strike another for fun!

“Yeah…s’ppose. Anyway…” Melony hadn’t realised her hat had fallen out of her pocket until she noticed Allister absentmindedly thumbing over it. It seemed to be calming him so she saw no reason to disrupt the activity, odd as it was.

Circular toast, Melony. Circular toast.

“Decided to look into some ghost forums, find some like-minded people or somethin’.”

Melony nodded but said nothing. It was a good idea as ideas went.

“Most of them were bunk, weird posers who were jus’ after money or attention. B-but…” Allister went to sniff again, but thought better of it, reaching for a tissue in the interim.

Melony hadn’t said anything so far about the sniffing habit but was glad he’d realised that it hadn’t actually been doing him any good.

Better out than in.

“…Well, I f-found someone I liked. Didn’t think that was p-possible!”

“Many things are possible even when we don’t believe them. Life’s like that, honey.”

“Y-yeah, I get that now. She’s into ghosts, has her own Mimikyu…and she’s e-even a gym leader, kinda.”

“Oh? Kinda?”

“She’s Alolan, they don’t have gyms there. Trial captain b-but she’s just become an Elite 4 member too!”

“Wow! Impressive!” Melony’s knowledge of Alola was almost entirely of what Gordie had told her when he’d returned, having spent a few months there whilst travelling. That and the omnipresent nature documentaries on TV. “So what’s her name?”

“Acerola,” Allister said shyly. He was hugging her hat to his chest now, like he’d been doing with the pillow earlier. “We haven’t even…video chatted yet. Been too scared, aha.” He gestured to his
face at the raise of Melony’s eyebrow.

“Ah, I get it, honey. You could just chat with her with it on, you know?”

Surprisingly, Allister shook his head.

“I gotta show m-my face sometime.”

“Are you worried she won’t accept you wearing one?”

Allister nodded, hitting the back of his head on the pillow in frustration.

“I haven’t told her I wear one…at all. Got scared. Thought it would freak her. She sounds so cool bein’ an Elite 4 member…I can’t compete with that.”

Melony pursed her lips, confused. She hadn’t even been aware that Alola had its own Elite 4 before now. From what she knew it was just the trial captains, Kahunas, and that was it.

“It must be a new thing, their Elite 4. If you’re worried she’s out of your league just because of a title, then remember you’ve got one too.”

“Elite 4 members are s-supposed to be stronger than g-gym leaders…s’what I heard.”

“Maybe in other regions.” Melony patted Allister’s head lightly, gauging his reaction. When he made no move to pull away she started running her fingers through it slightly, as she would with her own kids. “But here we do things differently. We have the Champion Cup instead, so we can’t judge our strength by other place’s rules. For all we know the Alolan Elite 4 could all be really weak!”

“Heh, that’d be kinda f-funny. The Elite 4…bein’ awful trainers. Sounds like a t-terrible TV comedy or something’!”

“Indeed!” Melony let her face go back to serious. “But this Acerola, if she’s really as nice as you say she is then she won’t mind at all what you look like. She’ll just be happy to have another friend, the same as you.”

Allister stared at his hands holding them up in front of his face.

“…The same…as me?” He locked his fingers together.

*He’s imagining them holding hands? That’s just the sweetest thing!*

Allister let his hands drop, then quickly separated his hands as he noticed the hat on his lap for the first time.

“O-oh, s-sorry! I dunno…how I even g-got this!”

“All right, honey. You were having fun with it. Cute really.” In response Allister buried his face in his hands.

“Aww geez, that’s embarrassing. Here.” He handed the hat back, looking in the opposite direction to Melony. The wall had a lot to offer anyway, like the pillow.

“Thank you, Allister.” Melony placed the hat back on her head, tucking the excess hair under it in a single swift motion.
“Um…is it okay for you…t-to…t-touch it like that? I mean…” He rolled back to face her again. “Germs ‘n all.”

“I haven’t had a cold in over thirty years, Allister. When you train with ice types for as long as I have things like colds and flu bounce right off me!”

You do seem pretty bouncy.

Allister decided to keep that remark to himself. He was hardly one to talk about weight, being so vanishingly far down the other end of the spectrum it hurt. At least with fat you could sit anywhere and be alright. Whenever he sat down somewhere unfamiliar he had to spend a good minute adjusting himself.

Bony. Wonder if Acerola is bony? Or maybe she actually has a body which you can turn sideways and not have vanish into the ghost dimension?

“I’m planning to t-tell Bea soon, promise. I think she knows I’m keeping somethin’ from her. Don’t want her worryin’ for nothing.”

“You don’t have to promise me anything, honey. You can promise to yourself though if you’d like.”

“Yeah…that’s a better…idea.” Allister blew into the tissue again, tossing it off of the bed and near to the bin. Not in, but near enough to be considered a decent effort.

“Jus’…want everything to work out.”

“It will, honey. I’m not in the business of making grand promises about anything, but it really seems to me that all the pieces are here for a success story.”

“Y-you really think so?”

The hopefulness laced within those few words had Melony’s heart wanting to escape the confines of her chest all over again.

“I sure do. Bea will be so proud of you making a friend, I’m certain!”

“Y-yeah…I hope so…”

They stayed in silence for another few minutes. Eventually Melony took it upon herself to conclude their earlier conversation. Leaving things hanging was a sure-fire way to breed misunderstandings, she knew as much from experience.

“So…that answer your question for you, honey? We got slightly side-tracked but I’m glad we did. You wanted to know about me and Gordie, did you get what you wanted?”

“…Yeah.”

Melony looked up, not anticipating the response.

“Oh?”

“I get it, a l-little. I think.” Allister tossed the pillow aside, crossing his legs under the covers. “We all got secrets we don’t wanna say. Whatever happened, it’s complicated. Like how Bea feels about her parents or me not sayin’ anything about Acerola yet, or h-how I feel about myself a l-lot of the time.”
“…”

“None of us have to tell anyone anythin’ we don’t want t’. Even t-talking ‘bout things we have inside doesn’t always help if we dunno what to say. Right?”

“In a sense. That’s a fine way to look at it, honey.”

“I…um…” Allister was psyching himself up again if the fidgeting was anything to go on. “I get mad…sometimes. At m’ sis. She’s jus’ trying to keep me safe…b-but I go crazy! She asks things I c-can’t always answer…”

“Honey…”

“B-but I know she’s just concerned is all. So t-then…I get even more mad. At myself. G-get afraid she’ll want t’ leave me or somethin’. G-get a different brother who’s not a weirdo.”

“Bea worries about losing you too.” Melony had said it before she realised what she was doing. So much for not letting him know yet but in her mind it was the only thing she could possibly say to cut Allister off.

“…W-what?”

“She does.”

“B-but why? What c-could she ever be afraid of? She’s so strong!”

Melony scrunched her eyes up, disguising the gesture by bringing her arm up as if to scratch an itch.

Is this right?

“She…worries…when you get older…that you won’t want to be around her.” Melony rephrased what Bea had said as best as she could. It wasn’t a direct one to one, the definite article wasn’t something that could be easily replicated.

I still can’t believe she cried. Though if she was ever going to, it would be over her brother wouldn’t it?

“T-that’s crazy talk!”

Though the words were full of energy Allister himself hadn’t moved all that much in response. Just a slight shift towards the window. Like the notion he wouldn’t ever want to be around his sister was just crazy to the point of not even sparing it a thought. In a way, perhaps it was.

“After all Bea’s done for me, all the…c-crap she’s had to put up with I w-wouldn’t leave her! Crazy talk…”

“Hey…don’t tell that to me.” Melony sighed, letting a warm smile cross her face. “While I’m more glad than you can know to hear you say that…I think your sister is the one who needs to hear that more than anyone.”

“T-then I’ll tell her…when she gets home today.” Allister had rolled to face the wall completely by now and Melony knew that tone. The tone of a boy who’d made up his mind.

“A good idea, Allister. A very good idea.”
“You…you didn’t just bring Raticate to your gym battle, did you?”

It wasn’t often that Bea was completely and utterly miffed by something but the battle that had just taken place had earned its rightful spot.

“Aww what?!” The challenger recalled the defeated Pokémon to a lukewarm applause. Bea could a couple of ‘yeahs’ being thrown around but they were half-hearted at best.

“Gym Leader Bea is the winner! A shockingly quick match everyone, that has to be one for the history books!”

Bea gave credit where it was due, the announcer was trying their best to inject some energy into the lifeless stadium. It wasn’t as if she’d just curb-stomped this teenager’s team into the ground in under a minute, Pokémon changes included.

Even the crowd is disappointed. Usually they get hyped up for just about anything.

The challenger seemed frustrated, throwing their hat down. Perhaps it would be understandable if they had more than 2 Pokémon on their side.

“I can’t believe I lost like that! I was supposed to be the best!”

“Yeah…that’s…surprising.”

“I know!!! I mean…”

“No I mean it’s surprising you made it past any of the gym trainers.” Bea couldn’t help but cut him off. Delusion was the opposite path to discipline after all, and not one that was easy to get off of without a degree of severity.

“They were all using ghost types!” The teen frowned, like he’d somehow been wronged. “Both of my Raticates know Crunch! I only challenged this gym because I thought it was the ghost one, not a fighting one.”

So that’s how. All of Allister’s gym trainers are here today instead of mine because it was supposed to be his match. Bea shook her head.

“Relying on type match-ups will only get you so far. If you want to become truly strong you’ll have to break through that mentality by training harder.”

“But my Raticate…” The teen fell to his knees, hitting his fist against the grassy floor lightly. Bea honestly felt a little embarrassed on his behalf, not sure where to look. “…they’re both in the top percentage of all Raticate! I even went to Alola to get one so its Crunch would be even stronger!”

“…Well you have dedication, challenger Joey, that’s plain to see.” Bea held out her hand to pull him up; thankfully the teen accepted it. Any further escalation just wouldn’t have been fun to deal with. “Just…not in the right areas.”

“Hah, just you wait! One day people will appreciate the strength my Pokémon have!”

“I look forward to it.” A genuine statement, Bea was definitely curious as to why todays challenger had such a love for the Rat Pokémon. If he stayed on his current path he was going to continue his plateau of mediocrity, but if that was what he thought was best then Bea had no choice but to accept.
She frowned as she watched him walk off of the pitch. That hadn’t been nearly as satisfying as she’d hoped it would. Usually challenger battles took at least 10 minutes for the quick ones. The crowd clearly shared her sentiment, leaving quieter than Bea thought possible.

Well, guess I’m taking up Melony’s offer then. It’s been a while since I’ve fought Gordie.

Now THAT was a way to get her blood pumping again! Bea signalled to the announcer that she had something to say, prompting a burst of static.

“Hold on there, folks, it looks like Gym Leader Bea isn’t quite ready to let you all go yet! What could she have to say? Ooooh the anticipation! Hopefully something exciting after the speed of her last battle! Or will she continuing blazing ahead??”

“Hey everyone!” Bea shouted, pressing her fingers to her dynamax band. “If you want a really good time I’m planning to challenger Gordie’s gym in Circhester today. I’ll give you hour to get there, before we show him what Stow-on-Side is really made of! Who’s up for that?”

The roar of approval was deafening, so Bea took that as a yes. People who were born in a certain area did always have a special attachment to their gyms after all. It was beyond a tradition, a heritage almost.

“Whoa!!!” The announcer was genuinely upbeat now, the image of Ballguy on the flatscreens imitating a happy dance. “An exhibition match between two of the fiercest gym leaders in Galar?! Count us in, Bea! Take a lunch break, or take a leak, but be in Circhester in an hour if you want to see a clash of the titans, folks!”

Another hiss of static and the announcement ended, but the crowd chant was back in full force. Bea wouldn’t admit that she liked the busy atmosphere of it all but it was infectious. It always had been, right when she’d first stepped in the Stow-on-Side gym.

I can feel myself getting fired up. Remember, confidence is fine, but it’s a breeding ground for mistakes. Don’t get carried away.

The cynical part of her mind told her that it never did Piers any harm to blurt out his tactics all the time. She consistently lost to him despite that, and despite the type advantage too. Bea put it out of her mind.

Right now my target is Gordie. Focus on that. I’ll beat Piers one day. I’ll beat everyone someday.

Bea closed her eyes, breathing deep.

It’s okay to be moved by battle, as long as I’m immovable during.

Her eyes snapped open, clutching her pokéballs tightly.

“Right then, Gordie. Let’s see what you’re made of this time!”

Chapter End Notes

Really loved getting to write this chapter! Credit to the Anonymous writer of ‘Between
a Rock and Cold place’ for getting the Melony/Gordie relationship down pat, respect where it's due!

Acerola gets her second mention, it's going somewhere don't worry.

I really tried to go to town with the whole sport/football aspect. Soccer for my lovely Americans. In the UK people go absolutely insane over their hometown team doing things so to see all the crowd cheering and whatnot in game brings a smile to my face. Also a reference to everyone's favourite youngster at the end, that was good fun.

Uploading at the worst times in the morning for me is a habit now. I embrace this life.
Stony Face, Rocky Heart

Chapter Summary

A challenging battle unfurls between Bea and Gordie, and not all of it is on the pitch.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“No hard feelings when I win.”

Bea hadn’t been sure what she expected when she texted Gordie to let him know she was challenging him. The message her Rotom phone was displaying seemed par for the course honestly; cocky, confident, but no bragging and straight to the point. That was Gordie to a T.

She didn’t bother replying, preferring to let the battle speak for itself. That was what he was expecting from her anyway. Despite her type advantage she only had 4 wins to his 3, and it was always a sobering thought.

Not that I ever drink. There’s enough to cloud the human mind without external influences.

The Corviknight taxi was nearly to Circhester now judging by ever thickening blanket of snow that was wrapping its arms over the ground. Bea found herself half wishing she’d dressed up warmer, but a good battle was better than any jumper in her book.

And if that Sinnohan gym leader can walk through the snow barefoot then so can I.

Even so, at this altitude Bea couldn’t help but shiver; she wrote it off as a shiver of anticipation. Gordie was not someone to take lightly, and apparently he wasn’t in the best of moods already according to what Melony had told her.

There was a reason his gym (or rather Melony’s, with his rotation worked in every other week) was higher than Stow-on-Side’s. Strength in the face of adversity. Bea knew she had no excuses for not wiping the floor with the rubble of his rock types. They should all crumble under her fighting spirit, but if anything he was the closest thing she had to a real rival.

Even Melony, using the traditionally defensively weak ice types gave her significantly more trouble than seemed logical.

What is it about the two of them that stops me from crushing them? It’s not like I don’t train. Do they train more?

Melony did have experience on her side, having the Circhester gym for the last two decades but Gordie was only a few years older than her and yet…

This time I’ll win definitively. No more close calls or ‘technical victories’ for me. I’ve got enough energy from that last battle to level a mountain. Level a mountain is exactly what I plan to do.

She’d gotten her best team for this occasion, once again ignoring the Nurse Joy’s pursed lips as she tracked dirt into the Pokémon centre. Her team had to be perfect, and she’d apologised so there was
no more too it.

Bea could feel the Pokéballs on her training belt humming in excitement too. Pokémon were influenced by their trainer’s feelings, that much had always been clear.

*Soon, guys. We’ll put on a show that’ll blow Circhester away.*

Exhibition matches between leaders weren’t as common as one might think. Between challengers and League conferences the time to ‘relax’ as the Chairman called it, was a rarity. Going all out against gym challengers wasn’t really approved of outside of the Champion Cup so it was no wonder her team was as itchy as she was.

*Is that really the word? Itchy?* Bea looked down at her palms. She was shaking, but whether from the chill or excitement was still unclear. Time would soon tell as her taxi touched down outside of the bath houses.

“Thanks, Corviknight. I’m glad you don’t feel the cold.”

“Caaaaw!” The bird was already gone, no doubt used to the praises and platitudes by now.

The snow was a shock to her feet, but Bea wasn’t about to be defeated before even making it to the gym and pressed onwards.

Despite Christmas nearly upon them, Circhester didn’t look a whole lot different; an ethereal winter wonderland with soft lighting and jolly people. The candy canes hanging from the telephone exchanges were a nice touch, Bea noted. Everything was just that bit more festive.

Gordie was already inside, as was expected. Bea wasn’t oblivious to the fact he had a significant home ground advantage, as even with the Stow-on-Side residents she’d roused into making the trek her fans were still outnumbered 3 to 1.

She could deal with the booing if things swung her way, but it would still sour her mood none-the-less. Bea kept having to remind herself she wasn’t any more made of stone than her opponents rock types were.

*Remember what Melony told you. You’re making progress. You’re allowed to feel.*

“Hey, I know I’m a magnet for attention but are we going to fight or what?”

Gordie was waving his hand around, beckoning her closer and snapping her out of the daydream.

“Of course, Gordie. Always a pleasure to beat you.”

“Heh, that’s my line, Bea.” Gordie flicked the (likely intentional) stray hair strand out of his eye and turned his waving to the crowd. “Give it up for the Stow-on-Side leader, everyone! Make sure she knows that todays the day I take her down a notch.”

There were equal yells of approval and roars of indignation from the stands. Gordie must have had a challenger of his own today for so many people to already be seated. Bea scanned the crowd, noting that her own fans were at least easy to differentiate from his, waving crudely made banners with her face on.

She had to suppress a smile when she caught sight of a kid waving a flag with Allister’s face on instead of her own; the smile quickly became a frown as she realised Gordie’s error.
“One of Stow-on-Side’s leaders,” she corrected. At this he raised an eyebrow, adjusting his tinted glasses in the process.

“Really? Did you get bored or something? Knew I’d wear you down eventually.”

“My brother earned his position, just as you did,” Bea replied evenly. “You’ve met him twice now.”

He’s definitely in a bad mood today. He usually keeps blunt remarks like that to himself…just how bad did he and Melony fight?

“Heh, I think I vaguely remember that. Hardly matters when I become the Champion.” His grin was making Bea further fired up, but she quickly brought it under control. Losing the mental game so early would be a detriment. Besides, talking trash was fairly common for crowd publicity purposes.

“Allister is a talented trainer, don’t be so sure. He’s got it in him to go far.”

“Probably, unless I shout ‘boo’ and scare him away. What’s he going to do then? Get you to fight in his place?”

“…”

He’s going to pay for that.

The crowd were definitely on board with it too, ‘ooooing’ and ‘ahhing’ as the two danced around each other’s words back and forth. The popularity polls always had a field day even before the Pokémon ever got sent out.

Bea however, was beginning to tire of Gordie’s slight bravado. Hype was one thing, but trying to get a rise out of personal things was never the answer.

“I’m surprised you even showed up! My team and I scared off the last challenger before he sent his last guy out!”

“The same team that lost to mine last time?”

“…No.”

Bea was surprised but didn’t let it show. Usually that was the button to push whenever things got heated. Gordie was a notoriously sore loser, not even giving post-match interviews on principle if he lost. This time he seemed almost…too confident.

“Go, Shuckle!”

Clearly the time for words was over, and Gordie made his first move. A deft leap and 360° flip and his Mold Pokémon appeared in a flash of light. Bea did have to admire his agility, coming from someone so heavy. It wasn’t as if he didn’t push his own body to its limits like she did with hers.

Still, Bea couldn’t put her finger on as to why but she felt uneasy. He always led with Shuckle, so perhaps he’d already won the mental game and she just didn’t know it. Regardless, she unhitched her first Pokéball.

“Hawlucha, you’re up!” The wrestling Pokémon eyed its opponent warily, it too sensing something was amiss.
“Aww, no Hitmontop this time?” Gordie was obviously trying to play her but she refused to rise.

“I know what contrary does, Gordie. Giving you a free attack boost isn’t good policy.”

“Oh because Shuckle is known for its fierce attacks, right everyone?” The crowd responded in kind with uproarious laughter at her apparent logic.

So that’s it. He’s playing specifically for his fans this time, even more than usual. That means…he has something to prove to them.

Bea had an idea as to why but she wasn’t just going to tell him straight to his face. Not when he obviously had an ulterior motive for accepting her challenge so readily.

“Hawlucha, taunt Shuckle. We’re not dealing with Stealth Rocks and Sticky Webs this time!”

“Oh?” Gordie readjusted his visor a second time, pointing in the direction of Hawlucha.

“Infestation, Shuckle. It’s not getting away.”

Bea watched as her Pokémon became locked in place, shifting around as the tiny bugs latched themselves into its feathers.

Using an offensive move as a lead? He must have suspected I’d use taunt then. He can’t encore me with Shuckle taunted so…

“Hawlucha, get up a Swords Dance so we can break through Shuckle’s shell!”

If the images of swords hovering above her Pokémon’s head was intimidating to Gordie he wasn’t letting on. If anything, Bea could see him grinning.

“Shuckle, keep using Infestation on Hawlucha.”

Just what is he intending to do? With most of his moves disabled what can he do to us?

“Hawlucha, ignore the trap and start attacking Shuckle with Flying-Press!” Hawlucha did just that, somersaulting in a similar way that Gordie himself had done before crashing into the rocky shell of the other Pokémon.

Shuckle winced, but didn’t seem all that bothered and continued to sit in place. Gordie’s grin was starting to unnerve Bea, though of course she wasn’t going to let him see that.

“Good job, Shuckle, taking hits all day every day! Hey Bea, not going to use any more Swords Dances to hit us?”

“I’m going to play things my way, your advice isn’t required.”

“Ohohoho, you’re going to wish you’d respected my advice a little more. It’s the advice of the future Champion after all!”

“Of course. Hawlucha,” she called over, prompting a nod of agreement. “Use High Jump Kick on Shuckle! Another nod and her Pokémon flew into the air once more. In a way, Hawlucha was similar to Gordie. Both liked to showboat, but attacks deadly precision and refinement were sure to follow.

This time would be no different, Bea was sure. Right up until High Jump Kick was about to make contact.
“Shuckle, Power Trick!”

“What?!“

It wasn’t an intense or directed burst of light, like Flash, but it was enough to throw off Hawlucha’s timing; Bea could only watch as Shuckle rolled to the side and Hawlucha kept going and crashed into the ground.

“Quick, while Hawlucha is down use Rock Tomb!”

“Hawlucha get out of there!”

Shuckle was quicker, Hawlucha having sustained serious damage already from the missed attack. The rocks fell, crushing the last of her Pokémon’s energy, prompting a cheer from the crowd. Bea returned Hawlucha, stroking the ball slightly.

“Sorry,” she whispered, shutting her eyes. “I shouldn’t have let that happen.”

“Heh, so much for ‘crushing me’ as you always put it.” Gordie wasn’t even addressing her directly, instead waving to his adoring fans.

“I haven’t ever seen someone use Power Trick like that. Usually the loss in defences mean Shuckle gets knocked out before it can do anything.”

“That’s why I had to wait until you used a risky move. Plus waiting for the taunt to wear off. Simple really.”

“…”

“And now I’m going to sweep you away in a rockslide as the rest of your team falls, no hard feelings.”

So this was his plan. He really intends to take every one of my team out with his Shuckle? No wonder he was so confident, using Power Trick is unorthodox at best. I could never have predicted it.

A smaller voice in the back of Bea’s head told her that she should always predict her opponents ahead of time, or her training wasn’t tough enough. She tried to shake it away, as the voice might as well have been her parents. She wasn’t sure which, it was a mashup of both really.

Bea unsuccessfully told herself that predicting and being a psychic were different things, sending her Sirfetch’d out.

Besides, having a challenger turn up with only Raticate wasn’t something predictable either.

“Sirfetch’d use First Impression! Catch it off guard!”

“Fetch’d!” It might have been a blur to the crowd but Bea followed her Pokémon’s path with trained precision as it delivered a quick stab to Shuckle’s chest area, knocking it back.

“Stand strong, Shuckle and retaliate with Rock Tomb!”

“Sirfetch’d, be ready to block Rock Tombs with your shield!”

With the rocks and shield colliding, a cloud of dust was kicked up off of the barren floor of the gym. Bea heard a cry of pain, unmistakably from her own Pokémon. When the dust cleared
Shuckle was a distance away, sitting still as normal as Sirfetch’d did its best to remain proud. Its shield appeared to have taken heavy damage however, though it was clearly willing to fight on.

“Good job, Shuckle, I was curious as to how much that would do.”

“Shuccc, Shuckle!”

“That’s the spirit! We’ll bring a mountain down on her team!”

*I can’t…I can’t let that happen.* Bea looked over again to Sirfetch’d, who was breathing heavily despite having only just been summoned. *That rock attack did a lot even though it’s a resisted hit. Shuckle’s attack is sky high because of the swap.*

“Sirfetch’d use Meteor Assault, go all in! We have to knock out Shuckle!”

Gordie seemed unimpressed, flicking his hand lazily over his shoulder.

“Protect yourself, Shuckle.”

Bea grimaced. The glowing leek bounced harmlessly off of Shuckle’s barrier and Sirfetch’d stumbled back, unbalanced from the force of the impact. It too was knocked out by a Rock Tomb and Bea was forced to recall it.

“That was a great job, you dented it enough for us to take it down.” Hardly high praise, especially for one as proud as Sirfetch’d but it was all she had. Gordie’s battle style was as severe as ever, just like his mother’s.

*Empty words won’t win you battles. Overwhelming strength will.*

Bea dug her heels into the dirt, crouching. She was NOT about to be swept away by a silly looking tortoise with a gimmicky strategy in front of an enormous crowd. A crowd with a lot of Stow-on-Side residents, she reminded herself.

She looked up at the stands to see whispering amongst the banner wavers. They never were all that subtle with their doubts. Still, they were still waving so they clearly still had faith in her to stay, and that was good enough for her.

“Grapploct, go!” The jujitsu Pokémon plopped itself to the ground, awaiting its orders.

“Heh, saw that one coming.”

“I bet you did.”

“I did.” He affirmed.

*That’s where you’re wrong.*

“Grapploct, grab on to Shuckle and hold it tight!”

To the surprise of the people watching, Gordie gave no commands to Shuckle and instead watched the show unfold.

“Predictable, Bea. I think my skill is already clouding your head.”

“Oh is it? Grapploct, trap Shuckle in a Whirlpool!”
"What?!" Gordie could only watch as his Shuckle was swept away in a hurricane made of water, trapped in place and unable to attack. "I thought you were going for an Octolock! Shuckle, try and escape!"

"As if I’d forgotten about Shuckle’s contrary ability already. Only an amateur would raise Shuckle’s defences, you got complacent because of your attack swap."

The crowd seemed to be in agreement with her, strangely enough. Gordie, unsurprisingly, was none too pleased with the development.

"Grrrah, Shuckle toxic Graploct before it can get away."

"Graploct, let go of Shuckle!"

It was already too late, as the tell-tale signs of poison coursing through her Pokémon became apparent the closer Graploct got towards her. Bulging domes of purple pustules were beginning to form as the poison did its job, slowly weakening it until it too had fainted.

That was a potent poison, Gordie must have trained Shuckle specifically to do that.

Both gym leaders recalled their Pokémon.

"I’m impressed, Bea, you knocked a whole ONE of my team while you’ve lost three."

"You’ll be even more impressed when we still win!"

The grin was back on Gordie’s face, apparently content with the way things were turning out for him.

"Sure! I’ll give you a signed copy of my League Card if you do."

“…Sure.” Though their words had been the same, the intonation was far different as Bea began to plan her next move. Unlike gym battles and the early Champion cup rounds, exhibition matches allowed for the use of a full team of 6.

Though Gordie had been rubbing it in she was still at a severe disadvantage in terms of numbers. But not in terms of skill. If I have to I’ll force a draw. I need power and I need it now. Her mind made up, Bea released her next Pokémon.

"Falinks, I choose you!" The formation Pokémon quickly assembled itself into a line, awaiting commands from both its trainer, and the leader of the pack.

"Interesting. Stonjourner, go!" The big rock Pokémon towered over both Bea and Gordie, as if hoping to squash the competition. Clearly Gordie thought the same. “Target their leader with a Body Slam! Without it they’re useless!”

"Falinks, scatter yourselves! Make it impossible to identify who’s in charge!" Her Pokémon did just that, confusing Stonjourner who only managed to Body Slam the air where they had once been.

"Oh no you don’t, Earthquake the area to disrupt the formation!"

"Protect yourselves, then use No Retreat! Let’s show them our real power!" A red aura enveloped the units, signalling to Bea her Pokéball’s recall function would no longer work. Not that she wanted it to.
“Stonjourner, Rock Slide the area to make it more difficult for them to move!”

“Assemble into a circle and hide around the rocks!”

Gordie narrowed his eyes as Bea’s Pokémon began to adapt to their surroundings. She was starting to turn the tide ever so slightly, and a lack of focus was something he didn’t need right now.

*Not a lot gets past her. She probably already figured out I’m not feeling great right now.*

He clenched his fist unconsciously, though even that was picked up on by Bea.

“Falinks, Iron Defence.”

_Most rock type moves are physical, we could do with the extra hits._

The battle went on like this for another few minutes, with Stonjourner being unable to locate Falinks and Falinks boosting its stats. The rocks, it turned out, were helping the opponent more than his own team Gordie noted, growing annoyed.

Despite his lead he wanted more. Winning wasn’t enough, he had to be seen doing it easily if he was to keep up appearances. Though Bea had a type advantage, the Stow-on-Side gym was two places below the Circhester gym and Gordie knew that realistically there was more pressure on him to win than on her.

If he won then it was ‘Of course you did, you’re from a higher ranked gym’ but if he lost then all he’d hear was ‘You lost to a lower ranked gym? That’s a shame. Type advantages be damned.’

That was part of the reason he’d never wanted to come back to Circhester, but he couldn’t ignore his problems forever. There was just so much pressure. It was infuriating to him how he just wasn’t allowed to be his own person.

*It’s your choice, honey, I’ll never ask you to do it if you’re heart isn’t truly in it.*

“Stonjourner, Body Press!

Gordie yelled his command, trying to drown out the voice of his mother. It worked, if only for a second. That gentle yet firm tone she always used to try and talk him down annoyed him more than it really should have. Maybe he had too much of his father in him but he could never listen.

No matter what she said he knew he was expected to take over the gym one day. These past few months of trialling the two of them together as leaders had been grating, but bearable. If he ever was to be free, he needed to show the Galar region that his proficiency with rock types was beyond compare.

*To hell with the ice type, that isn’t me.*

Gordie recalled Stonjourner, having been knocked out by Bea’s Falinks and not even landing a single hit.

*Too big and unwieldly. Gah, I need mobility when rocks are known for standing still!*

“Barbaracle, you’re next! Let’s test your teamwork against Falinks.”

Bea’s face was ever impassive, just a slight frown as usual as Falinks organised into a box formation.
How does she do that? Even when I had an enormous lead she didn’t crack. If she even has emotions at all she keeps them very well hidden.

His fans were after emotion, however, and Gordie riled them up further with his signature pose; palm out, index finger up; he had had that printed on t-shirts with the chairman’s blessing.

“You almost seem to be staging a comeback, I’m impressed! You’re not getting any further.”

“And here I thought you were going to try another gimmick rather than show me your real power. Enough talk.”

Gordie recoiled internally.

How can she say that with such a straight face?

“Heh, our true power it is then. Barbaracle use Shell Smash!” His Pokémon flipped away from Falinks’s attack, just how he taught it.

His fans always admired that he and his Pokémon could pull the same moves. A synergy not every trainer had, but he was a rising star (or so he’d been called by the media) and he was going to put on a show either way.

“Falinks use Smart Strike to ensure your attack connects!” No amount of dodging was getting away from an attack like that and Barbaracle stumbled backwards.

“Use Payback and regain your balance.”

“Scatter again, don’t let yourself get hit!”

Bea knew that even after a Shell Smash that she was faster thanks to No Retreat, and Falinks was easily able to avoid Barbaracle’s wild swing. They reassembled in front of her, content to march in time while Gordie continued his assault.

She could see he was beginning to lose his cool ever so slightly.

He really banked on defeating me with only Shuckle. What does he have to prove to…oh.

“Melony,” Bea murmured. The same as her mother, Gordie felt he had to live up to his. That had to be it. Melony was a kind soul, but a harsh taskmaster and her persona on the field and off the field might as well have been two different people with the way they acted.

He wants to impress her.

“Barbaracle focus yourself, use Surf to turn Falinks over!”

Gordie’s idea worked and the formation was disrupted, leaving it open for a powerful Razor Shell. Before going down, however, Falinks was able to use Mega Horn at point blank and the two Pokémon ended up knocking each other out. Bea’s 4 to Gordie’s 3.

I’m still at a disadvantage but it’s not the loss it could have been. I can still win this.

I’m losing my lead. How did she bring it back so easily? I have to be better than this.

Two trainers, two trains of thought. One climbing the hill of adversity, one at the peak and ready to slide back down at a moment’s notice.
“Rhyperior, go!”

“Pangoro, go!”

The two eyed each other, mirroring their trainers. Trying to predict the other’s moves, guessing, second guessing, and counter-playing scenarios. Truly this was how battles were won and fought.

“You could give up now, Bea. No one would blame you for losing to me.”

“Just as I’m beginning to turn the tide back my way? Think again, Gordie.”

_She isn’t backing down, Gordie_ mused. _That’s to be expected she’s as dedicated as they come. Heck, she marched through Circhester in winter without any shoes and didn’t bat an eyelid! Tough alright._

“Then we’ll have to convince you through our skills alone.”

“Now you’re speaking my language!” Bea resumed her fighting stance, arms ready to follow along with Pangoro’s strikes.

“Maybe you should stick to ghosts after I destroy the rest of your team! Or is that your brother’s thing?”

“…I should hope you choose your words carefully, Gordie.” Bea could feel her eyes beginning to narrow involuntarily. Whenever people brought Allister’s business into places it had no right to be she got tetchy.

“Hey I’m just saying, maybe that’s a better career choice?”

“What do you mean?”

Gordie froze for a moment, realising he’d wandered into territory he didn’t fully understand. Scratch that, Bea’s glare made him feel it was more akin to a minefield than a territory.

“I-I just…it’s like…” He couldn’t figure out how to turn his comment into a harmless jab.

_You idiot, of course family gets her fired up just look at yourself? One argument with mum and you lose all credibility as a trainer. All honour._

“Are you questioning my brother’s skills as a trainer?”

“No, I just…I mean if he wants to challenge me can…”

Bea could feel her eye begin to twitch. It was dumb, and irrational, but it bothered her all the same.

“You’re here for me and me alone. My skill versus yours.”

“I mean…”

“What my brother does in his spare time is irrelevant! He can choose to do whatever he wants.”

“Like fighting my gym? I could always use the training…”

“It doesn’t matter what you want, but what he does! If he wants to go explore Glimwood Tangle instead of fighting then that’s his right.”
“I’m not saying… I mean… of course he can…”

Gordie could hear the crowd growing quieter as the two bickered back and forth, unsure of who’s side they were on or even if they were on a side at all. They were just… observing.

*What the hell is wrong with me? This is trivial nonsense and yet I still fucked it up. Just like home.*

“You bet he can!”

“…I bet he’d rather explore than train though.”

“…”

Gordie realised his mistake far too late as his opponents eyes lit up in fury. Even her Pangoro seemed angry with him specifically, ignoring his actual opponent and affixing him with a steely glare.

“Oh shit I didn’t mean it like tha…”

“PANGORO, OBLITERATE GORDIE’S TEAM! DYNAMAX NOW!”

Dynamaxing when you weren’t on your last Pokémon was seldom done, but it was by no means forbidden and Gordie watched in trepidation as the Pangoro before him grew in size until the stadium was no more than a suggestion for it. A mere formality as it crushed Rhyperior with the force of a meteor, knocking it out in a single hit.

*Gordie, you put your foot in your mouth you idiot! Why did you have to bring the brother into this? Everyone knows she’d die for him for Arceus sake! Gaaaah!!!*

Bea on the other hand was seeing red, not even caring when Tyranitar’s sand stream began to cut into her skin.

“I’m getting tired of your trash talk, Gordie. That was a line overstepped.”

“Look, Bea, I didn’t mean to say that! I mean not like that! Obviously your brother is skilled, he’s running a gym with you!”

Whether he was backpedalling or genuinely sorry she couldn’t tell, the continuous stream of sand in her eyes made sure of that. She could barely even make him out as far away as he was.

“Your lack of self-discipline is evident. Even if you didn’t mean what you said I can’t ignore something so… callous. Questioning my brother’s dedication at all shows your true thoughts and I can’t let that slide, even for a lapse in judgment. Pangoro, Max Knuckle once more!”

“Damn it, Tyranitar protect yourself as best you can!” Even with its barrier up the attack from above still inflicted major damage to him, being quadruply weak to the fighting type attack.

“Again, Pangoro, destroy everything around you if you have to!”

This time Tyranitar did not get back up.

With the sand stream gone, Gordie could see Bea clearly again.

*She’s mad. Obviously. If someone called your brothers and sister out for not working then of course you’d get mad. Bea and Allister are far closer than I’ll ever get to my siblings so I can’t even imagine how… ah who am I kidding it’s hopeless, I messed up. Got carried away with trying
to win.

Gordie sent out his last Pokémon, Coalossal warming the area up considerably with its presence. Even if he won now, it would be hollow. On the inside it was just...hollow.

As it turned out, neither of them would end up winning. With Pangoro’s dynamax ending and Coalossal Gigantamaxing it seemed like Gordie would take the win, only for Bea’s Hitmontop to use Endure and Counter to knock them both out.

Though it technically counted as a draw, the two fainting at nearly the same time, Hitmontop had been the one responsible for the draw and in his heart Gordie knew it was her win. Clearly the crowd thought so too, the Stow-on-Side portion going wild and cheering for their favourite leader. An incredible comeback in the face of a shaky start.

Even the Circhester portion was clapping for her to a degree, though they were yelling their support for him as well.

