Angelic Shadows
by WiseAbsol

Summary

With his memory of Mewtwo restored, Giovanni sends one of his Elite to take care of the clone for good. While Agent Cassandra has no reservations about accepting her assignment, there is much she hasn’t been told about her target, and more than one life that hangs in the balance.
Story Warning: There is profane language and graphic violence and sex in this story. As such, it is intended for mature audiences only. Specific trigger warnings will be mentioned at the headers of the relevant chapters.

CHAPTER 1: DARK ANGEL

"Art thou pale for weariness
Of climbing heaven and gazing on the earth,
Wandering companionless
Among the stars that have a different birth,
And ever changing, like a Joyless eye
That finds no object worth its constancy?"

- Percy Bysshe Shelley, To the Moon.

Through a frosty window of a ranger’s cabin, a humanoid creature gazed out at the forest outside, a hand on the cool glass pane. Beneath the frigid wind, the barren branches of the trees, thrusting heavenwards like bony arms, entangled their ashen fingers together as they swayed. Above them dense clouds churned, and snow drifted and settled in pristine dunes. Upon occasion, the wind would stir up small flurries of opal dust, and as he watched, he caught a glimpse of the moon between the clouds. For a moment the world was bathed in a ghostly, almost holy glow...before, once again, the scene was plunged into darkness. Yet even in the shadows, the winter world was glorious, for it held all the clarity and frailty of the purest glass, awaiting a mere glimmer of light to bring forth its fierce beauty.

However, the beauty of this place was not limited to what spanned beyond the glass. There was beauty within the cabin as well.

Turning to face the blaze in the fireplace, the creature's eyes came to rest on the blankets strewn a meter from it. The dim and flickering light revealed the form of a young woman sleeping under one soundly, her black hair falling over her shoulders and onto the material behind her. Her clothes lay scattered around her, some having been removed hastily at an earlier hour of the twilight. The male, remembering the moments when they’d been shed, crossed over to her and sat down beside her. Her arms, he noted, were curled close to her breasts, which were concealed by the blanket covering most of her person. Her calves and feet, however, were exposed, and the creature quickly remedied this, not wishing for her to be cold, despite the fire burning nearby.

Afterwards, he brushed his fingertips across her upper back, and watched her stir as a result. She seemed to tense for a moment, as if bracing for something unpleasant...but then the tension eased, as if she knew who was touching her. At this, the corners of his lips tucked upwards in a small, rare smile, and his amethyst eyes softened with affection. Contentment warmed him as he recalled the night's events and those of the last several weeks. Even some memories from years prior surfaced in his mind, of how it had all begun and where it had led. Despite the struggles they had known during those times, he could not be more pleased with the outcome: he finally had his angel...his dear, dark angel....

And yet...what would happen to them now? They had defied so many people so, had crossed so
many lines, all so that this could occur... As sudden weariness suffused him, he closed his eyes, attempting to will away such heavy thoughts. Yet despite his efforts, they seized his mind...unbidden by him, Mewtwo.

Giovanni Maki - referred to as "The Signore" in his organization - had never been the type of man who accepted defeat. Some even referred to him as a croconaw who, once biting down on something, would not release it until he'd finished with it. This behavior was especially evident when someone did manage to beat him, for far more often than not, that victor would soon go "missing" after his or her success. As far as the leader was concerned, if he could not succeed in his original goals, he would eliminate the ones who opposed him entirely, if only to make it clear who was truly stronger.

On this night, that exact scenario drove him to visit the Team Rocket dormitories. His right hand, Agent 009, codenamed "Domino," trailed behind him silently, wrinkling her nose at their surroundings. He could understand her disgust well, for he also never came here if he could help it, despite it being where a majority of his underlings lived. In most cases, he would have summoned the one they were visiting to his office instead, which was, on the whole, much better tended to than this facility. However, for this particular mission, he felt he should make an exception.

The duo soon halted at Unit 150, and Giovanni rapped his knuckles on the door to announce their arrival. After a few moments, during which the bellows from shouting matches from the floor overhead were all they heard, the door before them opened a hand's width. Although the hallway was dimly lit, since a number of the lights above them were spent, the fragile illumination managed to reveal the young woman of the apartment, who was clad in only a towel. However, she didn't flush upon her superiors seeing her so exposed, but instead opened the door further.

"May we come in, Agent Merlo?" Giovanni asked, noting how she didn't step away from the doorway to let them in to her home.

The woman, nearing her twentieth year of age, nodded. "If you'd like."

As the visitors crossed into the apartment, the door "snicked" shut behind them, and lavender and ebony irises analyzed the space. Across from the entranceway was an open kitchen: the refrigerator set into the far corner, the counters extending on either side of the stove and the sink, the cupboards placed both above and below the glossy surface, a microwave and other appliances planted into the other corner. Beside this culinary area was a walled-off bathroom, the door slightly ajar. Glancing to their left, they noted a closed closet, and to their right, over the stomach-high wall divider, was the woman's bed, the covers of which were mussed. Finally, in the center of the domain stood a faux bois table, bare of flower vases or used dishes (as far as the first went, the agent had little use for flora, and concerning the latter, the apartment lacked them). The only source of untidiness in the dorm lay in the clothes strewn over the carpet, and considering these, Ms. Merlo turned to the duo and warned them to watch their step. "I doubt either of you would enjoy having a foot sliced open," she said, referring to the blades discarded along with the clothes, and without another word, she crossed barefoot over to the bathroom, intending to get dressed.

Giovanni and his right-hand agent, keeping a wary eye on where they tread, managed to reach the table and its vacant chairs intact. Once they sat down and began to wait for the woman to make herself decent, Domino attempted to relieve her building boredom and distaste for being in the other Team Rocket agent's home by amusing herself by counting the number of cracks in the crème-colored paint of its walls and ceiling. As her lavender eyes swept over the bed, she gave an involuntary start when she saw a pair of red irises peering at her from beneath the blankets. A shiver crawled up her spine as the eyes narrowed, and only when the bathroom door swung open did the
blonde find relief from the crimson gaze. The other agent effectively ended the staring contest with her entrance, and Domino noted with some annoyance the casual garb she now wore: a pair of jeans and a charcoal-gray sweater lacking the crimson "R" insignia of the gang. Before the Signore, all other members of the organization were supposed to show their allegiance to Team Rocket through wearing their uniforms. Yet this woman, Agent 009 mused to herself sourly, was exempt from this policy.

"Is there something you'd like to drink?" their host asked the blonde, her light grey eyes calm, yet guarded. She already knew what their leader would prefer to drink, and set to making a pot of the black brew for him.

"Do you have any soda?" Domino's query, honeyed with a mock sweetness, made her displeasure in being there quite evident. Her superior chastised her with a glare, but it was an unnecessary gesture. The other woman didn't notice her tone, or else simply didn't care.

"I'm afraid not," the other agent replied. "I do have coffee and tea, though. Would either of those interest you?"

Reluctantly, Domino replied that coffee would be fine, though inwardly wondered if the woman was on a hiatus from sugar. The notion was unfathomable to the teenager, for while she usually only consumed health foods and beverages, she couldn't bring herself to give up carbonated drinks and sweets on occasion. As if sensing where her thoughts were roaming, the older female, her black hair still wet and dripping from her shower, reached up into a cupboard and tossed a package towards the girl. Catching it deftly, Agent 009 found it to be a small bag of lemon cookies. Staring at it in shock, she wondered, was the other agent, in fact, human…?

"Shadow likes to horde those, but I'm certain he won't mind you having some."

Perhaps not, Domino thought as she opened the package and popped the first cookie into her mouth.

During this time, Giovanni was firmly employing the virtue of patience as he waited for the two girls to finish their exchange. After years of coping with the one-sided rivalry, he was inured to the verbal barbs, and taking a sip of the bitter, black coffee from the mug Ms. Merlo soon handed him to him, he even found some amusement at the expression of disgust that crossed Domino's face as she drank from hers. Yet she, he knew, would need the caffeine to last her through what she perceived to be an aggravating ordeal: the discussion of Ms. Merlo's next mission. By this point, their hostess had divined the reason for their visit, the manila folder that her superior had placed on the table being the giveaway. She had another assignment, and that fact neither delighted nor dismayed her (although she was certain others might have reacted in such ways). She merely sat down with the duo and silently drank from the cup of steaming mint tea she'd prepared for herself. Unlike her fellows, she'd never fallen into the contemporary cult of coffee-drinkers, since she didn't enjoy its taste or its aftereffects, the potential insomnia and the yellowing of the teeth. Yet she also understood she couldn't boast having any better taste, given that - although she could never remember how she had picked up the habit in the first place - she drank tea, which was an even blander drink.

Setting her drink down, she reluctantly broke the silence between them. "So, who would you like me to kill for you this time?"

Domino nearly choked from the woman's lack of tact. As an agent who often participated in undercover operations, she considered subtly essential, yet Agent Merlo, it seemed, did not partake in the same belief.

Their boss, however, was not perturbed by this. "Not 'who,' but rather what," he said, sliding the folder to the inquirer.
Ms. Merlo raised a thin, dark eyebrow at that as she opened the file. "The creature I would like you to hunt down is known as Mewtwo. One of my recruits into our genetics department, a man by the name of Dr. Fuji, created it for my use. However, it's managed to rebel and escape from our control...twice," the crime lord explained, his tone conveying his bitterness at the knowledge.

In the year after the incident on Mt. Quena, the Japanese-Italian man recalled sullenly, he'd found stories of a mysterious feline – or rather, rumors recounted by his contacts on the northern Atlantic coast - to be rather unsettling. The informants in the western superpower had described the creature as a bipedal feline with a violet-hued pelt, its features borderline demonic while its movements were graceful. Supposedly, it could sometimes be spotted soaring through the nation's largest city on moonlit nights, and because even levitation was a difficult feat for most psychic pokémon to achieve (they'd concluded that to be its element), the unidentified, rare pokémon was assumed to be of high level, and so of interest to Giovanni. And after the crime lord received the shadowy, distant snapshots of the creature, the lure of familiarity had inclined him to agree. However, he initially declined pursuing the oddity, for he'd possessed more important matters to concern himself with. He'd allowed it to fester in the back of his mind until, finally, the feeling of déjà-vu had been too insistent to ignore.

Following his instincts, he begun investigating entity, and soon (and rather reluctantly, because he didn't believe in the credibility of such procedures,) he'd found himself in hypnotic therapy to find the answers he sought. And he'd certainly found them: entire banks of memory that had been hidden by Mewtwo's amnesia-inducing skills were suddenly accessible to him again. Telepaths, after all, could not fully erase memories; they can only repress those memories with varying success, the energy spent and the skill employed during the "wipe" being large factors in determining how easy or difficult remembrance is to obtain. The trainer Ash Ketchum, when faced with the tortured replica in Purity Canyon, had almost overcome the barrier once erected in his mind to conceal the events on New Island. However, he hadn't accomplished this (even though that incident would no longer be a secret when his companions and he had left), but with the aid of an external source, Giovanni Maki of Team Rocket, whose remembrance of the clone would prove far more dangerous, had.

Confirming what the hypnosis had uncovered in his brain, Giovanni had found the confidential files he had kept on the Lazarus Project: the documents verified his dreamlike recollections, and offered him proof that the artificial legendary was not to be trifled with. Doubtlessly if he attempted to ensnare the creature again, it would manage to slip away, and so his desires regarding its fate had shifted. He was determined that he would not be made a fool of again...!

Breaking him from his thoughts, Agent Merlo corrected her superior. "He."

The crime lord narrowed his eye in puzzlement. "Pardon?"

Light grey eyes glanced at him from the papers. "'He' - the medical records in this file state that Mewtwo is male."

Her superior was taken aback by this declaration. Why was this relevant to her? "That may be so," he conceded, "but that creature is an artificial life form. While it may possess qualities similar to those of an actual being, it's not one. Hence, it requires no engenderment."

For a moment, he thought he saw her eyes flash at that...yet perhaps he was mistaken, for she dismissed the matter and moved on to a different topic. "Why exactly do you want him to be killed, though? From this, I see no reason why it would be necessary."

She keeps calling "it" a "he," Giovanni noticed, but he answered her question nonetheless. "Mewtwo is an extremely volatile creature who would rather perish than serve me. Given that it won't obey my commands, I find I have no use for it. However, I wouldn't see the power it
represents fall in another's hands," he said, contemplating the challenges that could be raised by other shadow organizations, or even by the government itself if Mewtwo joined forces with them in a belated attempt at revenge. Not that either possibility was likely, but if there was even the slightest chance it could occur, then it posed a threat that must be dealt with accordingly.

Accepting his reasoning, the young woman nodded and took another sip of her tea. After she had set her drink back down, she then asked the one question Giovanni had anticipated, but nonetheless loathed hearing from her. "But why select me to hunt him down?"

When he didn't answer, she glanced at Domino, who was enjoying the last cookie from the pack. "From what this reads, Agent 009 has experience dealing with him, and if I recall correctly, she also has a variety of high-level dark pokémon at her disposal. It would seem more practical to send her on this mission. After all, this isn't a human target, and pokémon usually fall into her area of expertise."

She ignored the glare that the blonde woman directed at her in response. "Agent 009 has turned this mission down, and given that she was among the victims of Mewtwo's amnesia attack, you should be able to understand why. Besides, with your abilities, you're probably the only member of this organization capable of completing the task."

The females near him had very different reactions to this unintended compliment: Domino expressed her annoyance with an unflattering scowl, while Ms. Merlo seemed oblivious to the flattery, or merely regarded the comment as a statement of fact. For he was correct - she did possess skills which others lacked, and had endured years of intensive training to master them. Perhaps he had made the right decision in approaching her with this task….

"So, will you accept, Agent Merlo?" Giovanni asked. Further discussion was unnecessary, as everything the woman needed to know lay in the folder he'd given her, including the proposed location of the clone.

Contemplating the matter for a moment, Ms. Merlo soon nodded. "I see no reason to decline. I'll do what you request."

Giovanni's mouth lifted in a small, triumphant smile at her answer. "I'm glad to hear it." Then, glancing at Domino and seeing that she'd finished her coffee, he said, "009, if you would wait outside for a few minutes? I have a personal matter to discuss with Ms. Merlo."

Her irritation spiking, Domino nonetheless smothered it and said, "Sure thing, boss," and then left, shutting the door with more force than necessary as she went. Her superior decided to ignore the impoliteness, for he understood why her temper was so apt to ignite - she'd always found the young woman before him repulsive for a number of reasons. Agent Merlo, after all, behaved in ways that defied Domino's understanding, as well as had a unique relationship with Giovanni. Additionally, no other agent in Team Rocket was closer to Domino in power and influence, and this made his second-in-command wary that, someday, the left hand of the organization might reach up to drag her from her lofty perch. That possibility was slim at best, for Ms. Merlo had never shown any interest in obtaining control over factions of the gang and using them to usurp the blonde from her position. Yet despite this, Domino's paranoia remained, and no amount of proof concerning Ms. Merlo's disinterest could sway her to yield her fears. Knowing the details of the situation he intended to discuss with the woman certainly didn't help in reassuring her, and in this subject, Agent Merlo actually shared the teenager's dread. Indeed, as seconds passed in silence, she seemed to coil with tension, and in a futile attempt to escape the impending conversation, she took the empty mugs from the table and went to wash them in the sink. She ignored Giovanni's fixated stare, not allowing his eyes to catch hers.

However, Giovanni would not leave without discussing the matter.
"Cassandra," he said her name, his tone one of warning as he dropped the formalities between them. She didn't turn to face him, instead snarling, "I don't want to talk about him!"

Inwardly, the crime lord growled. They'd argued repeatedly about this matter for months, and from her current reaction, it seemed she hadn't budged a centimeter from her original standpoint. "Cassandra, Zachariah's offer is perfectly reasonable! You should seriously consider accepting--."

"Excuse me if I don't find the idea of marrying a man who's more interested in my body than me appealing!" she snapped, her usual emotionless mask falling away. How she hated this argument…!

Giovanni closed his eyes momentarily and sighed. "The incident at the dinner party was quite some time ago."

"Like hell it was! That little reception was only five months ago, and that was the first time I even met him! I'm sorry to disappoint you, Giovanni, but I refuse to be engaged with someone who thinks my greatest value will be found in his bed! If he wants some of those thrills, he can hire expensive whores like you do," she spat, leveling a scorching glare at him.

Her superior resisted the urge to flinch from the heat in her words. He would have severely punished anyone else who dared use his or her knowledge of his private life as an insult, but with her, he merely said, "That was rather uncalled for, my dear."

She sniped back at him, "Don't you 'my dear' me. It's true, and he has just as much access to the brothels as you do. Is he even aware of my-?"

"After you met, he became quite interested in you and read your files. So yes, he is well aware of your unique attributes."

Cassandra Merlo could find no response to that, and so they fell into uneasy silence. During those moments, Giovanni gazed around the apartment once more, noting the ridges on the walls that marked where blocks of plaster had been set to fill in once damaged areas. Fights has been waged within this little apartment, some far bloodier than others, and he couldn't help but disapprove of the condition of the place. Yet what annoyed him more than that condition was the idea that his personal assassin was living here. No matter how he'd suggested she move into finer, more spacious quarters like Domino and the other members of the Team Rocket Elite had, she'd stubbornly refused…just as she was with accepting Zachariah's proposal.

"I simply can't understand why you won't accept," he said, breaking the quiet that had formed. "Even if my nephew wishes to have you for your beauty, do you believe that will be different with anyone else? You've committed countless murders in my name, so finding someone who will embrace you fully is unlikely at best. You'd do well to be bound to someone who will at least accept you as a woman, and who will provide you with a political advantage in this organization. As my heir, he will someday inherit Team Rocket when my reign is complete, and binding you to him seems the most logical move available to us. Not only would you be able to defend him when he's in danger, but in the event that something does happen to him, you'd be the first in line to carry on my legacy. Considering the extent of your training, you may be the most suitable candidate for handling the burden, and only your different blood excludes you from the running. If you marry into my family, that will no longer be a problem. You will be my kin, and I find that idea rather appealing."

Once more, his words met no response. Trying again, Giovanni used shockingly gentle voice for a criminal leader who had been responsible for a number of heinous crimes during his lifetime. "I'm also concerned for you. You've been doing my bidding since you were ten, and in the last few years,
your missions have been all that have mattered to you. Sooner or later, I'm certain you'll crash."

Then, destroying what might have been an honest sign that he could truly care for another being, he said, "And I can't have that. You're an important part of Team Rocket, too important for me to lose. I can scarcely recall the last time you relaxed-.

She shot him a cold look. "That's because I haven't."

"Which is precisely what I mean!" he growled. "It's unnatural for you to continue pushing yourself as you are. You need a change of pace, and I think this would be a good way of doing so. Besides… you did sign an agreement with me on this matter, Cassandra. You may be regretting that choice now, but you did agree to be matched with whoever I thought was suitable, and I think Zachariah would be."

The agent bristled and turned back to him. "I was sixteen, Giovanni! I signed that stupid thing when I was sixteen and out of my fucking mind, in return for 'certain favors' from you, whatever the hell that meant. Care to enlighten me on what those were? Because I sure as hell don't remember you doing shit for me back then! So I don't see why I should be held accountable for that when you never-.

"But I did, Cassandra," he said in a low, stern voice, his eyes clouding with an unpleasant memory. "I did exactly what you wanted me to back then, at the expense of some very valuable and irreplaceable resources."

Still she tried to argue with him, her voice gaining an edge of desperation as she hissed, "What part of 'I was out of my fucking mind back then' do you not under-?

Giovanni had had enough of this. "Argue all you want, but you did sign that document, and it remains valid regardless of your mental state at the time. You agreed that you'd accept the suitor I wished you to be with, and I happen to think that my nephew is right: he'd be a suitable match for you. So you will accept his offer, Cassandra – I'm going to hold you to your word on that."

She looked as if she wanted to lash out at him in rebellion, but seeing that he wasn't going to be backing down, her shoulders sank…and she reluctantly nodded and spat, "Fine. Whatever. Do whatever the fuck you want." He obviously had his mind made up, and having been raised by him, she knew how stubborn he could be. He would just continuing confronting her over the matter – waving that goddamned legal and binding document in her face – until she folded under the pressure. That he'd allowed her to evade and resist him for this long had been a mere courtesy on his part, and one which he wouldn't have offered to anyone else. She tried comforting herself with that thought, along with the thought that the points Giovanni had made did have some merit. So long as her godfather understood she'd never sleep with his nephew and give him grandnephews and –nieces, there would be no further issues. *Maybe...*

For her superior, her surrender was somewhat surprising; after all, he hadn't been expecting her to change her tune after four months. But he supposed every creature had their limit, and now that he'd managed to make her reach hers, he felt satisfaction and relief course through him. Determined to keep the upper hand, he pressed on, "When you return from your mission, we'll begin preparing for your wedding. Perhaps you should consider what flowers and music you'd prefer while you're completing your mission?" He nearly chuckled at the absolutely disgusted expression she gave him then.

What he didn't know was that Cassandra has already picked out the flowers and music: striped and yellow carnations (maybe with some rhododendrons for good measure) and a funeral dirge. Hell, maybe she'd ask Mewtwo to be merciful and put her out of her misery; death couldn't possibly be any worse than what now awaited her when she returned. She took a perverse sort of pleasure in the
thought that if Zachariah tried anything, she could always castrate him and make a few "mistakes" while she was at it. Maybe slicing into his bowels and causing him to poison himself would be entertaining to watch. Rubbing her temples at the thought, she cursed under her breath, and noting her mood, her godfather stood and said, "As for the mission itself, your plane will leave at eight hundred hours tomorrow, so be prepared to depart an hour prior. Your supplies will be sent ahead of you and transferred in the usual manner, so have them ready by then as well."

Cassandra acknowledged his words with a nod, and with that gesture, Giovanni Maki let himself out. Glancing at the folder on her table, she sighed and realized she couldn't dwell on what would happen if she managed to kill the clone. She had to focus her mind on her mission now and nothing else. Hours later, she could be seen doing precisely that, having sat down at the table to begin the process of reading through the documents concerning the entity known as "Mewtwo." Among these files was the creature's history, which she read with interest:

Twenty-five years ago, when Team Rocket was still under the leadership of the late Madame Maki (Signore Giovanni Maki's mother), her second-in-command, Agent Miyamoto, was charged with the mission of finding the legendary phantom pokémon, mew. Believed to reside in the Andes Mountain Range, this creature was supposedly the rarest and most powerful pokémon in existence, and so desirable for the purposes of the organization. However, Agent Miyamoto never succeeded in her mission, nor ever returned to Kanto - the radio transmissions she sent ceased within months, which has led investigators to believe she perished in her quest to locate the phantom. Within the next five years, Signore Maki inherited Team Rocket and began the hunt anew. This search uncovered an excellently preserved remnant of a deceased mew: a fossilized eyebrow with the roots intact. From the desire to have the mythical, yet supposedly extinct creature, Signore Maki hired the leading scientist in the field of cloning, Dr. Johnathan Fuji, to create a new creature from these genetic remains.

An older gentleman, Dr. Fuji accepted the challenge in the hope that through it, he could learn the secret to restoring the life of his deceased and only child, Amber Fuji. The little girl, only eight years of age, had been killed in a car accident some years prior, and through cloning he intended to resurrect her. This desire had the adverse effect of driving his wife away, and perceiving that he'd nothing left to lose, he accepted Signore Maki's offer, despite knowing that the man was the leader of a criminal organization. The funding and the latest equipment, after all, significantly improved the chances of bringing Amber back to life. Before this, he'd spent a decade on his own experiments, during which he and his employees succeeded in creating an enhanced bulbasaur, squirtle, and charmander, and a clone of his daughter as well. Upon accepting Signore Maki's offer, he then began to create the clone of mew as well. Because the creature had not been seen in several centuries, this process involved much guesswork, and some modifications were implemented to make the clone stronger. After a month of laboring, Dr. Fuji and his colleagues succeeded in making the infant, and named it Mewtwo.

When the clone was only a few months old, the unexpected occurred: Ambertwo, as she was called, contacted the feline through telepathy and began to communicate with it. The other clones, Bulbasaurtwo, Squirtletwo, and Charmandertwo, soon joined in, and they continued to communicate until they began to disintegrate in their cultivation tanks some time later. Ambertwo, being a human clone and thus considerably weaker, died soon after them. Only Mewtwo survived through this crisis period, and from the distress discerned from its erratic brainwaves, the geneticists hypothesized that the children - especially the girl and the kitten - had been quite close. Yet Mewtwo, soon sedated, would be forced to forget this experience to preserve the safety of the facility and its inhabitants, who were otherwise vulnerable to its psychical powers. While some considered the experiment to be a failure, the being Signore Maki had invested so much money clung to life, albeit alone and highly sedated throughout the next several months as it matured to adulthood. When it awoke, however, it lashed out violently, destroying the laboratory and killing its creators. Unlike
them, Signore Maki managed to bring Mewtwo to his side despite its uncontrollable temper, and in the year that followed, the clone fought in the Viridian City Gym under his command.

However, after that year the creature lashed out again, breaking free of the restraining armor that had been carefully suppressing its power. It destroyed the original Team Rocket Viridian Laboratories, and nearly killed Signore Maki in the process. In the upcoming year, during which Signore Maki and his second-in-command, Agent 009 - also known as "Domino" or the "Black Tulip" - searched for the creature, what Mewtwo did remained unknown. Eventually its hideaway in Purity Canyon, a vast, natural landmark in the Johto region, was discovered. It was soon also found that Mewtwo had created other clone pokémon like itself, undoubtedly to comfort any loneliness it might experience. After being used as bait to lure Mewtwo into being restrained by capture drones, these additional clones would have been utilized in genetic experimentations had the original plan succeeded.

Had such events unfolded favorably, Mewtwo, under Signore Maki's control, would have eventually led a clone pokémon army to dominate the rest of the world. However, a group of trainers intervened, managing, despite the odds, to fight back Signore Maki's forces. This battle went on long enough for one of them to drag Mewtwo (whom had been weakened, almost to the point of death, by the machines used to contain it) to the healing spring of Mt. Quena. From drinking its waters, the creature's strength was restored, and to defend Mt. Quena (for it was to be used as a new laboratory base), the clone moved the spring and the lake of Purity Canyon, as well as its companions and itself, to an unknown location. Afterwards, Mewtwo erased the memories of its existence - and the subjects related to it - from the minds of the Team Rocket black operations unit used to capture it. This amnesia spell also included Giovanni Maki and Agent 009, who later overcame the effects of the attack and reclaimed their memories of these events....

Finishing the synopsis, Cassandra suppressed the unsettled emotions that had arisen within her at what she had read. She allowed only one thought to surface in her mind, and that was wonderment at the realization that she'd never been introduced to this creature. Usually she was among the first to meet new agents of power, but in this case, his entire existence had been hidden from her. She supposed this could be due to the clone being viewed as a weapon rather than a person, but all the same, it was odd. Dismissing it with a sigh, she turned her attention from his history to his medical and anatomical records, his personality assessment, and other such files. Sipping another cup of ocha, she didn't notice the ebony- and golden-furred fox that approached her feet. When he leapt up and settled on her lap, however, she smiled and looked down on him fondly. As she scratched him behind the ears, he leaned into her touch, closing his ruby eyes and purring.

"Good evening, Shadow. It seems I have another mission," she said to him, although she was certain he has guessed as much.

"Umbre," was the response. He bared his fangs to make his opinion of her so-called occupation even clearer.

"You shouldn't worry so much about me. You know I'm more than capable of handling whatever that man throws at me."

He opened his eyes just enough to gaze at her sourly. "Breon," he rumbled.

She chuckled quietly. "Yes, I know you don't approve of Giovanni…or Domino, for that matter. You gave her quite a scare earlier, by the way."

