Things I Can Never Say

by Snowden

Summary

Erika invites Jasmine to stay with her in Celadon in order to teach the younger girl how to be a Gym Leader. She reflects on their friendship and how much it means to her amidst a difficult life.

Notes

This is a side-story and prequel to Olivine Romance, explaining how Erika and Jasmine’s friendship formed. It is especially pertinent to Chapter 57 and should be read immediately before or after that chapter, if possible.
I've Been Waiting To See You Again

I found her much as I had first found her: lost, forlorn, a little dazed, and with a Magnemite in her arms.

It was easy to spot her. In a sea of cacophonous cosmopolitan colors, her pure white sundress stood out, radiant as the lighthouse she so often calls home. And also as a lighthouse, she stood stock still despite the tempestuous churn of the airport terminal crowds washing around her. As the minutes wore on and the young lady refused to explore, it became apparent that I would have to leave my perch and go to greet her. With a heavy sigh, I departed my overwatch and descended the escalator into the mob.

"Jasmine!" I called, waving my arm high.

Her demeanor roused immediately upon hearing my voice.

"Erika?" she said aloud, perking up. "Erika!" she repeated excitedly once she spotted me.

We hugged, an act made difficult with Magnemite between our chests, at least until Jasmine set the Pokémon aside and renewed our greeting. I then stood her back to appraise her.

She has a milder tan than expected for a young woman living by the beach. Darkened folds under her eyes speak to too many late nights. Her figure is made up of bones and angles and pointy parts, from her lithe feet to her sharp facial features to those curious hair stylings she keeps.

"Oh? Are you still wearing these things?" I said, thumbing one of her twin spike-tails.

"Yes. Of course. What's wrong with them?"

"I thought they were a passing phase, something you would get tired of."

"I've worn my hair this way ever since you met me. Ever since I was a kid. How could you think it was a fad of mine?"

"I don't really know where I got the idea. They just seem like something a middle-schooler would wear."

"They're fine!"

"How do they stay up? And how are they so spiky? I've always marveled at that. It doesn't feel like you use spray or gel."

"It's natural. Hey stop playing with them!" she huffed. I would not withdraw my playful hands, however, and so she forcefully extricated herself from my reach. "Erika, please! It's been thirty seconds and you're already making fun of me!"

"My apologies. I can't help it. I always wanted a little sister to fuss over," I confessed.

"I can't say I really wanted a big sister growing up. I'd prefer a little sister, so I could boss her around, and not vice versa."

It wasn't so much what she said, but the matter-of-fact way in which she said it, that made it so funny. She was being completely serious. I myself could not take her seriously, and so burst out laughing as a result. Immediately mindful of the public space I was in and the image of respectability
I must keep up, I struggled successfully to put my humorous outburst under control. Inhale, exhale. Inhale, exhale.

"Ah, ha… You're so sweet. How are you doing? How was your flight?" I asked.

"It was okay." She then slipped into a conversation full of mundane details about her trip, explaining and complaining about her Magnemite's malfunctioning Pokeball and security and check-in and rude co-passengers. It was interesting to see how easily she slipped into the familiarity of long acquaintance, talking as if we had last seen each other this morning, and as if we had shared a decade of close company. Neither were true, though. Others might think it rude, that she should be more excited, attentive, and affectionate in greeting her friend after so many months of separation. I, however, counted it a blessing. I felt it heartwarming that she would feel so comfortable around me, even though we had only met a year ago and the distance between our cities kept visits to a minimum.

"The luggage claim is this way," I told her.

"Not necessary."

I took a misstep, stumbled, and nearly fell.

"You jest."

She shook her head.

I eyed her lone carry-on piece, a duffel bag one might mistake for an oversized purse. Further observation would reveal that an undersized purse was contained within the bag- meaning there was even less space for apparel and other travel necessities.

"You do realize you will be staying here for a month, don't you?" I asked, fearing the worst.

"Yes," she said with a simple nod.

"And yet you brought so little."

"Yes."

"And you expect that miniscule wardrobe will last you the entire trip?"

"Yes."

"I'm speechless."

Truly. The ideas this young woman entertains. I don't think she could fit more than two dresses in that space. She'll be doing laundry every other day just to keep clean, to say nothing of the affront to fashion.

"Let me see what you have in here," I demanded, and took the bag from off her shoulder. It was much heavier than expected.

The zipper came open.

"Magnemite." 

It's a Pokémon.
Rather, a second Pokémon, identical to the one she was carrying in her arms. Jasmine helpfully pulled it out for me.

"I think it's some kind of interaction between the Earth's magnetosphere and the solar flare we got a few days ago. Disrupted their internal charges or something and made them sick. Anyways, they can't get into their Pokeballs, so I had to carry them by hand."

My limp hands reached the bottom of her duffel bag, my face aghast at what I found.

One pair of underwear. A plastic bag with toothbrush and comb. Her purse.

That was all.

"Jasmine, you've nothing."

I'm going to cry.

"Hmm?"

"Where are your change of clothes? Where are your socks? Your bras? Your pajamas?"

"I don't have any," she said, confused.

"Why didn't you bring them?" I asked.

"No, I mean I don't have any."

"You don't mean… Oh dear. Oh dear…"

"What is it?"

"This is all you own?" I held out the underwear.

"No," she answered.

Oh thank the ancestors-

"My other pair got caught in Mother's laundry, and I didn't have time to wait for them to dry. Our dryer broke down last month."

Ancestors, you fail me!

"Jasmine, may I ask a question?"

"No."

I halted mid-breath and blinked.

I've been rebuffed. The sting of rejection, it hurts.

Then I remembered my position in this friendship and asked anyways.

"There are four fundamental necessities every parent is universally obligated to provide their child: food, water, shelter, and clothing. Do your parents not clothe you?"

Jasmine appraised her own figure. She placed a hand over her stomach, and the gesture reminded me how incredibly thin and wiry she was.
"You mean my parents are supposed to feed me?"

I covered my mouth in shock.

"That was a joke," she said.

I scowled.

"Your jokes aren't funny dear."

She frowned, and then answered seriously.

"I'm supposed to buy my own clothes with my allowance, but I just spend it all on Pokémon items instead. It doesn't bother me if my closet isn't as stuffed as other girls'. Most days it doesn't matter, I just wear my school uniform. I could've brought that, but it didn't seem right."

How to respond to that? There is so much wrong here!

"Firstly, to be ascetic is one thing, but if this is the entirety of your wardrobe then you own virtually nothing and that is not acceptable! Especially for a woman with whom I share company! Secondly, while a school uniform is out of place on a summer vacation, it is still better than nothing at all. Thirdly, my dear girl, clothing is a human right. Your mother should be ashamed for forcing you to spend your allowance on something so basic and vital."

Jasmine suddenly turned away.

Is she shaking? What's the matter? Did I offend her?

"Are you all right?"

"I don't want to talk about that woman," she muttered.

"Your mother?"

She nodded.

"I'm sorry."

In all of our previous conversations, Jasmine assiduously avoided the topic of her parents, especially her mother. There is definitely a tension in her household, but I had no idea the mere mention of it could send the poor girl into such a nervous state. Not knowing how to handle the delicate topic, I decided it would be best to keep quiet and approach it another time, in private, when I was better prepared.

While she settled down I repacked her bag and slung it over my shoulder. We were past the secure section of the terminal and so Magnemite was allowed to hover freely.

"I'm sorry," I repeated. "I'll not mention her again. However, we must address your lack of apparel."

"That's alright."

"We were going to go to my gym first, but this requires a change in plans. Yes. Definitely. Celadon Mall. Come, we're going to get you a proper set of summer attire."

She assented with a mumble and then took my offered hand. Hers was very cold, I noted. I gripped it all the harder. In this way we exited the airport and hailed a cab. As we pulled away, my cellphone
"Hello?"

"Erika, I've got a problem, and you know what that means," said a voice on the other end of the line. My grip on the phone tightened.

"If you have a problem, then that means I have a problem," I whispered.

"Got that right miss. I want to see that pretty bob-head of yours over here quick."

"I have a guest."

"Ditch them."

"But… I can't."

"You playing me? Think your girly friend is more important than us? Hmmm? Ehh?"

"No! It's not that…"

"Be a good girl and don't make a fuss."

"I'm sorry, but, it's not possible. It's too risky right now, and I cannot leave my friend."

"Wah? Why do you women have to be so difficult? You're not under-nosing us are ya?"

"No! I promise I'm not. I'll… I will see you tonight. The situation can wait at least that long, right?" I pleaded, already guessing what the issue was.

The voice cut away for a moment, although I could make out some underhanded mutterings that sounded like curses.

"Fine. Tonight, midnight, no later. The boys will be expecting you, usual protocol."

The line went dead.

My hands shook as I clicked the cellphone shut and put it away.

"Who was that?" Jasmine asked innocently.

"My parents," I said with a false smile. "We'll be eating with them tomorrow."

"Oh."

She leaned her head against the window, apparently tired from the flight.

"The mall, please," I told our driver. I leaned back and observed my friend.

…sigh.

It's been so very long. Of course we must find her a cute dress. She's much too sad-looking as-is.
"Here we are."

"Oh!"

Jasmine stared in quiet awe at the spectacle.

She last visited Celadon six months ago, before I assumed the full title of Gym Leader and had all the renovations implemented. The gym has always catered to a particular segment of green-thumb enthusiasts, but under my ownership it has been transformed into a veritable palatial garden. The dazzling display of Rose-Mallow, Purple Wave Petunias, Zinnias, Globe Amaranths, Stella de Oro Daylilies, Evergreen Candytufts, Marigolds, Cinderblooms, Sunskirt Gladioulus, Nagrand Arrowheads, and Dusclops-eye Chrysanthemums had rendered my friend speechless.

She herself had become a colorful display of gaiety, quite in contrast to her typically modest outfits and glum demeanor. Even though it was quite a battle to find something she would acquiesce to wearing, in the end I believe I made an excellent selection. We had found her a short-length sunflower-pattern sundress. The bright and cheerful outfit matched her mood as she romped around the indoor gardens. Once she found the sunflower stalks, she jumped in among them and crouched.

"What are you doing?" I asked with a chuckle.

"Shh! I'm camouflaged! You can't see me!"

I stifled myself, in order not to let my chuckle turn into a full torrent of laughter. It was so extremely rare for her to make a good joke, I feel guilty for not rewarding her humor. Alas, I must maintain my composure. We are in my gym now, and challengers are watching. I have to keep up appearances, less the trainers begin to think I am not worthy of the respect due the position.

Yet, here is another supposed Gym Leader, acting nothing like a Gym Leader, nor even an adult.

"What are these?"

"Eucalyptus trees."

"And these?"

"Mossdeep Magnolias."

"And these?"

"Bellsprout."

"Oh!" She was trying to smell the plant in question when it nibbled on her cheek. She squeaked and leapt away. "I've never seen them shaped like this!"

"It's a foreign breed, raised in the savanna."

"Is that why its snout is so narrow?"

"Yes, in order to reach through the thick grass and get at the insects in the soil." I motioned for her to follow me. "And with that, let us finish our sight-seeing and move on to the matter for which you are here for."
Jasmine perked up.

I know that she likes gardening, aromatics, flower arrangement, fashion, and sightseeing, that these subjects interest her and she has some competency in each, and that she will indulge my passion for these topics for hours on end. Deep down in her heart, though, her true love is and will always be Pokémon. Nothing else excites her more.

"I understand Mr. Beret has turned nearly all functions over to you now," I said.

"He's completely retired."

Mr. Beret was her predecessor as Olivine City's Gym Leader.

"What about the things you aren't allowed to do because of your age?"

"My dad handles the financial stuff, and Mr. Pryce takes care of the League representation."

"I see. Well, if you are sixteen now, then you have about two years to get ready for the transition."

"Yep."

"Splendid. More time than what was afforded me. Let's get to it."

The Pokémon League does not allow youth under the age of eighteen to be in charge of a gym. Teenagers cannot be trusted with all of the legal and financial duties that come with the position. However, it is not uncommon for an under-aged trainer to be appointed Acting Gym Leader, on account of their raw talent and prowess on the battlefield. Such was the case for both me and Jasmine.

I had recently turned eighteen and completed the strenuous battery of tests needed to take full control of the gym. It was now my turn to impart my knowledge upon my young friend so that she may become a Gym Leader in her own right. It was for this purpose that Jasmine is taking a three week vacation in Celadon.

"Are we going to battle?" she asked.

"Not today. I have challengers shortly, I'd like you to observe. In the meantime, let me show you how the match-recording system works."

"Okay."

I dislike technology. No gadget is better than a means to an end to me. I've begrudgingly learned how to operate these machines because it is necessary to my job. Jasmine, however, is a natural-born technophile. She had no trouble whatsoever navigating the digital menus and myriad of data options. It got to the point where she was skipping ahead of my instructions, guessing what to do before I told her. Twenty minutes into the lesson, and...

"What's this?" she asked.

"I don't know."

She clicked.

"It's a filter option. Hey, I bet if you sort it this way *click* *click* you can arrange all of the ineligibles and no-shows and then you don't have to click each one to check if they need a battle report or not."
"Huh." I thought it through. "That would save a lot of time."

…she was the one teaching me how to operate the program. What a wonderful little genius I've befriended.

"Oh, it's time."

Jasmine eagerly followed me out to the main arena. From beyond the foliage the sounds of violence reached our ears. Challengers were making their way through my subordinates, the best inevitably working their way towards me. I readied three Poyeballs.

A foul odor wafted into the area. The cry of a Gloom fainting could be heard; I recognized it as Lisa's. She was my lieutenant and last line of defense. A challenger was coming.

"Good luck," Jasmine said.

A Raticate jumped through the stalks of Willowbrush, Cutting them to shreds in the process. Its trainer followed behind it, swatting aside more stalks as he passed. Completely unnecessary, there was a path.

"Hi there Erika."

He greeted me with a high-pitched, nasally voice, quite fitting for the little slime of a man it belonged to: balding, bespectacled, comically oversized snout, overgrown grey beard, hunched posture, dirty white lab coat, patched up jeans, a badge with the name "Lepert" labeled upon it. I was confronted with this unsavory sight, and although my personal tastes were highly offended, I was forced by custom to greet him with professional courtesy.

"Hello, and welcome. I am Erika, as you know, the Gym Leader of the Celadon City Pokémon Gym. I will test your ability as a trainer of Pokémon, to see whether you have the skills and knowledge to merit the Rainbow Badge and move closer to your goal. Prepare yourself, for I am not accustomed to losing."

"Hooo! You're a formal one! Very formal! And very be-u-ti-FULL! What a catch! Hehehehe! Don't mind if our acquaintance lasts a little bit longer than this battle. Mmm? Sound fun? Erika?"

"I'm not sure about that…"

How rude! I had wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt, but his words are quickly vindicating my initial assessment of this man: he is a major creep!

But I mustn't say anything.

I must maintain my composure.

"Oh honey, you look nervous. Relaaaaaax. Quickest way to lose is ta start doubting yourself." He has both hands behind his back, approaching the field in a zigzagging line. He didn't stop once he reached the sideline, but continued, deliberately plodding his way across until he stood directly before me. "Pleased to meet you."

He held his hand out. I flinched.

"Aww, you flinched. Am I that ugly? I coulda wore my toupee today but the youngsters like to make fun of it. It's no fun being laughed at, is it?" The strange old man leaned forward, twisting so that he could look up into my bowed face. "Nice tots," he casually remarked with a disgusting grin.
"Please," I muttered.

I don't know what to do with these kinds of men. I try putting up a brave front, show the world my best impression of dignity and calm, and pray that the people I meet see that and return it in kind. Perverted men with no sense of shame, decency, or compunction, I don't know how to respond to. This man is giving me goosebumps.

"May we begin the battle?" I asked, almost desperately.

"Battle? I suppose, but why? Why why why why? So much violence, violence, VIOLENCE! It's so banal, so unbecoming of a gentle-looking lady like yourself. Why don't you just hand over that Rainbow badge and we'll have a nice little chat over tea? We can talk about art and philosophy and all that liberal art prattle."

Is there any excuse I can think of to pardon myself from this situation? I can't think of any off the top of my head.

"You're such a pretty girl. Tell me, pretty girl, do you get a lot of attention from the men folk? You're a good-looking lady, hooo, and a Gym Leader! And how formal, how regal! It must be nice being you. You get to pick and choose which men you'll entertain, right? If one's boring you, but say the word and he is dismissed. They're not good enough for your imperial majesty, are they? Kinda arrogant, kinda arrogant if you ask me. Hey, you ever been rejected before? I bet you haven't."

"No…" I murmured.

"But I'm pretty sure a pretty girl like you's done your fair share of rejecting. All one-sided. You ever feel for the poor schmucks you've turned down? Ever thought how bummed that can be for them? How embarrassing! How infuriating! It's insulting when a man puts his best foot forward and gets snubbed for no discernible reason. I'd hate to be in his shoes. Rather be in your shoes, dictating and lording over and thinking myself too good for the low-life skullduggery. But that's all aside the matter, maybe I'm jumping to conclusions."

"What do you want?" I whispered.

The old man began licking his forefinger, his wide-eyed stare never leaving my chest area.

"Hey! Are you going to battle or not?!"

Jasmine's yelling jerked the man to his senses.

"Oh, what's this? Another beauty! Teehehe!"

"We're in a gym! If you're not going to battle then get out of here! You can pick up women at a bar if that's what you're after!"

"She's fiery! Who's this, Erika?"

I did not like the way the man kept calling me by my given name. It seemed too casual, too intimate, for a stranger to be using, let alone a disturbing creep such as him.

"Erika, if you're not going to call security, I will," Jasmine threatened.

"Oh fine, fine! No need for that. A Pokémon battle it is. Bunch of amazons around here."

I didn't realize I had been holding my breath until it all came whooshing out. The stranger scampered
his way back to the challenger's stand at the other end of the arena. With him vacating my personal space, I felt like I finally had the breathing room to reproach him.

"Lepert, I would appreciate it if you kept your visit professional. That was very rude and uncivil."

"Meh, meh. It's not like you're the one getting rejected here. Hurts, you know, stings! Like sulfuric acid! I would know, I've worked with the stuff."

"Your Pokémon, please."

"Oh poo. Alright, Ratty-Daddy, you're up!"

The Raticate scampered to the center of the arena.

"Tangela, go forth."

The Raticate bristled and jumped side to side. Judging by its entrance, it knew Cut, and would try to use that attack to negate my Grass-type attacks.

"Very well. Let us begin."

"Mmm. Aha!" Lepert shouted, as if he had figured something out. "Hyper Fang!" he ordered. His Pokémon dashed in to execute the command.

"Poison Powder."

"Nuh uh uh!" Lepert waggled a finger.

The oversized rat pulled its head down and rammed Tangela with a Headbutt, knocking her onto her back. She tried righting herself and releasing poisonous spores, but the opponent had already backed out of range.

"I believe your call was for Hyper Fang, not Headbutt," I said.

"Was that it? I don't know. Maybe that's a good idea. Headbutt!"

There was no way to know if the foe would Headbutt as ordered or revert to Hyper Fang; this trainer was playing mind-games. What poor sportsmanship. "Constrict," I commanded. This should counter either attack.

Yet, just as Tangela's vines began encircling the charging Pokémon, Raticate lashed out with both teeth and claws, shredding the vines. It followed with a Tail Whip. Tangela was turned around and made defenseless against the final Skull Bash. She landed face-first in the dirt, and although moving, she could not get up.

"Look pretty, talk pretty, and you battle pretty too. 'Fraid that doesn't do you much good in a street fight."

"Return, Tangela."

"Fearow, your turn." Lepert had Raticate retreat and replaced it with a Flying-type. He now has both the numerical and type advantage. This isn't going well for me. "What's next?"

"Victreebel, it is your turn. I need your best," I implored.

This isn't over. Now I know to expect his Pokémon to ignore his orders and fight independently. To
counter free-style, one must go on offense.

"Drill Peck."

"Sludge."

Fearow dove straight towards Victreebel, making for an easy target for Sludge. Yet, the bird took the ball of poison head on and kept diving. Victreebel couldn't dodge the Drill Peck.

"Swallow! Constrict!"

Unable to dodge or stop Fearow, my Pokémon did the only thing it could do to survive the deadly beak- it ate the attack. Quite literally. Fearow's beak, head, and neck disappeared down Victreebel's gullet. My Pokémon clamped down, trapping its prey. Her vines wrapped around Fearow's wings and legs, preventing escape.

"Gust!" Lepert called out.

Fearow’s wings broke free and let loose a powerful flap, lifting the entangled Pokémon into the air. They arced to a peak and then hurtled to the ground, landing with a dull thud some yards away. The effort did not succeed in freeing the bird. Victreebel renewed and strengthened her Constrict, immobilizing the foe for good.

"Aww! Fight! Drill Peck!"

"Acid!"

Vicreebel's bell shivered and shook violently, evidence to the desperate conflict taking place within. Fearow’s Drill Peck would be causing damage all around Victreebel's internal orifice, even as the plant Pokemon's Acid acted upon the bird's head.

After a minute of thrashing and lurching, the Flying-type finally came out, stumbling towards its trainer.

"Did ya get it?" Lepert said, hopeful grin on his face- quickly turning to disgust as the Fearow flopped to the floor.

"Vic-tree," my Pokémon growled, asserting its victory.

"Bah! Scum-suckle. Get your flap-a-flap back in the ball, ya useless egg-whelp."

Even to his own Pokémon, he's crude and abhorrent. I want to say something, but should I? I'm afraid…

"Your Pokémon fought hard! Don't call it names!"

Oh no.

"You need to treat your Pokémon with respect! Say you're sorry!"

Jasmine was yelling at the challenger. Lepert looked at her in bemusement.

"Appreciate your advice, little girl," he said.

"I am not a little girl, I am a Gym Leader!" she shouted back.
"Well then, I may need to talk with whoever put you in charge of a gym, tell them a professional institution is no place for loud-mouth precocious brats."

Jasmine looked about to start a war. This isn't good. There's no telling what a man like him would do if antagonized. I can't let this escalate.

"Jasmine, please, let's not antagonize him."

"But-!"

"No matter how disagreeable you or I might find him, he is a guest in my gym," I hastily explained. Truthfully, I just wanted to finish this battle and pray he leaves without further incident.

She scowled at me and reluctantly slunk back into her seat.

"Now, let us continue." I turned to the challenger. Lepert was picking at his ear.

"Weezing's up."

The origin of the foul smell from earlier revealed itself. A trio of interconnected gas bags spewing noxious poisons floated into the arena.

"That Victreebel looks mighty tired. Should be easy," he commented.

He has a point, my Pokémon didn't appear to be ready for another fight.

"Victreebel, come back." Instead of recalling her to her Pokeball, however, I waved for her to come back to the sideline. Once she arrived, I kneeled down and whispered a hint to her. Victreebel nodded.

"Vileplume will be next."

We each now have two Pokémon.

This is an unusual match-up. How will Weezing fight? Vileplume is part Poison-type, so that Poison is not super-effective against her Grass-typing. On the other hand, Weezing's typing resists all of Vileplume's attacks. Neither of our Pokémon were fit to counter the other.

"Vileplume, let's try Sleep Powder," I ordered first.

Lepert spat out one succinct word from the side of his lips:

"Ka-boom."

Before I could comprehend or react, Weezing tackled Vileplume and Exploded. Both Pokémon, and a good portion of the arena, were engulfed in a single massive fireball. The sudden roar made me flinch and raise my arms to protect myself. Heat and debris washed over me. When I could finally let my arms down, I found my kimono dirtied with ash and dust. No creature could be seen moving amidst the remnants of the blast.

"Why?!" I uttered. "Explosion is a move of last resort!"

"Simple and elementary. Hehehehe! Ha! What a hoot. Victor-sphincter over there is a farting breeze from blowing over, while my Ratty-Daddy is pretty much tip-top ready-ta-rumble. Heh heh ha ha. G.G. princess."
Vileplume was shriveled up, most of her body buried and hidden underneath her ashened flower petals. This is not good. Actually, it is somewhat dire. I hurriedly recalled her to her Pokeball.

"Jasmine, come here."

My friend hopped up.

"Please take Vileplume to the healing machine."

"But I'll miss your fight!"

"Sorry, but Vileplume needs treatment right away."

"I'm worried that he'll beat you!" she protested.

"Then that will be that. He will have his badge and then he will leave. Sometimes a Gym Leader has to accept defeat," I said, sounding- and feeling- already defeated.

"You don't understand! A creep like that… if he wins, do you think he'll settle for a badge?"

I froze up.

In my time with her, I have seen many negative emotions pass across Jasmine's face. Fear was not one of them. Fear was now etched into her expression.

This isn't right. She has too many burdens, too many worries, to be allowed to fear for my safety. When confronted by such a menacing man, I began doubting myself, preparing myself to lose simply to appease him and avoid incurring any sort of ill will from him. That is the sign of a victim, and I will not become a victim, and I will not cause Jasmine to worry.

"Don't worry. By the time you return, I will have won this battle. Go." I clasped her hands, the Pokeball held between our palms.

"Cocky cocky!" Lepert overheard us and let out a yowling insult.

"I'll hurry." Jasmine grasped my hands hard. "Don't lose," she commanded, looking me straight in the eyes. A chill ran through my body- no, not quite, for a chill is cold and denuding, but this jolt was warm and uplifting, and made me feel empowered. She took Vileplume in the pokeball and dashed away.

She's fast- almost as fast as Whitney, and much more agile.

"Ah, good, the brat's gone."

Lepert's voice took on a lower, more sinister tone.

I turned to him.

"I will defeat you, and then I will personally escort you out of my gym," I asserted.

"Beat me? Ain't happening. Time to teach you a little lesson in humility. Best get you re-acclimated to your place on the totem pole, Erika."

What did he mean by that?

"Ratty-Daddy, get up there."
"Victreebel, just as we discussed."

My Pokemon bobbed in acknowledgment.

Raticate began scampering to the center of the field, but unexpectedly took a tight turn and positioned itself on the far left side.

"Ugh! That's not good. Victreebel, try to corner it with Razor Leaf!"

"Cut! Screech!"

The barrage of slicing leaves were slashed apart and then blown away. Victreebel flinched under the subsequent ear-splitting sonic assault.

"Quick Attack!"

"No you don't! Sludge!"

Victreebel recovered faster than Lepert or Raticate anticipated. The foe managed to dodge aside, letting the Sludge hurl harmlessly past. My heart jumped. Raticate had jumped into the center, right where I wanted.

"Screech!" Lepert ordered.

Raticate had no intention of staying at range, though. It began a zigzag dash towards Victreebel. Once in melee range, anything- a Cut, a Bite, a Scratch- would probably faint my Pokémon.

"Ratty!"

It's fast!

Lepert opened his mouth in excitement.

"Now!"

Vines burst through the dirt, tripping up Raticate as it ran over them. They began writhing and whipping, entangling the creature in their grasp.

"Ha! What?! Oh! Well-played!" Lepert said, clapping. "I bet you had Victreebel set those up while it was "resting" on the sideline! Too bad. Ratty-Daddy, Cut yourself free."

Raticate jerked around and gnawed the roots apart with Cut, quickly liberating itself.

"That's not all. Did you know that the most toxic part of poison ivy is, in fact, its roots?" I asked, with just a trace of conceited smugness.

"Pffha! Wow! You're just full o' tricks!"

Raticate lurched, spitting and coughing.

"So you poisoned Ratty-Daddy. Con-grapes! So tell me, how long does the poison take to faint a Pokémon? Two minutes? Five?"

I stared blank-face in reply.

"Thought so."
Lepert sneered.

"Eat 'em."

Raticate hopped into a run, then a mad-dash towards Victreebel. The Grass-type was stuck. Her vines were ingrained into the earth, necessary to control the root network it had planted as a trap. She was trying to extricate herself, but it would take just a few seconds too long.

Raticate closed the last three yards with a pounce- and then dropped to the turf.

I let out a big breath of relief.

"WHAT!?!"

Victreebel pulled her vines free of the ground and hopped over to Raticate. The creature was jerking intermittently like a toy at the end of its battery life, completely unable to attack.

"You made the assumption that Victreebel's root trap was laced with Poison Powder. I probably should have corrected you by clarifying that it was laced with Stun Spore, but my apologies, it slipped my mind," I said.

"Thrice sneaky snitchy sniveling-" Lepert's rambling trailed off into a string of inaudible profanities. In a fit of anger he threw a Pokeball to the ground and began stomping on it.

"Power Whip."

Victreebel beefed up its dominant vine, swung back like a shot-put hurdler, and let fly. Raticate was sent end-over-end, bouncing across the field much as a tumbleweed in an old western film would. It came to a stop near the sideline. There was no miraculous recovery from the creature.

The match was ended.

I smiled, laughed, and would have broken into a joyful outburst of celebration, had I not caught myself. I couldn't relax yet. Where was Lepert? I expected him to be charging towards me, ready to take out his frustration with a verbal assault on my own person.

"See ya later."

To my surprise, he was already strolling towards the exit, Pokeballs in one hand, the other waving goodbye.

Was that it?

No tantrum, no snide remarks, no lechery?

Some people… there's no predicting what they'll do. How frustrating!

Then I found myself being spun around and embraced.

"Oh gosh, I didn't think you could do it but you did! I saw what you did with the roots, that was really clever! You've got to teach me how to battle like that!"

Jasmine was thoroughly impressed by my performance.

That makes me happy, happier than winning the battle itself.
"Well, yes, I told you to trust me, didn’t I? What about Vileplume?"

"She’s healing up, the machine said she’ll be ready in ten minutes."

"Oh dear."

"Hmm? What’s wrong?"

I nodded to a middle-aged woman approaching us, flanked by a Ponyta and Wigglytuff.

"I believe I’ll have to do without Vileplume for this match."

"Haaa..." Jasmine sighed. "I know how this goes."

"A Gym Leader is not done after one battle. It is a never ending fight with no lasting victory, no final goal to strive for. That is our duty," I recited.