As if I deserve it, Gordie thought bitterly, though waving and smiling to them all the same. I went overboard on the mental game and struck a nerve with Bea. If I won I’d feel terrible, so I’m glad she got one on me this time.

Speaking of, the fighting type leader was approaching him now. No doubt for the customary post-battle handshake. Her face was back to impassive, the outburst just a dream from another life.

“That was a good match, Gordie. Your early game strategy was unusual, but clever. I can respect that.”

“T-thanks.” Gordie took the hand outstretched, shaking it with a strength he just didn’t have. “Bea I...”

“Yes, Gordie?”

He looked away, finding the rubble and grass that had been kicked up as a result of their battle to be far more interesting.

“...Meet me in the locker room. I can’t...I can’t do this in front of people.”

“...As you wish.”

And so Bea made her way to the Circhester gym locker rooms, signing a few autographs for her fans on the way. One of Gordie’s surprisingly wanted one too, but of course she obliged. The kid seemed so happy with it, it made Bea feel strange to have fans who predominantly supported another leader.

People are allowed to enjoy battles from any trainer, not just one or two. I’m grateful people can like me even if I’m from a rival gym. On their home turf no less.

Her anger at what had happened was still present, but less now. Meditation training did wonders for letting go of emotions like that. In fact if anything Bea was more annoyed at herself for acting as she did instead of remaining calm.

Foolish.

“Gordie, can I come in?” Bea announced herself just in case he wasn’t ready.
“…Yeah.”

The locker room was bigger than Stow-on-Side’s and filled with icy and rocky tiles interlacing.

“Mum’s idea,” Gordie said, noticing her gaze. “Her way of letting me know that ice types and rock types can get along. That we should get along, or something like that.”

He hadn’t looked up, still refusing to meet her gaze since the pitch. He was sat on the floor instead of one of the many benches, slumping against the confines of a locker with no regard for comfort. He was fiddling with his visor now. No…seeing his own reflection in them was a better descriptor.

“I’m sorry I lost my cool back there,” Bea started. “That was a very dishonourable dynamax and not the way I wanted to win.”

Gordie put his visor down, finally looking up at her.

“You’ve got to be kidding, right? I’m the one who should be apologising to you!” He gestured around to the empty room. “That’s exactly what I called you here for, you know that right?”

Bea nodded.

“I know. You don’t like your fans to see you sulk, I suppose apologising comes under that banner.”

Gordie winced, but sighed and leaned his head away from her gaze.

“I deserved that. Yeah…I’m a wimp when it comes to crowds. Even if I won I’d still have left. I’m sorry.”

“…Look me in the eyes and tell me that or I won’t believe you.”

“Now you sound like mum.”

Still, though the effort was clearly a gargantuan one Gordie still turned his gaze to hers. Steely grey met stormy blue, and Gordie honestly felt like cowering. Bea barely came up to his shoulder and yet she was easily the scariest person he knew, besides his mother. He swallowed uneasily.

“I’m sorry for what I said, Bea. I was trying to break your concentration but you’re just so damn composed all the time. I got desperate and went overboard. I just…I wanted to win so badly and…”

“And you thought rather than trying to win with skill you’d try to get me to make silly mistakes?”

“…Pretty much, yeah.”

“I did wonder why you were trash talking me so much.” Bea sat herself on the bench opposite Gordie, watching him intently. The scrutiny clearly bothered him so she let up, pretending to look around the room; he visibly relaxed. “Why though?”

“…”

“We’ve fought before and it was nothing like today. You using a risky Power Trick strategy is strange enough, but what you said…I didn’t expect it from you of all people.”

“I know, I know!” Gordie pushed his visor across the floor, apparently unwilling to look at himself in the reflection any longer. “I was in a mood already before you came over. I…overate again to try and calm myself but it just made it worse. Then I felt bad for overeating and got more angry, I took that out on you I guess.”
“You overeat when you get angry?”

In response Gordie pinched the sides of his stomach, pulling a roll of fat out from beneath his jersey. His arms fell limply to his sides, not bothering to pull the shirt back down.

“Or when I get sad. Not exactly the most surprising thing ever, is it? I mean just look at me.”

He slumped further to the ground as if he was planning to dissolve into it. Bea could tell he was seriously considering it if he could have done.

“And you, you’re built like the rocks I’m supposed to be good with! You could probably strike a match on your abs. I look at you and...ugh, look at me, oversharing my issues when all you came for was an apology. I’m sorry, Bea, we’re not exactly friends yet. After today, I can understand you not wanting that from me either.”

“I just want understanding, Gordie. The match analogy isn’t one I’ve heard yet so I…appreciate it. It’s nice to have my training acknowledged.”

“Wish I had half the work ethic you do. Then I wouldn’t look like a melted icecream.”

“You eat when you’re sad, right?”

“Yeah. You’ve got discipline in spades.”

“It came at a cost.”

“Huh?”

“You heard me.” Bea crossed her legs on the bench, closing her eyes. “My work ethic is entirely a product of my parents doing. They instilled that into me since day one, and probably before that they were that dedicated. I never had a ‘childhood’ as it were.”

“Neither did I, but one of us looks ready to snap a tree in half and the other...I’m fat, fine I said it.”

“I didn’t ask you to.”

“I had to. For me.” Gordie rubbed his eyes blearily, noting Bea’s motionless form but also aware she was clearly listening to him. “Geez, I just kept on complaining even after I went to apologise.”

“You clearly have a lot to vent about. Do so, you’ll feel better.”

“To you of all people? Right after I was an arse about your brother?”

“Why not to me? I’m here and you’re clearly not venting at home in ways that help you. Keeping your emotions inside leads to pain. I found that out the hard way. It’s bad for you.”

“Tch, I vent all the time, trust me. Getting heated at home just leads to more trouble.”

“We’re not at home, and I’m not Melony. Families...can be tough. I know all about parents wanting kids to do things before they can even comprehend what ‘things’ are.”

“But...you’re so collected. I was trying to get a rise out of you but it just didn’t work until I said what I did.”

Bea’s eyes opened a crack, before going back to being closed.
“It didn’t mean I didn’t feel what you were saying, Gordie. Showing weakness in battle does me no favours. I suppose… I lost in that regard anyway after I dynamaxed Pangoro. Perhaps I was wrong to not show how I was feeling.”

“I… ugh… I don’t even know, Bea. I didn’t mean what I said at all, you’ve got to believe me! I just… damn it all.”

“You just…?" Bea let the question hang in the air over them like a fog. It was thick, nasty, and one Gordie struggled to get rid of decisively.

“Look, everyone knows how close you two are.”

“… Go on.” Bea opened her eyes fully this time, though remained in her meditation position.

“Yeah, every other leader I’ve spoken to says the same, you two are inseparable! Some part of me thought that pushing that button was the way to make you lose focus. Some other part of me was… jealous.”

“Jealous?”

“Jealous,” Gordie reiterated, slowly drawing his legs up and under his chin; he knew well enough that crossing his legs wasn’t going to happen, whether he could flip or not. “Home life was always so hectic for me, I never felt all that close to my siblings because of the age gap.”

“You’re significantly older than them.”

Yeah, I’m from mum’s first marriage. My dad, the bastard, left her with me and nothing else before he cleared off. She raised me as best she could while being new to the whole gym leader thing herself. She remarried and had my brothers and sister. The guy was nice to me, good even, but I wasn’t his. His heart belonged to mum, and his kids alone. I never felt like there was any room for me.”

“So you ran away?”

“Yeah.” The word echoed around the empty locker room. Gordie hated that word and all it entailed in his life. “I ran away after I lost to mum and when I came back they all seemed far happier. Like I was the wedge between them, like I was the thing stopping them for being happy together. The guy had passed on while I was gone and I didn’t even know. I never answered any messages from mum, I just assumed she was nagging me. I got myself an apartment on the edge of town so I wouldn’t get in the way, even though mum says its fine for me to move back in.”

“Why don’t you?”

“She still wants me to take over the gym permanently. Wants to focus on her family, her real one.”

“Gordie, you’re her real family too. She wouldn’t have offered you a place at home if she didn’t care. I bet she even offered family Christmas dinner at her place, right?”

“Right. You know you might be a fighting type expert, but you could be a good psychic too if you wanted.”

It was a dumb joke but Bea found the corners of her lips turning upwards slightly. It had been one of those days.

“I’m serious. You should take her up on that offer. It would mean a lot to her.”
“She cares about everyone.” Gordie turned his head away, drawing circles on the dusty floor. “It’s in her nature to want to help everyone, she’s helping your brother today isn’t she? She said so before she left the gym today.”

“She is,” Bea admitted. “But that doesn’t mean she doesn’t want you home. You’re her son, Gordie, nothing can change that or make it any less true. I can tell she misses you.”

“Yeah. I know.”

“…”

“…”

“…”

“…Bea, I’m so sorry for bringing Allister into this, it’s just that you and him have the kind of relationship I’ve always wanted.”

“…Really?”

Gordie nodded, voluntarily meeting her eyes this time.

“You’re so close to each other, I want that for myself. I’ve always wanted it but I don’t know how. I don’t know how to act around my siblings, we’re hardly related. You’re always so perfect and…”

“Allister and I aren’t related at all, it doesn’t matter Gordie, trust me. Family isn’t just blood, it’s what you choose to do with it.”

Gordie seemed stunned by the information, and it was only then that Bea was reminded that her and Allister’s personal history wasn’t common knowledge.

“You two…aren’t related? At all?” Gordie gave out an exasperated sigh, banging his head on the lockers behind him.

Bea shook her head.

“It’s not exactly hard to figure out. My parents and I have dark skin, and he’s white as a piece of paper. He’s adopted.”

“I just thought he had a skin condition. That and the mask, I thought that made sense…”

“He wears his mask because he wants to,” Bea advised. “Nothing more, nothing less.”

“Right, sorry. Again.” Another attempt at denting the lockers. “So I really am just a screw up. You two aren’t related and you’re closer than I’ll ever be to people I actually have genetics with. I mean, I can’t share that much, I definitely didn’t get mum’s ‘have unlimited energy to give a shit about other people all the time’ gene. How she has the energy is crazy.”

“That’s a defeatist attitude, Gordie.”

“Yeah, I’ll go get an Archeops and all. Heh, they’re even rock types so they’ll fit right in on my team.”

“Jokes aside, that’s no way to think.” Bea rolled eyes, though the attempt at humour was decent enough. “Your environment was pretty hostile by the sounds of things. Your mum doesn’t have infinite energy either, she said as much to me today.”
“You spoke to mum today?”

“I did. She viewed looking after Allister as a break of sorts.”

“…I knew you didn’t challenge me of your own accord. She told you to come and ‘get me to let off some steam’ didn’t she?”

“Yeah…and you fought with her again this morning? In the gym in front of everyone. That’s why you were so eager to prove yourself to your fans as you’d already lost once today. That’s why you went overboard trying to taunt me.”

Gordie clenched his fist, both of them even, clearly having much more to say on a few choice subjects. However, the rage fizzled out and the apathy drained back in and his arms fell back down.

“Yeah. Glad we’ve both got the full picture then.”

“I suppose we do.”

“I suppose we do,” he echoed.

“Gordie, I care for my brother a lot but we’re not perfect. Far from it. Whatever image you have of us is just a sweeping generalisation.”

“A sweeping generalisation sounds nice honestly.”

“I do my best for him, and I know he tries too. Hearing you say what you did after he’s made so much progress got to me in a way I didn’t know it could.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You’ve said sorry enough, apologise by listening.”

“…Okay. Sorry.”

“These things aren’t perfect. People say things they don’t mean and people get hurt. Alli and I fight sometimes, and it hurts me but I can’t let it show, just like venting for you doesn’t work at home. People fight, we get mad and sometimes we stay mad long past the time we should.”

Bea uncrossed her legs and sank to the floor next to Gordie.

“No amount of meditation will ever truly erase feelings, or we’d be erasing what makes us human. Whatever you think of me being a wall of stone, forget it. I’m human too.”

“…I can see that.” Gordie was looking at her now, now that they were on the same level; it was if he was truly seeing her as just another person, not some ideal on a stand. Bea had to admit that it felt good.

“Just as I need to be more honest with Alli, you need to be honest with Melony. Go for Christmas, stay and help and be a big brother to your siblings. Just go with the flow, there’s no plans you can follow for that kind of thing. I don’t follow a plan for being a big sister, I just live day to day and do what I think is best.”

“But I…”

“I already know you don’t truly feel that isolating yourself from your family is for the best. You
want to be a part of it or you wouldn’t care nearly as much as you do.”

Gordie closed his mouth.

“I know that because that’s what I want. I’ve set myself on such a high pedestal away from Alli and he looks up to me like I’m some sort of saint, when really I’m sitting right next to him. That’s my fault, but I haven’t addressed it until recently. I want him to see me as his sister, not a saviour.”

“Well…Christmas is the time for family, as you say.”

Bea could see he was properly smiling now, not flaunting a cocky grin or pretending he wasn’t hurting on the inside. Just, a genuine emotion.

“Look at us.”

Gordie looked around the locker room again. It felt cosier than before, and not just because of the body heated now next to him. Like he belonged, just a little more.

“I genuinely didn’t know if you had emotions, Bea. I’m glad I was wrong. Sorry if that sounds rude.”

“It’s okay, I get it a lot.”

“You…shouldn’t.” Gordie scratched the back of his neck awkwardly. “I can see you have a lot going on inside, like me. That isn’t stony at all.”

“…Thanks.”

“Gah, I mean…you should tell your brother what you told me.”

“Only if you tell your mother what you told me.”

“I…heh, yeah. You got me.”

“You’ll spend Christmas with them?”

“I’ll try. I have to start somewhere.”

“I can respect that. Choosing to start a new chapter in your life is always the hardest part.”

“…”

“…”

“…So do I have to give you a signed copy of my League card now?”

“A decent present, if you really want to.” Bea couldn’t help but smile. Today was definitely one of those days.

Chapter End Notes

Writing Pokemon battles is tough stuff! I have battled competitively in the past, Shuckle is a demon without taunt. It’s early days for Gordie, give him some slack he
hasn't settled into his role completely yet. Family has the power to bring out both the best and worst in you.

Though this chapter had some holiday themes, stay tuned for a Christmassy update to this fic soon! How could I resist? For those of you who don't celebrate it, continue being as kind as ever ^_^
Heart to Heart

Chapter Summary

With Christmas upon them, Allister can hide his secret no longer. Bea has things of her own to say.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Alli, it’s nearly time for presents!” Allister heard Bea’s voice drift up the stairs and into his room but he made no move to leave.

Alright, I’m gonna tell her! He immediately didn’t believe a single word. Christmas day was supposed to be a happy time and yet Allister remained paralysed with fear.

Bea had been in a relatively good mood ever since she’d spoken with Melony and come back from the Circhester gym and he really really didn’t want to do anything to sour that. With his cold gone, Allister’s mind had defaulted back into fear. Fear of the unknown. Fear of change. Fear of loss.

I have to tell her.

Realistically, Allister didn’t have any reasons at all to be afraid today. House decorating was all fine, and Bea had dragged in a pine tree from outside for him to have free reign over. Allister did secretly count that as a present in its own right but made sure to not voice that; Bea wouldn’t have approved, saying ‘It’s just a little something.’

‘Yeah ‘cos dragging a tree all the way from Stow-on-Side outskirts and up all those cliffs was ‘little’. Bet she had haul it past Cara Liss without stopping. She’d probably steal it.’

Allister wasn’t sure why exactly the self-proclaimed ‘fossil reanimator’ had parked herself at the edge of their town but she unsettled him. Bea thought so too, and they did their best to avoid the thousand-yard stare (and creepy grin) whenever possible.

“Is she having Christmas in that tent or does she actually live somewhere?”

Allister knew he was distracting himself purposefully and tried to put it out of his mind. He had to focus or he’d never get around to anything important.

They’d also gotten through Christmas dinner without incident, if one discounted Gengar vanishing one of the chairs for a few minutes. He’d gotten Bea’s present on time, no stress of last minute market shopping for him! He’d even survived the traditional Galar League holiday get-together on the top floor of the Budew Drop Inn.

Bea had been very proud of him but Allister still shuddered at the memory. He knew it was optional, and Bea had made it very clear he didn’t have to but he wanted to. For her. She didn’t care much for parties herself but it was only once a year, and having all the leaders together was a rarity. Only the Champion Cup had that honour, and even that was mostly business as opposed to pleasurable endeavours.
At least I got to see Milo again.

No, what was bothering the young gym leader was that despite his best efforts he still hadn’t been able to confess that he’d been talking online with someone. His friend in Alola, trial captain Acerola.

She’s got to know. The secret’s just gonna be hanging over me if I don’t, and it’ll ruin Christmas for the both of us if I don’t. I’ll be all anxious and weird if I don’t!

It had seemed so easy when Melony had encouraged him but as soon as Bea had gotten back his confidence had taken a backseat once more. Allister was sure his sister knew he was hiding something, and that something extended beyond this year’s present.

He had enough anxiety concerning whether she’d even like his present. He’d helped make it himself after all.

“Gen, gen-gar!”

Allister observed his Gengar floating around near the top of his wardrobe, licking up any stray dust particles it could find. He hoped it was the spectral kind, not just house dirt.

“Y-yeah! Shame Bea doesn’t speak ghost too…otherwise you could tell her instead!”

“Garrrr…”

“I know, I gotta tell her m’self. She’ll…be proud of me, r-right? She w-won’t get mad?”

And so the debate continued, both internally in the battleground that comprised Allister’s thoughts, and with Gengar in the bedroom.

She’ll be proud I made a friend, but mad I kept a secret so big. I just…I dunno.

“Alli?” His sister’s voice called again, and Allister knew he was out of time.

“Comin’, sis!”

Guess there wasn’t a better day I could pick. This is kinda a present too, right? She said that making a new friend is a present in itself.

Allister shuffled himself down the stairs, careful not to pull any of the tinsel on the railings down with him.

Bea was in the kitchen wearing a terrible sweater that passed as her parent’s gift to them. To their credit he had one as well, but it was olive green and white with little Mudsdale on. Not enough purple for his liking.

He knew it was a token gesture, just as much as it was a token gesture Bea was still wearing hers. At least they’d settled for a video call instead of physically coming over. That would’ve definitely made things…interesting.

Allister watched as his sister continued clearing up from the meal. How only two people could make so much mess was beyond him, but it was his mess too and he wanted to help; Bea had encouraged him not too despite his protests. She enjoyed making order from chaos far more than he did.

Chaos had its own value to Allister, ruins were proof of that. That tree branch growing in that
specific way had led to the collapse of that wall there in such a way that rainfall filled a little pool.

One tiny change and the rain would spread elsewhere, and the little colony of Morelull would be forced to move. He frequently spent hours just staring at one crack in a wall in abandoned buildings, and then returning the next day to continue.

Unfortunately that made Allister’s ability to organise and put things away to be…fairly limited. He could understand his sister shooing him for something as big as a Christmas meal, but he still liked to help. This time he’d gotten a present so amazing Bea would absolutely forgive his uselessness. He hoped.

_Not that she ever gets mad at me for that. She gets why I have trouble._

“Oh there you are! Your present is on the table, if you want to unwrap it?” His sister was smiling warmly, that special kind of smile reserved just for the two of them on a cold winter’s night. The kind of warmth that infected him with its heavy, sluggish hold and Allister quickly gave in. He took a seat on the loungeroom sofa, mumbling his thanks as Bea turned away.

_You coward, it’s now or never._

“Umm…a-actually, sis?”

“Hm, what is it, Alli?”

“I…have something…to say. Like, before w-we do all the presents ‘n stuff.”

“Sure, I’ll be a minute or two.”

Allister hadn’t seen his sister’s expression as he’d shied away behind a cushion before saying anything. His own personal shield against his doubts, just like monsters could never get through is blanket no matter how strong. Still, he’d sensed she was a little confused, but supportive and willing to listen.

_If that doesn’t sum up our entire relationship then I don’t know what does._

True to her word, Bea only took a few minutes to put away the last of the leftovers before sitting down next to him gently.

“So, what’s on your mind?”

“I…”

_I’m really doing this._

“I…want to say…I-I mean first…t-thanks! To you! Thank you! That’s…um…what I meant. Thank you.”

“Thank you, Alli. That’s very kind of you to say.”

“N-no…I mean…” Allister bit his lip, before making the decision to remove his mask entirely, placing the glazed ceramic next to him on sofa. “I gotta look at you w-with my own eyes f-for once in my life.”

“Alli…are you sure? You don’t have to…” Bea was nothing if not concerned for him and her face was full of it. Removing his mask was seldom done, even for her.
Whatever he’s about to say must be big.

“I do have to a-and I…want to too.” He looked up at his sister, her face a picture of joy marred with worry. “No masks between us.”

“…Alright.”

“I…” Allister sighed, violet eyes blinking heavier than he would have liked. “I did mean it. Thank you, I mean. N-not just for today but for…everything.”

He reached out his hand slowly, Bea understanding what he wanted; she took the hand in her own, covering it with her other and sandwiching it. A gesture of comfort for the most serious of times.

“You don’t have to thank me, Allister. I’m just doing my job.”

“Your job was hard this year,” he pointed out quietly. “I make things hard.”

“Alli, please don’t say things like that.” Bea’s voice was equally quiet now. “You know I wouldn’t ever give you up. Not for anything.”

“You could’ve left m-me with your parents…when you got old enough to leave. They could’ve done your job.”

“Would you have wanted that?”

“Of course not b-but…”

“But nothing.” Bea gave Allister’s hand a gentle squeeze. “They weren’t what you needed, nor need now.” She gestured to herself up and down before re-grabbing his hand. “You saw what they turned me into. You remember when we first met?”

“G-geez, yeah. You were scary and aloof. M-more interested in p-punching bags than me.”

“I didn’t understand. I didn’t get you. Over time, I started to, and I came to appreciate you. At least I hope I did. My parents never quite figured out how to. Besides,” Bea raised an eyebrow to Allister’s wide eyes. “…why do you think I put my name down on your adoption certificate? My parents don’t have any legal right to you. You’re my brother, and you’re not tradeable for another. Giving you up would be giving part of me up. We’re family. Nothing will change that.”

“…”

“Oh, I’m sorry I…” Bea quickly handed Allister the box of tissues from the coffee table. They did little to stem the flow of tears, the waterworks deciding now was the time for a test drive.

“I d-don’t deserve you!”

“Hey, no one deserves anyone at all. We just got lucky. I got lucky.”

“N-no…it’s not true. It c-can’t be.”

“It’s true,” she reassured, taking the time to stroke his hair lightly. The bangs that weren’t usually visible were darkened slightly, likely by the lack of sunlight; Bea swept them out of his eyes as he continued to sob intermittently. “You made me better. That girl who only wanted to punch training bags, meditate, and be the strongest above all else is gone. You helped her change, just as I’m here for you.”
“S-stop…I can’t…w-what Ms. Melony said…w-was actually…true then?”

“Melony?” She shouldn’t have been surprised, he’d been at home with her for the best part of a day after all. Her influence gracing their lives again.

_I hope her and Gordie put aside their differences, at least for today. They did both go the gym leader gathering but I didn’t see them talk much._

“Y-yeah. She told me…” Allister paused to blow his nose into the pile of tissues he’d grabbed; this wasn’t a one tissue job any longer. “S-she told me what you just said. About you…valuing me. As a person.”

“Alli…”

“I figured s-she was j-just bein’ Ms. Melony, bein’ kind to everyone. I didn’t b’lieve…really, t-that she wasn’t jus’ trying to make my feel better. I figured you were nice to me jus’ on principle. I… um…was n-never sure if you actually…liked me for me.”

“Of course I do, Alli. The days of me just tolerating you died long ago when we were still with my parents. You’re the real, proper family I think I always wanted. I needed, even.”

Before Allister could react he was already in the embrace, Bea leaning across the sofa and hugging him as best she could in the current position. Though still jittery, he sank into the hug to wrap his arms around his sister’s back, not even caring that the tears were going to soak into the new sweater.

*It’s a dumb jumper anyway. Better off as a tea cosy.*

“You’re my brother, best friend, and I love you. What’s brought this on, Alli? It’s not just seasonal depression is it?”

“B-Bea…I love you so so much, I don’t w-wanna lose you or make y-you mad! You’re my b-best friend ever b-but I think I m-messed up.”

“You messed up?” Bea didn’t let go, if anything hugging the boy tighter as if he’d slip away between the cracks. “What’s wrong?”

“I got a s-secret!”

“A secret?”

“Y-yeah!” Allister drew the line at wiping his nose on the sweater, as garish as it was and separated the two of them, taking a wad of tissues for his troubles.

*So much for bein’ well, I just got rid of my cold and I’m already back to wipin’ myself up!*

“I-I know you know I do. And t-then I know you know that I know y-you know I do! Cos’ of that I know that you know…”

“Breathe, Alli…just breathe for me. From the top.” Without the two in close proximity Bea wasn’t exactly sure what she should be doing with herself. It just felt like there were strings tied to her arms and legs like a puppet, but no one was controlling her and telling her what to do.

_Hugging is always easy. We can both hide our faces that way._

Bea watched as Allister calmed himself down, following her lead as she breathed deeply. Not
perfectly in time, but the effect was the desired one. Diffusing tension had always been an art for the two of them.

“I…you know I’ve b-been hiding something, right?”

“I know.” Bea settled for folding her hands in her lap with little else do with them. “You’ve been giving me side glances for months now, skittish when on your phone, lights under your door late at night.”

“T-then why didn’t you s-say something…if you knew…I mean.”

“Because you weren’t ready to, Alli,” Bea said gently. “I didn’t want to push you.”

“B-but I was keeping something from you! I thought…” Allister paused, blinking away his tears in a show of defiance to his own body. “…I thought you’d be upset.”

“You’re your own person, my dear brother. You’re allowed to keep stuff from me.”

“I don’t make a h-habit of it,” he mumbled. “I tell you n-nearly everything.”

Allister quickly hugged his knees at the memories, just out of reach; Bea instinctively shuffled next to him to allow a side hug. He latched on, fidgeting with the jumper as the material itched him. She always knew his mind in those instances.

“Th’ nightmares, my past, my parents…you know everything.”

“Because you chose to share it with me,” she comforted, running her hands through his hair.

It was an unspoken truth between them, or perhaps a lie, that ‘everything’ only meant as far as ‘everything that I know’. Bea continued scratching her brother’s scalp lightly.

Great swaths of Allister’s life had been stolen away, vanished in silence by forces neither of them could understand. Now they only remained as memories. A jigsaw with pieces missing and pieces torn.

Why he could commune with ghosts and hear the dying, or what had really happened the night his abilities revealed themselves: He couldn’t answer those questions nor did a part of him want to. His mind shielding itself from an unknowable truth.

He wanted his new life as a gym leader, and he wanted to be a good brother. The fear of messing any of it up would always get to him. A finely delicate balance not to be disturbed under any circumstances, at least in his mind.

Even the thought of his parents was just a faded remnant of another boy’s life. Was that life even his?

With the dreams and nightmares, Allister would wake nearly every night in terror at something just out of reach. A shadow stopping him from seeing further, as Bea would hold his hand and stay with him until the sobbing would give way to silence, as it did now.

Bea scrunched her eyes tight. Even someone as emotionally airtight as her past self could see something bothered him. Now, it made her sick with grief that one so young had so much to deal with. It wasn’t fair. It never was.

“I didn’t wanna share…’til now.”
“I’m glad you feel confident enough.”

Allister looked up his sister’s eyes, violet reflecting on silver.

“Allister, though? Don’t feel so confident…”

“If you were keeping something truly dangerous I’d have been able to tell, and I’d have intervened. But…you seemed happier, better even, when you weren’t freaking out about me knowing. Me asking before you were ready would’ve pushed you away. I never want to push you away, Alli. Even if I do accidentally.”

“I…huh? ‘m happier but what d’you mean you push me away? You’re always there for me even when I freak and run away! Remember when I t-ried to camp out?”

“Yeah…I didn’t mean it like that…” Bea sighed, knowing it would soon be time.

_What I told Gordie. It’s time for Alli to know too._

“In a moment, I promise. You’ve worked up the courage to tell me something big and I have so much respect for that. This is your moment, Allister, I won’t take it away. Go ahead.”

Allister scrutinised his sister’s face, searching for any gaps in the armour. Finding only reassurance the fidgeting ceased. Then, after a big breath that only someone about to expect the worst would take in, Allister spoke.

“I……..I met someone…online...without telling you. I made a f-friend! Please don’t be mad at me.”

The last part had been uttered so quietly that even the walls strained to hear the words of pain. Bea however had heard clearly. The tears leaking down her own face was proof of that.

“Alli…”

“Aww g-geez, you’re c-crying! You n-never do that I’m sor…”

Though Allister had made to leave, no doubt to escape back to his sanctuary of pillows and blankets upstairs, Bea pulled him back, shaking her head vigorously.

“No no, these are happy tears, Alli! I’m so very happy for you!”

“I-I’ll say! I’ve never s-seen you light up like this!” This was absolutely not the response he’d been expecting and his heart felt ready to leap out of his chest. Leap far above the peaks of Mt. Lanakila and Coronet in tandem, that his sister was actually accepting this.

It was more than a little shocking for him to see his sister so…emotional. Even when it was just the two of them she was usually so much more subdued. To her credit it wasn’t often a bombshell of this magnitude got dropped.

“To think this is what you’ve been hiding from me! How could I not be happy my little brother has made a friend?” Though Bea wiped her eyes, more tears replaced them quickly. It was a lot to take in.

“You’re not mad? At all? And you’re crying, I don’t t-think I’ve seen you do that before!”

“That you’ve gotten one of your deepest wishes come true? Never, Alli, never.” Bea raised her palm up to the light, now wet. “Heh, until recently I wasn’t sure I could. I think a talk with Melony
was the tipping point I needed.”

“Yeah, Melony’s pretty great.”

*Got her own demons too, though. Gordie seemed so sad at the gym party when we were supposed to be havin’ a good time.*

“So what’s their name?” It seemed Bea had composed herself now, though not before another quick hug as Allister’s insides protest at the squash.

“Acerola, s-she’s super cool! She’s l-like a gym leader in the Alola region but like t-they don’t have them so she’s a t-trial captain instead but then a-also she’s part of their elite4 and she likes ghosts l-like me and, and, and…”

Allister was forced to pause for breath, Bea beaming all the while. Her brother, helping himself!

*He’s grown up so much. A year ago and this would never have been possible. Perhaps all things are, given time?*

“She’s got a Mimikyu, and a Palossand, which I’ve only s-seen in picture books, and she’s about my age! I…um…I like her. She’s g-great.”

“She sounds great, Alli. Someone who appreciates ghost types the way you do is a real gift.”

“Um…you see why I t-tried to hide her then?”

“I think I get it? You thought I was going to act all helicoptery and nosy and ask if she was real, right?”

“Y-yeah…pretty much.”

Bea leaned back on the sofa, the feeling of surprise not quite gone yet. Here she thought they just going to exchange presents and watch a Christmas movie together.

“I can see why you would. That’s exactly the kind of thing my parents would do. Since I come from them…yeah, you were worried I’d try and take this away from you.”

“Mmhmm. Figured you tell me it was too dangerous talkin’ to strangers by m’self. People can pretend online, I know that.”

“They can.” Bea shrugged. “You’ve got a pretty discerning eye, though. You can smell danger a mile away, Alli, I trust your judgment.

“You got…that much faith in me?” Allister tugged on his sister’s sleeve. “For real? You’re not jus’ saying that?” Bea placed her hand over his as she had done so earlier.

“Of course not. I may have kept things from you but I’ve never lied, Alli.”

“Y-yeah, I guess. I wouldn’t know either way, right?”

Bea had to laugh at Allister’s poor attempt at humour. The sheepish grin was just too much to bear.

“True. You trust me though?”

“’Course I do.”
“So…are you planning to meet up with Acerola then? Alola’s pretty far, y’know?”

“I hadn’t…uhh…thought that far ahead.” Allister furrowed his brow, examining the outside of his mask. He’d gotten dirt on it from somewhere again. “I jus’ wanted to chat n’ stuff. We haven’t even video called yet.”

“Ah I understand. Does she know about…stuff?”

“My mask? Not yet. It’s kinda scary to think.” Allister placed it on the coffee table out of reach; he’d just fiddle with it given the option. “You think she’ll accept someone she can’t see, Bea?”

“Hey, she’ll be able to see you’re a great person with love in their heart and an adventurous spirit.”

“Aww, I—I’m gonna blush.” Allister hid his face with hands but smiled all the same.

“I’m serious, Alli. I’m sure she’s been having as fun talking with you as you have with her.”

“I…I dunno what to say, sis…this went better than anything I hoped.”

Bea raised an eyebrow as he peeked out from behind his hands; when he began to bite at his nails she gently pulled his fingers away from his mouth.

“Uh, uh. No biting, Alli.”

“Awww…special occasion, sis?”

Bea shook her head, though kept a wry smile.

“Let’s be glad you wear a mask most of the time. You might not have fingertips at all otherwise.”

“Heh, n-nerves! M’bad.” Regardless Allister let his hands be guided, not resisting.

“Hey you earned the nerves today, Alli.” Bea nodded in confirmation. Visual cues were just as important as the audible ones after all. “I’m really proud of you, not just for having a new friend but for trusting me enough to tell me.”

“T-thanks. I’m glad I did too. Um…don’t you have something you wanna say too? If you wanna…”

Bea’s smile faded.

“I do.

“If we’re telling secrets I suppose now’s the time.” Bea flicked the hair out of her face. Without her headband it got unruly quickly but she couldn’t bring herself to replace it. One day maybe.

“I’ve made up this image of myself, Alli. A strong, amazing sister who can do no wrong in your eyes.” She unfocused her eyes, staring past Allister to the empty space beyond. “I’m not a saint on pedestal, brother. I’m just a person and I…I make mistakes too. I’m not nearly as perfect as I’d have you believe.”

“…”

“I fail, I get angry, and I have regrets. Just last week I could’ve ripped Circhester stadium apart because I got mad during a dynamax. I always manage to calm you down when on the inside I’m hurting. It’s…it’s been eating away at me for a while now. I’m not perfect, but I’m still your big
sister, whoever that is.”

“I…never knew, Bea.”

“That’s why it was a secret, Alli.” A listless smile crossed her face. Lost to the dark. “If you have the courage to tell me something that matters to you then so can I.” She ruffled his hair lightly, prompting a giggle. “Look at you being the leader now, showing me how it’s done.”

“I learned from the best.”

“Aha, alright hotshot.” Silence. “I didn’t want you to know but I’ve come to realise that although I’ve been helping you, I won’t be able to help you any further if I don’t change too.”

“That’s mature, Bea. That’s why I look t-to you.”

“That?”

“Y-yeah! You’re strong because you really work at it! Every time I think ‘bout quitting I think of what you do all the time. You don’t give up!”

“Sometimes I feel like giving up, Alli. No matter how hard I work.”

“I think…everybody feels like that, sis. Some do give up. You don’t though you keep workin’ hard even when you can’t see a way forward.”

“Well, that’s a mature thing to say. I suppose I look up to you too in that way.”

“Nawww, you don’t need to flatter me, sis!”

“Seriously! You work hard too even when it overwhelms you, you never give up completely.”

“Cos’ I got you by my side!” He countered.

“Anyone can do my job, Alli. I’m not special doing what I do.”

“I mean…if you mean the words then yeah. Could get m’ Rotom phone to just tell me how to do things or what t’ do.”

“Well…”

“Aren’t all people just big, human shaped Rotom phones? Saying random things at random times?”

“Your analogy is strange but the logic is there. I get you.”

“Do you though?” It was Allister’s turn to take Bea’s hands in his own. He knew Bea secretly liked him to take the initiative once in a while. “Anyone could tell me to pick m’self off the floor and not sob into the carpet for 6 hours. Wouldn’t work though as they wouldn’t be you. No one knows me like you do, sis, and I don’t want them too. No matter how friendly Acerola and I get she won’t replace you or even come close if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“I have worried…before. I admit it.” It pained her to say so but this wasn’t a time to hold back. Losing her brother was a loss she didn’t know if she could take.

“We grew up together, no one k-knows me like you do. Sure, somebody else coulda but no one did, Bea. You did. Anyone meetin’ anyone is just luck in the end.” Allister held the darker hand close. “And I’m the luckiest sod in the world to have you as my sibling!”
“Alli, oh Alli!” Bea sniffled slightly, but kept the tears at bay. “That was the purest thing I’ve heard I think. I try never to focus on what could’ve been, but you’re right and I’m lucky to have you too. And…thanks for stealing my line…hearing it out loud warms me up more than this tacky jumper ever will.”

“Wouldn’t trade y-you for anyone, just like y’ told me.”

“…Yeah.”

“…The jumper ‘s awful, though. You’re spot on.”

The silence that followed was the most comfortable ever to grace that house. Finally at a peace not had in years, the two siblings just enjoyed each other’s company. The howl of the wind, the drip of the tap, and the squish of the sofa cushions were all a highlight of an otherwise muted time.

“H-hey why did y’ nearly break Circhester stadium? Melony said you were fightin’ Gordie?”

Bea coughed into her fist. Obviously fake, but obviously embarrassed too if Allister had a read on her.

“I…Gordie said something he didn’t mean, that’s all.”

“Wow, he must’ve said somethin’ wild to get you mad!”

“Yeah I guess.”

“He didn’t call you ‘not girly enough’ did he?” Allister contemplated the options, and that was the only thing that sprang to mind. “I know that’s a button.”

“It is,” Bea affirmed, trying to put being forced to try on a dress during the gym leader party out of her mind.