Her umbreon's laugh resembled stones being ground together. Cassandra stroked him down the spine at that, lavishing him with some of her hard to come by affection. The dark fox was perhaps the only creature on Earth that had a chance at understanding her, for only he knew the tenderness that lay in
the core of her hardened heart. In truth, he was her only companion, though one who'd possessed little choice in the matter. He'd been given to her as a gift in her sixteenth year, a runt of an eevee at the time, but through their bond, he'd eventually evolved into predator of the night, just as his mistress was. As strange as his company had been to her at first, the young woman was now grateful for his presence, for without the pokémon she would have likely lost her sanity at some point during the last three years….

When she completed the study of her prey, she stood, causing the umbreon to fall from her lap. Although startled, the fox nonetheless landed on his paws, and watched as his mistress began to prepare for her mission: she pulled from under her bed a familiar black case, lined inside with velvet, and went over to the closet and threw open its doors. Lining the shelves were weapons of all sorts, along with vials of powdered drugs and tablets for the purpose of accomplishing captures for the interrogations sometimes set before she completed the assigned assassinations. Contemplating what she'd learned about her current target, and the specifics her godfather had requested for killing it, she drew her twin tanbō blades, forged from Damascus steel, and set them on her pack. Having long since memorized the upcoming procedure, Shadow turned his eyes away and jumped up on the table. As his eyes roamed the spread out files, they settled on the picture of the creature Cassandra was to slay….

…And his tail twitched in response, for a reason known only to him.

When he turned back to face his mistress, he found her packing her clothes and other necessary supplies for the journey. Concerned that she might forget one of the most essential items, he padded over to the bathroom and leapt onto the counter within. Leaning upwards, he nuzzled the medicine cabinet door open and grabbed one of the prescription bottles in his mouth. Glancing once into the cracked mirror, he offered a prayer for the woman's safety on her mission, and then descended, carrying the medicine to the one he the he'd vowed to protect….

By noon the following day, Ms. Merlo was aboard the airplane traveling towards the grandest city of the west. On this day, the sky was overcast and rainy, yet despite the dismal weather, a flock of pelipper escorted the flight out onto the wide, steel-colored ocean of the Pacific. Gazing at the seabirds wistfully, the Team Rocket agent felt a dull ache spread between her shoulder blades, and on impulse tugged at the choker she always wore around her neck. When this motion resulted in stinging pain, her hand fell, and she grimaced at how she'd forgotten….

"Miss, would you like something off the cart?"

As the flight attendant spoke, the young woman refocused on reality, and processing the inquiry, she turned down the offer with a soft "no thank you." Once the woman had moved on to other passengers, however, Cassandra was again disturbed. She soon felt her hair being tugged at from behind, and turning around, she found a small boy with messy black hair staring at her. His mother was slumped in the seat beside him, seemingly asleep, and not wanting to wake her, he whispered, "Have you ever been on a plane before?"

Bemused by his curiosity, she replied, "Yes, I have. Many times, in fact." Although, she thought to add, the length of this particular flight was new to her. Usually her missions remained within the Union of Japanese Isles, the intergovernmental league of countries and kingdoms – including her homeland of Kanto - that made up the archipelago of the eastern sea. As such, her trips usually clocked at under three hours, but since she would be crossing both an ocean and continent, this meant a considerably longer trip than she was used to.

Ten hours longer, in fact – and she still had the jet lag to look forward to. Although she'd left Viridian City in the morning, with her destination on the other side of the world, the metropolis
would just be greeting the dawn as she arrived. Once she made her way to the hotel, sleep would be essential, but since she'd need to adopt a nocturnal schedule while hunting her quarry anyhow, she supposed it would work itself out. All the same, being more or less confined in a seat for so long - no matter how cushioned it was - was less than ideal. She almost wanted to cuss out Giovanni's secretary for not putting a flight change or two into her schedule, since that would at least give her the chance to walk around and perhaps savor the scenery of the northwestern continent. Alas, assassinations and sight-seeing had never mixed well before, and were not any more likely to do so if she berated the crotchety woman like so many whiney trainers did on a daily basis.

Tugging her from her straying thoughts, the boy behind her murmured, "Oh. Well I haven't. Is this going to be a long trip?"

For a child, across something as featureless as an ocean for a good portion of the flight? This journey was almost certain to last an eternity, and answering him with a nod, she almost quirked a grin at his resulting scowl. He opened his mouth, likely ask something further, but in that moment his mother stirred and sharply reprimanded him for not staying seated. Turning to face the movie playing on the screen above them, Cassandra heard one more, tentative comment from the boy, before she placed the headphones over her ears: "Your eyes are an odd color…they're pretty, though."

In response, a small smile formed on her lips. Thank you…someone once told me that these eyes...that my eyes are like moonlight….

By nightfall the next day, the refreshed agent stood within her hotel room, her suitcase lying open on the bed. Stripping off her civilian clothes, she donned her official uniform from within the pack, which included an open-backed shirt that revealed the array of scars she'd gained from prior missions. After dressing, she pulled her sheathed tantō daggers from the velvet beneath her clothes and the other essentials, and savored the feel of the weapons within her hands: they fit well, and unlike the guns and bullets her superiors favored, she viewed these blades as the ideal weapons. They needed limited maintenance and never lost their lethal potential, and they suited her with their cold, gleaming, razor sweetness. On the other hand, perhaps she was the one who suited them, for in her line of work, she needed to be made of something stronger than bone and flesh to survive. Whatever the case might be, she was nearly ready for the task ahead of her, and deactivating the device wrapped around her neck, she completed her transformation. As the final, hidden part of her identity manifested in a flash of black feathers, she sighed with relief: magnificent wings now hung down her back, giving her the outward appearance of one of the fallen angels.

Now she would begin the hunt.

Walking out onto the balcony, she launched herself into the air in one practiced, fluid motion, and altered her fate irrevocably…for never again would it follow along the narrow course chosen for her.

Thank You: To everyone who read this first chapter and are planning to continue reading Angelic Shadows. I hope you'll be kind enough to leave a review!

Author's Note: Hello, everyone! Welcome to Angelic Shadows. Since we're just starting out, a few quick notes. First, the timeline for The Birth of Mewtwo has been adjusted in this story; namely, the number of years in which Dr. Fuji struggled to create a viable clone before Mewtwo has been reduced. Second, while I have read the script for The Birth of Mewtwo, I will be following the anime version of it (though I may reference parts of the radio drama version as a nod to other Mewtwo fans). Third, pokémon speech will have their vocal sounds written out first and then an italicized translation afterwards. Finally, oddities such as Cassandra's wings will be explained in a
later arc of the story.

Again, thank you for your interest in *Angelic Shadows*! I hope you enjoy reading it!

Sincerely,

WiseAbsol
"The healthy man does not torture others - generally it is the tortured who turn into torturers."

- Carl Gustav Jung.

"Do you think really think we should have sent her alone?"

Leaning against the wall to the right of Giovanni Maki's ornate mahogany desk, her person half cloaked in shadow, Domino gazed upon her leader with hooded eyes. Her expression conveyed little emotion, though a flicker of concern passed over it as she regarded leaving this important mission in the sole hands of Cassandra Merlo. She cared little what would happen to the woman she felt only contempt for, for the agent in question had claimed what should rightfully belong to her: a relationship with Giovanni that went beyond the master and servant bond. Although Domino, being the man's second-in-command, was capable of seeing him as a fellow human being and vice versa, they nonetheless ran their interactions with veiled formality. This displeased the teenager greatly, for in being his most loyal and trusted agent, she believed she should be the closest soul to the crime lord…and yet the outlier held this position, and that irritated the blonde to the point of bitterness and jealousy.

To clarify, Agent 009 did not hold any feelings beyond respect and admiration for the man. Contrary to the rumors circulating around the Team Rocket leader and her, their relationship was strictly professional, with neither harboring romantic yearnings for one another. Primarily, the wide age gap between them was a massive deterrent, and another hindrance was the reality that Giovanni Maki wasn't a person one could love without sentencing oneself to the life of a masochist. Although the man was charismatic, clever, wealthy, and not terrible to behold physically, he was a sadist who only possessed a husk of a human heart. Only the longings for power and profit stirred within that carapace, and she understood how it had been hollowed out until those two things were all it could hold affection for. His mother had neglected and tortured him throughout his life, and his father, the only one who might have defended him, had vanished when his son was still a child. By the time Giovanni had attended college, he'd begun to step down the path to damnation and perdition, the close friends he'd made before the loss of his humanity eventually shed like an old snakeskin…

Yet her leader's personal history was not what concerned her now - Cassandra's was. Was sending that woman to slay the clone truly a wise idea?

"It couldn't be helped," Giovanni replied, "Agent Merlo was the only one available and capable of the task. Besides, she's never before failed to complete one of her assignments, and I see no reason why she can't fulfill this one as well." He took a sip of the white wine from the crystal chalice on his desk. The faceted surface glinted as the low light struck it, and in the miniscule panes, the text from the documents before him reversed and splintered...

"But this assignment isn't like the others." Why wouldn't he acknowledge the risks…?

His ebony eyes met hers over his glass. "And as such, we must have faith. Remember, even a
creature as powerful as Mewtwo has its weaknesses." And after another few minutes, in which he finished savoring the wine and set the crystal down, he said, "You should refrain from worrying for her – concern yourself only with your own tasks, dear girl. If I recall correctly, you have a meeting with our researchers to attend to later today, so I'd recommend you go prepare yourself for it. I expect a full briefing on their progress when you return."

Knowing a dismissal when she heard one, the blonde walked to the front of his desk, bowed, and exited the office. Her superior, she knew, was correct: they had far more important matters to consider than the dark angel's mission. She would see to it that they, at least, would reach their desired outcomes….

In the city of the western nation, the clone of Mew silently gazed upon the metropolis surrounding him. He noted the reflected images of the swarming humans in the glass and metal bases of the towering skyscrapers, as well as the beetle-like vehicles that ingested and regurgitated their kind, almost as if the humans were a viral poison. He found this metaphor amusing, for indeed, humans consumed the resources and subsequently corrupted their host, the Earth, as they multiplied. However, he knew well that they weren't purely a destructive species, merely misguided in their behavior; after all, they possessed an astonishing ability to create whatever their minds conceived. Around him was the proof of their efforts to build from their dreams, the grand architecture expanding across the shore of the sea from horizon to horizon. The metropolis he'd chosen to dwell in was renowned across the globe, a marvel of engineering and tangible proof of humanity's ability to adapt to nature and create a realm all their own. Millions lived within this city, this microcosm of civilization, and from this height, he regarded them as they might regard the ants flowing into and out of an anthill beside a sidewalk. He wondered if the higher power they often referred to saw them in the same respect, as insects who assisted in the cycle of rot and rebirth. In their power to cause the entire globe to decompose, Mewtwo supposed that their god must also fear and dread them, no longer bearing pride for Its once prized creation.

And Mewtwo was their creation, and perhaps that truth was why he'd chosen to dwell in this place as well. Although he disliked to noise, the bustle, and the potential for his existence to be discovered at any time, he nonetheless viewed this as the most fitting place for him. Like the technology, the machines, the soaring buildings, he too was the product of their science, of the intelligence that had made them the dominant species of the world. For him to live in their realm seemed most appropriate…although that didn't exclude the possibility of ulterior reasons. Perhaps he remained here because the concentrated presence of so many beings was a balm to his loneliness. The persistent ache that had gripped his heart after the departure of his fellow clones was soothed here, and he gave an almost unnoticeable wry smile at that understanding, for he knew that this sensation would never vanish completely. No matter where he strayed, it would always exist, as inescapable as his mortality….

"Espeon!"

At the cry from below, the replica looked down from his perch atop a flagpole. At first, his keen eyes wandered among the potted plants scattered upon the rooftop, before they pinpointed where the sound had originated from: near the stairwell doors was a small, lavender fox. She was the reason he'd obtained the garden samples in the first place, for she'd mentioned during the last few months that their dwelling could use the touch of nature. He'd agreed and begun the work of creating a makeshift meadow, but the project had yet to be completed. Now, as he gazed upon the one who'd first contemplated the idea, he found himself somewhat annoyed at the fact that she had interrupted his musings. That she'd done so with such a harsh, commanding tone did not endear her to him this evening.
“Espe!” she called again.

Closing his eyes for a moment in annoyance, he reopened them as he leaped down from his perch. Her forked tail and large ears twitched as his paws hit the concrete, and her silky, lavender fur darkened as his shadow fell across her. Although he leveled narrowed eyes upon her as he approached, she didn't shrink away from him – in fact, her round body was quite relaxed. This absence of fear in her violet eyes usually amazed him, but now only irritated him. He mused that she was making a routine of impolitely dragging him from his contemplations like this, as if doing so entertained her, or as if she was testing how far she could push him before he snapped at her. Indeed, although it was impossible for a mouth the shape of hers to smirk, her gaze shimmered now with mischievous mirth.

"What is it, Psyche?" When she mewled a response, his irises narrowed into slits. "Of course that is not my intention, but in a city of such a dense population, I am likely to be sighted whether I desire it or not. As such, for me to curl up under a table and hide would be senseless. Now, why else did you wish for me to descend? I take it your warning was not the only reason?"

"Es…espeon…," she blanched. "Well…the thing is…." 

Divining the situation, Mewtwo sighed and said, "You are worse than a child, seeking attention whenever you are bored. At least they have their age as an excuse, unlike you."

"Espeon?" She hissed at him, bristling. "Are you calling me old?"

"Not at all, but even you cannot claim that you are still a kit." As he said this, his eyes swept over her swollen stomach to emphasize his point.

At this, the smaller psychic flushed, and then twitched at the sensation of being kicked from within. The feeling was evidence of what awaited her soon, and with a hiss, the fox - despite her condition - pounced towards his chest, intending to carve a few scratches into his pelt. However, she never reached the replica, for he caught her in midair and held her with his telekinesis. At this, she began to struggle against his psychical hold, and Mewtwo watched her pitiful attempts with a bit of amusement. His companion would never learn….

"You will not succeed in freeing yourself and attacking me, Psyche. Please stop before I must force you to," he ordered, concerned with how her physical and psychical thrashings might jolt her kits. If they were accidentally harmed….

Heeding his words, she surrendered swiftly enough, although she still regarded him with a sour expression, her almond eyes now narrowed in a glare. In an attempt to soothe her, the clone brought her into his arms and cradled her, releasing his telekinetic hold on her. As he began to stroke her down the spine, she sighed, her lust to draw his blood quelled. Their "fight" was over, and curling up against his chest, she began to purr under his ministrations, which he wasn't even fully aware of giving her. Yet even if he'd noticed what he was doing, he wouldn't have minded, for this treatment had become common in the last few months. Attempting not to jar and disturb the now very pregnant fox, he sat down on the cement and leaned his back against the cool doors behind him. They served as the entrance to the stairwell that led into the studio he had made into his residence – a studio that had once been owned by a couple wealthy designers. Thriving in the fashion industry, the highest level of the building had served as their home away from home. The lower levels, on the other hand, had been used as offices and storage rooms, with the base level acting as the shipping center for their fabric products. However, in time, the questionable location of the building, as well as weaknesses in its design, had forced the business to move elsewhere, and so the facility had been abandoned. In the months that had followed, it had never been reclaimed or destroyed, and so wild pokémon had moved in and now occupied the center.
Mewtwo had been allowed to roost in its homey top level in return for protecting the building from vandals and, worse, trainers. This was a responsibility he took great pleasure in, and by now his efforts had resulted in the widespread belief throughout the slums that the building was haunted by a violent poltergeist. The only visitors who dared entered the facility now were close acquaintances of Psyche from other parts of the city, and these were allowed to wander untouched. In general, there were no longer any unwelcome visits – the humans shunned the center, which, of course, suited Mewtwo just fine. He enjoyed the solitude that was being bestowed upon him, for it brought him peace. When he'd arrived in this place after soaring far from Mt. Quena, striking up this arrangement had granted him an ideal lifestyle, and while he'd at first been quite preoccupied with making repairs to the facility, he was now quite comfortable with where he dwelled.

As Psyche stirred in his arms, his eyes fell to her, and he remembered the events that had established her as his roommate. The memories of that period amused him now, and shaking his head, he mused that of all of the strangers he might have been stuck with, she wasn't so terrible. While her temper was bound to ignite at the smallest of triggers, she had qualities that redeemed her for the flaw: she was mischievous, full of energy, and at times quite thoughtful…and even though he wouldn't admit it aloud, she'd managed to sneak her way into his heart. She was dear to him, and gently scratching her behind the ears, he watched the as red gem imbedded in her forehead, a perfect circle of ruby, glowed faintly from her pleasure. Minutes passed, and eventually she opened her eyes and stared into the city, as if detecting something Mewtwo did not. Perhaps she smelled a murkrow – she was, after all, quite fond of chasing the dark birds. If he'd asked, however, she would have informed him that this wasn't the case.

Something else, much worse than a simple crow, was approaching.

After five hours of searching and following the leads the Team Rocket associates had given her, Cassandra Merlo now crouched on a rooftop three hundred meters from her target. Folding her wings behind her, the vivid light radiating from a nearby neon sign made her features harsh and stony, with the open eye behind a sniperscope the only source of life in her appearance as she beheld, from afar, the clone sitting upon a studio roof. Another pokémon, a pregnant female if the swollen stomach was any indication, rested in his arms, but her presence would be inconsequential. Checking her blades, she mused that they'd make clean work of the creature if the ensuing struggle came to that. She'd admit to herself that while she hoped such an outcome could be avoided, she was at least pleased that she'd tracked down her target as quickly as she had. She'd thought he'd keep himself better concealed, as he seemed to place a high value on secrecy – humans with similar mental frames usually barricaded themselves within fortresses littered with detection devices. On other missions, the hunt for her prey had sometimes taken weeks, and even when she'd found the dens, she'd often had to persuade the guards into allowing her to infiltrate the facilities days before the actual strike. Otherwise, the layout of her targets' homes wouldn't be memorized, and she might be unable to maneuver her prey into a corner. When she entered their haven one last time, they might slip away before she cut them down, and that was unacceptable.

Yet she'd found Mewtwo within a matter of hours, and thus far, she'd avoided detection. No technological precautions seemed to have been taken to prevent invasion and assault, and while she felt him occasionally scan the area for intruders, her ability to conceal her aura made her invisible to his senses. Yet his sweeps gave her glimpses of his own spiritual signature, which he otherwise kept well hidden. The metaphysical codes flickering from him warned that he was, foremost, a powerful psychic who was not to be goaded. Avoiding him was the safest course of action, yet naturally, this was what the agent couldn't do. She'd traveled across an ocean and continent to reach him, and soon she'd move in for the attack.

But she wouldn't confront him out in the open; a sky battle would draw attention to the area, and she
wasn't supposed to be seen by the inhabitants of this region. Instead, she intended to pin him in his own home…but first, she'd have to find a way to enter the building undetected. Scanning the structure through the scope, she soon found a potential breach point, and placing the device away and raising her wingtips high, she jumped from the ledge into the street below. Spreading her wings, she caught the air beneath her and glided down the long, dark road towards the facility. Arriving at her destination, she landed in a run, folded her wings back, and ducked into the alleyway hugging the building. Gazing up towards where she knew Mewtwo to be, she mused that it was going to be a long climb up….

A door slammed nearby, footfalls approached, and before she could step fully into the shadows, a voice bellowed out, "What in the hell is…?"

Cassandra turned to find a group of young men now standing at the mouth of the alleyway, all of them staring at her with widened, bloodshot eyes. Even from this distance, she could smell the tobacco smoke and beer clinging to them, and thinking of the clone high above, she cursed, hoping the shout hadn't been heard. She certainly didn't need his attention to be drawn, or the attention they were giving her, for that matter. As she leveled a glare their way, they merely smirked foolishly, too submerged into a stupor to recognize the danger conveyed in her cold, predatory gaze. One approached her, chuckling, and jeered, "Halloween isn't for another few weeks, little blackbird. How about you get out of that costume and let us find something else to cover your back with?"

Agent Merlo rolled her eyes at the statement. She'd give him points for stringing together a coherent sentence when drunk off his ass, but beyond that, she wasn't impressed. She told him just that, and then demanded that they scurry back to the pub – otherwise, she would be forced to crush their balls. Yet instead of heeding her warning, they laughed and continued to eye her up greedily, and when they began to edge towards her in unison, her expression hardened.

What did they think they were going to do? Grab her, strip her down, and toy with her? Perverted assholes, the lot of them. "You're lucky I don't have the time to deal with you all. Otherwise, you'd be missing limbs by the end of this."

And then she moved, darting to the nearby boarded up window, ripping one of the planks off and swinging it as hard as she could into the skull of the man closest to her. The wood split from the force of impact, and the first opponent crumpled to the ground, the nasty gash across his temple. When two of the others rushed to aid him, she slugged the nearest in the face – otherwise, she would be forced to crush their balls. Yet instead of heeding her warning, they laughed and continued to eye her up greedily, and when they began to edge towards her in unison, her expression hardened.

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Yet there was no movement. The beating, it seemed, had gone unnoticed.

Giving one final look at the unconscious figures, she crossed back into the alleyway and turned towards the boarded up window. Ripping more planks from it, which were already weak from decay, she eventually had the area uncovered. The glass pane behind was already cracked, and gave way with ease and she rammed a cloth-covered fist against it. Large shards of glass fell inwards into a fine layer of dust, and once the opening was suitably free of jagged edges, she climbed through, her boots making the remnants of the window crackle as she stepped on them. The boarded windows, spaced two meters apart, allowed only thin shafts of light into the cavernous room, which was
cluttered with discarded furniture, nests made of old papers, and stacks of boxes never to be delivered to shopping centers. As she wandered towards the metal stairway leading to the next level, she slid out her tantō blades upon spotting pairs of eyes glinting from the murky spaces of the chamber, and seeing she was armed, the wild ones left her be. When she passed up the stairway and through the subsequent levels to reach her true prey, these gazes gradually vanished, not one of the beings stepping forward to confront her. That she carried herself with an aura of predatory confidence dissuaded any who might have desired to, for risking one's tail over a transient hunter simply wasn't worth the battle experience. After all, she wasn't hunting any of them, so there was no need for them to involve themselves in this affair….

When the agent finally emerged on the top floor, her gaze roamed around it to take it all in. Unlike the cluttered rooms below, the studio - ninety meters lengthwise, forty-five widthwise - was empty of unnecessary items. The moonlight drifting through the skylights revealed one set of furniture in the center of the vast room: two cushioned chairs, one sofa, and one coffee table. On the lengthwise wall facing towards her, a large plasma screen - centered in a row of framed prints of scenic water paintings - was hooked up to a computer workstation, which was currently powered off. Nearest to her on the opposing wall was the kitchen, which opened to another simple furniture set, including a dining table, two wooden chairs, and a pair of stools of the same grain. Beyond these were four self-contained rooms, which she guessed would contain two bedrooms, one guest room, and the bathroom, each having their own windows and closets. Dismissing those for now, she looked over the two lengthwise walls: they reflected one another, bearing veiled viewing windows and shelves brimming with books, the closest having a piano near the tomes. On the one farthest from her was another stairway, which she knew would lead to the roof upon which, at this very moment, her target was sitting with his companion.

Realizing that she might not have much time before the two returned inside, she memorized the layout or the studio and strode to the self-contained rooms. The first was the bathroom, while the second was what she supposed was a guest room - it lacked any personalization. Next was a disorganized, vibrantly decorated room that only a packrat could tolerate, and she knew instantly that it wasn't the clone's chamber. The last one, then, must be his…and indeed, it matched what his files has claimed was his preferred style of den. Scarcely furnished, it held only a nightstand, a padded hammock that was strung down the center of the room, and a mat covering most of the tiled floor, the weave of which was dyed with a dully-colored, geometric pattern. The window was completely cloaked behind dark grey sheets, which added to how cold and lifeless the room seemed. Only the items on the nightstand hinted that the room's occupant found some pleasure in material possessions - there were three aromatic candles and one thin, tattered book. Closing the bedroom door behind her, knowing she now only had to wait for the clone's return, she walked to the nightstand and picked up the book. Holding it closer to her eyes, she searched for the title, curious, but found none. Perhaps it was a journal…?

The sound of a door opening and closing, and of footfalls padding down a metal stairway, urged her to place the book back quickly. Her prey approached, and slipping out her blades, she stepped into the murky closet space and vanished behind the cloaks hanging within….

Having calmed Psyche with a mild hypnosis, Mewtwo set the mother-to-be down into the mountain of pillows on her bed. She now dozed lightly on her side, her enlarged stomach providing her no other option, and seemed content for now. As he left her room, the clone considered returning outside to resume his contemplations, but recalling the growing chill in the autumn night air, he decided against the idea. He'd retire to his own room for the remainder of the night and try to sleep for a few hours. Considering his persistent insomnia of late, that would do him some good. With a sigh, he exited the espeon's bedroom, keeping her door ajar so she could easily slip out once she awoke. Otherwise, in her groggy state, she might demolish the latch when using her telekinesis to

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open it. If possible, he would like to avoid such damages, and stepping into the studio, he stood for a moment in the place that had become his sanctuary.

However, his brows soon knit together, his muzzle wrinkled, and the fur of his scruff bristled as the sensation of something being out of place — *wrong* — draped over him. As he gazed around, he could detect no differences from when he'd left earlier in the evening, and yet...there was a fragrance here that he didn't remember. The odor was faint, but a few molecules in the still air, and inhaling deeply, he attempted to pinpoint what it was: it mingled the scents of copper, cotton, sweat, and vanilla. He supposed he could discern sources around the room for the primary three, but the fourth...he had not lit one of the candles in his room for a week, so while it was possible the aroma came from one, the odor of a burning wick didn't accompany it. So what might it be...? Casting out his senses, he detected no intruder, and wondering if the lack of sleep and Psyche's words were giving him mild paranoia, he made his way to his room, alert for the slightest of movements. He reached his door unmolested, and hesitating briefly, he opened the door and entered into his own room. There was no one there, and again, nothing was out of place. Levitating into his hammock, he sank into its blankets and pillows, wondering if he was pouncing after shadows. From beyond the walls, the sounds of the city arose, of countless humans walking along the streets, of car engines rumbling alive, of sirens wailing in the distance...and of closer, quiet breathing? Within the room arose a whisper of moving air, and he opened his eyes slowly to spy the source....

*Psyche...?*

The shadow emerging from behind his cloaks was no pokémon, however. His heartbeat sped, and sitting up, he rolled from his hammock onto his haunches as a flash of silver flew at him. The *tanto* penetrated the plasterboard behind him with a distinct "*thunk,*" and as the shadow leapt over to retrieve it, the clone rolled away and rose to his feet. Spinning, he watched as the intruder pulled the blade from the wall deftly and turned towards him. Gazing upon the winged figure in the dim light, he felt his blood run cold with shock. How...why...what was this?

Agent Merlo used his confusion to her advantage, springing towards him and thrusting at him with one of her Japanese daggers. The replica, levitating backwards, managed to avoid the jab towards his throat, and dodged another calculated stab a second later. These slashing motions continued, only to be dodged by the retreating clone, who soon brought them out into the studio space. In an attempt to find an opening, the assassin flew over his head, landed behind him, and spun, intending to inflict a biting, bloody gash into his back. However, Mewtwo was similarly agile and jumped back to avoid injury. Then, taking the offensive, he crouched down and then launched himself at her, catching her around the middle and causing them to crash to the floor. He managed to pin one of her arms down, but the other thrust towards him, forcing him to veer away to avoid the blow. Tearing her wrist from his grasp, she rolled to her knees and stood, finding the clone doing to same, albeit now a couple meters away. They stood facing one another, breaths and pulses quickened, each alert for movement from the other. Who would trigger the next round of blows, resetting the match they had begun...?

Mewtwo, it appeared, didn't wish to be the culprit, or even a participant in this battle. "*Cease this assault! I do not wish to-!*"

Cassandra charged at him before he finished speaking, and within a meter crouched down to slash at his stomach. Mewtwo intercepted the slice, knocking her arm down and the *tanto* from her hold, and then thrust a clenched fist towards her. She ducked beneath it and sent a punch into his side, which began a volley of strikes from hands and feet, which only ceased as Mewtwo crouched down, spun, and whipped his tail at her ankles, intending to knock her to the ground. The dark angel jumped over the limb, adding a wing-beat to increase her height, and the pokémon followed her into the air.