Jasmine deflated into herself, reverting to her usual dour, dismal self.

"At least this one isn’t a guy," she noted.

"Well, yes. That man was beyond reprehensible! Thank you."

"For what?" Jasmine asked.

Yet the new challenger lady was waiting, so I left Jasmine pondering what she was being thanked for…

…and cursed myself for not having the courage to explain it to her.

_Courage, _Jasmine, _that is what you gave me, and why I am grateful to you. Without it, all of my strength and all of my skill are useless against even the pettiest of challengers. Your stubborn determination not only teaches me _how_ to be brave, but what’s more, your enduring innocence gives me a reason _why_ to be brave- so that I can protect you._
The sky was made of fire. It felt much earlier in the day than it really was, while my body's internal clock told me it was much later than it really was. The truth of the hour lay in between these two indicators, or to be precise, it was 7:12 in the evening. The sidewalks of Celadon were less crowded than the height of rush hour, which afforded me the opportunity to walk side-by-side with Jasmine, as opposed to leading her from in front, or pushing her from behind.

Then again, it was a struggle to pace myself to her sluggish gait. The toll of the airplane trip, the airport, and the long session of battles in which she could only spectate, had taken their toll. She had caught an overly-long nap at the tail end of my work day, leaving her in her present, drained state.

"How far?" she asked.

"Two more blocks, and then some. You will want to wake up by then."

"I'm tired."

"I know, but we must go see this."

"I'm tired."

"I know, you just said that."

"I'm tired."

"Do you mean to say you're going to repeat that phrase until I take the hint and take you to a bed? Because that is not happening."

"I'm tiiiiired," she said one last overly-exaggerated time.

Our destination never truly came into view, we merely turned a corner and found a narrow gate sandwiched between a rest house and a retaining wall. It would be quite easy to miss if you did not know where to look.

Hightower Park being a hidden paradise amidst the concrete jungle was an accident of urban planning. The city road grid intersected a steep ridgeline at a diagonal angle, creating a wedge-shaped space at the base of the hill which could not be developed. The area was designated a park, only reachable via a narrow corridor.

"Welcome to Hightower Park, Celadon's best-kept secret getaway," I pronounced, leading Jasmine into the open.

It was small, but startlingly rich with flora. The emerald tree canopies managed to top the multi-story apartment buildings bordering us to the left and right. The grass was tall and un-mowed, but from experience, quite soft and inviting to lay in. In one corner they had tucked a veranda with tables and benches, in another a swing set with two seats. A silt-colored pond occupied the center of the park, about an acre in size. Beyond was a steep hill covered in a thick forest, and at the very top you could just make out the roofs of a row of condo units. The steep enclosure on all sides gave the park a sense of privacy and quietude unknown elsewhere in the big city.

Her first reaction?
"That looks like a good place to sleep."

She lilted over to the side of the pond and flopped onto the sanded shore.

"We just bought that dress."

She doesn't care at all. In fact, she rolled over onto her back, dirtying both sides of the new clothing. Normally she despises dirt, mud, and the ilk, but I suppose sand is an exception for her. It must remind her of home.

"Homesick already?" I inquired.

"Just plain sick."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

I spotted a man in uniform across the waters, steadily making his way around the shoreline. He was someone I knew and was expecting.

"Officer Evans. Pleased to see you."

"Gym Leader," he replied, nodding politely.

He was typical for the police of the city- younger, late-twenties, more lean than muscular, hair cropped to the scalp. He didn't appear too pleased to see me- a reasonable reaction, given the… circumstances.

"I take it you're here to tend the colony."

"Correct."

I hefted the pack carrying gardening supplies off my shoulder.

"And who are you?" he asked my companion.

Jasmine noticed the police uniform and scurried to her feet. She quickly hid behind my figure without answering his question.

"She is Olivine's Gym Leader, Jasmine Mikan. She is going to help me today."

"Another Gym Leader, huh."

Evan leaned around to get a better look at the young woman. What he saw apparently pleased him, because his suspicious apprehension instantly melted away.

"Oh. Hello. My name is Evan. Officer Evan Norland, I guess, but you can call me Evan. What brings you here to Celadon?"

"Nothing," Jasmine replied, her answer half-muffled into my backside. Evan stepped around to talk to her directly. She clung all the closer to me.

"Really? That's too bad. Well, even if there's no particular reason, we're glad a pretty girl like you decided to visit."

"I'm not interested," Jasmine said. Evan was taken aback.
"Hey, wow, sorry, I was only trying to say hi."

"Evan, we all know what you're after. She is sixteen, too young for you."

The young man stood embarrassed at having been so transparent.

"Right. Uh, sorry, I guess I was off-base. Um, well, I'll let you do your job then. Careful on the rocks, they're wet from last night's rain."

"We appreciate the warning."

"Bye."

Evan strode away towards the entrance, with Jasmine glowering at him the whole way.

"Pervert," she muttered.

"Jasmine! That's rude."

"It's a fact."

"He is not a pervert, just awkward around women." I would know. "You're prejudicing against him."

"He's a guy. They're all perverts."

Her words struck me in a way I wasn't expecting.

"Surely you don't mean that," I said with a choked laugh.

"I do." Furrowed eyebrows. A stare that dared me to question her conviction.

Oh my. She's dead serious.

Yet I can't resist a jab.

"With that attitude, you will never find a boyfriend."

"I don't care. I hate them, all of them." She crossed her arms and turned up her nose.

"Well, of course Evan is a little too old, but there are younger gentlemen here that could disabuse you of that notion. I will be sure to introduce you to them. There are always parties going on, we should go to one or two."

"I'm not interested."

I shrugged, sighed, and spoke all the other words of exasperation known to the language of the human body. It can't be helped. This is Jasmine being stubborn, as usual.

"Let's get to business."

"Why is there a police watch here anyways? This doesn't look like any place worth guarding," she noted.

"Follow me and I will show you. Watch your step."

"Huh?"
With Jasmine in tow, we skirted around the large pond, heading towards the remote corner of the park. The back half of the pond was bordered by the steep hill and thick vegetation, so that the only way forward was hopping across the boulders that littered the shore. My jumps were measured and always involved an element of caution. A slick, slanted surface caught me off guard and I nearly tumbled into the water before skidding to a safe halt.

"Careful," Jasmine called out. She herself was having no difficulty whatsoever navigating the boulders. In truth, she was more endangered by having to slow down and wait for me to advance than by the mechanics of rock-hopping.

"I'm sorry for being slow."

"It is kind of a hassle," she admitted. "Eh, I know a better a way." Then she deliberately leapt into the water. It came up over her knees, drenching the lower half of her dress. She held up her hand to me. "I'll help you over."

I stood a moment in astonishment.

The water is grimy, the mud grimier, and the bottom littered with sharp rocks and disgusting weeds, and yet she jumped in anyways and now she is completely soaked. This young woman has no compunction, whatsoever. It's hard to comprehend that she is a woman at all; she is much more of a tomboy.

…that likes to wear dresses.

A tomboy in a dress. What a quaint creature I've befriended. I took her hand and hopped to the next footing.

With her wading through the water and lending me a steady arm, our progress was significantly expedited. Reaching the far side of the pond, we came upon a stream running down the hillside. The vegetation thinned out, forming a natural tunnel that led up into the trees.

"Up there?"

"Yes."

We climbed.

"Ugh, I'm getting muddy," she complained.

I couldn't help but laugh.

"If you wanted to avoid muddy feet, you shouldn't have jumped into the pond."

"I thought I could wash it off in the water. I didn't know we were going into the jungle. Besides, you might've slipped and banged your head on the rocks."

She says this so casually, I can't tell how real a worry that was for her.

"Well, we're not safe yet."

The path, if one could call it that, was a struggle. The only way to ascend was to grab outlying branches and roots and haul oneself up. Our exertions were noisy and full of unfeminine grunting.

Jasmine was clambering up the steepest part of the path, when-
"What's so great that we have to come all the way to-" and mid-sentence she lifted her head up, went silent, and dropped her jaw in wonder.

Hidden in the blank space between skyscrapers, put out of reach halfway up a ridge, snuggled amidst tall alder trees, was Celadon's own secret garden. Silver, the color of mercury, filled our vision. With the evening sun dipping below the skyline, it was even possible to see a faint white glow coming off the leaves.

Exotic plants, for which no names existed and no species identified, bloomed from every corner of the hollow. Leaves shaped like the whimsical creations of glass-blowers hung off slender, wisp-like branches. There were troughs filled with dark, rich soil from which star-like flower clusters bloomed. A heady aroma saturated the air, making one feel as if they were about to fall into a dream.

"It's like winter," Jasmine said at last, still in awe. "Why is it like this?"

"See that rock?" I said, pointing to a slab the size of a sedan. The top was completely covered in dull-white moss, but the underside sparkled like crystal. The stream emerged from the hillside directly beneath the rock, formed a pool in the center of the hollow, and then filtered through a layer of roots, bushes, and soil before cascading down the hillside toward the park pond.

"That's so pretty! Is it quartz? Or a geode?"

"No, no, miss geologist. Although I cannot remember what the full scientific name is, (Memenosethosomethingorother), that rock is made of a unique mineral not found anywhere else on the Earth's surface. The stream erodes little flecks of it off, emptying to this pool, which feeds all of these plants. The vegetation imbibes the mineral water and takes on its properties. That is why all these plants are colored so."

"It's beautiful! Thank you for showing me this!" Jasmine exclaimed.

"That is not the most fascinating part," I told her. I signaled her over to a curious patch of leaves. I knelt down, and she joined me. Her face was eager, full of expectation, and yet I wondered and maybe even relished what was to come next.

Most of the leaves were large, long, and came in clusters of three, although a few were shorter than the rest or missing a leaf. Altogether it looked like someone had stumbled into Santa's workshop and knocked over a box of Christmas-tree decorations. I donned a pair of gardening gloves and then gave the nearest leaf a gentle stroke.

"Oddi!"

The leaf shook, and then jumped out of the soil, along with an oversized bulb. Jasmine fell back onto her tush in surprise.

"Oddi! Oddish! Oddish!"

"It's a Pokémon!"

Indeed, it was a silver-leafed Oddish. The creature was perturbed at first, not happy with being disturbed. Once it saw me, however, its mood turned to glee. It proceeded to rub against my apron and call out excitedly. A flurry of rustling and soil-splashing surrounded us, and soon we were swamped by dozens of the exotically-tinged Pokémon.

"Oh! Woah, wow!"
"Don't touch them directly, you don't want the mineral staining your skin. It's tough to scrub out of biological matter."

"What about this dress?"

"That's synthetic, I have a special cleaner for it."

"You knew we were coming here when you bought this, didn't you?"

I nodded.

"It's okay. Woah! Hey, little guy! Wait, Erika says I need gloves before I can pet you."

Jasmine tilted her head to one side to get a better look. The Oddish all copied her. She tilted her head to the other shoulder, and the Oddish did the same. She spun around on her heel, and the bulbs spun likewise. She sighed and sat back on top of a log; the creatures plopped to the ground with a chorus of "Od! Od! Od!".

"They're adorable!"

"I thought you might you enjoy them."

I began my chores while allowing Jasmine to entertain and be entertained by the Oddish. There was quite a lot of work to do, but I didn't begrudge having to do it by myself. I was used to it, and the silver-leafed creatures were seemingly succeeding where I could not: Jasmine was smiling.

The sun was low enough that its rays made their way underneath the canopy and between the tree trunks. Every few minutes I would finish one patch of plants and need to move; when I did I had to carefully select a position where I wouldn't be blinded. My spade bit into the earth, dislodging intrusive weeds and sending a painful shiver through my palms. Each one hurt more than the last, but I forced myself to keep going. When finished, the emerald of the regular forest boughs and the silver of the secret hollow bushes was clearly delineated. Then it was time to dredge the small pool of water and shore up the dam of peat moss, making sure that the mineral traces stayed within the hollow and did not leak down into the general ecosystem. The enriched soil mounds the Oddish burrowed in had to be plowed and a nutrient mix added. I was hoping to harvest some Sistenia Flowers for use in my perfume shop, but none of the buds I found were sufficiently mature. The tree branches overhead needed a little bit of pruning, to ensure enough sunlight for the Oddish. The last chore was the least pleasant-

Ah, there, I knew it.

Near where we entered the grove, a litter of the things: burnt-up husks resembling oversized cigarette butts. Nearby, beer cans and used paper towels. Odds and ends, pieces of trash I couldn't identify. Human refuse. Disgusting. And for me, deeply concerning.

*People have been here. That can only mean…*

My attention was caught away by Jasmine's behavior. She was stumbling around in circles, head tilted and eyes glued to the sky. A purple and silver ball suddenly fell from above. Jasmine dashed forward and caught it.

"Got ya! Who's next?"

A horde of Oddish jumped at her feet, all begging. She selected one from the back whose leaves were shorter than the rest, as if stunted. The Pokémon wriggled eagerly in her hands. Jasmine
crouched, and then leapt up and hurled the Pokémon skyward.

"Come on! Got it, you got it!"

The Pokémon had successfully landed on a branch and was shortly dashing across it. It reached the apex, whereupon a bushel of flowers was waiting. With one leafy tendril it plucked a pair of blossoms, and then canon-balled over the edge. Jasmine snatched it from midair, cradling the creature in her chest. Such a lucky thing. I'm sure many men would be jealous to be snuggled so.

Jasmine took the flowers from the Oddish. One was added to a growing bouquet, the other was affixed to the Oddish's head. The Pokémon emoted its joy and joined a collection of similarly decorated compatriots. Then it was the next Oddish's turn.

She is happy, right now.

It seems strange and sad that such a statement be so remarkable. Shouldn't all humans enjoy happiness from time to time? Some more often than others, but for no one should it be such a rare status that its mere occurrence is surprising to the ones who are most attentive to that person's moods. Yet here we are.

Jasmine is smiling. Not the dry, ironic smile of bitterness, the kind she so often displays for want of a better reaction to her hapless life. Nor the transient half-smile that comes from recalling a fond memory, before present matters wipe the expression away again. No, this is the crescent of the lips that reaches deep into the cheeks, that draws wrinkles beneath the eyes, and animates wildly according to the highs and lows of her emotions.

Pokémon are everything to her. These innocent creatures bring her joy. I feel that by bringing her here, I have contributed just a little bit to her joy. It's not much, and not nearly enough to banish her apparent depression. Yet, I think it helps, and is a positive step, one of many in the right direction. I should be satisfied by this…

…except I feel horrible.

*You're a fake, aren't you Erika?*

"No," I whispered, trying to banish the thought.

"So they stationed an officer to protect these Oddish? From poaching I guess?" Jasmine surmised without noticing my slip-up.

"Something like that," I said.

"That's really considerate of the city. I wish Olivine's mayor was that thoughtful."

"I'm sure Olivine is well taken care of by its Gym Leader."

"No, it's not." She hung her head. Disappointment in herself, I guess? "Mr. Beret was such a big part of the community. He helped everyone with everything, without ever asking for anything in return. He hated honorary parties, wouldn't accept rewards. He was so smart and commanding, too, there wasn't anything he couldn't tackle. There's no way I could compare. The only thing I can do is direct Pokémon battles."

"You will get there, it is only a matter of experience," I said reassuringly.

"I hope so."
She kneeled down and began helping one Oddish dig a hole to bury itself in for the night. Others began finding their own accustomed spots, settling in, going to sleep. This is when they would absorb nutrients from the ground, including the silvery mineral filtrating its way through the soil. From above-ground, it looked like an extraordinary patch of grass, like a jeweled welcome mat. Some fronds were long, brightly colored, and smoothly rounded. Others were short, scraggly, and varnished. Jasmine saw them all the same, precious creatures worth protecting. There is such joy in her eyes as she nestled the Oddish inside its burrow, such care in her hands as she molded the soil around the Pokémon's crown.

Never change, my dear. I hope you can keep ahold of that joy and love you feel for these creatures, and that nothing ever breaks it.

We said goodbye and started back towards the park.

"Do you want me to help you across the rocks again?" Jasmine asked.

"No, please don't. You're tired, aren't you?"

"Yeah, I guess I am. Awwwwah." It seemed talking about being tired induced yawning in her.

"If you could go on ahead and wait for me at the benches, I think I forgot a minor chore."

"Oh. I'll come."

"No, no, this won't take very long. Go take a nap, I'll be right back."

She yawned again, which seemed to convince her that a nap would be best.

"Alright. Be safe. Use your Pokémon if you have trouble crossing the rocks."

I watched her skip across the half-sunken boulder field with the deftness of a Sentret, although not as fast as before. She must be very tired after such a long day, it's the only reason she would listen to my advice and leave me, however temporarily.

She shouldn't believe you, if she knew better.

I made my way back to the hollow. Even with the sun below the horizon, it was still bright enough to see by, on account of the faintly glowing foliage. The inanimate plant life hung completely still. The sentient plants betrayed their nature with intermittent, ever-so-slight shivers. I looked around and found one of the largest and healthiest set of leaves. Kneeling down, I donned a gloves once again, and began digging. It didn't take long to reveal a purple bulb at the base of the leaves.

"Ooooi?" came the hazy, unawake inquiry.

"Shh, little one. Just keep sleeping. It'll be alright."

"Oooooddi."

I reached into the bottom of the gardening pack and withdrew a plain metal case. A tap of the thumb and it clicked open. Inside was a hypodermic needle and syringe, pre-filled with a clear liquid.

"Shhhh." I brushed the dirt away, exposing a clear patch of skin on the top of the Oddish's head. The needle went in with little effort, not very deep at all, less than a centimeter. A squeeze, and the liquid was injected.

"Ooo..." The Oddish went silent.
"It's okay. You'll be okay," I whispered, for my own benefit. The Pokémon couldn't hear me anymore.

Now for the hardest part.

I bit my lip and picked up the spade.

As was normal, the Oddish had three leaf-like fronds growing from the top of its head. I took the two longest in my gloved hand, twirling them in my fingers. Then my fingers clasped into a fist, grasping the stalks painfully tight. The fronds stretched out, leaving a little bit near the base tense and exposed. I brought the spade down, level with the leaf stalks.

"I'm so sorry," I whispered, biting back tears.

The two fronds were carefully folded and put away in a plastic bag. I turned back to the Oddish, placing my fingertips on the wound. I took a small tube of balm and emptied it onto the severed stalks. The hemorrhaging sap bled out into a blob, intermixing with the balm and slowly congealing. I let it set for two minutes, then filled the hole with soil. The only thing left was a single frond waving in the warm summer night breeze.

It looks so wrong.

Most of the Oddish have three full fronds poking above the earth. Others have two fronds. Others have three, but not all were healthy- some stalks were cut short, ending in raggedy, unnatural tips.

This Oddish has one.

These leafy tendrils contain chlorophyll, the substance responsible for taking in sunlight and turning it into energy. One frond is enough to survive on. Not enough to avoid disease. Not enough to interact with its peers. Not enough to explore, to play, to battle, to make love. Not enough to live- just survive.

This glade is known to the few who visit it as the Garden of Dreams. I don't call it that. To me, it is the Garden of Evil.

Jasmine, if you really knew me, if you knew what happens to these creatures you so love- you would call me a monster.
I do not own a car. This is not unusual for a young adult living in the big city, where public transportation is plentiful. Unfortunately, public transport is not available at this late hour, to this decrepit neighborhood.

Half the houses on this street were boarded up. Of the ones that weren't, perhaps half again showed no signs of habitation. And then, the people who inhabit the remaining houses very likely do not have the legal right to do so. It was the sort of street where one would not like to walk alone as a woman without the protection of large men or Pokémon. In fact, I did have my Pokémon out, Vileplume and Victreebel on my left and right, keeping me snug between them. However, I found myself wishing I had access to Father's Pokémon. A Rhydon and Machamp would make for much more imposing bodyguards.

Shadowed figures assessed me from afar. Fortunately, none ever approached. A turn off the road and down a long lane brought me before an old, run down warehouse. A loading dock faced an open, seemingly abandoned yard. I walked to the center.

By appearances no one else was around. Just me and the quiet night breeze. But I knew better.

"Vileplume, Victreebel, please return. I can't bring you any farther." Victreebel obeyed, but Vileplume lingered a bit, looking concerned. "It will be okay, just like the other times, I will come back."

The giant flower Pokémon reluctantly returned to her digital confines. I walked over to a toolbox left atop a stack of construction pallets. My three Pokeballs were placed within the toolbox. I turned the key and locked them inside. Next, I held the key aloft, as if to play show-and-tell with the stars as audience. I slowly walked to the opposite end of the yard and placed the key carefully down atop a tin drum. Then, still slowly and calmly, I made my way to the center of the yard, and there stood still.

It seemed like nothing happened for ten minutes.

My legs were growing weary. My hands were shaking. There was blood coming from the calluses littering my knuckles and palms. They hurt. Everything in me hurt.

A loud mechanical sound, and I was blinded. My eyes were dazzled. I had to resist the urge to bring my forearm up to cover them. That kind of gesture wasn't allowed. All I could do was squeeze my eyelids shut as tightly as possible. The assault of radiance let up, little by little, as my pupils adjusted.

Five spotlights shone out onto the yard. Three of them held me under guard. One was focused on the toolbox, the other on the drum. This state of affairs lasted another five minutes.

At last, a crack of light appeared in the wall of the warehouse. A large bay door slid open, welcoming me in. I obliged its invitation.

"It's Erika."

Young men surrounded me. Almost immediately I was being groped, probed by hands that ostensibly searched for weapons or wiretaps, but did not abstain from certain… extracurricular activities. I bit my lip, shut my eyes, and bore the indignity in silence.

"Clean."
The hands withdrew. I was forcibly escorted to the bowels of the warehouse, where many more men, and some women, busied themselves. Most stopped a moment to stare at my arrival.

"Wait here."

They sat me on an unmarked crate, from which an obnoxious odor emanated. It smelled like a loaf of bread that had been microwaved for an hour.

The men returned to their duties, leaving one solitary grunt to guard and ogle me.

The fashion police would have a field day with these people. Polyester black jumpsuits worn tight, with their emblem emblazoned on the backs. Oversized white boots, whites gloves, and white caps. The uniform was gaudy without excuse, a 1950s envisioning of futuristic apparel. Then again, I do not know of any self-styled "fashion police" that would dare voice criticism to the face of one of these people.

Oh how the mighty have fallen.

I remember a time when getting through security involved retinal scanners and laser trip-gates, securing entrance to a high-tech underground facility. The Pokeballs were of Ultra Ball quality or better, and contained rare specimens such as Abra or Clefairy, not common tall-grass riff-raff like the Ekans and Spearows they were currently loading. Operations had been financed by sophisticated extortion and hacking schemes, not these less savory, cruder methods. Three years ago they were almost strong enough to take over Indigo Plateau, now they struggle to hold their own home turf. I remember when they were led by a truly terrifying figure, a man to be reckoned with- not the petty, asinine substitute that claims to direct them now.

I remember Team Rocket when they were feared.

Now… one should fear them the same as any other petty criminal gang. Dangerous on the streets, no further than that. If not for… certain personal issues, I would never have to deal with these scum.

"Where is your boss?" I asked.

"Shut up," was the grunt's answer.

A gaggle of angry voices was approaching from down the hall. One was familiar, I had heard it not five hours ago.

"Tell that damn pixie if he wants Mayor Corpish to lay off he'd better pony up the campaign funding he promised! Woah! Uh, hey Erika, um, figures you'd be here."

"Officer Evan," I acknowledged without so much as a nod.

The man, still in his police uniform, paused in place, shoulders hunched, grimacing, feet akimbo, looking awkward and embarrassed. He always had a difficult time addressing women, especially in an environment such as this. His flustered attitude was growing more acute by the moment, of which he himself seemed to be keenly aware. His apparent solution was to turn back to the three senior grunts and resume belaboring them with renewed bellicosity.

"What do you expect? We're not running some petty back-alley dictatorship like you all, we are a democracy! We have to actually rig elections; that ain't easy, that ain't cheap! It takes money to keep up appearances!"

"Ohhhh, so you think we're so ugly and you're so beautiful, huh, hehhh?" I jumped in shock. A
high-pitched nasal of a voice sounded out right behind my ear. "Calm down." A pair of hands fell on my shoulders, pinning me down to my seat. "The only one worth being called "pretty" is Miss Hikami right here."

The sneak rounded the pallet to come face to face with Evan.

"Who are you?" Evan said with contempt. The elderly man glanced aside, showing me his face. My body shivered.

It was the slimy creep that had dared to set foot in my gym earlier in the day- Lepert. What was he doing here?!

"You're one of them?" I said in disbelief.

The old man cackled.

"One of them? Miss, I own this lot!"

And for the third time in the space of a minute my body was convulsed by shock. What I had assumed was a hunch-backed elderly sleaze transformed right before my eyes. His back un-contorted, causing his stature to grow by a foot. His lab coat fell off, revealing a slender frame encased in a skin-tight, high-quality Rocket Uniform. Then, perhaps most shocking, he reached up and ripped off his face. A rather grotesque mass of make-up, wig hair, and prosthetic skin dangled around his fist, which he began twirling on one finger like a frisbee.

Oh dear. So that's it.

"Not too bright, are ya little girl? I didn't even try that hard, not even the name."

"The name? Oh… I see. An anagram."

He's right, I'm not that smart, I should have known as soon as I saw his name.

L-E-P-E-R-T.

= P-E-T-R-E-L.

Petrel Vladimir Lambda, acting head of Team Rocket. Master of disguise, manipulation, and fraud. He was a middle-aged man who kept himself impeccably groomed, even if his violet-dyed beard and tufted mohawk looked like they belonged in an adult film. There are rumors around the organization that he in fact directs and acts in home-made productions of the filth, which are then peddled to teenagers for profit. I feared this man, but more than that, I despised him on a very primordial level.

He stared me down, licking his lips, which provoked a grimace from me. Out of survival reflex, I tucked my knees to my chest and tried to make myself as small and non-threatening as possible. Evan's condescending attitude vanished, replaced by wariness. He has the training of an officer of the law, but not the experience. We were both amateurs in relation to this long-standing criminal.

"Let's continue our conversation from before. What was I saying before you pestered me into fighting that laugh-off of a gym battle?" Petrel stroked his beard. "Oh right, right, I was wanting to let you know how it felt to be laughed at, looked down on, embarrassed." Petrel waved for everyone in the room to come closer. "Hey, you lot! Look who showed up tardy!"
Whether eager to take part in the roasting, or else fearful of retaliation, all the idle Rockets crowded around the three of us. Their jeering faces and excited eyes were enough to convince me what was about to come down upon my head.

"Here's the little princess who thought she was so high and mighty she couldn't be bothered to see an old friend at a reasonable hour. You all had a good snicker seeing your boss getting turned down by a stuckedy-up young lady, didn't ya?"

No one was snickering now.

"But I'm a good boss and a nice gentleman, and I got worried. Maybe something's happened to my lady friend? So I go out to see what's going on. You know, maybe she got caught up with the law in a bad way? Or maybe a good way? Too good a way? Mmm? Or another gang, oh boy, what would the crazies from Sinnoh do to her if they caught her? But it turns out, she was just playing hooky, having fun gym battles with her cutie lil friend by her side."

He leaned over me, putting his nose to my hair and sniffing. "Why didn't ya bring your lil friend along? Would've been lovely to introduce her to everyone."

Now there were snickers, from some of the less scrupulous males in the crowd. At the thought of them laying their hands on Jasmine, a cold quivering ran through my chest.

"Now, what are we going to do about this?" Petrel asked. "Can't let something like this go unpunished. For tardiness, I think detention is in order."

No. Not that. Never again.

"Here." I was prepared. I quickly reached inside my kimono and withdrew a plastic bag. It was full of an ultra-fine, heavy dust the color of glitter. I offered it up to Petrel's inspection.

"Hmmm? What's this?"

He snatched the bag, weighed it, and then tossed it over his shoulder; a female aid caught and cradled it before it could land. Petrel's real interest, however, was my hand. He grasped it tightly, prying fingers apart so that he could inspect my nails.

"Oh dear, you're bleeding."

"I'm fine."

"No, you're not! Let's get you to the clinic!" He turned to the crowd. "Doctor! We need a doctor in here! The woman is dying!"

The Rocket grunts burst into laughter.

Petrel ceased his joking, seemingly satisfied.

"That felt like two kilos."

"Two-point-three," I muttered, having carefully weighed it out.

"Nice haul. How many of the bongroots did you nip to get that much?"

"Just one, two fronds," I answered.

"Two fronds! Sizzling Saturdays, you're a damn fine green-thumb! A whole kilo from one frond! A
super-triple-A-grade quality kilo at that!" Petrel let go of my hand. I promptly tucked it back into the folds of my dress, and then choked back a sigh of relief. My bribe had made him happy, but any miniscule emotion on my part might bring back his malicious mood.

"Everyone give it up to our All-Star Botanist! Thanks to her, everyone's going home with a paycheck tomorrow!"

The Rockets cheered and howled. Some directed cat-calls at me.

"Ceres, dear, take that bag to the lab and have them dilute the stuff asap. I'm guessing it's pure…" Petrel glanced towards me.

"Ninety-nine-point-whatever," I muttered, wiping my eyes.

"…pure, so they'd better get a month's shipment out of it. As for you, boy scout."

Evan reacted to his name, becoming on guard.

"What do you think you're doing in that uniform?"

"It helps me get through the neighborhood without being mugged," Evan explained.

"No, it makes you a target, it makes you stand out! What a flippin amateur! Come in plain-clothes the next time! What are you doing here anyways?"

"My boss wants his money."

"Tell your boss to shut his trap and wait in line!"

"Hey, punks, I'm not here to argue, I don't have to listen to your kind, you're not on my level," Evan said.

Petrel jumped into his face, but before he could fire off a word Evan shoved him away.

"Don't you dare touch me. I'm an officer of the law. Who do you think runs this town?"