“Hey, didn’t Nessa make you wear a dress at the party?”

“H-huh? You saw that??? Bea sputtered, for once not being composed even a little. “I thought you were in the other room! It was truth or dare! I had to!”

“You looked fine. Nice even,” Allister mentioned, not really paying attention. It hadn’t been correct after all and focussing obsessively was one of his option select’s.

“I couldn’t refuse, it’s dishonourable! I…wait what?” Bea recalled the faces of those in the room. They just seemed as miffed as she did. Thankfully no pictures or selfies after she’d threatened to break Raihan’s throwing arm and threats of death. Her face was hot at the memory alone.

“Yeah, suits you. I dunno about girl stuff but it works with you, even if you don’t think it’s for you.”

“Thanks, Alli. That’s…nice to hear.” Bea could feel her face getting hotter if that was even scientifically allowed. “Hadn’t considered it. They’re hard to train in.”

“Plus you haven’t worn shoes since you finished school. Girls like shoes, right?”

“They do. Lots and lots of shoes.” Bea tried to drown out Nessa’s constant offers (read: instances) of shoe shopping together at various times; she resigned herself that even if she became comatose or braindead nothing was going to ever stop the begging playing on a loop for all eternity.
Just oooonnnneeee time, Bea, it’ll be great! I’ll even pay! Come onnnnnn!


“Hmmm, I’m outta ideas then, that was my go to!”

“It’s nothing, Alli. Don’t trouble yourself.”

“Nuh-uh, was all that talk about keeping secrets a lie?”

“You little…” Bea couldn’t be mad at his face, eyes wide and deliberately trembling for her. “You’re playing me like a pokéflute!” Allister cracked a toothy grin in response.

“Maybe, sis, maybe.”

“Ughhh…”

“Maybe you should tell me, you’ll feel better.”

“Maybe you don’t want dessert?”

Allister held his hands up in defence.

“Aww c’mon, I take it back! Nothin’s worth knowin’ to give up your Christmas berry pie.”

“…Tch, I give in. I was going to give you some anyway.” Bea sighed deeply, knowing exactly what was coming. “Fine, Gordie called your reputation as a trainer into account. He was trying to get a rise out of me and went overboard.”

“…You nearly destroyed the Circhester gym…cos’ of me?”

“Yeah.”

“Wow, you’re even more hardcore than I thought!”

“W-what? That’s hardly the message to take away from this!”

“Kidding!” Allister held his hands up a second time; Bea pulled them down, exasperated. “Seriously though, you didn’t have t’. Folks can think what they want.”

“I…I know. I know. It just, bugged me I guess. He’d been talking a lot of big talk a while and I snapped. I try not to make a habit of it.”

“Like when you invited yourself over for a school assembly to stop me getting bullied?”

“…Exactly. Maybe that was irrational too.”

“I don’t get bullied, sis! That’s p-pretty great even if people ‘r scared of me too now.”

“Yeah, sorry about that. You were so hurt so bad I couldn’t see another way.”

Allister instinctively rubbed at his arm, once broken by kids twice his size just because they could. Obviously being a shy, awkward, mousy kid did him no favours either but it was on them not to act, not him to change. He knew that now.

“All they understood was violence and hitting n’ stuff. You comin’ in to talk about fightin’ types and how strong they are did a r-real number on their confidence!”
“Well that’s something good then.”

“Did y’ at least beat Gordie?”

“Hm? Oh I flattened his team after that, yes. I’m not proud of it, but I did win.”

“Makes sense then, did wonder what was with him at the party.”

“Ah, I did wonder where you went off to.”

“I watched him eat through a w-whole cake like it was nothin’…he didn’t even enjoy it, but he did it anyway.”

*Stress eating. Even at the party he couldn’t relax properly.*

“Is he depressed, sis? Like I’ve got anxiety?”

“He’s…confused,” Bea said at length. “A lot of emotions to fight through and not all of them are good. I think his mother is the same, just hiding it better.”

“Oh…makes sense ‘suppose. He was t-trying not t’ be sad in front of me.”

“Did you see anything else interesting at the party?”

“Uh…” Allister searched through his hazy account of the night, drawing mostly blanks. “I saw Raihan swaying and trying to get his arm ‘round Leon. Nessa and Sonia went off somewhere for ‘girl stuff’. Milo found Piers hiding with a songsheet tryin’ get some peace n’ quiet. Standard I guess. Oh,” he exclaimed, sudden clarity at the memory. “Did Leon ever find his keys?”

“No that I know. Wins every Champion cup no problem, but can’t hold on to his things to save his life. It’s a mystery.”

“Poor guy.”

“I just hope Gordie and Melony could put aside their differences, at least for today.” Bea mused, resuming her fondling of Allister’s locks. “Today is a day for family.”

“Isn’t that, like, everyday?”

*Especially today.*

“H-heh, fair enough.”

“Speaking of…” Bea leaned over the side of the sofa. Allister was momentarily confused until she returned holding an immaculately wrapped, colourful box. “…I believe we have some presents to give.”

“You w-were hiding stuff under th’ sofa? Aww…I didn’t think t’ check!”

“You keep finding my hiding places so I thought more creatively this time. I win this round,” she added, noting her brother’s pout.

“Pshh, ‘suppose it’s better than me findin’ out what in advance.”

“An astute observation.” Bea held the box out. “Merry Christmas, Allister.”
“Thanks, sis! It feels…good. Like even before I’m inside.”

Allister thumbed over the box inquisitively, Bea watching every brow furrow and lip bite as he tried to work out its contents.

“It’s like…familiar. Somethin’ ghostly.”

“That’s my brother! Sensing things even though you haven’t opened it yet.”

“Does it count as me ruinin’ the surprise?”

“No, just aware. Go on, open it!”

Allister wasted no more time and ripped into the packaging messily (using his teeth on that extra stubborn piece of tape that had refused to budge). Bea was forever glad her brother had decided to remove his mask earlier; she wouldn’t have been able to see his eyes light up as they did when the contents spilled onto the sofa.

“This is a Reaper Cloth!”

“After you used your old one to evolve Dusclops I thought you could do with another.”

“B-Bea…these things are super hard to find!” Allister rubbed the ghostly rag all over his face as if to check its validity. It was no trick, and he shook his sister’s hand up and down with the force of a boy high on too much sugar. If sugar was spooky ghost relics.

“I had to search a while, but it was worth it.” She pinched his cheek, smiling. “Judging by your face anyway.”

“It’s a real beauty, high quality and all!”

“I’m glad it’s up to standard.”

“Y-yeah, no kidding. How did you…aww man, you ain’t gonna tell me, right?” Allister rolled his eyes at the ‘nope’ he got in response. “Figures. Still won’t tell me how you managed to get a Mismagius in Galar.”

“Mysteries for the future, Alli. If we knew all the answers life wouldn’t be interesting.”

“You just sound like you’re bein’ evasive on purpose…but it’s Christmas so I’ll forgive you.”

“I’m humbled.”

“You w-will be! Wait ‘til you see what I got you!” Allister spoke with a confidence he didn’t really have but Bea still bought into it, clearly impressed. “Hold on.”

Bea watched as he scampered upstairs, returning quickly with a slightly deformed looking package covered in glitter. Purple stars had also been glued on with more glue than star.

“T-tried to decorate it m’self. Got a little…out of hand.”

“It’s a personal touch. I appreciate all the more.”

“O-oh…well go ahead anyway…”

Bea did so, though did take the time to admire the handywork before ripping it apart. Inside the
mishmash of bubblewrap and loose glitter there was...something. Bea wasn’t entirely sure. It was curved, likened to a boomerang almost.

“This is…”

“It’ll make s-sense out of the box. When it’s…unfolded.”

“Unfolded? I…oh.”

Allister was indeed correct, without the confines of packaging holding it in place the gift was beyond obvious. Black plastic wrapped in felt with just a hint of orange at the tip.

“A headband,” Bea whispered. “A new one.” Holding it like it was worth its weight in gold, Bea swivelled her eyes to look at her brother.

“Um…l-look at the top. Closely!” Allister resorted to hiding his face behind his hands again. Even in confidence some things were still just a little too intense.

Bea did so, greatly intrigued by just how much of a facsimile of her old one this was. There was even the custom padded stitching under the scalp area so it could double as a sweatband when needed. Her fingers traced upwards towards the ‘ears’ of the band. The previous familiar shade of orange tinted the leftmost ear.

“Wait…” Bea held it closer, eyeing the other side with greater scrutiny. The other ear tip wasn’t completely black as it had been before. Instead, it was quite faint, but a definitely visible shade of purple adorned it.

“I made it for you,” Allister blurted out, not realising he’d been holding a breath in. “To show I’ll n-never l-let you down, a-nd that Stow-on-Side’s got 2 gym leaders now. Orange for you…purple f-for me. W-wanted to show you I’m s-serious about bein’ a leader…and I f-felt so bad you lost your other one cos’ of me. Purple so it’s personal.”

“Alli, it’s perfect,” she said simply.

“R-really?”

“My smile doesn’t lie.”

Allister watched in amazement as the widest grin to ever grace his sister’s features made itself at home there.

“How did you even…? It’s incredible.” Bea gently placed the headpiece where it belonged, sweeping up the unruly hair in a single motion. “How do I look?”
With one tip of orange, and one of purple, the added highlight of the new headband was (in Allister’s humble opinion) nothing short of genius. It was his work after all. It wasn’t an obvious change, but a subtlety that further signified their connection as both dual gym leaders, and as siblings.

“You look like you!”

“I feel like me. Now people won’t be as likely to question your position, and I don’t have to have my hair in my eyes all the time. Seriously though, how did you make this?”

“Lotsa help with the band itself, the merchants in town were super nice about finding material and even let me use the sewing machines!”

“You talked to the merchants? On your own?”

“Y-yeah,” he mumbled, looking away shyly. “Was scary.”

“And the purple tip?”

“Tie-dye.”

 “…So that’s why the place suddenly smelled of chemicals and berries for a few days.”

“Aha, you noticed that…” Allister rubbed at the back of his neck for no reason other than want for something better to do; Bea pulled his fingers away again.

“Of course, but it was clearly for a good cause.” Bea pulled him close once more. “This is the best Christmas present I’ve had, no…the best Christmas I’ve had. Ever. Thank you.”

“Same to you, Bea. Best Christmas ever?”

“Best Christmas ever,” she affirmed. “Here’s to another year.”

“Yeah…sounds like a present I c’n get behind.”

“…”

“…Can we use your parent’s jumpers as tea cosies?” Allister said after another brief silence.

“…What?”

“You’re n-not gonna wear yours after today, and I haven’t worn mine at all. Could…make them useful? I dunno.”

“That’s a fine idea, Alli,” Bea murmured, reaching over and patting the boys head lightly. “A fine idea indeed.”

The year had been a tough one but they’d made it through. Not just in one piece, but stronger and better for it. Ups and downs, highs and lows, and all that in between. Bea finally understood what it really meant for her to be a sister and she was all the better for it. After today, she knew Allister was too.

What does that mean? To be a sister? Well, we’re allowed some secrets, aren’t we?
Fun fact: Galarian Christmas is a couple of days after regular Christmas (and not because I was busy, just trust me). We deserved some nice fluffy times after all the intensity, hope you enjoy!

I really wanted to do some fanart of Bea with the new headband, but I'm a fanwriter not an artist hah, so you can use your imaginations for this one ^_^

EDIT: So it turns out an artist by the name 'Chikuseren' actually went and drew the most beautiful fanart I've ever seen! With their permission I've embedded it into the work! I'm seriously blown away, and I can't thank them enough. I was a wuss and went and cried slightly. Sketchione isn't made of rock, who knew?

You can consider this the end of 'Part 1' if you like, as this current arc has reached its resolution, tying together all the chapters previously. The campout, Allister's school, the gym, the headband, Acerola, and their feelings.

Thanks to everyone for their support thus far, you've all been far too kind ^_^
Part 2: Silent Wonderland

Chapter Summary

With a day spent napping and relaxing in one of his favourite spots, Allister declares that no matter what happens, he'll be grateful for this day. Fate, however, likes to accept challenges such as those. At least his sister is by his side, and that's all he can ask for.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ah…now this is the life alright.

Allister always enjoyed his rare moments of relaxation to the full extent of his abilities, be they small or otherwise. The wind blowing throw his hair, warmth of the sun dancing over his lain body; it was as perfect as could be.

Could get used t’ this.

Watchtower Ruins were a place near and dear to his heart. The perfect weather was just another sign that today was going to be an extra special day. Not too hot, not too cold. In other words, snoozing weather at the height of midday.

The voice at the back of his mind informed him that he wouldn’t have been nearly as sleepy if he hadn’t gotten back at 2am.

That abandoned hospital was so good though. Could hardly resist it, could I?

He’d done all of his homework (courtesy of Milo’s help again) so there was hardly an obligation to not go exploring.

After the first hour the voice had gotten bored of falling on deaf ears and decided to retreat to the calmer recesses of the ghost leader’s mind. Quietened down, it was now giving way to the calming ripple of a boy at peace.

Allister wanted to hang onto the moment forever…and all those surrounding it too. The rustle of the Wild Area’s leaves, the ghost Pokémon of the Watchtower humming around him…just sublimity all around.

Even the little ‘drip-drop’ of water from the cracked ceiling fit the aesthetic.

Allister rolled over in his mossy den, stretching lightly.

Can hear Bea outside. She must be pushin’ herself real tough.

Being as it was the middle of the day, his sister had decided to accompany him on one of his adventures for once. For her, it was more of a training exercise, but Allister appreciated it all the same.
‘Family outing, Alli? What do you say?’

Of course he’d agreed! It wasn’t often Bea agreed to be in such close proximity to a gathering of ghost types (even if she was currently training by the lakefront below the cliffside). She was here with him and that made him happy.

As Allister curled into the mossy floor, a tingling sensation in his arm told him that another Gastly was trying to snuggle up.

“Mmmm, you go…mmmmn, around my body. You’re not…solid.” Allister didn’t bother to raise his voice. The ghost types could understand him just fine with a mere thought if he really tried.

The wild Gastly wasn’t perturbed, instead engulfing the young boy’s arm as he continued to relax. The shady Watchtower was in many ways perfect for them both.

“…Thanks for…not…mmmmn…poisoning me.”

It was a little known fact that Gastly and their line could withhold their toxins to interact with a trainer they trusted. A tickle at best, and a prickle at worst, right now the wild Gastly seemed to be following Allister’s lead.

“You’re enjoying…the moment too? Good…mmmmn…for you, buddy.”

The gaseous body was almost likened to a blanket over him, and with the many years of moss beneath his back it was practically the same as being back home.

Yeah…I could get used to this.

A more cynical part of Allister’s mind was snarky enough to remind him that this was the point things usually went wrong. The weather was nice, no major disasters were happening, and he was relaxing.

How often did he get to say he was truly relaxed? ‘Not often’ he’d say…not often at all.

Even when he began to doze off the scene didn’t decide to drop its façade of tranquillity. It really just…was.

Whatever life throws at me tomorrow…I’ll remember today.

One nice hour and a half nap later and Allister’s eyes fluttered open. Disappointed to see the wild Gastly had moved on, but refreshed and relaxed, the ghost leader got to his feet.

“Good nap.” Allister never cared when he spoke to himself alone. To some, the sign of madness. To him, a reminder that he was truly a part of the living world.

Fair trade for living. Folks can call me mad, I s’pose.

The shadows had deepened their hold over the inside of the tower, the sun having continued its daily slog in the absence of his consciousness. Allister turned his gaze skyward, the clouds seeming oh so near at his current height.

Even the Duskull and Pidove above him were within reach as they gently vied for air superiority.

The faraway grunts and yells of his sister were still drifting up to him, and Allister’s ears retuned to the waking plane to hear of her exertions in full force; the boy had to be impressed.
“Still at it, sis?” He murmured.

Peering out of the holes that had once passed for windows and down to the plains below confirmed it. Right now, Bea was practicing her cartwheels, Machamp imitating alongside. The fighting type specialist had drawn somewhat of a crowd too. Allister could understand that.

“S’not everyday a gym leader does their training in full view of everyone. Wild Area is a public place, after all.”

Still, the people kept a respectful distance from Stow-on-Side’s Bea, endlessly fascinated by just how in tune a human and their Pokémon could be.

“Or maybe they’re afraid Machamp will blow them away if they get closer?” Allister giggled, imagining the Pokémon hefting onlookers, four at a time, into the western half of Lake Axewell. “Bea’s just annoyed she lost to Leon in that exhibition match. Trainin’ hard to make up for it, I guess.”

It wasn’t all that odd, losing to Leon. Heck, the guy was known as ‘The Unbeatable Champion’ in Galar for a reason. It didn’t spare Bea from feeling she could’ve done more, even if Rose himself had told her otherwise.

“Then he had to go to a kid’s hospital, or somethin’? Busy guy,” Allister mused to himself. Which brought them to now, Allister enjoying his ‘together-alone time’ in Watchtower Ruins and Bea pushing herself further at the lakefront.

*I’ll train some other time. Today’s a day for me. Goin’ great so far!*

Bea did always remind her little brother of the importance of selfcare after all.

‘*If you can’t do the things you enjoy, what makes you think you can do the things you don’t? If you think pushing yourself to your limit will make you more motivated then you’re not really correct. It works for a certain type of person, Alli, but that isn’t for you, nor everyone. Setting time aside to let your mind unwind and reacclimatise is important too.*’

Allister could already feel himself drifting off again just listening to her voice. He didn’t mean to be disrespectful, but long wordy lectures were never his forte. A perfect unintentional lullaby for his idle mind.

*I get her meaning though. I need my ‘me time’ or I’ll run out of steam when I gotta do what I gotta do ‘out there’.*

‘Out there’ of course meaning ‘rest of the world’. It was 90% of the time, give or take, but the other 10% was squarely his and his alone. Moments such as these were proof of it. Allister lay back on the moss, enjoying the squish under his delicate fingers.

His body clock was going to complain later, but it was a sacrifice Allister was willing to make.

*Sleeping at bedtime is…overrated.*

“Alli, you still up here? Time to go!”

Allister reopened his eyes, sharper this time. His sister’s voice was a lot closer than before, and the sky darker to match it. Not quite twilight, but the sky was definitely thinking about it. On the verge of a setting sun as it were.
‘m here, sis. Hold on.” Allister rose a second time, brushing away the leaves that had blown in from the outside.

“There you are! We’ve got a Corviknight taxi scheduled in a bit.” Bea poked her head around the corner of the tower’s ‘entrance’, catching his eye.

“Trainin’ go well?”

Her hair was in complete disarray, sweat dripping down her face, but she grinning like an idiot. A rare sight, no doubt fuelled by adrenaline. It was always nice to see his sister in such high spirits, and Allister felt a tinge of pride that he was allowed to see her like this…even if she was sweating like crazy.

*Hope the taxi’s’ got roll down windows or I’m gonna start t’ smell too!*

“Adequately. I see you’ve been having a nice time as well.”

“Yeah…relaxation…had fun.”

“I’m glad to hear it. I think we both needed this.”

“Yeah. New year n’ beginning’s, right?”

Bea nodded in agreement, sending a few drips from her scalp to the ground in doing so. Her brother’s slight hesitation in coming forward didn’t go unnoticed; Bea retreated slightly.

“Ah, I may have gotten carried away with my drills.”

“G-geez, yeah. You look l-like you fell in the water!” Picturing Nessa and Bea side by side and asking him to say which one had been swimming would have been tough. Allister didn’t want to oversell his sister’s current appearance but she didn’t make it easy.

“…”

It only occurred to Allister now that it wasn’t just his sister’s hair and face that were dripping but the rest of her clothes as well. It was almost as if…

“…You didn’t…?”

“Only the once.” Bea turned her face away, indicating that perhaps the redness on her cheeks may not have just been due to exertion. “The grass is a lot slipperier when you’re sweating.”

“…And in front of all…the people gathered? Y-you fell in..the lake?”

“They saw. No doubt there’ll be *ahem* pictures.”

She looked genuinely abashed now and Allister just wanted to run over and hug her; his common sense held him back, for which he voiced as much aloud:

“I’d h-hug you, but I don’t wanna…get wet.

“It’s cool, Alli.” Bea gave him an easy smile, reassuring him she wasn’t mad. “You can high five me instead if you like?”

“Of c-course!”
The mild pain and tingling sensation in his palm didn’t compare to the feeling of joy the act brought, even if his hand had gotten slightly sweaty because of the contact.

“C’mon, let’s not miss our ride.”

Allister fell in step with her as they slowly make their way down the hill, noting the crowd has thankfully dissipated. The thought of having to go down to his sister with them all still there had been a panic he’d been supressing since he’d awoken the second time. Thankfully she’d come to him instead.

“Where’d all your fans go?”

“After I fell in the water, Machamp shooed them for me.” Bea patted the pokéball at her waist lightly. “Keep the photos to a minimum, though I suspect there’ll be a few anyway. I just hope the newspapers don’t take interest.” Bea sighed, though didn’t seem particularly annoyed.

“Interesting headlines I s’pose.”

“True. ‘Clumsy gym leader represents Stow-on-Side perfectly.’”

“I was thinkin’ more ‘Steadfast gym leader swims with fishes.’”

“…Wow, Alli.” Bea turned to him as they walked, raising an eyebrow. “Dark.”

“K-kinda. J-jus c-c-cos the…R-Remoraid n’ Basculin…aha.” Allister face was already hidden but he felt like hiding it further. Bea gently pulled his hands away, though also tried to minimise the contact given her damp state.

“I understand what you meant, don’t worry. The wordplay isn’t lost on me.”

“O-oh…cool…”

“I’m not mad.”

“…”

“I promise.”

“…Double promise?”

“Triple.”

Allister breathed a sigh of relief. They were at the bottom now, only having to wait for the taxi to find them.

“S-sorry.” He’s fidgeting before he realises. “Joking ‘bout you…not bein’ round messed me up a little. Didn’t realise w-what I’d said before I said it.”

“Allister, it’s alright, really.” Bea crouched down to his height, placing a finger to the side of his masked face. ‘I’m not going anywhere. You made a joke, and a good one at that. Clearly you’re learning a lot in language classes at school.”

“Hah, y-yeah. They’re…pretty cool.”

Bea knew the faintest spark of a conversation starter when she heard one. The hesitation, yet underlying passion in her brother’s voice has always been something she’d sought to develop.
“You’re enjoying them?”

“We’re looking at Galarian mythology right now.”

With encouragement from her, Allister was soon relaying all he’d learned and the bits he found particularly interesting. Seeing him slowly become more and more at ease was relaxing for Bea too. Just hearing him speak his mind was nice.

Even when the taxi arrived he didn’t stop, it was almost to the point of babbling. A sign his head and mouth were struggling to connect properly but the earnest sincerity was never lost. Besides, Bea had grown up with her brother’s musings for a while, so she understood him to a T.

The cab driver not so much, but he paid them no mind. He was just paid to transport, and it was always an honour to give gym leaders a ride. Two, no less today!

 “…and then the teacher started talkin’ about J-Johto myths a-and how there’s p-parallels to us!”

“Oh?”

“S-so they have a b-big tower called B-Bell Tower I think and then the teacher started talkin’ about how different a-architecture influen-ces design, and how our r-ruined Watchtower is a g-good example of a para-illel to th-the Burned Tower there, and ooooh the place with the t-towers has a ghost type gym l-leader too, called Morty! He sounds r-really cool and…”

*It’s fantastic to hear him go on and on. He really comes out of his shell when he gets excited. It’s not much but I can do foster his growth as best I can.*

A sudden jerk to the carriage snapped both leaders out of the thoughts. The Corviknight holding the carriage ‘cawwed’ loudly, then suddenly dropped them. Though its foothold was swiftly regained, Bea’s hand was already on her pokéball.

The confined space wasn’t big enough for Machamp but in dire situations it could rip through anything it needed to. Thankfully, all appeared to be under control.

“What’s going…what the…?” Bea refocused her eyes to the outside world. Silence.

“Bea, what’s with all this fog?” Allister instinctively grabbed on to his sister’s hand, sweaty or otherwise. For that she was glad, clapping her other hand on top.

It was true, they were entirely surrounded. A sea of white in what had been the Stow-on-Side outskirts not a moment before. It was a deafening, intoxicating white, and Bea couldn’t make out anything in any direction. It was like a wall on every side.

“Not sure, Allister. Driver, what’s going on here?”

“I’m not sure, you two,” the driver called back, seemingly at just as much of a loss as them. “I’ve never seen fog this bad outside of the Wild Area, but we’ve been gone from there for at least 15 minutes. It’s like the visibility just…stopped. I’m having Corviknight take us down. It isn’t safe to continue flying when we can’t see.”

“I see. I respect your judgement.” Bea nodded swiftly, squeezing Allister’s hand lightly, eyeing the fog around them with curiosity. “Alli, we’re going to be fine. We’re just coming down earlier than expected is all.”

“A controlled descent,” the driver added. “Normal procedure under these conditions.”
To his credit, Allister wasn’t panicking all that much. He was clenching and unclenching his free hand a whole lot but other than that he was normal. That and the leg bouncing a mile a minute.

“S-Stow-on-S-side isn’t on fire, is it?” His voice just screamed he wanted to freak out, only keeping it together as he had nowhere to run.

*In an enclosed space, a cornered animal will often remain still until it can be sure there’s an escape route.*

Bea found herself remembering the excerpt from an old school textbook.

*My brother is no animal, but he scares easily. I have to alleviate any concerns.*

“Good deduction, Alli. This isn’t smoke, or it’d be hurting our eyes. Plus…” Bea made a show of sticking her hand out of the open window. “…it isn’t coming inside. It’s condensing before that, so it’s just some sort of fog. Like breath on a mirror. Remember you made me open the window because I smell?”

“Y-yeah…I…remember.”

The first signs of hyperventilating were upon them, and with nowhere else to go Bea could tell she had to act now or never.

“Allister, look at me.”

“…………”

“Please, look at me.” On the prompt he did so, meeting the gray of his sister’s eyes. “We’re going to be fine. This kind of thing happens occasionally. It’s normal.”

“…Okay. Good…to…hear…” His hand was turning into a vice grip, already whiter than it normally was. A stark contrast on her dark skin, but Bea endured for his sake; Allister wasn’t strong but hands were delicate parts of the human body.

They were dropping slower now, the Corviknight above them getting more used to the total whiteout around them.

*What could this possibly be? Is this really a natural phenomenon?*

One glance at Allister told Bea that wasn’t the most pressing issue at present.

*If reassurance won’t win out then I need to distract him.*

“You remember you made me open the window because ‘I smell real bad?’”

“Y-yeah. You still k-kinda do…”

“Well hey,” Bea expressed, sniffing her undershirt. “Maybe I do?”

“Ewww, sis c’mon! Gross!”

“Hey, I kinda smell like lake water too!”

“Sis, that’s awful!” Allister was focusing more on her than the outside. Exactly as planned.

“Oh…you don’t want to smell it?”
“N-no way!”
“I’m not sure…you aren’t convincing me.”

Allister immediately let go of the hand, shifting himself more into the corner of the compartment. Bea smiled to herself; it wasn’t often she got to play the part of a sly sister.

“N-no, it’s gross and weird and full of germs!!”
“…You can if you want t…”

“Nooooo, I’m not going n-near the shirt, I’d rather…”

“Alli, it’s cool. We’ve touched down.”

“We…huh? Oh.”

Bea’s distraction had proved successful and the two had been brought safely back to ground level in the resulting confusion.

“I told you we’d be fine. We’re safe.”

“…I didn’t…doubt you,” the ghost leader professed. “P-panic and trust aren’t r-really the opposite. Sorry…if I…made it seem like I d-didn’t.”

“I didn’t ask if you trusted me, Alli,” Bea emphasised. “I know you do. I was just reminding you we’re okay.”

“…T-thanks, Bea.”

“Sorry, you two. I can’t make heads or tails of this.” The driver had already gotten out, surveying the area. Bea immediately recognised it as midway through route 6, only foggier.

Far less dense than the mass hanging above them, but still present in small amounts. The fog that was there swirled along the ground carelessly, as if snaking or dancing. The visibility was poor for what it was, maybe only 50 or so metres in any direction. Hardly ideal.

“I see. Alli, let’s get out and take a look, okay? We’ll be safe, I promise.”

“Triple promise?”

“Triple promise,” she confirmed, having seen that one coming. Allister forced himself to nod, not entirely happy with the situation, though glad to be on solid ground once more.

Allister retook his sister’s hand as they stepped out, surveying the area where they’d touched down. It was serene, like a dream almost. Route 6 had never looked so…alone. A painting unfinished.

“Oww,” Bea muttered, stepping onto the sheet rock outside. “That’s a lot colder than I was expecting.”

“Bea…it’s freezing here.” Bea turned back to her brother, seeing he was looking into the carriage windows from the outside. “It’s n-never this cold…”

The carriage had been protecting them from the worst of it, but stepping outside to the elements was already chilly. The lack of sun wasn’t doing them any favours, but even if had been the middle
of the day, Allister guessed it would still have been dingy.

“Another great observation. Stow-on-Side is usually pretty warm. Driver,” she called, catching his attention. “Do you think the sudden temperature drop and the normal Stow-on-Side temperature mixing could’ve caused this? My science isn’t all that great.”

“It’s possible,” he conceded, removing his goggles for a better look. “I’ve never been right where a cold front and warm one meet before! This is the weirdest day in all my years. If you’d have told me this is the Crown Tundra I’d have believed you!”

Bea took another step, wincing. It wasn’t nearly as cold as her trek through Circhester but the freezing rock was a lot tougher on her feet than the soft snow had been.

This is going to be some extreme training then.

“I can see some rime deposits around us, watch your step, you two. Odd…” The taxi driver bent down, the Corviknight’s watchful gaze following. “It’s got an odd tint to it. See what you think?”

Bea knelt down herself, inspecting the icy coatings that had unevenly decided to attach to route 6’s already sparse plant life. Holding it up to the light (of what little direct sunlight was passing through) yielded an interesting change. Not just clear and colourless, but clear and…

“Purple?”

“Looks more pink t’ me.”

“Maybe so, Allister, maybe so. Any ideas, driver?”

“Salt impurities? Whatever this ice is, is weird. This looks like it’s appeared in a matter of minutes or we’d have noticed it from the air.”

“Makes sense.”

“I don’t know how likely a rescue is in this weather,” the driver continued, stroking the Corviknight. “I definitely can’t take off, and I think any other taxis would have the same problem.”

“Could it be hours then?”

“Easily.”

Bea winced as her query was proven correct, her brother squeezing her hand again. Now in an open space, she was at least grateful they were linked lest he run off into the whiteness.

“H-hours? We’re g-gonna be f-freezing here f-for…hours?”

“No, don’t worry. I’ve got an idea for how to get home.”

Slight lie, she hadn’t gotten all of an idea yet, just some of one. Better to appear decisive and work out the details as she went along.

“H-how?”

“Alli, you and I are going to walk back to Stow-on-Side.” Both the driver and her brother had objections ready but she hastily quietened them. It was bonus thinking time anyway. “We don’t have cold weather clothes like the carriage driver so if we stay here we’ll get colder faster. Whether we’re inside the carriage or not, it’s not windy so it doesn’t matter.”
“Y-you want us t’ walk through the fog, sis? I trust you but…”

“I know where we are, it’s okay. Keeping moving will keep us warm. Driver?”

The man seemed to hesitate, but a look to they gym leader’s face told him no persuasion was happening on the matter.

“If you’re completely sure then I won’t stop you. You know the local area better than me.”

“I do.”

“I can withstand the cold here for a while, so I’ll stay with Corviknight until I can get help, or until you get to a Pokémon centre and find a phone.”

“Excellent.” Bea took out the fare for the journey but the driver waved her away.

“I didn’t take you all the way. That’s no way to run a service.”

“You made a safe landing in bad conditions, I’d say it’s praiseworthy.”

Still, Bea frowned as her cash was swatted away a second time.

“Very well.” She bowed, prompting Allister to do the same (one hand in front of his mask to prevent it falling). “Thank you for the excellent service.”

“I…sure. Thanks for flying with me!” Stunned driver aside, Bea knew it was time to go or they would start to freeze before they’d even started.

Waving goodbye to the man, the two gym leaders began the long trek back to their hometown.

_It’s not that long. Far easier than staying in one place and waiting to be rescue. Gym leaders should set an example._

Bea knew that the last statement wasn’t exactly her own words. More a mantra that her parents had drilled into her. Still, she’d made the ideology her own, in her own way. She embraced it. Setting an example that both her brother and other people could follow.

Allister didn’t approve of her humming though. So much for lightening the dour mood. His eyes were locked firmly on the ground, as if worried he might slip. Bea wasn’t sure that was it, recognising it again as a grounding technique.

“Sis, it’s bad luck to s-sing Christmas songs…when it’s not Christmas.”

“‘Delibird is coming to town’ is an all year classic,” Bea expressed, though still noting her brother’s disapproval. “Besides, I was humming.”

“Mmhmmm.”

“We could play ‘I spy’ instead if you like?”

Allister looked up to see a wry smile on Bea’s face.

“C-come on, quit messin’!” He bopped her shoulder in turn but there was no malice. More… playfulness if anything. “Can hardly s-see nothin’ in front of us.”

“Hey, beats my humming.”
“Ugh, I h-hate singin’ in school assembly. Makes me feel all…conscious ‘bout myself. More than usual.”

“They still have that then? I never liked it either. Same reasons.”

“No kiddin’.”

The silence fell once more, but more companionable than before.

It occurred to Allister that he’d never really heard his sister sing before. Not properly. He shrugged to himself, reasoning the same was true from her perspective. They were both self-conscious people in their own ways.

Even when he’d jump awake at night and Bea was there to calm him down, she never sang. Humming as she’d done before was the extent really. Her real talent (for his money anyway) was story telling. Some might’ve called his sister’s voice deadpan, and maybe they were right, but to him it was the greatest thing in the world.

Lying awake, unable to sleep, those deadpan tones were perfect to drift off with. Even imagining one of her lectures about work ethics was enough to do the trick sometimes. The proof of that was with the afternoon gone.

It’s not mean for me to think that, right?

Having an uncanny ability to know what he was thinking, Allister stole a look at her face, but she was focused on the environment for now.

Makes sense. What’s happened is weird alright.

In different circumstances it was quite beautiful really. Trees covered in the thinnest layer of ice, no doubt deposited by the freezing fog. The long grass empty of Pokémon, having all burrowed underground or moved to warmer areas for the time being.

It really was its own winter wonderland.

Oh…that explains the Christmas humming. Hope she’s not mad that I cut her off.

“Something on your mind?”

“…I…guess.”

True to form, Bea could pick up on when something was bugging him. Maybe it was just that things bugged him all the time and she was usually around him? Who knew, but the system worked.

“Go on.”

“I…I dunno. Thought to m’self about how I w-was havin’ a great day and all. Then this…goes an’ happens.”

“You think you jinxed it?”

“Kinda.”

“You know that isn’t true.”
“I know.”

“I mean, unless you’ve developed some weather controlling powers?”

“Hah… I dunno though… s-seems unfair that this happened today.”

“… Life isn’t always fair, Alli.” Bea bent down, scooping some of the strangely tinted ice into her palm. “I’m really glad to hear you’ve been having a great day so far, though.”

“T-thanks for coming out with me. Felt… nice.”

“I agree. It was nice. Lake aside.”

Earning a laugh from her brother, Bea refocused herself on the icy structures. Peering closer, the colour seemed somewhat familiar.

“Hey Alli, let’s see your dynamax band for a second.”

“Huh? Oh… sure.” The ghost leader held out his left hand so Bea could examine. Comparing the two was a little difficult but she seemed satisfied.

“I thought that reminded me of something.” Bea let the ice fall to the ground, shattering harmlessly. “It’s similar in colour to dynamax energy. That’s weird.”

“I’ll s-say…” The similarity wasn’t lost on Allister either, now that Bea had pointed it out to him. In hindsight it seemed rather obvious. “Why’s it like that?”

“Couldn’t say, Alli,” Bea announced, straightening up. “Let’s keep moving.”

“R-right.”

“Maybe it’s where all the dynamax crystals come from?”

“I thought they’d c-came from… w-wishing stars?”

“No one’s quite sure where they come from,” she emphasised, gears starting to turn. “They just sort of… fall to the ground. Maybe we’ve just witnessed what actually happens? They form in clouds then rain down?”

“Nuh-uh, dynamax crystals don’t melt.”

“True.”

“We… um… should tell the professor, or Sonia, r-right?”

Bea smiled, ruffling the boy’s hair. It was a little tough given how the cold was starting to freeze the strands together, but worth it.

“I think you’re right. Even if this is something totally unrelated, it seems like something they’d be interested in.”

“Y-yeah.”

The more the two walked, the slower time seemed to drag on. Bea found it wasn’t so bad for her, used to exerting over a longer period, but Allister was starting to fall behind in steps. Every 1 in 20, then 1 in 10, then 1 in 4… his muscles weren’t used to long periods of exertion, and certainly not at
these temperatures.

In time Bea knew she was going to succumb to fatigue, having already been tired when she decided to call it a day from training. This was an unexpected ‘bonus.’

_How that Sinnohan gym leader doesn’t freeze to death astounds me. Just how long is the path to Snowpoint?_

The environment was beautiful, that much was true, but as any nature documentary will tell you, when something has beauty then something deadly is usually lurking right behind. The ‘winter wonderland’ was slowly but surely getting the better of them.

“Hey, Bea?”

“What is it, Alli?”

“I’m…um…r-really sorry about my joke earlier.” Allister tried to scuff his shoes on the ground, only to nearly slip. Thankfully, as ever, Bea was there to steady him. “T-thanks. I…didn’t…mean it. W-what I said, not the…thanks,” he corrected quickly, noting the mild confusion.