"*Have it your way,*" he hissed, and forming a *shadow ball*, its electrified depths spitting and
crackling, he hurled in into her.

The energy sphere hit her in the stomach and sent her into the wall. On impact, dust and smoke arose from the collision, concealing her momentarily from view. Then a glint of metal erupted through the depths of the debris cloud, whistling towards him, and the replica only just managed to lean out of its trajectory in time to avoid being skewered. Despite the motion, however, the thrown tantō still managed to mark him: a cut seared across his right shoulder and began to seep blood. The agent, it seemed, had been trained quite well. While being thrust away from him, she'd flipped over the orb a moment before it had driven her into the wall, and when the crackling ball had collided, she'd opened her wings to steady herself against the shockwave. Through the smoke she'd estimated her target's position, had arched her left arm back and then shot it forward, sending the blade to spear him. Yet instead of hearing it sink into flesh and bone, she heard it clash against stone, and knew she'd missed her mark. Cursing, she rolled out of the smoke towards her other blade. Picking it up, she spun in time to see an enraged Mewtwo hurtling towards her. She had drawn his blood, and to him, that was unacceptable...!

Originally, his only goal had been to drive her into unconsciousness rather than injure or murder her, which was a goal he still stood by. Yet now that she'd managed to slice into him, he knew he'd have take a more offensive role in this battle. However, even as he began to calculate strategies of attack as the distance between himself and the dark angel narrowed, his eyes caught on movement over by the bedrooms. The noise from the fight had, it seemed, awoken Psyche, and she now stood before the doorway of her chamber, staring at the struggle with wide eyes. Alarm burst in the clone's mind, and the order for her to flee formed on the tip of his telepathic tongue…but that warning was never uttered, for in his distraction Cassandra struck, sending a vicious kick into his stomach. As he crumpled somewhat at this, she continued her assault, uppercutting him in the face. When he began to fall backwards, she grasped his shoulders and kneed him in the ribs, and turned sideways to thrust an elbow into the soft tissue of his throat. Gagging, he then fell the rest of the way to the ground, and managed to rise on his elbows before she drove another forceful kick, this time to his gut, into him, causing him roll onto his side. Then, for a brief moment, her attack let up.

In those few seconds, Mewtwo peered up at her, surprised at the beating and stunned with pain. Although his body, crafted to be the ideal fighting machine, could take far more damage than she was inflicting, he was nonetheless a creature of flesh and bone – he could be bruised and battered. He felt a harsh hand grasp his injured shoulder then, making it erupt with stinging pain, and as she turned him over, he saw the glint of metal in her other hand, poised to sink into him. Yet she hesitated then, and in her hesitance, he caught her thoughts, which circled around her wonderment that killing him was going this easy. After all, he was supposed to be a demi-god in his powers, capable of killing her with a single thought if he desired. Yes, he mused, she was correct on that count – it would take so little effort to crush her now as one might an insect. He could have done so at any moment in their battle, had that been his wish. Yet he'd refrained, and that begged the question of why.

However, that mystery didn't matter here. The kill did, and so the dagger fell towards him, gleaming silver like her eyes-.

"Espe!"

Suddenly his attacker was forced away by a psychic, spherical shield as Psyche leapt to his defense. As she hissed furiously at the young woman, all of her energy being channeled into the barrier, her companion sat up and gazed at the dark angel through the energy wall. Having been knocked down by the creation of the defense, she now glared at the pregnant pokémon, who bristled in response. The espeon only relaxed slightly as Mewtwo rested a paw upon her back.
"You should not have done that," he said to her. "This is not your battle, Psyche, and it's not only dangerous for you, but for your offspring as well if you become involved."

"Espe - espeon!" Psyche said, unconcerned with his words. "Friends aid their friends when needed, and I daresay this qualifies. You're getting your ass handed to you."

Although a comeback came to mind, Mewtwo remained silent, instead watching the approach of the winged human warily. Ignoring her protest, he teleported Psyche into her room and barricaded the door, and as the agent thrust her blade into the bubble shield, it burst into sparks of psychic energy. As it exploded, Mewtwo stood, grabbing her wrist and digging hard into the pressure point. While she'd been trained against releasing her weapons, the sudden pain and force of his grip caused her to do so. With a clatter, one of her tantō blades hit the floor, and relying on the strength of her honed body, she swung her leg up into his side. He raised a forearm, blocking the strike, and lifted her from the ground by the wrist he held. At this, she twisted in his grip and launched his feet into him. When he dropped her to avoid this, she landed on her haunches and glanced at the spots where her daggers had fallen. Seeing that look, the clone teleported them away, and resigning herself to flesh-and-bone fight, she leapt at him, her fist raised. She swung one strong punch into his muzzle before Mewtwo reached forward and grabbed her sides, drawing her forward to knee her in the stomach. As her breath left her, she felt his hands on her ears, and in the next moment, she'd been stunned by a headbutt. As she fell back, he spun, whipping his tail into her ribs, and watched as she crashed and tumbled across the floor. After a moment, she shakily rose upon her arms, fingers curled, a hand clutching her bruised and possibly broken ribs. She spat blood onto the tiles beneath them, and then, mindless of the pain, she stood and dropped into fighting stance. Mewtwo, having become something of a pacifist over the past year, was disgusted. He only fought these days when need be, and while this certainly qualified as a situation where violence on his part was appropriate, he nonetheless wished she'd surrender. Her body would soon be spent, so why couldn't she allow it to dictate her next course of action…?

Yet her will, it seemed, prevailed instead, and she came at him again. They began to spar in an array of blows, punches, kicks, chops exchanged in a swift, flowing pace. However, as time stretched on it became apparent that the clone would be the ultimate victor here. Despite her extensive training, Cassandra couldn't track the clone quickly enough as he teleported around her, and she cried out as he struck the tendons of her wings and pulled out some of her feathers. Her down, dark as obsidian, fell to the floor beneath them like black snow, and little droplets of her blood speckled the floor - the demonic angel was being worn down by an angelic demon. Yet despite her strength being eroded away, Cassandra wouldn't forfeit the match: even if she died in the task, she intended to complete the mission that had been given to her. Digging into what reservoirs of strength were left in her, she shed all thoughts and emotions, stepping into the persona Giovanni Maki had sculpted her into: the living weapon, the toxic byproduct of years of manipulation. She discarded her spirit, which was crumbling from hurt and fatigue, and embraced recklessness for the chance of landing a single, precise, lethal blow. Only after its delivery would she surrender to exhaustion, and as she heard a cracking sound as he slugged her already fractured ribs, she twisted his other arm in an attempt to dislocate it. However, this move failed, and so she attempted another assault that might bring the beast down….

By this point, Mewtwo had realized what she was doing: she would turn this into a suicide run before submitting to him. For a brief moment, his assault on her ceased at that understanding, and this hesitance nearly killed him – when he paused, the dark angel ducked behind him and reached up, clamping a hand around his second neck, while the other arm wrapped around his primary neck in a tight headlock. Her wings beat to keep her in place as he struggled, and soon his vision grew foggy and his movements sluggish from the strangulation. The secondary neck was his primary concern, as it not only assisted in supporting his skull, but it also fed extra oxygenated blood to his brain. If it was damaged in any way, he would be psychically disabled or perhaps suffer some level of paralysis, or, if it was severed entirely, he would soon after die from blood loss. While he doubted she had the
strength to tear it open with her bare hands, one harsh twist would be terribly destructive to him. Panicking slightly, he summoned up what psychical energy remained in his body and teleported out of her grasp. As he appeared behind her, he savored the sweet release, and decided it was time to end their struggle. Holding her still with his telekinesis, he struck the side of her neck and felt her go limp in his hold. Unconsciousness overtook her, and stepping to her, he lowered her into his arms.

Holding her with surprising gentleness, he sighed as he gazed at her bruised face, and shook his head and he strode over to Psyche's room. Insistent, worried mewing, and the scraping noise of unsheathed claws scratching on the sealed doorway, carried through the wooden barrier. With his arms full, he dissolved the psychical barrier on the door and swung it open with his telekinesis. The espeon darted from the room, and then relaxed as she saw Mewtwo, tired, battered, but otherwise all right, standing before her. He'd won - he was safe. She nearly sighed with relief before she realized the body he carried was still alive.

"Espe?" she cried, her eyes narrowing with anger and bewilderment. "You're keeping her alive?"

Mewtwo nodded, ignoring the espeon's tone. "Indeed, I am. I see no reason to extinguish her life at the moment, especially when I have questions which only she can answer. Besides, she is no longer in any condition to inflict serious damage."

"Espeon?" Psyche inquired. "So what are you going to do with her now?"

"First, she must be firmly restrained - a repeat of this incident is not desirable in the least. After that...."

"'Espe'…?" Psyche followed him as walked to the sofa, a chair from the dining table and duct tape soon floating to them. "'After that'…?"

He glanced down at her, almost amused at her words. "After that, we must find out why she attempted to murder me. Is that not obvious?"

Psyche rolled her eyes at his tone, watched as lay the woman on the couch, and saw him gaze at her oddly before his eyes regained their iciness. The look bothered the espeon, but she dismissed it as a trick of the moonlight. After all, the woman had attempted to destroy him, and he would never feel compassion for such a being. Still, the clone stared fixedly at the angel, and when they settled on the collar she wore, he leaned forward and fiddled with the device. When he retracted his paw, he smirked in satisfaction as the wings vanished in a flash of black feathers. The espeon, witnessing this, shook her head in amazement.

"Espeon…?" she cried. "How did you…?"

"The bioelectric energy signature of this device should be familiar to you, Psyche: it is a molecular disrupter, which are most often used in pokéballs. When the device is activated and applied to a quarry, it gathers and compresses their cells into a small storage space. From there, the genetic codes of this material is keyed into the device, and it places the living being, or in this case, the limbs of ones, into the proper environment to keep it in stasis. Once it's deactivated, the process is reversed, and the content will rematerialize outside of the device. This choker is a modified version of that technology, and although its design could be improved, it is quite ingenious, and probably quite expensive to develop. It is also undoubtedly essential to her, for without it, her wings would bring her and her superiors unwanted attention," he explained as he lifted the woman from the sofa and began to tape her into the chair.

"Es…espe?" Psyche said as she absorbed that information. "Oh...so could she throw away her wings if she discarded that thing?"
"I suspect it has been designed to prevent that. Most likely, it runs of the heat generated from the body, as a battery would eventually be drained and a microchip could be easily damaged. If she simply removed this choker, I daresay her wings would rematerialize whether she would like them to or not. The device, after all, would deactivate as it lost power, so that would be the most likely outcome."

As she watched, Mewtwo's eyes flashed azure, and the smell of burning plastic and scorched metal rose into the air, a wisp of smoke soon seeping from the device. Was he wrecking it…? No, he explained again, he was merely ensuring that it would be permanently activated and couldn't be removed with ease. He supposed it was possible that she could slip a blade under it and tear it away, but this would damage it thoroughly and make it impossible to conceal her wings once again. If this occurred, her movements in public would be restricted considerably, and so it was an option she'd almost certainly desire to avoid. Besides, if she did attempt to escape on foot, he'd always be able to track her down and recapture her without much trouble. Content with that knowledge, Mewtwo strode away with the espeon trailing after him. For now, a calm had settled throughout the studio, and a handful of hours would pass before anything else occurred that night….

Cassandra awoke sore and tender from her scalp to her toes, the headache throbbing behind her eyes reminiscent of waking up after an evening of drinking shots in a dingy bar. But since she never did that, there had to be an alternative explanation for the aching, and soon the memories of the fight filtered into her brain, solving the mystery. Realizing she must have been knocked unconscious, she swore colorfully in her mind and wondered how much time had passed. Moreover, why had Mewtwo spared her life? A handful of possible reasons came to mind, but setting them aside for the moment, she focused on the current situation. Keeping her head bowed, her eyes closed, and her breathing steady, attempting to maintain the illusion that she still slumbered, she minutely twitched her extremities, checking to confirm that everything was in order. She immediately determined that her wings had been dematerialized, which meant the target had figured out what her collar was and how it functioned. She also found that while her other limbs responded to her will, they'd been bound to the legs and armrests of a chair, with additional binding circling around her chest and the back of the chair. Annoyance flared in her, and she mused sarcastically at how unoriginal that was. She was in the presence of someone reputed to have an IQ score of over two-hundred, well into the range of a genius, and yet he possessed no creativity when dealing with intruders. She supposed she should be grateful for this, but all she could do was curse him silently: *damn that cocksucker to hell…!*

When was the last time this had happened to her? She couldn't recall any specific incident immediately, for while she'd been trained to handle the possibility of being captured, her actual experience with such situations was almost nonexistent; such was a mark of how good an agent she was. Of course, in this case, her target was someone who'd experienced training similar to what she'd been through, and furthermore possessed powers she could scarcely comprehend. This made him much more of a challenge to defeat, and this thought was almost enough to make her smirk. Once she triumphed over him, she could rest assured that no one existed who could force her to submit….

"I know you are awake, woman. Your psychical traits, while no doubt useful to you, cannot conceal your return to consciousness – not when your own heart betrays you," said a masculine, pure baritone voice.

How did he know about…? Well, she supposed that in being a powerful psychic, he could sense that much when her mental shields were lowered in sleep. Erecting the barriers once more, she opened her eyes and fixed a glare upon the clone, who sat on a stool two meters from her, his paws resting on his knees. The studio lights had been turned on, illuminating his features, and she mused within the privacy of her protected mind that the photographs in his files didn't do him much justice. But
then, they’d been snapped for the purpose of analyzing different parts of his body, and such fragmentation couldn’t convey his structure as the biological work of art it was. Glancing him over, she noted that he was an amalgam of feline and human features, although she knew his genetics were purely those of a mew. His thick, muscular legs were balanced on two-toed feet, the orbs protruding from them representing his ankles. Although his fur was mostly of a snowy lavender hue, his long, sinewy tail, thickening into a mound at its tip, was a dusky purple hue, a color that extended between his legs into his midriff.

Above this, his torso mimicked that of a human man, save that his upper chest and upper back was covered in a boney plate of armor, which acted as an additional defense to his heart and lungs. This feature spread over his shoulders, and she was satisfied to see that one had needed to be bandaged from a cut she’d dealt him. From under the covering, thin, yet muscular arms extended, ending with tri-fingered paws with rounded fingertips. Higher up the body, above a pronounced collarbone, was his thin neck, the jugular veins readily visible, as well as a tubular growth extending between his shoulder blades to the back of his skull. His head was angular, possessing hornlike ears, a small but sleek muzzle that housed his nostrils and mouth, and pronounced brow ridges over fierce, amethyst eyes. The hue they held was vibrant, intense, and seeing how she gazed at him, the pupils within those violet irises narrowed with anger.

"First you attempt to murder me, and now you gawk at me? You certainly were never given lessons in manners, were you?"

The agent ignored the snarl and shifted in the chair, testing to see whether any of her concealed weapons were still on her person. While they couldn't inflict major damage to the clone, they could make short work of the tape binding her, and perhaps if she managed to free herself, she could-.

"Do not bother, human. I removed your other weapons some time ago, and they, along with your twin blades, have been well hidden," the clone said, his lips curling over his fangs.

As the implication of those words sank in, Agent Merlo stiffened. While the main pairs had been strapped to her forearms and calves, one had been placed across her breastbone, which meant that this creature would have had to slip a paw underneath her shirt to reach it, possibly touching her breasts and he did so. "You perverted, son of a-!" she began to growl.

The clone stood and placed a finger over her lips to stop her from finishing the curse. "Doubtlessly you are aware of my origins, and as such, you should understand that that curse does not apply to me. If you insist on attempting to anger me, at least be creative in your insults."

Infuriated by his condescending tone, Cassandra snapped at his fingers, and simmered with disappointment as he swiped his paw away before she managed to bite off a digit. The replica himself vaguely wondered whether this woman was an avian or a viper, and concluded that perhaps she was both.

"Don't you dare touch me, you fucking freak of nature!" she hissed, which only accentuated her snake-like attributes.

Although the comment had the potential to sting him, Mewtwo found he could not take offense to it. It was true, after all. "Likewise," he responded, his tone crisp and cool.

Her expression contorted with anger at that. "Shut it."

Those fierce eyes narrowed again, and the beast leaned over her, his paws gripping the edges of the chair above her shoulders. Yet even with a two meter tall, one-twenty-two kilogram pokémon looming above her, Cassandra didn't shrink away, instead glaring back into his eyes defiantly. This
kitten wouldn't frighten her, not when she'd endured the wrath of beings far more monstrous than Mewtwo in the past….

His baritone voice was charged with barely contained fury as he spoke. "I do not take orders from humans. You had best keep that in mind."

The agent didn't respond, and in the following moments as she contemplated possible ways to escape her bondage, she tuned out his words. If she could just manage to free herself and retreat to her hotel room, she could assess what had occurred tonight and think of a more effective angle of attack. She wouldn't have the advantage of surprise, but then, even the best of plans didn't survive the first encounter with the enemy. The last several hours proved that much, but nonetheless, the woman knew she needed to regain her bearings, and more importantly, mend her wounds before returning for the second assassination attempt.

Mewtwo's growl interrupted her ruminations. "...Answer my question, woman. Who seeks my death? Who ordered you to kill me?"

"How do you know that I don't just want to kick your furry, purple ass?" she sassed him in her thoughts, but aloud snapped, "Right, and I would tell you that why, exactly?"

Sensing his growing aggravation, Cassandra struggled against the tape binding her to the chair. If she could only loosen it-!

Yet then Mewtwo's paw flashed towards, pausing just before reaching her forehead. The lightning fast movement, along with the arrangement of the digits, spread and curled like a poised claw, startled her into ceasing her struggle. What was he intending to do? Was he planning to interrogate her by sending psychical probes against her mental shields, searching for weak points, or was he instead going to send psycho-electrical shocks into her system? Knowing she could endure torture for quite some time before buckling, she gazed up at him calmly, inviting him to do his worst. Given that he knew firsthand what being tortured felt like, she was willing to bet he wouldn't be able to place another through that hell for long. He would cave long before she did, she was certain of that. The replica seemed to be sharing those same thoughts, for although he'd considered delivering a nasty psychical shock to her system in that moment, making every fiber of her being flare with pain, he found he couldn't go through with it. To do so would be to descend to Giovanni Maki's level, and the notion made the clone's stomach turn over in disgust. Other wisps of thought strengthened his moral protest, and eventually he retracted his paw. No…he could not go that far.

"Psyche," he called his companion over, hoping that she would accept this burden in his stead. It was unfair of him to ask her to do this, but the task had to be carried out. When she settled at his feet, he said, "Please summon Tyson here and have him assist you in interrogating this human. I care little about your methods in extracting the information, but I ask that you refrain from killing her prematurely. I may have a use for her at a later point." Then he paused, considering the pokémon's current condition, and asked in a softer voice, "Are you willing and capable of doing this?"

"Espe," she replied, although she was inwardly concerned at her friend's apparent metamorphosis into a harsher, crueler being. "I will be fine, Mewtwo."

With her consent, the humanoid feline left the espeon to do the bloody work in his stead, ignoring the surprise radiating from his roommate and the captive alike as he departed. When he entered his own room and closed the door behind him, he sighed and placed his face into a paw. Stepping towards his hammock, he waved his free paw towards the crème white candles, their wicks igniting under his will. The fiery light from them danced happily over the walls of his chamber, and the fragrance of vanilla, a scent that usually managed to soothe him, was incapable of relieving the chaotic emotions building within him soul. He levitated himself into the hammock and rubbed his eyelids with a paw,
attempting to alleviate the growing ache behind them. Then, even knowing that it probably wasn't wise to do so, he drew the slim book upon the nightstand to him with his telekinesis. Opening it, he paged through it until reaching a certain page, where what appeared to be an old photograph lay. Flipping it over, he peered at the image with dull, wearied eyes, a flicker of sadness passing within their depths as he traced his eyes over it. Then, averting his gaze, he slipped it back into the pages and snapped the book shut, returning the thin tome to the nightstand. Had he been a stronger creature, he would have burned that picture long ago and rid himself of the poison yet lingering in is veins...but he supposed that even he had his areas of weakness, and that photograph found shelter in one of them.

Through the doorway into his room, he heard electrical shocks being delivered, and he surmised that Psyche had successfully employed the assistance of her electabuzz friend in the task he'd given her. The pregnant female would have surely opened up a telepathic line between herself and woman by now, and her questions, it seemed, were currently being met with stubborn silence. Yet as an hour passed, and then two, the woman's self-control began to erode, and she moaned in pain as electricity flared across her flesh. At the sound, bitterness began to pool in his stomach, sickening him, and he inwardly cursed at the knowledge that these actions were all in vain. The agent would not talk under this duress, at least not anytime soon.

She'd been trained that way.

The irony of the situation was almost enough to make Mewtwo laugh. He hadn't expected this turn of events, this unwelcome reminder of the pain he'd once known at the hands of another. Just when he'd believed he could live his life in contentment, grief seized at it once more, and he wondered to himself whether it might be best for him to surrender into death's embrace to find the peace he sought. Perhaps allowing the huntress to succeed in her mission would be the kindest outcome for them all...

Then, although he knew the source of the conflict couldn't hear him, he nonetheless whispered, "Giovanni, you despicable viper...I should have expected you to elude my powers in some way, but I never would have imagined you could strike this low. Is your sense of humor, of vengeance, truly so twisted...?"

From the distance, another moan of pain arose, and hearing it the clone shut his eyes, wishing the world away....

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**Thank You:** fan of this story, Mai-danishgirl, Spirit of the Sky, Random Reader, Mousewolf, SithSlayer, Mohamadharad, Nolaquen265, blackwaterII, gojira4life, Shiguya Retomasi, Tomoyo Kinomoto, Resuri, Shattered Silence, and oddity for reading and reviewing the previous chapter. I hope you and my other readers will do the same for this one!

**Author's Note:** Mewtwo is essentially an Agnostic in this story. Given that he refers to God in the radio drama, he does seem to believe that a higher power could exist, but that is as far as his beliefs are defined. Most of the other characters will fall under this same mindset, though references to different religions, particularly the Judeo-Christian faith, will show up throughout this story. This is mostly there for color, since Angelic Shadows focuses more on the relationships between the characters than anything else. Any religious themes you find would be entirely accidental on my part.

Sincerely,

WiseAbsol
"Poor restless dove, I pity thee;
And when I hear thy plaintive moan,
    I mourn for thy captivity,
And in thy woes forget mine own.
To see thee stand prepared to fly,
And flap those useless wings of thine,
    And gaze into the distant sky,
Would melt a harder heart than mine."

- Anne Brontë, *The Captive Dove*.

The woman's cries, Mewtwo noted, had quieted some time ago. Either the agent had fainted from the pain, or his roommate's will had broken, rendering her incapable of harming the other female any further. As he lay back, staring up at the ceiling, several quiet hours passed, and although the replica was weary to the bone, sleep refused to claim him. Perhaps resting, however, was futile endeavor this night - after all, there was so much for him to occupy his thoughts upon...

The sun would rise and fall before he emerged from the depths of his mind. When he did, he was surprised to find that it was half past six in the evening. How had the hours fled by so quickly…? Dismissing his wonderment, he rose, deciding not to allow any more time to slip away. Exiting his room, he paused to allow his eyes to adjust to the sudden, rosy light bathing the studio. The warm hue was one he associated with femininity, with sensuality, with ardor, and each of these, if he were to utter their names aloud, would leave his mouth as poison. Although he held no misconceptions concerning the first, for he was no sexist, the latter abstractions left a vile taste in his palette, for they reminded him of events he now preferred to forget. After all, over the course of his short life, he'd seen many facets of the world and could comprehended them in full, but not everything he'd witnessed had been welcome in his mind.

Crossing through the room, averting his eyes from the bound figure in the chair, Mewtwo sat before his computer and logged on, soon running hacking programs to grant him access to the hotel databases throughout the city. Thinning and scanning their contents, he soon found what he sought and shut the system back down. Teleporting onto the roof, he stood within the brisk air and watched the sun, the color of a grapefruit's flesh, drift down beyond the city skyline. When the last, flushed rays of sunlight faded, he flew from the studio roof into the metropolis, the shafts of illumination from artificial lights occasionally falling on his form as he travelled. He had a simple errand to run, one that would ultimately be of great use in the upcoming days...and by the time he returned from his flight, the crescent moon had almost reached its zenith. Searching through the contents of his thieving, he found little to worry about, and so he placed the stolen case into the vacant guest room, which he took the time to freshen before returning to the studio.

When he stepped into great room, his eyes were more focused than in the previous hours, and he noted that Tyson was nowhere to be found. Psyche, on the other hand, lay dozing on the couch, and walking over to her, he woke her with a gentle touch, not wishing to rouse her too far from sleep. After all, she could use the rest. Groggily blinking open her almond eyes, she summarized what she'd discovered during the interrogation, which was virtually nothing beyond the fact that the woman had
a sharp tongue. Undoubtedly, she must have been raised in a coarse environment, which the clone mused aloud was most likely the case given her current occupation. At least to his knowledge, few murderers emerged from untainted backgrounds, and thanking his roommate for her efforts, he granted her leave from watching their captive. Her forked tail drooping, she sluggishly shuffled to her room, where he predicted she would remain until noon tomorrow. Given what he’d decided to do about their uninvited visitor, the espeon's absence would be for the best, and crossing over to the assassin, he allowed his eyes to wander over her slumped figure, his gaze almost probing, as if he were attempting to memorize the appearance of the creature before him. That thought almost brought a wry chuckle from his throat. Yet he had to admit, despite how the dried blood and bruises distorted her appearance, beneath the smudges, she possessed an sort of elegance beauty to her, like a black opal holding dark fire inside.

Her black hair, spilling to her shoulder blades, framed a face with high cheekbones, a small nose, a fragile mouth, a single chin, and unpierced ears. Beneath thin, dark eyebrows was a pair of exotically shaped eyes, the grey irises holding a cold luminance reminiscent of polished silver. Her facial skin was scarcely marred, holding no hints of pockmarks from acne, so he supposed she’d been blessed with clear skin throughout puberty – that, or lemons had been shoved down her throat during that time. He noted that her body itself was quite slender, her muscles honed (as was to be expected of someone with her occupation), and he estimated that she was a little over a head shorter than him. Her skin was of a deep olive hue, marked with shallow scars in places, and he supposed from her features and the sound of her voice that she was primarily of Italian descent, possibly having some Japanese and European blood mixed within her as well. He supposed she was a true mongrel in that way, but regardless, she appeared to be in good health. He analyzed the uniform she wore then, the garments inky black and lacking the insignia of Team Rocket. She wore jeans over steel-toed boots, and he supposed these could be explained by needing the option of blending into a crowd. The sturdy denim hugged her thighs and hips, flaring out halfway down her calves, and on the jeans' pockets were signs that the symbolic red "R" had once been sew onto them. Evidently, those had been removed sometime prior to her current hunt – perhaps Giovanni hadn't wanted to associate Team Rocket with every hit he ordered, and it seemed as though slaying Mewtwo was among those more personal kills.