"I DO!" Petrel shouted.

"Tauros-balls. Now you listen and you better understand this: the public are getting antsy about your Moon Dust trade, and the mayor's up to here," Evan motioned to his eyeballs, "with their whining. So unless you fess up the money you promised, he's gonna have to run some BS populist campaign to win reelection. That means an anti-drug campaign, and that means he's gonna come down and Eminent Domain that precious plant colony of yours. All I see here is a couple dozen high-school dropouts with tater-tot Pokemon. We've got three hundred officers with real weapons and trained attack-monsters. You remember your position and write me a check, this instant."

"Boy, you don't know who you're dealing with," Petrel sneered. Evan remained defiant. "Ned, Sledge, take this kid down to the fridge, show him what we did to his predecessor, Barnie."

"What?" Evan sensed the danger and lashed out, catching Ned in the side of the chin with his elbow. Unfortunately, Sledge was already on his other flank and living up to his nickname. Evan crumpled to the ground, holding his side. The pair took a hold of the young officer's shoulders and dragged him away, kicking and screaming. Petrel threw jeering, childish faces after him.

"Where's my money, where's my money, where's my money?" the criminal head-honcho mocked aloud. "Every little spit and spat obsessed over material gain, what has this world come to? They all
need to behave, take life easy. Look here, Erika is behaving herself. Why can't more people be like Erika?" Petrel took me by the forearm and dragged me up to the center of the crowd.

"This is what a model citizen looks like! Upstanding, doesn't complain, doesn't fight back, not greedy or selfish! If we were all so kind-hearted as Erika, there'd be no need for these unplesantries! No matter the crap, she just bows her head, does what she's told, and gets what she's due. Miss Erika Hikami, folks, give her a round of applause."

More cheering. Petrel was breathing down my ear. His breath was hot, sickly and wet. It felt like the room was growing dizzy, heavy, like being tied to the center of a G-Force carnival ride. There are tears I want to cry but cannot, and they are threatening to cluster in my throat and drown me.

Petrel whispered into my ear. "Now, dear princess, I know it's asking a lot, but we're kind of in a pinch. Would you be so kind to get us another two kilos next week? I'd thank ye very much."

"I…" I nodded once, without imagining how I was going to be able to fulfill that "request".

"Good, good."

He again took my hand in his and raised them high. My gaze was transfixed to my nails.

They were not bleeding so hard now. The sundered calluses had begun coagulating, the flesh surrounding them a raw pink. It was a testament to the four frantic hours I had spent grinding, and grinding, and grinding the Oddish leaves into the finest possible powder, to make the most raw material out of the smallest possible plant matter.

The Oddish of Hightower Park were beautiful, because of the rare mineral they absorbed from their environment. Yet that beauty hid a more sinister truth: their bodies metabolized the mineral into a powerful, powerfully addictive narcotic: "Moon Dust". The black market value of the stuff was absurd- an ounce could fetch enough money to buy a new car. The Hightower colony was the only reliable source of the drug in the entire region. Through bribes, intimidation, and violence, the Rockets had managed to monopolize it. I… I was their cultivar.

I do not do it for money.

Once Petrel had his fun with me, he quietly slipped me an envelope half-full of cash. It was supposed to be used for "my personal entertainment, clothes or perfume". Not that I could live with myself if I spent it like that. No, every last Pokedollar was spent on care for the Oddish.

I do not do it out of fear.

I would rather join Barnie than bring further pain to these creatures.

I do not do it out of extortion.

The Rockets have no sway over me. My family is rich and powerful in their own right, the gangs are smart enough to avoid taking them hostage. My friends and coworkers fall under similar umbrellas of protection. It was I, of my own free will, who approached the Rockets and offered my services.

Why?

I do this evil deed because I am weak.

Because I cannot stand up to Petrel.
If not for my efforts, if I refused to carefully cultivate and harvest the Oddish, I know that Team Rocket would sweep in and slaughter them wholesale, to be pulverized into Moon Dust.

There is no one to turn to, no one who can bring them to justice. The police are corrupt, the mayor is corrupt. They would just as soon destroy all of the Oddish just to eliminate Moon Dust from the market. The public has no power, and so little care for the Pokémon, that they cannot be relied upon. My family will not interfere in the criminal underworld for the sake of, as they see it, ”a collection of weeds”. Greed is everywhere, as is materialism, as is apathy, as is selfishness. I feel like I live in a world beset by evil on every side. What I do… is the best option out of a terrible set of options.

*It can't be helped. I have no choice.*

…I have to keep telling myself that, in order to keep from utterly falling apart.
She paused at the gate entrance, one foot poised in midair over the threshold, as if unsure she had permission to tread upon these halcyon grounds. For a moment she was at a loss for words. I tried to be helpful and nudged her in the back, just enough to get her to step forward.

"This is your parent's house?" she asked in awe.

"Yes," I confirmed to her.

"It's huge! And so... so... pretty."

"It feels like an old castle, doesn't it?"

"Yes! That's exactly it!"

Jasmine strode inside the walls, probably not thinking about their significance. With its stone walls and multi-tiered roofline, ornamental woodwork and sculptured bonzai shrubs, the building truly had the look of an Edo-era castle. Yet, if the metaphor is carried forward, it is important to remember why castles exist, and why they are surrounded by walls. They are made to separate that which is "inside" from that which is "outside". By entering, we are no longer out in the wide world of free society. We have entered the domain of the Hikami clan. I hope you keep that in mind, Jasmine, when you meet my parents.

The young woman tip-toed down the pathway, taking in with wonder the sights of the garden. Over the course of our friendship she and I had visited a number of botanical sanctuaries across Kanto and Johto. I had taught her the fine details of cultivation, flower arrangement, and landscaping. She was well versed in the differences in quality between various displays of gardening, enabling her to discern the mediocre from the exquisite. So that, there was no hiding that my mother's masterpiece put my own efforts to shame.

Mother simply had the gift of aesthetic instinct, to know exactly which plants would add to the overall sublimity and grace of the yard. She knew the limits of variety, how to interweave species, how to make them grow exactly how she desired. My gym contains over sixty species, hers had but seven, and yet looked fuller and richer by magnitudes.

Jasmine wandered off the path to examine a row of sculpted hedges made to resemble people: larger adults holding hands with smaller children in alternating sequence. Even up close, the plants showed no signs of clipping, as if the branches and trees had not been sheered into this unnatural shape, but rather persuaded to grow into this form. The skill needed to achieve this made me blush with envy.

As Jasmine tried reaching up to pet the head of one of the hedge children, she paused, growing still and quiet. I sensed she was listening for something, quieted myself, and heard it as well. A muted *snip snip* could barely be heard coming from the other side of the hedge. My friend quietly made her way around the end of the row.

A lady sat upon her knees, a pair of garden scissors in hand, delicately picking away at the leaves. Ignoring the branches, she cut only the leaf stems, and I immediately understood how the figures were so expertly effaced. Wherever the branches were exposed to sunlight, they would grow out, and wherever the leaves were kept thick, they would not grow. To make a predetermined shape with this method, however, would take meticulous, maddeningly tedious dedication- daily grooming for weeks or even months on end.
"Hello. You must be Jasmine Mikan. I've been looking forward to meeting you," the lady said.

"Um, um, hello. I am Jasmine. Pleased to meet you. You are… Mrs. Hikami?"

The lady set the sheers down and stood to face us.

Even at her age in her present work attire, she still manages to carry an aura of dignity and nobility about herself. Long dark hair, currently rolled in a bun, pale skin, wholesome face, pleasant expression- she encapsulated the very definition of traditional beauty.

"Yes, that is correct, I am Erika's mother. We’ve been expecting your visit for some time now. Even though Erika does not call us very often, she always mentions you when she does."

Oh mother, what are you saying? Please don’t embarrass me.

“Oh really?” Jasmine inquired.

“Yes. I take it you two are becoming close."

“Um, I suppose that’s true,” Jasmine admitted, taking a glance towards me. “I’m staying with Erika for the next month. Since I live in Johto, I think it’s a great opportunity to spend time with her that I haven’t gotten before.”

“I see.”

“She’s my senior as a Gym Leader. I’m only an Acting Gym Leader, so I’ve been learning all I can from her in preparation for the exams. And we also share a lot of hobbies in common, and she’s teaching me about some of her favorites, like gardening and flower arrangement. She’s a good teacher. And a kind person.”

“I’m happy to know I raised her well,” mother said with a smile.

“You did! I couldn’t help but notice, actually, that you used Autumn Fireball bushes along the side of your house. That’s something Erika does as well, she mentions it’s a good contrast with the whitewood siding. It’s a rare plant that wouldn’t normally survive in this climate, unless you know the special techniques to take care of it. I guess that’s my clue that you’re the source of her gardening techniques?”

“Oh haha! She is a good teacher indeed, with an astute student! You are correct on all accounts. I taught her, as my mother taught me, and her mother taught her. Excellence in botany is a tradition of Hikami women.”

“One tradition I am happy to continue,” I interjected.

“Of course, you needn’t tell me. And of course, welcome home dear. This house feels that much bigger and emptier without you home.”

“I’m sorry for not coming home more often,” I apologized. Mother came forward to embrace me lightly.

“You are a bit early. Will you be staying the night?”

I hadn’t planned on doing so, but my reservations evaporated upon seeing her expectant face.

“Yes,” I answered.
“Good. I’m glad. Your room is just as you left it. Dinner will be a little while longer. Why don’t you settle in and show Jasmine around?”

“Yes, that’s a good idea,” I accepted her suggestion without hesitation. “Where is father? And Adam?”

“Father is cooking dinner. Adam has already left.”


“My little brother. He’s going… gone on his Pokemon journey for the summer break.”

“That’s wonderful!”

“May I ask which Pokemon he took with him?” I inquired to mother.

“Only Weepinbell.”

“Ah, that would make sense.” I turned aside to Jasmine, who looked eager for details. “Tangela was our family’s first Pokemon, when we were babies. My brother and I received our own Pokemon together for Tanabata. Mine was Oddish, his was Bellsprout.”

“Oh I see. Wait, I’m confused. Do you mean he took your Victreebel?”

“No, silly, I captured my own Tangela and Bellsprout.”

“Oh now I get it! Thank you for clearing that up, onee-sama.” Jasmine pronounced the honorific with teasing exaggeration, which seemed to amuse mother.

If Jasmine thought of me as a big sister and teacher, it is only because I’ve had so much practice with my little brother. Adam is such a gentle child, I feel like he and Jasmine would get along well. It’s unfortunate he left already.

“Well, Jasmine, there’s much that I and my husband would like to know about you. For now, let us all get ready. If you need anything, ask Tangela. I will see you two at dinner.”

“Nnn.”

“Okay. And thank you for the invitation, I’m very grateful.”

Mother collected her tools and began departing towards the master suite. Jasmine, without prompting, treated her to a slight bow as she left. Mother responded with a smile and a nod. The acts of courtesy concluded, Jasmine turned to talk with me while mother entered the house.

Phew! That went better than expected. However, that was only the first hurdle, the next will be much steeper.

“Your mom- she’s exactly what I imagined her to be like,” Jasmine said.

“A forty-three-year old version of me?” I chimed.

“That, but more…” she searched her cranium for the proper word, “mmm…. more genuinely polite.”

“What kind of description is that! Are you saying I’m insincere?”

“Maaaaybe.” She danced off as if to escape physical retaliation, not that I’ve ever been known to hit
her (the reverse could not be said to be true).

“You little fiend! Slanderer! You don’t even know where you’re going!”

“This really is a big house!” she called out. “I’m so jealous! I bet it was fun to play hide-and-seek in!” So saying, she dashed around a corner and out of sight.

Oh, dear. She doesn’t know; couldn’t understand.

It’s hard to play hide-and-seek with just one sibling and no friends.

We ate in silence. Even the sounds of chewing were muted.

By some miracle, Jasmine seemed to have sensed she was not to speak until spoken to. Perhaps it was the chill reception mother greeted her with upon entering the dining room. Perhaps it was the overly formal dinner laid out before us. Or maybe it was the stern expression on his face as he entered with the steak. Whatever it was, when the four of us sat down, not a word was spoken. We merely savored the hibachi steak presented to us without comment or compliment.

Jasmine couldn’t hide her nervousness completely. Upon meeting mother in the garden she had managed to remain calm, friendly, a little shy but nothing inordinately awkward. Here, she could not meet the adults eye-to-eye, and mainly kept her gaze on her food or me.

The meat disappeared into our gullets little by little. Mother and I sat across from each other, sitting demurely, striving to maintain our unimposing mannerism, as was proper, as was expected. Only the tiny glances of our pupils towards the one plate belonging to the head of the household did we deviate from perfection. The strips of steak were consumed one by one, and it felt like our breath was paused until the last one was gone.

The fork came up, inserted the morsel of what was once a Miltank (the dumb, witless kind they raise for such purposes), and withdrew, landing on the table with a gentle tap.

That was the signal.

The stir-fry rice and vegetables remained, but they were not important. It was the preparation of the steak that he prided himself on, reflective of the reverence he held for meat and the living creature it came from. To a man who had spent so much of his life cutting flesh to save life, to cut and burn flesh to take life felt like a sacrilege, justified only through the humility and mindfulness displayed in its consumption. The steak consumed, the ritual of the feast completed, conversation was now allowed.

“Miss Mikan, is it? It is good to meet you.”

“It’s a privilege to meet you, sir.”

As soon as that austere baritone of a voice reached out and addressed her, Jasmine’s focus rose to meet him eye-to-eye. She was no longer shivering underneath the table or sulking in her seat. Her back was straight, her head held high, her gaze unwavering.

Ah. This was the countenance she showed challengers at her gym. Good. He will appreciate that.
“Hm.”

He nodded, noting her expression.

“I am Nikoto Hagoromo Hikami.”

“Pleased to meet you Mr.-“

“Doctor,” he interjected.

“Doctor Hikami. Thank you for inviting me to your home and providing this meal. It was very delicious.”

Ouch. I should have warned her about that. He’s very particular of his title.

Father… the man who sired me… he is very particular about many things.

His appearance, for one. A regal man, well-groomed, short silvered hair, a clean-shaven face, hard eyes, hard expression, hard contours of skin fitted over a hard skull. A figure that was a little on the brawny side, with arms, torso, chest muscled over, and having just a tiny bit of pudge on the belly. Hands that were enormous, but astonishingly delicate and precise in their movements, trained over many years to wield the scalpel. He wore a long-sleeved maroon dress shirt and dark pants, free of wrinkles despite a vigorous workday. His black tie had yet to be loosened.

He had the look of a man who could kill you if he so chose, but was more likely to beat you down with his sheer intellect and force you to submit. This was the force of authority that was now bearing down on poor Jasmine’s head. I hope she-

“And I understand about wanting to be called Doctor. You worked very hard for that distinction, and you fulfill a very important and respected role in society, so you deserve at least the acknowledgment of your title. I know because my mother is the same way,” Jasmine said.

I gawked at my friend.

It would be all too easy to silently accept the adult’s humiliating correction and let it pass, but she has both the nerve to address the matter to his face, and yet the perfect apology to offer up for his appeasement.

Not to mention, since when was Jasmine’s mother a doctor? I had no idea!

“Your mother is a doctor as well?” father asked.

“Ah, yes, that’s right.”

“What hospital does she work for?”

“Oh! I apologize. She’s not actually practicing, and her degree is in psychology, not medicine. I take it that means you are an M.D. yourself?”

Father looked disappointed.

“I am the Chief Surgeon of Kanto University Medical.”

“That’s… that’s… quite an honor, sir.”

Good. She’s aware of how high a place in the world my father holds, and it is very high indeed.
Kanto University Medical is the foremost authority on all human health matters in the country, an institution that encompasses two-thousand doctors considered the elite vanguard of the medical community- and Dr. Hikami is their leader. Or to put it frankly- the only medical official above my father is the Surgeon General of the Nation.

“It is also a great responsibility,” father said.

“Of course, it must be. I’m sorry if I’m not familiar with your work, though, I tend to focus on Pokemon health more than humans. It’s part of my job.”

“You are a Gym Leader, like my daughter, correct?” father asked.

“Technically, Acting Gym Leader. I hope to become the official Gym Leader when I turn eighteen. For now I’m only in charge of the competitive aspect of the gym, battles and such.”

“That was Erika’s case as well. What city do you represent?”

“Olivine City, in Johto.”

“And you said your mother holds a Doctorate in Psychology. That would make sense. Olivine University has a good program for that field. I’ve never heard of a Dr. Mikan in that area, however.”

Jasmine glowered, wrinkling her nose. Luckily father missed- or no, more likely, ignored the rude gesture, and changed subjects.

“Do you have any other plans for your future, or is Pokemon battling the only thing you’ve considered?”

Oh dear. Now comes the interrogation.

“Um, well, my parents want me to attend college, so I’ve been trying keep my grades up while working. It’s been very busy and I really haven’t had the time to think beyond school and gym work. Next summer I think I will be better prepared to answer that.”

“Is that so.” He’s not impressed. “Did you have a major in mind? Or a college?”

“Olivine University, definitely. I love my home town and want to stay there if I can. I really have no idea what I would major in. Pokemon Care, maybe, or Chemistry or Physics, those are my strongest subjects.”

“STEM fields are difficult to pursue but rewarding. Do you feel up to the challenge?”

“Father, she is only sixteen, there is plenty of time for her decide such things,” I reminded him. My protest only served to bring attention to myself, however.

“How did you and Erika meet?”

“I was visiting Celadon last summer for the Gym Leader Summit. I got lost looking for the conference center, and sort of stood around at the big water fountain downtown with my Pokemon. Erika saw me and approached me to ask if everything was alright. We walked to the conference together and ended up spending the rest of the summit together. It was really a coincidence. If she hadn’t been so kind and helpful that day, I doubt I would have talked to her on my own.”

“I see.” Father took a sip of his tea.

“You seem different from Erika’s other friends,” mother added.
“Is that… bad?”

“It’s unusual for her,” mother explained. “From her description, you’re very much the opposite of her.”

Jasmine eyed me, suspicious.

“What did she say about me?”

“For starters, you’re somewhat of a tomboy.”

“That’s not quite true.” The strain in her voice was audible; plainly she wanted to say something stronger about the comment, but was restraining herself. Did something about mother’s statement tick her off? Or is she mad at me?

“But you are into computer games, technology, and science, correct?”

“Well, I do consider myself a geek.”

“You also have a fierce stubborn streak and are somewhat temperamental, by her accounts.”

“There are things I care strongly about, is all.”

“And you’re not particularly into girlish things like cosmetics and fashion.”

“No, that’s untrue. I care very much about my appearance, but my preferences aren’t what most girls consider “stylish”. But, for example, this dress isn’t something I was forced to wear for this dinner, but typical of what I like to wear every day. I don’t try to look or act like a boy, so I don’t think it’s fair to call me a tomboy, Erika,” Jasmine accused out the side of her teeth.

“Was I mistaken? Did you mislead me?” -Mother, addressing me.

“I may have exaggerated some,” I said in excuse, not really meaning it but wanting to defuse the issue.

“What brought you two together?” father asked.

“Pokemon, I guess,” Jasmine answered.

“Well, with both of us being Gym Leaders, our work provided the opportunity to meet each other on a semi-frequent basis, and gave us a starting point to grow upon,” I said. “And even if she resents how carelessly I describe it, I find her personality very enjoyable to be around.”

“And you’ve been patient with me and treated me well, despite my more inane moments.”

We both exchanged smiles of reconciliation.

“So you two do get along well. I’m glad to see that in person,” mother said.

“Did I give you the impression that we were not getting along?” I asked.

“You always sounded anxious and worried when talking about your friend.”

“That’s…” my voice trailed off.

I see. I suspected as much. The purpose of this dinner was… well, Jasmine seems oblivious, and I
really don’t want to tip her off, so…

“Are you interested in politics?” father asked out of the blue.

“No.”

“What about social activism?”

“No, not at all. I think they’re annoying,” Jasmine answered.

“That’s good to hear.” Father nodded. “Would you consider yourself conservative or liberal?”

“Um. Um. I’m a moderate, maybe? As long as people don’t bother me and the laws aren’t burdensome, I don’t mind them. Unless they deal with Pokemon, then I’d probably have a stronger opinion on the matter.”

“What about religion?”

“I don’t go to church. My dad does, but not my mother, and they never made me go.”

“Do you believe in any faith?”

“I don’t know. It’s not something I think about too much. To me, beliefs should be private, for oneself, not shared or forced on others.”

“Hmm.”

“Erika follows Shindoism? Right?” Jasmine looked to me for confirmation.

I nodded.

“One of a few belief systems I follow.”

“Is that how you were brought up? Or did you pick that up on your own?”

“I taught her about Shindo,” mother informed her. “As I did for Nikoto as well. He was like you in his younger days. I managed to convert him, after twenty years of marriage.”

“Dear, you make it sound like some great challenge. My family is traditionally Shindoist. I merely lay my faith aside in my youth while I pursued my immediate goals. Jasmine, do you understand the tenants of our faith?”

“Erika explained them to me. I don’t remember exactly, but it’s about living in harmony with all the spirits of the world, I think?”

“That is sufficient, if you are going to condense it down to one sentence. Do you know the particulars of how it applies to relationships between people?”

“Um, um…” Jasmine wracked her brain. “To try to force yourself onto others is bad, and that you should look for connections with others that contribute to your sense of peace, the other person’s sense of peace, and peace within the community too.”

“That is correct.” Father tilted his head. “And do you know how it is determined which ‘connections’, as you put it, are allowed and which are to be spurned?”

“No, I don’t.”
Dinner went on for another twenty minutes or so, in which time the rest of the food and drinks were polished off while father relentlessly tore into Jasmine’s psyche. She answered candidly, not without fault or weakness, but with enough frankness and humility to assure him of her honesty. Overall, she acquitted herself well. Father would bring home candidates for high ranking positions at the hospital to interview. Many could not match Jasmine’s performance, some fell completely apart.

I didn’t expect it to go this well. She is answering without much hesitation, with answers that are thoughtful and polite, and managing to avoid responses that would upset him. It’s as if she could sense father’s preferences and was tailoring her answer to appease him as best she could. As if… as if she had experience dealing with this kind of imposing authority figure.

The ‘interview’ concluded, we moved ourselves to the public lounge and continued the conversation in a more casual, friendly manner. Mother managed to alleviate the mood by sharing stories of our family, including some embarrassing bits about my tender years- which I did not appreciate! Tangela waddled in from time to time to provide drinks, wine for the adults, tea for me, water for Jasmine.

“So then, you’ve mentioned Pokemon a number of times. I take it to mean they’re an important part of your life.”

“Probably the most important,” Jasmine said. “Not just because of my job as Gym Leader, but I really love them. Oh, and I’m also taking care of Olivine City’s Lighthouse Pokemon, an Ampharos. He’s very dear to me, we’ve known each other since I was little.”

“That’s sweet. I wish Mareep were more common here in Kanto, they’re such adorable things.”

“Well, I guess. I never knew Amphy as a Mareep, he evolved pretty quickly for his age, so I’ve always known him as an Ampharos. Still he’s adorable, and so is his personality. He knows how to play card games.”

“Oh really? Which ones?”

“Go-Fish, and Military, and Slap-Jack, and even a simple playing card game that we made up.”

“Can he read?”

“Uh, no, not really. He can recognize the pictures and symbols, and I managed to get him to memorize the individual rules for each card.”

“Erika, how is your gym doing?” father interjected.

“It’s going well.”

“And your business?”

“I am having a meeting with my suppliers next Monday, and with the financiers the Friday after.”

Father nodded, and then lowered his voice.
“And what of your other business?”

I breathed deeply.

“There’s nothing to report. I don’t work with them anymore.”

Father nodded again, accepting my answer without further comment.

“It’s getting late,” he declared. He rose and began departing towards his study. “Dear, please clean up the dinner table.”

“Are you going to bed so soon?” mother asked.

“Yes.”

“Will you be busy tomorrow?”

“We’re preparing the demonstration for the experimental cancer surgery next week, and behind schedule.”

“I see.”

“If you’ll excuse me.” Father walked out. I was a little surprised. I expected at least some remark concerning Jasmine before he departed. Now I feel left in limbo.

“Erika, Jasmine, I trust everything’s prepared for you?”

“Yes, it’s all fine.”

“Then I will see you in the morning. Please don’t stay up late or make a fuss, your father is going to need a good night’s sleep.”

“As if he could hear me in this oversized mansion of his,” I muttered.

“What was that?” mother asked sharply. Daggers in her eyes, venom in her voice. Tension that had always been there, just under the surface, completely hidden but only a paper’s thickness distant, and now threatening to shatter everything that I had striven for this whole evening.

“We will behave,” I quickly responded.

“See to it. Goodnight.”

I ushered Jasmine away, in the opposite direction of the dining room. Even if it meant taking a detour to get to my room, I wanted to evacuate mother’s company as soon as possible. Her disapproving stare fell heavy upon my shoulders as we left.

Damn it.

I was so close. All through the evening, I’d managed to avoid this issue. Jasmine had performed splendidly. Her only hiccup had been calling my father ‘mister’ at the beginning. Nothing else she said brought down the Hikami’s infamous contempt. Then at the last second I just had to ruin everything with a thoughtless utterance. What an idiot I am.

I am fortunate it was at the very end; the matter was let off before it could become a bigger issue. Yet, if I was trying so desperately to convey to Jasmine the picture of a perfectly harmonious family, I’ve failed. She’s staring at me, wanting to know what the deal was, why everything suddenly
seemed more dire and tense.

“So, you survived,” I said with false joviality.

“Your parents are really strict, aren’t they?”

“They can be.”

“Is that why you moved out?” she asked.

I bit my lip.

“It’s alright, I understand. I want to move out of my house too.”

A well of relief filled me up. She understands. She sympathizes. Perhaps, just maybe, I could open up a bit…

“Is your father like mine?” I asked.

“You mean a misogynistic patriarch? An overbearing authoritarian?”

I cringed. To put it so bluntly! That is so utterly like you, Jasmine.

“No, not, my dad’s nothing like that. If he were even a little more assertive, maybe… but he’s not the one that, he’s not the, not the…”

Jasmine stopped mid-step, averted her eyes, and began shivering. Her breathing became heavy, burdened.

I placed the tips of my fingers on her shoulder. Should I do something more? It’s like that time at the airport. There’s something wrong with her, but I don’t know exactly what. Something about the subject of her parents is triggering this awful reaction. I wish I knew what it was; I wish I could help her.

My touch seemed to have made her aware of herself. She perked up.

“At least I only have one parent who gives me a hard time, you’ve got two! I can’t imagine being in your spot!” She says this with cheer, but I know it’s false bravado. “Except,” she followed, “I don’t think your parents are that bad. I mean, anyone who raised someone as kind as you can’t be that bad.” Maybe she didn’t realize she had paid me such a high compliment, because her gaze wandered off in thought.

Did my parents really contribute to the person I am now, or am I this way in spite of my upbringing?

Am I even worth that praise?

“Such a silly girl,” I said to mask my own confused feelings.

“So did I pass?” she asked suddenly.

“Hmm?”

“Well, from your dad’s shake-down, I assumed I was being vetted.”

“To be frank, yes, that was the case. I’m not sure how you fared, but I think we avoided the worst possible outcome.”
“Really?”

I have seen Jasmine in both public and private, casual and formal company. As a Gym Leader, she’s a little shy, so she comes off as innocent and sweet. Those who know her in her unguarded, natural state are privy to her sour, sarcastic personality. To men, particularly the ones prowling for pick-ups, she is cold, disdainful, quick to temper, and if provoked by a pervert, wrathful - a truly terrifying sight to behold. To her seniors, she can don the mask of respect and courtesy with sufficient grace.

I was worried how well she would get along with mother and father. There was a chance that if Jasmine had let her more… let’s call it “abrasive” side come through, their first meeting would likely become an unrecoverable disaster. Fortunately things seem to have gone quite well. Jasmine was perceptive, quickly intuited father’s personality, and played to his whims. She ingratiated herself to mother almost immediately. Unless father put far too much weight into her younger age, everything should be acceptable.

With this, our friendship is secured. I wonder if Jasmine herself realizes the import-

“Are your parents the kind of people that would forbid you from hanging out with me if I didn’t make a good impression?”

Well I’ll be… she’s seen right through me as well.

“Yes, they are like that, but I don’t think we’ll have to worry about it anymore,” I answered.

“That’s good, actually,” Jasmine said.

“Hmm? How is that good?”

“It means they care about you and are looking out for you.”

“I guess if you look at it that way… what about yours?” I asked, just to be kind and reciprocate.

“She never gave a damn about my relationships,” Jasmine said bitterly. “I’m jealous of you.”

I stood aghast as my friend hurried into the nearby bathroom.

My daze lasted far longer than it should have. It was lifted when my ears picked out the sound of footsteps approaching from behind.

I spun around.

“Father!”

“It’s me.”

He was still dressed, except his tie had come undone.

“I thought you were going to bed.”

“I am, I just wanted to have a word with you.”

“About?”

Father stared onward, catching a glimpse of Jasmine as she exited the bathroom and headed to my bedroom.
Oh. This must be the verdict.

The fact that he wanted to talk to me in private was not a good sign.

I braced myself.

“You and her are close, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

“How long do you think your… friendship will last?”

“A lifetime, I hope. But, it’s not what you’re thinking,” I said.

“What do you think I am thinking?”

I went silent.

“She seems innocent enough. Does she have any connection to your warehouse friends?”

“I told you I’m not involved with them anymore.”

“Erika, don’t lie.”

I bowed my head in shame.

“She has nothing to do with them. She doesn’t even know about it,” I answered truthfully.

“Very well.”

Father nodded and stared at the wall for a moment. Then he turned to me and prompted me to look at him by grabbing my shoulders.

“Erika, I want you to know that because we are your parents, your mother and I will always love and support you, no matter how you live your life.