“You’re still concerned?” Not really willing to stop moving, Bea still humoured him. Having a heart to heart in a snowy landscape had its own beauty. “Alli, I’m touched. You really don’t have to worry though. I’m not going anywhere. Bet my life.”

“I…know. Scary t’ think about is all. You’re a-all I got.”

“Hey…if I triple promise to not die, will you take a piggyback ride?”

“H-huh?” Not the response he’d been expecting; Bea nodded to reinforce her point.

“We’ve not got long until we’re back at home and warm,” she added, trying to inject some enthusiasm into her voice. “What do you say you help me with one bit of final training for the day?”

“You want me…to ride on your back?” Allister asked suspiciously. They hadn’t done that since Allister was much younger than we already was.

“Sure! It’ll be great weight training for me. I can jog and we can go quicker. Make it a real work out.”

“…I’m slowing us down, aren’t I?”

Bea sighed. Allister could be misdirected well enough during an episode, but he was a sharp kid when his thinking cap was on.

“………If we stay out here much longer, Alli, we’re not going to be able to move properly. You’re not used to such extreme elements and you’re slowing down. You have been for a while now.”

“…”

“I underestimated how long this was going to take, but I promised I’d get us home safe. I can’t do that without you.”

“…Thanks…for not l-lying to me.” It was a sulky tone, but not all that mad. Just defeated, and the cold taking its toll.
“I’m not going to do you the disservice of pretending things are fine when I know things might not be. You’re a smart guy, Alli. It wouldn’t be fair if I didn’t treat you like a person.”

“………………………………………………”

“…You going to climb on?”

“…Yeah.”

Allister did so, allowing himself to be hoisted upwards and wrapping his numbing arms around her chest. Bea set off at a light jog, puffing jets of cloudy air into the surroundings. Progress was definitely better now, though she did feel a slight pang of guilt for trying to lie to him.

“Thanks for promisin’ not to die,” Allister said suddenly. “I know y-y-you can’t really…promise somethin’ like that…but thanks. Reassuring I g-guess.”

“You’re…welcome,” Bea replied at length. “Sorry for trying to keep you in the dark.”

“I u-understand why. It’s alright, r-really, sis.”

“Doesn’t mean I don’t feel guilty.”

“H-hey, you’re a person t-too.” Allister quietly let his chin rest in the locks of bouncing hair beneath him. “We agreed to b-be more honest w-with each other…and w-we have been.”

“…Again, very mature, Alli.”

Bea didn’t know whether to feel better or worse with that information; as the minutes wore on she made the conscious decision to feel better. Allister was right, after all they’d promised to see the other as they really were.

_Not an idol on a plinth_, she echoed.

Either that or she was losing the brain power to fight any negativity. The one plus side of freezing.
“Hey…a ladder.”

“Hold tight, Alli. Going up.” Bea recognised it as one of the ladders used to get to Stow-on-Side’s elevation from the bottom of Route 6; they had to be getting close by now. Sure, her muscles were moaning about it, but it was going to be over soon.

At least until they nearly smacked into the wall blocking their path. Bea didn’t set Allister down, out of mild fear she wasn’t going to be able to pick him up again should the need come.

It was some sort of rockslide, right before the Diglett statues at the edge of their town.

_The ice must have loosened the rocks around here. I always figured the arch would collapse eventually but to happen now…we can’t go back down the ladder…and we can’t get through here. If I got Machamp to try and punch through we could destabilise the whole floor of this place. So…_

Knowing it was entirely pointless, Bea struck the wall anyway.

_Serendipitous that my hand is nearly numb from the cold already, or that would’ve hurt._

“O-oh…what a-are we…”

“Allister, cover your ears please.”

“Huh?”

“Please."

Bea waited until he had done so, then swore loudly into the emptiness. It reverberated before being lost, vanishing into the nothing like it was never there to begin with.

“You can uncover now.”

“…”

Bea pulled his hands away slowly.

_He’s like ice._

“I’m done.”

“That b-bad, huh?”

“One of those times.” Bea didn’t make it a habit to swear but sometimes when things went _just_ that extra mile in making things needlessly difficult did she find herself losing it slightly. Her muscles were beginning to go from moaning to screaming, one by one.

“Okay…we’re going to go around.”

“Around, Bea?”

“I think this is the arch that leads to eastern Stow-on-Side’s entrance. We’ll cut across the plateau, and it shouldn’t be another 5-10 minutes.”

“O-okay, let’s g-get to it. I can’t f-feel…fingers. Or toes.”

“Let’s do this then.”
Bea doubled her pace, trying to force warmth back into her own feet. If Allister couldn’t feel his toes, safe in his shoes and socks, then Bea’s time was tougher by far.

Allister did briefly query this fact as Bea made her way around the formations, but she assured him it wasn’t the biggest issue. In fact, the biggest issue was that although while, in terms of distance, the detour over the plateau was fairly short compared to their journey so far, the terrain was completely unmanaged.

Most of route 6 had been worn in over time over hikers and trainers alike smoothing the surface. Here, the rocky outcroppings were at best a nuisance, at worst a trip hazard. Made worse by the poor visibility, Bea couldn’t be sure exactly where the edge of the cliff began and ended.

“I can’t see more than 30 metres in front…maybe even 20 metres,” Bea muttered to herself, confident Allister couldn’t hear. “Where the hell did this fog come from? What’s with this?”

Bea resisted the urge to swear again, another sharp rock jabbing into her sole. If it was sharp enough to be painful even with the numbing cold, then that was bad news.

“Just gotta keep moving. We’re nearly home.”

“Bea…h-how’re you copin’?”

“I’m fine, Alli, but we’re going to need to get inside soon. I think we’re nearly there anyway.”

Half true, but Bea had spotted something through the impasse, as miraculous as that sounded. An orange light, glowing through the fog. Whatever it was, it meant people, and Bea rushed as fast as she could towards it. Any help was good help.

At least until she made it to the source. Fire was good. The person tending it, not her favourite.

“Oh, gym leaders, huh? Welcome.”

“Hello, Cara.”

“You two look nearly as worn out as Cara Liss does. Sit for a while, warm up?”

Bea dearly wanted to say ‘no thank you’, finding the woman creepy, but the logical part of her mind had overridden any of those thoughts the moment she felt the warmth.

The scientist was sensible, at least when it came to self-preservation. Her tent was well pitched, she was sitting cross legged to conserve heat, and had a solid couple of campfires going lest one decided to go out. It was easier to maintain two then build a new fire after all.

“Alli, we’re going to stop here for a bit. Regain some feeling, then we’ll keep moving.”

“’K.” Allister slid to the ground, thankfully thawed around the immediate area.

“Do you have a blanket he can borrow,” Bea urged, gesturing to the laying Allister. “He’s feeling it worse than me.”

“So selfless,” the scientist mused, wiping some of dirt off of her face. “Cara Liss most definitely approves.” She briefly disappeared back into the tent, returning with a small rag of some kind. “It’s the best I can do. I travel light.”

Bea wanted to say she hadn’t once moved from her base ever since she’d first appeared 5 months ago, but wasn’t about to argue. Quickly tucking the blanket around him, Bea shifted her brother as
close to the fire as she dared.

“Thank you, Cara. I won’t be as dramatic to say you saved our lives, but a trip to the hospital probably. He doesn’t like hospitals that much.”

“Cara Liss can relate. Still,” she added, eyeing the two entirely nonchalantly, “There’s free health care in Galar. That’s part of the reason I settled here. Those Unovans don’t know what they’re missing.”

“…Quite.” Bea turned back to Allister. “Alli, don’t close your eyes. Keep awake.”

“I’m awake, sis.” His eyes were indeed open, purple visible behind his mask, if only slightly. He was starting to shiver again, also a good sign. Heat returning to the body. Content with things for now, Bea sat down next to the resident fossil extractor.

“Cara, do you have any idea what’s happened? We were in the air and all of a sudden we had to land due to poor visibility. The ground’s frozen, the ice is weirdly coloured, and there’s a rockfall blocking eastern Stow-on-Side.”

“Nope.”

“What?!” Bea checked herself, noting the woman’s dopey grin. “I mean…it’s hardly your area. Forgive me. I just thought, since you were here…”

“Cara Liss is great at many a thing, but not this. I saw no source for this bother, it appeared just as you said.”

“I see. Well then…”

“I will say, that it was the ground that chilled first, then the fog followed. Not the other way around. It isn’t rising either, the ground is too cold. It’s just hanging around like a weird uncle.”

“Oh. Does that mean anything special?”

“No. Just what I saw.”

“Well…thank you.” It was odd for Bea to say that to her, the three of them hadn’t really gotten along all that well in the past. Not that they had much contact at all, but whenever they had to pass by Cara Liss’s makeshift camp, the woman was always staring into space weirdly. There were thousand-yard stares, and then there was Cara Liss.

Bea didn’t want to hold it against her, judging on appearance was something she strove to never do, but it made Allister jumpy so of course she found herself prejudiced.

“Thanks anyway.”

“It’s okay. Cara Liss was just surprised to see anyone else out in this weather. Company is nice.”

While Bea reasoned that the scientist was absolutely of the loner archetype, even loners enjoyed interactions occasionally. She knew she didn’t have the best luck with people, no doubt due to her unprofessional appearance.

“I don’t have any fossils to give you, sorry.”

“Cara Liss can see you have nothing but yourselves. I don’t require a payment for these, non-recombination services.”
Bea looked back to her brother, now rubbing his hands together. A good sign. Over her shoulder she just make out the fabled ‘fossil recombination’ device that was apparently Cara’s pride and joy.

“Is your machine going to be okay in the weather?”

“Aha, don’t doubt my craft,” the woman chortled lightly. “I’ve dropped it down a ravine before and its been fine.

“…” Bea didn’t want to question whether that was the result of a scientific test or ineptitude. Still, her sincerity in helping the two of them out was enough, and for that she was grateful.

“Any ideas how big an area got hit? Is Stow-on-Side alright?”

“Cara Liss suspects so. Residents with fire types to help keep the streets clear.”

“Ah, of course.” It was only a guess though, she knew the scientist didn’t like to venture into town unless she was getting supplies. “We can bring you something from the market or store if you like, when this clears up?”

“Think of this as…a future favour.” There was that unsettling grin again, but Bea ignored it as best she could.

“Oh?”

“Cara Liss’s way of saying, ‘I couldn’t think of anything I want right now.’”

“Oh. Needlessly cryptic.”

“Many people do come to that conclusion about me,” she pondered, finger wiping away get more dirt. “Very haughty of them.” It didn’t help her hands were dirty too, Bea noted, a net gain of dirt to her face if anything.

Her own body was starting to warm now, if her feet beginning to sting was anything to go by. An unfortunate consequence of the process, but better than stepping on some discarded glass and cutting herself not realising. That was definitely a hospital trip waiting to happen.

“Alli, how’re you doing now?”

“Mmmm…better. Warm is g-good.”

“Warm is good,” she confirmed. It then occurred to Bea that because of her brother’s position and the fire between them, he hadn’t actually seen Cara Liss yet.

*He was very out of it when we arrived. Best he doesn’t realise, it would quite a shock.*

“Are you about ready to move?”

“Dunno, w-why you’re askin’ m-me. You’re…the one doin’ t-the walkin’.”

“…You have a point.” Bea stood, her body protesting that it wasn’t done with its rest. However resting for much longer ran the risk of her not actually being able to leave, her adrenaline stores already depleted beyond reasonable use. It was now or never.

“Cara, thank you so much for the hospitality. I’ll endeavour to remember your favour.”

“Hmm? Oh that, sure, don’t forget it now.”
It seemed entirely like the scientist had already forgotten, but again Bea made no claims of having an understanding of the woman’s mind.

Bea gently picked her brother up off the floor, carefully returning the ‘blanket’ that had been given. Allister said nothing, content to be handled like an awkwardly shaped sack of potatoes as Bea hoisted him upwards once more.

Being at the lone scientist’s camp had given Bea a much better grasp of her surroundings, and it wasn’t long trek (though still a bitterly cold one) before the two made it into Stow-on-Side at last.

In fact it was barely a few minutes away, the tired and defeated Bea noting that stopping at Cara Liss’s camp had been almost entirely unnecessary.

*Stupid wall of fog blocking the view.*

It had been an ordeal, but they were both in one piece. Hot chocolate, blankets, and one pillow fort in the living room later and they were both asleep at the reasonable hour of 5.30pm.

Perhaps Allister’s body clock would be thanking him after all?

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“That test was an utter failure, Chairman.”

“Indeed, Oleana, indeed.”

Chairman Rose sat down heavily at his desk, monitoring the minor weather broadcasts picking up all the side effects that had unfortunately occurred due to their work. Thankfully now passed, the fog had been a complete anomaly, a freak side effect that neither of them could fully explain.

“With the fog burned off there will be little coverage now on the news, if any. There is nothing linking us.”

“It isn’t a link I worry about.”

The two didn’t need to say out loud what bothered Rose the most. The reason he’d dedicated near every waking hour to the growth and sustainability of Macro Cosmos was proof that his worry was real. His dedication real too, Rose switched off the monitor.

“I will gladly own up when the time comes, I have nothing to hide from the people of Galar.”

“…If that is what you think, I will support you, as I have always done.”

“Thank you, Oleana. It will do us no good to dwell, we must continue our search. How have our response vehicles to Stow-on-Side fared? I know the area surrounding our site was impacted most dearly.”

“It’s in hand, there have been no hospital admittances recorded, and your teams have handed out blankets and supplies for those who need them.”

“That is something, at least.” Rose sighed, staring into the paper on his desk. A simple drawing, outlining exactly why he was doing what he was doing. Whenever he felt doubt for his goals, he needed only look to feel his passion reignite. He had come to loathe how he was powerless to solve the problems that had built up over time...and they were problems made by others, now fallen to him. Even he, the richest and most powerful man in Galar was making no headway. The drawing embodied his resolve now, though he'd only received it today.
Perhaps he'd needed the reminder all along?

“…I have received a report that the gym leaders of that area were caught during the aftermath.”

“What?” Rose’s eyes sharpened immediately. If there was one thing he hated more than his powerlessness, it was endangering the public. “How can this be?”

“Some of the residents gave accounts that the two entered from the south, after a rockfall had blocked their path. They later called in asking about a flying taxi stranded on route 6.”

“…And they are both unharmed?”

“Apparently. They didn’t stop by the hospital or Pokémon centre, though Bea was allegedly carrying Allister on her shoulders.”

Rose said nothing, closing his eyes.

“Chairman…”

“I know, Oleana, I know. This could’ve been so much worse. I need to look for the positives.” His head in his hands now, it bothered Oleana to see her friend and boss so…down. “Just, with this test going to the way it did, I wonder if a new strategy is needed.”

The secretary sat opposite, her face of slate frowning ever so slightly.

“Chairman, forgive me. The machine was built to my designs. Perhaps they…” Rose held out his hand slowly.

“You know you aren’t to blame. Your designs are perfect, they always are. However,” he conceded, “Anything we do is built on understanding limited by the tools at our disposal. Our search must take priority now, this incident is proof of that.”

“I understand. That is the best course of action. Have you run our proposition by the champion?”

“I’ve tried to plant some ideas but…it’s hard.” Rose stood, taking the paper he’d been staring at with him, and walked over the tempered glass floor of Rose Tower to his window. “Leon has a one-track mind. That much has always been obvious. Clearly not all of Mustard’s teachings went in.”

“Then…?”

“I will keep trying, Oleana. Mustard will object, we know that. Better as few people know of our work as needed until it’s time. Just because our goal is for everyone’s benefit, it doesn’t mean they’ll agree.”

“Then they lack the vision you do. You’ve seen the future, after all.”

“And it is a future I will not let come to pass.” Through his reflection in the glass, Rose could see his free fist clenching lightly. In the other, the paper he’d received from the boy at the hospital. A boy and his Charizard outlined crudely in crayon. That was a future worth protecting, idealised into a child’s drawing. “No matter what.”

Chapter End Notes
Hello, my friends! Welcome back to 'Bea-ing a Sister', I've missed you all dearly. I took some time off for work but now we're ready for more wholesome goodness...as well as fog?

Firstly, I'm truly humbled to have had someone draw Fanart for this series: https://twitter.com/Chikuseren/status/1217866394055905280?s=19

Bea with her new headband, and Allister holding his sister's arm, my heart melts. The artist goes by 'Chikurseren' so please send them your love, they deserve it for all the hard work they put in!!!

To celebrate the return to this fic, today is a triple upload from me! That's right folks, limited time offer ^_^ 'Cold Night, Winter's light', which takes place before chapter 7 (but is a story well within its own right) at the gym leader party will be going up shortly. Featuring all your favourite gym leaders having a good time (and some not so good)!

The other is '5 Minutes of Poison', another oneshot sidestory focusing on Bea and a new character revealed recently. Do check it out if you enjoy...stranger interpretations.

I had a lot of fun writing this, if you can tell. Even got to use the meteorology module from university I thought wasn't worth it ^_^ Oh how wrong was I?

Cara Liss is such a fascinating character to me, though I can guess she passes a lot of people by.

I'm sorry I haven't been able to reply to your reviews before now, just know I'm beyond grateful for all of them! Seriously, you all rock, I'll see you next time! P.S. The 1st Galar animation that dropped on the official channel was heartwarming and I couldn't resist referencing it, forgive me.
Ocean of Doubt

Chapter Summary

Allister is one to spend his time blind to the forest, for want of the trees. An endless loop of sitting and staring that can hopefully be broken by the usual suspects.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*I can do this. I…I can do this. Just do it, don’t even think.*

“D-don’t even think about it,” Allister echoed aloud; he frowned, the otherwise empty room offering no encouragement.

The voice in his head sounded far more confident than the stutters he’d been accustomed to for most of his life. That was a given. Still, it didn’t exactly inspire the boy to action and the words felt as empty as the room he was perched in.

*This is easy. It’s not scary. She’s not scary.*

Allister’s phone lay across from him at the kitchen table, unresponsive. If he wanted to wimp out and just ask Rotom to make the call for him then the option was there.

“B-but I’m no wimp r-right, Mimikyu? I can…do this…”

Was he trying to convince himself or his Pokémon? Another question for the ages it seemed, but the Pokémon on his lap offered encouragement either way.

“Kyu…yuuku…?”

“I know, I know. I’ve been doin’ this a while now.” Allister sat back on the chair, head in his hands. Not even the creak of the wood was going to startle him enough to admit defeat.

Nervous tapping on the chair, biting at his fingernails, looking anywhere but the phone…all good ways to pass the time.

*I’ve made phone calls before. They’re not hard. Guess I’m havin’ one of those days.*

Allister tried his best not to wipe his marginally sweaty hands on the fabric of his Mimikyu’s disguise, seldom succeeding.

It was either that or no pats at all, and the lone arm of his Pokémon would always pull him back for more attention, sweaty or not.

*Guess that’s a necessary downside of someone anxious, huh? I get sweaty real easy…*

“Mimmm…Mikyu.”

“T-true, most people don’t like t-touchin’ a Mimikyu. People don’t know what they’re missin’,” he muttered as an afterthought. “A real shame, y-you’re ace!”
The sounds of muted purring were of little comfort to the boy’s endeavours yet comfort they were.

When most of what life has to offer you is thorns, you look for the petals.

**Worth a few pricks ‘n bleedin’ fingers. I can make this call. She’s not scary, c’mon Allister get it together!**

“Ugh, I’m hopeless, Mimikyu.”

Allister swung his legs idly, hoping to busy his eyes in the depths of the kitchen. Unfortunately for him, Bea kept a very clean showing and any mess was likely going to be due to him.

“I could…make a mess? Then l-look at that?” At his Pokémon’s confused hum, Allister dismissed the idea. “Nah you’re right. Crazy talk,” he mumbled under his breath.

And thus the staring resumed, the orange plastic of the RotomPhone proving an impassable mountain for the time being. The reflection of the darkened screen only sought to illuminate Allister himself, and not the person who he hoped to talk to.

“C’mon, you’re t-tough? Right? She’s not…scary. More…nah, intimidatin’ s’not right either. Imposin’ maybe? Yeah…” He nodded to himself, content with the descriptor. “Imposin’.”

Catching sight of his mask in the phone’s reflection was a reminder of his own foolishness. Just that.

*The journey’s the hard part. Destination’s easy. Sis always says to imagine things like a mountain. Climin’ upwards and overcomin’ things aren’t bad…apparently. I’ve got a big ol’ mountain, Mimikyu. This is today’s problem, not tomorrow’s. Gotta do this now.*

“You’re going to burn a hole into the table if you keep staring that hard.”

The semi-blunt reply from his sister caused the ghostly gym leader to whirl around so fast that Mimikyu was forced to dig its claws into his leg to avoid being thrown off.

“Oww!” Allister hastily petted his grumbling Pokémon, before turning his attention to his sister. “Sis, how l-long’ve you been there?!”

“Alli, I’ve been here for nearly 20 minutes.” The fighting gym leader raised an eyebrow, filling the kettle that had apparently moved without Allister even realising. “And I was kidding about the table, that’s not how eyes work.”

“I…know?”

Allister racked his brain, trying to work out how exactly Bea had gotten past him without him realising, terrible joke aside. Had he really been focused to that extent?

“I th-thought…you went out? Hours ago…”

“I did.” Bea nodded in affirmation, placing the filled kettle to its cradle. “And then I got back to find you exactly where you’d started. You seemed focused so I decided not to disturb you. A clear mind is often hard to come by.”

“My mind s’not clear, sis, you…know that…”

Bea nodded once again, adjusting her headband as it graced the rim of the counter cupboards.

*She’s barely taken it off since I gave it to her…glad she likes it so much.*
“Hence why I’m making us both cocoa.” She presented the jar from the cupboard, noting her brother’s eager expression. “I figured you wouldn’t turn it down so I’m making two cups.”

“Th-thanks, sis…you know m-me so well…”

A dual warmth did blossom within Allister’s heart at this, both mental from the image of his sister wearing his crafted head decoration and her offer of hot chocolate, as well as the physical expectation of the sugary drink and the guilty pleasure that would no doubt follow.

“Glad I do.” Bea smiled, heaping a couple of spoons into the mugs she’d set out. “Guessing you haven’t made any progress with your call? Or are you waiting for a response now?”

“F-first one,” Allister admitted, resuming his routine of staring and stroking. “Guess I’m havin’ more trouble…than I thought I w-would.”

“Hey, if we guessed everything right all the time we’d all get bored really quickly. At least that’s the way I see it. What do you think?” It took Allister a moment to realise his sister’s question hadn’t been rhetorical.

“I think…it’s one way…to look at it? S’got some merit, definitely.”

“Great answer, Alli.” Bea sat opposite, moving the phone so it was equal distances from either of them. “I meditate on exactly that daily, and I don’t have a concrete answer either. I probably never will. Doesn’t mean I won’t try.”

“…”

“I’m proud of you, not giving in.”

“Huh?”

“I mean,” Bea emphasised, sliding the phone towards herself. “You could’ve asked me to make the call at anytime but you didn’t. You’re working up the courage to do it yourself. Slowly but surely.”

“W-wouldn’t be any p-point if I-I’m not the one to do it.” Allister sighed, watching Mimikyu curl up once more. “If I…c-can’t even call another g-gym leader…then how ‘m I gonna…call Acerola some time?”

Bea nodded, hoping to give some sort of encouragement to the stalemate before her.

“It’ll be good practice. I’m glad you’ve got a goal to put your mind to.”

“I haven’t succeeded.”

“But you haven’t given up either,” Bea countered gently, sliding the phone further towards the corner. “I think you’re getting close.”

“…Maybe.”

That was a white lie if Bea had ever heard one. She’d been out for hours at the gym, reorganising things for the upcoming challenger season. Even with several delays caused by a minor power outage, it hadn’t proved enough time for her brother to make his move yet.

“Definitely.” Standing once more, the fighting type leader surreptitiously moved Allister’s phone closer to the edge of the table again; he was still wholly focused on the spot it had once been as Bea watched out of the corner of her eye.
“But Nessa’s scary,” Allister whined. “Or r-rather…imposin’. That’s…um…the word I’ve been usin’…in my head.”

“Imposing, huh?” Bea shook her head, smiling as she stirred the water into the cocoa (and of course half Gogoat milk for Allister). “I can see that.”

“I-it’s not f-funny!” Allister pouted, embarrassed. “If I’m g-gonna learn how t’ swim then I g-gotta do this! I don’t w-wanna go to Alola in future and sink…like a brick!”

“That would definitely not be ideal.”

“Or what i-if I teleport int’ the ocean, sis? Have you thought aaa-about that?”

“It may have crossed my mind once or twice.”

Allister paused, frowning.

“W-wait really?”

“No.”

“Ughhh c’mon, sis, be serious!” Allister looked down at his hands, drawing an imaginary diagram of Galar in the air around them. “We live in S-Stow-on-SIDE. L-like the side of the ocean…n’ stuff. What if I…fall in?”

Bea returned to the table, mugs in tow.

“I’ve seen you near the ocean exactly once, when you caught yourself your Corsola that washed up. Otherwise you stick to land, I know you.”

“W-well yeah but…”

“But I concede, safety first.” She set the cups down, again moving the phone slightly closer to the edge. “Learning how to swim is a key skill. Neither of us have a dedicated water type.”

“T-true, Grapploct and Cursola d-don’t really count.”

“Indeed.”

“So w-what better way to learn how t’ swim than the b-best w-water type trainer around?”

Bea watched her brother’s masked expression carefully as she continued to shift the phone.

Still not paying attention. He’s more focused on the cocoa now.

Indeed, Allister was throwing caution to the wind and had removed his mask to drink. At a lower temperature thanks to the milk, he didn’t even have to wait like she did to enjoy it. Blissfully unaware of his sister’s schemes.

Mimikyu however wasn’t, beady eyes flitting back between her and the phone suspiciously; Bea pressed a finger to her lips and silently urged it to play along.

Apparently content to see how things played out, it said nothing as Allister continued until he’d finished. Mug safely back on the table, Bea acted.

“Oops.” Bea shifted her cup slightly so as to knock the phone off of the table. Immediately the
The orange plastic was cool in stark contrast to the warmth of the cup and Allister took a few seconds to fully comprehend the flurry of events that had just unfolded.

“H-huh?”

“Guess I’m not as careful as I should’ve been.” Bea shrugged, attending to her own cup.

“No kiddin’, Rotom would’ve invaded our oven or somethin’! Crumbs, sis, you need t’ pay more attention.”

Bea found the mental image of their house accidentally burning down thanks to a sentient oven not an overly pleasing one.

“Clearly I do. But…” Bea set her cup down and pointed at the phone her brother was now holding. “…seeing as you’re holding it you might as well call Nessa.”

“W-well when you put it like that…” Allister paused, it dawning on him what his sister was trying to do. “H-hey no fair, you tricked me!”

“I can’t make the call for you, but I can help you hold the phone.” Bea folded her arms in admission. “You’ve been staring at it all day, I figured I’d give you the push to have it in your hand at least. Even a step like that is worth taking, I think.”

“…Thanks, sis. I was just gonna s-stare at it forever wasn’t I?”

“Forever? Probably not, but I don’t want you to get tunnel vision.”

“…” Even with the phone now in his hand Allister could feel himself hesitating.

“I’ll be here alongside you,” Bea assured. “For support.”

“…She gives me the j-jitters, sis.”

“It’s just her persona, Alli. All that modelling means you’ve got to be able to switch between personalities in an instant. Once you get to know her she’s very reliable, and a good person.”

“…What about the dress?”

“Aside from the dress. We don’t speak of the dress incident.”

“H-heh, whatever you say, sis.” At this, Allister powered the phone on and began to scroll through his contacts, grin blazing for all to see.

“Oh that’s what motivates you to get moving, huh? Remembering my past woes with Nessa’s party games”, Bea mused, though unable to supress a hint of a smile. “I shall have to remember this for future reference then.”

“W-what can I say? Ghosts I-like a good prank!”

“You’ve got me there, Alli.”

*Good motivation I suppose. Look at how goofy his grin is. I can’t be mad at that.*
nervousness prevented him from just calling unannounced lest Nessa be busy and not pick up.

“Can I…?”

“You may. Never need to ask me, you know that.” Bea didn’t need to hear the rest, holding her hand out across the table for her brother to hold.

“…Thank you, Bea.”

Allister pupils dilated immediately upon the ‘ding’ of a text received and snapped out of whatever mushy internal dialogue was going through his head.

Too much mush and we’ll dissolve. He doesn’t need to say it, I know how he feels. That, along with the ocean and the house burning down are today’s ‘issues’ apparently.

‘Much mush…’ Bea mouthed the words but didn’t vocalise, finding the phrase odder the more she repeated.

Anyway, enough of that. Looks like Alli got a reply.

“She’s…available…t-to talk.”

Allister was holding the phone like it was solid gold, and weighed as much too. He didn’t know whether to drop it or hold it tight, instead finding an awkward middle ground as he clutched a single corner in a vice grip.

“Great to hear, Alli, I knew she would. Go ahead.”

“Al…right…th-this is m-me…goin’ ahead.”

“…”

“I’m d-d-dialin’…right n-now. It’s h-happenin’ just watch…”

Allister did indeed look to his sister face for her approval, finding the reassurance he was after.

“Breathe, Allister. Slow…deep…breathes.”

“A-alright…good idea.”

“Nessa won’t understand you if you start hyperventilating.”

“…Makes…sense.”

It took a minute but Allister found his peace, and with a phone in one hand and his sister’s hand in the other he finally dialled.

“This is gonna be worth it…this is gonna work.”

“Great outlook, Alli. Nothing to fear.”

This isn’t worth it, it’s not workin’ and there’s everythin’ to fear!

Such a positive attitude is only maintained by how much work you consciously put into it, and for someone who’s mind tended to wander, it was hard for Allister to remain calm.
The swimming pool looked more or less like the ocean but it was even worse in some ways: It was clear and the boy could make out the tiles at the bottom, slowly shimmering as the water shifted idly.

He knew it was irrational, but being able to see the bottom made it seem like he could fall down there and not be able to get back up. If the water with pitch black then he wouldn’t be able to see and everything would be fine. Probably.

Allister wasn’t afraid of the dark, not really. It was almost comforting, like nature’s own unique wall to keep strangers away.

*Can’t exactly bring a load of black food colourin’ and tip that in, can I? Nessa would probably hate me if she doesn’t already.*

The woman in question had been surprised by his call, but had accepted his request immediately, finding it unthinkable that someone she knew didn’t know how to swim.

He just…hadn’t ever learned.

*When Bea first found out…she was surprised too.*

*‘How can you be like that? Didn’t your parents ever teach you? Irresponsible of them.’*

*‘I don’t…they’re not around anymore’.*

It had been years and he still felt guilty. She wasn’t to know. Back when she was still living with her own parents, her tact had been far less than it was now and stunning her into silence wasn’t an easy feat.

He’d managed it, and she’d disappeared for the rest of the day before coming to apologise.

Nessa on the other hand, knew none of the story and Allister intended to keep it that way if possible. He’d handed the phone over to Bea after he was done stuttering so she could work out the finer details for him.

Allister surveyed the Hulbury gym swimming pools, keeping a safe distance back from the edge of the water. White tile as far as he could see, the place was nearly as large as the stadium at ground level.

Several lanes marked out with line floaters, diving boards, metre and angle markings on the walls for the technically minded, it was a swimmer’s paradise. Apparently. Allister didn’t know a whole lot about swimming (though that was to be expected).

All underground and heated, separate from the recesses used for the gym challenge, they were the ideal teaching grounds.

“That’s what…Nessa said on…the phone. Hope she’s right.”

“Heyo Allister, are you changed?”

“G-gah!” What was it today with people being able to sneak up on him? Nessa took a step back, though her face was an even smile.

“My bad, Bea did mention I should announce myself and all that.”

“It’s…alright…’m changed.”
Nessa looked him up and down. Though he was wearing a lilac pair of swim shorts, he’d put on a different t-shirt (also purple), and was still wearing his mask.

*Just go with it.* Nessa recalled her fellow gym leader’s words and figured it was worth a shot.

“If it works for you, then it works for me. Let’s get to it!”

Her words echoed around the cavernous space.

*Sure. I can do this. Not like I want to run away or anything.*

“Follow me,” she proclaimed, ignoring the silence. Allister continued to give his best Whismur impression and did his best to keep up with Nessa’s long strides as they rounded the pool.

*The shallow end. Not so bad…I guess.*

“Sit,” Nessa stated simply, petitioning him to copy her movements; he watched as she sat down at the pool’s edge, dangling her legs over.

“You…don’t w-want me…to get in?”

“Nah, not right now. Just sit at the edge with me.” Nessa patted the (thank fully dry) tiles next to her, so Allister obliged after another hesitation.

He’d already guessed the water was warm but it was still a pleasant surprise.

“…”

“I’m not gonna throw you in at the deep end, either literally or metaphorically. That’s soooo not how this works.”

“…How does this work?” Allister asked, putting special emphasis on ‘this’. He really wasn’t sure what ‘this’ was supposed to be. Was he swimming or not?

“We’re just gonna sit here and get you used to things.”

“Things?”

“The water,” Nessa clarified, sweeping some of hair away from her shoulders. “If you haven’t swam before then getting you acquainted is best.”

“…G-guess that makes s-sense. Is it t-true th-that you can get cramps from eatin’ t-too soon to swimmin’?”

“Total myth,” Nessa replied without hesitation. “I think it started to stop people getting crumbs and trash in the water. Quite right.”

“O-oh…” The one solid thing Allister thought he knew about swimming wasn’t even true.

“Yeah, no worries if you believed it. I think they’re still teaching it in schools.”

“Th-they do.”

Allister remembered as much from his form tutor and various PSA posters urging people of the dangers. The non-existent dangers, apparently.
“I make it my business to educate people, but some people are way more set in their ways than I can change. Block heads.”

“H-huh?”

“Not you, Allister, you’re cool.”

“Oh…thanks…you’re k-kinda cool too.”

“Well,” Nessa said raising an eyebrow. “I’m gonna have to work to get better than ‘kinda’ aren’t I?”

“…”

“I’m not serious, got any more questions?”

“Acquainted?”

“Hmm?”

“S-sorry…I’m askin’ a lot of questions…”

Nessa shook her head, looking the now sitting boy up and down again.

“I did just ask if you had any.”

He was clearly uneasy just being near to the pool, but he was also trying his best. Her instincts told her more was at play than Bea had let on, but said nothing.

Curiosity had its time and place, and right now she was a teacher not a pushy journalist.

*And I’ll be the best damn teacher in the whole of Galar. If he thinks I’m the best then I’ll prove that I’m worth it!*  

“No shame in that, you’re not going to be an expert on swimming if you don’t know how to swim!”

“I…guess.

“So what’s your question, Allister?”

“I…it’s j-just kinda odd…I guess.”

“Odd?”

“Acquainted. You t-talked…about the water…like it’s a person? Like it’s alive. I dunno…”

“Oho, I get you now! Hulbury folk have always had an intimate relationship with the sea, writing shanties and ballads about harsh storms and lover’s lost. It’s a real cultural deal and overtime it’s just become part of us to think of the water as its own thing. Like…” She grasped at the air, trying to think of a phrase he’d be able to relate to. “…oh, like Mother Nature. Bea says you like to go exploring, right?”

“Y-yeah?”

“It’s like that, the sea’s got a personality all of its own. Like, you respect it and it’ll respect you.
That make sense?"

“Kinda… I s’pose.”

Allister kicked his legs back and forth, watching the ripples form and disappear. Nessa noticed, having expected as much.

“See that? That’s a natural response to being in water. You’re already getting the hang of it.”

“I mean…I haven’t swum a-anywhere yet.”

“There’s more to swimming than swimming.”

“…”

“…”

“…I’m confused.”

“Yeah, maybe I could’ve explained that a little better.” Nessa laughed at her choice of wording. “I just meant there’s more than just the motions.”

“Like… painting?”

“Hey yeah! Just like that!” Nessa strongly wished she could give him a hearty pat on the back, but she figured it wouldn’t end well. Being a hands-on kind of person did mean you had to watch what you were doing.

“Y-you can do the m-motions…but if you d-don’t have a goal you’ll end up with a stick figure.”

“Nicely put, you’re a smart kid, Allister! Couldn’t ‘ve put it better myself.”

“B-better than ‘there’s more t-to swimming than s-swimming?”

If Allister’s mask hadn’t have been hiding his features Nessa would have bet money that he was blushing. Maybe she still would if anyone else had been present.

His voice had been so shy and quiet yet it belied a certain wit. Charm almost. It was endearing enough that she had to restrain herself against patting him again.

Bea’s a lucky son of a… I get why they get on so well now.

“Tch let’s forget about that, wise guy.”

“A-alright… um… wh-why do y-you swim then? If we’re g-gonna do g-goals n’ stuff.”

“Ah… an excellent question. My family’s always been close to the water, ever since I was a tyke.”

Allister watched as Nessa lost herself in the memories, legs kicking back and forth rhythmically.

She’s almost touchin’ the floor of the pool just sittin’ down. How tall is she? Taller than Bea by a mile for sure.

“Everyone in Hulbury is a swimmer, that’s just how things are. We’re practically born in the water!” She emphasised the point by kicking a wave of water out; Allister locked his eyes onto it as it faded well before reaching the halfway point.
She didn’t even bothered to slip her sandals off gettin’ in. Guess those life ring thingies are just for show then.

“…But why do you like swimming?”

“Well…I suppose I just wanted to be the best at something,” Nessa said at length. “Being a trainer is one thing, but to have crowds of people adoring you because of your form, and the raw power and speed of you and you alone, no support from a Pokémon…it’s exhilarating.”