Moving above her beltline, the shirt she wore was made of a more silky material, and hugged her form comfortably. Partially covering her stomach, the front of her ribcage, and her breasts, its left her sides and a majority of her back exposed. From the bottom and the center of the garment extended two straps which wove around her back, providing support for the front, the higher one bisected by the "Y" of black material than ran down her spine, while the lower met the base of the "Y." The branches of the vertical material then circled around her shoulders and ran down over her arms in a pair of sleeves. Circular cutouts from this material exposed the tops of her shoulder, while the rest of the sleeves loosely hugged her biceps, flaring out over her forearms to give space for the secondary blade sheathes that had been strapped there. The final feature of the garment was the low neck cut, which exposed her collarbone and ended just above her cleavage, indicating that while the agent wasn't completely modest, she limited her skin exposure to her navel and back. Finally, he took note of the choker: it possessed six rectangular metal plates, each run through by a row of black, insulated wires. These plates were spaced apart equally, the largest in front, two on each side, and one which acted as the clasp of the choker, capable of being unclipped into two separate parts. These latter four were all two-by-three centimeters in size, while the frontal one, which was engraved with Hebrew characters – a name, he suspected - was a half a centimeter wider on all sides. He mused that this one was likely the storage area of the device, while the others, besides the clasp, contained the actual mechanics of the molecular disruptor, each installed with thermoelectric conductors.

In all, the uniform suited the agent. Yet now that his observations had been made, he recalled one of the reasons he was standing before her now: she was injured with a variety of wounds, including
burns from the electrical attacks she'd endured. Closing his eyes momentarily, he attempted to settle the sudden upheaval in his core at the sight of the marring – he'd made his decision already, and he wouldn't change it now, no matter the potential consequences that might arise. Opening his eyes once more, he stepped forward and reached out a paw to her to brush the bruise darkening her cheek, which slowly faded as he sent healing energy into her cells. Having learned the move recover soon after departing from Mt. Quena for his own sake, he would now use it on another…yet as he touched her, a part of him began to rebel, and as his pupils narrowed into slits, he smothered that piece of himself forcefully as he continued to make her hurts disappear.

In her dreams, she knew only darkness and fire, her skin burning from her injuries and her stomach seeming to be flooded with acid. In the miasmic shadows, she curled up, feeling the black fog undulating beneath her, and gritted her teeth with the longing to find a cool pool in which to submerge herself. Perhaps such waters might relieve her hurts, and almost as if obeying her silent request, she felt a soft coldness, like chilled velvet, touch her skin, her aches fading away wherever it brushed. It reminded her of another touch from long ago, of gentle fingers smoothing pungent aloe gel – straight from the plant - over her sunburns. She'd eluded the woman whose head was crowned in ash brown curls earlier in the day, and although the sea and the sands had been a delight to her, Cassandra the child had paid no mind to the warnings of her mother. Now slender hands, which had sought to rub protective lotion across the girl's exposed skin during the morning, now rubbed the hydrating slime across the child's pink limbs, back, and face. She teased her daughter, saying she looked like a cooked krabby, and her bright grey eyes shimmered as she ran her fingers through Cassandra's wet, dark hair. She was gentle, so very gentle, and in that time, Cassandra had known happiness and peace.

Yet as the touch grew more invasive, the dreamscape shifted, and a memory of a far more sinister nature emerged. Cassandra began to struggle against it, twisting the body of her mental avatar, a moan of distress escaping her lips. Her heart raced with fear and dread, and the yearning to escape from the black fog grew. She couldn't stay here, for through the mists approached the worst of the monsters, and she would crumble if she had to face him once again…!

Disturbed and disorientated, Cassandra began to regain consciousness as she was being healed by the clone. As her eyes fluttered open, it took a moment for her to blink her gaze clear…and once she did and glanced down, her eyes widened, and a number of curses and protests formed on her tongue. Mewtwo, not yet noticing that the woman had awoken, ran a paw over her abdominal muscles, healing the purplish bruise there. Although watching the mark fade under his touch was fascinating from a medical standpoint, the feeling of his fingers against her bare skin made her stomach twist. A cry rose from her throat, and sputtering, she shouted, "Get - get the fuck away from me!"

Bringing her knees up, she kicked him square in the face and then curled her knees to her chest, shuddering at the feeling of being sullied. As he clutched his muzzle and sat up with a groan, she glared at him and wondered who the dickwad was who'd labeled the replica as being very "formal" when interacting with others. He'd nearly put his hand up her shirt – wait, he had done that before to disarm her, the creep! Agh!

As he picked himself up and rubbed at his muzzle, Mewtwo leveled an irritated look her way. Regaining her collected composure, she continued to glower at him and wished her wrists had been unbound. If they had been, she'd have slugged him in the face. Yet then she blinked and glanced down at her knees. Her legs had been freed? When had that happened, and did she want to know why…?

"I pity your doctors, woman. Tell me, do you beat them as well for binding your wounds or giving you medicine?" he asked, his irritation evident in his voice.
She snarled in retort. "You are *not* my doctor - and those I do have don't *grop* me, so no, I don't kick them in the face!"

His muzzle wrinkled as he peered at her for a moment. "I *did* no such thing. I was healing you, not molesting you, let us be very clear on that!"

"I can heal on my own, thank you very much!"

For a long, tense moment, they glared at one another, before Mewtwo pressed his knuckles to his brow in exasperation. She was fiery, coarse, and dangerous, a harsh combination to be certain, and she wouldn't even accept assistance when it was offered, at least not by him. He snorted at that and walked behind her, ignoring how she twisted her head around to see what he was doing. His nearness to her back made the skin over her spine crawl, and as she watched him, suspicious, he flicked his wrist, slicing through the tape still binding her to the chair. Ripping herself free, she rubbed her wrists and gave him a questioning look as he circled in front of her again. She realized, with some irritation, that he could've freed her from where he stood. The point of his movements had been to make her nervous, and they'd succeeded in that regard.

"...Why?" she asked, after having enough of the way he was gazing at her. His eyes were cold, but something flickered in them that made her soul squirm within her.

What he said next would aggravate her horribly. "You no longer pose a threat to me, that is why," he said, almost sounding bored.

On impulse, she hissed at him, "Excuse me? I-!"

"Be quiet. You are weaponless, your wings are sealed away, and you have no way of contacting anyone for aid. In pure physical strength, you may be strong enough to act as a decent sparring partner for me, but you would not be capable of defeating me. Furthermore, even if you did manage to arm yourself while here, I could easily disarm and subdue you with my psychical abilities." After allowing those facts to sink into her mind, he repeated himself, "So, as I said before, you pose no threat to me."

While his words displeased Cassandra, she knew he spoke the truth, and eventually she asked, "So what are you planning to do with me? Will you teleport me in cuffs to the nearest police station?" Dare she hope he'd be foolish enough to send her away, giving her the chance she needed to escape and rework her battle plan…?

He shook his head in response. "No. I have not yet discovered what I wish to know from you, so until then, I intend to keep you here-.

"Like hell you will! I'm not going to be stuck in this shithole!" she cried in outrage, crossing her arms over his chest.

He snorted at her. "Feel free to attempt an escape - you will die doing so. Although the wild ones on the lower levels of this building do not care for me, they are quite fond of Psyche, and yesterday you threatened her life numerous times while she questioned you. I assure you, they will no longer have any qualms about dismembering you and feasting on your hide. Even a person as skilled as you cannot defeat them all, not without gaining mortal injuries, and I doubt you have the option of seeking medical attention in a hospital. You must not be seen, I am certain."

She said nothing, but her murderous look was enough to confirm his suspicions. Eventually, after simmering over what he'd told her and realizing that the situation had taken a rather unfortunate nosedive, she said, "So you'll hold me captive until I answer your questions, is that it? How are you
planning to do that? Should I expect crusts of bread for my meals, or only some pitiful crumbs?"

She watched his lips curl over his fangs, and looking away from her, he growled, "Despite what you may have been told, I am not a heartless monster. I will not confine you to some suffocating, dreary room and refuse to give you food and water."

Cassandra couldn't help but laugh at that. "Is that so? So what will I be, then, pussycat? Your guest?"

She threw out the term jokingly.

Mewtwo, however, answered her in perfect seriousness. "That is precisely what you will be." Then, spying her bewildered expression, he tilted his head and said, "Unless you would prefer the alternative. It is entirely your choice."

As the assassin absorbed what he was saying, she stared at him incredulously. "Say what? Completely thrown, she blinked and said, "Come again?" What was he playing at…?

"You heard me perfectly well. Whether your stay here will be comfortable or not is up to you, but realize I won't treat you like royalty after you attempted to murder me. You will have to care for your own needs, but as a grown adult, you should be capable of that."

"Are you serious? Is this your version of a joke?" She couldn't believe what she was hearing. What he was saying was just so illogical!

His leveled a severe look her way. "I do not joke, human."

Actually, she had no trouble at all believing that. What he was proposing was difficult to accept, but if his offer was genuine, she would be a fool not to take it. Even if it was some form of trap, it was better to embrace what little freedom it provided than opt to be imprisoned in a cell and starved. Resigning herself to walk down the more obscure path, she nodded, stood, and said, "Fine, I'll go along with this 'guest' idea. Yet after this is over, tell me, will you kill me?"

He'd turned away from her and begun to walk away, but halted at her question. "That has yet to be decided."

So that was a "maybe" – a shame, that, because even a "yes" would have given her solid ground to build a plan for that eventuality on. Instead, the outcome facing her was one of uncertainty, but staring after him, she knew at least one thing: she'd go down fighting.

Spying how she hesitated in following him, he said, "Stay there, if it pleases you, but a room has been prepared for your stay."

Hearing this, Cassandra's bewilderment only increased. Why was he being so hospitable after she'd attempted to murder him...? Trailing after him into the guest room, the light of which switched on at her entrance, she saw that the bedclothes had been changed with a fresh set and much of the dust that had settled on the shelves and windowsill had been swept clean. And there, upon the mattress...!

"You may sleep here-", Mewtwo began, only to be interrupted by Cassandra's cry as she strode over to the bed.

"My suitcase! How did you…?"

"You should consider changing handlers. The alias you were given to use at the hotel you checked into, Selena Brennan, is the name of a woman who died thirteen years ago. ...What is it? Are you surprised I managed to find where you were staying? There are only a handful of hotels in this city that are frequented by members of leading criminal syndicates, and by comparing the names on the
booking lists with individuals matching your description in passport documents, I narrowed down the search considerably. After I found the exact match, traveling to where you were staying and removing your belongings from the room was simple enough. For a hotel which boasts such excellent security for its clientele, it was ridiculously easy to break into," the replica said, and watched carefully for her reaction. He sensed keen irritation and a trace of another emotion when he mentioned her cover name…but she seemed to dismiss his words soon enough, and proceeded to open up the suitcase.

Anger flashed across her face as she saw the disorganized mess within. "You rifled through my things," she noted, her words tart.

She looked as if she wanted to slap him. Unconcerned about that outcome, he replied, "Yes, and I am not ashamed of that. Not searching through your case would have been foolhardy of me, as you may have easily been keeping other weapons in there. As such, I did what was necessary to ensure my continued safety. Surely you cannot begrudge me for that, Cassandra?"

Hearing him utter her first name, she went rigid and didn't bother to disguise her shock. As she slowly straightened, she missed the flash in the psychic's eyes as he reprimanded himself silently. For the young woman, however, the room suddenly seemed too small, and although she struggled to regain her composure, her voice nearly wavered as she asked, "How…?" He shouldn't know her name…and out of her initial surprise, fury flared. He had no right to know anything about her! Using her anger to fuel her strength, she asked more forcefully, "How do you know my name?"

He answered her calmly, coolly. "Psyche's interrogation, despite not being as effective as I had hoped, did manage to glean a few facts from you. Your first name was one of them."

Her stomach filled with ice, she paled, and like air suddenly being released from an untied balloon, her rage left her. She couldn't determine whether or not he was speaking the truth, since he was concealing his aura from her, and so she was forced to wonder: had she truly talked under torture? Her memories of when the electabuzz and the espeon had questioned her were chaotic, and only the echo of the feeling of thunder punches rammed into her gut could be readily recalled. Yet her target could be attempting to deceive her, or he might be guessing…although, if the first was the case, it begged the question of how else he knew her name, and if the latter was true, it was one hell of a guess.

As he stepped towards her, jarring her from her contemplations, she snarled at him, "Get out."

He regarded her wordlessly for a moment, before turning away with a nod. "As you wish." However, as he reached the door, he paused and, ignoring her murderous glare, said, "One last thing: if you dare harm my companion or the kits she is carrying, I will not hesitate to end your life. They are not a part of our conflict, understood?"

"As long as she stays out of my way, you don't have to worry."

His eyes narrowed at that, but he said nothing further. Turning away, he exited the chamber, the door shutting behind him as he went. Musing on their conversation now that it was over, Cassandra scowled, and her displeasure only grew as she unpacked and considered the implications of her situation. She was in trouble, and it was clear to her now that this mission would likely be among the most challenging assignments she had ever received. Perhaps she'd even be incapable of completing it alone…but then she scoffed at that thought, reminding herself that she'd handled solitary hunts for years now, and this one, while abnormal, would be no different. Digging into the depths of her case for her bathing supplies, her fingers brushed a smooth, cylindrical surface, and pulling the item out, she saw that Mewtwo hadn't taken her medication. Within the little goldenrod and white bottle were around four dozen small pills, and the agent peered at them bitterly, vaguely recalling why she took
Sighing, the agent opened the bottle, threw back three, and then placed the bottle on top of her clothes. In the following minutes, she lay back in the bed provided to her, her eyes closed and her ears listening for the wisps of sounds that carried through the walls: a single pokémon's padded footfalls, close to silent, could be heard as he wandered throughout the studio. She would kill that creature eventually. She would kill him or die trying, and when she managed to deliver the fatal blow, she would feel no remorse, for they weren't tied together in any way. To her, so long as he remained nothing more than her prey, her target, her enemy, then his death, the stink of his blood on her hands, wouldn't curdle her soul.

If she didn't know him, then he'd just be another meaningless face….

"Espeon?" Psyche exclaimed from where she sat on the kitchen floor, scarcely able to believe what her roommate had just told her. "You healed her and are letting her stay?"

The clone, who was currently dicing up a midnight snack for her, didn't look at her as he replied, "That's correct."

"Espe?" she wailed.

In perfect monotone, he said, "You forget, my friend, that I don't need to explain myself to you. Make of my actions what you will, but I have no uncertainties about them."

"Espeon?" she sniped up at him. "Taken a liking to her, have you?"

This time he did look down at her. "…She is a human," he replied solemnly, as if this were answer enough. Upon the sanitized cutting board near his paw, a paring knife, directed by his telekinesis, sliced open berries with unnecessary ferocity. Turning his amethyst eyes to the nearby cupboard, he opened it and drew a small ceramic bowl from its lowest shelf. "I advise you to leave the matter be, Psyche. My reasons are mine alone to know."

"Es, espe. Espeon!" she said, lifting her nose up at him. "Fine, if you want to be a secretive jerk, then go right on ahead. I'll have you know that you won't earn any points with the kits that way!"

The shift to the lighter subject made a faint smile tug at the clone's lips. "Perhaps not," he conceded, "but we shall see before long, won't we?"

Psyche quirked a grin at that, pleased by his attitude. When she'd first informed him of her condition, he'd been rather miffed and uncertain about how to handle the situation. Although he had some prior experience with the condition from the cloned nidoqueen's pregnancy, he hadn't been directly involved in the affair, and had merely offered his protection to the children after they were born. Since their parents were being sheltered under his psychical wings at the time, extending his role as a guardian over their offspring as well had only been natural. His roommate's little surprise, however, hadn't been anticipated in the least. Unlike with the courtship of the clone couple, which he'd observed and predicted the eventual outcome of, he hadn't even realized that Psyche was physically mature enough to have already had a mate. Even now, long after learning the details of the conception, he was uncertain of how he'd manage when he'd have to avoid stepping on a passel of little ones scurrying around the studio.

Yet it was no matter. They'd already discussed the possibilities in the hours after she'd told him, and their decision about what to do had long since been made. However, that had been before their uninvited guest had invaded their home, and now the replica wondered if things would indeed unfold
as they'd planned. Would the agent murder him and leave Psyche to go through childbirth alone, or would she, as she had so slyly implied, grow weary of the espeon's protectiveness of him and kill her along with her kits? Surely the huntress wouldn't be so cruel as to dispatch a mother and her unborn children? His paws clenched at the thought, for while he could tolerate the notion that he might be slain, the others fully deserved the chance to live happy, carefree lives.

Exhaling slowly, he filled the bowl now resting on the counter with the fully diced grapes, raspberries, and strawberries, and set it down in front of his eager friend. She was craving fresh, tart fruits tonight, and while she usually prepared her own snacks, this was his way of thanking her for everything she'd done since the dark angel had winged her way into their abode. She'd attempted to defend him against a creature far more deadly than she could imagine, and had then done the work he couldn't bring himself to do. A bowl of fruit seemed too small a repayment, but she accepted and appreciated the gesture without complaint. As she gobbled down the berries, he sat beside her and stroked her down her spine, soon able to feel her purring with pleasure through her lilac fur.

Sometime later, she retired to the sofa for a nap, and after washing the dishes and putting them away, Mewtwo stood over the sink and unwrapped the bandage from around his shoulder. The slash mark had mended, leaving only a pale white line behind – even without knowing recover, he mused, his body's regenerative capabilities were quite remarkable. Yet he knew well he wasn't immortal, and throwing away sullied strips of gauze, he washed the dried blood from his fur with tap water. Allowing it to dry on its own, he walked into the living area and covered his roommate up to her neck with the afghan that usually hung over the cushions. He wondered whether it safe for him to leave her there, considering the animosity of their "visitor," but he reminded himself that Cassandra had given him her word (or as close as she could come to it) that she wouldn't harm the little pokémon. He'd merely have to trust that the human wouldn't be stupid enough to defy him and attack his companion while he slept.

As it were, his insomnia was at last buckling under the demands of fatigue, and knowing sleep to be a rare gift, he returned to him room to claim it, a few downy feathers following in his wake as he went. Although he couldn't claim to know what dreams would fill his mind once unconsciousness overwhelmed him, as he settled into his hammock and spotted the tiny black feathers blown through the doorway as the barrier closed, he harbored a guess. As he watched, they curled and spun about one another in a gentle and almost intimate way, and closing his eyes, he smothered the quiet sadness that had begun to bloom in him at the sight. Such sorrow would serve no purpose...he knew that well enough.

As he drifted away from reality, the downy feathers settled together on the floor, like snowflakes fallen from a peaceful winter storm....

**Thank You:** Miyuutsuu, colordrone, Mousewolf, Random Reader, Meriah, Darkness, Fl4mingTurd, ImJessieTR, Tomoyo Kinomoto, sapphire espeon, and Rizaidym for reading and reviewing the previous chapter. I hope you and my other readers will do the same for this one!

**Author's Note:** In case anyone is wondering, each chapter of *Angelic Shadows* will be around 10,000 words or more. This is due to me structuring the chapters in a very episodic way. There will also be some romance in this story down the road, though a stronger emphasis will be placed on platonic and familial bonds overall.

Sincerely,

WiseAbsol
CHAPTER 4: INTERNAL SCARS

"The scars left from the child's defeat in the fight against irrational authority are to be found at the bottom of every neurosis."

- Erich Seligmann Fromm.

Early the following morning, just as the gray light of dawn began to seep through the curtains, Cassandra's eyes fluttered open to gaze at the wall beside the guest room bed she was laying in. Upon the floor, her suitcase was open, its contents lain out and sorted, and beyond the now mussed bedclothes around her, it was the only indication that someone was now occupying the previously vacant room. Turning over onto her back, she lifted her forearm to block the glow from the window, and grimaced at how greasy her hair felt and as the sour smell of her skin wafted to her nose. Dried sweat and blood, in addition to fitful hours of sleep, had done her body no good, and despite the fact that Mewtwo had healed her wounds, her muscles still ached from the fight. Only one thing could act as this morning's panacea: a nice, long, hot shower. Sliding out of bed and reaching for a change of clothes and some other necessities, she wondered if her target would protest her using up his warm water – but then, she was his "guest," wasn't she? If he complained about it, she could always thrown his own terminology back in his face, which would surely be enjoyable. She snorted as she mused on the arrangement again, for who'd ever heard of a predator being welcomed by its prey? The replica must have lost some of his marbles during the cloning process…that, or life in this city had simply not been conducive to his sanity.

With a yawn, she slunk out of the guest room and peered around in the dawn's faint light, finding the espeon, Psyche, asleep on the sofa. Cassandra almost wanted to resent the creature for her actions against her, but dismissed the notion as she walked to the bathroom. Holding a grudge against the little being would serve no purpose. It would only cloud her judgment and waste her energy, and she needed to be in peak condition to accomplish her goal here. Speaking of which, where was the clone? He was nowhere to be found in the studio itself, so perhaps, she thought, he was resting in his bedroom. Well, if that was the case, he could go ahead and continue to sleep; she didn't want to be interrupted during her wash, after all. As she entered the bathroom and closed the door behind her, his continued slumber became essential, given that the lock was broken. With no other way to secure the door, it seemed she would simply have to trust that the two pokémon wouldn't walk in on her when they heard the shower running. Aggravated by the thought, she nonetheless stripped off her sullied clothes and turned on the hot water. Before stepping into the spray, she glanced into the mirror, which reflected her form from the waist up. Already fogging from the steam of the shower, she was pleased to see that she appeared cool and collected, yet as she traced a horizontal scar that ran above her left breast, something fragile flickered in her eyes….

Sighing, she buried that weakness and stepped into the shower, feeling the liquid burn across skin before it became inured to the high temperature. As the heat eased into her muscles, they started to uncoil, and grabbing the soap and the clean washcloth provided, she began to scrub away the past two days worth of grime and added shampoo to her hair. As she rinsed, she leaned forward against the tiled wall and watched the suds swirl down the drain, savoring the sensation of the spray drumming into her back. From the strands of her wet hair, droplets of water began to fall, and closing
her eyes, she attempted to listen to them over the rush of water against her.

*Drip...drip....

...Drip.

Cutting through the darkness that had engulfed her, the crystal sound called for her to awake. Like an infant stirring in the womb, her limbs reached out through the rosy water, brushing the smooth sides of the porcelain bathtub. In her nostrils, the odor of copper and soapsuds pricked, and her entire body trembled as it floated in the icy waters she'd been submerged in. Her thoughts, quiet and fragile, noted how dangerous that was. She might catch hypothermia if she remained in here. Yet then the memories of how she'd come to lay in that bath fluttered into her brain: muffled screams, spilled blood, fierce pain.... Her trembling grew stronger, and her grey eyes drifted open as a wave of nausea tore through her stomach. She stared up at the white ceiling with empty eyes, not noticing the wisp of black blood draining from her, but as another wave of queasiness ripped through her, she lifted herself from the cold, sullied water to lean over the side of the tub. At this motion, searing pain bolted up her spine, her bruises flared, and in response, she lost control of her stomach: she vomited and then began to dry heave. Tears stung in her eyes and mucus began to seep from her nose, and she clutched the edge of the tub with white knuckles, her body shaking as the violent scene replayed in her mind's eyes, the details burned into her retinas, her flesh, her soul, her memories...

For what else was there to think about now? A moan grew in her throat, and as she covered her face with thin, shaking fingers, the noise tore from her in an agonized scream.

In the present, Cassandra's eyes shot open, and she felt her heart race within her chest. As she saw droplets of crimson falling into the now lukewarm, swirling waters, she brought her hands in front of her to find a series of crescent nicks on her palms, from which her blood was oozing. She'd dug her fingernails so hard into her palms that she had broken the skin – *how wonderful*. Washing the red away, she then turned the faucet off and, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, exited the stall. Shivering at the change in the air temperature, she balled a hand into a fist and wiped away the fog on the mirror. Opening up the medical cabinet within, she searched for something she could wrap around her hands, but by the time she'd found the bandages, the cuts had already clotted. As she began to close the cabinet, however, her eyes caught on a prescription bottle below the First Aid supplies. Picking it up, she read its label: mirtazapine, a medication often used in the treatment of depression, insomnia, and a poor appetite.

Despite herself, a crooked smile curled on her face as she acknowledged, "So, Mewtwo...you too have your troubles." And then placing the bottle back and closing the cabinet, she picked up her towel from the counter and began to pat herself dry.

As though he'd heard his name being uttered, Mewtwo began to struggle towards consciousness, seeking to escape the dream that now held him firmly. Behind his eyelids, his pupils narrowed into slits at the images dancing within his mind, and as he twisted in his sleep, his lips curled over his fangs in a hushed snarl. Around him, the hammock rocked in a soothing motion that usually calmed his nightmares, but this time failed to do so. As the dream intensified, his breaths came in raspy pants, perspiration began to soak his pelt, his pulse thundered in his ears, and then, as the nightmare reached its climax, the clone jerked forward, his eyes shot open, his paw reached out to grasp something....

Yet it closed upon air and nothing more. Drawing it back, Mewtwo sluggishly recalled where he was, what year it was, and the events of the past few days. As his heart rate and breathing began to slow, he pressed his knuckles to his brow. "*Curse it all,*" he murmured, despising his subconscious for daring to bring that dream into his mind, although he'd anticipated that it would before he'd succumbed to slumber. Exhaling slowly, he noted that dawn had arrived, its light flowing through
the gap of his makeshift curtains. Although he was nocturnal by nature, his roommate and their
guest, he was certain, were not, so it would be best for him to greet the day with them. Leaving them
alone together wasn't wise, but first he needed to wash up to rid himself of grogginess. Perhaps the
cold water would help him to focus more on the present situation than on ghosts of the past….

Focusing his will on teleportation, he vanished and reappeared within the bathroom, only concerned
with splashing some water on his face before he began to attend to breakfast. Yet when he glanced
up to find a perturbed and naked woman within a meter from him, that desire was banished from his
mind – although, had it remained, it would have been rendered void, as the sight before him had
shocked him fully awake. As he froze and his eyes widened, Cassandra stared back at him, too
startled and furious to remember to cover herself up with her towel, with was currently pressed
against her hair. As she slowly lowered her arms, the feline's mouth went dry, and although he'd later
realize that it was not the only part of him that did so, in the back of his mind, something stirred.

Two figures moved as one within the covers of the bed, taking shelter in the shadows that concealed
them. What they were doing, if discovered, would be regarded as an abomination by society, and
punished as such…however, they were well past the point of caring. For now, hidden within the
darkness, they were safe, and reveling in the freedom that security offered, they writhed together,
exchanging passionate kisses and gasping declarations of adoration. As a hand stroked down the
young woman's side, resting on her hip, she moaned under her amour's touch and clutched him
closer. Intimately joined as they were, she dug her fingertips into her lover's back, riding on the
waves of pleasure his movements within her invoked. He could see that as he peered down into her
lovely eyes, and kissing her shoulder gently, he quickened his thrusts, feeling the pressure, the
pleasure within them both grow as they neared the end. Holding her firmly, he mused that yes, what
they shared now went against everything they had been taught. If known, it would only be viewed as
an unforgivable sin…yet that fact did not stop them for yearning for one another, nor did it make
them cease their current lovemaking….

Whether this scene was from a whimsical dream or an actual memory didn't matter to the clone; he
shoved it from his mind to cope with the situation at hand. Now that his shock was fading, he noted
that the woman had wrapped herself in a towel, hiding her nakedness from his eyes, although they
both knew the gesture was far too late to accomplish anything. He'd seen every inch of her tan flesh,
and the sight now burned in his retinas - were he to let his eyelids fall, he was certain he would be
able to trace the gentle curves of her sleek form in his mind. He'd seen water droplets drip from her
hair to roll down the smooth, defined muscles of her abdomen and back, and only the numerous
scars she'd gleaned from her line of work marred the natural beauty with which she'd been bred. Yet
for the most part, those scars didn't draw attention to themselves, save for the ones across one
particularly intimate area….

"Does privacy mean nothing to you?" she asked quietly, her voice icy as she broke him from his
thoughts.

Not breaking her gaze, for he refused to stare at anywhere else, he said, "No, privacy does mean
much to me. I apologize for intruding on you."

Before anything else could be said, he turned, opened the bathroom door, and stepped through,
closing it behind him with his tail. Afterwards, he leaned back against the nearby wall, attempting to
regain his bearings, although that was difficult when he was swearing wildly at himself within his
mind. If he could purge his brain of what he'd just seen, he would gladly do so, but it refused to fade
from his mind's eye. Damn it, he had not needed to see her like that…!