*However*, society has no obligation to do the same. Be mindful of your position, of how society sees you. Take care to keep your… *affairs*… private. The world is cruel, and will judge you.”

He took me in a hug.

This is unusual. Rare. It felt nice, receiving this embrace from him. It made me feel like he really did love me.

But it also showed how serious he was about his words.

“If it’s what you want, I wish the best for you and Jasmine. And Erika-”

“Yes father?”

He held me at arms’ length once again and looked me in the eye.

“Be safe.”
“What about this?”

“No.”

“This?”

“No. Too boyish.”

“Definitely this.”

“Too stuffy.”

“Well?”

“Shows too much skin.”

“Here!”

“Too frilly.”

“Hah! Try this one on!”

“Feels like wearing a backpack.”

“This?”

“Too itchy.”

“Oh, this one is perfect! It surely is the best of the bunch! You can’t possibly say no!”

“I like it, but did you see the price?”

“Blah! This one is cheaper!”

“It has a cleavage slip.”

“This one is more modest.”

“Too frumpy. I thought we were going to a party?”

“This one looks fun!”

“It looks like a skank uniform.”

“This one’s not as bad.”

“I would get detention for wearing that in school.”

“Here, this one is plain enough, right? Right?!”

“A girl who tried to bully me wore one just like that.”

“This one, certainly!”
“I don’t like pink. It’s too girly.”

“Grah!!!”

I threw my hands up in the air.

“Hopeless! Hopeless!”

Thus spoke the Voice of Despair.

This frustrating episode could be the epitome of my never-ending war on Jasmine’s nefariously picky fashion sense. In fact, having exhausted every outfit of every outlet in Celadon Mall, Emerald Springs Mall, University Mall, Bridge Street, Middletown, and Couture Market, I am willing to assert that Jasmine has never displayed more stubborn prissiness in all my time with her than today.

“Why can’t I just wear one of the dresses you bought me last week?”

“Because, my dear,” I said, brow about to burst, “you saw fit to wear them to our gardening activities, and now they are waiting their turn at the dry-cleaner.”

“But you said that it was okay to wear them for that stuff.”

“I did say that, however, your enthusiasm for playing with the Oddish has been a little bit excessive.”

She literally buried herself in dirt up to her chest, just like the wild Oddish, in order to amuse them. Even after sending them to the professional cleaner, there was no way those dresses would ever be fit for formal company ever again.

“I could wear this dress.” She clutched the one she was currently wearing, which was also the one she had arrived in Celadon wearing.

“I forbid it.”

I will not have my best friend frolicking around a party in a maiden’s pure-white sundress. Never mind the travesty of fashion, it would tip off too many predators to Jasmine’s naïve nature.

“Sorry.” Jasmine shrugged, clearly showing she was not sorry at all.

“Something has got to give!”

We walked, or rather, she walked and I sulked, out of the store, heading to the bus stop. At this rate, I might end up abstaining from the party altogether, such would be my shame. The sidewalk was overcrowded with people of every station, sporting every genre of wearables. Some women perked my interest, wearing something similar to Jasmine’s tastes and not wholly objectionable on my end. I had to resist the urge to dash up to them and demand to know where they acquired their clothing from.

There was a dress on one young lady, pure white like Jasmine’s but constructed in a ritzier, more playful style that greatly intrigued me. I turned to compare it to Jasmine’s, and suddenly discovered I was alone.

“Jasmine?”

I gawked about, shocked, worried, aghast, mortified that I had lost her. Then, by the good grace of that same glaring white sundress, I spotted her across the street and half-a-block back. Under normal circumstances I would never consider jaywalking, but with traffic halted and feelings of
abandonment welling up inside of me, I darted across without a second thought.

She was staring at the window display of a hole-in-the-wall boutique. The name of the store didn’t ring a bell, I suspect it was the brain-child of some young, struggling first-time entrepreneur; it had that amateur, minimalistic feel to it. The same description could be applied to the outfit that had Jasmine enthralled.

She pointed a finger at it without saying a word.

I processed the dress through my fashion-analysis-meter, tripped about a hundred red flags, and then discarded my better judgment. Anything was better than nothing, and at this point we’d barely have enough time to get ready.

“Fine!”

I entered first. Several friends were already there, expecting my arrival.

“Erika!”

“Lisa,” I greeted my senior assistant. Close behind her were familiar faces, though I hadn’t seen them in person in a while.

“Hello! Greetings! Brock, Misty, Janine, it’s so good to see you all together!”

Teenagers, young adults, men and women, cosmopolitan and agrarian, nerds and jocks, fifty or so people all gathered at this hotel galleria, with but one common denominator- they were all prominent Pokemon trainers from the Kanto region.

“How ya been? I got your package and tried some out, it smelled great! I think you’ll have no problem selling it!”

“Thank you, Janine, and I’ve been doing well.”

“A fine and lovely sight as always, Miss Erika. Would the heavens ever grace me with the sight of my handsome mug and your beautiful face side-by-side on a date, I would die a happy man.”

“Ever the shameless lech, as expected Mr. Brock.

“When are you ever going to come up to Cerulean? You promised me a match, flower girl. You’re not scared, are ya? Even with your type advantage? Or what about that beach outing we always talk about but never go on? Come on, some friend you are!”

“Misty, what’s really bothering you?”

“I have no boyfriend! I didn’t think dumping that loser would make me so darned lonely!”

“I will gladly take that position and fill your life with endless entertainment, no matter the personal sacrifice and tsundere beatings it might demand of my body!”

“Shut it, Brock! Shut it right now! You have a girlfriend!”
“Oh, you’re dating again? Who is the misfortunate maiden?”

“Er, um, erg…”

“It’s Professor Ivy.”

“Shhhhh! We’re not, like, official yet! Don’t go telling everyone!”

“So your pervy spiel is actually a cover?”

“Oh, I see. How funny. Ha ha ha ha.”

“Hey Erika, I heard you had a friend over. Introduce us!” Misty demanded.

I noticed the girl in question was still loitering outside, and so went to fetch her. By the time I returned, the group had grown to ten heads.

“This is my friend Jasmine, Gym Leader of Olivine City.”

The women gazed in interest, the men inhaled sharply.

She wore her new dress, a pastel green A-line with a sheer fringe, overlaid with a white cardigan clipped in the front with an orange bow. Her little feet and toes were on display by virtue of opal-studded sandals. Her wide forehead was also prominent, given that her signature hairstyle was now immaculately perfected with the bulk of hair combed and let down, bangs cut neat, and the spiky twin-tails flaring straight up and held in place with her usual mandarin-like hair-clips. Her eyes were downcast, displaying her typical shyness when greeting large groups of strangers.

“Well, hello!”

There were too many to reasonably introduce to her one-by-one, and yet the group members insisted on individual greetings. While a loose line formed (mainly composed of men) to wait for her attention, I consulted my assistant.

“I noticed that we are missing company,” I said, somewhat accusingly.

“If you’re referring to Sabrina, she’s entertaining folks at the bar,” Lisa answered.

“I meant him. You said he was going to be here.”

“He said he was going to be here.”

“And?”

“That’s all I have.”

I squirmed in frustration.

“My plan is no good if he doesn’t even show up!”

“It won’t work. I know you’ve got good intentions but you’re no good at these kinds of things. They always fail.”

“That’s why I wanted your help!”

“I can’t help. How am I supposed to know any better than you?”
“Erika!” A whispered plea and a tug at my elbow brought to my attention a desperate, pitiful looking Jasmine. “Please help.” Oh my, she’s about to cry, I think. Whatever could put her in such a wretched state so quickly?- oh.

“Ah, the loveliest of ladies know their worth and always play coy, but my persistence is matched only by my endless patience, charm, and charisma!”

“Oh! That’s just Brock. It’s okay to smack him.”

Jasmine instantly whirled around and delivered a full-force facial fracking to the young man, the sound of which exploded across the ballroom and caught the attention of every single occupant within. The victim of the blow completely lost his feet and stumbled backwards into the arms of two astonished onlookers. His jaw hung limp and cheek burned the color of raw Charmeleon.

Oh my… perhaps I was bit hasty in giving her permission to violent recourse.

“I didn’t deserve that,” Brock cried- literally cried, there were tears.

Jasmine was breathing heavily. I brought her heaving form within the fold of my arms, clutching her strongly from behind. Even if Brock’s advances were entirely farcical, Jasmine’s display sent a clear message. No other would-be suitor would dare to approach her after that.

“Are you alright? That was far too excessive. I think you should apologize.”

“He said he wanted to give me a load of the ‘Samba Bamba’. How could you let a guy get away with that?”

*Sigh.* Oh Jasmine.

“The Samba Bamba is a dance, Jasmine, he wanted to take you dancing,” I explained.

She covered her face in shame. “Idiot! Stupid boy! Why would he ask that? I can’t dance!” she cried.

At that moment, the door to the outer hallway burst open and a young man came flying through. I lit up in joy, it was just the man I was expecting. But then-

“Woah!”

*SLAM!*

“Ooof!”

In one motion he had doubled back, slammed the door shut, locked it, and then backed away in the opposite direction. His terrified face was still fixated upon the door even as he launched himself into a sprint- straight into Jasmine and I. His focus came forward just in time to anticipate the collision and bring his arms forward. They wrapped around my shoulders, and his chest hit Jasmine’s straight on. The three of us fused into a single stumbling mass of confused bodies. We came to a rest miraculously still standing, although off-balance and unable to move apart.

Jasmine’s quivering head slowly, shakily peered over her shoulder to face me.


“It’s alright,” I tried to assure her.

“It’s touching me.”
“That is Gary Oak, and is a ‘he’, not an ‘it’, dear.”

“No, it.” Her eyes darted downward, to our collective hip area.

“Oh!” I giggled. It was too lewd, too absurd. “Well. You can’t make a Jasmine sandwich without a little sausage.”

She let out a scream, thrashed like a wild Pokemon, and extricated herself while inflicting grievous harm upon herself, myself, and the unfortunate Viridian Gym Leader. Her next action was to run to the door, desperately seeking an escape.

“No, stop! Don’t do it!” Gary cried.

Jasmine had already unlocked the door, but paused just before opening it.

Was it his words of warning that gave her pause? Or the ominous pounding coming from the far side of the door?

Jasmine’s hand hovered over the door handle. The pounding increased, until the entire door was jumping in its frame. Something was thrashing against it, violently trying to gain entry. The man shook his head, pleading for her to back off.

“What is it? What’s chasing you?” I asked Gary.

The look of terror in his eyes told me enough. I didn’t want to know. He, I, and everyone else stood riveted to the spot, holding our breath.

Jasmine’s hand was trembling. She took a glance at the man. Indignation welled up inside her throat. Her body tensed, shame overtaking primal fear. She took the handle and pulled.

A tidal wave of Eevee washed over her.

The girl yelped once, and then disappeared under the flood of brown and white fur. The cries of a hundred adorable dirges coalesced into a single death knell of cuteness.

“Eeee! Eeee! Eeee!” All I could comprehend was soft fur and the fifth letter of the alphabet filling the entirety of my senses. Everything became Eevee. The walls were Eevee. The air was Eevee. The trainers were people-shaped statues of Eevee. The contours of reality became a fabric of interwoven Eevee bodies, leaving nothing else. Life was Eevee. Death was Eevee. The universe is become Eevee, Destroyer of Worlds.

I exaggerate, but only a little.

No fewer than four hundred and eighteen Eevee flooded the ballroom. I would learn this number from Gary Oak himself.

“Gramps wanted me to take care of a batch of Eevee they were keeping at the lab to use as starter Pokemon. It was only supposed to be eight of the things, but the old man screwed up the registry and sent me every bloody furbag in Pallet Town. Four hundred and eighteen! I didn’t think Pallet had four hundred Pokemon total, let alone—” “EEEEEEVVV!” The younger Oak’s explanation was abruptly cut off as five furry bodies jumped on his face, proceeding to suffocate him with affection. I stepped forward to help, only to hesitate. One of them had turned around and noticed me.

I held my breath.

“No. No. Stay away.”

“Eeeveeee.”

The one got the attention of the other four. Gary Oak’s silently writhing body was abandoned, their attention now fixated on me.

“Eevee. Eevee. Eeveeee.” Their cries sounded eerily like the dying throes of a HAL 9000 unit. I took one step back, they took two hops forward.

“BWAAAAA!”

Well, to be fair, no one in the ballroom looked dignified at the time, so I don’t feel that the sight of me running akimbo and screaming my head off in terror would be all that damaging to my reputation.

“Thunder Shock! Thunder Wave!”

Two Eevee seized up and fell behind the rest. Unfortunately, six more had joined the chase.

“Erika, over here!”

My friend and would-be savior had climbed atop a table. She had one Eevee on her back and one hanging off her arm, with five more fainted about her and twice as many attempting to climb onto her refuge. Her two Magnemite were out and delivering electrical jolts to the mass of escaped Pokemon.

“I- I- *huff huff* can’t jump!”

In this kimono, it would be impossible to make it on top of the table without being overrun. I was barely outrunning my assailants as is.

“That’s okay, just run laps around the table!” Jasmine shouted.

I didn’t understand how that would help me, but did as she said. The little thumps of paws and mewling cries grew closer and closer with each turn. Wet noses found purchase on my exposed ankles, causing me to flinch. The ring of chaos and cries filled my ears, but all I could focus on was keeping close to the edge of the table even as I ran at full speed.

The cries grew fainter. No, not fainter, just less voluminous. The leader was right on me, even taking pounces that brushed on my buttocks. It’s close, any moment now I’ll be caught.

I’m no athlete, by the seventh turn I was out of breath. Resigning myself, I stumbled to a stop and scrunched my eyes, fearing the onslaught.

“Eh?”

Nothing. I opened my eyes. The Eevee- they were all fainted.

“But- you- how?” I stuttered.

“If a line of charging enemies see their leader fall, they’ll know they’re under fire, stop, and turn on the defender. But if you pick off the caboose one by one, they’ll never get wise and keep charging,” Jasmine casually explained, as if lecturing a military academy classroom.
“Where did you learn that?” I asked, incredulous.

“Heroes of The Great War, History Channel."

“Really? I never thought of you as the kind of girl who would watch the History Channel.”

“Why not?”

“Well, to be blunt, it’s not like you. You’re too feminine to be watching such things.”

“You said yourself I’m a tomboy.”

“That’s not tomboy behavior! More like tomgranny behavior.”

“Don’t you mean tomgrandpa?”

“No I meant- wait what?”

“You mixed up the genders, it would tomgrandpa for tomboy, not tomgranny.”

“Oh to be such a pedantic little nit-pick is just like you! I take it all back!”

“Duck.”

“What?”

“Duck!”

“Goose?”

Luckily, my lower brain functions kicked in and I ducked down, just as the Magnemite ripped off a combined Thunder Shock attack over my head. A mob of Eevee were zapped to a halt just inches short of my backside.

“It’s not safe down there, climb up.”

Jasmine’s warning was born out, another large mob was heading our way.

One in particular was faster than the rest. It took note of the piles of fallen brethren, and trotted to a halt. Not to be deterred, it began wagging its tail and puffing out its chest and eyes.

Those eyes. Those big, beautiful eyes… They’re calling to me…

“Mag! Protect her!”

I have to. I have to join him. It’s definitely a he. He is my future, my everything.

Then my vision was filled with a solid plane of metallic grey.

“Erika, snap out of it! Climb up!”

I shook my head and clambered up.

“Watch out, they’re using Attract now!”

Oh dear. I see. I was saved by Magnemite, who was genderless and immune to such follies.
Magnemite on the floor could not suppress all of them and was about to be overrun. Magnemite on the table was exhausted.

“What are we going to do?”

“Don’t you have your Pokemon?”

“No, I didn’t bring my Pokeballs. I have no pockets on this dress.”

“Your purse?”

“I didn’t want to bring a purse to a party.”

“You’re kidding me! Magnemite, Self-Destruct!”

Just as the giant mob washed over Magnemite, the little ball of steel flashed bright white. The detonation was muffled, smothered by the two dozen or so furry bodies covering it. Nonetheless, the physical effect was readily apparent- a shockwave of Eevee flying through the air.

Flying-type Eevee evolution- why does one not exist? I caught myself thinking as one such creature with a dazed, doofy-looking grin flew by my head in slow motion.

Wow. I truly am out of it. Get ahold of yourself, Erika!

“Jasmine, we need to rescue Gary!”

“Gary? That guy? No! Heck no!”

“Come on!”

“I don’t want to help any guy!”

“Don’t be a misanthrope!”

“Not true! Misanthropes hate everyone! I only hate boys! That’s called misandry!”

“Holy Miltank Jasmine this is a crisis, have some compassion!”

“Fine! Fine! Where is he?”

I pointed to a horrific scene.

It’s hard to conceptualize one hundred Pokemon packed into a ball, the radius of which measured a mere three yards, and yet that is exactly what was transpiring before us. The majority of the escaped Eevee were piling on top of one another to get at Gary Oak’s person (body? corpse??). Jasmine exchanged a worried glance with her one remaining Magnemite.

“I don’t think Mag-mag can take all of them, even with Self-Destruct.”

The mass of cries were deafening, or so I thought. Then an ear-splitting screech erupted from deep within, growing and growing until it became physically painful. The dome of bodies writhed and seethed. Eevee began jumping wildly, wriggling violently to get on top or under or around. They started biting and fighting one another.

A single head poked itself above the fray. An Eevee head, with some kind of cube in its mouth. The
collective cries converged into one eardrum-splitting whine.

“EEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!”

Then the lone Eevee jumped off and dashed away.

“Eevee!” The rest slowly became aware of the situation and broke off. In short order the ball of fur dissipated, its constituent members scattered to the four corners. I rushed forward, scared of what I might find.

Gary Oak was coughing, visibly bruised, and wincing in pain, but remarkably already on his elbows and lifting himself up.

“Grrr.”

“Are you alright?”

“Yeah I’ll be fine.”

“What happened?” Jasmine asked. “Why did they all run?”

“They were after the Pokéblock I had. Custom Eevee bait. Grr. Dang it! Damn it!”

“So they’re attracted to the Pokéblock? Why not chase it down and use it to lure them back to the Pokécenter?”

“No, no, not that simple,” Gary shook his head.

“What else?”

“Crap. Crap crap crap.” Gary pointed to the door.

A pair of police officers were standing by. With them was a Pokémon League officer. The latter was handing out what looked like grey Pokéballs.

“Oh thank goodness! The League is here!” I exclaimed.

The grey Pokéballs must be Capture Balls. They’re programmed to bypass ownership protocols, in other words, they can zap up any Pokémon, even ones owned by a trainer. The officers can help us get this horde under control. We’re saved!

“No, NOT good,” Gary growled. I and Jasmine stared at him in alarm. He continued. “One of the Eevee- she’s the child of my Umbreon. She’s not well, she was born with an illness that makes her allergic to Pokéball digitization. She can only be digitized in her own custom Pokéball. A Capture Ball would…” and he fell silent.

“No way.” Jasmine was shocked. “Church-Berrington Syndrome?” she whispered.

“You know about it?” Gary asked.

She nodded.

“I gotta go,” he said.

“I’m coming with you.”
“Jasmine, wait!”

“Hey, Erika, if you could do me a favor, go explain to the police the sit. Oh, and if you’ve got time, track that one thief down and get the Pokeblock back. We might need it,” Gary said.

“Um, but, Jasmine, will you be okay?”

She looked at me like I was crazy. Gary Oak was already dashing off.

“Because he’s a guy,” I added.

“So? A Pokemon is in danger!” she said, and then sprinted to catch up with Gary, even overtaking him.

I stared after them.

You know, when I was plotting to set those two up on a blind date, I never intended to use a horde of escaped Eevee as the mechanism for bringing them together. Life can be just so utterly ridiculous sometimes!

“Lisa, come with me.”

My longtime assistant skipped to my side. She was a slender girl. Not too tall, but her long dark hair and thin waist made everything about her seem vertical. Even her brow seemed stretched tall, perhaps because of her thin eyebrows and the hairband holding back her bangs. Her day-dress was noticeably fur-ridden (as was mine).

I had just finished debriefing the officers and retrieving my Pokeballs from the PC. Together we exited the hotel and set out in the direction of a distant ruckus. I gave her a quick rundown of the situation and my appointed task.

“Our top priority is the Pokeblock and the Eevee that made off with it.”

“I see. It’ll probably be at the center of the horde, right?”

“Yes,” I nodded. “We’ll follow the noise.”

It wasn’t so simple, however, as several large groups of Eevee had split off in different directions, which forced us to slow down and check which particular group was the one we were looking for. As we walked, Lisa kept glancing at me.

“Hmm?”

“So? How did it go?” she asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I saw Blue and Jasmine walk off together. It looks like your plan actually worked.”

“Well I can hardly claim credit. Jasmine ran off with him of her own accord. They’re looking for Mr. Oak’s own Eevee.”
“Professor Oak’s Eevee?”

“No, Gary’s.”

“Oh geez. Mr. Oak, Professor Oak, it’s too confusing.”

“Then use his first name.”

“Only you and the other gym leaders know him well enough to do that. It’s easier for us to just use his nickname.”

“He dislikes it, though.”

“Bah, whatever!”

We stopped to let pass a flock of Eevee, followed by a young, exuberant child, then a harried mother, and lastly a desperate police officer. Lisa stepped after them, but I shook my head.

“Too small, it’s not the group we’re looking for.”

“So what’s the deal with the date?”

“Well, if you hadn’t noticed yet, she’s quite difficult when it comes to men.”

“I thought that was because—”

“No,” I answered preemptively. “I think it has to do with something that happened to her.”

“Oh, so that’s how it is.” Lisa frowned, looking disappointed. “A bad relationship maybe?”

“Something like that, although she has told me she’s never had a boyfriend. I’m supposing a bully or stalker or something of that sort.”

“So…”

I shrugged.

“I want to see her happy, is all. I thought that if I could introduce her to the right young man, she might be able to get past her squeamishness and have fun.”

“What makes you think she wants to start dating?”

“Oh it’s not about what she wants. She’s too stubborn for her own good. If we don’t force her, she’ll stay just as she is.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, how is she?” Lisa asked.

The question bit me in the nip; I didn’t know how to answer. When talking about Jasmine? How do you summarize her troubles?

“It’s… It’s…” I rubbed my eyes, “like having a potted plant. Yes, you can water it and its leaves will perk up for a while, but if you leave it alone it will go back to drooping and eventually wither. Her mood, I mean.” I grasped at thin air, as if trying to catch the ideas I was struggling to explain. “You have to feed her with positive experiences to make her happy. She’s never happy by default. If I or someone else don’t attend to her, she sinks right back into melancholy.”
“That sounds like depression,” Lisa said.

I bit my lip.

She’s right. It’s hard to admit, but any way you look at it, Jasmine probably suffers from depression.

“So what you’re saying is you’re trying to find a permanent distraction.”

“A distraction? That’s not what she needs,” I said.

“Oh, but that’s what a boyfriend would be. Just a distraction,” Lisa insisted. “If you don’t find the root of the problem, depression won’t go away. It’ll keep lurking under the surface.”

“Oh I doubt that,” I said. “She’s not something that needs to be ‘fixed’. Hope, that’s all she needs. We just have to replace her bad experiences with good ones.”

“Mmm. Suit yourself. But it’s still not going to work.”

“And why not?”

“Because Blue is still in love with Green.”

“She turned him down though, didn’t she? Years ago!”

“Feelings don’t die that easily. They still hang out a lot, so it’s not like he can forget about her and move on. Besides, Jasmine doesn’t sound like the kind of girl who would date a douchey a-hole like him.”

“Oh give him credit, he’s gotten better than he used to be.”

“I’ll give you that, but will it be enough? Jasmine seems really shy and sensitive. I don’t think they’re suited for each other.

“We’ll see.”

A block onwards and a commotion caught Lisa’s attention. She tapped me on the shoulder.

“I’m pretty sure that’s it.”

She pointed to an apartment building with an exterior stairwell climbing up seven floors. Virtually every step and most of the adjacent landings were filled with Eevee. The building’s face was overflowing with them. At least half the escaped Pokemon must be present. One officer and his Rhyhorn were already present, trying to make headway against the mob. His Pokemon couldn’t climb the steps, however, and so the pair was stuck dealing with the escapees loitering around ground level.

“Miss! Stay back!” he said, putting a hand up to block our way. He used his free hand to direct Rhyhorn’s charges into the nearest pack of hazel fur.

“It’s alright, let me through,” I said. The officer took a second look at us.

“Oh, Gym Leader, Ma’am! My apologies! Hey, please tell me you’ve got back up! This is- just look at it!”

“It’s just me and my assistant. Actually, we’re looking for one Eevee in particular. Did you notice any of them carrying something in its mouth, a small cube?”
“Oh great.” The office grabbed his brow. He perked up on hearing my question. “Oh, yeah, I did see that.”

“What did it go?”

He pointed straight up, to the roof of the building.

“Thank you.”

I stepped forward and assessed the task at hand.

Seven floors, fourteen flights of stairs, every step overrun with an excitable ball of fluff.

“Lisa, could you?”

“On it,” she said. Out came her Pokemon, Peridot the Gloom. Within our gym, it was also known as the “Gloom of Boom.” The reason why- well, it was the same reason I asked her to assist.

Unlike my Vileplume, who specializes in Grass-type attacks, her Pokemon has a much greater affinity for its Poison-type arsenal. Namely-

“Sludge Bomb!”

Peridot swallowed, burped, chewed, bulged, and then belched. A mass of gunk shot high into the air. We watched the projectile arc overhead.

“You’re responsible for cleanup,” Lisa warned me.

At its zenith, the Sludge Bomb exploded into a dozen small Sludge Bombs. These impacted all across the balconies of the building, bouncing once- and then divided into a further dozen bomblets. That’s one hundred and forty-four Sludge Bombings. Each one contained the potency of three Stunky Gunk Shots. All detonating simultaneously.

The stairwell was consumed in foul gas. Some Eevee made blinds leaps, landing in the bushes at the bottom. Some scampered around the walkways, others crowded onto the rooftop. The unluckiest were caught with no escape, and soon fainted from mere exposure to the noxious gas.

“Crowd control accomplished!” Lisa cheered.

“Vileplume.”

My petaled Pokemon was let out.

“Antidotes, please.”

“Pluuuu!” Vileplume gurgled and upchucked four pistil. I used two to plug my nose and offered the other two to Lisa, who did the same.

“Officer, could you guard the bottom and make sure no Eevee escape?”

“Yes ma’am! I’ll try!”

We climbed up the stairs. The makeshift nose plugs worked fairly well; they were coated with a resin that nullified Vileplume-family poisons. The hardest part of the ascent was avoiding the half-fainted Eevee tumbling down the stairs. I felt like I was Mario playing the original Donkey Kong game, dodging and leaping over living barrels of cuteness.
“I’m sorry! Excuse me! Not now, little one! Heave ho!”

The rooftop came into view. I took in the sight slowly, with awe and terror slowly filling me.

Eevee. Eevee everywhere.


Wait, what?

My eyes were not deceiving me. A group of Eevee were floating in the air. It took a second to comprehend this impossible feat: they were bobbing in midair above a massive air conditioning unit, riding the stream of hot air being emitted by the fan. It also seemed like they were not doing this purely for thrills, as the participants seemed to be eagerly lunging towards one another, a game of aerial tag.

No, wait. Their tackles weren’t random. They were all directed at one particular Eevee. This one twisted around, showing me its snout- and within was a cinnamon-red cube.

“That’s it.”

I, Lisa, and our Pokemon advanced. When we got within ten yards, the pack of miscreants perked up, aware of our presence.

“Hello there! Would you be so kind as to hand that little treat over and follow me back to the Pokemon Center?” I held out a hand.

“Evv!” The thief back-flipped out of the air draft and dashed away. The remainder leapt forward, blocking their comrade’s escape.

“Shouldn’t you be helping me catch the Pokeblock thief? Don’t you want it for yourselves?” I asked. They growled at me (you have no possible idea how cute and non-threatening an Eevee growl is).

“Well it seems you are smarter than you look. Lisa, use your Oddish to block the escape.”

“Yes!”

“And then ready Peridot in case the others join in the fray.”

I looked around and hastily assessed the situation.

The first and foremost threat was letting Mr. Thief escape. The second threat was attracting the aggression of the rest of the careless mob surrounding us. The eight Eevee in front of me would be no issue, but if all one hundred of them joined in, we would be overwhelmed.

I don’t want die to Eevee-induced asphyxiation.

“Vileplume, Stun Spore. Quietly.”

In short order the Eevee were crippled and we were allowed through.

“There’s the culprit.”
“Ah, what’s he doing?”

The thief was dancing around, bumping and pouncing onto other Eevee. Some ignored him, but others became annoyed and started chasing his tail.

“He’s rallying them.”

“I got it. Peridot, stealth dose.”

Peridot shot out spit wads of Toxic poison. The Eevee that followed Mr. Thief’s lead were sniped one by one. These weren’t battling Pokemon, and it only took a half-minute each before they keeled over.

“Victreebel, out. You and Vileplume, chase that thief down.” I clutched my third and final Pokeball. I had a plan.

The foe was not dumb to what we were doing it. It took one glance, saw that none of its bodyguards were conscious, and bolted. Peridot the Gloom, Vileplume, and Victreebel gave chase. The faster quadruped outran them. It started skipping across the heads and backs of its comrades, rousing more and more into an angry frenzy. The plants’ progress was further bogged down by having to subdue the riled Eevee one by one. Seeing our efforts frustrated, the thief merrily pranced around the rooftop, as if treating it like a giant pinball machine.

Yet the mischief-maker failed to notice the trap. The Grass-types were slowly but surely forming a perimeter around the Eevee’s movements. Each missed tackle saved it from capture for a little while longer, but corralled it to a smaller and smaller area. When it tried to dodge between our Pokemon, it found itself confronted by a cloud of Sludge Bomb and Stun Spore.