She exhaled deeply, rubbing her eyes.

“Don’t copy me,” she warned. “Don’t be tempted to rub your eyes in saltwater. I’m used to it but you’ll go red, mask or not. That’s my one solid lesson for today.”

“The pool…is salty? But…it’s indoors…?”

“True, but I like it to mimic the outside as much as possible.”

“…Makes s-sense.”

“Thanks.”

“…”

“…And don’t tell Sonia what I said about ‘crowds adoring your form’.” Nessa pouted, hoping Allister would get the message. He didn’t have a discernible reaction; Nessa sighed again. “I get enough lip about my vanity as is!”

“O-oh…sure. Not sure…how likely it i-is I’ll run in t’ her.”

“It’ll give me piece of mind, that’s all, don’t worry.”

“I can relate to worrying ‘bout things that aren’t super likely…so y-yeah…okay.”

“Fantastic!” The sudden change in volume startled him slightly, the echoes catching Allister off guard. “Oh…yeah sorry about that. Bea did advise against that too.”

“S’alright. Mistakes…are allowed?”

“Hey that’s my line. Who’s the teacher here anyway?”

“…I…”

“You don’t have to answer that. But yeah, I’ve always felt more at home swimming than running. More freedom of movement.” Nessa slipped herself into the water effortlessly. “Funny, my parents say that all the time. They were swimmers even before they came to Galar.”

Allister didn’t know why he was surprised to hear that. Maybe it was just because Nessa seemed so…natural? Like she really had a place in the world, like she fit. He had to remind himself that he did as well, but she didn’t seem to need reminding at all.

“Ah, you’re curious?”

“Is it th-that…obvious?”

“Little bit, but that’s alright. Wouldn’t have brought up if I minded!”
At her full height Nessa was still taller than he was, even sitting while she stood in the shallows.

Wonder if that’s why Bea puts on those wooden platform sandals when they’re together?

“My parents came from Hoenn, just like Kabu. They’re actually super big fans of his ‘cos of that. They wanted a fresh start and Galar seemed the way to go. Settled down, got into fishing and selling, and bam…here I am.”

“Huh…thought there w-was gonna be more to it…” Allister bobbed his head, losing himself in thought.

He sounded almost wistful to Nessa; it was interesting.

“Cheer up, Allister! Not every story needs to have some crazy goings on! Just people living out their lives is crazy enough sometimes.”

“…That’s an ace way of l-lookin’ at it!” Allister nodded again, firmer this time. “A-alright, s-so I just get in like you d-did and…”

“Whoa there! You gotta tell me why you want to learn the ways of the water now!”

“Aww, what?” Nessa could feel the pout even with his face concealed. “D-do I really gotta say?” She nodded insistently.

“That’s my rule. There’s a lot of different types of swimming and I’m not gonna know how to teach you if you don’t say.”

“Types?”

“Yeah! Leisure, fitness, endurance, flexibility, warming up, cooling down, synchronised dancing…” Nessa listed the options off one by one on her fingers.

“Can I j-just have…survival?”

“Oh…thought that was a given.” Nessa furrowed her brow, reminding herself that not everyone grew up where she did, and not everyone had the sea in their blood. “Guess not, we can do survival! Still, any particular reason? Why did you decide now?”

“Oh…w-well…u-ummm…”

For the umpteenth time Allister found himself glad of the protection his mask afforded him. He never knew where to look when he got embarrassed, but people didn’t need to know that.

True, he did like to obsess about things that weren’t at all important, but it was either that or a sensory cascade. His masks were an excellent way for him to be able look at people and read facial clues without having to commit to anything himself.

“I see, I know that look.”

“Y-you d-do?”

So much for that.

“Girl, right?”

“Sh-shhhh! Not s-so loud!”
If Nessa’s raised eyebrows were anything to go by, then miffed would’ve been a good word to describe her expression.

“There’s…only us here?” The water trainer exaggerated her motions as she looked around, sending ripples out to the edge of the pool. “I checked and made sure none of my trainers would be barging in on us. We’re cool.”

“I-I know…b-but still you got it im-immediately!”

“Hey, when you’ve got eyes on you most of the time, you get a feel for how people are looking at you. Especially when your gym has a lot of skin showing and you get all of these hotshot ‘trainers’ who just come into ogle your stuff,” Nessa grumbled, recalling all of the people she’d had to kick out over the seasons. “So yeah, I know when feelings like that are in play.”

“………I can’t believe…you got it so quick like…ughhh.” Allister raised his head, finally meeting his partner’s eye for once. “I kept that from m’ sis for so l-long and you g-got it in minutes! H-how does that work?”

“Ohoho, I should’ve known!” Nessa stifled the rest of her laugh, finding the scenario more than a little amusing. “Your sister is many things, Allister. An expert on relationships isn’t one of them.”

“…I guess…”

“Hey, not for lack of offers mind you!” So much for hiding her grin, Nessa couldn’t help it, it was just too pure. “I’ve nearly lost some of my trainers to her before! Many people have tried to get into her heart before.”

“…Some of y-your trainers t-ried to…transfer to Stow-on-Side?”

“Sure did. Bea turned every one of them down, same as everyone else. She’s just not interested, and more power to her! She knows what she wants and a relationship isn’t one of them.”

“Sounds like sis.”

“To a T. Still, it means she can miss some obvious cues.” Nessa pointed down to Allister’s fidgeting hands; he consciously stopped, having not even realised he’d started.

“I fidget a l-lot anyway!” Allister threw his hands into the air, exasperated. “Wh-whatever, y-you’re good…I’ll give you that…”

“Thanks, wise guy. You’re right, enough of that for now.”

Nessa took a step backwards, lifting her legs up to tread water (though Allister could tell it was a purposeful effort as she was still in range of the pool bottom by a wide margin.

“So this girl, you want to learn to swim for her? Why?”

“She’s f-from Alola,” Allister explained, having his restless hands return as he did so. “L-lots of water…around. D-don’t w-wanna die when we s-see each other.”

“You haven’t met yet?” Allister shook his head.

Nessa shouldn’t have been surprised. Most of the gym leaders barely saw Allister as it was, some even going months without seeing him at all.

Piers in particular noted his record to be about 7, but that was neither here nor there as he tended to
avoid the league on principle.

The only indication that Stow-on-Side even had a dual gym leader system was the change in light colour when it was Allister’s turn to take challengers. The harsh burnt umber becoming a more subdued, almost spectral indigo.

Nessa figured that was the point.

“Met online…she’s s-super cool. W-we’re gonna…face-call soon…”

“You’ve not even videocalled? She must be something really special then!”

“She l-likes ghosts n’ everythin’! She’s a t-trial captain but also a-a-an elite 4 member!”

Nessa kept her face even. That was certainly unexpected. Alola hadn’t even had their own league until a few years ago.

If she was around Allister’s age then his friend had to be fairly young. Young gym leaders weren’t unheard of, Allister was a case in point. Her parents had spoken of a pair even younger than him back in Hoenn, but a young elite 4 member…it was almost unheard of!

“She sounds like the real deal, Allister. A strong trainer just like you!”

“S-sure, I guess…”

“Let’s not sell yourself short, Galar has one of the most competitive Leagues in the world! Maybe even the most! We have the Champion cup instead of an Elite 4 and Raihan’s easily strong enough to be another region’s champion. You’ve gotta earn your place here, and you have.”

“…Forged in fire, weathered by wind…”

“Hmm?” Nessa had almost missed the boy’s words, and that was saying something considering the proximity between them.

“O-oh! Jus’ somethin’ Bea says sometimes.”

“She’s got the right idea. You know Raihan’s got Alolan heritage too?”

“Really? H-huh…makes sense I s’pose.”

“Hey, between you and me…” Nessa stage whispered, leaning in. “…I think your friend is cooler than him!”

The sound of Allister’s laugh was a lovely sound indeed, she decided.

“Y-you can’t b-be serious! Y-you d-don’t even know her!”

“True. Raihan’s a good mate but he can be a right pain in the…anyway.” Nessa trailed off, not sure where Allister was at with his ‘extended adult vocabulary’. “Let’s get to it.”

Nessa cleared her throat slightly louder than was necessary, catching Allister’s attention once more.

“I, Nessa, Hulbury gym leader, do pledge to make sure you don’t drown when visiting your friend!”

“…Thanks? W-weird w-way of puttin’ it. I d-don’t wanna die like that.”
“Apparently it’s very peaceful...yeah we’re not gonna go there.” Nessa cut herself off a second time, not wanting to spook her pupil before they’d even begun. “Okay, let’s get you in the water.”

“W-wait...right now?”

*Saw that one coming.*

“Right now,” Nessa agreed. “You’ve actually been learning from me a while now.”

“I...have?”

“You have. I started treading water a while ago and you’ve been watching what I’ve been doing while we were talking. It’s starting to imprint on you.”

“That...makes a wh-whole lot of s-sense! Cool!”

“Great to hear. Now, can you get in the water by yourself?”

“Actually, I was hopin’...you could h-help?” The fidgeting was back in full force. “I don’t wanna fall and not be able to stand right.”

“I...hmm...you know I’d have to come into contact with you to do that?” Nessa surveyed the nervous boy, unsure of how to proceed. “Are you okay with me touching you? Bea said...it might be difficult.”

“N-nah...as l-long as...I...um...have warnin’ and all. I’ll be...fine.” Nessa wanted to believe that was true. If it wasn’t and he struggled there was a very real possibility she could drop him.

That was a road they really didn’t need to go down. She’d taught people with anxiety issues before, those with nerve damage, and those with more severe forms of learning disability were no obstacle either.

People came to her for a reason, vanity aside. She was the best.

She knew CPR and first aid like the back of her hands, so that wasn’t it; the real problem was she’d need to remove his mask...and that was definitely a no.

Nessa eyed it, wondering what he could possibly need such a thing for.

*There’s anxiety...and there’s this. It must be pretty severe if he won’t go outside without it. Does he shower with it on too?*

“I...okay, here’s what we’re gonna do.” Nessa moved herself opposite the sitting gym leader, making sure her hands were where he could see them. “I’m gonna place my hands around your waist on the count of three, and you’re gonna grab onto me, okay?”

“I can...do that.”

“Good. One, two, three.” Even with the countdown and slow deliberate motions, Allister flinched considerably on having the water type leader’s skin against his; foreign sensations were always taxing.

Nessa did her best to not flinch on reflex, instead keeping an easy smile on her face in the hopes it would reassure him everything was natural. It took a minute, but it worked, and Allister slowly took hold of Nessa’s arms, awaiting further instructions.
“You’re doing great. Now, I’m gonna lift you up slightly then put you down next to me. Stand up straight and we’re in the shallows so your head and chest won’t go under. No danger. You got it?”

“I get it. R-ready as I’ll ever be…”

“You’re totally ready, you got this, wise guy! One, two, three.” In a singular fluid motion, Allister found himself standing exactly where Nessa had promised. He was in the water.

Making sure he was steady before she let go, Nessa put some distance between them (though still easily in arm’s reach should anything go awry).

“If you fall, I’ll catch you waaaay before your head gets wet. You’re in no danger with me, Allister.”

“I…wow…this f-feels…it’s odd.” It was like an electric current was rooting him in place. Allister stood stock still though his head pivoted occasionally, following a favourite ripple or two.

When had he started to have favourite ripples?

“See, it ain’t so bad!”

“F-floor…it’s…ewww.”

“Eww? Damn, kid, I try and keep this place clean and all but…”

“N-no th-that’s not it…p-promise.”

“I’m joshing, what’s up?”

“Umm…floor…sl-slimy?”

“Huh? Oh!” The proverbial lightbulb went off in the water type leader’s head. “You’re not used to standing on wet tiles like that. Big difference between a wet bathroom floor and a pool, right?”

Standing like he was bolted to the ground made a lot more sense now. Allister was afraid of slipping.

Duh, of course! He’s hardly gonna start ice-skating around is he?

“That’s a natural response, don’t worry. Your body needs time to adjust to the new sensation is all. You don’t even need to move, just stand in place for me, okay?”

“O-okay…can do that…” He said slowly. “This…is…so weird.”
Allister wasn’t in the habit of taking baths, Bea’s family were very conscious of water conservation among other things, and he didn’t remember enough about his past life to really say how he’d bathed.

It just wasn’t a thing one usually thought about. Definitely not enough to retain over other, more impactful memories.

“Hey, you’re doing it though! You, Allister, are standing in a pool, not drowning!”

It had all happened so fast Allister hadn’t even pieced it together. He was doing it. He was doing!

“I’m doin’ it!” It was an excited shout to be sure, the sounds of a boy who’d forgotten just how echoey a large room could be. “O-oh…m’ bad…”

“It’s cool, Allister. Just us here, remember? Yell as much as you want, you earned it, hotshot!”
“...H-heh...alright. I’M NOT DYIN’!’”

A little morbid, but he’s got the spirit. I can appreciate that, he really pushed himself out of his comfort zone. Whatever that is...doesn’t he sleep in the woods sometimes?

It was strange to Nessa that Allister would be fine with exploring graveyards in the dead of night, but object to swimming in a pool.

Each to their own. He seems happy doing what he’s doing.

Allister had gotten over the initial shock ever so slightly and was making ripples with his arms over the water’s surface. A simple pleasure for a simple pastime.

“See, not so bad, right?” In response Allister’s arms fell back to his sides, slipping into the water.

“I…yeah…”

“Something on your mind?”

“…..Promise y-you won’t get mad...if I say?”

“Promise.” Nessa placed a hand over her heart. “We’re all accepting here in Hulbury.”

“...T-trying to call you…was more...scary,” Allister admitted, careful to not lose his already shaky balance.

“Calling me was scary? Yeah I can see that.”

“R-really? Oh...” Allister jumped slightly, though thankfully still no slipping. “I thought you’d...get mad or somethin’.”

“Sure, I’ve got quite an image. Stern but poised, and all that. No sweat, hotshot.”

“…..Should I start kicking my legs around then?”

“Nope, I think you’ve made enough progress honestly. Just getting you in the water was a big step. You can tread water next time, how about that?”

Nessa was genuinely proud, no lie. To an outsider it may have just been a kid taking their first steps, but physical steps didn’t even factor in. All of the mental framework was starting to come together for a roaring success story.

“N-next time...y-yeah, okay!”

The thought of there even being a next time had seemed a world away when he’d started the day. Now it was a natural second step in his journey to not sink like a brick.

“Sounds like you’re enjoying this! I knew you had it in you.”

“I...didn’t. G-glad to be wrong f-for once!”

Sinkin’ stinks. I’m not gonna sink never!
We jump back on the fluff train for this chapter, I do hope you had a good time ^_^ 

So it turns out an artist by the name ‘Chikuseren’ actually went and drew the most beautiful fanart I've ever seen! With their permission I've embedded it into the work at the end of chapter 7, so please do check it out and give them your thanks on Twitter! https://twitter.com/Chikuseren/status/1217866394055905280?s=19

I'm seriously blown away, and I can't thank them enough. I was a wuss and went and cried slightly. Sketchione isn't made of rock, who knew?

P.S. Bea's sandles are from the new promo art of Twilight Wings episode 2! Figured it was worth a mention, now that her and Allister (among others) have voice actors/actresses for it.
Winds of Change

Chapter Summary

All Bea wants to do is relax after a tough day training, but predictably there's another trial to be had before the day is done. The nature of which is entirely unpredictable...such is the nature of ghost types.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Wow, now that was quite a workout!”

Bea assumed she made for quite the spectacle, walking back through the Stow-on-Side market in the state she was in.

_Eh, they’re probably used to this by now. It’s not like it’s the first time I’ve trained all day. Not by a long shot!_

White shirt brown with dust, sweat marks littering the rest of clothes any time she turned her head, and her hair itself not unlike a scarecrow with the way it had frizzed up; truly a sight to behold for a non-local.

That combined with the ragged breathing and team of Pokémon trailing behind her got people to quickly stand aside.

While Bea would normally dislike being treated as ‘above’ a normal citizen, when she fresh out of the training mindset it was nice to not be blocked or harassed.

“You guys all did great today. I’m proud to be your trainer.”

A chorus of tired, but enthusiastic cries from her weary team was all the motivation she needed. Most of the voices were carried away on the wind, but they could tell Bea had heard.

Machamp was carrying both her Machoke and Machop in its arms, steadfast despite her own fatigue. Pangoro was less happy to have Hitmontop balancing on its head but had long since conceded over the years that his friend was more suited to spinning than walking.

Even Hawlucha had forgone trying to fly for now and walked in step with its trainer.

“Let’s get you to the Pokémon Center. You can have tomorrow off. I’ll take the rest of my team out then.”

“Mach…champ?”

“I’m not pushing myself too hard, don’t worry.”

Bea had seen that coming a mile away. Machamp might’ve been a muscle-bound martial arts expert but it still had a heart.
Like me I suppose? I’ll need a lot of training to get muscles like that, though.

“If we want to beat Leon or move our gym up in the rankings then we have to train harder,” she said simply. “Maybe we should stay in the wild area overnight next time?”

Machamp sighed, doing her best to tune out Bea’s chiding to her fellow Pokémon’s protestations.

“It’s just an idea, Pangoro, I know that tone. If you don’t want to come you don’t have to. I haven’t made up my mind yet.”

It was a tone that entirely screamed that she had but they weren’t going to try and persuade her away from it. When their trainer’s mind got like this it was easier to move mountains.

If only Bea trained rock types. Maybe she could have a Tyranitar to do that for her?

As she readjusted her fellow Superpower Pokémon, Machamp eventually conceded that things weren’t nearly as harsh as they used to be. Getting Bea to change her mind about anything was near impossible in days gone by. Now…

It’s that boy…her brother. I don’t know how he does it, but it calms her. It’s strange.

Family wasn’t an alien concept by any means to Pokémon, but direct parallels were hard to draw. Still, whatever Allister did just by existing then Machamp was ever grateful for it.

She’s been happier ever since he showed up. Even if losing to the Champion hardens her mind for the time being, it won’t stay that way indefinitely.

“But for now let’s rest, it’s getting kind of late.”

Right on cue.

The fighting type leader and her team continued their trek back home, the umbrella’s lining the various stalls no longer the only source of shade as the shadows continued to lengthen.

Stow-on-Side during twilight hours was a sight to behold. Perhaps it was the natural orange of the surrounding rocks but the entire town almost seemed to shimmer slightly in the dying light. Like a slow, disorganized mess of a dance that slowly came to a standstill.

Allister had said there was a rhythm to the way things moved but it was beyond Bea’s scope of understanding. She wouldn’t say he was wrong, far from it, just the concept didn’t click was all.

“Hey gym leader!”

Bea turned, finding the little girl who ran the flower stall was waving her over. She didn’t think it was warranted, the loss to Leon still weighing heavily on her, but the girl considered her a role model of sorts.

It wasn’t uncommon for gym leaders to inspire those around them so Bea obliged, taking with her the solace that victory or failure were never the end of anyone’s journey. She could yet inspire a younger generation, and the wide eyes of the girl before her were proof of that.

“Hi, what’s up?” Bea asked, trying to not let the weariness creep into her voice. “Was your business good today?”

“It was pretty okay…” The girl frowned, jerking a thumb to the Pokémon behind her. “Wish my uncle’s Maractus would actually do somethin’ for once!”
The Pokémon in question was still lazing about, though on closer inspection it had in fact fallen asleep at some point in the afternoon gone; Bea surmised she’d not wanted to prick a finger trying to wake it.

_I don’t think I’ve ever seen a Pokémon so lazy. No wonder the Pokéjob market here is booming._

“Heh, want me to have one of my team use Wakeup Slap on it?”

“Naw, it’s not gonna learn nothin’ if it doesn’t do it itself, but thanks!” The toothy grin Bea received was adorable, but smiling in return would take more energy (both physical and mental) than she had to give, so a raised eyebrow was the only thing the girl got in return.

“Wise words. I say that to my brother sometimes.”

“That’s actually kinda why I called you here!”

“Oh?” Now Bea’s attention had been grabbed, the rest of her team gathering around her as well.

“Yeah! I haven’t seen your bro all day, just thought I let ya know.”

Bea looked over her shoulder to the building opposite. The tin roof overhanging the plaza was Allister’s favourite spot to hang out in the entire town, apparently being the best viewing spot for the canyon below. The angle the flower shop was at gave anyone who stood there a good view of it, so the girl often saw him no doubt.

“…All day?” The girl nodded emphatically, bun bouncing up and down. “Well, that isn’t unheard of. My brother has a changeable mind. He gets distracted easily.”

“Oh totally, just thought I should let ya know is all. Weather’s been good today and I thought he’d be here about now.”

“…Thanks for letting me know. I’ll see what’s happening.”

Bea left the stall, more awake than when she’d left.

_He’s fine, right? He’s probably fine. He doesn’t always go to that EXACT roof. He might be in the Tangle again? Maybe he got back late from his swimming lessons?_

“He’s fine right?” Bea asked over her shoulder. Her team didn’t commit to any one answer, averting their eyes. “Yeah…sorry, that isn’t fair of me to put on you. Let’s just get the Pokémon center.” Bea huffed, retightening the bow at her waist.

_It’s my job to watch out for him, feeling a little anxious is natural._

“He’s probably fine.”

The available evidence over the years was absolutely weighed to the contrary, but Bea wasn’t going to let that shake her optimism. Or maybe she was just exhausted and wanted a hot shower?

“G-gah!!”

Of all the things Bea had expected to find when she entered the house, an entire team of Pokémon staring her down wasn’t one of them. Not just any team, but Allister’s team. Ghost types.

Bea did her best to be unmoved by the display, knowing it was only going to make things worse.
Allister’s team could always tell how to press her buttons despite her best efforts.

It was a tiresome cycle.

Gengar was floating around the kitchen, waving cheekily as it pretended over and over to knock things into the sink.

Bea was unimpressed. It would *threaten* to do many a thing but rarely would it follow through; it was mainly after her reactions if anything.

Cursola was perched on the coffee table with Polteageist, the former eyeing her warily and the latter pouring its innards out into another cup; Bea quickly snatched the cup away before another Sinistea was born. A raspberry was blown in her direction, Polteageist clearly labelling her a spoilsport.

Runerigus had assembled in front of the TV, though seemed to be searching behind it for something while Dusknoir simply folded its arms and observed her.

It was surreal having them all out at the same time, but Bea knew better than to show it on her face. Allister’s team and her had a strange relationship. They both cared for him deeply, that much was obvious. Just…in different ways.

“Come on, we’ve talked about this!” Bea lamented, the initial shock of 3 pairs of eyes all snapping to her (plus the singular eyes of Runerigus and Dusknoir) wearing off. “Two at a time, the house isn’t big enough for all of you!”

She was just thankful her own team had been recalled or getting inside at all would’ve been a problem; Gengar, being the defiant Pokémon it was, merely grinned at her and stuck its arm through the wall.

Bea was again unimpressed.

“Your point? Just because the walls don’t matter to you, doesn’t mean they don’t matter to me! Ugh.” Bea slicked her hair back, removing the headband. She was dearly regretting not using the showers at the Pokémon centre now, as clearly the florist girl had been on to something, if only by coincidence. “This is exactly why I got us a detached house. I can’t trust any of you to not go next-door and mess with people.”

A small tap on her head made her jump, Chandelure deciding to reveal itself from its lofty hiding spot. Bea went to bat it away but it quickly moved out of reach, making a hollow, raspy sound Bea had learned was akin to laughter.

“Honestly!”

Bea folded her arms, trying to appear imposing to the creatures before her. However when levitation is second nature to you (as is breaking the rules), it had little effect on the congregation.

If anything it encouraged them to act out, Cursola slowly turning the wood of the coffee table to rock, attracting Runerigus over. Dusknoir silently opened the mouth on its stomach and ingested whatever items Gengar had ‘appropriated’ from the kitchen area, including some of the tea from Polteageist.

“H-hey, we need those!” Bea exclaimed, watching the knives and forks vanish into the abyss. “Give those back right now!”
Gengar shook its head, frowning.

“What do you want from me?” She turned to face the Gripper Pokémon directly. “Dusknoir, you can’t even eat those, unless cutlery has souls. Back. Now.”

At the lack of response, Bea flipped her arms into the air and sighed, exasperated.

“I’ve had a long day and I don’t want to have to fight any of you.” Bea tapped at the pokéballs around her belt. “I will if I have to. Please, why are you all out and being such a nuisance? Where’s your trainer?”

“…” The room went silent.

While that was the hallmark of the ghost type, Bea couldn’t help but feel uneasy at the sudden drop in volume.

“…Where’s Allister?” Bea scanned the room, noting thankfully the table had returned to normal. “And for that matter where are Mimikyu and Mismagius? If you’re causing problems, they’re not ones to miss out.”

“Grehhh..erigus.” Runerigus gestured to the ceiling, Chandelure flying as high as it could go to illustrate.
“Up…stairs?”

The pokemon nodded in unison.

“They’re in his room?”

This time heads and bodies were shaken back and forth, Dusknoir deciding to disgorge the silverware onto the floor.

“You’re not making sense, are they here or aren’t they?”

Again, the Pokémon before her just pointed upwards.

“Fine, I’ll ask him myself then.” Bea made her way to the stairs, stomping more harshly than she meant to. “Try not to set the house on fire, please. Like I said…long day.”

Leaving the gathering behind, Bea’s head was racing. This was a completely unpredictable scenario by any stretch of her imagination. Why had Allister’s entire team decided to assemble?

Scratch that, where were Mimikyu and Mismagius during all this? Scratch that, why wasn’t her brother reigning them in?

Where is he?

“Allister? Alli? Are you up here?” Bea waited for a response, finding none. It was well past twilight now, but she deigned not to turn on the lights; startling her brother if he was upstairs was just going to complicate things.

Moving closer towards his room, Bea could just about hear something. A rustling of the covers and the creak of the bed. Something else caught her ear too. Straining them, it sounded almost like…

Sobbing.

Bea steeled herself, her tiredness giving way to the sisterly compassion she’d grown to love in its own right. The sound of her brother trying to suppress his crying into his pillow was heartbreaking, but a sister with broken heart wasn’t going to be able to help.

Alli, oh, Alli, what’s happened to you this time? I hope I can help…whatever it is.

“Alli?” Bea knocked on her brother’s door, with no response. Her hand went for the door handle but just was quickly slipped away. Intruding wasn’t the way things were going to be fixed. “If you want I can make you some cocoa?” She said quietly. “Have you eaten?”

“…”

“…I can come back in a bit if you like?”

“D-don’t go…please…” Allister voice was croaky, leading Bea to believe he’d been crying a while. ‘Can come…in…”

Bea slowly opened the door, finding Allister curled up on top of the bed head in his hands, still clothed. The window was open, cool air blowing and rustling the posters, with Mismagius swaying gently in time with the motions.

Allister’s Mismagius was hovering in front of him, guarding him as Bea had hoped it would; the
magical Pokémon nodded when it saw her, floating to the side to grant her access.

Allister was still sobbing into his mask, the increase in volume telling Bea he’d been deliberately trying to hide it until she’d arrived.

Sitting down on the desk chair (carefully removing some of the spare masks that made their home there for today), Bea leaned forward onto the bed.

“Alli, what happened?”

A question such as ‘are you alright?’ was simply meaningless for the two of them, as had been for many years. Bea had learned to cut out the fat and be as direct as she could.

“…M……Mi………m…” Allister snorted heavily, an ugly wet sounding snivel that echoed around the small space.

Ah, and I used up all of my tissues during training today didn’t I? Ugh.

“Mimikyu?” Bea guessed, earning herself a tiny nod.

It made sense after all, Bea leaning back onto the desk. It was the only one of Allister’s team she had yet to see, which was odd considering its role as a support for him.

“Where is Mimikyu?”

“….G-go……gone………they’re…g-gone…”

“Gone? Gone where?”

“I dunno!” Allister snapped, immediately regretting having done so. “S-sorry……sor…ry…” He hunched himself over, turning his back to the chair. “Please…don’t be m-mad…at m-me.”

Bea listened to him repeat his mantra of ‘please don’t be mad at me’ a couple more times before intervening.

“I’m not mad, Alli. Not mad at all.”

“……I’m so…*sniff*…sorry…I’m sorry, Bea.”

“It’s okay, my brother. I’m just concerned for you. As always.” Bea lay her hand down on the bed, palm up; letting her brother decide whether to take it or not was a tried and tested technique.

He did, grasping it lightly, though still refused to roll back over.

Damp with tears.

“Can you tell me about your day? What happened before you got back?” If Bea was right then the events that had led to the current situation would arise organically.

“…”Spose so.” The voice was tiny, but it had Bea’s full attention as Allister relayed what had been going on while she was out training.

He’d gone to the gym to practice standing in front of so many people. Even when it wasn’t challenger season just staring at the rows and rows of endless empty seats was a little tough for him. This way, he didn’t have to feel so bad about having to leave if he got frightened at least.
Bea found herself very proud of him for coming up with that idea all on his own.

Then, he’d gone into the Glimmwood Tangle for a couple of hours and trailed around before seeing Sonia inspecting the Stow-on-Side Mural. When queried on whether he’d spoken to her, Allister declined, which made sense. A few messages to Acerola and another swimming lesson with Nessa had followed before Allister had realised Mimikyu hadn’t been with him.

His team assembling downstairs had been the result of a group effort to locate the Disguise Pokémon, but to no avail. Bea almost felt bad for assuming the worst of them. Almost.

“…a-and…s’not like M-M-Mimkyu doesn’t v-vanish…f-for long peri…ods, b-but th-they’re not anywhere!” Allister rolled over, pointing shakily to his hair spike. “I c-can’t find them e-even when p-projecting m’m’self!”

*That doesn’t seem right at all. Something’s definitely going on here.*

Bea didn’t pretend to know how exactly Allister’s abilities manifested themselves, but his ability to locate ghost types even when they weren’t visible was tried and tested too. His hair being a dowsing rod was cool, if she was being totally honest, so why wasn’t it working?

*Is Mimikyu so far away it doesn’t work? Is Mimikyu injured or lost somewhere?*

“I…*sniff*… just…w-want them…b-back.”

“I want them back too, Alli.” Bea made to place her hand on his arm in a gesture of reassurance, but to her shock it passed right through; her fingers grasped only the fabric below, and she quickly retracted it, confused.

“W-what was…noise, sis?”

“Nothing, Alli, just leaning back on the bed.”

*He didn’t see. His arm…for a second…I must be imagining things.*

Perhaps it was just that it was dark, but Bea could clearly see her brother’s arm, and it was very much a solid object when she tried for the second time.

*I really am burned out today. I must have just missed it all.*

“Alli.” Bea swallowed, hesitating. “I’m going to…get Mimikyu back for you.” At this Allister removed his mask, eyes wide and slack jawed.

“W-what? You…what?”

“I’ll find Mimikyu. I’ll even…take your team to help me search.”

“But sis…you h-hate ghost types…”

“I’ll be fine,” Bea reassured, though she wasn’t sure if it was more for her or him. “I don’t hate them…we just don’t see eye to eye all the time. I think with a shared goal we can be an effective team.”

“…Allister scanned his sister’s face, even in the gloom she betrayed nothing. “…Y’don’t have to…I can…when I’m feelin’ b-better.”

“I think finding Mimikyu will make you feel better, right?”
“Yeah b-but,”

“And you’re always telling me I should try to get on better with your ghost types,” she continued, trying to assuage his obvious doubts. Even when he was wracked with tears he was still conflicted; he was still connected to reality, even if his mind was wishing he wasn’t.

Why wouldn’t he be skeptical? Every time we’ve tried working together in the past it’s fallen apart.

“This will be a great opportunity for us to work on our differences, Alli,” Bea soothed, stroking the boy’s hair back and forth. “Let me do this, you’ve already had an exhausting day. You’ve been very active, haven’t you?”

Bea added the last statement to steer any accusations that she hadn’t been doing the same, if not more, in terms of activity than he had.

It had been part of her new years resolutions to never lie to him again, not after the problems it had caused, and she was making good on it. If he’d asked her then and there if her day was exhausting and did she want to rest, she’d have said ‘yes, but I want to help you too’.

Steering the conversation away before he could ask things like that wasn’t cheating, at least in her book. More…maintaining the peace.

Thankfully Allister seemed not to notice, holding his pillow close to his chest in place of Mimikyu.

“W-why w-would they go? Where…would th-they go?”

“I’m not sure, but I…”

Allister looked her dead in the eye and Bea trailed off.

“Did I do somethin’ wrong?”

Just how clearly he was able enunciate considering the amount of strain he was under took her aback, but Bea wasn’t to be shaken.

“Not on your life, Alli. Mimikyu loves you very much.”

“O-oh…I…know.” His voice made it very obvious to her that he’d been considering the opposite since before she’d entered the room.

“Listen Alli, you remember how Mimikyu and you met?”

“Mnhmm.”

Allister did remember, how could he forget? One of the best days of his life, no less, finding a Mimikyu in an abandoned Pokémon centre with its hoard of Pikachu related memorabilia. In that moment, in the dark and cold, they’d found solace with one another.

Knowing that the world may judge them entirely without merit if they were to drop their disguise, even for a moment.

Mimikyu had let itself into a duskball without any words exchanged and that had been that.

“Mimikyu wouldn’t leave you and I don’t think it has. Something’s…happened is all. I’m going to find out what, I promise.”
“Promise?”

“Promise.”

“Pinky promise?”

Bea raised her hand, sticking her smallest finger outward for him to latch on to.

“Pinky promise.” Allister looked back between her and the finger for a moment before stealing it away in his own slighter one.

“…Oh…kay…trust you…I g-guess. Please,” he mumbled, squeezing his eyes shut. “Find Mim-Mimikyu…please.”

“I’ll try my best, Alli.” Bea turned to Mismagius, standing to what equated to attention for something without any legs. “Mismagius, thank you for looking after my brother.” The magical Pokémon curtseyed, eyeing the boy on the bed with a degree of worry. “Please continue to watch over him. I’m taking the rest of Allister’s team to scour Stow-on-Side.”

“Mismag…misa-gaius?”

“She asked how you’re g-gonna communicate,” Allister murmured, reattaching his mask. “Without me…they probs w-won’t listen anyway…”

“We’ll…” Bea struggled to find the words. “We’ll make it work. We have a common goal, and I know they respect you so they should step in line.”

*That’s the theory anyway. My own team is far too tired to help after everything we did today. Even with a rest in the Pokémon Centre they still need regular relief as well. It’s healthier that way.*

Bea stood, mind made up.

“I’ll be back before you know it. Do you want anything before I go? Warm milk, yesterday’s leftovers?”

Allister shook his head slightly, mumbling his negatives into the pillow before curling up even further.

“Alright. See you both soon. Try to get some sleep, Alli.” Bea left the room as quietly as she’d entered, more confused than ever but with a concrete goal to follow.

*This really wasn’t how I expected this day to end. I’m running on empty but I can’t turn a blind eye for something like this.*

Allister’s team were still downstairs, no surprise there, though part of Bea hoped they would just vanish. Not the spooky, ghostly kind, just the regular kind where she didn’t have to deal with them. Her own team were disciplined and honourable, a far cry from the ragtag bunch that greeted her eye as she descended the stairs.

*Tolerance, Bea. Tolerance. If your brother can earn their respect and trust then so can you.*

“Hey…guys.”

Being ignored was about what she expected, a cursory glance from Cursola was the only indication she’d ever said anything. The rest continued to mingle, searching the house in the own way for Mimikyu.
Their actions make far more sense now. They need guidance though, or they’ll go around in circles forever.

“Continuing to search this place isn’t going to make Mimikyu appear, you know. If they weren’t here 5 minutes ago then why would they be here now?”

“Luuuuuuure…”

“Allister explained everything, so I know what you’re all doing now.” Bea bowed, though she wasn’t entirely sure why. “I’m sorry for judging you earlier.”

The Pokémon stopped, gazing curiously at her from their various resting places; that had gotten their attention at least.

“Look…I know we haven’t gotten along in the past but this is for your trainer, my brother. Just searching our home over and over won’t help. We need to coordinate ourselves properly and go outside to look.”

“Noioiorrarrrgh.”

“Tea, teageist!”

“I’m not your trainer, and I won’t pretend to be.”

Bea looked around the room, meeting each of Allister’s Pokémon’s eyes individually. Even if it sent tingles down her spine to do so, there wasn’t another way she going to assert herself to them or prove she was serious.

“Right now, however, you and I have something in common. If we all work together we can get Allister back to normal, okay? Just for a little while…let’s put aside the past, okay?”

Despite their standoffish demeanour (at least to her), the ghost types assembled did stop and consider the possibilities. Bea watched as the team conferred, seeing the dynamics she didn’t know even exist come to light.

Gengar, despite being Allister’s gigantamax, was not the leader type and much more at home with giving input where it was needed, rather than actively contributing. Flitting between the different arguments it would often settle on the most chaotic one, just to see what would happen.

Dusknoir filled that role for the group, an imposing and well-set build offering a much needed physicality that the others lacked. Some would say that Dusknoir were vicious, powerful threats to people and Pokémon alike given that they carried souls away to other worlds. Allister would disagree, finding it a dependable ally.

The statements about its ‘soul stealing’ were vastly overblown anyway.

Runerigus was more of a thinker than a doer, though took pride in its wiry yet solid frame that gave it the best of both worlds. Random twitches to its limbs as its past lives resurfaced would plague it, and keeping it under wraps when it was trying to think often gave it somewhat of a short temper. Not the most conducive to a civil discussion.

Chandelure too was content to be a background character, though it found the hollow energy that Dusknoir would give off occasionally to be unsettling, even among the ghost types. Lack of an internal flame wasn’t an attractive trait, so any decisions tended to be against rather than for the majority.
Polteageist and Cursola came as a pair, Allister often swapping between them depending on who he needed for his matches.