"Espeon? Espe, espeon," a voice, brimming with amusement, arose from the kitchen. "So, is she up
to par with some porn models, or has she been infibulated? If the latter's the case, it would certainly
explain why she's cranky enough to go after people with a pair of knives."

Walking to the kitchen, he sat down in one of the dining room chairs and sighed. "Your jokes are not appreciated. Although her physical form is pleasing to look at – and not mutilated in such a way, I might add - I do not believe she would be suitable for the pornographic film industry. Her personality is not conducive to pleasing a multitude of people, and besides...she has been marked."

"Es? Espeon," the other pokémon laughed. "Is that so? Well, for your first time seeing a naked woman, I'd say you handled it rather well."

He looked away from her at that, his fingertips drumming against the table. "Contrary to the popular belief that you, the wilds one, and my cloned companions seem to harbor, I have seen an unclothed woman before," he snarled, his muzzle wrinkling.

"Es? Espe?" she cocked her head, bemused. "Really? Did you walk in on her too?"

He didn't respond, but from his persistent scowl, she supposed this was probably the case. However, something flickered behind his eyes as she voiced her assumption, and she couldn't tell whether the emotion lurking in his gaze was aggravation...or apathy. As he stood, striding over to the refrigerator to pull out the milk, she watched him carefully, attempting once again to understand the enigma that was her roommate. Yet just as in the past six months since they'd met, the more she attempted to decipher him, the more difficult he became to read, and she wondered if she'd truly learned anything at all about her companion during time they'd spent together in this space.

As the clone and the espeon spoke about their guest, the woman herself clutched the towel more firmly around herself as she turned back to the mirror. Peering at her reflection in the glass, she saw the ghost of weakness in her manifesting, and unable to bear the sight of that vulnerability, she lowered her gaze to the countertop. Damn him, why'd he have to see her so exposed? It was horrible enough for her when a certain man looked at her clothed form with greed and lust in his eyes, but now the wretched clone had taken that boorish behavior a step further. There had once been a time when she could've endured such gazes and even found them flattering, but now they merely sickened her, frightened her with what fantasies they spurred into the minds of males. If any were to act upon their perverse dreams, that would be the end of her...

As her eyes began to regain focus, she found herself shuddering and one of her hands clutching at the edge of the counter as if it were the only grip she had on a cliff's face. Perhaps the metaphor was appropriate, for if she descended into the madness of her mind and the minds of those she'd encountered, there would be no return ascent. Struggling against that outcome, she inhaled deeply, willing herself to regain control. Her trembling ceased, and when she opened her eyes, she found her irises were glazed over with their usual coldness. She wouldn't allow her nightmare to haunt her here. She had a mission to complete, so she couldn't afford to linger in that hell.

Yet all the same, she hoped she could complete this mission soon. She dared not remain near a beast who'd gazed upon her with hungry eyes...

Somewhere between the moment when Mewtwo lost himself in his thoughts and the moment when Psyche began to make her breakfast, the assassin snuck back into her room. When she emerged, dressed in charcoal-colored jeans a dove-grey sweater, she ignored the clone completely as she headed into the kitchen to search for items she could potentially use to injure him with. Most of the drawers, she soon discovered, had been locked, and she suspected the metal utensils and ceramic dishes were within these. The closest she came to finding anything that could inflict harm was a fork, and she rather doubted she would manage to remain armed with one long enough to drive the prongs
into his eyes. However, she didn't despair at this, for she suspected there was much in his home that she could fashion into weapons. Giving up on her search for now, she noticed the espeon observing her actions with a sour expression on her face, and Cassandra merely muttered that the creature should mind her own business. With a roll of her almond eyes, the lilac pokémon picked up her meal with her telekinesis and left. Content with that - and still with a fork in hand - the agent switched priorities. She needed to eat as well, as evidenced by her growling stomach.

However, here she found herself at a disadvantage, since she'd never been able to cook well...which, considering she lived alone (excluding Shadow, of course), was rather unfortunate. In the past, almost all of her attempts to whip up a filling, tasty meal had turned out horribly. After the last failed try, she'd needed to repaint the wall above her stove to hide the scorch marks from the oil fire, and taking heed from the damage, she'd decided to settle for instant and pre-made meals. As such, when she found the pack of shrimp ramen in the depths of one of the cupboards, she couldn't have been more pleased. Ignoring the recorded expiration date on the paper cup, she cooked the noodles in the microwave, and once they were done, gulped them down as soon as they were cool enough to eat. Employing table manners in a place like this seemed pointless, and perhaps the rudeness would even bother the other two.

Once she finished her meal, she tossed the container in the trashcan and walked into the main room, guardedly staring at the pokémon duo. Psyche looked up at her from her now empty bowl, and ignoring the little psychic, Cassandra strode towards her target, who glanced at her from the documents he was editing on his computer. Before she could reach him, the program he'd been working on closed, and he rose from the revolving, leather chair to face her. He gazed down at her wordlessly, wondering what she wanted from him, and didn't move as she stepped closer to him. Her face was as expressionless as his was as they peered at each other...and then it contorted with rage, and she swung her hand against his face to slap him. To his credit, he took the blow without a word of complaint, and although his eyes narrowed, he didn't strike her in return, merely returning to gazing down at her as his cheek smarted with pain.

"That was for earlier! Next time, make certain I'm not using the washroom before you teleport in," she snarled and spun away from him. Clearly, she hadn't accepted his apology, but as he gazed after her, he found he wasn't surprised.

Turning away with aggravation simmering in his innards, he mused, *I should have expected her to react in such a way....*

Psyche, who had watched this exchange, bared her fangs at the two and rose with a huff, levitating her bowl into the sink and stalking towards her room. As she padded away, her belly swung low and heavily beneath her, and staring after her, Cassandra guessed that the espeon had perhaps three more weeks to go until she gave birth. Wondering vaguely what the little creature would do without the clone to support her, she flopped down into one of the cushioned chairs and arranged herself into a comfortable position. Cradled in one of the soft corners, she dangled a leg over the opposing armrest, an arm over the one closest to her, while her other arm crossed over her abdomen. Her other leg fell over the edge of the seat, her booted foot tapping against the polished tile floor, and at the persistent clicking, she watched as the replica's brow twitched from annoyance. Smirking at that, she wondered how long it would take before he would voice his protest...but as minutes passed by, he proved himself capable of ignoring her. Sitting in the other lush armchair, he drew a hardcover novel from one of the bookshelves, opening it to the page a bookmark protruded from.

After growing bored of watching him read, she ceased the tapping and said, "I take it you aren't the father?"

For a time, he didn't respond to the query, instead savoring the text, but when she opened her mouth
to speak again, he asked, "What has led you to arrive at that conclusion?"

She snorted at the question. "Well, the size difference between you two would make sex a little problematic, and even if you bonded to her as a mate and used artificial means to conceive offspring, your children would be dangerous for her to carry. If they took after your species, they would grow too large for her to successfully bear and deliver." When he glanced up at her from his reading, she continued, "Plus, when she attempted to protect you in our battle, you told her that doing so would be dangerous for her and her children, rather than our children, which was enough to clarify your relationship to them."

"Although your behavior is rash, you are observant. There is an irony there," the replica mused, turning a page. When her eyes narrowed at his words, he said further, "You are correct - Psyche and I are merely roommates. As I understand it, the one who sired her children is no longer involved in her life."

In her boredom, Cassandra snatched at the potential subject of conversation he hinted at. "What, did he just get what he wanted and then shunned responsibility for the litter?"

His answer surprised her, however. "No. The father of Psyche's kits was separated from her forcefully. He is either both alive and incapable of reaching her, or he has been killed."

Reluctantly, some interest stirred in her at that, especially when she noted the faint bitterness in his voice as he spoke. "Do you wish that weren't so?"

His eyes rose then to meet hers. "...If they could meet once again, I would not disapprove. Lovers, after all, are supposed to be together in the short time life offers them." Then turning his gaze away, he placed the novel aside, and continued, "Yet concerning their situation, it matters little to me what their fate will be as a couple. What will happen to them will happen in due time - it is not my place to involve myself in their personal affairs."

"Considering how much you seem to care for her, that stance seems rather indifferent of you," Cassandra said, noting with interest how he now refused to look at her.

"As her companion, her happiness and her health do mean much to me, but her destiny remains her own to make. I have already intervened in her life enough by taking her in."

The assassin quirked an amused grin at that. "Right...and just how was it that you, the demon with a heart of ice, began to shelter a pokémon you didn't even make?"

His eyes narrowed, and as his fingers drummed against the armrests of his chair, he said, "Your information concerning me is sorely lacking if you're under the impression I would ignore a starving, injured creature that was tossed in my path."

When the human raised an eyebrow in inquiry, he grudgingly explained how he'd found the vixen, if only to diffuse the woman's belief that he was a callous being. He began by saying he'd stumbled across Psyche around six months ago when wandering through the alleyways of a nearby district. Searching for a warm, filling meal that would satisfy his hunger, he'd scouted out the restaurants in his area, hoping to steal his dinner from those who could afford to spend the money reordering their dish. Usually the notion of lowering himself to thievery would have appalled him, but given his poor luck in finding any wildly grown edibles in the city thus far, he'd been given no other choice. To his credit, he'd gathered enough human currency to purchase food for himself at the street booths, but entering into the dense crowds and risking revealing his identity, simply to buy what might be an unsanitary meal, proved unappealing to the clone. As such, he'd simply leave the money when he snatched a meal; perhaps when he became inured to the rhythm of the metropolis lifestyle, his
methods of gathering supplies would change.

Yet during that night, upon nearing a fancy Italian restaurant, his search had led him to return home with another mouth to feed, rather than the sustenance to feed his own. Through the propped open windows of the kitchens, crashing sounds poured out like steam from the aromatic rooms, and as the back door was flung open, the clone instinctively ducked into the shadows. As he watched, a small bundle was tossed out, and as the door slammed shut and he approached, he saw what all the fuss had been about. Like him, an espeon had tried to steal some food for herself, and for her efforts, she'd been knocked about and discarded like garbage. Her hind leg, which was crooked at a sickening angle, was proof that the chefs within were far from merciful, and without much hesitation, Mewtwo knelt down, scooped her up into his arms, and brought her to his home. In the following weeks, she'd healed nicely under his care, and was soon ready to depart back into the streets, as he strongly suggested she do. After all, he'd no desire to acquire a roommate, far preferring to live alone. However, the little vixen, who'd been given the name Psyche by her former owner, had refused to leave his comfortable abode. In the ensuing struggle, the replica had tried several times to remove her from his home…but no matter what he did, the fellow psychic had returned to the studio by daybreak the following morning, her eyes conveying her amusement at his mounting frustration. Eventually, and much to his horror, she'd "officially" claimed the room beside his as hers, and had gathered a variety of glittering and colorful objects into the chamber to personalize it as such. From there, Mewtwo had made a campaign of forcing her out of his home, but in the end, she would…not…leave!

As he recounted this dilemma, Cassandra laughed at his inability to resist the espeon despite his extensive powers. "So you were struck with her!" she crowed, and then, with some reluctance, veered the conversation back to the original topic. "But that doesn't explain the circumstances behind her pregnancy."

"True, it does not, and it was some time before she felt comfortable enough with me to tell me what had occurred. Since I do not believe in prying into the affairs of other people, I'd allowed her silence to go unnoted...yet when she did tell me her story, I found myself once again astounded by your kind's arrogance."

The agent cocked her head to the side at that. "Oh really?"

"Quite. As it turned out, Psyche was a breeding pokémon. This pregnancy is her first," he said, his eyes glazing at the unpleasant memory of his companion's confession.

After considering that for a moment, the woman asked, "What's so horrible about that? Many trainers breed their pokémon for contests and the like, and as I understand it, their success depends on their pokémon's willingness to interact. If the members of the potential breeding pair aren't attracted to one another, then nothing comes of it."

Mewtwo acknowledged that with a nod. "Typically, you would be correct. However, some breeders do not care about whether the desired offspring were born from a consensual union or not. When these individuals have a suitable match in mind, the pokémon involved are given no choice in the matter. They are manipulated into mating using several methods, the most common being waiting until the female is in heat and then placing the male in her company. Usually, that male will have been deprived of contact with the opposite sex for months, possibly even an entire year. In such a case, resistant on his part is minimal, regardless of whether the female wishes to mate with that male or not. Other times, the female's willingness, or lack thereof, simply does not matter to him. In his mind, and certainly in the minds of the breeders who have matched them, the female pokémon cannot be raped, since sexual violation is strictly a human offense. These people conveniently forget – or ignore - that these 'animals' are, in fact, sentient, and so can be damaged through forced sexual
encounters."

As he said this, he watched the woman carefully, and noted that her posture had stiffened. The telepath soon continued his explanation. "However, a majority of the time, pokémon raised in this environment accept what the breeders have decided without protest. That fact that struggling is futile is pounded into them at a young age by certain higher authorities, and so by the time these children mature, it is uncommon for them to resist the partners they've been matched with. Yet sometimes, despite the ingrained behavior, this does occur when one participant wishes to avoid being hurt or avoid hurting their partner."

"Psyche and her mate, placed together during the spring, were initially one such unusual pair. They had never met before they were placed in a pen together, were both still young in regards to their sexual maturity, and they were, above all, nervous and apprehensive about the prospect of mating. Yet even so, Psyche was willing to submit to her intended partner. Like her mother, she had simply wanted the act to commence and conclude as quickly and painlessly as possible. Yet her potential mate surprised her - he had no desire to mate with her unless she truly wanted to be with him. However, Psyche understood the consequences of them not conceiving offspring. Once breeding pokémon have surpassed their childhood years of being paraded on stage, their only remaining use is to continue adding positive traits and abilities to the gene pool. Their worth lies in their ability to produce worthwhile progeny, and if they fail to do so, they can be abused until they cooperate. To the breeders, these pokémon are merely tools with which to accomplish a goal, rather than living beings who can be mistreated."

When Psyche had originally told him about her companions and she had been objectified, he'd sympathized with them, for he'd once been viewed as a mere "thing" as well. Yet for him, that era of degradation was long over, and so he continued to tell his roommate's tale without flinching. "With that understanding in mind, Psyche insisted they continue. Hence, sometime during that night, they mated and conceived their children. However, something else began to develop between them in those hours, something that the breeders had not desired. They began to grow fond of one another, and during the following month, those feelings only strengthened."

Cassandra Merlo seemed intrigued now, and so he continued into the sorrow of the tale. "However, such gentle love is not meant to develop between the participants of a match. After it was confirmed that Psyche was expecting a litter of kits, the breeders considered her mate's task complete, and attempted - much to Psyche's and his dismay - to match him with a different female. However, he refused to mate with another pokémon, and despite being punished severely for this, he remained adamant in his decision to be loyal to his original mate. When he learned he was having kits with her, he only grew more attached."

For a moment, Mewtwo paused in his recounting, and then said, "Eventually he concluded that if they were to live together as they desired, they must rebel and flee. In his mind, he believed that the only hope for their family would be to escape the control of the breeders. Psyche agreed, and fortunately for them, she was not yet encumbered by their kits, so she could still travel with ease. After planning their travel route, they broke free of their holding pens and ran into the wilderness... but their absence was soon noticed by the breeders, and the pair was pursued. When the hunters caught up with them, Psyche's mate turned to fight, determined to give his partner time to escape. Though Psyche didn't wish to leave him behind, she realized the fate that awaited her offspring if she lingered there. So she chose to run and eventually arrived in this city, completely shaking her owners in the process. The fate of her mate, however, is not known...but considering that he has never found his way here, we can safety assume the worst."

As he finished the tale, he stood and returned the hardcover novel to its place on the bookshelf, no longer interested in resuming reading its pages. As he walked towards to staircase to the roof, he
paused and gave the now hushed woman a long and searching glance. She was staring at the door to Psyche's room contemplatively, no longer tracking the actions of the clone, and lifting his eyes towards the windows, he murmured to her, "I will not allow you to harm her, Cassandra. After everything else she has endured, after losing her mate in such an way, she does not deserve any further injury. She should at least have one part of her life go fairly – she should have the chance to care for her children, and no less than that."

Having said his part, he ascended the stairway that led up into the breaking dawn, soon stepping out onto the rooftop with a shiver. Moist with scattered dew, the concrete beneath his feet chilled the pads of his paws, and the morning breeze carried the scent of the ocean as it flowed over his pelt. However, he barely felt the fresh, cool wind. Instead, numbness was steadily permeating his being as he tried, in vain, to embrace indifference towards the story he had just recounted to the agent. After several minutes of his internal struggle, he lifted his face to the rays of the rising sun, and within his mind, his voice asked in a saddened and almost desperate cry, Amber, why? Why…?

Yet the only answer he received was the caress of sunlight upon his cheek, and nothing more.

Thank You: Mousewolf, Fl4mingTurd, Miyuutsuu, Meriah, Mai-danishgirl, MeNotYou, Tomoyo Kinomoto, and sapphire espeon for reading and reviewing the previous chapter. I hope you and my other readers will do the same for this one!

Author's Note: Here, have your fanservice and Psyche's tragic backstory! I am nothing if not tropey in this arc of the story. Here's hoping you enjoyed the chapter!

Sincerely,

WiseAbsol
CHAPTER 5: FAKE VODKA

"Cruel with guilt, and daring with despair, the midnight murderer bursts the faithless bar; 
invades the sacred hour of silent rest and leaves, unseen, a dagger in your breast."

- Samuel Johnson.

The woman glared at him, her draconic expression so similar to Giovanni Maki's when the man was 
enraged. As he would with that demon, Mewtwo was determined to stare this woman down, to not 
allow the female to have her way. She wouldn't receive what she so dearly wanted from him - he 
refused to provide her with the satisfaction. After all, what she'd suggested would only further 
complicate their situation, and serve a limited purpose while it unfolded.

"Absolutely not," he snarled at her, flatly denying her request once again.

She crossed her arms and regarded him stubbornly. "Oh, come on - it'll be fun! It's not like I bite," 
she snapped, and then muttered, "at least not hard."

For a moment, he stared at her in revulsion, his muzzle wrinkling as he said, "Maybe it would be 
entertaining for you, but your amusement is not my concern."

Cassandra merely rolled her eyes. "Tell me, are you always such a stiff? While I'm sure being rigid 
has its advantages in some activities, it's rather undesirable in a negotiation."

In response, the clone bristled and his patience ran dry. This woman had been attempting to dig 
under his skin for the past hour, trying to persuade him to alter a decision he'd made well before she'd 
awakened and discovered his intents. In a cool and firm voice, he growled, "For the last time, you 
are not accompanying me into the city!"

Her grey irises flashed amber from the golden glow of encroaching sunset. "You know, considering 
you now have an abundance of wank material from peeping at me like you did, keeping me cooped 
up in this place is hardly generous of you, you perverted tom-.

"Have you forgotten, woman, that no matter how comfortable your surroundings may be, you are 
still fundamentally a prisoner here? I do not care if you're weary of these walls - you have no choice 
but to remain within them!"

She stepped close enough to him that he could feel her hot, angry breathes against his chest. "You're 
wrong. I could always throw myself off the roof to escape you, couldn't I? Besides, think about the 
consequences of leaving me here while I'm pissed off. You might return to find your home destroyed 
by fire, or maybe you'll find your roommate's intestines strung over your hammock like bloody tinsel. 
It's your choice, clone."

He continued to glower down at her, and wondered silently over her behavior. After all, she hadn't 
been this adamant on accompanying him on his ventures into the metropolis before. She'd seemed 
quite content to remain where she was and analyze his home while he was gone. She'd taken what 
he supposed must be detailed mental notes concerning the layout of his home, of his various 
belongings, of his and Psyche's lifestyles, evidentially searching for ways to take advantage of what
she had hand to accomplish her goal. She was acting like a professional in this way, but he also knew she took pleasure from how this aggravated him. Her glee had been especially evident when he’d seethed and snarled at her upon returning to find her trying to hack into his sealed account on his computer. She’d merely shrugged off his fury with an unconcerned smirk, and had asked if his personal files contained naughty pictures that he pleasured himself to while the females weren't in the room with him. She’d even attempted to guess what types of pornography most aroused him. By the end of the argument, he'd been so disgusted that he'd stormed outside to wander until the sun had almost completely surfaced over the horizon, a risky move he’d rarely made before then.

All of this had occurred within the first week since her unpleasant arrival, and now, much to his frustration, the burden of harboring another in his home was beginning to show in the depletion of his resources. Food, most notably, was being consumed at an alarming rate. Although Psyche was heavily pregnant, and so required a fair deal of daily sustenance, he knew the woman was the culprit behind their current food crisis. The espeon, after all, didn't eat what he thought to be a considerable amount, and despite being a large mammal himself, Mewtwo could easily survive on a few meager meals a day. Given he maintained a diet that was low in meat, far preferring the cheaper and healthier nut substitutes, he could purchase edibles in bulk that wouldn't spoil as easily as dairy, egg, and meat products could. As such, he usually had more than enough food to last through at least a fortnight. However, adding this human to the mix had shifted the equation. She seemed to relish gobbling up the contents of his cupboards, and upon noticing that she didn't gain an ounce, despite this voracious behavior, he'd blamed her high metabolism for the current shortage he was facing. She also burned what calories she taken in through what he suspected was an vigorous exercise routine in her room, given that the odor of her perspiration now seeped from her bedchamber and left him with a headache. Her heavy breathing, as well as Cassandra’s offhand comment one afternoon about working out in very few articles of clothing, had only made the ache intensify.

With this behavior, and simply by being a human in general, the woman naturally required more calories than Psyche or he did. While the espeon was small in stature, and so needed limited sustenance, his body had been designed to survive times with limited resources, and modified so he could gain every last iota of energy from whatever he ate. Humans, however, typically ate three meals a day to ward off hunger pangs, and this woman was no exception; combined, what the clone and the espeon consumed in one day was matched by what Cassandra ingested. Hence, he was confronted with the current situation: he needed to gather more food to fill their pining bellies. Cassandra, upon learning what he was planning, had insisted on going with him...because when it came right down to it, she was bored out of her skull. Although her target had a large collection of books to read, a majority of them were on scientific studies and philosophy, which were of little interest to her. Some, to be fair, also contained dramas or epic poems, and while she had considered reading *The Iliad* or one of Shakespeare's plays, her patience for deciphering the old English dialogues was limited.

She supposed practicing music on the old, ebony piano in the main chamber, or at least deciphering the graffiti carved into it, was a possibility, but if she were to play any of the melodies she'd memorized, one of her companions might enjoy listening to it, and she flatly refused to provide them with any such pleasure. As such, she'd determined that if this creature before her wouldn't release her entirely, then she would, at the very least, follow him on one of his flights. She needed to shake the cabin fever gripping her brain, needed to breathe in fresh air that didn't stink from shed fur. Besides, perhaps when the clone was out of his home territory, he might make a mistake that would leave him vulnerable to attack. In the city, there would be an abundance of possible weapons she could bash his skull in with. The only real pitfall to the scenario would be having to heave his corpse to a secure area; considering his massive weight, that would prove to be rather irritating. However, if there was a chance she could murder him beyond these walls, then she wanted to have the chance to exploit it.

Finally, Mewtwo relented. "Very well, woman...you may accompany me on this venture. However,
do not attempt to stray from my sight. I can track you down using your smell alone, without even brushing my psychical abilities, so attempting to escape from me would be futile."

Turning away from her, he strode to the dining table where a bundle of fabric rested. Picking it up, he pulled on the traveling cloak he'd set down earlier when she'd begun arguing with him. Throwing a sack made from the same dun-colored cloth over his shoulder, he walked over to where his roommate lay and whispered something to her. As she waited for him to finish, Cassandra watched him, untouched by the gentleness in his voice as he spoke to the little vixen. What mattered to the woman was the implied challenge he'd made. So he thought he could find her no matter where she ran? Well, she'd be certain to test that theory…. As he turned back to the agent and approached her, his eyes were harsh and hard, and he gripped her shoulder with his free paw firmly. As far as she was concerned, his touch lingered a little longer than it should have after he teleported them to the alleyway below. Stepping out of his grasp when the initial vertigo had faded, the assassin shivered and clutched her leather jacket around herself tighter, savoring the warmth of its inner fleece collar against her neck. Autumn was deepening quickly this year, and from the intense chill and the faint smell of snow in the air, she wouldn't be surprised if winter arrived early.

Breaking into her thoughts, the clone spoke. "Come, Cassandra. We have a long way to travel before we reach our first stop."

She wished she could retort with some snide comment, but there was no way to counter that statement. With a curt nod, she obediently followed her prey, her eyes glazing over as she contemplated other matters. After walking a number of city blocks in silence, the replica glanced back at her, noting that she was keeping his pace without any problems…and then he realized that at least in that moment, she appeared no different from the other humans who wandered these streets. Her hands were stuffed into her coat pockets, her hair danced in the wake of a passing taxicab, her exhalations rose as mist from her face in the crisp evening air. This last detail proved she was indeed warm inside, with blood flowing through her veins rather than liquid nitrogen. Perhaps if she'd been born into a normal life and family, she could've lived as unfettered, concerned more with passing her introductory courses in college than whose blood would be on her hands in the upcoming month. Against his better judgment, he felt the vestiges of sympathy begin to stir in his soul.

If only things had been different for you. Perhaps then you might have known a life of peace… perhaps….

Yet no, he couldn't allow such a thought to formulate within his mind. The woman before him was a soldier, a killer, a monster, not….

Cassandra noticed him gazing at her, and her benign expression contorted into one of aggravation. "What? Why are you staring at me? Don't look so concerned. I'm not cold, clone. I'm perfectly fine, so you can just avert those big purple eyes of yours."

If only….

Turning his face away, he crossed the street and strode into the open marketplace, hearing her footsteps following behind him. At this hour, few of the stalls were still set up, and only a handful were open, but those that were would serve his purpose nicely. At the very least, these portable stores remained devoid of security cameras, and never left their produce to rot – to offer spoiled goods would risk losing business. Of course, in this season fresh fruits and vegetables were dwindling, leaving only dried packets of foodstuffs in their place, and from these, Mewtwo picked out several packages, inwardly lamenting the knowledge that it might be some time before he tasted the tart juice of freshly picked grapes again. With a sigh, he showed his intended purchases to the booth owners and handed over the coin necessary for the trade, bowing his head beneath his hood.
and keeping his paw concealed in the sleeves of his cloak. Cassandra watched this behavior, understanding why he took such lengths to conceal himself. It would cause quite a stir if he were exposed as the rare pokémon he was. After he browsed a few more stalls, buying salted fish and jerky and adding them to the sack, he surprised her by pausing at a stand for sweets. On bits of wax paper lay balls of honeyed almonds and other nuts, an array of chocolates and caramels, and creamy sweets with berries in their centers. He ordered a bag of the last selection, murmuring something about Psyche's recent cravings, and then, surprising her, he asked if she wanted anything.

Her extreme discomfort at this suggestion was obvious, despite how she tried to conceal it. "No, Mewtwo, that's hardly…that's not appropriate."

"You surprise me, Cassandra. You, who defies laws and morality alike, now worries about whether something is correct in social function or not. However, as your 'host,' I must insist on treating you."

He gazed at the array again and then settled on a packet of vanilla candies, the small, white spheres supposedly having a lemon jelly core. As he tossed the candies to her, she caught the gift and held it at arm's length, perplexed by the gesture. Her bewildered expression was amusing, the clone thought to himself, yet he held back his soft chuckles as he handed over the small amount of cash required for it. The paper money didn't seem anywhere near enough payment for the humor it had brought him. Yet what made the purchase priceless was what happened minutes later: Cassandra opened the packet and popped one of the sweets in her mouth, and tried very, very hard not to let Mewtwo see how she enjoyed it. Yet he could sense her pleasure, and that pleased him.