At last, it was cornered against the edge of the roof. The little creature scrambled on top of the ledge, looked down, looked at us, and cowered. It cried aloud, drawing the attention of the entirety of the Eevee horde. Too late. What few dozen Eevee that listened and answered its call were trapped behind a wall of noxious fumes.

“You’ve nowhere to go now. Hand it over,” I demanded.

The thief shook his head.

There is always the possibility he might jump. From seven floors up, I don’t think that would be a good idea, but with the balconies below he might find room to land. We couldn’t force this.

That’s why I had my Pokeball.

“I’ll catch you,” I said. I tossed the Pokeball towards the Eevee.

The creature puffed up.

It’s an average red and white Pokeball, not a grey Caputure Ball. The Eevee knew this kind of ball couldn’t capture him, because he was a human-owned Pokemon and this Pokeball was programmed to ignore registered Pokemon. In his pride, the thief failed to consider all possibilities-

-such as the fact that my Pokeball had Tangela inside of it, and when my Grass-type was released, it would appear within three inches of the target. At that range, no matter how fast and agile Eevee thought himself, he was not going to escape.

“Constrict!”
Tangela’s vines thrashed about, twisting around every limb it could reach. The Eevee’s agility allowed him to turn around and jump, but no more. Thick vines caught him around the chest, more around the waist and legs. They squeezed tight, immobilizing the creature in midair. Lisa and I strode up, triumphant. Our other three Pokemon stood their ground at the perimeter, warding off the agitated mass of Eevee.

“And so it ends,” I exclaimed. “Mr. Thief, it’s time you had your comeuppance.”

Ohohoho, how careless I was.

The thief glanced at me, at Tangela, at the other Eevee, and then over the edge. He smiled, cried a gleeful little cry, and then flicked his head.

“Heh?!”

The Pokeblock went sailing into the air.

“No!”

Down, down, down it went, to the ground seven floors below.

“You bitter, spiteful, poor sport! You’re doing nothing more than wasting our time!” I said.

“It’s done more than that.” Lisa leaned over the precipice. At her bidding, I took a look myself.

The Pokeblock had landed in an open garbage dumpster.

“Ooooh, I’m going to have good long talk with your trainer!” I wagged my finger at the Eevee. He bobbed his head side to side, pleased with himself.


A sound, like the warning from some construction vehicle backing up. I peered over at the dumpster.

As we watched in horror, a garbage truck lifted the dumpster and upended the contents into its chute. The dumpster came down with a crash, the truck backed up, turned around, and drove off.

“Why, why, why you!!!”

“EEEEEEEEEVEEEEEEEE!”

“Huh?” I whirled around.

Not an Eevee in sight, except for our prisoner.

“Where’d they go?”

I turned about, feeling dizzy.

The truck disappeared around a corner. The streets turned amber in its wake. Screams of shock and anguish followed, as mothers bolted out onto the streets to grab overeager children. The flood of Eevee surged to full and then ebbed to nothing, leaving behind bewildered humans, a titanic mess, and one stray straggler Eevee (who was subsequently buried under a pile of toddlers).

“I think we blew it,” Lisa said wryly.
I hung my head.

“We’d like to report that the mass outbreak of Eevee has been brought under control. The bulk of escaped Pokemon were contained once they chased a city waste disposal vehicle into a local landfill. League Officials humanely subdued and recaptured the Eevee, which are believed to be tamed creatures belonging to the denizens of Pallet Town. The circumstances in which they somehow were transported to Celadon and released are still under investigation. Officials have promised to return them to their rightful owners once they’ve cleared identification and medical checks. In the meantime, they are being held at Sepia Park Zoo. If you and your children would like to take a look at these playful cuties, you’ve still got a couple hours to do so. See you here! This is Rocket 48 News, back to you, studio.”

In the end, our efforts had not been in vain. The Pokeblock bait worked as intended, and although a landfill was not the ideal containment ground, the PokeRangers had made it work. Even the lone Eevee we had managed to capture was not inconsequential- the Pokeblock thief was in fact one of the eight Eevee Gary was originally supposed to have received from his grandfather.

In due course we returned to the hotel, found Gary, and handed the culprit over to him.

“Ah, thanks, Erika.”

“And how did your search go? Well?” I inquired.

“Well, about that…” Gary nodded to an open lounge lined with couches and coffee tables. Jasmine was seated at one, playing peekaboo with a little Eevee pup. The young man walked over and joined her, and together they played with the young Pokemon and chatted. Jasmine started petting the Pokemon. Gary reached over and held her hand, showing her where the pup liked being scratched and rubbed.

I stood rooted on the spot.

She is happy. She’s getting along with him. They’re having fun.

It was just what I wanted, what I had hoped for.

Why then, did I feel so sad? What was the reason for this sinking feeling in my chest?

It hurts, doesn’t it?

“Don’t they look cute together!”

“Oh!” I found a tall elderly man at my side. “Professor Oak!”

“Hoy! It’s me!”

He had his hands in the pockets of his trademark lab coat, a clinical white shade that matched his grizzle top of hair. He was all grins at the moment.

“What an episode this has been! All those Eevee! Bwahaha! From Pallet Town no less!”

“Haha. You’re right. I’m surprised there were so many from one little town. They’re supposed to be
rare Pokemon,” I said.

“So they are! Bordering on extinction in the wild, actually! That’s exactly why the League sponsored a breeding program to boost their numbers! We have a nice breeder community in Pallet, Starter Pokemon are our number one export ya know! Hahaha!”

“Now it all makes sense. So you were going to use the ones you sent to Gary as Starter Pokemon, but because of a technical error-“ I stopped mid-sentence. Wait a minute. “But why would you need to send them from Pallet to Celadon over the PC if you were already here…”

I stepped away and took a long, hard look at “Professor Oak.” It was the eyes that gave him away. I’d seen that slithery glare too many times to forget it.

“Petrel!” I hissed.

His grin turned to an unsightly, gleeful sneer, looking nothing like the Father of Pokemon Science.

“What are you doing here!” I demanded.

“No, what are YOU doing here?” he countered. “You promised me another shipment, three days ago. You’re late. What are you doing fallutin around with high society and playing games. Eh?”

I balled my fist.

“I am not on your schedule!” I whispered defiantly.

“Neither are the police.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“You get your little tush back to the park and see for yourself. You wanna keep those oh-sooo-pweshus mulch-munchers alive, you’d better attend to them soonish. Don’t forget, between us and the cops, which one of us is willing to let you play garden mommy.”

The fake Professor Oak twirled about and prepared to exit. Before he left, though, he pointed to where my two friends were enjoying themselves.

“And if you even think of going against us or ratting us out, you’re not the one we’ll go after. We’ll give the nasty to her.”

He left with his usual flippant wave.

I stood my ground, but as soon as he disappeared I tottered over to the nearest couch and collapsed. Damn that Petrel. How does he know so well, so instinctively, other people’s weaknesses? If it were my own life, it wouldn’t be a very difficult decision. But to go after Jasmine? That man is cruel, and evil. Someday, I hope, I or another will bring him to justice. Until then, though, I will have to survive.

My gaze went to my friend.

The Eevee was asleep in her lap. She was petting it gently, just as instructed, while talking to Gary. By their gaze, the subject was apparently centered around the pup. She was smiling.

I’ve tried so hard, so many different ways, to get Jasmine to smile, to help her find happiness. It was not that hard to draw a laugh out of her, to entertain her for a little while. But to have that joy last beyond the fleeting moment, to be able to leave her in the evening and return in the morning and
finding her still content and at rest, that was not something I had been able to accomplish. As much as it pains me to admit, I, as her best friend, may not be able to provide her that lasting happiness. This solution did not make me happy. It did not gratify my ego. It was a surrender, and against my better judgment. Jasmine has bluntly informed me, time and again, since the first time we met, of her low, low opinion of men. Yet, if nothing else works, I must try it: to prod her into a relationship. 
Love, romantic love, between a girl and boy, was my best hope, perhaps not my last, but best, for finally comforting her troubled soul.

There’s no guarantee this will work. A relationship might be a foolish idea. Or even more likely, Gary Oak is not the man for her. It could all end in disaster. It could push her even further into depression. Yet, as I sit here and watch them, and see her and him getting along and looking like a couple already, a little flicker of hope stirs in my heart. She’s still smiling.

Somehow, Jasmine, I will find a way to protect your smile. I will find a way to make it last. This happy day will be your rule, not your exception. Somehow. I promise.
Something was wrong; it was quite plain to see that as soon as we arrived. Six police vans were parked up and down the street. The park entrance was roped off with yellow tape and an unknown officer was standing guard. These were not Pokemon League officials, but Celadon Law Enforcement. We were challenged well before we got to the gate.

“You can’t enter.”

“What is going on?”

“The park is closed, move on.”

“But what is happening?”

“Did you hear me? Move on. Bug off.”

“You’re not going to answer a simple question?”

“You don’t need to know. Get out.”

“I do have a right to know. I have special access here.”

I dug into my purse, pulled out a card and handed it to the guard. He casually shoved the card back into my purse without even looking at it.

“I don’t care who you think you are, no one’s allowed in.”

I stood aghast.

“This is a registered Pokemon sanctuary and I am the Celadon Gym Leader, by what right do you claim to be able to refuse me entrance?” I shouted indignantly. Apparently even my title meant nothing to this officer.

“Do you wanna be arrested?” he replied testily.

“Where is Evan Norland?” I demanded.

The guard finally let up a bit at the mention of the officer’s name, but was not assuaged.

“So what if you know a name.”

“Evan! Evan!” I started screaming as loud as I could. “Evan I know you’re there!”

“That’s it lady, come here.”

“Blake, I got this.” Evan appeared coming out of the gateway.

“You know this woman?”

“She’s the Gym Leader, Blake, are you blind?”

Officer Blake blinked and let his mouth hang open a bit.

“She’s the caretaker,” Evan added.
Blake did a double-take and then backed off.

“Yeah well it don’t matter still, you let her in there and the captain will have your head.”

He grumbled further but let us some privacy. Evan steered me aside. Jasmine followed quietly, hiding behind me.

“What’s going on?”

“Mayor won’t play. He’s nixing the Hightower colony.”

“Nixing?”

“Killing,” Evan clarified.

“What!” My eyes grew wide. “Right now?” I began hurrying past him. Evan caught me by the shoulder, holding me back.

“Not now. We’re just securing the colony, taking stock. Tomorrow, termination specialists move in.”

“You can’t do that!” I cried. “Why wasn’t I informed? I’m responsible for all Pokemon matters in this city!”

“You’re in charge only as far as the League is concerned. This is a City decision, we’re not beholden to the League.”

“You’re going to murder those Oddish? For what purpose? Why must they suffer for the sins of humans?”

“Cause Corpish needs to be reelected.”

“By killing Oddish?!”

“They’re just Pokemon.”

“Erika, what’s going on? Why are they doing this?” Jasmine asked.

“It’s nothing,” I hurriedly told her. However, Evan butted in.

“The silver Oddish are used to make a street drug called Moon Dust, the mayor’s going to euthanize the colony to stop the narcotics trade.”

“What?” Her reaction was even more shocked than mine.

I shook my head, begging Evan. He doesn’t know she’s innocent, naïve, and that she needs to stay that way. I don’t want her finding out our part in this affair. He bobbed his head, recognizing my plea, thank goodness.

“They use the Oddish to make illegal drugs?” Jasmine asked for confirmation, in disbelief.

“Yeah… sometimes thugs come in and cull the Pokemon. We’ve tried to protect the colony for the past year, me and Erika, but we haven’t been able to stop them or stop the drug trade.”

“Why do you have to kill them? Why not beef up security? Build a wall around them?”

“Too expensive,” Evan explained, shaking his head.
Jasmine persisted.

“What about relocating them?”

“Mayor’s gotta do this quick, to show the public he’s serious and getting things done.”

“It’s impossible,” I said, shaking my head. “Even if they wanted to move the Oddish, they’re physically dependent on the white mineral residue from the boulder. If they become separated from it, they’ll die in weeks.” I turned on Evan. “Yet that’s still no excuse for killing them!”

“They’re just Pokemon! They’re harmless!” Jasmine cried.

“‘Harmless’?! Are you kidding me?” Evan leaned down to confront Jasmine, like she was a little kid who needed an adult to explain reality to her. “Do you have any idea how many lives are ruined by Moon Dust each year? Do you want me to show you the addiction treatment centers? The overdose morgue?”

“They’re innocent,” Jasmine mumbled.

“They’re getting put down,” Evan insisted.

“You’re heartless,” Jasmine whispered.

I couldn’t help but feel for her. I felt the same way.

“There’s got to be something, something we can do,” I said.

Evan caught me by the wrist. Old, unpleasant memories surfaced in a flash. I jerked my hand out of his grasp. The young man blinked, offended, but then seemed to realize what he had done.

“Come over here. Gotta speak to you. Alone.”

I understood.

“Jasmine, please stay here.”

“But, but…”

“Please?” I begged her. She fell silent. I took that as permission and followed Evan to an empty alley.

“So that’s it? You’ll do nothing?” I asked right away.

“It’s not about what you or I can or can’t do to change the mayor’s mind,” Evan said angrily. “We’re not innocent.”

“What does that mean?” I asked. I knew we weren’t innocent, we were involved, but what is Evan implying by saying that?

“I got us a deal. If we keep quiet and go along with the plan, the mayor will keep the prosecutors off us.”

An ice-cold dread took root in my chest. Jail. I could go to jail. That is what Evan meant.

“So why don’t you turn around, shoo off, and be rid of this whole affair. This is a way out. You can escape.”
“I don’t know if I can,” I said, stuttering.

“Do you really want to be busted for this? For some Pokemon?”

“It’s not just the Oddish.” I squeezed my eyes shut, hating myself for even contemplating sacrificing the creatures’ lives for my own freedom. Yet- “Petrel will throw a fit. He’s not going to forgive us.”

“He’ll take his anger out on the mayor.”

I shook my head.

“He can’t get to the mayor. Corpish is too well guarded. Too public. Petrel will lash out at those he can. You and me.”

“I’ll be safe,” said Evan. “Of course, if you want, I can arrange protection for you too.” He held out his hand.

I knew that invitation came with caveats. That there would be a price to pay. Given our history, I knew exactly what he wanted.

“No.” I slapped his hand away. “I can’t do that, Evan. I told you why.”

He withdrew his hand, frowning, disappointed.

“And even then, could you protect her?” I nodded to Jasmine, who was trying to peer inside the archway into the park without getting caught. “Petrel has threatened her, not me.”

Evan was silent for a minute.

“I don’t know her,” he said at last.

My feelings bubbled up into a disgust.

“You’re scum,” I spat.

“That makes two of us.” He backed away, took a deep breath. “Well, even if you’re going to be like that, I’ll still get the mayor to shield you. You’re on your own dealing with the Rockets.” He shrugged his shoulders, and then cursed under his breath. “Fickle b-.”

I rejoined Jasmine.

“Well? Is he going to help?”

“No. No. I’m sorry. It’s complicated.”

“Tell me about it.”

“I can’t.”

“No, please, I can comprehend, I’m not stupid, I’m not naïve. You can trust me.”

“Just leave it be. There’s nothing we can do right now.”

“Right now? The guy said they’re killing the Oddish tomorrow! We can’t wait on this!”

“It’s hopeless,” I murmured. “No, wait, Jasmine, you can’t go in there!” Officer Blake was almost caught off guard, almost, but managed to wrestle Jasmine from behind, catching her before she could
make her way inside the park.

“What do you think you’re doing! Stop it! Stop struggling!”

“Let go of me! Let go of me you nasty pervert!”

“Calm down! Quit fighting! I said stop fighting!”

I ran up and forcefully dragged Jasmine away from both the entrance and the officer.

“Do you WANT to get arrested?” Blake pulled out a set of handcuffs. I spotted Evan in the background, looking at us but making no move to intercede.

“She’s just a child. Let me take her home,” I pleaded.

Blake gave us a look-over. He saw Jasmine, a teenager who could be mistaken for a middle-schooler, and a distraught young woman who could be her older sister, or perhaps even mother. The elder woman was keeping a tight hold on the younger girl. The girl had given up trying to resist, overcome by distress. He snorted, put the handcuffs back into his belt, and waved us off.

“Get lost, I’ll overlook this.”

“Thank you,” I said.

The rest of the day was gloomy, despite the bright sun and cloudless sky. I stood in the doorway of my gym, soaking in the rays with eyes shut, hoping their warmth would help ease my worried mind. Jasmine sat on one of the planting beds, staring down, kicking dirt. Lisa and Gary stopped by occasionally, trying to comfort her, to no avail.

“It’s crap, I agree! Those crooks in town hall are gonna pay, we’ll get them. We’ll splash their dirty laundry all over the newspaper. I can get the League to boycott Celadon. See what that prick mayor thinks when his government is banned from using Pokemon laborers. We’ll revoke his trainer license. We’ll toilet paper his yard.”

“It will be alright. You’re safe, right? Look at all these Pokemon here. We have to look after them too. They’re relying on us to be strong. We have to move on. Yeah, it’s sad, I know. Go ahead. You can cry. Crying helps.”

Jasmine never answered in anything more than inarticulate mumbles. Sometimes she held herself close and began shivering, as if freezing, despite the eighty-five-degree temperature.

I relegated teaching duties to one of my lower staff members. Gym Battles were kept to a minimum, no rematches allowed. Gary volunteered to be a Gym Trainer for a day, dooming most challengers before they ever reached me. Those who did make it through Gary and Lisa’s gauntlet faced an unmotivated, easily vanquished Gym Leader. It evened out, an average number of trainers walked home with a Rainbow Badge.

Near the end of the workday, I received a text.

If you want, I can get you into the park when they do it. Maybe say goodbye. – Evan.
My first feeling was to reject him, to curse at him, to run away.

I saw my sick companion, and something flickered in my heart, a strange feeling I couldn’t describe. Whatever it was, it did change my mind.

**I’ll come.**

Just as I sent the message, I became aware of a pair of spiky hair-tips standing before me.

She was bowing her head, not looking anywhere near my face.

“I feel sick. Can I go back to your place early?”

“Yes, dear, of course. I have business tonight. Do you feel comfortable going by yourself?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay. Um, the officers said we can go to the park tomorrow, to say goodbye. Would you want to, maybe, I mean, do you feel like you could bear that?”

“I don’t know.”

She winced.

“This brings up bad memories,” she said as she turned around. Her limp form exited through the back entrance.

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“You’re kidding.”

“I’m not.”

“F-!” Petrel kicked over a pile of papers. “That freakin fast?! Tomorrow?! Those f-ers!”

He doesn’t care at all about the Pokemon. He’s just mad to see his source of income being ripped away from him.

“Couldn’t ya gotten more? One last crop?”

“They wouldn’t let me in the park.”

“You were lazy! We’re short ‘cause you slacked off!”

“I’m sorry. I had so much on my mind.”

The Rocket Boss waggled his finger at me.

“You aren’t sorry enough!” He heaved and sighed. “Not as sorry as that piss-kiss mayor is gonna be. Crewcut!”

“Yes sir!”

“I want plans to assassinate the mayor, pronto!”
“But, sir, um… that’s kinda impossible. He’s got more bodyguards than we’ve got grunts.”

“I don’t care you numbskull, get creative! I want plans NOW!”

“Sir!” The grunt saluted and scurried away.

“Dang it! I thought scaring off Mr. Norland would head off this kind of crap. Guess it did the opposite. No respect these days, none! Why, Boss never had to deal with this crap. If that blowhard tryhard loser hadn’t screwed us over with his grand plans, man, we could’ve been kings of this region! Blah!”

“Can I go now?” I asked.

Petrel sneered.

“Heck no. You’re sleeping here.”

“Why?”

“You’re in my bed tonight, b-. Least you could do.”

I tensed up.

They practically threw me inside his quarters, a disgusting residence straight out of a 70s-era strip club. It’s not even a room I want to dignify by description. I lay on the bed, quietly sobbing, flinching every time a door slammed open or shut, fearful of every footfall.

I wanted out. I wanted my life to be normal. I wanted comfort. Basic comforts. The touch of a human. Freedom from terror. Food. Water. Measly things. Most of all, I thought of what was coming and yearned for my friend, wishing I could be beside her, consoling her, finding my own solace in my efforts to assuage her.

Petrel burst in the door.

“How the heck are they?” he asked aloud. He ran straight to his bed stand, ripped apart every drawer, ripped through his closet, then the trash, then underneath the bed, then the piles of junk littering the floor, cursed, and then took his rampage back outside. The door slammed shut behind him.

He didn’t return.

I fell into an uneasy sleep that never lasted more than an hour at a time.

The female grunts let me out in the morning. No one said a word to me. Sensing a lack of care for my person, I quietly and calmly slipped out of the warehouse before anyone noticed. It took an hour to reach my apartment.

Jasmine was sleeping in my bed, the covers wound tightly around her.

“How about you?” I whispered once, then louder. She didn’t hear me, she was sound asleep.

I sat beside her.

Let her rest. We have a little more time.

I’m so sorry to put you through this. This is my burden, but you got involved.
I gulped down a lump before it choked me. Ha. You’re sorry? Your apologies would never be enough, you do realize that? No matter what your intentions or how you feel, the reality of humanity is that we are judged for our actions, for what we do, what we fail to do, for the pain we bring others. Some of us are devils and never seem to suffer the consequences, nor even bother ourselves with the associated guilt: Petrel, Mayor Corpish. Others know the feeling of shame but selfishly hide our sins to protect ourselves: Evan, myself.

Jasmine, the purest of us, the strongest of us: she would never, ever, in a million lifetimes, consider putting her own survival ahead of doing what was right, and protecting Pokemon.

I bit my lip, held back my voice. The urge to wake her, to tell her everything, welled up inside me. I tried. I almost did. My hand went to her shoulder. Then I saw her sleeping so gently, and my weakness took hold of me, and I held back. My thoughts came bubbling out where my words couldn’t.

*Oh Jasmine.*

*I’m so sorry I can’t be as good a person as you.*

*I’m sorry. I’m so so sorry.*

*I’m scared.*

*Please forgive me.*
It’s hard to read her this morning. She woke up late and was very tired and groggy after getting up. She wanted a shower right away but otherwise showed no other motivations. Her mood was strangely blank, as if her emotions were absent. I initially chalked it up to having expended herself on crying the night before. We ate breakfast and got ourselves ready. I called in to the Gym and told Lisa I would be taking the day off.

When picking a dress, my first choice was to reach for a pair of somber bone-white kimonos, the traditional attire for a funeral. I hesitated, grimacing. We were attending an execution, not a funeral. Would this be appropriate?

“No,” Jasmine said, answering my question for me and motioning for me to hold off. She silently insisted we wear our normal outfits: I in my yellow kimono, her in her new green sundress and cardigan.

The trip to Hightower Park felt long. For me, it was one long journey of remorse. Each building, each landmark passed by was a reminder of history long gone by. My friend seemed anxious; she wanted us to hurry and walked ahead of me.

“Look at that,” she said, pointing.

On arrival, I marked eight police vans- and then also several other vehicles. Firetrucks. Black SUVs belonging to some government agency. A white news van with a broadcasting dish on top. A short bus marked with the seal of the Pokemon League. A construction truck. In fact, the street seemed quite crowded and busy.

“There she is!”

A police officer spotted us and hurried to meet us.

“Captain Norland wanted to meet you.”

“Captain?” I asked, confused.

“Well, it’s complicated. I’ll let him explain.” The officer ushered us further on.

Something was amiss.

My sadness was replaced by fear.

Evan was conferring with seven or eight other officials at the edge of the pond. He looked up, saw us, and his face filled with relief.

“What is going on? ‘Captain’ Norland? Were you promoted?”

“Just this morning,” Evan replied. “Former captain was arrested on conspiracy and drug trafficking.”

“That’s no different than…” I began, pointing underneath between us.

He leaned in to whisper.

“Truth, he wanted the mayor to take over the Moon Dust business directly. Mayor didn’t like the insubordination.”
“Oh. So you as the loyal lackey got promoted in his stead.” My mood soured. “Then what about the Oddish? Are you still going to exterminate them?”

Evan frowned.

“Have you already done it?”

Evan’s grim face did not flinch.

“What have you done?”

He spoke up.

“The reason I wanted to see you,” he began. “Did you tell Petrel?”

“Yes,” I answered, unhappy in the way Evan seemed to be accusing me. “Of course I told him, he forced me to come to him and give a report. What you all were going to do wasn’t exactly a secret.”

The young man sighed, exasperated and annoyed.

“You know I’m right,” I insisted. He nodded, agreeing. “So what of it? Have you killed the Oddish or not?”

“Don’t say ‘kill’.”

“Have you?”

Evan shrugged.

“Go see for yourself.”

He waved me away, and in a curt conversation instructed the officers to let us through. I tugged Jasmine in the direction of the hidden garden.

“Well?” she asked.

“I don’t know. He wouldn’t say. Um, you might want to prepare yourself, in case they’ve already carried out the procedure.”

The hike was laborious, but not as much as before. A crude path had seemingly been bulldozed up the side of the hill. What we found at the top took me by surprise.

“It’s... they’re... gone.”

The Oddish were nowhere to be seen. The silvery fronds of plant matter, both sentient and non-sentient, had been stripped out completely. Here and there, some refuse and leftovers, but by and large the flora had been ripped out and removed. The shallow pool of water was completely drained. Perhaps, most astonishingly, the white boulder was also missing, a gaping hole left in its place.

I stared blankly. Jasmine looked at me, more interested in my expression than the empty devastation of the grotto.

“We didn’t do this.”

A voice, Evan’s, came from behind me.
“What?”

“We found it this way when we got here.”

“You’re lying,” I said.

“I’m not. We came in this morning and the place was already ransacked.”

“Didn’t you have a guard on duty?”

“No, not up here. Down by the entrance, and on patrol around the perimeter, but no one wanted to spend the night up here in the woods. Somehow someone snuck inside without us knowing.”

“Who?” I uttered.

“Who do you think?”

I inhaled.

“Maybe your blabbing didn’t tip off Petrel, but there’s no way to prove it didn’t spur him to act sooner.”

“Shh!” I flitted my eyes to my friend- who was tipping her head to the side.

“So? What’s up?” she asked.

“The thugs who were running the drug trade came in and ransacked the place. The Oddish are probably all dead already, fodder for their narcotic,” Evan callously explained.

“That’s horrible,” Jasmine said.

“Yeah well it makes my job a lot harder. Now your Pokemon are dead and we still have to deal with one last wave of Moon Dust addicts. Ah hell. The withdrawal symptoms are bad enough. We were going to use the euthanized creatures to make a diluted serum to help the addicts wean off, but now we’re borked.”

He shook his head in frustration. “Those thugs screwed us over badly.” He stared me in the eye. I knew what he was getting at.

No one wins here.

The Rockets may have gotten a massive harvest from this crude culling, but the purity and quality won’t be anything like when I was in charge of the harvest. Their temporary good fortune will vanish quickly, their steady income will dry up, and they may turn desperate and violent in order to continue to fund their criminal violations.

The mayor is hurt twice over. Corpish will receive no election campaign money from the Rockets, nor will he gain any respect from the public for his anti-drug campaign- not when a brief but violent wave of substance abuse is about to hit the city. Evan and I’s position was in jeopardy, we may not be able to count on the mayor’s protection in this fiasco. The mayor himself might not escape prosecution.

Worse, the entire reason I risked my career, my dignity, and my safety was to protect the innocent Oddish- and I’ve failed miserably. They’re gone. This is not all my fault, there is one evil man in the world who bears most of the blame. Yet, I’m not guiltless either, and the feeling that I could have done more is just now starting to set in.
“Still can’t figure out how they moved the boulder though. Dang.” Evan shook his head in disbelief. “I’ll contact you later. See ya.”

He waved goodbye. In due course, the yellow tape was stripped down and the throng of police left. We were left alone, Jasmine and I.

“They were your personal charge, weren’t they?” she said. I nodded. “You cared for them, a lot, didn’t you?”

“They were like my family,” I said. “I was supposed to protect them. Do you have any idea what this feels like?”

“Yes,” she said, sitting beside me. She laid her head on my shoulder, and we sat there for a long time.

Her voice broke the silence, voicing something she had been thinking about in the midst of the tragedy.

“I do know how you feel. I have a Pokemon I’m supposed to take care of. Once upon a time, something happened, and I…” and she fell silent.

Her Ampharos, I think she is talking about- although this is the first time I’m hearing about any sort of incident involving it. Yet she must have changed her mind about telling me mid-sentence. Whatever tale she had intended to reveal never came out.

“Let’s go down. I don’t feel well in this place,” I said.

“Right. Understandable.”

She helped me down the hill slope and across the rocky shore. The last gap between traversable boulders required a long hop. She happily jumped in the water, up to her knees, and held her hands out. I took them and used them as a crutch to clear the murky water without wetting myself. Her hands were warm, and dirty, and unexpectedly rough.

“They’re all gone.”

“No, there’s one. Oh, it’s Evan.”

Evan Norland stood in the middle of the park, still as a statue, with only his eyes wandering about and taking in the scene. As soon as we came within view, his stare locked onto us and held there. His intense gaze lasered in on us, never wavering as we approached.

“I’m not in a mood to talk to you,” I said. “What else do you want?”

“I told you. We wouldn’t come after you. I want her.” Evan raised his finger and pointed directly at Jasmine.

Those awful words returned to the fore of my memory and I suddenly realized it was not Evan standing before us.

“Jasmine, get behind me.”

“What is it?”

“GET BACK.” I forcibly shoved her behind my back. I did not turn away from “Evan”. His eyes did not leave me.
“What’s wrong? Why is he acting funny?”

“Show me your face,” I demanded. He obliged. The prosthetic mask was ripped off and tossed on the ground. The purple-stained wisp of a mohawk and goatee appeared underneath. The disgusting facsimile of Evan’s face wobbled and warped as it hit the grass.

“I know that voice. Is that Lepert? Why does he look so much younger?” Jasmine asked, confused.