Polteageist was a kind soul, often allowing Allister to sample some of its prized tea should he wish (though it was a rarely accepted offer due to the inherent bitterness), playing off of the equally bitter Cursola as it watched the world around it turn its beloved ocean into a cesspool of litter.

They played off each other rather well despite that, Polteageist curbing the violent tendencies of its friend, and Cursola providing stability when none could be found.

In spite of their differences, from their point of view one thing was for certain: Bea was a stick in the mud who didn’t know how to have fun.

Their sort of fun, the sort with ghostly pranks of course, were the best kind! But no, that always got them in trouble around her, which naturally made them want to do it even more. See who could rile her up the most.

Some out of spite, like Runergius and Cursola, and some more playfully like Polteageist and Gengar, but all agreeing that teasing the fighting type leader was one of life’s (or the absence of life’s) great pleasures.

Gengar snickered to itself, knowing that it held the honour. Replacing the doormat with slugs was a genius idea if it did think so itself, at the cost of Bea threatening to have it shipped all the way to Kanto in response.

And I’d do it again.

Bea watched as the back and forth continued, beating back her rising anxiety with a sharp and pointed mental stick.

She didn’t want to rush them, let alone tell her brother, but anyone that went missing had a far higher chance of being found the closer to the time it was that they went missing. In other words, time was of the essence.

“So…uh…you guys make a decision yet? It’s dark outside…”

Only earning herself the stink eye from Cursola, the debate continued back and forth. Dusknoir, Chandelure, and Polteageist for, and Runerigus and Cursola against, with Gengar not reaching a solid conclusion.

Even with Gengar abstaining, the democracy had reached a semblance of an agreement: they’d at least attempt to work with their trainer’s sister to find their friend.

Mimikyu had always been the heart of their team, and whether certain members admitted it or not, the dynamic just wasn’t the same without them.

“Dusssssk.” Bea watched as Allister’s Dusknoir turned towards her, nodding slowly.

“You guys are going to help me?”

“Noir!”

“Sorry, I mean help Alli,” She corrected, bowing again. “Allister.”

A unison of nodding followed, some more enthusiastic than others Bea noted, but it was a win in
her book. Normally they’d just have blown her off without another sort, but then again this was no ordinary situation.

As they say, desperate times call for desperate measures. While Allister wasn’t dependent on Mimikyu per se, but the loss of his dearest support Pokémon had very clearly taken a severe hammer to his mental health.

*And in such a strange way too.*

Bea wracked her head, trying to think of anything at all that could have led to this; she just drew another set of blanks, no explanation seeming to make any sense.

*Well it had to disappear for a reason. This wasn’t just a whim, was it?*

“Do any of you learn Foresight?” Bea suddenly asked, the proverbial lightbulb igniting. Her face quickly turned to dismay as the room grumbled in annoyance at her obvious question.

Dusknoir raised its hand briefly before folding its arms, glowering at her; Bea smacked her head in annoyance.

“Right, of course…that was probably the first thing you tried, wasn’t it?”

“Dusss-ussk.”

“Sorry, I’m not all that familiar with your type. Allister always…well anyway, that’s what this is all about.”

Bea made her way to the door, motioning the ghosts to follow her.

“We’re not doing any good loitering around here. Let’s get to it.”

With emotions ranging from intrigue, to apathy, to annoyance, the team faded through the wall of Allister and Bea’s accommodation to meet the silence of a Stow-on-Side ready for bed.

“Ahh…all the stalls have gone. Guess we’re not asking anyone in town if they’ve seen Mimikyu.” Bea shrugged, watching Allister’s team fan out into the darkness. Chandelure was already perched on top of the nearest streetlamp, taking the light for itself.

“Who can we ask? Who’s going to be awa…ah. Well I suppose that makes sense.”

“Errgghigus…” The groan from Runerigus indicated it had already figured out what Bea was getting at. Or in this case, who.

“If anyone has seen anything, it’s going to be Cara Liss. She keeps the strangest hours.”

A collective groan this time, though Runerigus didn’t pass up the opportunity to join in for a second round of complaining. None of them cared much for the fossil reanimator on account of Allister finding her thousand-yard stare unsettling. The grin was a factor too, but the stare especially. Even Bea found herself swayed by it, and that was saying something.

“Come on, please? This is probably our best shot.”

Bea made off purposefully towards the cliffside, noting thankfully that Allister’s team was trailing behind her, if not begrudgingly.

“Oh and check out the rooftops and chimneys as we go, please. Gengar, Dusknoir, Polteageist on
the left, others on the right,” she directed, arms gesturing to the buildings around her. “You never know.”

It didn’t take all that long to reach the ‘base’ that Cara Liss had constructed, and still no Mimikyu.

Well if it was that easy I could go home and get to bed, damn the shower.

The ‘base’ if it could even be called that (Bea’s mental air quotations asserting themselves anytime the scientist came to mind) was very…modest; it was a lost easier to see without the fog hanging over them.

A singular tent with a laundry line outside, various machines and gizmos strewn out over the rock, and the occasional black patch where maintenance oil had been spilled. At the centre Cara Liss’s campfire was going strong, as always, the woman herself standing to greet them.

“Oh, a gym leader? And with so many Pokémon out. Now that’s exciting, huh?”

The scientist’s eyes lit up upon seeing so many strong Pokémon in one place; the wild ones that frequented the area around her weren’t even worth her time apparently.

“Hello Cara, may we speak with you for a moment?” She nodded simply, sitting as quickly as she’d stood up. Whatever was cooking over the fire demanded attention; Bea could tell Chandelure was thinking about taking the heat for itself but shot a warning look before anything could happen.

They were here to ask questions, not make enemies.

Bea would hesitate to admit it, but after what had happened with the fog and ice a few weeks ago, Cara Liss had gone up in her estimations. Not by much, mind you, but some.

“I…have you seen a Mimikyu today?”

“A Mimikyu? Cara Liss can’t say she has.” The scientist poked at the fire, scattering cinders onto the bare rock; they were quickly stolen by Polteageist for an interesting addition to its current brew.

Bea wrinkled her nose, mildly uncomfortable with the idea of drinking anything that effectively had dirt in it.

“Oh…I guess that makes sense.”

“It does?” Cara gave the gym leader (and then the team behind her) a quizzical once over.

“I mean, you barely move from your camp. Guess I was just…hoping for nothing.” Bea scuffed her foot across the rock, annoyed with herself. This had been the only port of call she’d thought about. Cara Liss always had a knack for knowing things she had no business knowing, unless the time called for it apparently.

“Are you trying to pull the wool over Cara Liss’s eyes? Or maybe my eyes need a check?” Cara adjusted her glasses, refocusing. “My prescription went out of date a couple of years ago.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“I mean I know my gym leaders, and I know Stow-on-Side has two. The ghost one and the not ghost one,” she explained, for some reason counting the two off on her fingers. “You’re not the ghost one but you’ve got lots of ghost with you. What’s the idea? Career path change? Cara Liss can relate to that.”
“What? No!” Of all the ways to phrase something, the scientist’s were always strange to her. “I’m helping my brother look for his missing Pokémon!”

“Oh, well good for you.”

“Good for…? No, not good for me! And do you even know our names?” Whether it was being unused to the influence of so many ghost types at once or just plain frustration, Bea found herself getting mildly annoyed at the woman’s antics.

“Sure I do.”

“…”

“…”

“…And they are?”

“Is it relevant?” Cara gave her a blank look, before returning to tending the fire.

“I… I suppose they’re not,” Bea relented. “Right now I’m only after information about a missing Mimikyu. You can call me Bean for all I care.”

“Okay.”

“No don’t…” Bea shook her head, conceding she’d walked right into that. The raspy, guttural sounds that passed for laughter from Allister’s team were just the icing on the cake. Bea shot them a death glare but lo and behold it just made it all the more amusing to them.

“Fine, I’m Bean then. Cara have you seen anything unusual today? Anything at all that might be linked to Mimikyu’s disappearance?”

In response Cara Liss turned away from the fire out towards the canyon. Night was well and truly upon them now, the gentle crackle of the fire providing a brief respite from the impending darkness. Although, Bea did have to admit, albeit it begrudgingly, that the faint ethereal glow of the ghost types was a minor boon. Aside from the obvious benefits of Chandelure existing anyway.

“Many things happen to me every day. Who can say what is and what isn’t strange?”

“Cara…”

“But today, I saw a flock of Mandibuzz overhead when they don’t usually fly this far north.” The scientist scored the ground with her poking stick, apparently ignorant of Bea’s impatience. “You know there aren’t any documented accounts of a male Mandibuzz sighting? Perhaps Cara Liss should have lured one down…”

The sight of the exhausting woman being pecked at, or maybe even carried off was a tantalising prospect.

“So Mimikyu could have been carried away by bird Pokémon? Sounds…believable.”

“I also had someone who claimed to be from town planning asking about my permit.”

“Your permit?”

“To stay here. Ridiculous of course!”
“You have one?”

“No, I’m not within the boundaries of Stow-on-Side.” Cara Liss tapped the side of her glasses with a smug grin. “Cara Liss was very careful to check that before she settled, Bean. 20 centimetres is 20 centimetres.”

“…” But it’s the weekend? Why would town planning even…oh who cares?! “Anything else?”

“I ate some sweets, tuned my favourite machines, nearly had my laundry fall into the canyon, and dug around for fossils. Then I started cooking this Basculin a Braviary threw away and then you showed up and started asking about…”

Bea held up a hand, pursing her lips.

“Alright I get it.”

“…Did the gym leader come to have some of the fish?”

“No,” Bea quickly refuted, brain too tired to bother processing the multitude of things wrong with the previous statements. “But thank you…I...appreciate the offer.”

“What can Cara Liss say?” She said, leaning back on the stony floor. “Generosity abounds in my camp.”

“Clearly.”

An idea struck her. It was a stupid idea, and probably not worth the paper it could have been written on…but an idea none-the-less. Right now those were in short supply.

“Cara, how did you nearly lose your laundry?”

“Oh that? Wind. I saw a dirty looking sheet blow by and assumed it was mine. Nope.” She popped her lips. “Everything accounted for.”

“…”

“Runeairrrigusss?”

Bea looked over her shoulder to find the Grudge Pokémon with a hand on its chin, the others in Allister’s team crowding around it.

“…You don’t think?”

“Airrrrigus!”

“Gen-gengengar!”

“Cursssso?”

“That has to be it!” Bea clapped her hands together. “Only explanation I can think of anyway.”

“Oh? Something to share with the rest of the class?”

“Ah? Ah!” It had only been a brief stretch of time but Bea had already forgotten that Cara Liss was beside her.
“Cara Liss likes a good solution even better than a good mystery. Do tell!”

“I think…if I’m right…you saw Mimikyu’s disguise blow by.”

“Oh, an interesting idea.” Cara was unwrapping the foil of her meal by now, the smell hitting Bea and Allister’s team all at once. Polteageist in particular had taken refuge behind Dusknoir’s solid body in the hopes of protecting its aroma.

*Oh sure, you’ll put cinders in there but fishy smells is where you draw the line? Well I suppose it is…it’s.*

Bea covered her mouth in what she hoped was a clandestine manner.

*Dear Arceus…how can she even...AGHHH!*

“Cara I’ll buy you food, I really don’t think you should eat that?”

“Why ever not?” A knife and fork that had materialised from nowhere were already being used to break the package open. “Nature delivers to me this bounty and you’d rather I eat tinned soup with artificial preservatives and added sugar?”

“Well I…”

The scientist shook her head.

“Living off the land grants you a healthy immune system! Worry not, upstanding gym leader. Cara Liss shall remember the offer fondly.”

 “…Ahem, as I was saying. I believe you saw Mimikyu’s sheet blow away, the winds from Stow-on-Side all blows in this direction.” Bea stopped, the full picture dawning on her. “And with Allister’s window open it must have blown away! That has to be it!”

She jumped to her feet, last surge of adrenaline carrying her.

“And Mimikyu knows that if anyone sees it they’ll get hurt! You hear all these stories about mysterious illnesses from looking under the cloak!”

“You do hear that. I always meant to test it.”

“So Allister’s Mimikyu dives out of the same window its sheet left by, hoping to catch it,” Bea continued, ignoring the scientist. “It wasn’t running away, it was scared of hurting us!” Bea turned to Allister’s team. “No wonder none of you can find it! Mimikyu has been hiding its energy deliberately until it got its disguise back!”

“Chann…ledelure?”

“Gar, gargar!” It seemed that Gengar was informing Chandelure that Bea’s proposition was indeed feasible, a good sign.

“A couple of rips it can just patch up…but losing the whole thing…” Bea cast her eyes once more into the dark below. “It must have been terrified,” she murmured. “It hasn’t come back because it hasn’t found it yet. The ravines here are enormous. I’m guessing its been searching all day! What do you all think?”

It was odd of her to look to Allister’s team for approval, but they knew the territory better than she did. They knew Mimikyu better than she did for that matter; another round of debate later and they
were all in agreement.

They were going to have to search the canyon and split up.

_Deeply wishing I was able to rest now. Oh the things I do for you, Alli. Maybe we should get some sticky tape or something to stop Mimikyu losing it next time?

“Come on, everyone,” Bea beckoned, gathering the assorted ghost types around her. “We’ve got a disguise to find.”

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_Wake up…Allister. Wake up._

“…………mnooo…five more……minutes.”

_It is time for you to get up. Don’t you agree?_

Allister’s eyes snapped open, only to be met with darkness. That wasn’t his sister’s voice…

“Wh-wha…?”

Nor was he in his room. The darkness was everywhere. All around, a void of nothing…a world of nothing. Stretching out as far as he could see…which was nowhere.

_My dear child…it is time to wake up. You must._

“I…I-I…” Try as he might, his arms were making lead feel like Farfetch’d feathers. “H-hello? Bea?”

It was pointless, Allister knew it was. He hated how this was always a shock to him. No matter how many times or how tightly he braced himself, this sensation was always torturous.

Allister shut his eyes tight, then reopened them. There was no difference. None at all. What was happening? Where was he? The air was frigid and dense, hanging over him like a wet blanket. Oppressive and scary, Allister didn’t enjoy it one bit. The fog from weeks ago had nothing on this.

_Perhaps I can…help you? Let me open your eyes for you then._

A freezing sensation lanced straight through his body, the scream dying on his lips. Allister closed his eyes. There was no pain, but there never needed to be. His mind _made_ it real while he was here. Every single time.

A silent scream lost to the dark.

A silent scream in the silent realm.

And…in the realm of Allister’s nightmares, Allister’s body was unconscious long before it ever hit the floor.

_Your mind is beyond that of a walled garden. Even death cannot touch the flowers blooming there._
Chapter End Notes

Full disclosure, I was 90% sure that the second Twilight Wings episode was going to feature Bea so I deliberately held back the release of this to accommodate. I'm so glad I did, it was incredible! I don't know why I was so sure, but hey there we go.

Also not to pat myself on the back too hard, but I totally predicted Bea training in the wild area with Machamp in chapter 8, even being by the waterside for part of it! That and trying to move past a rockslide and having to find another way around, I'm clearly a psychic, and not the recipient of an lucky coincidence ^_^

This chapter is odd, and it was written to be just so. Shoutouts to CalculatingMinutiae for Cara Liss sneaking her way back in. Couldn't resist!

More giftart has been embedded in chapters 8 and 9, so send your love the creators! Also don't be a wuss like me and cry.

P.S. Cold Night, Winter's Light, has seen a minor update specifically in the Gordie, and Gordie and Allister chapters courtesy of user Bombcollar pointing some things out to me I wasn't aware of.
In a world where reality and fiction cannot be told apart, Allister must make his way through the dark if he ever wants to leave a prison of his own making. It was never going to be that easy, was it?

Though her energy is failing, Bea continues her search for Mimikyu.

Though it was by no means his favourite pastime, Allister of Stow-on-Side’s gym did spend a great deal of time staring into space.

Brief, insignificant moments. Those which were his and his alone. Moments in which to collect himself and get ready to brave the world. Right now, however, the staring was more of an obligation than an escape from the confines of reality.

Right now he was the one being confined by it.

Darkness.

Peering into the inky blackness yielded little more than strained eyes for the young Allister. There was just…nothing.

Spinning around until his head had gotten dizzy, Allister didn’t know when he’d begun to cry, only that it had been sometime since he’d started. Judging by the damp collecting on his jersey anyway.

He’d collapsed on the spot, his whole body locking up. He was freezing though Allister noted he was too apprehensive to even shiver. The whole place was like a fridge of sorts.

So there he stayed, curling up on his side and staring dead ahead into the nothingness.

“I don’t…I can’t…”

‘Where even was he?’ He thought. The nightmares hadn’t been this bad before.

Allister’s breath hitched as he checked himself; they certainly had, but the level of immersion was never this…real.

He’d watched his Pokémon fall one by one, each in more painful ways than the last. He’d watched Bea be taken away from him, or die protecting him. He’d seen the world around him engulfed in flames until it was just himself remaining. The last one standing. Just it had always been.

Had he just had a panic attack and passed out? He’d done many a time until Bea had taught him the proper way to breathe. Even then it still happened but thankfully in a more manageable fashion.

But he’d been in bed, asleep, hadn’t he?
Was Mimikyu going missing the only reason this was happening now?

He missed his friend so, so dearly yet he only had himself for company.

Worse, had a memory or fear so potent boiled to surface that even his sleeping mind was being affected? If that was true then why couldn’t he remember it?

Had it been that abhorrent that his mind was shielding itself? He should still have a vague recollection, he reasoned…but it was all as black as the wall in front of him.

It had to be a panic attack, surely?

If he kept just repeating that then it had to be true.

“B-but s’never been this b-bad before!” Even Allister’s tears were lost to the dark, hitting a floor that didn’t even exist. “I c-can’t tell whether ‘m awake or as-as-asleep!”

The past scenarios were just to name a few of the horrors his mind would produce as he slept, twisted out of his imagination by a boy afraid of loss more than anything. If he really put his mind to it then the patterns were obvious; telling dream from reality was always easy in the end.

*Dreams are just the mind tellin’ stories to itself. They don’t mean anythin’ at all.*

This passive state of just *being* was more than unnerving to him. It was as if an intense pressure was slowly swirling around his hunched form, slowly egging him on to create something to fill the space. His mind had always done that sort of thing for him.

Overreacting was as easy as breathing.

Whether it was the increasingly implausible scenarios of losing those he cared about (the giant Polteageist dissolving everyone with its water was something Bea and him had had a good laugh about over breakfast, once he’d calmed down of course), or remembering his perceived past embarrassments…the onus had never been on his conscious brain.

His unconscious self was more than hateful enough of himself for the two of them.

Allister opened his teary eyes, thumbing over his gym shorts lightly.

291

He’d chosen it after reading about Kantonian homonyms on his rotom phone one evening. He found the subject fascinating, and if reading didn’t hurt his head so much Allister figured an academic career abroad wasn’t the worst sort of life.

Plenty of new places to explore, but he digressed he was too much of a coward to ever stray that far.

Every leader in Galar had chosen a number to represent themselves, each with wordplay associated.

Apparently it had been a previous Champion’s idea after she’d travelled to the Indigo Plateau on holiday, and Allister was glad she had. Learning about everyone’s numbers was a level of nosiness that was socially acceptable, after all.

Some were obvious, like Nessa’s translating ‘to swim’ or Raihan’s as ‘powerful’, and others played off another’s like Melony and Gordie’s reading as ‘Cold’ and ‘Rocky’, a not so subtle nod to their continuing preferences.
Allister continued to list the numbers off in his head, remembering his sister’s as ‘to fight’.

His own?

*Number 291. Hateful.*

“Subtle,” he noted ruefully, scrunching the fabric so the number was hidden away. Allister knew that no one in the League really paid all that much attention so it was an easy to miss reference.

He’d seen Kabu sneaking a glance on more than one occasion, though that made sense. The Hoenn dialect wasn’t all that faraway from Kantonian. Oleana had been the other, though Allister hadn’t been able to understand why until the rainy night at Rose Tower.

*Seems like a lifetime ago now. Things were simple back then.*

Another part of his mind told him to stuff it and that he was just being dramatic. Not in that his life had ever been simple, a lie in itself, but that he was only 9 years of age.

“Bein’ d-dramatic is for old p-people.”

Of course that made him hateful in its own way.

Why shouldn’t he get mad? They didn’t know him or his story.

If Bea had been beside him she’d no doubt have told him ‘but you don’t them or their’s or what they’re going through’; she wasn’t and Allister angrily waved those thoughts away.

*She’s not here, it’s just me and my stupid thoughts.*

Another geyser for hate to bubble to the surface along. He hated how he could find it in himself to hate things about his sister, if only for brief moments. He never ever meant to feel like that, but the contrarian parts of his mind didn’t always allow for rational thoughts.

Bea had always seemed so put together, so for her to open up as she’d done on New Year’s Eve had made him feel all the more guilty for envying the life she’d lived. Sure life had been tough, but she’d always been indomitable to him, for better or worse.

Better, as it had turned out.

Bea had been nothing but kind to him, making efforts and graces to understand him when there really wasn’t any incentive for her to do so. She was just…kind.

‘Alli, if you remember anything I say, let it be this. Always try to be nice, but never fail to be kind. That’s a lesson I wish I understood earlier. Family is more than just our blood.’

Now Allister found himself hateful for just how angry he was at himself for *being* the way he was. For not being able to understand why he was the way he was. There were so many things he had no right to complain about and yet found himself guilty that he could be.

He had his family, didn’t he? Of course he did, and he wouldn’t have traded it for the world and all its ghosts. Was he still allowed to feel guilty for being curious about his previous one?

Who were his mother and father? What had happened and where had they gone? Who were they to him? Good people? Kind people? Did they love him or was he just an inconvenience for them?

Had he been experimented on?
No human had ever gone into the ghost dimension and come back.

He wouldn’t have blamed them for trying to answer it.

So many things in his life drew a blank when he turned his mind to the past. If he let it get to him then that was the day gone. He’d just sit and stare into space, much as he was doing now, in a silent hate of a world so foreign to him, yet one he could call a home.

Of course, Bea knew all this, but Allister wasn’t sure she knew the true extent. He didn’t know the story and it was his book, or so he was told.

The ink was on the pages, but it was blurry, runny even. Running right off the page and onto the void that was the table it rested on.

A stupid metaphor for his current situation.

“Do I…belong?”

With no reassurances from his sister, Allister’s mind filled in the blanks for him as they always did.

*You will never belong.*

“But I’m…r-real…aren’t I?”

*Are you?*

Allister placed a hand to his chest on reflex. Nothing. Allister shot up to his knees, knowing his heart was beating. It had to be; frantically patting around his ribs and chest still yielded nothing.

“W-w-where is it?! I’m r-real! I g-gotta be!”

Allister was standing now, panic having completely overtaken him. Taking his shirt off and repeatedly slamming his fist into his chest until it hurt wasn’t doing anything to prove himself wrong, but pain was real wasn’t it?

He had to be real to feel.

He had to.

He had t…

“Allister!”

Allister eyes snapped open, sitting bolt upright in bed. His chest pounding (an enormous relief!) he shakily called back:

“C-comin’, sis.”

The voice drifting up the stairs indicated it was almost certainly breakfast time. With the curtains drawn he couldn’t really tell, slowly looking around his beloved sanctuary with bleary eyes.

His room was gloomy, shadows stretching into the wall and beyond. Winter mornings always were like that.
Just how long had he been asleep for?

Noting his arms resting on top of the blanket prompted a silly giggle from him.

“No wonder I couldn’t feel m’ chest through that. Winter duvet is w-well thick!” Allister held a palm to his chest in a somewhat calmer fashion.

...Bahbump...bahdump...bahbumb...

“H-heh...perfect. Real as they come, Alli boy.”

Allister pulled back the covers, stretching. The events of the dream were already slipping away. Perhaps that was for the best? He wrinkled his nose in response.

*Ugh, no more of that talk. Cereal’s gotta be enjoyed with a clear head.*

“Maybe Bea will let me have fruit loops,” he reasoned quietly. “My math lessons with Milo have been goin’ well.”

His carpet cold to the touch, even through his socks (they were *not* ‘sockies’ as people at school would tease), and Allister wished he could take the duvet with him. Bea was definitely skipping on their heating bills today.

“...lister.”

Allister paused at the top of the stairs. Glancing around, he could’ve sworn he’d heard someone calling to him.

“Allister.” Bea’s voice this time. That sounded much more like something he’d been expecting, and so Allister dismissed any doubts. Starting a day with doubt in the heart would drag down the rest of the day with it.

“Oh g-geeze!”

No sooner had Allister taken a step downward did he trip, reflexively taking hold of the handrails before he fell; scooting down on his bum instead proved the safer (and more fun) option.

“What did I...even trip on?”

There wasn’t anything at the top of this stairs he could make out, though the house was still fairly dingy in the morning light so it was somewhat forgivable. It did always take him a while to get his brain in gear.

“Alli, you alright? I heard a noise.”

Allister could hear his sister shuffling around in the kitchen around the corner. The gentle clink of plates and bowls being set were a comforting thought that normality was once again a possibility.

“Nothin’ sis. Just...shufflin’.”

“I’ve got fruit loops if you want them?”

“YEA...I mean...yeah, that sounds nice.”

Allister shook his head, embarrassed.
Don’t let her know how much you like them, doofus. He giggled. She definitely already knows though.

He was about to round the corner when a picture caught his eye. Slightly dusty on their wall of them, it wasn’t a new one by any means, but just one he hadn’t really payed all that much attention to.

Him and his sister standing in front of the southwest cemetery in outer Motostoke.

Allister remembered the day well. Grey and miserable, it had rained and the two had sought refuge under an abandoned shed, only for the roof to give and drench the two. It was a fond memory for all the wrong reasons.

What Allister didn’t remember was Bea wearing a mask similar to his when they’d taken that picture.

“I’ve got fruit loops if you want them?”

“Y-yeah…in a sec, sis.”

Allister removed the picture from the wall, holding it up to the light.

“Hey, sis, did you change out…one of the pictures? Don’t remember this one.”

“No of course not, Alli. All of those pictures are important to me.”

“…Yeah. Figures.”

See the two masks side by side was odd. They were both his, he was sure of it. Seeing his sister wearing one as he did was just surreal; Allister quickly laid the frame face down on the corner table.

No, we’re not doing this now. Let me have this.

“I’ve got fruit loops if you want them.”

“Geez, I heard you the first time alr……ready…”

Allister froze after only a single step into the kitchen, air stolen right out of his lungs. His mouth moved but there was no sound.

“What’s wrong, Alli? Not in a fruit loop mood?”

Allister’s eyes were locked to that of the back of his sister’s head, his mind well past the point of overdrive.

“N-no…”

“No? That doesn’t seem like you, Alli, are you feeling alright?”

“No…n-no…p-please.”

Bea hadn’t turned around but Allister didn’t need her to, to know that she wasn’t real. That this was all a lie. That was all still…

“…a dream,” he finished numbly. His hands were beginning to twitch, giving himself away; he
quickly hid them behind his back.

“What’s that, Alli?”

“N-nothin’, sis. I’m…um…g-gonna be right back!”

Without waiting for a response Allister bolted, immediately making a beeline for the front door… for what he had seen hadn’t, in fact, been his sister at all; a mannequin dressed as she was had made its home in the centre of the kitchen, right down to the tears and patches on her training uniform.

Everything else had just been for show; Bea’s hair was just a mop of grey, the headband a coat hanger and the plates and cutlery had been levitating around on their own to create the illusion of activity.

The forgery was so blatant but that made it all the more terrifying to him. To have something so unreal seem real for so long was sickening. He’d been sure that he was awake, awake to leave the world of dreams behind. That was all a lie too.

“Wh-wha…?”

The door wouldn’t budge.

Allister tugged at the handle with all his might but it simply refused. It wasn’t even a real door. Just a solid block of wood painted to look like a door. Like a dollhouse, designed to keep him trapped there.

“Alli, you know you can’t leave without eating breakfast. You won’t have any energy to face the day otherwise.”

In response Allister jammed his fingers in his ears, blocking out the voice of his ‘sister’.

*Of course it’s not her. Real sis wouldn’t just give me my favourite cereal so easily. She’d make me work for it as a reward for effort.*

The more her voice filtered in from the other room, the less real it sounded; Allister shrank back against the door. It was far too happy, nearly sing-songy in tone, to have ever come out of his sister’s mouth.

“Alli, I’m not going to ask you again.”

“I’m…not…hungry,” he whispered, trying to cover his ears fully. As if that would somehow shatter the illusion entirely.

He hadn’t been wearing his mask when he’d ‘woken up’, which really should’ve been a dead give away. The relief of thinking he’d escaped had supressed that; Allister wished more than anything he still had it. Hiding his face as well as his ears would’ve been doubly effective.

If he couldn’t hear or see his surroundings then they didn’t exist…right?

“Perhaps we should get you looked at?” Bea’s voice disagreed with that assessment.

“N-no…I’m…I’m f-fine………don’t come in here p-please.”

But Bea did, the mannequin gliding slowly over the carpet towards him. No motion, no expression in the cold plastic that was supposed to pass for her face, just a silent locomotion as if windswept.
Her eyes were just buttons tacked on...not even close to realistic.

“Having another episode, Alli? I’m here for you, you know that right?”

Her mouth didn’t move but the voice came still, eerily similar yet now noticeably different to the sister the doll was imitating.

“S-stop it…”

“Alli, c’mon, you know talking to me will help. You always know.”

“Pl-please…stop it…”

“Alli…”

“STOP IT!” Allister hadn’t meant to yell but it was all becoming too much. He’d tried to leave peacefully but apparently that was out of the question.

“Alli…?”

“JUST STOP! DROP THE ACT! YOU’RE NOT MY SISTER!”

“…”

Allister blinked. Then again, and then again.

Standing in front of him was his sister. Flesh and blood, no dummies in sight, and tears in her eyes.

“B-Bea…I d-d-didn’t…I…”

“It’s okay, Allister. You’re…allowed an opinion.”

Allister shrank back further, curling in on himself as much as his body would allow. To hear her say it with such...finality, broke what little grasp on reality he’d salvaged.

The waterworks returned in force, seeping into the floor and blackening it with a dull sludge. Apparently this dollhouse wasn’t waterproof.

“I…I d-didn’t…I’m…”

Sneaking a glance at his sister’s face, standing over him with such hurt in her eyes was too much to bear.

“L-let me out! P-please…I-let me out, I c-can’t take i-it anymore!!! I’m sorry! I d-didn’t wanna hurt anyone! Please…*sniff*…please.

“Oh my dear Allister…what makes you think you can ever leave this place?”

The door that had once seemed so impassable melted away, sending Allister tumbling backwards out into the dark.

The house had been the only thing real about their reality, floating in the void as its solitary inhabitant. Well...as real as a lifesize dollhouse could be at any rate.

Explains why it’s so dark...and cold...I never left this place at all...

The house was already tiny as he continued to fall, the void more than welcoming with its embrace.
With the shock wearing off, Allister called out to his sister, real or not, that he was sorry. That he’d never meant to say anything of the sort. That he was glad to be her brother.

Whether she was just a trap sent to torment him, or a trick his mind was playing was irrelevant. He’d said those things and such things weren’t so easily taken back in anyone’s mind.

Least of all his own.

Regardless, the house was far too far away for anyone to have heard him.

Allister closed his eyes once more, attempting to remain calm. This was all just another dream. His mind was just playing tricks, that was all. If he really focused then he could banish this. This whole world would end, and he could wake up and leap into his sister’s arms and tell her how grateful he was.

He was going to count, just like she’d taught him to. Whenever he got overwhelmed he could close his eyes, cover his ears, and count to three.

Then everything would seem so much clearer.

So he did. Eyes screwed shut. Hands covering his ears, Allister began to count.

*One…two…*

**Three!**

Allister’s body hit the floor.

“I’m starting to think trying to search the entire canyon wasn’t the most sensible idea.”

Cursola and Polteageist watched as Bea continued to mutter to herself, overturning rocks and regolith in effort to discover Mimikyu’s whereabouts.

‘*She’s really still going at it, isn’t she?*’

‘*What did you expect? Girl’s crazy.*’

‘*Now, now, my dear coral, I think the term you’re looking for is dedicated.*’

It had been several hours since the group consisting Bea herself and Allister’s team of ghost types had departed Cara Liss’s camp. With each hour they could see their trainer’s sister slowing, yet remaining undeterred; she was currently catching her breath, overlooking a pond of stagnant water from yesterday’s downpour.

Bodies of the flesh were limited in ways they were not, after all.

Did her reflection say as much? Bea wasn’t a fool and the bags under her eyes were no liars either.

Some admired the dedication, knowing this was the best shot at finding their trainer’s Pokémon. Dusknoir tirelessly lifted boulders and widened cracks, searching for any hint of the missing disguise or its owner.

Some begrudgingly followed her orders to spread out as far as possible, just wanting the whole
exercise to be over and done with. Gengar was nearly invisible against the backdrop of the starless night, more content to watch than actually do any of the work.

The rest found it foolhardy, knowing the odds of finding Mimikyu in the vast rocky mazes of outer Stow-on-Side were vanishingly small. Bea herself was at least aware of it in part.

“Suppose Cara was wrong and the wind was blowing somewhere else?”

“Luuuuure?”

“It’s either we search here or in the Glimwood Tangle, and we don’t want to get lost in there.”

Using Chandelure as her only source of light at the ravine bottom, Bea continued to call out for the missing Pokémon, just hoping that the sleeping Diglett wouldn’t be too mad at being woken in the dead of night.

She’d already been trapped by Arena Trap once this night, until Runerigus lifted her to safety; the language barrier had led to some rather choice insults being hurled her way for her stupidity, with little repercussion.

‘Chandelure is right.’

Polteageist turned to its friend, surveying the scene below.

‘Oh?’

‘Why do we trust anything the scientist woman tells us?’

‘Do you want to search in the Glimwood Tangle?’

‘It would be more interesting than just rocks and dirt. This is boring.’

‘Come now,’” the teapot chided. ‘Don’t you want our friend back? Our trainer happy. This is our best chances of success.’

‘Of course I do! However,’ Cursola noted bleakly, ‘This being our best chance of success doesn’t mean it’s a high one’.

‘...True.’

Hours had passed and no sign of Mimikyu or its sheet. With the fire of Cara Liss’s camp but a distant memory, Chandelure’s dancing flames were all the fighting type leader had to continue her search.

Hardly ideal working conditions.

“Training *huff* is training. No ‘ifs’ or ‘buts’. This is the best way to search.”

It was very, very faint, but all 6 of Allister’s team could feel Mimikyu nearby; Bea’s remark about them potentially not even being in the right place was all the funnier considering none of them could tell her.

Mostly she just ignored their back and forth over her head, pausing only to give directions or otherwise while she searched diligently.

Still, it meant they weren’t completely wasting their time regardless of the monotony setting in.
The ghosts wanted their friend back, and Bea wanted to help. A solid enough alliance as she’d correctly predicted.

“Where are you, Mimikyu? We’re your friends and we want to help you!”

‘She’s going to ruin her throat at this rate.’

‘Good.’

Cursola looked up to see Gengar cocking his head, bemused expression apparent.

‘Can’t we just cheer Allister up another way and have him come back and search with us?’

‘You know that won’t work. Once our trainer gets an idea in his head it won’t let go until someone makes him.’

‘We could…?’

‘We can’t make him do anything, clod! They’re alike in that respect, his sister and him.’

Gengar huffed in response, knocking a pebble into the ravine below for good measure. It faded, arms crossed, reappearing next to a weathered tree hollow to see if Mimikyu had fashioned a den inside.

‘How long do you reckon she’ll last, Polteageist? She was tired when she started.’

‘Bea? As long as it takes. She’s very stubborn.’

‘Didn’t even take a torch with her. What was she thinking?’

‘Probably wanted to start as soon as possible.’

‘Tch…I hate to agree. Idiot girl.’

‘Mind your words, Cursola. If Allister found out you said something like that…’

“Oh?” The reef section squinted at its companion. ‘Tattling on me are we?’

‘Well, it would be mischievous of me wouldn’t it?’

‘…You’re insufferable.’

A call for them to move to the next section came soon, the ghosts and the fighting type leader hoping once again that this time their search would lead to sweeter fruits.

Body aching, throat sore, Bea was down but not out.

Mimikyu was probably right around the corner.

Allister had resigned himself to never open his eyes again. Every time he did he got hurt.

The fall from his house hadn’t hurt in the slightest, a welcome surprise, but he still didn’t feel like moving from where he’d landed. The floor was smooth, glass like in a way. Allister hated it.
Glass made him feel icky, just a pet peeve that Bea indulged for him. His cups were always ceramic if it could be helped, midnight glasses of water aside.

Something about just…didn’t sit right.

And that was just the floor he was on. The dark and the cold were still swirling around like a cloud of misery and he was privy to even their darkest of torments.

Visions of the past, coming back to haunt him. Every argument Bea and him had ever had. All the times he’d wanted to turn and run out of the stadium out of panic. Fans wanting an autograph or picture with him and being awkward about handling his newfound fame.

With the good in the world drained away…life had never seemed so bad.

It was a fully logical result, but not one Allister’s mind could fully grasp at.

*If you choose not to see the joy in the world you’ll still have the same amount of world every time you open your doors.*

A quote from one of his favourite bedtime stories had never seemed so appropriate. However choosing to see the good in a world you can only see as grey was half the deal, and one that seemed impossible once you’d fallen into the hole.

*Is this…my hole?*

That voice too. That awful, awful voice.