However, that feeling didn't linger. Soon enough it evaporated, and he grew rather sullen. You fool..., he hissed to himself, and as his surly mood began to overtake him, nurtured along by his disgust at his actions, he nearly passed by his second stop. However, he caught himself in time and stepped down into the filthy alleyway, avoiding the rats who were enjoying their putrefying meals of human garbage. He prayed he'd never need to stoop to their level, feeding on such filth, but he supposed he couldn't tell what the future might bring. The woman behind him was proof enough of that.

Realizing how she might bungle the upcoming exchange, he said, "Keep silent while I meet with these people. Their group is always on edge, and I would prefer to avoid startling them."

She raised an eyebrow at him. "What exactly are you trying to imply-?"

"Merely that I would appreciate your silence. Now hush."

By this point, they'd halted behind a dingy laundromat, whose vents belched perpetual steam that made the fabrics on the clotheslines above, which were strung between the apartment buildings, into canvasses of mildew. Clinging to each molecule of air of this back alley were the stenches of old beer, spoiled Chinese food, and rodent urine, while rust deteriorated any metal to be found within the area. Mold, meanwhile, dissolved the timber from long broken furniture into black fuzz, while slime spread in sticky layers around the edges of the garbage bins. Various species of flies had deemed this place a paradise, and she saw them clustered in swarms when the headlights of passing vehicles on the road struck them.

Ironically, the scene vaguely reminded Cassandra Merlo of "home." Yet while she was used to such places, she was still disgusted when she felt something squish beneath her boots, and when the pungent odor of decay filled her nose. Annoyance flared in her, and she repressed a curse as she closed her eyes. She would have to wash the grime from these... Mewtwo was lucky that she wasn't willing to walk in this place with only socks, otherwise she might have thrown the sullied footwear at him right then. With the nasty gunk on them and their weighted soles, dingy him with them was tempting, but she repressed the urge, and wordlessly watched a group of grungy young men and
women enter the alleyway, kicking about empty beer cans as they approached. Some appeared no older than fifteen years of age, while the oldest, the best dressed of the bunch, held herself as an leader would, her posture erect and confident. Unlike the others, she was dressed in a pristine university uniform, her auburn hair falling in glossy waves and her straight teeth a dazzling white as she grinned at the cloaked figure before her. Yet there was no sweetness behind her smile, and with growing surprise, Cassandra watched the clone pull a bag of what seemed to be coarse sugar from his sack, swapping it for the money the leader pulled from her purse.

Having witnessed exchanges like this one countless times as a teenager, the agent immediately understood what was taking place, and had to quell the astonished laughter that rose in her throat at the recognition.

Well, well…so looks can be quite deceiving, can’t they, Mewtwo?

Minutes later, when they'd returned to the swept, clean streets, avoiding the main crowds walking along the sidewalks, she said as much to him.

Yet he disappointed her as he explained, "What I gave those children was not cocaine - it is a far safer, synthetic substitute I created, closer to sugar than anything else. True, there is a hefty dose of caffeine in it to mimic the high, but it is barely toxic, and is not as addictive as the true drug."

And here he'd led her to believe he wasn't such a saint! "'Safer,' eh? For them, maybe, but what happens when they discover what it really is? People die when they try to trick hardcore druggies, clone."

"Considering that your assignment here is to murder me, you should not be concerned," he said bluntly.

Cassandra hissed at that. "Did I say I was worried about you? Fuck no - I'm worried about me! I've dealt with cranky addicts before, and ended up shot in the leg for my troubles! I'd prefer not to have that experience again, especially without having something to fight back with."

"You will not be getting your blades back. If you must defend yourself, I am certain your training would enable you to steal a weapon from them without much difficulty."

True. But still, that would be such a bother…!

"We have one more stop before we head back to my home," he said, glancing back at her to find her scowling. "There is no need for you to be so cross, either. This visit hardly merits you being coiled up, prepared to snap out and bite."

Is that his way of telling me to relax? Supposing that it was, the assassin trudged along behind him, wandering down the streets until they arrived in a considerably lighter part of town. The dingy apartment complexes melted into the houses of the wealthy, stylized in Japanese architecture, with curving, red tiled roofs; decorated, sliding doors; and furnished porches from which the owners could watch the autumn leaves float down onto their well-groomed gardens. Although it was only October, temperatures had fallen enough that the tiny, trickling rivers weaving across the personal grounds, feeding into shallow ponds of water lilies and koi pokémon, had a thin layer of ice coating them. From within the chilled waters, goldeens drowsily blinked up at the vagrants as they passed by, and the woman mused that soon the water dwellers would be moved indoors to prevent them from being frozen in the ice. Eventually, they entered one garden through an unlatched gate, and began to approach one of the smaller homes, which was cradled in a cluster of willow trees, whose golden boughs swayed in the evening wind.
Not understanding what the typically misanthropic clone was doing, Cassandra watched with considerable surprise as he knocked on the front door of the home and waited patiently for the owner to arrive. After a minute or so, the agent heard shuffling from inside, and the door slid open to reveal an elderly woman with gray, white-streaked hair. Despite the arch of her back, she leaned upon her cane of white bamboo lightly, and beneath the glow of the electrical lamp of the entrance hallway, the silken teal kimono she wore, with a blue wisteria print, shimmered beautifully. Yet then Cassandra noticed the older woman's eyes: her pupils were the color of pewter, and didn't focus on her visitors, instead peering straight through them.

*She's blind*, Cassandra realized.

Yet despite this fact, the woman seemed to know who stood before her, because she smiled and said, "Well, if it isn't the little snitch! Come on in, cat boy, and bring your she-demon friend with you."

*How does she know I'm here...?*

Mewtwo, seeing the confusion on the agent's face, answered her unspoken question. "*Abigail may be unable to see, but her other senses still function properly. She can hear you shifting in place, can smell your fragrance...why does that shock you? Surely you, of all people, were taught how to use all of your senses efficiently, in case you lost one in a fight.*"

At that comment, Cassandra's eyes hardened, for she had harsh memories of such training, and brushing by him, she murmured, "Yes, I was." Then, glancing back at him, she said, "Well, she invited us in, didn't she? Let's go."

After she entered the home, Mewtwo followed along behind her and slid the front door shut. As they strode into the dining room at Abigail's command, he saw Cassandra gazing around at the walls, noting the framed Japanese paintings and reading the calligraphy pieces that hung there. Each artistic work, she noted, was soothing to the eyes and heart, but given their owner couldn't see them, their placement in the home seemed strange. Then again, the elder almost certainly had visitors, so perhaps they were hung up for the viewing pleasure of others. As they knelt on the mat beneath the low table, Abigail asked them to be patient as she brewed them some tea, and while they waited, Cassandra summoned up her lessons on etiquette she'd been taught over the years.

When the old woman returned, carrying a tray weighted with a full teakettle, three cups and teaspoons, and small bowls of honey, sugar, and milk, she set the tray on the table and gestured for them to prepare their drinks as they pleased. After they'd finished, she stirred honey into her own and, smiling, asked, "Well, snitch, will you introduce me to this girl or not? Or will you prefer to maintain your silence, as you typically do during the first cup of tea?"

Mewtwo, taking a sip of his drink and savoring the light flavor and aroma, replied, "*Her name is Cassandra.*"

"What, no last name?" she said, turning her face towards the other woman...which, to the agent, was rather disconcerting, considering that she knew Abigail was actually peering into nothingness rather than into her new visitor's face.

"*If she were to tell me one, I doubt it would be her actual surname.*"

"So you picked up a slut, then?" the old woman inquired lightly, evidently amused by the idea.

Cassandra sputtered on her tea. "Excuse me? I'm not - that's completely ridiculous-!"

"Hm? Well, you have the scent of a woman entering into her sexual prime, young lady, and without
giving your last name freely, one might assume you don't want to be associated with whatever it is that you do for a living. Yet even if you don't sleep around, you should be a bit more careful. You're now fully equipped to be a mother, despite not being one yet - no baby fragrance." At those words, Cassandra Merlo gaped, not used to being talked to in such a way, and she flushed as the older woman went on, "Yet if you keep up this no-last-name basis, I am certain it will happen in time. I'm sure some careless-

Sparing Cassandra from further embarrassment, Mewtwo interrupted with a low chuckle. "Abigail, as amusing as your advisements are, I must agree with my companion. She does not 'put out' in the least. Unfortunately, she belongs to a far shadier occupation than prostitution."

Contemplating his words, Abigail paused, before understanding suffused her, and her expression darkened. "Ah, yes…I was wondering what that stench was," she said, and fixed her attention on the younger female. "Girl, try as you might to wash away the odor of blood on your skin, you'll never entirely rid yourself of it. It will take far more than soap to cleanse that away."

Abruptly, Cassandra's flustered expression morphed into something else entirely. Her clutch on her teacup tightened, betraying the warring emotions she attempted to conceal. Yet within seconds, this reaction died, and the woman went cold and numb. Her grip relaxed, and staring down into her drink, she mused that this entire situation was absurd. She then slowly sipped her cooling drink, almost able to taste the mint within…almost….

Looking up at them, her voice conveying faux sweetness, she asked, "Tell me, Abigail, do you happen to have any knives I could borrow? Mewtwo here has taken mine away." She then smiled cruelly, wearing the same grin Giovanni wore after cornering a troublesome foe. "This cat boy is quite the thief, isn't he?"

Startled silence met her words, and after several uncomfortable moments, Abigail replied, "Why…why yes, he is." Then gathering herself up fully, she continued on, "Truth be told, I met him precisely because of that! In the middle of this past summer, he had the nerve to steal plants from my garden, after all the effort I had put into raising them! I stayed awake all night hearing him dig them up…and when he returned again a few night later, I caught him in the act and used my broom on him, yelling loudly enough for all of my neighbors to hear! He didn't like that much," she chuckled, succeeding in dispelling the lingering tension.

"There was no need for you to shout. Being struck about the head is more than enough to convey to anyone that they're not welcome. What was more surprising to me was that you invited me in afterwards," Mewtwo murmured. Yet although the memory, even now, caused him to squirm, he was relieved that the old human had found a way to regain her bearings after the assassin's comments. Of course, with the daring life she'd led in her younger years, he wasn't truly surprised at that.

With a grin, the elderly woman retorted, "I'm not that inhospitable! I could hear your stomach growling, after all…and besides," she continued, pointing her cane at him, "I needed someone to fix my garden after you'd trampled all over it."

"I did nothing of the sort-."

Abigail smacked him with her cane to quiet him, and then turned to Cassandra. "Don't let his pretty speech fool you, girl. No matter what he claims, he can make mistakes as easily as anyone else can," she said, before lamenting her point, "That he stepped all over my poor sprouts proves that! It took days to coax them back to life after he'd beaten on them!"

Then, with a sigh, she turned back to the psychic pokémon. "Besides, if you'd simply asked instead
of taking from an old lady like me, I'd have given you double what you originally stole."

"I believe I have already apologized for this," the clone grumbled, rubbing at the back of his skull where she'd struck him.

"Certainly you did, but your friend didn't know that, did she?" Abigail pointed out, before telling Cassandra, "He doesn't need to ask anymore, however. An hour or two of giving me company is enough in exchange for some plants." With that, she glanced back at the telepathic and said, "Speaking of which, they're on the back porch."

"Thank you. I will be sure to gather them once we finish speaking."

The elderly woman nodded at that, and then, pouring herself another cup of tea, asked, "So tell me, how is Psyche…?"

For a time, Cassandra listened to their conversation, before eventually tuning out their voices. She concerned herself instead with the thought that the clone wasn't, perhaps, as much of a misanthrope as he led most to believe. These thoughts then strayed to regard the strangeness of her current situation, and vaguely, she wondered how long it would take before her mind began to bend under the continual, unexpected turns of events….

Eventually, the replica's baritone voice cut into her musings. "…Thank you for the tea, Abigail. Cassandra and I must be returning now, however. We have kept you up far too late, anyhow," the pokémon said as he stood and gazed down upon the elderly human.

Her pewter eyes glimmered with laughter. "Goodness, no! My grandchildren do worse any day! Besides, I'm hardy for my age."

The telepath nodded as he turned away. "Indeed. Hopefully, I will see you again soon."

Farewells were then exchanged, which Cassandra took part in, although her silence would have sufficed as far as the others were concerned. Yet nonetheless, the agent murmured a goodbye at the parting, for she doubted she would ever meet with the other human again. Afterwards she followed Mewtwo onto the back porch, where he gathered the parcels laid out, which contained wrapped tealeaves, tubers, and some spices and herbs. Placing them into the now full sack, they departed from the quiet neighborhood into the rowdier district of the city where they'd come from.

After they'd traveled several blocks, Cassandra said, "I thought you hated humans."

The pokémon steps faltered as he contemplated an answer to that. "…Certainly, I dislike your species very much. Contempt and scorn would accurately label my feelings towards them, but I do not hate humans. I admit, at one point that was the case, and during that time, I would have gladly seen to the extermination of your kind. Causing your extinction was well within my powers, and yet…."

The assassin regarded him contemplatively, understanding why he might have held such loathing towards her species. Among her people were monsters who were beyond reproach, who fully merited being eradicated from the earth. She'd met them, breathed the same air as them, had heard their growls within her ears….

Gazing up at the nearly black sky, she said, "Yet you refrained from killing us all. Why?"

As she flanked him to gaze at his face, she watched his eyes cloud over in thought. "Simply put, there are those in your species who are virtuous, who are pure and kind, and these people did not deserve to die because of the cruelty of their fellows. They are rare, to be certain, but they are
present nonetheless. I had other reasons for sparing your people as well, but let us leave the matter at that."

When his voice fell, the conversation died along with it, and they walked in mutual silence through the labyrinth of streets that were emptying of crowds and passing cars. Over the asphalt road, a fragment of concrete skittered after being roughly kicked, and chinked against the base of a lamppost. Beneath their feet, brown leaves crunched, a few whirling in the wake of a wailing police car, its flashing, red lights illuminated them momentarily as it shrieked by. Soon they found themselves trailing into the alleyways of flickering neon signs, the clanging of glass bottles being poured into the dumpster behind nearby pubs making their eardrums tingle. From all around them, strangers hollered to each other in jubilation and anger, providing another layer to the symphony of metropolitan life. This was the concert of the city at night, but the assassin couldn't appreciate its melody, not when she'd soon be trapped within the sanctuary of the clone, barred from wandering at her leisure.

"Screw this," Cassandra hissed, and without further warning, darted into the nearest bar before her target could stop her.

He stared after her for a moment, before shaking his head in exasperation. Of course she would choose a virtual cesspool as her version of a haven. Given what he supposed her natural environment was, it figured as much! Without any other option, he followed her into the bar, avoiding the smokers on the front steps as much as he could manage. Yet even so, the acrid odor of tobacco smoke filled his nostrils, making him grimace and need to repress a vicious cough. Humans, he mused, not only created filth, but also had the most horrible habits to add. As he stood near the doors, he scanned the room for his "guest," who was obviously attempting to enjoy herself far more than necessary. From the ceiling, blood orange lamps hung in equal intervals, giving the bar's atmosphere an edgy quality which was strengthened by the pounding, nu-metal music coming from the overhead speakers. Circular tables, surrounded by rigid chairs, were occupied by a number of varied people: many an ear were studded with earrings, some harbored hairstyles that defied gravity, while others bore the uniforms commonly associated with skinhead factions. Others, in contrast to them, wouldn't have been allowed in many public facilities due to their lack of appropriate clothing. Yet many of the other denizens of the pub merely appeared to be depressed civilians, having retreated from the corporate world into a simpler one of drink and money. Among these peoples, many participated in card and dice games while tossing back their drinks. Some were guzzling down mixes that would almost certainly give them horrible hangovers in the morning, or worse, put them into the nearest hospital for alcohol poisoning.

Yet these beings didn't concern the clone – the woman did. Eventually he found her sitting at the bar, slightly hunched over the glass in her hands. The drink within reflected the fiery light from above her onto her dark clothes, and as she took a couple swallows of the transparent liquid she'd ordered, the clone bristled. He knew she had no money to pay for the beverage, and so knew well on whom the charge would lay…and moreover, she was not old enough to drink.

Sitting down on the stool beside her, he set down his pack and growled, "You are underage."

She glanced at him. "Only until next March." And then, motioning to the bartender with her glass, she said, "Besides, he hasn't guessed that, so I can drink freely here."

Grey eyes then peered into the depths of his hood as she smirked. "That is, unless you plan on stopping me?"

Silence met her words, and she took another sip of the transparent liquid, testing for a reaction from him.
None came.

Smirking in triumph at the small victory, she began to slip her free hand down to her waist. Hidden from his sight, stolen metal gleamed briefly in the tangerine light. Around them, the pulse of the base in the current song beat the air, and setting down her now empty glass, Cassandra exhaled deeply. Her muscles coiled in anticipation of a long practiced rhythm, readied themselves for fluid motion. Her right hand tightened its grip, and from within the darkness of his cloak, Mewtwo's amethyst eyes gleamed….

Before the people around them registered what was happening, she'd spun towards her target, her free hand lashing out at him in a clenched fist. Mewtwo, moving with equal speed, caught her wrist, just as she'd expected him to. While his fingers finished tightening, she brought up her other hand, which clenched a pocketknife she'd taken from one of the pub's occupants. As the blade swooped upwards, it tore ferociously into his cloak, ever towards the firm muscles of his stomach, poised to slice into the soft organs within-!

His other paw whipped downwards, and grabbing her wrist, he turned to throw her down against the occupied table behind them. As its surface jolted on impact, poker chips and cards scattered, and drinks sloshed from their glasses to splash into their clothes, imbuing the garments with the sour stink of alcohol. As the young men sitting around the table stumbled back from their seats, cursing, one dropped the glass in his hand, which shattered as it hit the polished wood floor. Disregarding all of this, Cassandra snarled and tried futilely to kick the clone, whose body was curled over hers, and whose paws were pinning her down firmly against the table. The stolen switchblade, forced from her hand, had fallen in an arc to clatter against the timber floor. For a few moments, the only sound in the room was the heavy beat of the base drum, before cries of delayed shock and confusion rose.

Mewtwo, ignoring them, lowered his face to hers, the edges of his hood blocking out the reddish glow from above. His fierce eyes bore into her frozen ones, and tightening his grip on her, he hissed, "Do not go making a scene, viper."

He might have said more, but the expression of revulsion on his face was enough to convey what he thought of her in that moment.

Yet witnessing that expression did not stir her. She simply *did not care*….

For a moment, they stared at one another, animosity gleaming brightly in their eyes. Their faces resembled those of rival wolves who'd fought each other viciously, and now - despite still harboring the desire to rip out each other's throat - were incapable of continuing the battle.

The shout of the bartender tore them from of their hostile reverie. "You two, take it outside! I don't need *any* bodily fluids messing up my bar, got it?"

Her gaze darting to the man, Cassandra shoved Mewtwo, who released her and let her up with a scowl. The agent of Team Rocket regarded the local authority indifferently. "Don't worry, we're leaving. He'll be paying for my drink, by the way." With that, she wove her way between the tables, ignoring the stares of the other humans, and exited the bar without a backwards glance.

After she'd departed, slowly, hesitantly, the usual din of conversation resumed from where it had left off. Several people stared at the cloaked figure who'd been attacked for a few more seconds, before returning to their own discussions. Now sorely aggravated and feeling more exasperated with the woman than ever, the replica sat down on the stool the woman had vacated. Then, gazing at her now empty glass, he picked it up, sniffed at the vestiges of the substance within, and found it to be odorless. Swirling a finger into its depths and wetting it with the drink, he brought his fingertip to his mouth and licked at it, tasting the liquid.
It was nothing more than water.

Within the depths of the Team Rocket dormitories, a man in his mid-forties paused at Unit 150, musing at the risks he took in indulging in this visit. Anxiety raced along the length of his spine as glanced down the hallway extending on either side of him, and finding no one there, he took a key from his pocket, slid it into the keyhole, and turned the lock over, opening the door and stepping into the murk. Pocketing the key once more, he closed the door behind him and wandered into the woman's home, relishing being able to feel her spiritual imprint within these walls, without her ever uncovering the fact that he'd been here. After the first time, when he'd arrived to find he'd missed her entirely, too late to see her before she left on another mission for that man, he'd realized she couldn't know of his existence, and had settled for feeding his current sick habit. While she was away on a hunt, he entered her home to note what had changed in her life, all the while nurturing the addiction that was as harmful as it was comforting.

Inhaling deeply the air of the grim place, a faint, sweet scent, so like the fragrance of someone else he'd once known, stirred in his nostrils. Sadness bloomed at the understanding that he might never hold its source, and crossing over to her unmade bed, he sat on the dark fabrics with a sigh. From habit, he reached beneath her bed and pulled out a cardboard box, opening it to finger through her most personal belongings, soon finding the photograph he knew was there: a woman with curly, ash brown hair, in her late twenties, stood on a sandy beach, her hand holding that of a small girl's. Their skin tones contrasted, with hers being far creamier in tone, while her daughter's was of the same bronze hue as her father's, who'd vanished within two years of her birth. As the now frozen waves lapped at their feet, their identical grey eyes glowed with laughter as they posed for the photographer, and their lost joy now sliced deeply into the man. He stroked as their images gently, wishing their fates could have been different….

"Um. Umbre. Umbreon. Umbreon," a low growl reached his ears. "So you've come back. You better take care, human. If you're not careful about your timing, you'll die here at her hands. After what you did to her mother and her, I'm certain she won't give you enough time to explain."

As he placed the picture back into the box, he gazed at the dark fox wearily. "I know, Shadow, and I cannot blame her for that." Then, he asked hesitantly, "...How has she been?"

"Umbreon? Umbre? Umbre," Shadow replied. "Alright, though you should find a way to approach her with that question yourself. Why not ring her up one of these days? She can't sink a knife into you that way."

The older man merely shook his head. "You may be right, but I can't afford to reveal myself to her just now. I need more time."

"Umbre," the little pokémon turned his muzzle up at the human. "Coward."

Closing his dark brown eyes, he sighed. "You may be right, but I can't afford to reveal myself to her just now. I need more time."

At this, the umbreon allowed the old argument to rest again. "Umbreon," he piped instead, changing the subject to a far more intriguing matter. "Do you know who Giovanni sent her to execute this time?"

For the first time in their conversation, the human smiled. "Yes, and that bastard knows he's making an awfully risky gamble by doing so."

"Umbre?" the dark pokémon asked curiously, curling up beside the man's knee as he voiced his query. "So what are you betting happens?"
Pulling a stolen cellular phone from her jacket pocket, Cassandra dialed a memorized series of numbers and waited impatiently as the other line rang. Walking further from the pub, she glanced back at its front doors every few moments, checking to see if the replica had emerged. Thus far, he hadn't followed her outside, but she knew he'd leave the facility soon enough, and so she hissed under her breath for someone to answer the damned phone.

Finally, someone did precisely that. "You've reached the Viridian City Gym. How may I help you?"

Recognizing the voice as the one belonging to Giovanni's secretary, Cassandra recited, "Azra dico, questio placitum quod regimen."

There was silence across the line, before the woman replied, "Hold on for just a moment, Agent Merlo." From there, the assassin heard the click as the call was forwarded to another line.

Then her godfather's low voice carried through the cell's speakers. "Cassandra? What is it? Why are you calling?"

Gritting her teeth at his annoyed tone, she said, "I'm having some difficulties with my assignment over here, so I'll need a couple weeks' extension on the deadline."

Usually on rapid strikes such as this, in which her only task was to seek and destroy the target, a fortnight was all she required to complete a hunt. However, after that time limit had passed, if she made no contact to convey the situation, Giovanni would send in reinforcements to rescue her and complete her assignment in her stead. While they were efficient in their work, being the same group responsible for a number of terrorist strikes earlier in the decade, employing them required channeling a number of expensive resources from other operations, and was far more likely to draw the attention to the assassination with their explosive approach. As such, the agent and her superior preferred to avoid the option whenever possible.

Plus, Cassandra rather hated the idea of others believing her to be weak, as would inevitably occur if a backup team had to save her ass.

Her boss considered her request, and then said, "Very well, you'll have two extra weeks to complete your assignment. Will that be all?"

She murmured an affirmative, and then, smirking slightly as she peered at something out in the murk, she asked, "Hey, godfather, what's the best way to hijack a motorcycle?"

There was amusement in his voice when he replied, and she imagined a hand shooing her away as he said, "I'm certain you remember the tricks I taught you quite well, little raven. Now off with you, and remember, you have three more weeks left to finish your hunt."

The assassin understood. "Got it." Without another word, Cassandra pressed the "call end" button on the cell phone, went into its history and erased the dialed calls listing, and then flung the device back towards the bar, leaving it up to the ingenuity of its owner to find. In that moment, the door of the bar swung open and the replica stepped out, soon spotting her and beginning to walk toward her. She allowed him to catch up as she crossed into the nearby parking lot, and as she approached her quarry, listened when he commented on her drink being nothing more than water.

She didn't look back at him when she replied, "Of course. I don't drink alcohol."

He seemed to hesitate before he asked, "And why might that be?"

Her steps faltered, but when she continued to move forward, she said, "Let's just say that I've had
some rather unpleasant experiences with alcohol in the past, and I haven't been keen on drinking again since then."

"...I see."

She stopped walking. "You really don't."

After an uncomfortable moment of silence, she strode over to the V-rod motorcycle that had caught her eye minutes before. It glistened like polished obsidian, streaked through with a luminous, deep crimson hue. The black leather seats were finely oiled, and the wide headlight sat snug between the glossy, steel handles. Only slightly dulled with asphalt dust, the foot pegs and the chrome spokes of the wheels gleamed under the neon lights, while the exhaust pipe flared out on its right flank. At its rear were lights that resembled narrowed, golden eyes, and she mused that in its entirety, it was an expensive and well cared for piece of machinery. With a grin, she pulled out another few items she'd pickpocketed from the people in the bar, including a few sets of keys and some useful tools. Soon enough she'd pried into the inner workings of the vehicle and had it rewired, relishing using the skills she had learned during the one fun part of her training: how to acquire any escape vehicle that struck her fancy. With a few final provocations, the engine revved to life with a pleased growl, and casting the psychic pokémon a mischievous look, she sealed the now purring motorcycle up to its previous whole perfection. With a leg over its side to straddle it, she pulled on the available helmet and twisted the throttle. Putting the gears in reverse, she veered out of the parking spot, switched it into "drive," and began to speed off.

Turning around to race back down the road, she passed him and threw a challenge over her shoulder to the clone. "Catch me if you can, pussycat!"

Before he could respond, she'd rounded the corner well over the declared speed limit, her feet barely brushing the brake foot peddle as she turned. Her hands caressed the hand levers and clutch to switch into slower gears if the need arose…but for now, she wanted some speed!

Listening to the roar of the engine growing quieter as the distance between them grew, Mewtwo stared after her, surprised by her actions…and intrigued by her words. As a tiny smirk curled across his muzzle, his eyes glowed azure as he began to levitate. So she wanted him to chase her, did she? Very well, he'd play along; after all, he could hardly allow her to escape him riding a stolen motobike, now could he? Amusement gleaming in his eyes, he began to soar after her, determined to snatch her back. He wouldn't allow her to best him so easily…!

Darting through the thin traffic, Cassandra leaned forward and savored the rush of adrenaline from the ride, on occasion casting a backwards glance over her shoulder to see if the feline was following her. Soon enough, she spotted him flying around ten meters above her, beyond the reach of the lampposts staggered along the sides of the road. Grinning wickedly at him, she swerved down another street corner and another, darting about in an attempt to shake him. When she looked over her shoulder again, she didn't see him…but within moments he was there once more, flying a few meters above her head. Rising to the challenge he posed, she twisted the throttle, increasing her speed and racing ahead.

In the night, the chase went on.

"Umbre?" the dark pokémon asked curiously, curling up beside the man's knee as he voiced his query. "So what are you betting happens?"