“His name is Petrel, Jasmine.”

“You know him?”

I shook my head. “There’s no one in this world that knows him. He hides his true self behind an endless parade of masks and fake personas. I only know “of” him.” I gritted my teeth, and then clarified. “He is the monster who is responsible for killing the Oddish.”

“Oh… um, well.” Jasmine popped her head from behind my back. “Are you the drug dealer?”

Perhaps what terrified me the most is how little he spoke. In all the times we’d spent together (albeit none of them cordial), I’d never known him to be quiet or soft-spoken. Now, however, he wasn’t saying a word. He simply pulled on a pair of white leather gloves, and reached behind him to take out several objects.

They looked like Pokeballs.

Of course. That is what this would come down to.

“Hey! What do you have to say for yourself?! Huh? Drugs are horrible, they ruin people’s lives! They’re gross too! And you’re hurting innocent Pokemon to get your fix? You’d better apologize!” Jasmine shouted.

“Jasmine, this isn’t going to be settled with words.”

“Huh? Oh.” She saw me withdraw my Pokeballs.

“Stand back.”

Heart racing, I knew better than to hold back. This was no sanctioned battle.

“Vileplume, Victreebel, Tangela, Gloom, Exeggcute, Clefairy.”

My six Pokemon materialized before me, forming a wall between us and the villain.

Petrel flung what looked like handfuls of birdseed through the air. I was confused, and then surprised, when I saw the individual specks balloon into full-fledged Pokeballs.

“Mini Balls,” I murmured—Pokeballs able to shrink to one-tenth the size of regular Pokeballs, making them compact and easy to carry in bulk. However, they had a limit on the size, weight, and power of the Pokemon they could carry.

Which means—

“**KOOOOFFFF!**”

The forty or fifty Koffing facing us were not *too* strong.
“Oh really.”

My mind started racing through every lesson I had learned over the course of my Pokemon battling career.

He’ll use these Koffing to Self Destruct in order to wear down my Pokemon, to lay down a Smokescreen, and to buy his stronger Pokemon time to set up.

He has Raticate, Fearow, and Weezing. He might also have borrowed some of the Pokemon from Giovanni’s personal cache. They would be much stronger than his own Pokemon, but less experienced and less obedient.

Raticate will use Dig. Fearow will Fly. They’ll try to attack in an earth/air pincer maneuver. Weezing will prepare Fire Blast or Will-o-Wisp, or maybe a Poison attack on Tangela and Exeggcute.

Very well.

Let me show him what I’m capable of.


It all happened very quickly.

Clefairy snapped her fingers. The sunlight brightened artificially and the air became hot. Tangela buried a pair of vines into the ground. Vileplume launched a compact ball of spores at the nearest Koffing. It hit and exploded into a small cloud of sleeping agent. Victreebel’s Solar Beam charged nigh-instantly and fired across the narrowing gap, detonating on the sleeping Koffing. The beam triggered the Koffing’s Self Destruct prematurely, not only blowing itself up, but also spreading the cloud of Sleep Powder all across the charging horde of gas bags. Within moments the majority had fallen to the ground, snoring restfully.

“Tanga!”

Tangela had found Raticate underground and managed to get her vines around it. Unfortunately, the Raticate was stronger and was pulling Tangela underground. Their struggle became a tug-o-war, and my Pokemon was losing.

“Tangela, can you show us where the Raticate is?”

I was keeping my eye on the sky.

A glint crossed my vision, and before I could react Tangela was drilled through by a blur of brown. Fearow banked gracefully out of its dive-bombing Drill Peck.

It used the Sunny Day to hide in the sun. Curse it!

“Vileplume, Victreebel, combine your Solar Beams, swat the bird from the sky.”

The Flying-type’s resistance would not avail it with double the power bearing onto it. However, the ray of sunfire, massive though it was, was too unwieldy to hit the dodging foe. Fearow tipped and turned, easily avoiding the Solar Beams. My Pokemon couldn’t hit it, but neither could it approach. We were at a stalemate, at least until the Sunny Day petered out.

“Exeggcute, Confusion.”
Exeggcute used psychic pulses to down the remaining Koffing one by one. Raticate broke out of the ground, tipping over Tangela and nearly finishing her off.

“Protect.”

Raticate’s fangs crunched down hard on a shimmering shield, breaking the tips of its teeth in the process. The oversized vermin backed off, screeching in pain.

“Good job Clefairy.”

“Clef clef!”

“Wish for Tangela. Vileplume, Solar Beam the Raticate!”

I immediately turned without watching the results of my command.

“Victreebel, Weather Ball!”

The harsh sunlight was beginning to fade. This would be the last chance my two power-hitters would have to utilize it.

“Gloom, Mega Drain.”

Raticate had turned on Clefairy, dealing critical damage with a Hyper Fang to the poor creature. Her Wish successfully healed Tangela, thankfully.

Fearow was unleashing Whirlwinds and using a combination of Sand Attack and Double Team to disguise its location.

The last Koffing fell to the ground a mere foot from Exeggcute- but not fainted. The bag of noxious fumes glowed.

“Ex, back up!”

Too late. The ball of fire and thunder flashed across the battlefield. Exeggcute was consumed. I was flung over, as were the other combatants.

I looked down into the grass, staring at my hands. There was red covering them, and for a moment I was afraid it was blood. Scrunching my fist, the substance felt wet, but cold.

The ground shivered.

Something is coming.

Fearow swept by, taking a potshot at Clefairy while she struggled with Raticate. The Drill Peck slashed across her backside. She fainted. Gloom rushed in with another Mega Drain to try to help her.

“Glllm!”

My Pokemon was suddenly trampled under and flattened. The dust cloud above her dissipated, revealing a monstrous creature: Rhydon.

“Rhuuuur.” A low, guttural, threatening roar came from deep in its throat.

I looked beyond.
Petrel was directing his Pokemon with what looked like a remote control. He took turns talking into it and fiddling with the switches. I don’t know how that gadget works, I’m sure Jasmine does, but I wager if I knocked it out he wouldn’t be able to command his Pokemon so well from such a distance.

Yet, I didn’t have the luxury to think that far ahead. Yet another Pokemon joined the fray: Nidoking. The mass of horns and muscle jumped headlong into the fray, pounding the earth and roaring.

“Oh dear.”

What is the Weezing up to?

“Tangela, Root Trap.”

They were prepared. As soon as Tangela unleashed its roots, Nidoking unleashed a violent Earth Power, ripping the ground apart.

“Vileplume, Stun Spore!”

Vileplume jumped bravely forward. The three grounded enemies leapt at her all at once.

“Power Whip!”

Vileplume unleashed a cloud of paralyzing spores all around her. Raticate backed off just in time. The heavyweights Body Slammed her simultaneously. The spores covered them, getting into their skin and lungs. The paralysis was soon evident, their hides spazzing and their movements greatly disrupted. Still, it was a small victory- Vileplume was badly hurt after bearing the brunt of their combined body weights landing on her.

Then Victreebel came in with its one dominant vine bulged up, as if super-charged with steroids, and let rip a crushing blow. The vine caught Rhydon first, ripping through the rock hide and smashing the brute into the Nidoking. The pair tumbled across the field. The latter dug itself out from underneath the former. The Poison-Ground was hurt, but not out. The Rock-Ground was out cold, and judging by the deep red welt across its flank and the sickening angle of its misaligned limbs, would not fight again for the next year.

A pity, for a Pokemon to suffer because of its owner’s-

Raticate jumped in and mangled Vileplume with a Hyper Fang.

This is no time to pity the foe’s Pokemon.

Tangela was busy dodging a furious Nidoking. The monster was Stomping and breathing Flamethrowers, hurting my bundle of seaweed but not quite knocking her out.

Victreebel and Fearow were at it, entangled with one another. The enemy bird let loose a Gust, disorienting Victreebel and giving the foe freedom. It used this freedom to gain Victreebel’s backside. It lifted its head and readied its long, razor-like beak.

“No!”

A flash.

“I got it!” Jasmine cried. Her Magnemite stood on guard, magnetic nodes crackling with electricity.
“Thanks!” I said. That was useful, my Grass-types had no easy way to disable the Fearow. Victreebel bounced clear of the threatening beak and rejoined the main battle. Fearow wanted to pursue, but was zapped in the back by another Thunder Shock. It turned angrily on Jasmine’s Pokemon.

She can handle that one. She has the overwhelming type advantage. As long as I keep these other Pokemon away from her…

Weezing was at last applying itself. The massive, over-bloated Pokemon was using a scary combo-Fire Blast and Poison Gas. I could tell, seeing as the flames not only singed Vileplume, but turned the tips of her flower petals a sickly shade of yellow.

“Victreebel, Leaf Storm! Vileplume, Petal Dance!”

I made a molding motion with my hands.

“Tangela, Wrap!”

I pointed to the ground.

My three remaining Pokemon understood.

Petrel contorted his face in the distance. He began furiously smashing the buttons of the remote control.

Raticate darted in.

Weezing spewed fire.

Nidoking pounded the earth.

The attacks came all at once, blowing up the earth and lifting a massive cloud of dust and grass to obscure the battlefield.

“Please!” I begged the gods for my plan to have worked, even clasping my hands in prayer.

“Nido!”

“Ratta!”

The dust cleared out. The leaves and grass shavings floated down like a premature autumn. The six Pokemon stood in close proximity to one another, heaving and recovering from the onslaught. They were very close, actually, the first to recover their strength could strike out and win the battle. It looked like my Pokemon had gotten the worst of the exchange - they weren’t even moving.

Petrel jeered. He didn’t realize what I was after, and what small victory my Pokemon had accomplished. They had managed to relocate the fight closer to his side of the field. Or more precisely, the six combatants stood right amidst the horde of sleeping Koffing.

“Retreat!” I commanded.

Petrel had been fiddling with the remote, looking flustered, but his attention was raised by my shout. He quickly grasped the situation, realized both the danger and the opportunity it presented.

“Weezing, rise up and blow them all apart! Detonate the Koffing with Will-o-Wisp!”
"Weeez? Weeeeez! Weeeeeezez!" The mighty blimp strained and struggled, but couldn’t lift itself into the air.

“What are you, trapped?” He looked closer.

A multitude of thin vines crisscrossed the ground, interwoven with the roots of the grass and entangling the feet and bodies of the Pokemon. Raticate tried gnawing its way out, but couldn’t; the strands were too flexible and slender to yield to its incisors. The other enemies were in a similar situation.

“Well blabberfab! Look, her Pokemon aren’t moving anywhere either! It’s a double-edged trap! Weezing, blow yourself up! Now! Catch them all in the kaboom!”

“Weehhehe!” Weezing shook its body in the negative. It didn’t want to kamikaze.

“I said detonate yourself! What are you griping about? You lousy, useless, landlocked limp-goggled larynx of fart gas! I’ll force ya!”

Petrel smashed the remote control device. An electric shock jolted through Weezing’s body. It grimaced.

An obedience collar of some sort? How crude! How deplorable! How fortunate for me!

“Explode!” Petrel screamed, jamming the button down as hard as he could. Weezing tensed up, and then gave out. It sighed, resigning itself to destruction, I assume. From within the gas chutes riddling its body, a fiery red glow streamed out.

Only then, expecting the area to be lit like the blazing dawn of a solstice morning, did Petrel focus his gaze on the foe.

“‘Wah? Wait, no!’

The Explosion detonated with a swift fury. Its fireball rippled through the sleeping Koffing, blowing them up each in turn, beginning a chain reaction that wiped out every last enemy Pokemon in sequence and consumed the battlefield in ash and flame.

“Owww!” Jasmine was covering her ears. The bang of the explosion had not spared my eardrums either, even though I was expecting it. I peered over to her. Fearow was not quite fainted, but was on the ground and struggling. The two Magnemite were taking turns zapping it with Thunder Shock, effectively neutralizing the foe.

“What happened? Are your Pokemon safe?” she asked.

“They are, right here.”

Tangela, Victreebel, and Vileplume jumped out from behind a row of bushes. Petrel’s attempt to take them all down in one fell explosion was foiled.

“Substitute! Decoys! You cuss-mustard!”

Indeed, as Petrel says, during the upheaval my Pokemon whipped up clay and grass to mold a trio of Substitute look-alikes. Weezing was not fooled, it had a point-blank view, and resisted its master’s command to Explode knowing it was futile. When the fireballs began blossoming, my Pokemon were diving for cover, well out of reach. Petrel’s lack of respect for his Pokemon was proving to be his downfall.
“I’ve known you long enough, Petrel. I can predict your underhanded tactics and blatant disregard for the well-being of your own Pokemon. That is how I won.”

“If you knew me so well,” Petrel growled, “you’d know I wouldn’t let the outcome of a stupid Pokemon battle settle things.”

He held up something in his hand. Another Pokeball? A laser darted out from the sphere, and I readied myself for yet another foe.

When the laser flew straight and tapped Vileplume on the head and my Pokemon vaporized into a cloud of digital particles, my expression turned to shock.

What… what just happened?

Where is Vileplume?

Before I could register the fate of my Petal Pokemon, the same happened to Tangela and Victreebel.

“Ah, good, it worked.”

Did he just turn my Pokemon into ash? He- couldn’t. He wouldn’t. There’s no way!

It also didn’t seem like that was what happened. The particles I saw during Petrel’s attack reminded me of Pokeball energy, not atomized organic matter.

It was silly, but I had to check my own sash, to make sure my Pokeballs were still there. They were. Yet…

Impossible! Had he just captured my Pokemon? They’re registered, they’re owned, no one else should be able to digitize them!

“Hehehe. You look confused.”

“Capture Balls?” I said with a startling realization.

“Nope! Snag Balls! Well, I’ll give you partial credit, they’re related, use the same technology, developed by the same scientist. The difference is that Capture Balls are a tad limited, just kiddy toys the League prefers to use. These babies,” Petrel said, indicating the purple and white balls he was juggling between his hands, “have one little modification.”

“What?”

Petrel threw the three Snag Balls onto the field all at once. Vileplume, Tangela, and Victreebel reappeared. A chill ran through my spine. My Pokemon showed no signs of relief or confusion. They were upright, attentive, and facing me with an unwavering focus.

“Mind control,” Petrel said with glee.

“That’s not possible,” I uttered.

I was proven wrong. I was shown how wrong when a Razor Leaf ripped off Victreebel’s vine and sliced through my dress. Pain shot up my limbs, drawing a gasp out of me. There was blood on my arm and thigh from where thin, deep cuts had appeared.

“Hey Plume Plume, try Stun Spore.”
The next sensation I was treated to was the violent and painful constriction of my muscles. My limbs wouldn’t move. It was hard just to breath. I would tell you it hurt more to see my own Pokemon turned against me, but that would be a lie. My body was in torture, and my mind could not conceptualize much beyond the agony. It took a minute to even realize I was on the ground, writhing pathetically in the grass.

“Graveler! Roll Out!”

A living boulder rolled past my vision.

“Woah! Hold yer horses, your turn is next! Mega Drain, you lot.”

“Grrrr...”

“Eh, wow. Okay, try Vine Whip.”

The same stubby boulder went flying in the opposite direction, not under its own volition.

“Kkk, and you’re a Gym Leader? Grass versus Rock, basic type advantages little girl, you’d better learn them. C’mere, I’ll teach you.”

No!

I can’t let him have Jasmine!

I willed myself onto one side. In one corner of my vision I saw Petrel advancing, taking his time, walking in that senseless zigzag pattern. On the other side, Jasmine was standing her ground, but was obviously scared. She was shaking badly.

“Watching, Erika? I told you. I warned you. You screwed me over. You tattled to the cops and forced their hand, and look what they did. Now you’ve lost your precious Oddish, and I’ve lost my pay dirt. Now I’m a nice, forgiving guy, you know that? So here’s what’s what. I’ll be gentle, and just f-up this young friend of yours, and depending on how good it feels I’ll even keep her alive, you know, for repeat use. See? You don’t have to get hurt. You don’t have to do anything. Nothing at all. Nothing bad will happen to you. All you have to do is watch.”

No. No!

Jasmine’s Magnemite tried their best. Their Thunder Shocks were no use against my strong Grass-types. It was as the ruthless man said, basic type matchups couldn’t be overcome. Defensively, the Magnemite were better off due to their Steel-typing, but that only meant it took three Mega Drains to knock them out instead of one. In the end, Jasmine was left defenseless and I was left to watch in horror.

“Maybe you should run, little girl. I like playing tag.”

Jasmine shook her head defiantly.

You idiot. Get out of here!

“You idiot! Get out of here! Flamethrower!”

A wall of fire erupted into existence between Petrel and Jasmine. The trio of enslaved Pokemon drew back.

Oh thank heavens! Gary Oak!

“Hey Jasmine, I heard you and Erika were here to try to stop some Oddish from being euthanized, wanted to come and back you up. What’s the deal here?”

“He’s a drug dealer who was abusing the Oddish,” Jasmine summarized as quickly as she could.

“Oh, crap. Yeah, no prob, I’ll send him packing for ya.”

Gary confronted the villain with a confident smirk. He held multiple Ultra Balls at the ready. His first Pokemon, an intimidating Arcanine, was already out and preparing a fiery counter-offensive.

“Ha. Heroes. Geeze, good thing I had Gio-phony to learn from; how *not* to handle you’s types.” Petrel shook his head, as if the sight of Gary and his Arcanine was a mere nuisance and not a credible threat. I sensed why he remained so confident.

“Cap-” I tried gritting out. Dang it! Even my tongue, even my jaw were locked up! The strain I exerted trying to move them backfired, causing a fit of convulsions in my lung area. I coughed, or tried to. My vision dimmed. The Stun Spore’s paralytic grip was causing me to black out. I couldn’t warn Gary.

“Ugghh.”

“Booyah!”

When I came to, Arcanine was cornered and being doused by a Hydro Pump.

“Hey, a replacement! And this badboy’s one heck of a brute!” Petrel was referring to Gary’s Rhydon. It also appears that he had caught and mind controlled Blastoise and Alakazam as well. A fainted Umbreon lay by the wayside.

“Arcanine, take Jasmine, Extreme Speed out of here,” Gary ordered. Arcanine hesitated a moment, unsure whether it was okay with abandoning its trainer. That was a fatal mistake.

Rhydon dug into the ground and drew out several huge chunks of earth. It hurled these high overhead, each landing with a loud *thud*. The chunks cut off Arcanine’s escape route. The Fire-type was blasted with another Hydro Pump. It had nowhere to go. Gary cursed.

“Vileplume, Stun Spore the boy too.” Petrel burst into an insanely-wide grin. “If the girl turns out nice enough to keep, I’d like to have a backup for some meat-locker fun.”

Vileplume resisted. She regained control of her voice and expression, and loudly protested. Yet the psyche-wave of the Snag Ball hit her hard, forcing her body to move on its own. Pollen-colored clouds descended upon Gary. He went down, seized up and incapacitated much the same as I was. Arcanine was put down for good by a final Hydro Pump.

There was no one left to protect Jasmine.

Petrel was advancing quickly. His glee turned to a menacing glare, eyes filled with hate and anger.

“I’m gonna make an example of you all. That Dunsparce mayor is gonna think twice about betraying me after he sees the leftovers. We’re Rockets, damn it! We were once the most badass collection of bad boys in the whole nation. We were feared. We were respected. Our name meant something. Well, we’ll get there again. Starting with Celadon.” Petrel lurched forward. He was ten yards away
from Jasmine now. Some of the captured Pokemon were even closer.

“Don’t come near me,” Jasmine warned.

“I’m coming near you and I’m gonna touch you as I like and do what I want with you, and you’re gonna shut up and obey me!” Petrel spat out.

“You’re a drug dealer. You hurt my friends. You’re forcing Pokemon to fight against their will! You’re evil!” Jasmine cried. Petrel was beyond making light of her protests now. His anger had boiled over. He lunged for her. She back-pedaled.

“Just leave! Come any closer, and I’m not going to hold back!” Jasmine warned. Petrel lunged again, and again Jasmine stutter-stepped backwards to dodge him. Except, she was fast approaching the hillside. There was nowhere for her to go.

“Grrr.” She’s growling. That’s not fear, that’s anger. At a time like this, in a situation like this, with nothing to give her hope, and she is still not afraid? She is still not giving up? What could possibly give her hope? Jasmine, oh dear, for once drop your stubborn pride and please surrender! Do what he says! Evan, I’ll get Evan, I’ll have him and the police come rescue us! I’m sure I could get a call out, and even if it means turning over my body to him, I’ll do it! But please don’t get yourself hurt just for the sake of bravado!

Wait. What is she doing?

Jasmine reached behind her back.

That’s right.

Her last Pokemon, her team leader, she hasn’t brought out Onix yet.

Onix is strong… but… it would be one versus six. And a Rock-Ground-type would be at a severe disadvantage to my Grass-types and Gary’s Blastoise. The mind-controlled Pokemon would overwhelm her.

Is there some miracle, some hidden strategy she has, to defeat them all?

I can’t see any.

But maybe, just maybe, Onix can help her get away. A last stand, or maybe a mount to serve as her retreat. It would be hard, or impossible. If she does get away, I know I and Gary will suffer Petrel’s rage. But it would be worth it.

This one last sliver of hope-

“Zubat, if ya please.”

-dashed.

Because a tiny bat of a Pokemon flitted behind Jasmine, scratched her, and whisked away. In its claws it held her last Pokeball. The Zubat dutifully delivered the item and its living cargo to Petrel’s hand.

“Now then.” Petrel hunkered forward. The enslaved Pokemon gathered in a semi-circle. Jasmine was backed up against the hill. There was nowhere to run.

She was crying, I think. Her chest was heaving and her head was bowed.
“I have- only once- only one other person in this world I know- is worse than you. You… You… You evil MAN!”

“Shut up!” Petrel screamed. He stormed forward.

Jasmine stomped on the ground in a fit of emotion.

And then the ground rumbled.

Jasmine rose into the air.

I can’t believe it.

She’s flying.

No, she’s riding the earth. The earth is rising for her.

NO!

It’s alive! It’s a monster!!!

Oh Gods of every faith, it’s a… It’s a… It’s a…

“STEELIX!”

The young woman perched atop the head of a forty-foot-long leviathan, armored head to tail in sleek, impervious metal, a maw that could eat a human whole, and with eyes burning like raked coals.

Petrel’s face: Eyes popping. Jaw dropped. Tongue dangling out- Priceless. “Stone Edge the Blastoise!”

Wow. Even in the shock of the moment, she’s still thinking strategically.

The Blastoise was surrounded and locked down with rock stalagmites. Its water cannons were jammed into awkward angles, preventing it from targeting Jasmine’s Pokemon. The water-spewing tank was the most dangerous threat to her Steel-Ground-type, but being mind-controlled, it did not act of its own volition. Jasmine was smart in neutralizing it before Petrel could force a Hydro Pump.

The curb-stomp did not end there.

“Uh, uh uh uh, Giga Drain? Power Whip!”

My Grass Pokemon were forced to attack. The Mega Drain popped harmlessly on the leviathan’s chin, and to my amazement Victreebel’s Power Whip, the strongest physical attack in my Pokemon’s arsenal, literally bounced off Steelix’s iron hide.

“Iron Tail!”

Vileplume and Victreebel were sent flying clear across the park and into the pond.

Tangela’s mind-control was completely overpowered by fear. The poor bush flopped on the ground and shook in her pile of roots, unable to take any action at all.

“Zubat, distract her!”

“Roar!”
From my position, a good thirty yards away, my ears were ringing from the beast’s bellow. The Zubat was about three yards away. The puny little thing likely did not even make it to the ground before fainting.

“Graar! Where are those Revives? Revives! Nidoking! Get back up, save me!”

Nidoking huffed to a rise. It saw the great earth snake and backed up a step.

“Flamethrower! Just buy me some time!”

“Earthquake!”

Petrel worked furiously with his pile of equipment. Gary’s Rhydon was forced forward, using its own Earthquake to neutralize the oncoming seismic wave.

Well, Nidoking and Petrel were spared, but the Rhydon was laid flat out by the convulsing earth.

“Flamethrower, Ice Beam, whatever it takes! Dang it, where are the rest of those things?”

“Fissure.”

A gap in the ground split open wide. The crack ran beneath Nidoking, but the foe managed to jump aside and avoid falling in.

“Rock Slide.”

Nidoking regained its footing and prepared a Fire attack, aiming at Steelix’s head. Steelix cracked the ground with his tail. Nidoking tipped over, the Flamethrower going awry. The ground was giving way beneath it. Steelix was using tremors to cause a collapse on one side of the fissure, right where Nidoking was standing. Like an avalanche, the creature was drawn down and under, falling into the gap.

“Aha! Take a load of these!” Petrel shouted.

A cloud of Mini Balls appeared in the air. All at once the park was filled with dozens of Koffing, all primed and ready to Self Destruct.

“Knock Down! Wave version!”

Steelix whirled around, slashing at the ground. A wave of dust, dirt, and clay rose into the sky, and came crashing down on the multitude of living bombs. All were forced down onto the ground, their Levitate ability negated.

“Magnitude!”

Waves of shaking rippled through the ground. The Stun Spore paralysis gripping me was wearing off slightly; I had managed to roll over onto my side and clutch my stomach. It was good that I could manage that, because the Magnitude hit me in the side. It felt like a giant hammer hitting my side. I was afraid my spine might snap in two. The direct target of the attack, the grounded Koffing, stood no chance. They fainted in one slow-motion comedic wave, making grimaced faces as they keeled over.

“Grrr. Fine, fine, I didn’t want to have to use this.”

Petrel raised his hand, an object held in it.
Another Snag Ball?

No. It wouldn’t matter if it was- Steelix was a massive target, at full health, a monster in the oldest sense of the word. A Snag Ball wouldn’t be able to capture it.

But this wasn’t a Snag Ball.

It was colored slightly differently, a richer shade of indigo. There was a circuit board-pattern overlaying it- I’m guessing that’s the Snag Ball technology added to the original ball. It had an “M” imprinted on its seal.

How’d he get one of those? Oh no! Jasmine, watch out!”

“Jaaaa-zzz-min!” I tried shouting. My voice was still constrained by the paralysis.

“Eat Master Ball, b-!” Petrel yelled and hurled it.

At the same time, Steelix froze up. Gary’s Alakazam was forced to use Telekinesis to immobilize the leviathan, if only for a moment.

I froze up.

Then my fears vanished. My imagination was stumped. My attention was wholly captured and enraptured.

That dearest friend of mine, that shy girl and her unsure motions and lilting walk- jumped.

She leapt off Steelix’s head and caught the Master Ball with her bare hand, from mid-air, while diving.

The sight of her so selflessly hurling herself into the gap of the sky, fearlessly, to protect her Pokemon, was, to say the least- inspiring. I had never seen, and would never again see, such grace and poise in the actions of a human being. I do not usually subscribe to that religion, but for a moment, I could readily believe that angels existed, and I was beholding one.

Then she landed on the ground, rolled forward to save herself injury, and scampered to a crouch.

“You’re kidding,” Petrel cried weakly.

“Rock Throw.”

Alakazam was conked out.

“Eh. Ehehe. Eh…”

It took Petrel maybe five seconds to realize he should run. Jasmine seemed ready to let him run. Then, when he gained half the distance to the park entrance, she made a simple hand signal.

Steelix raced forward. It was shockingly fast for its size. Petrel made it another quarter of the way to the gate, and then a wall of steel and spines blocked his path. He changed directions and began running back towards us.

“Quake.”

This was not so strong of a Ground attack, just enough to flip the villain head-over-heels and land him flat on his back. He stared into the sky.
I leaned up on one elbow to get a better view. Gary was lifting his head up as well. Jasmine was
marching her way over to the vanquished Rocket Boss.

“Listen! And I mean LISTEN! That means you will stay silent! That means you will carefully hear
and evaluate my words! That means you will memorize my instructions and follow them with the
utmost care and forthright intent.”

“I’m not taking orders from a brat!” Petrel yelled.

“Steelix, kill him.”

“Wait! Don’t go that far!” I hissed, voice unheard.

Steelix raised his great tail high into the air. Jasmine raised her arm likewise. She brought her hand
down. Steelix brought his tail crashing down.

The earth shook. I winced.

Petrel lay ramrod straight, shaking like a wet, newborn baby. His teeth were chattering, his brow was
sweating. His eyes were popped open and locked onto the multi-ton iron bludgeon that had missed
splitting his head like a rotten coconut by a mere six inches.

“YOU WILL NOT TOUCH MY FRIEND, YOU WILL NOT HARASS HER, YOU WILL NOT
PEDDLE DRUGS, YOU WILL NOT STEAL POKEMON, YOU WILL LIVE A LAW-
ABIDING LIFE FROM NOW TO THE END OF YOUR DAYS OR I WILL END YOUR
DAYS RIGHT HERE AND NOW! DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME?!”

What else could Petrel do? He nodded and lay limp.

I cannot say Petrel lived a law-abiding life thereon after. He is a bad person, to his core. Nor did he
leave me alone. The Rockets and the Celadon Gym had a long, uneasy relationship, one stretching
back well before my tenure as Gym Leader. We were the mediators between the criminal gang and
the linchpins in town hall. It was impossible to fully divest my involvement so long as the corrupt
system was in place and Petrel remained a free man.

However, I will say that he never addressed me with the same kind of contempt and presumption as
he once did. His harassment became more passive-aggressive in nature. Our in-person meetings
dwindled in number, until he outright refused to talk to me except via phone or text. In matters
related to Pokemon, he seemed more willing to listen and defer to my wishes. I found I merely had to
raise my voice, and something in his primal instincts triggered and he would become submissive and
malleable. His threats were less menacing than they once were. The Rockets themselves were losing
appeal, mainly for lack of money, and their criminal antics gradually subsided.

It was a tenuous situation, one that would not last forever, but it was infinitely more preferable than
what had come before it. For me, it was a blessing. It was freedom from fear. The cold, dark fear of
the worst possible outcomes had been replaced by simple stress, everyday worry. My life was not
good, by absolute terms, but it had changed for the better. I felt, for once in my life, empowered.