Grating, like steel on stone. He’d never experienced anything like it. Piercing through all his defences with the ease of an arrow through tissue paper. Truly unsettling.

*Or maybe I have, and I’ve forgotten? Who can say? S’not like the rules apply in this place.*

Allister was sure his body was going to become a solid block of ice at some point, but that point was beyond his point of caring.

“Wh-wha…*sniff*…what would s-sis do?”

Drowning out the cacophony of ‘leave you’, ‘abandon you’, and ‘celebrate’ that his surroundings seemed intent on drilling into his brain, one word stood out above the rest.

*Meditate.*

Whenever he saw Bea feeling down or stressed she’d simply sit down wherever she could, and close her eyes.

*But I’ve got my eyes closed now? All I’m hearin’ is nasty stuff. What’s the difference?*

“G-gotta…gotta…focus…”

*If I don’t, I’m not gonna be able to leave…wherever this is, am I?*

And so, in the absence of a clock, Allister counted his breaths from 1 to 100 and then down again. Slowly but surely he could tune the voices out, feeling his heart slow right down below the breakneck pace that had become the norm.

*Inner peace…I’m focused…it’s just me…my thoughts…inner peace…I can…no…I will…do this.*
Not yet opening his eyes, Allister pulled himself into a sitting position and crossed his legs. He could feel the dark was still around him, but still now. Less of an inky blackness...more an undulating ripple passing through him.

“Still not right,” he murmured quietly. Without another thought Allister slipped his shoes and socks off, placing them carefully down next to him. “Gotta do it like sis does.”

Clasping his hands together in front of him, Allister rested his chin on the top of his hands and sighed, taking as much of the frigid air as he dared. It wasn’t really that bad in hindsight.

Either that or he was dissociating from his body to a much greater degree than he realised but if it was the price for warmth then Allister found himself more than willing to pay up.

Allister waited until his heart had really calmed down to focus. No longer wanting to burst out of his chest, the rhythms began to line up with his breathing little by little.

Inner peace...my fears...they’re just me...this whole world...is just my doing...inner peace...I’m still tucked up in bed where Bea left me...when she gets back with Mimikyu she’ll wake me...and this...will all be over.

A pang of guilt briefly rippled through Allister’s body but his mental grip on his psyche held. He’d nearly forgotten Mimikyu had been missing for almost an entire day by now. What sort of a trainer was he?

Bea will find them. I...couldn’t do it...I gotta realise...my own limitations...only then am I gonna get any stronger...than I am now.

The thought was surprisingly mature for the young boy. ‘Than you are now’ was something Bea told him time and again but he’d never really taken to heart. Now, surrounded with only the rhythm of his heart for company it had never seemed so apt.

His heart was stable now, truly at rest.

He was strong, wasn’t he? He had built up some of his own strength over time, not just leeching off of hers. He could leave the house without crumbling whenever he came across another person. He didn’t just one meal a day, and he tried new things on occasion to see if he’d like them.

Small victories in strength but Bea told him to always take them to heart.

Everyone’s battles were different.

So Allister sat there in the void, as much as at peace as he could be...tuned out to the world around him.

No matter what was going on in the void, or indeed if nothing at all was going on, Allister was sealed away in his bubble of meditation, deaf to the dark and the cold. It barely could barely even graze the sides.

Sis knows what she’s talkin’ about...this is...super peaceful alright.

Allister wondered how she was getting on. Certainly hours had passed since she’d left the houses, though then again it could have been minutes. Imagining a clock down here wouldn’t do anything if he didn’t know the time to start with.

Wish she was here with me...I could use a friend...
It was illogical and silly, but an idea came to Allister. Bea could never really be here but he could certainly imagine she was. He’d already done it, if only in a surreal and disturbing fashion.

If he tried consciously, he could create her properly and he wouldn’t have to be alone anymore. He might be able to give himself his Mimikyu too.

One step…at a time…

From within his bubble Allister began to focus in a different way. On his feelings. On how much Bea meant to him. Memories. Good ones. The first time they’d really connected.

When she first heard me call out at night…she did her best to comfort me. She didn’t know how…but sis tried.

He’d been 5 and she’d been 14, and that was first time they’d even had any physical contact with the other. Bea’s parents hadn’t really been those sorts of people. She’d never learned, aside from professional handshakes or a pat on the back for a job well done.

Awkward hugging.

She didn’t know what to do with her hands and neither did he. Regardless, it was an embrace of sorts.

Seeing her try…for him…it made him reconsider for the first time that maybe she wasn’t just ‘some other human who happens to live in the same house as me’.

Empathy wasn’t something taught, something Bea had learned that night.

It was something everyone had the capacity for.

“We all live our lives in phases, Allister. Just…look at the moon and tell me that isn’t natural. That’s my opinion. You can share it…if you like. I think my opinion of you…well…it’s changed a little. I understand you more.” She’d paused by his door, if only briefly. “I Hope you can sleep well, Allister.”

Indeed he’d slept much better after that.

Allister smiled fondly at the memory. He much preferred those sorts of flashbacks, rather than the ones that took advantage of his insecurities.

Eyes closed and breathing deep, a ghostly Bea soon came into existence within his bubble. Sitting beside him to copy his position, the image said nothing as she too began to meditate.

He didn’t need to open his eyes to feel her there. In a way those you care about are always with you.

Even those that are gone live long in your hearts as long as you remember, and Allister knew he could never forget his sister. The apparition of dully glowing violet colours was a proof of that.

This…I can deal with.

“…ster…………all……is……ister………”
Allister frowned. He'd been zoned out for what felt like eternity, but that voice was bothering him again. Not the mocking, invasive one of which he couldn't place, but the other.

“...list......ali...”

There it was again. The one he'd heard at the top of the stairs before everything had unravelled.

“......Allis......ter...”

He could feel his eyes twitching but he daren't open them for fear of betrayal. He'd trusted his senses once too often today. Here in his timeless bubble of reality he was safe, and he saw no reason to tempt the devils that no doubt awaited outside.

“...”

The voice soon died, fading away with the rest of them to a simple background lull in the otherwise silent realm.

It was odd, Allister was almost certain he'd heard the voice before.

Nah...that's just how they get me...just focus on yourself, Allister.

Dedicating anymore of his brain power to deciphering the origins of the mysterious voice would no doubt break the spell and snap him out of his self-induced trance, Allister concluded. Well, he was smarter than that. He wasn't going to play anyone’s games but his own from now on.

He was nobody's fool.

---

The ghosts were beginning to place bets on when the human leading them was going to collapse.

Bea hadn't even taken any water with her and adamantly refused to return home and get some, lest she fall asleep with the temptation of a warm bed within reach.

They'd only scoured a third of the canyon at an estimate (and a generous estimate at that), and there was little sign of the disguise Pokémon's whereabouts. The tiniest imaginable scrap of cloth that had once belonged to its sheet had been found hanging over a tree, at least confirming to the weary girl that they weren't in totally the wrong place.

At present, Bea held onto the scrap for dear life, as if afraid it would slip between her fingers and away into the night. It was her only proof she wasn't seeing things, and no doubt some of the ghosts would try and convince her otherwise if she lost it.

“You're giving her too much credit,” Allister’s Rungerigus continued. “That full head of steam she had left the station ages ago. She’s running on fumes now.”

The hazy eyed Bea was kneeling in a patch of scrubland, taking another rest break, breathing laboured. Slowly but surely the breaks were increasing in length, as well as frequency. Chandelure was cooing around her head, perhaps more concerned due its required proximity.

'Look at her, breathing so heavy. As hazy as my beautiful flames.'

Drawing lots for who had explain things to Allister when they inevitably worked out was a fun way to pass the time, at least for the ghosts.
'So what’s your time?’

‘I’m thinking…3 am tops.’

Dusknoir nodded, motioning to its companions to share any other opinions that they may have held.

‘Does that change your guess, Polteageist?’

The teapot shook its head, folding its arms carefully.

‘Her body will give out before she does. She won’t admit defeat on someone else’s terms.’

‘That’s a cop out and you know it.’

‘Well you didn’t give a time! You just said “hope she falls over a cliff”, Cursola.’

The coral Pokémon looked away, ectoplasm ruffled in annoyance. Their trainer’s sister was still calling out for their companion, voice dry and croaky with effort. It was both satisfying and pitiable in equal measure.

‘I haven’t made my mind up yet is all.’

‘Enough dithering, Cursola. We’ve had enough of a break.’

Dusknoir folded its arms, motioning to follow the now upright Bea into a hollow clearing.

‘If Chandelure doesn’t need a break than neither do we.’

‘Allister’s sister would be blind without them so they don’t have much choice.’

‘Do you really think that would stop her searching?’

Cursola shot a glare in Gengar’s direction, earning only a pointed grin in return.

‘Whatever. Mimikyu has a lot of explaining to do when we catch up.’

Allister had stopped counting the seconds a while ago. It have been mere moments or hours, but time held no meaning while he was here so he had to be content with the situation.

Don’t even feel hungry. Could just stay like this forever.

He checked himself at that, warning that slipping too far into trance was an entirely different set of problems he didn’t need to deal with; he was already having trouble waking himself up. Being asleep in his dream on top of that was just asking for trouble.

His joints were at peace, no pain even with his legs crossed. The perks of being young…or perhaps his physical body just had no bearing on what happened here? It was unclear but Allister was all the more grateful for it.

He could meditate uninterrupted, the spectral incarnation of his sister at his side.

At least until the voice reappeared. Allister silently willed it away, though confident his concentration wasn’t going to be broken. This was his sister’s technique after all. If she taught him
it then it had to be good.

The sound of singing was something that he hadn’t been expecting. It was low, but airy, a familiar twang in the cadence Allister knew he recognised.

♫ In endless dreams, countless realms collide…
Hope falls only to rise like the changing tide…
Though all dreams come to an end…
Just whispers on the wind… ♫

It can’t be…

Allister knew that voice.

♫ Please sing with me one last time, for light’s sacrifice…
Endless dawn comes but not without a price… ♫

Against his better judgment Allister slowly opened his eyes. His intrigue was proved fruitful when the owner of the voice appeared before him, smiling easily.

“Mismagius? How…what…why…are you…here?”

‘All good questions, young master.’ The magical Pokémon floated down to Allister’s level, making its home next to him before bowing. “I suspected that might work. Old Unovan folk song, I used that with my previous trainer on occasion to help them relax.’

In response Allister shuffled himself away, closing his eyes again.

“You messed up my concentration and now sis is gone again. Now’ I’ve gotta reimagine her.”

‘Ah so that’s what that was. I did wonder.’

“…”

‘It took me much longer than I would’ve liked to reach you. This place is near impassable and maze-like when you’re upset.’

“…What?”

‘It was only when you calmed down that I could enter your dreams. Quite the paradox as you seem to be doing alright.’

“You say that…don’t believe you though. This whole place is designed to trick me.”

‘That may be true, but it’s all out of your own imagination.’

“…Huh?”

‘Young master, do you really think anyone knows you as well as you know yourself? Your unconscious fears manifesting is perfectly natural in this place.’

“But what is this place?” A question he’d asked so many times in the confines of his own head sounded different aloud. More…potent.
Mismagius shrugged, swaying slightly.

‘Now that I can’t answer with any certainty.’ Mismagius frowned, landing where the ghostly Bea had once been. ‘My best guess is you were becoming so stressed by our reality that you tunneled deep within yourself to escape. This might well be where your conscious and unconscious minds meet? Or perhaps it’s just a very twisted up nightmare? Your guess is as good as my own.’

“So…am I…am I still in bed? At home?” Allister didn’t see the nod but could tell none-the-less.

‘Physically, totally. Mentally…you’re leagues away. As I said you’re in deep so it took me a while to find you!’

“You’ve been…lookin’ for me?”

‘Sure I have. Young mistress Bea did charge me with your care did she not? In Mimikyu’s absence it falls to me to take that primary role.’

Allister nodded silently, still not entirely sure what he was hearing was from his own fictions or not. His hair spike was glowing slightly, a good sign, but not a solid proof.

“That’s right. She made a trade for you for jus’ that…”

‘Rightly so. I was most surprised to learn I was going to be staying in Galar! Given to a young boy no less when my previous trainer was an elderly businessman from across the pond. A change of pace indeed.’

“…Yeah…sorry…I guess.”

‘Whatever for, young master? There’s nothing wrong with a change of pace. Change is a part of life!’

“But…” Allister sighed, humming softly. “You’re…with me. I’m nothin’ special. Can’t even fight my way outta this dream…”

The meditation had been nice, soothing even, but it hadn’t brought him any closer to escaping.

‘Come now, that’s why I’m here now. To help. Or try anyway.’

“…”

Mismagius frowned, hat bobbing as she circled the sitting boy; the strand of hair atop his head keep track of her all the while.

‘You’re still not convinced, are you? That I’m real?’

Allister nodded dumbly.

“I was wishin’ th-that I wasn’t by m’self…so I made a sis to keep me company…then you show up. Sus…suspicious.”

‘That’s fair. And you’ve already seen some unsettling things today. Cruel jokes might I add!’

“You…s-saw?”

‘Nasty business, dollhouses. Gives me the creeps.’ Mismagius scooted closer to him, careful to keep her tendrils away from his hands and feet. ‘I didn’t see much, just glimpses as I was trying to
break through to you. You were shaking like a leaf in the real world.’

“…I don’t usually do that.”

Indeed, no matter how potent the nightmare was, Allister usually remained still as a log when he slept. It was only when he inevitably woke up screaming did Bea become privy to his inner turmoils. She’d nicknamed him ‘the log’ in their earlier years for that exact reason.

“…Guess it was p-pretty bad, huh?”

‘One of the worst nightmares I’ve seen from you. I really don’t know what’s causing this, I’ll admit. Do you have any ideas?’

“No,” Allister said quickly. He felt like he should, this was all apparently his doing after all. Frustration at not knowing would eat away at him if he let it. “Guessin’ Mimikyu goin’ missin’ has got somethin’ to do with it.”

‘Rightly so. Still…it isn’t like Mimikyu hasn’t gone missing before? You told me about the trash alley incident?’

“…”

Allister had indeed confided that. Mimikyu had been found after several hours of searching in a back-alley dumpster, hiding itself with a plastic bag after an Impidimp had slashed its disguise in half.

Why was his reaction this time so much more severe?

Allister absolutely didn’t want to know why…and he knew that was a lie. He did but he feared the answer. What if there was something wrong with him? What if Bea wanted to take him to the hospital? What if she didn’t want him anymore? What if…?

‘You’re hyperventilating. Be mindful.’

Allister snapped himself out of the moment, not having realised he was getting carried away again.

“Th-thanks, Mimi…Mismagius.” Allister shied himself away again, embarrassed.

‘It’s alright, young master. You miss them greatly. I’m sure young mistress Bea is doing her very best to find them.’

“Tch…she’ll do her v-very best…like no one’s ever done.”

‘Exactly.’

The two remained in silence for more minutes than were necessary. Allister refusing to open his eyes, Mismagius silently using its power to ease as much of his suffering as she could.

‘…We can’t stay here forever, young master.’

“Why not?”

‘If you want to leave then we need to move forward. If all you do is stay, then here you’ll stay.’

“…That’s confusin’.” Allister opened an eye a crack, quickly shutting it upon seeing his Pokémon’s concerned face.
‘You still don’t trust me.’

Mismagius didn’t bother to phrase it as a question this time. Not when the answer was obvious.

‘I’m just some invented persona by your own mind, no?’

“…Yeah. How can I be sure? I-I was so sure I’d woken up,” Allister forced out, heavily resisting the urge to hug his knees. “Then my sister turned into a shop dummy but was suddenly real when I got mad? Wh-what does that even mean? Then I fell out my door and I was f-fine? I’m lost, Mismagius,” Allister expressed, nerves finding their way back into his voice.

‘I don’t know all the answers, Allister. I just know we should try and explore this place. Find a way out.’

“There’s nothin’ here, Mismagius. It’s an endless void of black out there. Why sh-should I move from my spot when I can see everythin’ from here?”

‘…Tell you what, you explore and try and find a way out, and I’ll tell you something that you don’t know yet. That way it can’t be your mind tricking you, since you don’t know the details.’

“…”

It was a tempting offer, if not one with certain gaping holes. If he didn’t know something, his mind couldn’t use it against him, that was true. His conscious one anyway. His unconscious one, the one responsible for the earlier depravities, should still be constrained by the same rules.

Why did Allister feel like that wasn’t the case?

Imagination was the hallmark of a young mind and Allister had it in spades, whether he liked it or not. His mind could still easily fill in the gaps or lie to him about things he didn’t know.

In his heart he knew Bea wouldn’t ever send him away, but that didn’t stop the scenario from being one of his greatest fears.

Being locked away in an asylum with only the padded walls for company kept him awake more than he’d readily admit. The ‘boy freak who could talk to ghosts’, as lots of men with clipboards observed and prodded him like a piece of meat.

“I…wanna know what you’re gonna say,” Allister said at length, not willing to dedicate any more of his mind to his abandonment fears.

‘I was going to tell the story of how young mistress Bea acquired me for you.’

“…”

That was something Allister dearly wanted to know the full story behind. Bea had always been vague about what exactly she’d had to do, brushing his fears of an unfair exchange away. The only thing he knew for certain was that the trade had taken place in the grocery store of all places.

‘You know you won’t be able to make the story up, so you can trust me, if you so wish.’

It was a fair offer, and Mismagius was giving him the option to say no, which Allister appreciated.

‘I should add that this place isn’t as empty as it would have you believe, if we do move.’

“There’s…monsters?”
Mismagius shook the brim of her hatted head.

‘Nothing like that. More…I suppose scenes would be the best way to describe them.’

“Scenes?” Allister uncrossed his legs, curiosity finally outweighing distrust.

‘They probably make more sense to you than me. Memories all strewn together and mismatched, but some clearer than others. On my way here you were a key player in most of them. This is your mindscape after all.’

“...”

‘What is it, young master?’ Mismagius knew that look by now. Lip bitten and eyes cast upward and to the side. Allister had found something of interest.

“...Most of them?”

‘Indeed. Why I think...’

“How can only most of the memories have me?” Allister didn’t appear to notice he’d cut his Pokémon off; Mismagius was more than willing to forgive. Allister’s disjointed way of communicating was something she’d quickly adapted to.

"They’re…my memories. I should be a ‘key player’ in all of them.”

“I hadn’t considered that,” Mismagius pondered. Allister did indeed have a keen eye for detail. ‘There were some people and places that I couldn’t place. Perhaps you were too young to fully grasp any details?’

“Let’s go.” Allister was already standing by the time the Pokémon had processed his words.

“Whoa there! That was a fast change of heart! I could still be trying to trick you, right?”

“Maybe. Probably,” Allister admitted succinctly. “But y-you’re still part of my s-subconscious if that’s…right. I know…there’s s-some memories I got that...I c-can’t see properly.”

‘So?’

“I wanna see them.”

Allister was already walking off in a random direction, Mismagius hastily floating alongside to catch up.

“You’ve got something specific in mind?’

“...Yeah.”

Allister would only realise later he’d forgotten his shoes and socks, but his mind was still reorganising after what he’d been told. Whether Mismagius was being truthful or his mind had inadvertently let slip a helpful detail was irrelevant; this was too good an opportunity to pass up.

He didn’t know how he’d gotten into this state of mind but equally vexing was that he didn’t know if he could get back.

It seemed absurd that he’d want to, given the events of the day, but that was before he knew he could walk between his memories like pages of a book.
Stories are where memories go when they’re forgotten.

And on this book, there was one set of pages Allister wanted (perhaps even needed) closure on more than anything. The pages where it had all begun.

Buried deep within the recesses of the library that was his mind, he’d glimpsed the odd word here or there or part of a face…but it was no longer enough. He wanted the whole chapter.

_Sis…forgive me. I wanna know. I’ve gotta._

Eyes creased with determination; Allister knew the memory of his parents was here.

Somewhere out in the void of his mind…and he was going to find it. His mind couldn’t hide them from himself forever. He _was_ going to see them.

Even if doing so would break him.

Chapter End Notes

One of these days I’m going not going to reply to comments and upload the next chapter on the same day and catch people out ^_^

I do hope you've been keeping yourselves well! This chapter eclipses 8500 words and went through the most iterations of any chapter so far at 17. I wanted to convey a very abstract, yet pointed look at Allister's mind while also leaving certain things to interpretation.

A cliff hanger chapter too, that's a first! Someone pointed out to me that Bea-ing a Sister has indeed reached double digit chapters so yippee . I really wanted to try and draw some art of my own to celebrate this (even though it was last chapter that we hit double digits shh), hence I delayed putting this out slightly.

There was a lot of imagery that was almost Coraline-esque in hindsight (especially Button Eyed Bea, I do hope folks can sleep alright, I'll feel bad otherwise!).

Alas working with microscopes and slides is a one way ticket to Carpal Tunnel apparently, and I suspect getting struck by a car last year didn't do that any favours (I'm only suspecting though heh), but I'm more than content with the existing fanart this stories has inspired and I'm not one to dwell. I mean seriously, how did I get blessed in this way?

I genuinely thought this story was going to buried and forgotten in days!

Apparently not, and so I give you all my hearty thanks for believing in this, and for following along so far with Bea and Allister on their journey together. I'll do my very best to continue delivering ^_^

See you in the next one for the continuation of this storyline. Perhaps maybe we will
find some answers? Or perhaps this is another cruel joke of the mind? Who knows...
Chapter Summary

Burrowing further into a world without rhyme or reason, Allister begins to uncover memories he isn't too fond of.
The ones he's most desperate to remember remain tantalisingly out of reach.
Allister is soon to find out all actions have consequences.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Tell me…are you a violent person, Allister?”

“No, I don’t wanna hurt anyone. I’ve never wanted to hurt anyone…”

“Then why should your dreams be any different?”

“…”

Allister’s dreams were a mess, Mismagius decided. Not that she knew what anyone’s dreamscapes should have looked like of course.

It was just a feeling. Nothing more, nothing less.

As quickly as her trainer stopped letting himself be controlled by fear did structures start to form out of the inky muck. A staircase here, a window there. The world’s most open plan building to the point where there weren’t any walls to keep anything in check.

It just…stretched on into the darkness.

A metaphor for the limitless imagination of the boy leading her, or a deep-seated claustrophobia? It was unclear.

It would explain why he enjoys the natural world so much. No walls. No restrictions. Being outside is a medicine in its own right.

As Mismagius continued to diligently trail after her wandering trainer it became clearer and clearer that they were not, in fact, outside. Allister was still trapped in the Dark. Not that there was any doubt in either of their minds.

The landscape was still hidden under the deepest shadow, dancing black in every corner…ever creeping. Even with Allister’s newfound determination the scenery was no less oppressive.
Not oppressive…that’s not it. Heavy then? Yes, quite. The atmosphere of this domain is colder than any winds I can remember, yet dense like a snow swirling around us.

‘Trapped’ wasn’t exactly true either, she had to remind herself.

Allister was now actively deciding to stay.

One look up at the young boy’s face said it all, her trainer had an intense look of concentration about him, the world shifting and changing around them with his every whim.

As soon as she’d told him there were people she didn’t recognise he’d turned into a machine. A one-track mind with a singular purpose. It wasn’t in the nature of ghosts to feel wary but such behaviour didn’t seem to gel well at all with what Mismagius knew of him.

It hasn’t been that long since I was traded and there’s any number of people in his life I have yet to put a face to. The straws he’s clutching at have never seemed shorter.

It was also becoming all the more obvious that Allister didn’t have a plan. He was focusing, violet eyes narrowed and brow scrunched, that much was obvious, but his method of wandering was exactly that…wandering. A dichotomy of his rational and emotional states vying for attention.

The delicate patter of his feet on the textureless surfaces too were at odds with the storm churning around inside him.

It was hard to watch, yet Mismagius knew telling him that his chances of success were, to put it kindly, ‘not all that likely’ would only upset him.

How can he even be expected to explore this place? Look at it. No rhyme or reason.

Twisted jumbles of times long since passed interwoven with memories of only the past few days, all the delicacy of a Rillaboom threading a needle. Stairs littered with half remembered conversations, some leading up, some leading down, some folding back on themselves in a defiance of the natural law. Imagination (especially ones that your own mind wasn’t privy to) were a world all of their own.

Allister’s subconscious, for all its twists and turns was surprisingly still. The aura it was projecting was calm in its own unique way, even if the architecture was at direct odds with the surrounding mood. That and the stifling cold.

Whenever a memory jumped out that Allister found scary or hard to deal with, the entire plane would vibrate (with those of a particularly unhappy nature causing a mild quake). The worst of which, being told off at school for not speaking up, past bullying, and of course lashing out at Bea, would send out ripples that fragmented the very air around them.

Memories bleeding through the cracks until Allister could compose himself.

There were a lot of unhappy memories in here, and it was saddening to the magical Pokémon for the vast majority to fall into that category. Especially in one so young.

Of course, what is dark without light? Though they were fewer, the good memories would reform things when they appeared. How bright they burned!

Mainly of Bea and himself just spending time together, times that Allister wished had lasted forever. In a way they did. Here in his mind, where he could walk freely across the pages of his life…those memories would never die. Mismagius could tell he was having a harder time than he
was letting on tearing his eyes off them as he forged onwards.

Times when his sister had made cocoa, or Allister showed her a particular interesting pattern he’d found on a rock…simple silly stuff.

*Silly to other people anyway. Not to him.*

Mismagius took note of a particularly bright scene meandering towards them; on closer expression it appeared to be of Bea teaching Allister how to ride a Rotom Bike.

No sooner had it appeared did it fade, and the duo watched the scene get washed away by a darkened waterfall that had come into existence over them.

Allister’s subconscious was apparently not too keen on the idea of dwelling on the good right now.

It felt more like a cool sand than water, but the vision dissipated all the same. Allister pretended not to notice, breezing past; the waterfall followed him all of twenty paces before being sucked into a doorway.

*How peculiar!*  

Mismagius took stock of the surroundings.

The current scenery was starting to resemble a hotel in a way. An ornate hotel, very fancy by anyone’s standards, though Allister had already explained he didn’t know where his mind was pulling most of the environment from. A picture book or a postcard perhaps?

Pictures on the emerging walls filled with minor memories. Icecream here, a plaster over the nose there. Many figures with their faces greyed out.

Allister apparently didn’t know of any hotels, at least not ones which weren’t abandoned and full of ghosts.

Mismagius bowed her head, continuing to trail.

*I wish I could do more than just reassure him.*

He didn’t seem to notice or care, walking like a boy possessed over the obsidian flooring.

From what Mismagius could tell Allister’s heuristic approach was no better than trial and error, and whether his efforts were going to lead him into or out of the dark was anyone’s guess. She was just…worried.

He didn’t even seem interested in learning the story behind her trade anymore, which she knew pestered his mind on a daily basis. What he was after now was taking priority, to the point where he was almost a drone to his desires.

She could hardly blame him. Human culture put a lot of stock in knowing one’s ancestors, and Allister knew nothing of them. Not their names, their faces…nothing.

The desire was very natural. That didn’t mean it was healthy.

It was that of an unspoken truth between himself and Bea that deep down he desperately craved to know his parents more than anything. Anything at all would do but there was nothing to be found.

No bills, no records, no visits, nothing Bea had tried to search up to support him existed.
These days it was well out of her control to do anything other than placate or support his feelings, whichever was needed the most by moment to moment.

Allister accepted as much, dearly grateful that his sister at least understood where he was coming from.

He’d thought that that would be enough.

To know he couldn’t know them. Now, with the opportunity to find out more, however vanishing the possibility, he just couldn’t help himself.

Years of pretending things were okay when they just weren’t were now rearing their ugly heads, if the gargoyles in the dream hotel were anything to go by.

That said, the dreamscape was resembling a theme park more than a hotel at present.

Spiralling banisters had given way to spiralling slides of jet-black waters, and the numerous potted plants reconfiguring into carnival stands.

“C’mon…where…where are they?”

Hearing the words aloud was a gut punch Mismagius didn’t know she could’ve felt. He sounded so…defeated. Desperate, but already having decided that he wasn’t going to win. Yet he still was refusing to give in and try to leave.

If anything his dedication was admirable. Allister was obviously giving it his all, eyes periodically screwing shut and pressing his fingers into his temples, forcing his visions to solidify in front of them.

They were like auras in a way, only completely forming if the boy himself concentrated. Any less than his full undivided attention and the windows into his life slipped out of focus and into the dark.

Trying to grab hold of flowing water. That would no doubt have been easier. The theme park aesthetic was on point for that one.

“No…n-no that’s not it…at all.”

‘Who is that, young master? I don’t recognise them’.

“…Doesn’t matter, does it?” Allister turned away from the rippling images in front of him, banishing them. “Not what I wanna know.”

“Perhaps you could use a break? You’ve been at this while. 5 minutes, then we’ll continue?”

“Do y-you have a cl-clock down here? Or a Hoot-hoot, h-huh? Time doesn’t mean anythin’ here…”

“…”

“S-sorry. That was r-rude, wasn’t it?”

‘If you want to keep moving you can. You’re only interested in your parents. Reliving other memories must be hard to weather.’

“Nah…s’alright. Guess you’re right…I’ll sit…for a l-little. ‘Sides,” Allister said as he plonked
himself down. “Not all my m-memories are…worth watchin’.” Allister shook his head, shivering slightly. “Bad stuff for me.”

That was true enough. Out of the good times Mismagius had caught a glimpse of through the windows, if one were to discount his sister then the only real times Allister was truly happy was when he was alone.

Sitting out in nature, just being one with his environment and exploring its majesty; its complex yet serene appeal had never dulled in all the times he’d camped out under the stars. That was certainly something Mismagius was glad Allister could hold on to.

The times when he was with people…not so much.

As the cloud of collected memories started to take more of a shape, a younger Bea and a figure Mismagius couldn’t recognise were arguing. The voices weren’t pitched correctly, the past Allister having his hands over his ears to prevent an overload, but it was clearly a heated exchange.

Vicious in fact from Bea’s end, the pink haired girl opposite barely sparing her a glance as the younger Allister peeked through a keyhole, trembling at the notion of being caught yet unable to tear his eyes away. Present Allister didn’t seem much better off.

“Allister’s dojo…” He said quietly.

‘The girl is Master Mustard?’

“N-no…that’s…Klara,” Allister explained, watching his younger counterpart wince as the two before him continued their back and forth, Bea’s voice a shout. “Th-they…don’t get on.”

The past Allister squeezed his hands tighter over his ears, the sound of the vision distorting further.

“When…” Allister sighed, deciding to sit for the time being. A step in the right direction if Mismagius had any say. “When sis was younger…her parents s-sent her to train on the Armour Isles. Soon as she could walk…pretty m-much. Early di-discipline…all that.”

Mismagius observed the younger Bea, hands bandaged and a plaster over her nose. Her expression was certainly fiercer than the Bea she knew, but she got the feeling the situation at hand wasn’t the only contributing factor.

“She was goin’ there since before I showed up and…r-ruined it.” Allister swerved his head away, the vision liquifying.

‘What could you possibly have done to have such a notion, young master?’

“Exist,” he said, numbly. “I s-screwed it all up when her p-parents made her take me with her.”

‘She didn’t look to be having a good time either way?’

“She was arguin’ cos of me.” Allister crossed his legs, bringing them into the meditation position once again. “Master Mustard and Avery were fine…nice even…if odd…but Klara. She could always rile sis up. Just a gift I guess. Bein’ everythin’ sis isn’t. Superficial…two faced…artificial and cold.”

‘So…?’

Allister sighed, though his eyes remained open and attuned to the blackness. A structure
resembling Watchtower Ruins was forming in the distance, no doubt in an effort to remind him of his favourite locations.

“Until I c-came along Klara c-couldn’t get to m’ sis…not really. Bea always treated their relationship as jus’ more trainin’. Mental trainin’. Then suddenly Klara had a way t-to get to her… through me.”

‘That’s terrible! Couldn’t you have said something to Mustard?’

“We could never tell how sincere Klara was bein’…that was the problem. Master M-Mustard is a real kind guy…and he could tell somethin’ was off pretty soon after I arrived. It was his idea that sis leave the dojo, puttin’ in a good word to her parents that there was no more she could learn from him.”

‘You think he was lying?’

“N-no!” Allister quickly said, hugging his knees up to his chest. “He was…being’ kind is all. He could tell the kind of trainin’ Bea’s parents wanted me t’ do and the trainin’ he was offerin’ wouldn’t work for me. Sis had been goin’ for years, if he said she was done then she was done. She’s incredible…”

‘…You hold your sister in a very high regard. It’s touching.’

“I’d b-be a liar if I didn’t. I’m tons of stuff but I’m no liar!”

‘…’

“Sorry…didn’t mean to yell…again.”

‘It’s fine, just tell me what happened next.’

“Sis an’ I returned home mid-way through the dojo season…parents weren’t too happy ‘bout that. Then…” Allister trailed off, the tiniest smile peppering his features. “That was when Bea suggested takin’ me with her and livin’ on our own. For ‘trainin’ reasons, and th-they bought right into it!”

‘You see? Something good came out of something bad! That’s life, right? Besides, it was her parents that made you go with her, so you can’t bear any blame for what happened.’

“Heh…I guess.” Allister gazed up at his floating companion, cracking a genuine smile. It quickly dimmed as another memory began to swirl around them. “Best thing that ever happened to me.”

‘And what of Klara and the other one?’

“Still trainin’ I guess.” Allister shuddered, making to stand. “Apparently they both wanna be gym leaders…and that means they’ll probs try and challenge us for major l-league rights. I don’t wanna…have to see Klara again. Or Avery. Anyone from that time of m’ life.”

The association did make sense to Mismagius. Even just the thought of the islanded dojo was causing the air temperature to drop considerably; Allister’s breath was beginning to puff into clouds. They too were dark, she noted, but then again there wasn’t any light to be found. Even the light of the happier memories casted no shadows of their own.

How they were seeing anything at all was a mystery. Perhaps it wasn’t so much seeing as knowing where things were? That seemed to fit the bill, given these weren’t their physical bodies.
Allister stood up properly, wincing to dispel the visions once more.

“Floor’s cold…weird. Don’t like it.”

Mismagius had wondered how long it was going to take Allister to snap out of his stupor; in direct contrast to his sister, Allister hated being barefoot, or indeed having anything touching his feet at all.

Having taken his shoes and socks off to meditate, only to become distracted by the thought of his parents was a slightly cruel twist of fate. Very minor by his own standards but still icky.

Just standing next to a pool with Nessa had been a challenge, allegedly.

“It’s weird and slimy!” Mismagius remembered his description well, but imagining physical objects into existence was probably too tall an ask on his mind.

His sister was just a spectre when he tried. Though I suppose now that I’m here he’s got some sort of companionship. Being alone down here must have really gotten to him. No wonder things started to become that little bit more benign when I showed…not that hellscape of demons and dollhouses.

Human minds are fascinating.

“Alright…’nuff distractions. Don’t know how long this place is gonna be here. Need to make the most of it.”

‘…’ It was hard to argue with the logic, but the inevitable disappointment looming over the both of them was going to come crashing down sooner or later. Mismagius did the best to shove those thoughts somewhere else. She was here to support and protect, not cause unnecessary suffering.

“Onwards we go. If I c-can’t remember anythin’ about my parents…what kinda kid am I?”
Mismagius had no answer to that. There may have been any number of reasons as to why Allister had no recall of those times of his life. She loathed to use the term…but the word ‘trauma’ instantly sprang to mind whenever Allister had queried the gaps before.

Once again did she try and banish those thoughts, finding the irony of trying to do exactly the opposite of what her trainer was doing just that bit too stinging to be comfortable.

The dreamscape was starting to resemble the hotel once again, though there were substantially more books lining the walls at present. Most with no title as Allister soldiered on, not dedicating his time to letting any memories surface; his subconscious took the initiative for him:

‘Why do smells have a shape?’

‘How long can I stay in the woods before sis notices (7th edition)?’

‘Fantastic Ghosts and where to find them.’

‘How to not wet the bed at night using berries and wishing way too hard.’

‘Is it homework if I do it in a graveyard? (Signed Copy)’

‘Where does sis hide the sweets she bakes?’

‘Trying to escape from dread by dissociating, and other semi-healthy coping mechanisms.’

The list went on and on, every other book drawing a blank. Mismagius tried her best to ignore the recurrent volumes of ‘How to get through life knowing you’re a burden and no one likes you: My Story’.

_The edition numbers stretch into the hundreds. Oh my dear young master, why can’t you see the good you bring into this world? You have more value than just what you assign to yourself._

She wasn’t going to cry, for his sake. Allister hadn’t even noticed what his mind was revealing in his oblivious quest. Even if his strength came from being unaware, he clearly was aware of it on some level or the books wouldn’t exist in the first place.

“Through h-here…” He called, stepping through an archway and into the next section. More books, but the waterfall from earlier was carrying some of them away, phasing diagonally through the wall and into the void.

Mismagius ducked under it, Allister doing the same, though stopping to bat away a forming memory of a younger Allister losing his house key.

“S-stupid,” he mumbled, forcing the memory to solidify only to then shatter. The shards too were carried away by the umbral water’s flow, along with the coverless books; Allister nodded, satisfied.

“Dumb panic, don’t need that in m’head.”

‘Where do you suppose they go?’

“No…idea. If it isn’t by m-me then it’s good.”

‘…I can see the merit. As you say… onwards.’

And onwards the duo went, the world continuing its ebb and flow in time with Allister’s psyche. They soon left the hotel behind, and the bulk of the memories with it, save for the odd fuzzy
conversation between himself and Acerola. Apparently Allister had held back on trying to look her up online as her face was shaded out any time Mismagius tried to focus.

Clearly he wanted their first face to face to be special.