At the question, the man's dark eyes glistened with wry amusement. "Haven't you heard the saying, Shadow?"
He paused before giving the dark fox his answer, before telling him the principle he'd come to believe in over the years. He'd lived long enough to recognize some of the patterns that wove within the lives of the people around him, and had realized that this case would likely have but one outcome:

"History is doomed to repeat itself."

And neither of them would know, until years later, just how accurate that saying would turn out to be.

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Author's Note: Cassandra's code phrase to Giovanni's secretary, in extremely rough and babyish Latin, was: "Azra calls, seeking conference and guidance." Azra was one of the first names given to Azrael, the Archangel of Death, so Giovanni thought it would be a fitting code name for Cassandra, given her appearance and her occupation. In any case, I hope you enjoyed the chapter!

Sincerely,

WiseAbsol
"I believe very strongly that when it comes to desire, when it comes to attraction, that things are never black and white, things are very much shades of grey."

- Brian Molko.

Beneath the door to the guest room, shadows passed back and forth, silent and seemingly uncertain. From the bed inside the room, Cassandra watched them shift, her muscles coiled from anxiety, and attempting to calm herself, she rolled over to face away from the flickering bar of light. As she closed her eyes, she willed herself to sleep, tempting Morpheus will her willingness to submit to him. Yet tonight the god of dreams refused to be seduced, and her mind tormented her with the possibilities of why the clone might be lurking outside her chamber, each one making her stomach churn and clench painfully. Her breath caught with apprehension as the doorknob began to turn, only to be released in a relieved, soundless sigh as it stilled. He would not enter the room this night…would he?

Beyond the bedroom, Mewtwo forced himself to cease his actions, barring himself from entering the room that was no longer under his ownership. Wrestling down the craving gnawing at the edges of his reasonable mind, he retracted his paw from the knob that would permit his entrance, berating himself for his foolishness. This desire to invade the woman's makeshift abode was blatant idiocy, a perverse form of childish curiosity lacking in innocence. The replica tried to convince himself that he wished to learn what the human's dreams were like, that knowledge being easily gained by brushing her mind as she slept...but that, he knew, was a weak excuse, and a rather inappropriate one at that. Keeping that in mind, he stepped back and forced his common sense to reassert itself. He couldn't surrender to what that nameless, buried piece of him desired. He was above that type of action it suggested, and if he had to resort to darker methods to quell this momentary senselessness, then he'd do so. Yet even as he reassured himself of that, as he gazed at the human's door, his thoughts continued to whirl, his paws clenched into fists, and he felt his hatred for the man who'd ordered his creation surge anew. Had it not been for Giovanni, this loathsome situation wouldn't be occurring! Everything would be different...and as he recalled something which pained him greatly, he stared at the door and noticed, for the first time, the way the grain seemed to form a cruel face, which mocked him with silent, scathing laughter. As his frustration peaked, he teleported into the dawn, wishing desperately to be anywhere but where the agent was. He wanted to be anywhere but here...

There was only so much any being could endure in one day, and in chasing after the assassin, in catching her, in having his veins flood with exhilaration throughout the flight, suffice to say that Mewtwo had, in the aftermath, reached that point. From the rooftop of a distant cathedral, he watched the sun climb over the easterly horizon with somber eyes. He struggled to petrify his heart, loathing its persistent beating, for what use had it ever been to him, or to anyone else for that matter? Hadn't he learned that it was the most deceptive organ of the soul, and that baiting it would only inflict more wounds upon him? In that moment, he yearned to tear that part of himself away, for surely it was the source of all that had once harmed him? He'd expected too much from other beings and had paid the price for his trust. Solitude and numbness, he mused, were the wiser, safer options. So why not turn to them instead…?
As he watched, the sun rose, shining brightly onto the world despite his dour mood. His only victory against the orb of flame was that its warmth and light were unable to penetrate his pelt...though as the rays struck him, he remembered that he wasn't supposed to walk beneath its golden glow anyhow. That too had only burned him in the past, which was - at least in part - why he'd exiled himself to the world of shadows in the first place.

There were simply some things he couldn't return to after leaving them behind.

Hours later, when the assassin awoke and emerged from the guest room, she found that the replica was still absent from his home. As she gazed upwards through the skylight, half expecting to see his silhouette cross over the glass, she noted that it was midday, making his current disappearance rather unusual. Despite how her target had sought to alter his sleeping patterns to match those of his roommate and his "guest," he remained primarily nocturnal, and typically never strayed outside in the daytime. This begged the question of why he would leave now - why would he break his routine? She found she couldn't discern a precise reason, but she suspected his strange behavior had something to do with the previous night...

As she tore down the narrowing backstreets on the motorcycle she'd stolen, he suddenly descended before her, forcing her to swerve away to avoid hitting him. As the vehicle jerked to the side, it struck an unseen pothole and broke free from her grasp...and as it began to tip, making her stomach flip within her, she felt herself being tugged backwards into the air. As she watched, the bike crashed onto its side, spun, and skidded into a nearby wall, its previous glossy front crumbling as it hit the solid surface. Its primary headlight sparked and burst out, and as it ceased moving, its wheels continued to spin about, before they too eventually spun to a stop. She lamented the damage done to such a beautiful vehicle, and cursed the clone for getting in her way, since he'd ultimately caused her to lose control over the bike.

Yet then, realizing that her target had his arms wrapped around her, she cussed more forcefully and struggled to make him release her, not quite considering the fact that they were hanging ten meters from the ground. Had he done as she'd desired and allowed her to fall, the impact may have seriously injured or killed her. As it were, the clone forced her to realize the stupidity of her words when he did as she requested, and as she shrieked at the realization that hitting the pavement from that height could do some serious damage to her body, he caught her again with his telekinesis...before letting her fall the last meter to the concrete with a "thud." As she groaned from pain and picked herself up, she glared at him through the visor of the helmet, her aggravated expression unable to be seen by him through the tinted plastic. Still, she could have sworn his eyes were smirking. Fucking jerk.

"Are you ready to return the studio?" he asked.

"Well, you certainly killed my buzz, kitten, so yeah, I guess I'm ready to go. It's not as if I have any choice in the matter anyway, right?" she growled, brushing herself off and grimacing at the throbbing pain that reached all the way into her jarred bones. She'd no doubt wake up bruised the next morning.

"Not in the least," he said, his tone light with his amusement. Tearing off her helmet and tossing it at the totaled motorcycle, she shot him a disgusted look, annoyed that she'd proven to be a source of entertainment for him. Yet even worse was the realization that – although she'd never willingly admit it to anyone else - she too had enjoyed the chase...and had known, even as she had exploited every evasion maneuver she knew to elude him, that he'd capture her in the end.

After a quick teleportation, they'd arrived back in the studio and she'd returned to the guest room to sleep, her final memory of the clone being of him unpacking the stash he'd gathered on the venture.
As she'd entered the room and closed the door behind her, stripping off her clothes and slipping underneath the covers, she'd fallen asleep to the sound of the refrigerator and cupboard doors opening and closing and he put the foodstuffs away. Only later had she woken to a light flickering across her eyelids, and had watched as the clone paced outside of her door, as if debating whether to enter the room while she slept. Recalling the incident with a shiver, she wondered what had compelled him to linger there for nearly ten minutes before turning away. At one point, he'd almost invaded the guest room, and if he had, what would she have done…? She honestly didn't know, and that had the effect of making her very nervous.

Yet from the memory that incurred her anger and discomfort, a more comforting thought arose: he wasn't here right now. He could be kilometers away, concealed in some shadowy nook until the evening when he could again wander freely. While he could return via teleportation, that he hadn't done so yet could imply that he might be gone for hours still. If that were true, than unless this was an experiment or a test for her, designed to gauge what she did in his absence (which she doubted was the case, since he'd had opportunities to analyze her reactions during other ventures), that would mean she was completely left to her own devices today. As she contemplated what she might do with such time, and as she remembered what had occurred last night, a single priority rose in her mind: find a way to escape him. With this urge compelling her, her eyes began to drift to the stairwell that descended into the building's lower floors. Mewtwo's warning echoed in her mind: she'd be attacked by the wild ones if she tried that route...but the arrogance spawned from her years of success as death's shadow flooded her with cockiness. Just how powerful could those pokémon be? How potent could their fury, eight days old, possibly be towards her? They hadn't taken the initiative to hunt her while the clone had been absent during other times this past week, and most would probably be slumbering now...

This might be the best chance she had to escape, and if she was successful, she could vanish into the city and rethink how to complete her mission. On the other hand, if she remained in this place and stagnated, then nothing would be accomplished...and there was the additional risk that one night, Mewtwo might chance his mind and visit her as she slept. And as she lay there, vulnerable, who knew what he might do to her…?

Shuddering and ignoring the questioning gaze of Psyche, she gathered her belongings from the guest room and then strode purposefully towards the stairwell.

"Espe? Es-!" the lilac vixen yelped, springing to her feet. "What are you doing? They'll kill you-!

Cassandra swept her gaze over the little pokémon and said, "That's hardly your concern. I have a chance to leave, so I intend on taking it. When the clone returns, tell him that, like him, I'm not fond of being caged."

_I'll be back, though. After all, I still have a task to perform before I can return to Kanto..._, she thought as she opened the door to the stairwell, stepping into the murk and the dust. As she closed the door behind her, with the latch "snicking" shut, the mother-to-be felt the sound echo through her, ominous as the first tick in a countdown.

The woman never would make it out of the building.

An hour later, a wearied Mewtwo returned to his home, his fur having been baked underneath the merciless sun, the heat of it making his stomach roll and the light making his eyes ache. He should have teleported to the studio earlier, but he'd needed more time to contemplate the current situation, and so had sacrificed his comfort to gain clarity. But as he stepped into his home, his brow furrowed as his ears detected the sounds of battle from the lower levels of the building, and as the copper odor of blood stung in his nose. Were some of the wild ones below fighting over territory or mates…? He
called out to Psyche, asking if she knew the source of the conflict, and soon spied her sitting near the exit to the stairwell. Her eyes bore into the door intently, and when his voice rose in the studio, she turned her gaze towards him…and her expression immediately conveyed to him that something had gone wrong.

"Es, espe. Espe...," she told him, her tail lying limp behind her. "Mewtwo, she wouldn't listen to me. She went down there and they..."

After her initial words, however, Mewtwo didn't hear the remainder of her statement. He cast out his senses, attempting to discover where the woman currently was, but in the chaotic whirl of battle below, he couldn't pinpoint her location. As the stench of blood once again filled his nostrils, the odor of it underlined with something bitter, he recognized the scent as primarily belonging to Cassandra. As rage clutched him firm, he cursed and then stepped towards the stairwell, his intent clear to the espeon. He was planning to go save the woman.

"Espe? Espeon. Espe-," she cried. "What are you doing? She's probably dead by now! It's been an hour since-

As he leveled an icy glare at her, the words were choked in her throat. The furious expression on his face made her soul freeze within her body, and though she wanted to retreat from his cold gaze, she found herself incapable of moving. For the first time, the espeon saw the monster lurking within the usually pacifistic being, more than capable of tearing her flesh from her bones within a matter of seconds. Although they'd been close companions for half a year, he didn't spare her from the ferocity in his eyes, and his features didn't soften at her sudden fear. Unable to look away, the mother-to-be could only gaze into his chilled, amethyst irises, and as they held her firm, she saw something lurking in their depths, something unidentifiable yet somehow familiar to her. Yet before she could place a name to, he spoke, his voice swallowing her like a wave of an arctic sea.

"I will retrieve her, espeon, for whether either of us like it or not, right now, I need that human."

"Es? Espe-!" Words finally came to her as she recoiled from the demon. "But why? Mewtwo, she tried to-!"

"I will be back, Psyche. Wait here where you'll be safe."

Yet did he mean that she'd be safe here from the wild ones or from his wrath? Watching him disappear into the gloom, his curling tail the last to slip into the black, his roommate shuddered, wondering if she's just caught a glimpse of the replica's true nature...

The warning arrived after midnight. Innocence had been slaughtered by an unthinkable nightmare, and a younger Mewtwo - wearing the suit of armor created to hold his powers in check - teleported to the place where dreams had been nurtured and, within these twilight hours, brutally murdered. As the stench of blood overwhelmed his sense of smell, he gagged and felt his heart crumple at the realization that he was too late. The messenger had taken too long to reach him, and so their hope, previously thriving despite the miasmic atmosphere it was growing within, withered and died upon the vine....

Splatters of crimson sullied the floors, and as he left bloody paw prints in his wake, countless pairs of luminous eyes appraised him, many of their owners swiftly assessing that they mustn't cross him this hour. Shadows darted back and forth before him, and as he followed the trail of blood, the echoes of yelps and howls grew louder. Crashing sounds and the shrieking of feral beasts arose from below, and quickening his pace, he descended further into the madness....
The sanctuary was a mockery of what he remembered it to be, with its holy ground saturated with an almost black liquid. He'd once heard that the darker the blood was, the deeper the wounds of the victim were, and as he searched for the causality of a devil's greed, he desperately called out for the one he considered a dear friend. Where... where...?

Where was she? In his mounting frustration, he lashed out at the beasts surrounding him with his psychical powers, their hisses scathing in his ears as they were seared by the psycho-electrical energies. Pressing forward, he descended down the stairs, throwing the pokémon who now sought to dispatch him down the shaft to their deaths. Their claws and fangs sliced across his barrier, and glancing at them with glowing, azure eyes, he propelled them into the concrete wall, crushing their torsos instantly. When he tired of that, he allowed them to leap close enough for his tail to rebuke them, savoring the exertion of the violent energy building in him. At times, he felt his opponents nip at him, felt them slash as his legs and chest and back, but those who damaged him were slaughtered as his telekinesis reached into them to implode their innards. Eventually, he sensed the aura of the human he'd come for ahead of him. He wondered if the foolish woman now regretted ignoring his advisements and had heading into a death trap...

Swatting away the beasts who charged at him, he drew closer to her, sensing that while she still lived, she was now weak and fatigued. This didn't surprise him; after running from and fighting against dozens of wild pokémon for over an hour, likely having minimal means to defend herself with, it was only natural that she'd be exhausted. As he concentrated on pinpointing her spiritual signature, a dark wolf leapt before him, and as it snarled at him to go no further, Mewtwo eyes narrowed. What an arrogant animal, to believe he could redirect a being who had powers that rivaled those of a god. In the end, this pathetic dog couldn't even hope to snap a single finger of his paw. As he stepped forward, the canine sprinted towards him, and without pause, the feline sidestepped it and whipped his tail across the creature's back. A resounding "crack" sounded in their ears as its spine broke in two, and the mightyena collapsed with a yelp of shock and pain.

Staring down at it, the clone said, "You forget who is the master of this place. You pitiful creatures cannot hope to stand in my way, so if you are interested in preserving your lives, step aside. I will not abide to you hunting down what belongs to me!"

He distantly realized he was taking possession of the woman, but in his haste, Mewtwo didn't dwell on the thought. He left the fallen pokémon to die like the others who'd confronted him, and felt nothing as more (and equally futile) attacks came. He'd detached his consciousness from the conflict and the destruction he was causing, dividing his soul from his actions as a soldier; after being involved in countless battles, the division came back to him easily enough. Occasionally, he reminded himself to mend the slashes he was gaining, since they'd lure additional opponents to him with the fragrance of his blood. Some of those enemies included those accursed dark pokémon, who passed through his shields as if they weren't even there - he mused to himself that they were perversions of nature, defying the abilities of mew, the ancestor who had brought them into this world. Only they possessed an element that could slay their ancient parents, and the replica found himself thankful for his training in physical combat, which he'd had at the suggestion of another. Try as they might to sink their fangs and claws into his pelt, he could evade and counter their strikes, all thanks to one being....

As the woman shrieked ahead of him, he refocused on the world around him and raced towards the sound. Flames erupted ahead of him, and as the fiery light illuminated the level, he glimpsed the agent shying from the heat. Her hair was plastered to her face, sweat and blood ran down her flesh in rivulets, staining her well-torn clothes. She had one arm wrapped around her stomach, her hand clutching at her side, where dark fluid was seeping from between her curled fingers. In her other hand she wielded a thin metal bar, which she swung into the skull of the persian who pounced towards her. Spying movement from the stairwell, her grey eyes darted to him and fixated on the
sight of him running forward. Distracted by his approach, she didn't have the chance to prepare herself as an arcanine leapt upon her, burying her beneath orange, black, and white fur, beneath razor teeth and claws. She screamed as they hit the ground, as fangs sunk into her arm.

She screamed for him.

He found his friend curled within the bed, seeking to conceal her wounds beneath a sullied sheet. The once strong creature now lay trembling, and his metaphorical heart, not yet sealed beneath layers of ice and stone, shuddered at the sight of her, broken, terrified, and drowning in shame. Seeing her so ruined made him quake with fury, and though he yearned to lash out in his rage, he was gentle as he brought the wounded one to the medical wing. Procedures where followed and questions were asked, and it was there he'd been told something that would haunt him for years to come: that during the attack, his friend had called out for her guardians to come save her, and of the names she had cried, she had murmured his the longest. Although she'd never blame him for not arriving in time to save her, his soul had still become burdened with guilt. He'd failed his companion when she'd needed him most…and later, when the bond between them was forcibly severed, the weight of his remorse would only grow. For when that day arrived, he would do far, far worse to her....

Fury roaring within him, the replica tackled the giant dog from the woman, and spun to whip his sinewy tail into its ribs. As bones fractured, it staggered back and snarled, before lunging at him, fire pouring from its gaping jaws. Directing his shield over the human to protect her from the blaze, Mewtwo hissed as the tip of his tail was seared by the elemental blast. Baring his fangs at the other pokémon, the telepath's eyes flashed azure as he charged a shadow ball between his paws and hurled it into the chest of the canine. The orb of energy exploded upon impact, flaring over the beast's body, and staggering through the smoke, it collapsed at the replica's feet. The threat it posed effectively eliminated, he looked back towards Cassandra, who lay crumpled beneath his shield, which scratches covering her exposed flesh, that nasty gash sliced into her side, and now the bite wound to the shoulder.

"What do you think you're doing down here-?" he began to snarl.

Yet then another monster reared up behind him, and flying into the clone, it knocked the feline to the floor and pressed blades into his secondary neck. As the psychic shook with unrestrained feeling at the cold sensation, the insect didn't have time to register its fatal mistake before Mewtwo reacted. After he'd torn through dozens of other opponents to arrive here, after being injured due to the idiocy of the woman now staring at them, this creature dared attack him? Growling with rage, Mewtwo twisted around and plunged a fist into the scyther's face, crushing its mandibles, and as he stood, he brought his tail down on the creature's blades to shatter them. Lifting the pieces with his telekinesis, he drove them into segments of the creature's body, skewering the pokémon with fragments of its own scythes. As it heaved and shrieked, beginning to die an agonizing death, Mewtwo turned away from it and strode over to the girl, who was busy picking herself up off the floor. Her right hand still clutched the metal pipe, and he stared at it wordlessly. His ears detected more enemies approaching, their claws clicking against the tiles, their wings battering at the copper-scented air. Crossing his arms, he erected a barrier around them both, for though it would barely slow some of the incoming fighters, it would buy them a few moments.

"Set that down or I will leave you here," Mewtwo growled, still eyeing the rod.

The assassin, slouched and trembling with fatigue, glared at him through the sweat and blood in her eyes. "What makes you think I'd want to go back with you?"

"...Are you so eager to die?"
Cassandra didn't answer…but she did release the metal pipe.

Before it had the chance to clatter against the floor, he'd teleported them out of the hell she'd unleashed.

In a distant part of the city, a young man watched the recorded feeds from his cameras on his three plasma screens. Thus far, he'd spotted his quarry only once during the day, returning to the highest level of a vacant building, which had once belonged to the owners of a successful clothing line. His research had revealed that the building had been abandoned due to safety hazards, but this hadn't stopped a number of pokémon from taking residence within it, or a human from entering it within the last week. The presence of the woman intrigued him, and as he leaned back in his chair, he wondered what purpose she served to the monster. Was she intended to be a pleasurable distraction from its dealings, or did she test the creature's synthetic drugs? Either way, he doubted she'd stand in his way. Most likely abused by the demon, she'd probably be too weak to put up much of a fight in its defense. As he traced the pokéballs attached to his belt, he smiled to himself, his light blue eyes gleaming. He was almost ready to face that monster…his pokémon team was almost there. Soon that psychic drifter wouldn't be a match for the dark beings he'd been training ever since his sister had died. Looking at her picture on his desk, he repeated the promise he'd made to her grave: soon he'd make that freak pay for what he'd done to her…soon, he'd get back at him for her...

"Ow! Be careful, you – ah, shit!"

After dousing her bite wound with alcohol, and after allowing Cassandra to apply antibiotic ointment to ward off infection, Mewtwo tugged the bandages around her shoulder tight. To be honest, he didn't feel a twinge of remorse at the pain he was now causing her; in fact, it had taken all of his willpower to restrain himself from boxing the woman's ears and berating her for her stupidity. But she was battered enough as it was, and besides, his hands were still aching from the numerous punches he'd dealt in the battle.

"You should have considered how you'd be injured before attempting to escape. I warned you that you'd be attacked if you used that route, did I not?" the telepathic growled, checking her skin for further injuries. Of course, the oozing gash in her side had yet to be attended to, but since she blatantly refused to allow him to touch her there, he was forced to bide his time until she passed out from blood loss. Only when she was unconscious, it seemed, would he be able to clean and bind it properly.

"Yes, yes, you did. Stop rubbing it in, I get it, okay? Christ…." Reaching for the alcohol, she lifting the side of her shirt, which was sticky with blood, she poured the fluid over her wound. Hissing at the burn and gritting her teeth, her eyes watered and her lungs closed from the fumes of the peroxide.

"You should allow me to attend to that."

She squinting at him with one eye. "You really want to get my shirt off, don't you? I guess you really must be male, with that persistent interest in looking at what's underneath."

"You are human, Cassandra. You have nothing beneath your clothes that would interest me."

Peering at him as the fumes dissipated, she couldn't tell whether or not he was lying, but after becoming entangled in bandages while trying to bind the wound herself, she reluctantly relented. She peeled off her shirt with a grimace, knowing it was beyond salvation, and setting it aside, she turned her back to her enemy. Her godfather would have been ashamed of her, but considering the situation, it couldn't be helped. As she closed her eyes, she tried to ignore Mewtwo's touch as he wove the
strips of gauze around her torso and as sent healing energy into her wound, soothing the pain in her side like an anesthesia….

As he tended to the gash, Mewtwo's eyes traced the scars that ran down her back, noting each of the pale badges she'd earned from her devotion to her work. Without realizing what he was doing, his trailed his fingertips along them: some were stark and white across her tan skin, while others were smooth and faint. Still more cut shallow grooves into her flesh, while a couple, running beneath her bra strap, were puckered into painful-looking ridges. Underneath his gentle probing, he felt her muscles go rigid, and heard her quietly ask him what he was doing. He replied that he was checking to see if she had any cuts across her back, but fortunately for her, she only bore some superficial marks and nothing more.

"Yeah, I'm sure that's what you were doing. You're a horrid liar, Mewtwo," she said as she pulled her grimy shirt back on.

Actually, the replica excelled at lying, but in this case, he inwardly admitted that he'd been rather transparent. Yet it would do no good for him to to correct her, and checking her over one last time, he surmised that her injuries had been fully tended to. Having his own injuries to look after, he stood and assessed the clotted slashes running down his chest, back, and tail: in most other beings, they would have been certain to leave faint scars. However, he found himself unconcerned about that prospect, for his regenerative capabilities had always impressed the medics he'd encountered over the year, including the Nurse Joy he'd abducted, who'd been present during the construction of his laboratory of New Island. Although he'd laid out careful plans for the building process, accidents had been unavoidable, and his "slave" had commented more than once that he healed at an astonishingly fast rate….

Yet his thoughts surrounding that woman were banished when he felt Cassandra's hand reaching out to grasp his paw. He was certain his surprise showed as he gazed down at her, for over the past eight days, she'd never willingly touched him without intending to do him harm. Thus, her current actions puzzled him.

Seeing his bemusement, the agent sighed. "Idiot…those cuts will fester if you leave them like that. That's how people die of infection. Honestly, do you want to have pus running down your torso later?"

"That will not occur. My immune system is far too advanced for that to-."

"This isn't up for debate, clone, so be a good kitty and sit your furry ass down while I patch you up. …Now, if you would," she snapped, giving him an exasperated look as she tugged at his paw.

And for the first time in years, Mewtwo obeyed a human's command. He sat down before her, attempting to decipher her motives as she poured the alcohol onto a clean hand towel, pressed the soaked fabric to his cuts, and then began to wipe them clean of the excess blood. He suppressed a grimace at the burn that erupted from her ministrations, first across the slashes on his back and tail, and then to those upon his chest. He watched her as she then patted them dry, wondering at how gentle she was being. She'd been sent here to murder him, and yet now she was ensuring that infection and fever wouldn't overtake him. While he was grateful to her for that, it begged the question of why….

"Why do you do this?" he asked, feeling her smear antibiotic ointment onto his wounds. The pressure of her fingers against the cuts were painful, and yet her touch also invoked some pleasure in him. He supposed that it had been a very, very long time since he'd felt the hands of another being on his fur….
She didn't answer immediately, but when she did, she tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear as she said, "...I owe you for saving my life, and for helping me bind my wounds. This is the least I can do to return the favor." She then wove the bandages around his torso, firmly but with care, before she tied them off with a sigh. "But this doesn't change anything, Mewtwo. I still intend to kill you. Someday soon, you'll probably wish that you hadn't come to my rescue."

"Perhaps...," he murmured, his thoughts beginning to drift....

"And what about that? Why did you save the person who intends to murder you?" she asked, curious but wary of his potential answer. "That is, unless you thought I'd spare your life in return, or offer you some other form of compensation...like that inappropriate right to 'deflower' the damsel-in-distress."

He regarded her with mingled exasperation and amusement. "Ah, yes, I rescued you from a pack of demons to win the right to have sex with you. It seems I am made of glass." When she simply stared at him, her mouth agape, he quirked an eyebrow at her. "What?"

"I thought you said you didn't joke...."

He leaned forward until his face was mere centimeters from hers. "What leads you to conclude that I was joking, woman?"

As he reached forward, wrapping his fingers around her wrists, slowly shifting his weight above her to pin her beneath him, she stiffened as confusion and anxiety rushed through her. His face lowered towards hers, making her breath still within her lungs, and causing her thoughts to scramble within her brain. What...what was he doing? As fear and uncertainty began to mount within her, she began to struggle in his hold, and found herself incapable of freeing herself from his grasp. Yet how could that be...? She'd successfully subdued even larger beings than Mewtwo during her sparring sessions with other Team Rocket agents, so surely she could force him to release her. Yet something within her was preventing her from fighting him, was whispering for her not to move, seemingly curious to see how the clone's advance would unfold. This small part of her, willing to defy what her soul had established as law, both alarmed and disturbed her then. It was willing to try what the rest of her being was unwilling to experience again, and as she felt his breath against her face, something deep within her was exhumed from its grave, and her entire body coiled with tension at her horror. No! Get away from me!

Yet even though she longed to scream those words and fight against him, the ambivalence of the moment paralyzed her. While most of her being rebelled, a fragment of her willed the act to take place, not even minding that the clone was a pokémon rather than a human male. The reasonable part of Cassandra's brain clung to the fact that they were of different species, and hence almost certainly incompatible...but even as she took solace in that idea, her thoughts began to quiet as she gazed up at him. In the back of her mind, a prickling sensation arose, and the strangest sense of familiarity and craving followed upon its heels. A sinuous voice whispered for her go ahead and submit to him, to experience his touch and the potential kiss he might lay upon her lips. As if sensing her forming surrender, something glistened within his eyes as he stared down at her. She shivered, feeling her stomach roll within her frozen form as the warmth of his breath flowed across her mouth....

Then, within a couple centimeters of kissing her, he abruptly released her and sat back on his haunches, the only crime he'd committed being the act of holding her down. "My, you are a gullible one, now aren't you?"