Because of her.
My friend.

The one I used to look down upon as a little innocent girl who needed protecting.

Now?

The morning after the battle, I found myself sleeping on the floor, and waking up, I found her in my bed. She was above me, still sleeping peacefully. That’s how I view her now. I look up to her-as a beacon of light. An exemplar of courage, and bravery, and strength. What the Rockets taught me is that the world is ruled by force, and that might makes right. What Jasmine showed me is that power is not the sole possession of the wicked, that there are good people in this world who are also mighty. I know now, Jasmine’s purity and goodness of heart is only matched by her conviction.

To put it simply, she has the strength to make her ideals a reality.

To someone like me, who has lived all their life by acquiesce, forced to take what was given to me, the good and the bad equally, without protest, in the hopes that such behavior would keep the peace and maybe, just maybe, end in a happy outcome, her courage is something I could never attain, and so instead, I am content to admire it, and give thanks.

So Jasmine- Thank You- thank you for saving me.
The Gym was bustling with activity. Being a nurturer of plants, it is not really within my nature to like or accept the frenzied pace of city-living. I prefer instead the existential philosophy of flora. They are peaceful, harmonious, stolid, gentle, and quiet. My gym, as a rule, is a tranquil place to visit. Even the Pokemon battles are to be conducted in a mild and unobtrusive manner. So that, the present swirl of human-induced chaos was not to my liking. It was rather grating to my nerves and adding stress on top of a persistent depression.

Still, I should not begrudge the surge of interest in my gym from all corners of society: trainers, horticulturists, beauty pageants, marketers, and many others. With rumors spreading that the Rockets had been dealt a huge blow and the sudden plummet in Moon Dust related drug crime, it seemed that many more people were willing to brave the streets, especially at night. A jubilant mood had caught the population, propelling them to celebration and public merriment. The Summer White festival announced it would open a week early. The shopping malls offered spontaneous sales. Business began hosting extravagant competitions, and customers rewarded them with a bout of reckless spending. The exuberance had spilled over into my gym.

So it seemed, in the midst of all this joy, I was the only one with a sour attitude. The lingering memories of Petrel and what he had threatened were haunting me (I did not yet know the pansy he would turn into, and feared his reprisal). Beyond that, I still could not forgive myself for losing the Oddish. It hurt me personally to think of their fate, and also it made me feel too guilty to enjoy any of the jubilations surrounding me, knowing I was only free thanks to my cowardice in the face of their extermination.

Jasmine was… acting strange. I expected her to behave the same as me, sorrowful and weary. In a mere week’s time, she had grown as close to the little shrubs as I did over the course of a whole year. It would make sense for her to be consumed in grief. Her efforts had saved us from Petrel’s wrath, but no the Pokemon. That should have devastated her. What she actually displayed was not sadness or grief, though- it felt more like… hmm. What is the word?

“Stressed,” she answered, when I got up the courage to ask her.

“How so?”

“It’s nothing.”

“Really? Tell me! I’ll listen. I’m a good listener.”

“No, it’s nothing. Tell me about the exam. I want to learn how the battle portion is administered.”

“Oh. Very well. It’s a five round course, best of four to pass. The proctor will use a standardized team that you have to beat. There’s no relative performance factor, it’s pass/fail.” And just like, she successfully side-tracked me for a good half-hour.

The rest of the day was spent rushing from one activity to another. Jasmine shadowed me the whole way, taking notes and being a very attentive student. I showed her how to run a class, how to organize battles for Gym Trainers, and how to write a suitably magnanimous victory speech and humble concession speech. We watched a little television: one video about how Gym Badges were made, another home and gardening show, and another showing the matches from the Super-Regional Tournament being held in the western continent.
Jasmine clung close by, clearly determined to keep by my side. She sighed and huffed a good deal, and was constantly on guard, eyes shifting, head rotating, looking for someone or something. I couldn’t tell if she was afraid of something or desperately looking for company.

“I’m terribly sorry, but you can’t come in.”

“Why?”

“You can’t.”

“WHY?”

“It’s… blah. The Kanto leaders are having a teleconference and we’re discussing salaries. That’s private information, you can’t listen in. I’m sorry.”

“Oh. But... fine.”

When I returned from my meeting I discovered the truth behind her strange mood.

The Gym was finally winding down, the many trainers and visitors filtering out. I was looking for her and couldn’t find her. My search took me through the numerous planting beds and colorful foliage, until I happened upon a secluded walkway near the back entrance.

“Well, it’s just lunch, right? Is that so bad?”

“I’m not hungry.”

“Then what about a movie?”

“There’s not really anything out there I’d like to watch.”

“You’re just not up for anything are you? Ya know, I’d love hanging out and showing ya some Pokemon stuff, but most of the Pokeparks are closing early today. Isn’t there anything else you and I could do?”

Gary?

Come to think of it, he has spent the last few days hanging around my gym. After the Hightower Park affair, I had my suspicions, with him showing up out of the blue and attempting a rescue (little good though it did). To hear him now though, it was plainly obvious he had developed some sort of feelings for Jasmine.

My heart raced.

It worked. For one side, at least. How will Jasmine respond?

If only I could get her to answer, to know what she really thinks here, then I could be sure… and what’s the worst that could happen? They might start dating? Wouldn’t that be wonderful?

Ha. I don’t know.

Just maybe, though, a good man like Gary could break her of her silence on this subject, and maybe show her romance was not all that awful as she depicted it. Even if it was a short summer fling, just to have a positive experience like that would do her wonders. I’m sure of it.

“Um…”
Gary gazed on her expectantly. She balled her fists and held her arms tightly to her sides. Gathering courage, she spoke up.

“I’m sorry if I misled you, but I have no interest in being anything but friends.”

All of my hopes, all of my fears, dashed.

By appearances, so too were Mr. Oak’s. The young man hung his head and stepped back.

“That’s it?” he asked, perplexed and bewildered, maybe a little bit bitter.

“Mnhm,” she mumbled.

“Well. Nice knowing ya.”

He exited the premise quickly.

I turned around and made my way back to the office. After something like that, I’m not sure I could do any good by showing up and butting in. Let Jasmine find me.

That sort of logic didn’t last long. My mood began itching, my legs grew restless, my mind anxious. It is like having the feeling you misjudged the number of steps on a staircase and there’s air where your foot expected surface, and you start falling- like that, but never ending. It became apparent I needed Jasmine’s company as much as she needed mine.

“Hi.”

She took a seat beside me. My anxiety evaporated.

“Are you alright?” I asked.

“Are you?” she countered.

“Why wouldn’t I be alright?”

“The Oddish.”

Oh. Yes. That’s one good reason. Not impossible to overcome, I think. My depression went away as long as I was occupied with someone or something. Yet this other thing on my mind, it never went away. It persisted.

“It’s hard to accept. I know I shouldn’t feel responsible, but I do. It hurts,” I said.

“Mmm.”


“You were spying on us,” she accused.

“No.”

“I saw you.”

Oh. Not an accusation, a statement of sure knowledge.

“Were you trying to set me up on a date with Gary?”
“Heavens am I that transparent?”

“Lisa clued me in.”

“That traitor!” I giggled. “Well, forgive me. I was only trying to have a little fun, with your best interests in mind of course.”

“Can we talk about it later?”

“Only if you promise to actually talk about it, and not use this deferment as an excuse to skip out on said talk.”

“Fine, I promise. I just have other things to discuss with you.”

“Such as?” I tried guessing what she could want.

“I’m getting tired of your apartment.”

Oh. Eww. That is perfectly understandable. It was a one-room, cramped abode that was designed to be spartan living for one person. Two people trying to occupy the place for more than a week was a bit much.

“Can we, maybe, go to your parents’ place and sleep there?” she asked.

I thought about it for a minute.

I haven’t talked to my parents much since our visit, but the few phone calls we had were warmer and more familial than normal. This might be a chance to introduce Jasmine to them as a real person, and not just a suspect to be interrogated. If it was only for the next three weeks, the remainder of Jasmine’s stay, I think I could bear it.

“Alright.”

“We should pack up then, so we can get our stuff over there,” Jasmine suggested.

“Good idea.”

This time Jasmine had no qualms in entering the estate. She strode inside with confidence, purpose even, and made directly for the front door. She ignored the doorbell and rapped her fist on the wood.

“They won’t hear you, the house is too big.” I said- and just as I said it, the door opened wide.

Mother appeared in the entryway.

“Welcome again Jasmine. Oh, Erika, for your information, we have motion sensors that alert us to visitors.”

I groused, annoyed. We never had motion sensors when I lived here. How was I supposed to know that? Fancy schmancy house you got there mom. Feeling proud of yourself? Nyeh nyeh nyeh nyeh! *sticks tongue out at mother’s back*.

“I have your room all prepared. I assume you are comfortable sharing a futon for the rest of your
stay? It is king-sized. Or would you rather have your own mattress?”

“I’m okay bunking with Erika. She’s a heavy sleeper, so it’s not a bother,” Jasmine said without a hint of humor.

“Good. You should unpack while I make supper. Dinner will be served outside, on the back patio.” Mother turned and gave an uncharacteristic smile to Jasmine, who returned it with her own.

“I’m a ‘heavy sleeper’?! What is that supposed to mean?”

“It means you doze off easily and it’s hard to wake you up when it happens.”

“Then you should know, you’re a nightmare to sleep with! Nights with you are like an episode of Dragonball V!”

“Then why not ask for another futon?”

“Haaaa… no. It’s too much trouble. Mother would lecture me if I asked for one myself.”

We arrived at my room.

“I like your mom,” she said as we unpacked. “She seems very kind and caring.”

“You wouldn’t say that if she was your mom,” I said.

“Yes I would,” she replied.

“No, you wouldn’t. All parents seem nice to other children. When it’s their own child, they don’t have the same kind of patience. There’s more expectations, more judgment.”

“Do you not get along with your mom?” she asked.

“No.”

“But it looks like you get along. She loves you, I can see that.”

I sighed.

“That’s how it looks on the outside.”

“What’s the matter?”

“You are only seeing the good side of our relationship right now. My mother, and my father… they never accepted the path I wanted to take in life. They love me, yes, but in their own way, on their own terms. Coming here to their house, I’ve learned to take up a mask and pretend to be the daughter they expect of me. So long as we all forget our differences and I play my role, we live together in peace.”

“Oh.”

Jasmine drifted off into contemplation. I continued, suddenly roused, unguarded, volunteering information I had never shared with anyone else.

“It’s hard to keep bottled up like that. I feel like I’m living in a forced silence, my wishes, my personality gagged. It wasn’t enough I took up mother’s work or father’s religion, or excelled in school or kept out of trouble or kept good company, never enough. Nothing less than perfect
adherence to their outmoded, bigoted, backwards morality was ever enough! I feel like I squandered my childhood trying to live up to their outsized expectations, always wishing they would grant me the tiniest little leeway to live how I wanted and be who I wanted to be, but they never tolerated it for a single second. Now I have my freedom and yet I still can’t get out of the chains they placed on my soul all these years, still living this farce, still being manipulated, still hopelessly clinging for their unconditional love and acceptance, just so I… so I…” I gulped, and prepared to divulge everything to her- but then-

“I think you’re being selfish,” Jasmine said bluntly. Her comment took me by surprise. My feelings were thrown through a loop. The stress and tension of trying to tell her what has been gripping my heart this past year was suddenly blown apart, like a dandelion before a whirlwind. The void was quickly filled with resentment; anger began bubbling up within me. She saw that.

“Sorry, but… it’s my own experience. I’m jealous. Maybe you don’t agree with what your parents want from you, but you have that option- you can play to their whims and you’ll be accepted.” She huffed. “At least you are wanted here.”

“I’m not wanted here! A charade called Erika the Obedient is wanted here-” I stopped talking, suddenly aware of my friend’s tears.

How often do we listen and yet only wait for our turn to speak? How often do we speak of others and yet say more about ourselves? What Jasmine was saying- was it really a criticism of me? Or was it herself she was thinking about?“Jasmine… are you… okay at home?”

She shook her head.

Oh dear.

I feel horrible now. It was wrong, trying to unburden my demons upon her.

Erika, whatever you’ve been through, no matter how awful you consider it, look at the end result. Do you truly consider yourself misfortunate? You have joy, and hope, and independence, and many others who rely on you and give meaning to your life. All those lost years spent as a child, unable to be yourself, you’re making up for them now, though imperfectly, though not the way your happiest fantasy would have it, but still good. Yet, you would complain and berate and take umbrage with this young woman, this girl, your friend, whose pain and suffering you can intimately feel? She’s in tears. This isn’t the first time. What could possibly be happening in her home that would send her to tears on a regular basis, from the mere mention of the issue? Your worries look paltry, childish in comparison! You idiot!

What do I do? Talk with her? This is such a delicate situation. I’m no psychiatrist, I’m worried about saying the wrong thing and hurting her. What to say? What to ask? What would the consequences be for not asking at all?

I ordered my thoughts, spoke up, and hoped for the best.

“Um… Jasmine, do your parents not love you? Is something wrong in your family?”

She shook her head and clamped down.

“I don’t want to talk about it.” She braced herself, took a deep breath. “I think you’ll change your mind soon. You’ll see how much your parents love you,” she said with utter conviction.

What could she possibly mean by that?
“I’m hungry, let’s get dinner.”

And now she’s chipper. A brave front? A diversion? She’s moving with urgency, so perhaps she really is hungry.

Out of habit I followed the winding halls to the kitchen. Jasmine seemed to know better and took a left where I turned right.

“Outside, remember?” she called back.

“Oh.”

Well it was a pleasant evening.

Jasmine found the sliding door and stepped outside ahead of me. She took a sharp turn and disappeared. Mother and father were probably out there. By instinct, I bowed my head, shuffled out the door, and mumbled a greeting.

“Good evening father. It is good to be home—”

I blinked.

The world was silvered.

“Oddish!”

Silver, silver and indigo, everywhere. The rustle of fronds stirred to motion met my ears.

“What the?”

“Oddi! Odi! Oddi! Oddi! Oddi! Oddi!”

“Oddish!”

“Oddidididid!”

“Issh! Isssa ish! Oddiiüsshhiiii!”

“Oddal!”

“Oddish!”

I was swarmed. I could progress no farther than a couple steps out the door before my path was clogged with specie-colored flora. Bulbous bodies hopped up and down in excitement, some leaping as high as my arms. One venturous leaper made it to my bosom, whereupon I reflexively caught it in my arms.

“How is it possible?” I uttered.

They’re all here.

All the Oddish from the park. All safe and sound. Flocking to me. Rejoicing at my presence. Loving me.

“No!” I cried.
It was an illusion. A false hope. Even if these creatures were real, they were living on borrowed time. Without the white boulder and its detritus, their metabolic process would fail and they would die. This could be nothing more than a bittersweet farewell.

“Just to see them one last time- I’m thankful, but it feels too cruel.”

“Silly, look.”

Jasmine pointed beyond the Pokemon, to the garden.

“Impossible.”

The white boulder lay upright. Even more absurd, it had already been incorporated into the landscape. Its back was set against a hill, from which a stream poured down and over the rock. A small pool formed around its base, slightly discolored from the eroded sediment. Surrounding that was a berm of freshly tilled earth, with visible pot-burrows dotting it all over. A set of young, newly planted willow stalks formed a perimeter.

“How?” I uttered in disbelief. “All this- how?”

“Don’t you think it was odd I had Steelix already in the ground when that thug attacked us?” Jasmine asked.

“I never gave it thought,” I admitted.

“When I heard what they were going to do, I felt awful. If that’s what the law considers “just”, then I didn’t feel any need to abide by the law. So I snuck into the park at night using Steelix’s dig. Got out the same way; Steelix carried the boulder and I managed to convince the Oddish to follow behind.”

“But to bring them here? I can’t believe mother and father would allow it.”

“She begged us to shelter the Pokemon beforehand,” came a deep voice from behind me. I turned and found father, followed by mother, walking up to us.

“You agreed?” I said, shocked.

Father sighed.

“I think you have found a very remarkable person to stand by you,” father said. I blushed. Mother followed with her own explanation.

“‘One only knows the value of something when it is lost.’ We discovered the truth of that proverb when you ran away from home. We miss you, and if there is anything we can do to convince you that it is okay to visit us from time to time, we will be happy to try it. Even if it entails taking care of these many little ones.”

“I know I have not always been the most loving father. It has been hard for both of us. Raising you was a trial, one that sorely tested the beliefs I held sacrosanct. I…” His voice softened “I am starting to realize that upholding my honor was not worth alienating my own child.”

What was saddening was that I understood what he meant. He still believes my choices, who I am, is wrong. He still thinks harboring me is a sacrilege that will taint his honor. The only relief is that he has decided that his duty as a father supersedes his honor as a man. Yet- it was an enormous relief.

“Come here,” he said, opening his arms.
I obliged.

Jasmine looked on as the father and daughter exchanged embraces. Then my mother joined in and she sighed. Then thirty-some Oddish joined in too and she keeled over and laughed.

The Pokemon are precious to me, make no mistake about that.

But Jasmine, your actions had the unintended consequence of bringing me and my parents back together.

“If you’ll be staying here for the next few weeks, you’ll help me tidy this place up, won’t you?” Mother said, nodding to the Oddish garden.

“Of course.”

“I want to help!” Jasmine chimed in.

“Young help would be welcome as well. We could start by excavating the ground around the perimeter. I would like to make a walkway using stepping stones. You don’t mind hard labor, do you?”

“Um, “hard” labor? I’m kinda scrawny, so… on the other hand, I have an eight-ton excavation machine on me…”

Mother chuckled. She led Jasmine towards the garden to show her what she would like done. A pair of Oddish followed them, playing leapfrog as they went.

“Father, is this alright?” I asked.

“I’m aware of what these creatures are sought for,” he said. “After considering everything, I think it was a good idea of Jasmine to leave them in my care. I can’t think of anyone else who is both trustworthy and powerful enough to safeguard them.”

“Will you be okay? You might be arrested if they find out.”

“The mayor? Have me arrested?” Father guffawed. “He knows full well if he ever interfered in the affairs of Kanto Medical, the Feds would come down on him in a heartbeat.”

Father is so funny. His favorite joke is to brag about what he could do to someone who is threatening him: life imprisonment in a nightmarish prison in the middle of the ocean, forced consent to experimental medical procedures, “volunteering” as a training dummy for our military’s elite psychological interrogation unit. The scary thing is that he really could do it, and get away with it!

His gaze went to the other two women, particularly my friend.

“I don’t know how to be comfortable with this,” he said.

It’s obvious, from his body language and tone, to see the inner turmoil and conflict of emotions he’s going through right now. He spent his whole life entrenched in his biases, years and years fighting against the reality I represented. If it were anyone else, anyone other than his own daughter, he would not tolerate it. Even if it were Adam, his son, and not me. Oh, thank the heavens it was me and not Adam; this family would be torn apart!

“What can I do to cope? Do you know how to help people like me come to terms with this situation? Is that something you’ve learned?”
“I know places where you can go for counseling,” I suggested.

He blanched at the suggestion.

*The Chief Surgeon in counseling? Ha! Not happening.*

I shrugged my shoulders, unable to offer any better advice.

“Do you plan on revealing this to the public?” he asked.

I sighed.

“There’s nothing to reveal.”

He cocked his head.

“It’s not mutual,” I explained.

“But, wait, I thought…” he stuttered, uncharacteristically.

“I’m sorry. I misled you and mother. It’s not that way- even if I wish it was.”

“Oh.”

The silver-leaf Oddish frolicked around, exploring, still getting used to their new home. Some of the lazier ones were already tucking themselves into the soil. That long-leafed fellow, the one I call Opus, is already buried over his bulb and dozing. The sun was failing, and I could catch the faintest hint of glow coming off the boulder, the water, and the Oddish. It would be quite a vivid spectacle once darkness fell. Thankfully the walls of the mansion would hide the luminescence from the eyes of outsiders.

These walls- oh haha. These same edifices which I once considered a barrier to the wide world and freedom; now they’re serving their intended purpose, and protecting that which I hold dear from the world which I have come to fear.

“Erika,” father said at last.

“Yes?”

“I don’t blame you for running away. I always wanted this place to be your home, not your cage.”

“It’s a cradle,” I told him.

“Ah.”

“It’s time for me to go out on my own.”

“I understand.” He put a hand around my shoulder and squeezed. “I hope, then, that you find your place in the world, and can be happy there.”
On the occasions we share a bed or futon, I usually let Jasmine fall asleep first so I do not have to deal with her Slumbering Fists Technique. However, her joke of me being a heavy sleeper was not unfounded, and I usually had trouble keeping awake past her. This wasn’t helped any by her being a Night-Noctowl type.

Tonight was different. She was getting tired and struggling to stay awake, while I had so much coursing through my mind that sleep was an impossibility. She had pilfered four pillows and the entirety of the comforter, nestling into them like a hibernating Teddiursa. I rested sidelong under a single sheet and did without a pillow. The lights were off. Illumination came from the glow of the city filtering through the window shades.

“I don’t know how to thank you,” I said aloud.

“For what? Saving the Oddish? There’s no need. I wanted to help them, simple as that.”

“It was my responsibility to protect them though.”

“You’re going to tell me you feel bad because you couldn’t save them on your own and had to rely on me to bail you out, aren’t you? Don’t think like that. It’s not healthy.”

“But...”

“The world is unfair. Bad things happen all the time, and you can’t stop the tiniest fraction of them. The best you can do is not add to people’s misery. Even that’s a hard thing to do all the time.”

“I wish it wasn’t that way.”

“Reality is realistic,” she recited.

“What does that even mean?”

“It means a lot of different things in different contexts. Mostly, it’s just a fancy way of conveying pessimism.”

“But doesn’t that make you feel bad, to go through life saying and believing such things? Even you can see, there is good in the world. The Oddish are alive because of you. A dangerous drug is no longer being peddled on the street because of you. That’s not something to sniff at. Are you not happy about those accomplishments?”

“It doesn’t mean happiness is impossible,” Jasmine countered. “Good things can be where they’re supposed to be. I’m a decent trainer with a very strong Pokemon, and this was a situation that could be solved by someone like me.”

“It could only be solved by someone like you.”

“No, I’m sure anyone else could do the same. You could have done it, I think. I don’t know why you didn’t. Were you that afraid of breaking the law and going against the police?”

“Haaa.” There’s no way I could tell you the reasons I did not, Jasmine.
“Something like that,” I answered her.

“Eh. Well, being a goody two-shoes is not always something to be ashamed of. What if there was a problem that could only be solved with the cops’ help? You’d need to be in their good graces to get them to help you, even if you disliked their other actions. That’s not something I could do. I’m too stubborn, my prejudices are too hardened, to let me work with people I don’t like.”

“Does that include men?”

“Especially men!”

I mulled her words over.

“You are right,” I said. She had a good point. “‘Reality is realistic’, in this situation, means that some people can solve a problem and others cannot. Is that what you’re saying?”

“I guess.”

“Then to extrapolate upon that supposition, isn’t it better to have friends to help with different situations? Each person’s strength can make up for the weaknesses of the others.”

“Right. Just like a—” she let out a deep yawn, “—like a Pokemon team.”

“Right. Although, there is the overall team, and then smaller sub-teams that are more tightly bonded.”

“Huh? I’ve never heard of that in Pokemon battles. Maybe operation battles, but I don’t follow those.”

“It’s a bad metaphor,” I said, backpedaling. “I mean to say, when two individuals form a bond, they can derive a greater benefit from their close connection than from their loose association with the overall group.”

“….”

*Kricketots.*

“I mean lovers,” I clarified.

“I know,” she replied, and again fell silent. She turned on her side so that I was facing the back of her head.

“You promised me you would talk about it,” I said, seeing if I could guilt her into opening up.

“I did.”

“So?”

“What do you want to know?”

“What went wrong with Gary Oak? Did you not like him?”

“No.”

“No’ as in you did and I’m mistaken, or ‘No’, you did not like him?”

“I didn’t like him.”
“Why not?”
“Because.”
“Because why?”
“He’s a guy.”
“What is wrong with men? Do you think they have cooties?”
“Yes.”
“Dear, cooties don’t exist…”
Oh wait, she was being facetious.
“Is there a history here I should know about?” I asked.
“No.”
“Have you ever had a boyfriend?”
“No.”
“Have you ever been kissed?”
“…no.”
“What about, have you ever had a crush?”
“Yes.”
Ah!
“Who was it?”
“Steven Stone.”
Grr!
“I didn’t mean a celebrity crush, I meant a real one, for someone you knew.”
“No,” came her answer.
“Nothing? No interest in romance whatsoever?”
“That’s right.”
“Zero desire for a boyfriend?”
“None.”
“You are not right in the head, young miss.”
“Don’t make fun of me.”
I bit my lip. This next question I had for her… Go ahead. Ask her.
“Are you attracted to boys?”

She did not answer.

“Hm? Hmmm?” I raised my tone a little. “Well? Or do you like girls?”

“Neither. Not boys or girls,” she answered at last.

I blinked.

That answer was not truly unexpected, but much blunter than anticipated. Did her opposition to romance run this deep? Truly?

“Pokemon?” I ventured.

She kicked me through the sheets.

“Not in that way, dummy.”

“Sorry! Sorry! It was a bad joke.”

“Don’t joke about things like that!” Her voice lowered. “Some guys once spread rumors like that about me. A lot of people believed them. It really hurt.”

“Oh. Dear. I’m terribly sorry.”

“It’s fine. You didn’t know.”

“Well if you were going to forgive me, please don’t kick me first.”

“That’s part of the forgiving process.”

“I cannot argue that.”

“Mmm.”

“But Jasmine, I’m confused. Liking neither boys or girls or anything else, do you consider yourself asexual?”

“Isn’t that rude to ask?”

“I would just like to get it clarified, so I can properly respect your preference from here on out.”

“Oh. In that case…”

She rolled over onto her back, eyes staring at the ceiling. Before she spoke, she let out another yawn and closed her eyes.

“Hmm? Jasmine?”

“Huh?”

“You’re falling asleep.”

“Oh. Mmm.”

“You were saying?”
“Whah?”

“Are you asexual?” I asked again.

“Nooo,” came her tired reply, and by its tone I’m not sure if it was an actual answer to my question or a meaningless utterance.

“No? Or what?”

“No, I’m not… asexual. I’m not into sex.”

“That hardly makes sense.”

“It doesn’t?” She’s trying hard to stay awake, organize her thoughts, and answer me, and I get the distinct sense that she is pondering some other thing in her mind beyond it all. She sighed, then yawned, then took a deep breath.

“If it’ll make you happy, listen- I think, if reality were unrealistic, I would have liked guys. There were two I had hopes for. One was a boy from middle school. We hung out a lot and had a lot of fun, but he bullied me too, and then he stopped talking to me, so I don’t think he really liked me. His name was Morty.”

She paused for a long moment.

“The other guy… never mind.”

Another pause.

“Never mind,” she repeated.

Long minutes of silence passed. The whoosh of the fan overhead was the only sound.

“It doesn’t matter. Nothing would have ever come of it. She made sure of that.”

Her voice was cracking, morphing to a whisper.

“Because of her, everything- everything-”

Her head turned away from me again. Her words came softly and slowly, barely audible.

“If only she… but… I liked him. A lot. His name was… nmmnnmmh…” her voice trailed off, the name she was about to recite lost in the garble. She sighed again. Her breath became steady.

I was in tears.

Of course. Of course.

You knew all along.

It was unlikely in the first place. You knew the odds from the start. Then you got to know her, and every little hint only reinforced your fears, and now the truth is upon you. It hurts. So much. What brittle little hope you had, now shattered.

If you expected it, why does it hurt so much?

I don’t know.
I lifted myself out of the sheet and dragged myself over to her slumbering form.

Her hair clips had fallen out. I took one up in my hand. It was mandarin orange and rounded like an oversized pearl. There was a strand of long hair caught in it. I saw the place where it usually perched upon her head and noted the way the hairs there were especially rigid, sticking straight out from her skull.

Ohhhh!

Ah. Haha. Hahahahaha!

Cowlicks. One on each side.

That’s why she keeps the clips. That’s funny.

The humor of it gave way to sentimentality.

Jasmine, dear, dearest Jasmine.

I’ve been waiting so long to see you like this: alone, vulnerable, at rest, at peace, open, honest. I wish it could last. I wish you weren’t asleep. I wanted to say so much more, to hear so much more about your life. Even though we’ve seen each other a dozen times, and talked many more over the phone, I never had this chance to be with you in total privacy. Around others, especially men, you always keep your guard up. At our respective gyms, you ease up a little, but not much. When I call you at your house, your personality is completely subdued, it feels like talking to a stranger. My porcelain mask looks so easily shattered compared to your iron hood. Yet now, at last, it has drooped a little and I can peer inside, and what I’ve seen has made me shy. So I talk to you like this- silently, wordlessly, without reaching your ears or your heart, and I wonder if there will ever come a day when I can be honest with you.

You probably do not realize how much I already know about you. When you talk about your life, you see me dozing off or staring out to space, but this indifference is only feigned. I am soaking everything in, every little detail, and if sometimes it seems like you have lost my attention, it is only because I am contemplating what you have just told me and what hidden implications there may be. Since the very beginning, you have had me enraptured. No, “enraptured” is too hyperbolic, and not the best way to describe this feeling… Intrigued. Surprised. You are full of little surprises.

Jasmine rolled over in her sleep. Her front was now facing me. I reached out and gently pushed aside a loose bang from her forehead.

Do you remember how we first met? I do. It is still crystal clear to me.