Now the scenery was that of a wasteland, uneven terrain and track marks cutting into the soiled ground, shards of forgotten memories littering the earth.

Allister had stopped to search through them, wondering if any of them would piece together into anything useful but all he received were pinpricks and poor reproductions of his nature walks; it stood to reason he went on enough that he could cherry pick the best parts to remember fully.

Alas that just added to the boy’s frustrations, with even digging into the ground itself yielding nothing but a whisper.

Doors were starting to appear, leading to themselves, yet only to lead into the hotel again. The logic was Allister’s and his rhythm was law. Perhaps his subconscious was taking a kinder turn and trying to turn him back?

He’d given up trusting it the second he’d ‘woken up’ the first time.

He was nobody’s fool after all.

The rhythm was gradually becoming just that little bit more erratic if the vibrations were anything to go by. Mismagius could tell that as time wore on, Allister’s desperation was becoming less and less controlled. Sinkholes leading to the abyss below were frequenting the already patchy landscape but still he refused to turn and give.

If no signs of his parents could be found here, then he wasn’t staying here, was he?

His face was still screwed up in concentration, but more vexed than before, only forming the memories around them for fractions of seconds before dismissing them.

If anything he could tell by now what was useful and what wasn’t.

The memories themselves were taking longer to form as his concentration slipped further into the dark, Mismagius fearing he was going to lose himself again. If his subconscious took back its controlling stake, then dollhouses were just the tip of the iceberg if the current scenery was anything to go by.

More of a castle than a hotel, that was the best description. It had risen out of the background to block their path as if it had always been present.

High stone walls, gates faraway in the distance and long winding road to the keep. Winding up down as well as side to side but it wasn’t stopping Allister, ignoring the impossibilities as gravity bent around the two to allow them passage.

“Th—this…they can’t…can’t…no…they’re here…they…gotta.”

Knowing it wasn’t for her ears, just a platitude for himself if anything, wasn’t going to stop her. Mismagius was here to support him but in equal measure was she here to make sure he didn’t hurt himself. Safety first, as they say.

‘Young master, might I suggest another break? Another 5 minutes perhaps?’
“No…no s-suggestions……no…”

“…”

“S-sorry…but I…no…no stoppin’.” Allister’s face was weary but made up, his voice pained. “If you wanna rest…you can…but I g-gotta go on…there c-can’t be….nothin’ here. Can’t be…”

‘Young master I really think…’

“I know I’m bein’ rude…and…‘m sorry…but th-this is everythin’…”

‘Allister…’

“Mismagius, you c-come from an egg! P-Pokémon don’t have th-the s-same kinda r-relationships with th-their parents…you wouldn’t…unders-stand…”

‘……I know. I can’t begin to imagine what you’ve been through. I don’t have what you have, but I’m here to support you in…”

“But I don’t ‘have what I have’”, Allister snapped, turning away from his floating companion to gaze up at the hotel’s keep. “That’s what ev…everyone else has. Not…me…”

‘…’

“……………………S-sorry……again……”

‘It’s alright, young master.’ The magical Pokémon sighed, cocking her head and forcing a smile to her shady features. ‘You’re under a lot of stress. There’s no telling how long this place goes on for or how long we can stay in it. We should use this opportunity to the fullest. I just wish you to remain clear of mind is all.’

“……………………Yeah. Okay…let’s……go…”

It wasn’t a yes or a no, but at least Allister had rested, however slight, during their brief pause.

‘This castle has a fine garden, do you not agree?’ It was a silly way to try and diffuse some of the tension but Allister took the bait well enough as they walked.

The wasteland was gradually giving way to some more of the lush foliage Allister prized so much. The smell of flowers was always a bonus.

“S’pose…really nice actually.” Though the palette was drained of its vibrance the physicality’s of some of Galar’s (and Allister’s) most beloved species had made their homes outside of the hotel turned sanctuary.

‘Do you remember any of their names?’

“Galarian fleawort…two tone lotus…stargazer lilies…violet daffodils…violet daisy…chrys…chris…cr…”

‘Chrysanthemums?’

“Y-yeah…that’s it. Lavender too. Lots of lavender bushes…” Even without their vibrant hues Allister could still tell what everything was, like it was designed specifically for him. In a way it was.
The garden was sprawling, yet cozy, with the path to the castle delicately weaving its way through its coverings.

Even the tiniest clovers looked to be well kept. Though there was little to smell Allister inhaled deeply anyway. If he could imagine the smell then the scene before him may as well have been real. Just breathing in the natural world could dispel some of his anxieties, if only for a moment.

What was life if not a long series of complicated imaginations?

That’s how he preferred to think of it anyway. That’s what made the absence of the memories of his parents so disheartening.

He also felt crumby for lashing out again at someone who was trying to help him. Allister knew he didn’t even have the stomach to apologise properly without freezing up, so resolved to make it up to his partner later.

And Mimikyu when sis gets back with them. We’ll have a good time, just like old times. Everything is going to work out…I gotta believe that. Losin’ hope means I just lose…full stop.

“This place is…big.”

‘Big is one word indeed.’

This was the first self-contained structure the two had come across, not being bisected by any waterfalls to speak of.

It was a daunting prospect.

Everywhere else that were clear ways out if you wanted to leave…but not here.

‘You’re going inside?’

“Gotta,” he said simply. A short nod to himself as Allister walked tentatively up to the door. The quick rap of his knuckles on the featureless entrance yielded no sound, but the torches on either side sprang to life upon contact.

Dark flames, licking at the equal dark of the stone around them, startling him but not enough to take a step back.

“…Ominous. This…th-this has g-gotta be somethin’. Why else…would it…b-be here?”

‘ Couldn’t say, young master. It’s nothing like we’ve seen so far.’ Mismagius flew herself up as high as she dared, trying to look through any of the tinted windows.

“Anythin’?”

‘Naught that I can see I’m afraid. It’s hazy…mist like in a way.’

“No answer either,” Allister voiced. “We…gotta…get in here.” Pressing his outstretched palm to the door was a pointless gesture but he tried anyway.

Smoothing his hand across its surface sent ripples into the stone, tensing when he pushed further; he took his hand back, surprised.

“It’s like…a jelly?”
Still, the door refused to budge. Not unlike the dollhouse door, Allister wondered if it was even a real door or just etched out to look like one. Doors weren’t made of jelly last time he checked, though he was sure Bea wouldn’t complain.

Too sweet for him, perfect for her.

There wasn’t any telling what it really was, the door was easily twice Bea’s height if not more. It was going to be heavy either way. Right now it was just an obstacle to be overcome.

Allister stopped, frowning.

“Hear…that?”

‘Only yourself.’

Again the words appeared to be for him and him alone and Allister pressed his ear up to the door, straining it to try and capture any morsels of information that were held within.

“…”

“…st……er………ome…”

“There’s…s-something’ on the other s-side! Or someone…”

‘Are you sure? This could well be another trick on your senses.’

“Nuh-uh.” Allister tried the door again. No movement this time.

He didn’t have any reason to be sure it wasn’t just a cruel joke, but the same could be said for anything in the world they were in.

Hope was a dangerous thing. Once you got a taste of it you’d always want more, hanging on like the last leaf on the tree in a storm.

Allister hated just how addictive it could be yet that wasn’t going to stop him from hitting the door repeatedly in an effort to fell it. Once…then twice…then thrice and more. Allister couldn’t help himself.

The answers were behind here, he was sure of it!

He could vaguely feel Mismagius telling him he was going to hurt himself, and then trying to pull him back once it was clear the words weren’t reaching him, but he refused. He just…refused.

That sticky, oh so sweet taste of hope that maybe there was a repressed memory of some kind trapped behind the doors was too divine to let go of. He’d gladly have stomached all of the diabetes in the world for another lick.

As Allister continued to push against the castle doors, the world was beginning to vibrate once more with the emergent stress destabilising whatever equilibrium had formed.

‘Please Allister! Just stop! Rest! Anything!’ Mismagius knew he could no longer hear her, caught up in his flurry of emotions, but her ghostly form was too weak to pull him away.

No amount of singing was going to bring him around if he wasn’t already willing.

The garden flowers were sprouting thorns, cracks forming in the dirt. Cracks in the fabric of the
world itself; Mismagius shrank back and redoubled her efforts.

The world was crumbling around them and her trainer wasn’t even noticing; everything except the structure in front of them was being washed away, as if by rain. The thorned plants, soil, memories, everything. All turning to a blackened sludge and fading into the dark.

“Got…ta……get…………in!”

Though it didn’t seem possible, Allister could make out figures behind the door. Two of them, calling out to him. Though he couldn’t make out the words he was entranced all the same.

That’s gotta be them! Please don’t fade before I make it through! Just a little longer!

Though his hands weren’t beginning to hurt, his head was, but Allister didn’t really feel it as he should have. It was like it was his head, and yet it wasn’t.

It was an aching, throbbing pain that seemed to channel down from his hair spike and into his mind itself. Was it his or someone else’s?

Mismagius could only watch as Allister’s body began to separate, an astral body not unlike the ghostly Bea he’d conjured starting to coalesce behind him.

He’s dissociating properly now. If he loses himself here there’s no telling how deep he’ll go! I’ve got to…got to…got…to.

Mismagius looked down at her body, starting to become hazy around the edges.

‘Allister listen to me!’ she tried urgently, tugging at his shirt with fervour. ‘If you keep this up I won’t be able to hold on! Things are becoming too unstable for me to even be here! You’ll be alone again! The only reason I can be here is using Dream Eater in the real world but the real you is starting to suffer with you exerting so hard! Let me help you, let your sister help you, let your breathing help, let something help but please just snap out of it!’

The magical Pokémon blinked.

Nothing.

The world had faded and Allister with it.

In his struggle…Allister had left her behind.

“Stupid Nurse Joy. ’Right to refuse service my arse!’”

Bea was ready to drop, arms like cinder blocks as she clutched the delicate form of Allister’s Mimikyu. It had been just past four in the morning when she’d finally found them, hiding away under a dirty pool of water while it sewed a new disguise out of reeds.

Her initial guess had been right, their original sheet had been blown away and they’d scarpered out of fear. At least that was the impression she was getting judging by how Allister’s team had cooed around them in a comforting fashion.

It was sweet in a way, and not behaviour Bea had ever expected to witness.
First guesses are usually right. Over thinking things leads to issues.

Thankfully it was actually Allister’s team who’d found them or Bea knew she really would have dropped there and then. No need to tempt fate, be the rumours true or not concerning those who saw an undisguised Mimikyu.

Naturally she’d been overjoyed at being vindicated in her night long struggle, damn near snuggling the reedy mass to death in her elation.

Of course that joy was soured slightly by the Nurse Joy at Stow-on-Side’s Pokémon centre refusing to serve her until she ‘cleaned herself up’.

They’d always had a vaguely strained relationship and Bea could understand that tracking mud in every time she went out training was a pain, but it wasn’t like people didn’t bring their Mudsdale in on occasion.

Or their Garbodors. She’s just the catty type. Probably has a Delcatty of her own.

Glancing at her reflection as she left, Bea had to hand it to her that she did look like she’d crawled out of a dumpster and then jumped into a lake; she’d long since stopped trying to shake the sticks and twigs out of her hair, the dirt holding everything together in one big mass.

In addition to that (and much to Cursola’s delight) she had indeed fallen over a cliff and scratched holes in her uniform. It was really more of a hill than a sheer drop but the thud had been oh so satisfying, even if Polteageist had slapped the smirk right off their face afterwards.

That being said the events of the night, even Nurse Joy turning her down, did nothing to wipe the grin off of the gym leader’s face. She’d succeeded. That was joy enough.

“Alli’s going to be so happy when we get back. Right team?” Allister’s team mumbled in agreement, just happy the ordeal was over with. They hated to admit it (some more than others) but Bea had been a damn good team leader, if only for a night.

That and they were tired too.

“Channnddle? Luure…?”

“Yes and you did extra well Chandelure. Thank you for being my light. I’ll put in a good word about you to Allister.”

Satisfied with the answer, Bea didn’t even mind when it perched itself on top of her head, flames dimming as she morning sun began to rise.

Just yesterday such a gesture would have seemed out of the question for either of them. Yet today…things were different. New and different.

It was safe to say her perspective on ghost types had shifted considerably as a result of their adventure.

“So it wasn’t just saying empty words to Alli. I really did get us to bond a little,” Bea murmured to herself. “And this is the best wakeup present Alli can have.”

Sure Mimikyu (and herself) now smelled of stagnant pond water and earth but they were still getting hugs, that was a given.
Mimikyu themselves hadn’t said all that much but Bea got the distinct impression they were very anxious to see their trainer. They were just curled up, humming under their makeshift disguise but allowing her to pick them up and that was the main takeaway.

Usually it was Allister alone that had that honour, but this was a special occasion.

*If occasion is the right word. Geez what a mess. Hopefully things don’t always have to be this extreme for his ghost types to work with me. I feel like we made some real progress.*

“Next time try and have a couple of spare disguises inside the house, alright?”

“…Mim…”

“I know your old one is special,” Bea said, thumbing over the reeds slightly. “But you caused us to worry so much. Allister will be over the moon to have you back.”

“…Mim…”

“Come on…let’s get us all home.” They were nearly there by now, trekking up the hill to outer Stow-on-Side. Allister would never have approved of a place in the heart of town. Too much chatter, too close to her parents. She could respect that.

“Garrr? Gen, gen-gar!”

“I swear if you’ve stolen my keys again Gengar, I’m going to…oh here they are. Nevermind.” Thankfully falling over the hill and wading into a pond hadn’t dislodged them from her pocket or that really would’ve been the final nail in the coffin; Bea was more than prepared to hop the fence and sleep in their miniature garden if she had to. Thankfully that wasn’t a necessity.

Bea was too tired to commit fully to the gesture but still managed to roll her eyes at the giggling Pokémon. It was always better to assume they were the culprit given the frequency of her keys vanishing.

“All right come on everyone, let’s go and give Allister the best wake up we can.”

She stepped inside, throwing the light on out of habit. It was just light enough to be pointless but at least she could pretend it was still night-time and have a well earned sleep. Training aside, Bea felt like she’d earned one.

“Alli, you up? We’re back and…ALLISTER?!”

The flick of the light switch illuminated the scene in a stark manner.

Her brother lying in a heap on the floor, mask cracked in two. Mismagius was lying under him, unconscious. He was at the bottom of the stairs; it was clear what had happened.

Tiredness pushed back once more, Bea rushed to his side, the team of ghosts gasping in disbelief before grouping around them.

“Allister?! Allister what happened?! Can you hear me?!”

Bea quickly checked for a pulse: he had one, that was good. Breathing? Normal. There was a hole in their drywall at the bottom of the stairs but on inspection Allister didn’t appear to have any bruising.

“What the…hell? What the hell happened here?” Bea took a deep breath, bringing her own heart
rate under control. Freaking out wasn’t going to help, and Allister didn’t appear to be in any immediate danger.

Far from it, the boy looked downright peaceful, a dreamy look on his features.

Bea scrutinised her brother’s forehead, gingerly removing the half of his mask that had stayed put; there wasn’t a single mark, save for the faintest of blemishes.

Bea eyed the fainted Mismagius being tended to by Allister’s team.

“Did you…break my brother’s fall?” One look to the top of the stairs told her all she needed to know.

The laundry basket.

“He must have tripped over it…” Bea smacked her head harshly in retaliation before catching herself.

Sure that had been irresponsible, but it wasn’t like she hadn’t left it there before. Her brother was always exceedingly wary of such things and preferred to slide down legs first. He was careful to the point of indolence.

“Did he…sleepwalk?” That didn’t make any sense, her brother didn’t do that. When he slept he was still, no matter what sort of dreams he had. Only when he woke up did he call for her in a panic.

Yet Allister wasn’t unconscious, just sleeping normally. Bea had had enough training incursions with other people to know when someone was unconscious.

Systematically checking his joints and body for fractures proved another positive, Mismagius had indeed done their job of protecting him.

“But why…why did it happen?” Bea’s heart went out for the magical Pokémon. Allister cut a very slight figure but being squashed by anyone was bound to hurt at least a little.

Bea looked over brother’s face.

*He’s just…asleep. Like he didn’t realise he’s fallen. Until he wakes up he probably won’t.*

The hole in the wall raised another question. Mismagius had broken his fall from below but he’d still obviously connected with the side of their house.

Bea placed the two halves of her brother’s mask back together. The cracks did indeed match the impact mark of the wall. Still…she expected more of a mark than just a blotch to his cheek.

Then again she had no idea how long he’d been lying there splayed out. A few minutes and any bruises wouldn’t have had time to form.

Judging it was safe to move him, Bea emptied the last of her strength into scooping Allister up in her arms, gently resting him onto their sofa and tucked Mimikyu into his arms; he instinctively wrapped his arms around it, a smile coming to his face even in his sleep.

The summer blanket under the chair would have to do, and it was better than nothing, and Bea draped it over the two, content he’d be warm.

*I hope you have some better dreams now that you’ve got Mimikyu back.*
A visit to the hospital was just going to make him feel terrible again and if Nurse Joy was turning her away for looking like she had the lurgy then they’d be no better off there.

No…the best play was to simply ask him what had happened when he woke up. Bea staggered over the light switch, flipping it back before collapsing into the chair opposite.

She was going to mark today as the weirdest, most exhausting day that the world could have possibly thrown at her.


Bea knew it was just her lack of clarity but she felt that she really should have been more worried about that last one.

It didn’t seem possible, but then again being able to talk to ghosts didn’t either. Her brother was one of a kind. Bea closed her eyes, watching the ghosts that were milling about start to settle.

Allister was one of a kind anyway. He was her brother, ghosts or otherwise. She was glad he was safe. Safety itself was never a guarantee in the world so she grateful to whoever had smiled on them to make it happen.

Her eyelids were making lead wish it was as dense, and Bea saw no reason to disagree. She didn’t need a blanket anyway. Her exhausted body had already fallen asleep long ago.

Now it was time for her mind to catch up.

Allister’s team of ghosts had much the same idea. Maybe too proud to admit they were tired too but eager to catch up on some well needed rest, they flocked around the sofa, forming a barrier to all those who would bring harm.

Bea smiled.

_As it should be. We can catch up tomorrow. I’ll bet he’s got quite the story to tell me._

“**Allister, oh Allister, how did you let this happen? Now it’s just you and me again. You were warned.**”

Allister was alone. He hadn’t even realised his Pokémon had disappeared until it was too late, his head screeching to him to knock it off. Even then he’d refused to yield. He’d rammed into the door over and over as the frozen flames of despair had licked around him until it was just him and him alone. Himself and the door anyway.

Now even it too was gone, but the force repelling him remained. Just as solid, just as unyielding as he was. It was like a solid smoke refusing him passage. Ethereal but tangible.

The world that had once been full of so much imagination and life was now gone once more, replaced with the chilling blanket of emptiness.

Allister hated it. That and the voice that was plaguing him.
“Your weakness was a forgone conclusion and yet I’m disappointed anyway. The bar was set so low and you still managed to trip over it somehow. A mountain out of a molehill, Allister.

“Wh-who are you? What…d-do you w-want…from me?”

“If you have to ask that of all questions…then you lack the maturity to understand.”

“What’s th-that s’posed t’ mean?”

“Try your door again. Prove me wrong and show me you have the strength to deserve the answers you crave.”

“Like…like who m-my parents are?” Even without the void around him Allister’s voice was small. Receiving no response Allister pushed at the invisible door once again. Nothing.

He didn’t know why he’d even listened the horrifying nightmare voice. It was just a nightmare, nothing more. Designed specifically to scare him.

The door wasn’t moving.

Allister refused to cry. He didn’t even know if he could in this place but he didn’t want to find out. There was no way back, no way out, and no way forward. The only way inward was blocked, the voices and figures he’d heard earlier having faded into oblivion.

Well…there’s only one thing I can do. Keep tryin’.

Allister backed up, deciding a running start was something he hadn’t yet tried.

S’like sis says. Where there’s a will, there’s a way.

Allister bounced harmlessly off of it; he tried a second time. His head was beginning to hurt again.

Not much more I can do than this.

Two more tries turned into twenty, then thirty, then fifty. Allister was beyond the point of frustration by now, simply going about the motions as if on a cycle.

They did call insanity expecting a different result by trying the same things over and over, but how was he supposed to know if what he was doing was having an impact or not? The way might well open on the next attempt or the one after that. He wasn’t going to find out if he didn’t try.

After one hundred came and went Allister couldn’t even feel the impacts anymore. They were a part of him. Just leaning against the door was producing the same response as trying to shove it was having.

Everything he’d ever wanted was on the other side, or at least he had to believe that was the case. There might well be nothing, a door to an empty room.

Allister didn’t believe that, he knew what he’d heard.

Voices he didn’t recognise could only mean one thing in his book.

Of course, the more cynical part of him tore apart his ‘everything he’d ever wanted’ statement. Did he not already have everything he’d ever wanted? A loving family who cared and supported him? The opportunity to be free and live the life he wanted? Was that not enough? Was not knowing the
past really something that should be controlling his future?

Allister didn’t know.

Maybe that was why the door refused to open. Maybe he had to be sure for anything to happen. The voice had told him his convictions needed to be stronger.

*But if I do that…I’ll be admittin’ to m’self that my life with sis isn’t enough. I’ll be sayin’ that all the work she put in for me and all the good times we shared aren’t good enough. That she isn’t good enough.*

“That some random p-people I’ve got no memories of ha-have more of a say in what I say a-and do than she does? Sis *is* family. She’s family ‘cos she put the work in! Just bein’ related doesn’t mean anythin’! I’m jus’ treatin’ her bad by tryin’ so hard! I’m sayin’ she’s not good enough! Why am I even botherin’?! She’s all I’ve ever had and I’ll I ever need!”

Allister scowled, hitting the door for good measure. Or he would’ve done had it existed. The door was gone.

Instead…a bridge.

Allister’s eyes widened, scanning left and right to make sure it wasn’t a trick; there was indeed a bridge.

Stretching far out into the night, streetlamps of dark flame at regular intervals. Black brickwork more rustic than the hotel but less imposing than the castle. Though it was hard to judge depth in the void, Allister got the impression if he were to walk on the sides of the bridge that weren’t raised he was going to fall. Fall to where it was unclear, but it didn’t seem like anywhere he wanted to be.

The bridge on the other hand seemed…inviting. The door had never had that kind of appeal.

As impossible as it seemed it had a sense of familiarity about it. Allister had no idea where it led, the end vanishing beyond the horizon, but it seemed good somehow. Like he needed to go there.

The longer he stared the better the idea sounded. Cross the bridge and there would be all the answers he needed. He’d gotten rid of the door somehow and this seemed like a far easier time than that, it was a no brainer.

Before he knew what he was doing Allister was walking towards it. Had he been here before? The voices were back, somehow reaching him from the other side of wherever the crossing led to. He needed no further encouragement.

Making his way to edge, as if in a trance, Allister prepared to continue his journey into the night.

One foot raised above the brick, and immediately Allister lost his balance, having been struck in the stomach by a cane of some kind.

“Owww!!!”

Reeling, Allister caught a glimpse of his assailant before keeling over completely.

Not a cane…but an umbrella.

“I don’t think so, child. This bridge isn’t for you.”
Winded, Allister stood up quickly, arms over his stomach in protest.

“Oww! Why’d you do that?! Who’re y-you supposed t-to be?!”

“Once you take a step you can’t come back. Trust me, it’s just how things are.”

Allister surveyed the woman standing in front of him. Midnight blue, near purple poofy hair and a high collared dress shirt made for a striking appearance, as did the stern gaze of someone not to be trifled with.

They looked to be early thirties at most, amber eyes boring into him as her cravat of equal midnight blue was adjusted condescendingly.

“As for who I am…let’s just say I’m an acquaintance here to stop you from doing something you don’t know the rules to.”

“You…” Allister shook his hands out, an anxiety banishing gesture from someone too on edge to curl up. “You…know me?”

“I said acquainted with,” the woman replied evenly. “Listen.”

“S-sorry…just…confused………sorry…”

“Stop apologising, child. You weren’t to know.” The woman retracted the umbrella and began to lean on it, gesturing to the bridge before them. “Just tell me why you’re here.”

“I…”

“And no lying,” she said succinctly. “Many people won’t admit it but I’ve no time for nonsense.”

“R-right…of course.”

Allister noted he could no longer hear any of the voices he’d followed. Was it all just an illusion then? The honest answer was he didn’t know the first thing about the place, let alone the world he was in. He’d just been forging his own path in the blind hope he’d been right. From the get-go it may well have been pointless.

The woman was handing him a hanky before Allister could comprehend he was finally crying. There was one question answered.

Long, hiccupy sobs as the weight of his plight ultimately caught up. He’d just been chasing shadows the entire time. He was alone, he was cold, he was confused, and he was scared. Putting on a brave front was just too much effort anymore. He wanted answers but more than that he wanted out. He wanted home, and warmth, his Pokémon, and his sister.

What was he even doing here?

Could he even leave this place?

“Are... *sniff*...are you magic?”

“That doesn’t answer my question exactly. Why?” The woman peered down at the teary-eyed Allister, raising an eyebrow. “Do you need a wizard perhaps?”

“J-jus’...wanna...go home. I want home...”
“Then I suppose that’s all I need to hear from you. Anyone who truly wants to cross this bridge is compelled to do so just by seeing it. I don’t think it’s your time.”

A short rap of the woman’s umbrella on the stone startled Allister, who nearly dropped the hanky in surprise.

“No, I don’t perform any tricks, and only you can get you home.”

“Oh…”

“I do think answering my question will help you figure something out though. How did you find this place? Why did you find yourself here?”

“Dunno…acc…acci…*sniff*…accident.”

“An accident?”

“Pretty m-much.” Allister made to give the hanky back, then stopped upon realising what a ridiculous idea that was. Germs aside it was wet and soggy, hardly befitting of someone as prim and proper as the woman before him. “Was chasin’…memories.”

“Ah. That makes much more sense. Then it was no accident you arrived here. Still, it is somewhat impressive.” The woman pursed her lips into a frown. “It must have taken a significant amount of energy on your part to even see this place.”

“Not…an acci…accident? Lots of…energy?”

“Quite so. No one finds this place intentionally though many try. I’m sure everyone will find it when they need to.” The woman shook her head a second time. “But trust me, child, you don’t want to cross.”

“Trust…you?” Allister sniffed away his tears and swallowed, standing taller in an effort to be more imposing; the woman did nothing but raise her eyebrow once more. “Why…should I? I’ve been…tr-tricked and trapped…more t-times today than any t-time in my life! Things I thought…made sense j-just don’t! I don’t…even know wh-what I want!”

“Then don’t trust me, the choice is yours of course. Listen instead to what I’m saying.”

The woman rapped her umbrella and Allister shrank down again. He hadn’t meant to sound so confrontational. Finally having the proper time to consider his actions of the day was piling up the regret.

Where had Mismagius gone? He sincerely hoped she was safe at least.

“If you’re not sure then the bridge isn’t for you. If you didn’t find it on purpose then the bridge isn’t for you. If you don’t know what’s on the other side then it can’t help you. Do you understand?”

“…No…”

“Correct answer. I admire the honesty.”

“………Wanted…to see…m’ parents.”

“I see. And you thought there was a repressed memory of sorts to be found, hm?”
“Y-yeah…”

“I’m sorry you didn’t find what you were after, Allister.” The woman turned, running her hand over the stone of the bridge’s wall. “Forcing yourself beyond your limit must have caused quite the headache.”

“…Mmhmm.” It was true enough. Allister’s headache hadn’t gone away since he’d stumbled across the scene before him. “But where…is this? It’s not…my imagination…r-right?”

“It depends on how you look at it.”

“That’s not v-very helpful…”

“I stopped you walking onto the bridge, that was helpful wasn’t it?”

“Y-yeah…thanks…I guess.” Allister pocketed the hanky. These weren’t his real shorts anyway so any damp wasn’t going to stick. “Are you…real?”

“Do I look real?”

“…Dunno. Imagination’s been…real today.”

“Ahaa, a fine answer as well. If you wore a little more pink I’d consider giving you a proper quiz.”

“…And you know my name too. Don’t…remember sayin’ it. Do I…know you?”

“Observant.” The woman’s face was unreadable as she evaluated the boy before her. “Like I said, acquaintances is perhaps the word I’d use. Knowing is a degree of separation we don’t have. More of a professional courtesy.”

“So…”

“If you want answers come and find me in the waking world. I promise nothing, but a nice chat over tea is nice for both parties.”

Allister furrowed his brow. He knew of nobody, even in passing, who even remotely resembled the woman. He figured he’d definitely remember knowing someone like that. Then again he thought despondently, he’d been sure he could remember his parents and look how that had turned out.

He scanned the bridge, the last cinder of hope finally dying out when no traces of life could be found; he steeled himself.

“…Okay…sounds…n-nice. But I don’t even know your n-name!” He added quickly, upon seeing the woman’s approval.

“My dear child, if you really have to ask that then I don’t know what to say. In dreams such as these we can appear as we wish with enough practice.”

“So I can…change m’self?”

“With practice,” the woman emphasised. “Why do you think you’ve experienced such turmoil from your subconscious?”

“…”
“Tell me…are you a violent person, Allister?”

“No, I don’t wanna hurt anyone. I’ve never wanted to hurt anyone…”

“Then why should your dreams be any different?”

“…”

Allister had no answer to that. He hated seeing his darkest fears be given life by his own hand no less, even if he wasn’t the one controlling it. He didn’t get to pull his own strings.

“I…”

I’ll tell you why, because you cannot control them in a meaningful way. The apparitions you have seen have no bearing upon your character.”

“…”

“Allister, perhaps it is better if I just tell you outright.”

“Tell m-me…what exactly?”

“That your mind isn’t necessarily on your side.” The woman motioned to the world around them. “No one’s is. It’s going to make you feel confused, and angry, and weak, and sad, and many things more, and that’s okay.”

“But…if I can’t trust my own mind, what can I? I feel s-so guilty! I d-don’t mean t’ feel these things. I f-feel guilty about wantin’ to know more when I know Bea’s my family. Like…like I shouldn’t complain. That I should be gr-grateful I’ve got anyone at all. Some people don’t even get that…”

“Just because something is natural, doesn’t make it good or trustworthy. Trusting the mushrooms in the Glimwood Tangle just because they’re ‘natural’ will lead to one’s untimely demise if one’s mind is truly opaque.”

“Okay…” Allister didn’t exactly understand the context, but the analogy seemed to work.

“What you’re experiencing is called an Intrusive Thought. Everyone gets them, you’re not alone in your desires. Feeling bad is very natural for something out of our control. There are many things out of everyone’s control, and trying to think of your mind as outside of that is simply incorrect. It will just lead to problems and confusion as I can see it has done. If you don’t realise something exists then how can you improve, hm?”

“…”

It was a lot to take in. Until then Allister didn’t know what he was feeling had a name. The ingratitude and selfishness his own mind conjured had always seemed so…definite. Like he was to blame even though the thoughts come about of their own accord.

Meditation would no doubt have helped but the shame of thinking anything along those lines had caused Allister to shy away from telling Bea. It was irrational but he didn’t want her to be mad. Now with what he knew…maybe he didn’t have to.

“You know…a lot. About m-me.”

“You’re a pre-adolescent boy with a strong sense of family. It’s as obvious as the best Pokémon
type. Your answer would be ghosts, no?"

“…Well that is obvious…heh…”

“It’s a given. I can’t share your opinion but I respect it.”

“…”

“…”

“…So…I don’t…have to be ashamed…of wantin’ answers? I’m not bein’ ungrateful to sis?”

“No, child. You’re a very curious boy, Allister, even among children and for something so big to be missing from your life it’s very understandable.”

“…Thanks. I think…I think I needed to hear that.”

“I’m glad to be of help.” The woman folded the umbrella under her arm, smiling knowingly. “The answers you’re after aren’t in your mind, but in the waking world. I hope you can appreciate that a little more.”

“…Why though? Why can’t…I remember them?”

The woman shrugged.

“Any number of reasons. As I said, I don’t have all the answers. It was only chance that I was here when you were, but I’m glad for it. I think I’ll enjoy our talk when we next meet.”

“…Next time?”

“Tea, or have you forgotten already?”

“N-no…but I still don’t know how t-to…find you? You’re…nice to talk with. I don’t usually say that about people.”

The woman chuckled lightly, turning away.

“Then I should be honoured. You’re earned a hint.” She patted her skirt pocket slightly, indicating Allister to do the same. “Perhaps you should check my handkerchief more closely.”

“H-huh? Hey wait!” The woman had already faded. “Who are you?” The darkness gave no answer; Allister spun around only to find the bridge had disappeared. It was if his adventures had never happened at all. No hotel, no garden, no bridge.

The atmosphere was considerably warmer than he’d first remembered though. It was fuzzy and nice, not at all like the encroaching cold that had plagued his body so far. It was just…good.

“Am I…waking up?”

Without a second though Allister scrambled to find the cloth scrunched into his pocket. It was already fading, light streaming into the world all around him as his body regained control over itself.

The fabric was heavily soiled, Allister cursing himself for being such a cry baby and obscuring anything that had been written. As it happened there was nothing to be found on the first side, Allister hastily flipping it before it was gone completely
“Huh? It’s…a number?”

Allister opened his eyes slowly.

The ceiling didn’t look familiar until he blinked the sleep away. He was downstairs.

He had no idea why but the number 910 seemed to be something he should be aware of. That and a woman whose description he could barely remember; Allister shook his head. Dreams were weird.

“Strange…coulda sworn I was sleepin’ upstairs?” Perhaps Bea had moved him? The blanket draped over him would certainly indicate that.

Allister caught sight of his sister snoring softly in the seat opposite, face peaceful.

“So that means…” Allister quickly lifted the blanket, to his utter delight finding his gently purring Mimikyu fast asleep. There was the source of his warmth alright. “Sis found you.” He stroked the outside of the disguise, intrigued by the fibrous feeling underneath his fingertips. “Told you she would…”

The rest of his team were fast asleep too, Mismagius sleeping in the arms of Dusknoir on the other chair. Clearly they’d all worked through the night to find them. He didn’t know what time it was but the sun was streaming in through the curtains like a blaze of glory.

Though he’d only just woken up Allister felt ever so tired. It was as if he’d had two days crammed into one. The sun could be in his eyes all it wanted: he was going back to sleep.

Allister closed his eyes again.

This time he had no dreams of which to speak.

Chapter End Notes

Welcome back folks. You know my bad habit of splitting chapters into two if they're long? Not this time, you lucky lucky people. A glorious 10,000+ words this time, I figured a lot of people who read this are going to be spending some time indoors over the coming weeks I'd give you a little more ^_^

This chapter is very surreal, and a lot of it is up to interpretation. I really tried to give Allister's dreamscape a personality all of its own not just 'there's dreams lmao', and there's a couple of easter eggs for those with sharper eyes.

As for me, I was sucker-punched by an impromptu 7am fieldtrip from my university, only to then have it cancelled. Heh, talk about a mood whiplash! Figured I'd use the time to draw something of my own instead of being a mooch, of which I have to give two huge shoutouts once again!

CalculatingMinutiae, also known as 2Sp00ky on Tumblr, (who I'm apparently shouting out every chapter now, but why not they're fantastic) did some legendary artwork of 'Dollhouse!Bea' which legitimately scared me. All those who thought they were safe, think again, as their beautiful piece is embedded into this chapter. It was
also apparently done on a whim and fairly quickly which I find staggering. Massive respect to them.

The second is a user who apparently made a Tumblr account just to let me know they'd made some art, of which I really don't know what to say, omegatheace! I'm touched, and the art is fantastic, lively, and is a comic style panel of Bea and Allister's team of ghost types when she first enters her house in Chapter 10. Thusly, you can find it embedded in chapter 10.

Now...as for my art. Heh, I goofed up a tiny bit. I hard committed to doing something myself for once and ended up absolutely DESTROYING my dominant wrist. That's carpal tunnel for you, don't be fooled kids, listen to your hand when it's telling you enough is enough. Don't be a 'stubborn idiot with a pea brain' as my housemate called me. So now I have a cast and my arm is as useful as a cinderblock (not unlike Bea this chapter), but I did end up producing something hey ho! Housemate signed my cast with a pea too so I don't forget, bless her.

I won't embed it yet as I wanted the spotlight to be on the two terrific artists who did something, but it is up on my Tumblr page. I'll provide some links at the end of the notes so you can check their pages yourselves! I made a spotify playlist (yet again borrowing from calculatingMinutiae, I know, shhhh) that relates to the themes of Bea-ing a Sister. Family, loss, love, and pain that maybe the world isn't as you want it to be (and that's okay). Now's a good a time as any to share it as there'll be a lot of us staying cosy inside for a bit.

https://2sp00ky.tumblr.com/ For the lovely calculatingMinutiae
https://omegatheace.tumblr.com/ For the lovely omegatheace
https://open.spotify.com/playlist/4pxGXrKnAe5iWfR4oZ2v12 Bea-ing a Sister playlist to help pass the time

Thanks for reading folks. Remember to be kind to others, and to yourselves ^_^

End Notes

I mean in the anime Brock's mother turns the rock type gym into a water gym, even though Misty's sisters are running one in the region? The compromise in the end is the gym becomes a dual rock/water gym? So there can be more than one gym of a type in a region, and gyms can be dual typed, so siblings sharing a gym isn't too crazy. Blue didn't even have a type!

It's also a vague headcannon that Allister suffers from some sort of ambiguous mental health problem (in this case anxiety). Does Bea ever wear shoes, who knows? You'll track mud everywhere!

This was just a silly little story I felt like writing just because. There isn't enough Bea or Allister in this world, and there likely never will be!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!