Central Square was overcrowded with tourists and shoppers. The summer sales were on and it was a sore contest amongst all the desperate men and women to see who could cram themselves into the upscale brand stores first. I had just finished purchasing Pokemon supplies and was now pushing my way through the throng of bodies. The Gym Leader Summit was beginning that afternoon, and I wanted to hurry and arrive early in order to see old friends from Sinnoh and Hoenn. I was halfway across the square when a stray glance brought to my attention the enormous clock over The Reach news agency headquarters.
I had overestimated the time by an hour, I thought it was closer to 1:00. The summit did not start until 2:00. My friends were probably not even at the conference center yet.

The knowledge that I was unnecessarily rushing caused me to pause. I collected my breath and peered around the square. That is when I saw her.

What appeared to be a young adolescent was sitting on the lip of the fountain. She was wearing a pure white sundress and sandals, and had the most curious hairstyle: most of her long, pale-brunette hair was let down, but atop her head was a pair of short, spiky pigtails that stood straight up. In her lap she carried a Magnemite.

‘What a cute little girl’ I thought to myself. ‘I wonder if she is a trainer?’

I approached the young girl, thinking nothing more than to say hello and compliment her Pokemon. Magnemite are somewhat of a rare sight out on the city streets, and hardly the kind of Pokemon to belong to a feminine child. My first guess was that she was carrying the Magnet Pokemon for her father or older brother. As I drew closer, I began noticing her demeanor and expression. Her face was cowed, her shoulders were limp. When she looked up, it was to awkwardly gaze around, as if confused or unsure. She studied the street signs, scowled, and then returned to bowing her head and hugging the Pokemon tight. My initial reaction turned from curiosity to pity.

“Hello there!” I said.

“Huh?”

“Are you lost?” I asked.

She stared at me, starting from my toes and climbing to my face. I in turn got my first clear look at this stranger’s face.

She is adorable! Or would be, if she weren’t so pitiful looking.

“I’m not sure,” she answered at last.

“Sure of…?”

“I know where I am, but I don’t know where I’m trying to get to.”

“Ah, that’s the problem. I know my way around this city quite well, I can give you directions. Where are you trying to go?”

“To the Gym Leader Summit, but I don’t know what the building is called.”

Imagine my surprise upon hearing her destination.

“Oh? What a coincidence! I am on my way to the Summit right now. It is being held at the Celadon Masters Convention Center, next to the Game Corner.” I told her the directions.

“Thank you.”

I started walking off, when a thought crossed my mind, I paused, and turned back to her. She was already looking relieved and preparing herself to set off.

“By chance, is one of your parents a Gym Leader?”
“What? Oh no no!” She shook her head, embarrassed. “No, I’m a Gym Leader,” she said.

Now imagine my surprise at hearing THAT!

“You?!” I uttered.

My initial assessment of this poor child was ripped to shreds. How could such an innocent, scrawny, child-like thing hold the prestigious title of Gym Leader? It made no sense!

“You are a Gym Leader?” I repeated.

“Yeah. Well, Acting Gym Leader, technically, but there’s not much difference. Here’s my badge.” She pulled out an octagon-shaped piece of metal and handed it to me. Indeed, the Pokemon League holographic seal could be found on the backside. It had the little bronze Pokeball symbol that confirmed the badge belonged to a Gym Leader.

I gawked at it, and then her.

I do believe I have underestimated this little girl.

“You said ‘Acting’ Gym Leader? I hope I am not going out on too much of a limb here, but you do not appear to be of age. May I ask how old you are?”

“Fifteen.”

Only two years younger than me! The same age as my little brother! I’ve been fooled! She looks so much younger than her given age.

“Well, it just so happens, I am an Acting Gym Leader as well! And I am going to Summit too, so… would you like to walk there together?”

“Okay,” she said.

“My name is Erika Hikami. What is yours?”

“Jasmine.”

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Miss Jasmine.” I extended my hand. She took it, and I lifted her to a stand.

There was nothing overly cute or dramatic about it. Perhaps coincidental. There is no telling if I would have picked you out from the crowd of trainers at the summit itself. To find you alone at the fountain-side was a chance of fate, one that turned out to be one of good fortune. I was drawn in by your apparent vulnerability and meekness; I was surprised by your position and strength. Likewise every meeting since, I have been amazed by your hidden depths, and dumbfounded at my own continual ability to underestimate you.

That meeting was August of last year. Since then, how many times have we met?

I visited Olivine twice, and you visited Celadon three times, including your first and current visits. We rendezvoused six other times, at various Pokemon Trainer functions throughout Kanto and
Johto. Then there was spring break a couple months ago, the weeklong vacation in the Sevii Islands we enjoyed together. All totaled, twelve times we have met in person. Each time felt more precious than the last. Talking with you was endlessly entertaining. For each question, you always seemed defiant and overeager in attempting to answer, like you wanted to surprise me. Often, you succeeded. Trying to get to know you was like solving a rubik's cube within a rubik's cube within a rubik's cube. With each nudge, question, answer, experience, memory, I tinkered with the lock of your personality, and eventually heard the click and unlocked some new fact about your personality or history- only for it to reveal another puzzle waiting to be solved. It was a challenge, one I enjoyed. With each visit, I grew to understand you a little bit better. With each departure, I was left alone to process what I had learned. Slowly, the blank space of your character was filled in with bits of knowledge: experiences we shared, facts, opinions, feelings. Some were quite random, others were illuminating, and some cut right to the heart:

You don’t have a favorite color. A good color to you is one that fits whatever it is coloring- food should be brown, cars should be silver, flowers should be purple, dresses should be white, the sky should be grey, and so forth.

Your favorite season is autumn. Your ideal weather is chilly, 50 degrees, with a clouded sky and strong breeze, but rainless.

You are struggling in school. Your grades are kept afloat because you are good at test-taking, but you procrastinate on doing homework and can’t get along with your classmates on group projects.

If your lifestyle was a flavor, it would taste like vanilla. Plain and simple was your ethos, everything from your fashion to your food, your work ethic to your battling style was ordinary, modest, ascetic, straight-forward, efficient, rote, material. I have never seen you wear makeup or jewelry. You are extremely picky about what you order to eat, but when you are done your plate is picked clean, nothing wasted. Your gym has no mazes, no traps, no puzzles, merely walk in and get right to battling.

I don’t recall you cursing too much, and in the off-chance we hear a dirty word from your mouth, you feel embarrassed and guilty about it.

Your Pokemon obey you without question. I have never seen such expediency between order and execution, at least not in person. Your skill in that area matches a world-class professional. What that shows me is how intimately trusting your Pokemon are towards you. It makes sense. When offered the chance to go off sight-seeing, or to a party, or a theme park, or clubbing, or sleeping in, or literally any other activity, your overwhelming preference is to spend it with your Pokemon instead. I have to drag you to social events, kicking and moaning sometimes, and even then you grouse and count the minutes until you can rejoin your pets. Maybe it is just me, but I find it odd how much love and friendship you have for them, on account of the kind of species they are: a pair of animated magnets, a rock snake, a literal rock, and a living Pokeball- they do not seem like the kind of Pokemon that one could develop a deep and meaningful relationship with. There is your Ampharos; I suppose he is dearest to you. You talk about him quite a lot. I only met him once, though, and it was brief. Compared to your other Pokemon, he seemed quite animated and personable.

Your vehemence for the male sex is legendary. “Boys are dirty perverts.” “Men cause all the problems in the world.” “Sluts or prudes, there’s no middle ground in their minds.” “Why do they keep hitting on me, even after I say no? Mankeys and Slowpokes, all of them!” “I hate boys! Don’t talk to me about boyfriends!” “I’m on a countdown to menopause! Then I’ll be so ugly no guy will ever bother me again!” —a sampling of your diatribe on the subject. Many times I have witnessed outright unfair and prejudiced behavior from you towards males: the men’s restroom in your gym is left to desecration, while the women’s is immaculately kept. When lining up challengers, all the boys
are sent to the back of the line. An enterprising touch, even an innocent gesture devoid of lust, is met with violent retribution (as Brock can attest). No one will call you out on your misdeeds, because you are cute and small and judged to be harmless. That does not stop people from talking behind your back, or passively shunning you, or privately vilifying you. I myself would have stepped in long ago and told you to back down, but certain things have staid me. Mainly, I am afraid of hurting your feelings, knowing something I can’t comprehend is driving these sexist actions of yours.

You are difficult to handle sometimes. Far too stubborn. Anti-social. Blunt. Obtuse. Pessimistic. Yet, I do not think these traits overwhelm the good in you. It just makes it harder to get to know you. You are like a castle with two sets of walls. The first wall is tall, without feature, clean but boring. This is your façade of respectability. This is the quiet, shy, courteous girl that the whole world assumes on first acquittal. Entering through the gate, however, will show another face- the wall of iron: rough, abrasive, with spikes and barbed wire sticking out at hostile angles. Your polite exterior is a veil to assure others of your rightness, while dissuading the curious from peering beyond and running afoul of the iron gauntlet of bitterness, criticalness, and pride. Behind that second wall, however, is the keep: your true self. What little I have managed to glimpse of this bastion reveals to me a much kinder, a much more sentimental little girl than anyone suspects. I understand that the outer wall is to protect others from yourself, and the inner wall is to protect yourself from others. This double-sided defense is quite effective in its purpose, but sadly, too effective- you have shut yourself off from many good social opportunities because of it. I think the world would be a happier place if it saw and recognized your better self.

I remember on the last day of the summit, a little girl lost their Natu. My inclination was to fetch a member of the security staff to help her, but you took it upon yourself to help the girl. After thirty minutes it became apparent why the Natu had gone missing- the girl was a complete brat: throwing a hissy fit, arguing with you and I, insisting we search unlikely or absurd places, stopping mid-search to wait in line for ice cream, loudly berating us for our lack of success. The Pokemon had probably run away from its temperamental master. Her lack of manners did not dissuade you at all. You badgered and lectured the little girl, patiently explaining to her each fault in her logic, and trooped on through the harassment until we found the little bird hiding in a giant abstract sculpture.

When you agreed to help me build a flower garden for Cerulean’s Pokecenter, you had no clue the disaster that awaited us. The truck bearing the fertilizer was carelessly driven. Opening the backdoor, we found the bags of mulch torn and scattered, the contents coating the entire interior. Worse, we discovered the mulch was made of composted Pokemon manure. The stench was palpable from across the street. I insisted that you should back out and let myself and the Machoke laborers deal with the mess. You had neither and wanted neither, on account of the heat. In your stubborn willingness to help, you bravely stuck your arms into the (literal) crap and hauled it off, one armful at a time. I knew you hated it, despised the smell and stickiness and the gross violation of sanitization involved, but you did it anyways. "I'm not going to diddle my feet while you and the Pokemon do all the work. Just let me have the first shower when we're done, okay?"

I selfishly asked you over during cram-week, to keep me company while I studied for my final exams. I thought you would be bored out of your mind and want to leave. Instead, you stayed with me the whole time, taking care of chores and preparing snacks and coffee for me. You picked up the textbooks and, despite the subject matter being two grades above you, quickly grasped the material in order to help tutor me. I remember the crude manga you put together to explain the Tendo Period of Nihon Unification, how Satoshi Tajiri ventured to each region and persuaded its political leadership to join his alliance. You drew Satoshi with a perpetual smiley face and tongue hanging out, and each daimyo was represented by a brutish, scary Pokemon creature (I think they were Pokemon; your art skills are… err…. scary, to say the least). Your attempt at playing mangaka was… cute, your humor was certainly funny, and in the end it worked; months later I still have Tajiri’s diplomatic exploits
memorized, an academic achievement on my part.

You have borne all of my selfish requests with much complaining, but never hesitation. So many people listen to your words and take them at face value. They hear your complaining and grumbling and think it means you despise others and begrudge the effort to help them. They ignore your actions. They have no perspective. What kind of young woman would tirelessly hurl herself at others’ problems if she hated them so much? We humans have become too enamored with those who can charm and woo us with words, and fail to take note of their broken promises and hypocrisy. Genuine care is overlooked, or denounced, when offered in the grumpy trappings of someone like you, Jasmine. It is not fair. Beneath the shyness, beneath the bitterness, is a young woman who deeply cares, but just has difficulty showing it. Yet you still try, in what ways you can, to show everyone who you really are. And the two ways you do that so well are by helping, and by teaching.

You have taught me so many things.

Little things. How to operate my computer. How to throw a Pokeball correctly. Training a Pokemon to use a new move by subtly increasing the difficulty of repetitions. The recipe for cooking stroganoff. Lyrics to little known songs and superstitious rituals popular in Johto middle schools. The intricacies of sports rivalries and the prominent trainers within your city. It is a fascinating pleasure to have a constant friend from a different region. It has given me an appreciation for the cultural variety within our nation, and makes me curious about the wider world.

Then there are the important things, the lifelong lessons that I want to take to heart and never forget. These are things you have shown me, not in words, but by your actions:

You taught me to find something to care about, and devote my heart and soul to it. For you that would be Pokemon. For me it would be my horticulture hobby and... *sigh*. When you hold something so important that you’d sacrifice everything for it, it becomes a justification for enduring the mounting abuse and striving onwards. The suffering is given purpose. It becomes bearable.

You taught me that loving myself and taking pride in myself, selfish as it may seem, is okay. When the world batters you, it is not sinful to hold yourself in higher esteem and spite those who wish to denigrate you. Sometimes pride and stubbornness is wrong, a way to raise yourself at the expense of others. But other times pride is necessary to defend against the incessant barrage of insults and pejoratives levelled against you. As father says, society is not understanding, society will not hesitate to crush an individual who goes against the common flow. Your example is the rock in the river, defiant and immovable. I cannot aspire to such fortitude. I will become the willow brush instead: soft, flexible, bending, letting the currents of societal pressure push me about and wash around me, but like you, my roots will not budge.

You taught me how to care. For myself, for others, for the things we hold dear.

You taught me how to protect that which I cared for. You taught me how to think logically in the heat of the moment. Your advice in Pokemon battles has been invaluable. Your demonstrations are incredible teaching experiences. Vanquishing Petrel with a single Pokemon was a shining example of your genius and your training methods. A Steelix? My goodness, I did not know you had evolved your Onix. To command such a mighty beast is a testament to your capabilities as a trainer. I wish I could stand before such a terrifying monster and not flinch, let alone ride its head and brashly demand its obedience!

Because of your example, I am strong. Because of my desire to emulate your strength, I have endured, and I think, one day, I will make it to that place where I can stand tall and no longer fear anyone or anything.
“Mmm.” Jasmine mumbled in her sleep. The sound of her voice, however muted, stirred my heart. A pang welled up within me, urging me to speak out loud to her.

“Jasmine, I…” I whispered.

The words won’t come. Even like this, with you asleep, I cannot voice them aloud. It is the fear, the burden I have lived under my whole life.

Fear of judgment. Fear of reprisal. Fear of being shunned and cast out. Fear of losing those who I care for and care for me, because of our prejudices. So I keep everything secret, hidden away. That protects my feelings, and the sensibilities of others, and safeguards our relationship. Of course living like that is tortuous in so many ways.

What you have shown me is how to endure that torture.

No. Not just that.

You have given me a reason to endure that torture.

I do not know what I have done to deserve your friendship. I have only lied to you, kept you at a distance. In all my efforts to pry into your private affairs, I have never divulged anything of myself. You never resented that. You dislike my nosy inquiries, but never enough to reproach me, and not near enough to abandon me as a friend. You never retaliated by interrogating me or attempting to pick at my inner soul. For that I am relieved, but also a little hurt- do you not care to know? But I think about it, and I see that it is not that you do not care, but you see my reticence and respect my privacy.

For all the things that you do for me, for who you are to me, the companionship you’ve given to me, what have I done for you? Nothing, I fear. Money. I buy you things. I give you trite advice that anyone could offer you. I can’t make you smile, I can’t give you happiness.

If you knew my secrets- my past, my relationships, my offenses- what would you think of me? Nothing kind, I am sure of it! How could I hope for your forgiveness if I told you what I did to the Oddish? You think I’m their caretaker- I was their butcher! The one who maimed them! There were many options to save them but I took the most cowardly.

Even my friendship with you is based on a one-sided farce. If you knew the real reason, the sun rising tomorrow is less sure than the inevitability of you ending our friendship. Everything I have gleaned about you points to that end. More so than all the pressures of society, this one burden is the hardest to bear. The lessons I have learned from you to endure these hardships come to naught when it is you I confront. You are the one person whose hatred I could not bear.

I am weak. I am ashamed to say this, but I am comfortable being weak. When one is weak and hides their shame, they appears harmless. The strong may boss them around and take what they want, but so long as the weak acquiesce, they are left unharmed, and sometimes even earn the coddling of the strong. The true shame of this is that it is selfish. I give up my right to affect the world in order to protect myself. I yield up happiness for peace, pride for stability, possession for attention. It was justifiable so long as it only affected myself. Now, though, I have someone to care for, and the need and desire to help her. I cannot help her, however, if I remain compliant and stand for nothing, if I continue to wallow in helplessness.

My weakness is that I am a coward. This weakness is one I must overcome.

The night was warm, the air conditioning was absent. Jasmine pitched about in her sleep, removing
half the comforter from her body. She was in a loose nightgown I had loaned her. The thin fabric fell smoothly over her body, revealing every curve (or lack thereof). Except for Jasmine’s tossing, the room was silent and still, as was the rest of the house.

Oh yes, this house…

I have learned many things growing up in this house: how to garden, how to distill aromas from flowers, how to cultivate fruits and vegetables, how to cook wholesome meals and present them to guests. How to behave and please visitors, and how to respect those of authority. Plentiful examples of how to show disdain and mockery for those beneath oneself. How to excel in school and work. How to run a business, and how to navigate bureaucracies. How to draw, how to play music, how to sing, and how to decorate. So many things to learn, and whether they were good to learn or painful, my parents were always good teachers. Yet the one thing they never taught me was how to make friends.

What are friends? People who treat you nicely because you buy gifts for them, or promote them to a higher-paying position, or loan them money. I am ashamed of our wealth, and the barriers it creates between us and others. Not only is it the banality of a relationship based on money, but the assumption of the one-way exchange: we never take, we never receive, we always give, we always grant, because to my family, it is supremely important to be in the position of power. We thrive on ego buoyed by the purchased gratitude of “friends”.

If that is all our friendship is, my shame is complete. I do not want the gap between our families’ means to be a gap between our feelings, Jasmine. You offer me things of no monetary value, but what price could one possibly put on things like- jumping into a dirty pond to help me over rocks? Playing hide and seek in the gym garden? Fixing a technical glitch in my computer program? Amusing me by organizing a Pokemon theater? Fielding a barrage of insulting questions in order to appease my parents? Defying the law to save my Pokemon? Comforting me in my deepest depression? These things are priceless.

And I can only give you things, clothes and snacks. It is an unfair exchange.

How do I make up the difference? These little things are not trivial, not in their reception and I realize not in their offering. It takes will, care, and motivation to do these things for me. It is a burden on you. I do not know why you shoulder that burden, but I am grateful. I want to help. I want to find a way to sustain that spirit of yours that is so brave and selfless and giving. How can I make you happy? Your little moments of happiness sustain me, how can I make them last?

It is obvious you are hiding something, a darkness in your heart that is as deep and painful as could be. Tonight my efforts revealed just a little. Enough for my own purposes, but not enough to help me understand you. I once thought your troubles might have something to do with romance. Of all subjects, of all issues, that seems to be your chief antipathy. I’m not quite sure of the reason for this. The little hints and bits of pieces you have confided to me paint a confusing picture. I know you have been on the wrong side of men’s obsessive crushes. Some boys have bullied you before. I understand that. Yet, even when presented with more upstanding individuals of their sex, you have shown them nothing but disdain. Gary was categorically rejected merely because of his gender, as far as I can tell. This disdain is not limited to the arena of romance, but all ills in all areas are to be blamed on the existence of men, according to you. What is there to explain this misandry? Something in your past? Something that is going on in your family? A relationship gone wrong? Is it plain sexism? I cannot tell, and not knowing the answer has dearly vexed me.

After hearing what you have told me tonight, though, I am less sure than ever.

‘Because of her, everything- everything.’
‘If only she... but... I liked him. A lot.’

Who is she?

Who is he?

What happened?

I can guess, but that is all: I do not know the truth and feel unable to pry it from you, and working on assumptions feels dangerous.

Yet...

There is something there, lurking in the darkest recess of your heart. Something beyond your hatred of men, something past your troubled relationship with your mother and father, something more narrow than the oppression of society upon your soul. I would never have suspected it, never would have thought it more than residual damage from some incident between you and a boy, except for that one crisis over Spring Break.

We were together, at last, for a whole week! Glorious! And the location could not be better! The beaches of the Sevii Islands beckoned with their golden sands and endless horizons. We were joined by our fellow Gym Leaders, Whitney and Misty. It was a time for play, for joy, and for cheer! Girl's Beach Party! Surely, with nary a male in sight, Jasmine must feel free to loosen up and have fun.

Yet, the shy girl did not seem to be enjoying herself.

I chalked up her quiet mood to boredom. After all, she lived by the sea, this was nothing new or exciting to her. It was quite hot too, with the sun bearing down on us with nary a cloud for cover. Still, she seemed aware of the significance of being on vacation with friends and tried not to be a total recluse.

“Come out! Swim in the water!” I urged.

“Nnn.” She shook her head.

“What is wrong? You’ve been grumpy all morning long.”

“It’s nothing.”

“Come on in! The water feels good, it will cheer you up!”

“No it won’t.”

“Oh come come! I’ll feel guilty if you sit there alone while we’re having fun.”

She sighed and reluctantly waded out into the ocean.

We were frolicking in the salt water, catching and riding the waves for about half an hour, before I noticed an absence.

“Where is Jasmine?” I asked Misty.
She shook her head.

“On the beach?”

“Did she go back?”

“I don’t know.”

“I just saw her.”

We three girls came together and conferred for a minute.

Whitney was facing out to sea as we talked. She suddenly lit up.

“Ahhh! There she is!”

“Where?”

“There! Oh my god, she’s far out!”

My chest was gripped by a chill far colder than the water.

Jasmine’s white one-piece could be seen bobbing in the waves, a hundred yards from shore. She was not moving.

“Oh god,” Whitney cried.

I cried with her, silently, choking up with fear.

“Ah!” This was Misty. She was observing Jasmine and the waves around her.

“Get out of the water.”

“Huh?”

“You got to get out of the water, NOW!”

We hesitated, so Misty slapped us and pushed us towards shore.

“It’s a riptide! Jasmine’s caught in a riptide! Go! Now!”

Whitney and I swam in a panic towards the safety of the sand. Behind us, Misty’s whistle pierced the air. Her Starmie and Seaking returned from their play. She climbed atop the Pokemon and powered out to the open ocean.

I could do nothing but watch and pray.

For six minutes I did so. Every now and then a break in the waves revealed two tiny dots of color amidst the turquoise sea.

My heart quivered when I realized the dots were growing bigger.

“She’s alive!” Misty called out.

Jasmine was laid on the sand.

Misty told us to stand back. She had to restrain me from leaping on her.
“CPR!”

“No. She’s weak but she didn’t swallow much water. Give her room. Come on Erika, back off!”

It was many long minutes of sputtered, weak, and feeble coughing that ensued. At last, Jasmine rolled over onto her side and began breathing normally.

“Jasmine are you alright? Are you hurting?”

“Eh,” she murmured. “I guess,” were her first words.

Later on, we took her to the beach house and set her to rest on the couch. She was shaking violently so I piled all the blankets and pillows in the house on top of her. When she was snuggled in I patted her down and took a seat beside her.

“A riptide?” she asked.

“Yes. You were carried out to sea.”

“Oh.”

“Do you remember anything?”

“No.”

“I was so scared!”

“Eh,” she shrugged.

“You could have drowned,” I insisted, irritated by her apathy.

She averted her eyes, staring out the window.

“So?” she answered.

“So?! You could have died! You would be dead, and we would all be grieving!”

“Nnn.”

She rolled over, turning away from me and digging deeper into the cushions.

“So what if I died? I’m not wanted here.”

“I’m not wanted here.”

Those words haunt me.

I do not believe it was the shock of the crisis that elicited those hurtful words. There was something vague in your spirit that I had not managed to pin down until that moment. Those words were illuminating, they summed up with crystal clarity all of the troubled behavior I had witnessed out of you. Everything you have suffered, your dark secret you do not want me or anyone else to know, all distilled down to a single sentence.
“I’m not wanted here.”

Of course you are wanted here! I want you here, in my room, in my life, beside me, my dearest friend! How could you say such a thing?! It boggled me, and pained me, and most of all it scared me.

For now I know that whatever haunts you, is dark enough to make you not care about your own survival. That truly terrifies me.

You do not know your own worth.

You have no idea how much you mean to me, and so many others. I said that society underestimates you, but after that night, I have also come to think you underestimate yourself. So it falls on me, as the person who heard you utter those terrifying, utterly honest words- “I’m not wanted here”- to find out what they mean, and to try to help you. Maybe tomorrow night, or another evening during your stay, or further into the future, but sometime, I hope to draw out that darkness and banish it.

I hope I can do it. I pray for it. I pray to all the deities I know that I am able to help ease your sorrow without hurting you in the process. I have doubts about what I am doing, but I will try to overcome them and forge ahead. My hope is that I will be strong enough and wise enough to do so, and that I am not too far gone because of my actions for you to accept my help.

How do I apologize for everything? How do I make it all up? What can I do for you, Jasmine, to be for you what you are for me? How can I be brave like you? How do I find the courage to stand up to the mayor and the Rockets when I cannot even bring myself to tell you these fretful feelings? How do I live freely and openly when I cannot even share my secrets with my best friend?

Will I ever reach that place where I belong?

For so long I have suffered in silence. Not being able to reveal my true self to anyone, for the simple fear of being hurt and ostracized. I once wished I was not this way, that I could be like everyone else. I tried very hard to fit in. I debased myself to the point that when Evan asked me to join him upstairs during the prom after-party, and full-knowing what his intentions were, I agreed anyways. What little self-worth I had hung on to for my teenaged life was ripped from me after that night. Since then I have survived by clinging to the ego of pleasing others, while inwardly weeping at the unfairness of it all. My desire to change who I am to appease the rest and assuage my soul grew and grew, even as my emotional ability to do so become more and more impossible. I was in despair.

Meeting you changed that.

Being with you awakened me to the injustice of it all, and the hope that something more could be achieved. It gave me the desire to be myself and for society to change for me- even if I could not make that desire a reality.

Yet, if society’s prejudice could wreck this kind of havoc on my spirit, if mother and father’s prejudice could nearly crush me, I am terribly afraid of what would happen if I found that same prejudice in you.

So I keep silent, forever unable to share these feelings.

My chest is aching. A Golem is weighing down upon my heart. A Gengar is lurking about the shadows of my mind.

I bit down a cry, choking it off.

I reached out, resting my fingertips on Jasmine’s chest. I brushed along the nightgown, reaching her
neck, and then cheek, stroking it. She felt my touch, judging by the slight rise of her form, but she did not wake up. My gaze wandered over her body.

Blessed, really. To have such an exquisite figure, and yet need so little care to maintain it. You have the body of a gracefully sculpted blade. The tiniest imperfections, a bump here, a scar there, tiny and barely noticeable, just enough to give a reminder of your humanity. Otherwise, a sleek and beautiful ballerina-like figure. Some may mistake it for that of a child, but only because you are short and your breasts are small. That is not fair, though. You did not choose your appearance. Nor is there anything childish in your intellect or your ability to navigate the horrors of the modern world. Rather, I would say your attractiveness derives from an appeal to innocence that so many of us have lost as we transitioned to adulthood. A reminder of a time when we were untainted.

*You are beautiful, my dear. So beautiful.*

I found myself being drawn down. My hair hung down around my face. It brushed against her cheek and brow.

Your face is the most beautiful of all.

Maybe it is your expressions. When you look sad or worried, I think it looks touching. When you scrunch up your nose and brow in anger, I think it is cute. When you light up in joy, it tickles my humor in a way no comedian or frolicking Pokemon could.

Your soft, thin lips, slightly parted, lay invitingly right before me.

I blinked. I breathed.

When did I start holding my breath? When had I gotten this close? Her lips were mere inches from mine.

It hit me, full force, very suddenly, the truth laid bare to my mind and soul.

The urge to close the gap welled up inside of me. It impinged upon my cerebrum, it took fire in my muscles, urging, wildly *demanding* closure. I leaned in so close I could feel her breath.

No!

I mustn’t!

Why not? These feelings are there, they are real!

I can’t!

You can! You can have her! You must try! You must risk it!

*I cannot!*

Why?!?!

Because I am coward!

Because I do not do things for my own sake!

Because I suffer and sacrifice for others’ prejudice!

Because I would rather have this friendship than risk losing her completely!
Because she means that much to me!

I cannot!

I lifted my head and drew away. Not fast enough though. One, two, a pair of wet drops fell and shattered upon the bridge of her nose. She wrinkled her nose. Then looking very closely, what I saw broke my heart.

Oh Jasmine. Please forgive me. I do not know how to tell you this.

When you suffer I suffer. When I see your face with my tears upon it and it looks so utterly natural, it makes me realize how accustomed I have become with your unhappy countenance. I wish I could make you happy. I want to make you happy. I want to give you a reason to live- because…

Because of everything you have done for me, the things you know about, the things you do not know about.

Because of what you mean to me, the infinite joys you have brought me, the little touches of care, the meaningful lessons, the companionship I could not bear to live without.

Because of the primal forces of nature that propel me towards you, the beauty I am inexplicably drawn to…

Because of how much I care for you.

“Because…” I said, and then choked, my voice lost in emotion, unable to say the words I so desperately wished to tell her…

…because I love you.

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The End

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading, I hope you enjoyed and welcome all comments, questions, and criticisms.
Note that this story is a prequel and side-story to Olivine Romance, namely Ch. 57 of Olivine Romance, where Jasmine goes to Erika for comfort after a devastating revelation. "Things I Can Never Say" was intended to explain Erika's history and thoughts so that readers are not as blindsided as Jasmine is when her best friend confesses her feelings.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!