Cassandra, however, was not amused. All at once, everything within her rebelled against the actions he'd taken, and sitting up, she shouted at him, "You...you-!"
She couldn't think of a curse strong enough to label him with, so instead, she took the bottle of alcohol and chucked it at him. When he leaned out of its trajectory, she rose and fled into the guest room, slamming the door shut behind her. As such, she didn't spy the odd expression that flickered across his face as she went. Psyche, however, having watched the whole exchange with growing trepidation, saw it and wondered at its cause. Did he feel regret for his actions or something else entirely…? She didn't know, and as she watched him warily, he sighed and stood as well, packing away the medical supplies and then cleaning up the mess they'd made. Afterwards, he walked up to the roof, and as he stepped out into the evening air, he acknowledged that he'd made a mistake in testing the woman in such way. Yet he'd learned something from her violent reaction: she was afraid of something, and he believed he knew precisely what it was.

Beyond the gazes of the pokémon, the agent leaned against the guest room door and slid down to the carpet, not knowing how what to think or feel about what had just happened. Barely noticeable, her limbs began to shake, and as she fought to control them, she reached over to her suitcase and pulling from it the bottle of her pills. Unscrewing the lid, she tilted three into her palm and tossed them back dry, and as she felt the tablets moving down her throat, she gazed upon those that remained miserably. If she didn't start ration them, she would run out after this next week…and as that fact seeped into her brain, she felt the icy twinges of true fear prickling within her.

Yet then, from deep inside her psyche, some part of her laughed at her weakness, mocking her from the depths of her own mind. She wondered then which persona was taunting her: was it Azra, the merciless assassin…or was it Brennan, the keeper of her soul? Smothering the latter entity, she buried her face against her knees, knowing there was nothing she could do to change her situation. She could only hope for a break that would help her complete this mission, and from there enable her to get back to Kanto. There her doctor would be, preparing the medicine that would drive the tremors from her flesh and banish the nightmares from her mind. And as though summoned by the thought of them, her quaking grew stronger, and deep within her mind, she heard it: the sound of whispers.

The whispers of someone screaming….

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Thank You: AnimeCrazy88, Mewtwo, Tomoyo Kinomoto, and Colyo for reading and reviewing the previous chapter. I hope you and my other readers will do the same for this one!

Author's Note: Everything will eventually fall into place. As always, I hope you enjoyed the chapter!

Sincerely,

WiseAbsol
CHAPTER 7: RAPTUROUS SIN

"Sex: the thing that takes up the least amount of time and causes the most amount of trouble."
- John Barrymore.

"Signore Maki? Agent 009 is outside your office. She says she needs to speak with you."

"Send her in," her superior replied, not even glancing up from his desk, where a steaming mug of black coffee and a multitude of updates on various missions rested. Excluding some minor internal affairs issues, as well as the delay of his nephew's and goddaughter's wedding, everything was going quite well. Law enforcement was the lowest it had been in years, and highly profitable deals were being sealed wherever he glanced. Yes, for the leader of Team Rocket, his organization was running very smoothly, and that, in turn, made his mood almost chipper.

As he heard the door to his office door open, he glanced up to watch Domino stride into the room. His persian stood at her arrival, approached her, and as she scratched the regal feline behind the ears, it purred and rubbed its scalp against her palm. Behind her, the security agents closed the door, and when the barrier "snicked" shut, she stepped away from the pet and approached the crime lord, a thick manila folder tucked underneath her arm. When she reached the desk, she lay the document on top of the other papers, and taking a sip of his bitter drink, he flipped open the folder.

Classified.

The Gainesboro Project, Progress Report #128:

Among the three joint committees, progress on individual tasks varies. Committee Kuroi is pleased to announce that it has now fully streamlined the external synthesis process of their product, and that the product itself is now safe for the use of human and nonhuman subjects alike. Its effects are limited to seventy-two hours after injection, but the committee intends to research methods of internalizing the synthesis process to make the effects permanent. Permission to collaborate with Committee Haiiro on this effort is requested.

Committee Haiiro also requests to collaborate with Committee Kuroi, on the condition that some of their personnel transfer to assist in Haiiro's efforts. Concerning their section's project, the first prototypes and their preventative and counteractive agents are nearly complete. Initial trials are proving promising, but varied, with the chemical stimulus employed having proven sixty percent successful in catalyzing desired results. For specific reports concerning the experiences of the test subjects, please refer to the laboratory reports included.

Finally, Committee Shoroi has completed preparations for their part of the project. Their isolated facility is fully operational and reinforced to withstand elemental barrages, and the procedures to be employed have now been perfected by the committee members. They are merely awaiting the delivery of the organic material harvested from the source specified by Signore Maki. Afterwards, they can begin manufacturing the final element of the project.

Reading no further than the general synopsis, the crime lord glanced up to see his second-in-command frowning down at him. He could be certain her displeasure did not stem from the
information contained in the update she had delivered to him, for the subject was one they had
spoken about at great length. No, something else must be bothering her, and so with a sigh he asked,
"What is it, Agent 009?"

Her lavender eyes narrowed as she seethed, "I heard about Agent Merlo's request."

Giving her a weary look, he replied, "Given the nature of the target she's facing, her request for a
time extension is not unreasonable. Surely you understand that."

She leaned forward and shook her head. "But boss, don't you find it suspicious?"

Annoyance flared within him at the insinuation – the teenager's doubts in his goddaughter were
going out of hand. Resting his elbows upon his desk and intertwining his fingers into a steeple, he
growled, "I'd recommend against allowing your contempt for Cassandra to cloud your judgment, Domino. You can't latch onto a single incongruity in her behavior and conclude that she's repeating a past mistake."

"A mistake?" She raised a pale eyebrow at that, unable to believe what she was hearing. What he so
lightly dismissed had been one of the most grievous internal affairs conflicts to occur in the past
decade! The other woman had nearly turned against them over the subject, had threatened to murder
as many of her fellow agents and then herself if her demands weren't met. She recalled how the
Signore had responded to his goddaughter's rebellion quite well, and remembering his ire now,
couldn't see how his renewed affection for his ward could have smothered his reason. Did "The
Black Tulip," the unofficial leader of the Elite Children and the Grigori Agents, truly have more
clarity in this matter than the Gym Leader of the Land...?

The man in question countered her disbelief with a calm, collected response. "Yes, a mistake,
Domino. For all of her training, Agent Merlo does possess human frailty, and was once as foolish
and melodramatic as any child. We should merely be grateful the conflict ended as it did. Had it not, then I'd share your concern. However, given the circumstances, you should rest assured: there won't be a repeat of that incident."

Domino wished she could be as certain about that as he seemed to be, but she believed that what had
happened before could, and often would, happen again. As such, she could not place her trust in the
dependability of the other agent. She expressed that sentiment with a bitter murmur, "You put so
much faith in her."

Giovanni Maki peered up at her, dismissing her envy as a futile emotion. "As her guardian, that's my
duty," he replied, and then, glancing down at the project update, he diverted the conversation
towards it. "Now tell me, what has Dr. Kitadake told you that he's kept from this report?"

The spy that she was, she embraced her duty and repeated all she had learned from the secretive
biologist to her superior, and as she did so, attempted to smother the unease that stirred within her at
the thought of the potentially wayward angel....

While her superiors discussed their schemes nations away, the beginning notes of a haunting song
made Cassandra Merlo stop short of emerging from the bathroom she'd been toiling within. For the
better part of the last two hours, she had been scrubbing her suitcase and clothes clean of pokémon
urine and excrement, as well as digging out the container holding her bathing supplies, her
medication, and her MP3 Player from the mess. After throwing her clothes in the washing machine
to continue sanitizing them, and placing her other possessions – now unsoiled - in a cardboard box,
she'd washed her arms and hands thoroughly, and had mused that she should be grateful to Mewtwo.
After all, if he hadn't retrieved her supplies when he had, the damage might have been much worse.
Just as she'd been about to emerge from the room, however, with words of thanks reluctantly forming on her lips, she'd heard the piano beginning to be played. Now, as the melody rose and fell in a melancholic progression, she leaned against the wall beside the doorway, yet unseen by the pianist.

As she listened, she imagined shadows drifting through an underground wasteland, with one of their number struggling to escape from its suffocating confines. For an indiscernible time, that being wanders through the darkness, pondering the emptiness stretching out before him, willing the horizon to change and give him a reason to keep moving forward. Eventually he witnesses the impossible: a glimmering light in the distance, dancing tantalizingly before him, and as he rushes towards it, it grows ever brighter and brighter…until, at long last, he ascends into the daylight. The sun blinds him momentarily, but as his eyes adjust, he finds himself within a sprawling vineyard, the aromas of the loamy earth, the pungent grapes, and a trace of myrrh filling his nose. For the vagabond, this vibrant place is paradise, and as he wanders over its hills, he encounters a woman, who is carefully cutting bunches of grapes from their vines. She glances up at the newcomer, wary at first (for although she doesn't guard this grove of hers, no one else has ever entered it before), but over time, they come to know happiness with each other, and relish in the warmth and the wine they share. Exchanging soft glances, they eventually reach for each other and meld together, breathing as one as evening falls over the vineyard. As she sleeps within his arms, he brushes a strand of her hair behind her ear, certain of his love for her. With her, he could tolerate the darkness…no, he could even linger within it forever, so long as he was with her. Yet just as he reaches the point of true contentment, the tendrils of the black begin to weave through the grove, turning the fertile soils ashen, souring the grapes, and poisoning the once sweet air…and when they finally ensnare him, he loses the one was would have made that desolate world bearable. His beloved vanishes from the grove, and as despair and loneliness weakens him, the morning light fades as he is dragged back into nothingness….

And then there was only heartache.

Pressing her knuckles to her lips, Cassandra attempted to regain a collected composure, before silently peering beyond the doorframe to see who was playing.

It was Mewtwo…but then, of course it would be him, for only he could sit upon that bench, and only his fingers could dance upon those keys. As she watched him, she noted that his eyes were distant and seemingly entranced with images in the depths of his psyche, and she lay a hand to the doorframe, simply listening to and observing the phenomenon. As minutes passed, she picked up some of the recurring themes of the piece, and listened for how they developed and transformed in the minutes that follow. One in particular seemed vaguely familiar to her, as if she had heard it performed sometime prior by another, perhaps during the private viola lessons she had taken at her godfather's encouragement. However, as is inevitable when attempting to snatch at a fleeting memory, it evaded her mental grasp the more she attempting to capture it, remaining nameless and without origin. Yet even in her frustration over her apparent forgetfulness, she found herself being soothed by the melancholy opus, her usual, fiery exterior being quelled, and a softer side of her spirit roused into wakefulness.

With this transient shift in her persona, she stepped out from the bathroom and began to walk towards the clone. He did not seem to notice her approach, and while she might have thought to take advantage of his distraction, she possessed no weapon…and besides, she did not intend to harm him in that moment. Instead, she merely wished to speak with him, to gain insight into the background of this song – who had composed this sorrowful song, and why? Since the clone played from memory, having no sheet music in front of him, she would not be able to discover the answers on her own, and so she had no choice but to ask him for its history. Yet although she came to stand near him, he still did not turn to her.
At that point, the atmosphere of the song shifted, and she imagined the wanderer waking to a place cast in shades of amber. Determined to return to the vineyard and his beloved, the vagrant stands and races towards the glow in the distance, dodging the shadows and listening closely to the woman's muffled calls. He encounters numerous obstacles within his path, often brambles seeking to bring him to his knees, but as he leaps over the last one, he lifts his head and sees the vineyard once again, in all its full, lush glory. And she is there as well, waiting for him with open arms, and as he embraces her again, feeling the heat of the sun across his back, he forgets – for a short and beautiful moment – every terrible thing that had happened. For a moment he simply believes, and is nourished by that belief…and that is the moment his world goes black. When his eyes adjust, he finds himself within the wasteland again, the moments before having been mere illusions that his trembling, struggling, bleeding, gasping heart had brought into being. Alone once more, he drifts through the underworld, uncomprehending, stirring up ashes with each footstep, the sound of his own breathing rasping in his ears.

Fixedly watching the horizon, he soon trips over a bramble, and as he crashes into the dust, he sees what they truly are: charred grapevines and their supports. He realizes then that the grove is gone, and that – by extension - he will never see his beloved again. Yet instead of grieving for his loss, anger steadily rises beneath his despair - for how can he be condemned to live in the ruins of his dreams, forever tormented by what was and might have been? Why should he be forced to accept such a fate…? Within him, his anger reaches its peak, and he vows that this world - in return for depriving him his happiness - will be condemned to burn. And as he stands and marches forward, fire flickers around him, growing hotter and hotter as it spreads…but in the end, it dies back, and years later the wanderer wistfully remembers everything that occurred, and wishes to himself that events could have unfolded differently. Drifting within oblivion, he feels himself growing colder and his heartbeat beginning to slow. There is one beat, then another, and when the last one finally passes, a tear falls into the void…and the wanderer turns to stone….

Mewtwo's eyes were nearly closed as the piece faded away into those hushed, lingering notes, dropping into a lower register and ending the song on a low, disconsolate tone. When that final note died, the clone stared at his paws, recalling experiences which he had disclosed to no one. In that moment, his expression might have appeared devoid of emotion to many beings, but after weeks of observing him, Cassandra had begun to catch the minuscule hints that conveyed what he was feeling. As she deciphered his current posture and features, she surmised that he was not angered, saddened, nor tranquil; instead, he was simply weary. He confirmed her suspicion when he lowered the cover for the piano keys gently, rested his elbows against the wooden surface…and then buried his face in his hands.

The gesture stunned her, for while she knew that no creature could maintain unfaltering strength, this open act of weakness from him was seemingly unprecedented. Furthermore, the action itself was so natural, so very human, that she found herself growing uncomfortable with it, for it made her animosity towards him begin to ebb, and a tinge of sympathy begin to color her attitude towards him. Despite these shifts and her resulting uncertainty, however, she wished to remain near him, for now she had more questions than before. What was causing him to behave in such a way? Had it been that song? If so, then why had he played it? While she doubted he would speak to her at length about the subject, she still wished to have the answers. Perhaps if she gained more information about him, she could use the information to her advantage later on…and besides - she was curious.

Yet before she could speak her first inquiry, Mewtwo spoke. "What do you want, woman?"

His words, frigid and abrasive as frozen grit, banished her forming concern for him. Nonetheless, her response remained civil. "I was only wondering what song you were playing."

His amethyst eyes flashed azure with aggravation, but in his apathetic mood, he answered her
without a care. "*Its name is* 'Piano Fantasy in C# Minor,' or 'Ziv' for short. *It was, in part, inspired by a piece I heard performed on a single, string instrument, some time ago. Over time, I expanded on the original theme of that opus, adding several layers and movements around it. What you heard just now is the final product of a three-year-long process.*" He refrained from telling her that he'd once wanted to compose the song on the strings instead. He refrained from telling her how frustrated he'd been when he'd discovered that his awkward, spherical fingertips would make him incapable of playing the final product. He refrained from telling he how he'd reluctantly turned to the piano, and how - after some experimentation with it - he'd been pleased to find that it could produce just as beautiful a sound as the strings. And he refrained from telling her that, even now, there were still times when he missed the way that first piece had originally been performed, for it had been just as beautiful as its maker….

Mindless of his ruminations, the woman said, "Care to name the string piece that inspired it? I think I might have heard it played at one point, but I can't quite remember-.

At this, the clone's pupils narrowed into slits, and turning to her, he said, "*You must be mistaken. You cannot know that piece.*"

She raised an eyebrow at this unexpected response. "I beg your pardon? I'm certain I've-

His muzzle furrowed in a snarl, and glaring at her, he growled, "*No, you have not. That song was a private work, one which only I was allowed to hear-.*"

Irked at his response, Cassandra flopped down beside him on the piano bench, pushed back the wooden key cover, and defiantly began to peck at the black and white keys. After a few fumbling attempts, she managed to find the correct octave, and then slowly and erroneously began to play one of the subtle, recurring themes in the song. Mistakes littered her performance at first, but as she went on, gaining confidence in the melody, her playing improved, and she smirked at the surprised expression on the clone's face. This, they both knew, was more than her simply recounting the part by ear; she knew that underlying theme of "Ziv," although where and when she'd learned it eluded her. As she played it over again, stripping it to its barest form, she lost herself in perfecting the transitions and conveying the raw emotion within it. She no longer noticed how the replica stared at her in horror as one of his surest beliefs crumpled within him. Perhaps Cassandra might have explained her knowledge of the theme by saying that perhaps the unknown composer had shared it with her in her youth, or perhaps she had overheard it somehow…but Mewtwo knew better than that. When he had informed her that the opus was a private work, he hadn't been understating the matter: for in truth, the person who had composed the piece had dedicated it to him…had created it thinking of him. As such, that the agent played it now represented an impossibility. Unless…but no, that couldn't be, could it? If *that* were true, then it would mean that-.

As the assassin finished playing the final notes of the theme, she flashed him a triumphant look. "*You see! I do know it, so don't take that haunty tone with me and say I don't know what I'm talking about. Now if you want, I could play it one more time, just to clarify-.*"

Standing with his paws clenched into fist, he growled, "*That is unnecessary. You have made your point.*"

"Have I?" Surprise shone on her face at his willingness to yield to her argument. He usually always had something else to counter her words with.

Yet apparently not this time. Glancing away, the telepath murmured, "*Indeed, you have,*" and with that surrender, he began to walk away from her.

As he left, awkwardness suffused her, making her squirm, and compelled her to say something more.
"Mewtwo," she called out, hoping to gain his attention for a few more moments.

He paused at the base of the staircase to the roof. "Yes?"

From deep in her soul, the words emerged, but they were not the ones she had intended to say. "That song…your song…it's beautiful," she said, and cursed herself for not thanking him for his saving her and her belongings as she'd originally intended. Such an expression of gratitude caught and died within her throat; it seemed she no longer knew how to voice it.

When the clone glanced back at her and his eyes grew thoughtful, she wondered if he understood. Yet if he did, he said nothing of it. In that moment, he only replied to her spoken statement. "Perhaps to you, who knows nothing of its history…yes, perhaps to you, it would be." And saying nothing more, he walked away, leaving the woman behind.

Over the duration of his life, there were a number of creatures in the world that Mewtwo had come to despise. These beings were typically human geneticists and pokémon trainers, each breed utterly drunk upon the power that came from knowledge of forbidden arts, or from owning slaves who were then made to draw each other's blood for sport. These breeds had treated him as a subhuman being, as an animal to be experimented upon or commanded about in the pursuit of glory. However, several pokémon had managed to incur his loathing as well, namely among the purist species who regarded him as a mutation who must either be shunned or driven away by force. Intellectually, the clone realized that there were exceptions to this communal mistreatment: Ash Ketchum, his companions, and Psyche were proof enough of that. Their acceptance soothed his embittered spirit in a way which the embrace of his fellow clones had not, for the other replicas had been like him – they were shadows, copies, so-called "soulless" and "godless" creatures. Although they had proven a comfort to him until their eventual departure from his side, their opinion on the subject was understandable biased in his favor, given that they too were replicas of naturally conceived beings. The views of the strangers, however, offered a far more valid insight into how the peoples of the world viewed him and his kind. However, even while these foreign perspectives interested him to a certain degree, he something found himself wishing that certain individuals among this group would hold their tongues in check during the instances when they dared visit him.

The being who currently floated before him, with an unbelievably saccharine smile plastered over his face, was one such being who frustrated him to no end.

This was the mew he had met on New Island, whose name the replica had since learned was Citlali. Beyond the insufferably chipper and playful disposition of the pink-furred ancient, which often made Mewtwo wish to tear the critter a new asshole, the last mew had gone a step further in his antics: having come to view his "little brother" as hopelessly dour and taciturn, his solution was to invent increasingly outrageous plots to try to lighten the clone's mood and, with any luck, "instill within him a sense of humor." His most recent scheme, unfortunately, had not been scrapped during its original trial runs: Citlali was now convinced that in order to "fix" the replica's attitude, the clone needed some "hot, strong loving." Given that anyone who had known Mewtwo for even an hour could see that a female would be the last thing that could solve his problems, Mewtwo had to wonder if it merely entertained Citlali to see his younger brother twitch around prospective mates. For although Mewtwo comprehended many subjects, like most people, the opposite gender was – for the most part - a foreign species to him; hence, Citlali's solution had no chance at success. Making matters even more difficult was the replica's stubborn declaration that his life was fine as it was. He was content with how he spent his days, how he freely wandered and never need concern himself of the pain that came from an intimate attachment to another. To invite someone in was to leave oneself vulnerable to suffering and betrayal, was the equivalent of placing a knife in foreign hands and trusting the person not to plunge it into his heart. With that belief firmly set in mind, if there had ever been a time in
Mewtwo's life when he might have made a sarcastic remark or gesture, he would have done so the instant the legendary had first suggested the notion nearly two years ago. However, he was not an adolescent who back-talked to his elders; he was a fully mature male, and a cynical one at that.

And he had no desire, whatsoever, for a mate!

Yet did Citlali pay his opinion any mind? Of course not. With a wicked smirk, the mew vanished and then reappeared with a gardevoir named Nenetl in tow, a female the replica recognized well, and whose presence he would have groaned at if he were the type to vocalize his dismay. However, were he to reject her outright, he knew from experience that the shallow and undeniably slutty female would begin to pout and cling to him, both responses he wished to avoid if at all possible. However, encouraging her would have even worse affects, for she would undoubtedly throw herself at him and begin committing carnal acts on his person which, coming from her, who he held no attraction for, would be entirely unsavory. He had made the mistake once of peeking into her mind, incapable of believing that she found him an attractive, prospective match, given that his form was a disturbing mix of human and feline features, and had been entirely disturbed at the activities she imagined them sharing. One image had permanently marred his brain from the glimpse: of him sitting with his back against a tree, with her kneeling before him, her mouth around his member. After a futile attempt to give himself amnesia to purge the whimsy from his mind, he had almost, almost viewed her utter insanity as marginally comical. Yet in the end, he had merely declined her offer once again, for he knew what taking a mate entailed…and the idea of sharing his body so utterly with another repulsed him.

So now that the first steps in this tiresome dance had been taken, what would he do? How could he escape them this time…?

As in numerous other situations over the years, the brilliance of his mind proved to be his salvation. A sudden, perverse little thought arose within his brain as Citlali and Nenetl gazed at him expectantly, and while it provided him with limited pleasure to consider, it would no doubt solve his current dilemma. If the parts were played convincingly, this pair of distasteful beings would surely spare him of their pestering in the future, which would be well worth the wrath of a certain other female once he told her his intentions. Hence, certain that his scheme could work in his favor, Mewtwo told his brother and potential lover a series of lies which would, with a little help, enable him to escape this troublesome situation. As their eyes widened in disbelief, he held his mental shields firmly in place to repel their telepathic probing, which rudely attempted to divine the validity of his declarations. He then turned away from them, braced himself for the impending chaos…and began to stride towards Cassandra's bedroom.

Within the chamber itself, the woman lay awake on her bed, her grey eyes boring into the ceiling as she listened to a selection of modern rock, alternative metal, and Japanese instrumental songs. The vocals from one metal song blared in her ears, but then, she mused, she had turned the volume up on high to drown out the sounds of the apartment. Yet this attempt to reject the existence of the others in the abode was futile; she sensed the approach of the clone, and opened her eyes in time to watch him enter the guest room without her consent. Her gaze narrowed with annoyance, for while she understood that the two new arrivals were irritating him, that was not a valid excuse to flee into her room like a frightened kit to its mother. She sat up somewhat, an acid reprimand forming across her tongue, but in the end she could not summon up the motivation to voice it. Instead she merely settled back into the mattress and allowed her eyelids to fall, one hand raised to casually shoo him away as one might an unwanted pet. Otherwise ignoring his presence, she continued to listen to the rapid beat of the percussion, the harsh sounds tearing from electric guitars, the guttural male vocals degenerating at the chorus.-

The clone plucked the earphones from her ears by tugging the cord with his telekinesis, and as he
took the device and set it aside, she sat up and glared coldly at him, spitting out curses at him in a variety of languages which included Japanese, English, and Italian. He swiftly covered her mouth with a paw, demanded she be quiet, and sat down on her bed. "Be grateful that I didn't break your little toy. Now if you would listen to me carefully, rather than ruining your hearing with that atrocious music, this can be over with as quickly and painlessly as possible.-" 

She bared her teeth and snapped at his fingers, making him jerk his paw away. "What the fuck are you rambling about?"

For a moment, he seemed reluctant to offer an explanation, his pride and common sense warring viciously within him, but eventually his logic won out, and he said, "I need you to do me a favor. Outside of this room, there are two incredibly irritating pokémon, one of which is attempting to force the other onto me.-" 

She raised an eyebrow at that and grinned in amusement. "Really, now? Are you going to get laid, pussycat?"

He in turn slowly smirked at her words, and not looking directly at her, he said, "I suppose that depends on one's point of view. However, if I will be having sex tonight, it shall not be with that creature out there."

…Very suddenly, Cassandra understood what he was suggesting, and shaking her head, she hissed, "Hell no! You are not getting into my pants, you perv-!"

Yet at that precise moment, the door began to open once again, and two pairs of eyes gleamed through the gap. Mewtwo acted.

He moved with surprising swiftness, and before Cassandra realized what was happening, his arms were drawing her against him, his mouth was pressing passionately against hers, and his tongue was sliding between her lips to lap at hers. Her eyes shot wide at the foreign, hot, moist sensation, and as she attempted to struggle away, he whispered for her to play along; if she humored him now, she would be released sooner rather than later. As scrambled as her thoughts were at the unanticipated kiss, at the feeling of his body pressed firmly against hers, she yielded to him, hoping that he would keep his word and soon release her. She allowed her eyelids to fall, wove her arms over his shoulders, and dug her fingernails into his shoulder blades with enough force to leave crescent-shaped indents in his skin. As the disorder of confusion began to dissipate, anger filled her in its wake, and curses began to burn within her mouth, none of which seemed to sear the clone's own tongue. That dexterous muscle, she noted distantly, was not as raspy as Shadow's (who often gave her platonic, affectionate licks), but was also nowhere near as tender as that of another human. She was not happy in the least to make this discovery, nor was she pleased with the warmth that began to gather within her chest, or with the itch forming between her thighs. In her fury at how he was managing to arouse her so, she bit at his lower lip and tore scratches down his back, trying to harm him in what little way she could. Meanwhile, the strangers peering at them quickly retreated from the scene, the sound of the door shutting scarcely audible over the faux lovers' raspy breaths. Yet Mewtwo noticed their departure, and subsequently withdrew from the woman before she had another chance to lash out at him. Across his back, the scratches she had inflicted upon him flared, and his mouth swelled minutely from the previous pressure of her teeth; yet he found he did not mind these superficial hurts in the least.

Cassandra, on the other hand, reacted to what had just happened rather poorly: she sank back into her bed, placed a hand across her eyes, and as the last few moments replayed in her head, she had to struggle to keep her stomach from heaving up her dinner into her sheets. A pokémon had just kissed
her…and she, in response, had not shoved him away, but had kissed him back. To be certain, her panic had played a role in this reaction, but remembering the hints of lust that had begun to stir within her during the act, she knew it was more than that. As much as she wished to denounce what had just taken place, the kiss itself had not been foul. In fact, it had been inept and even somewhat enjoyable, although how the clone had come to acquire skill in such an activity was beyond the limits of her imagination. Yet in truth, what impacted her most in the aftermath of his kiss was not the intimate touch; after all, it could be explained as an impersonal ploy. No, what staggered her instead was her lack of disgust concerning the act: she had responded positively to it, and that, in turn, revolted her. As her thumb strayed across her mouth, her eyes flicked toward the replica, who now leaned against the nearby wall. His gaze was unfocused and his brow was furrowed, as if he too was musing on what they had done, but unlike her, he was not horrified at their actions. Instead, he merely seemed irked that he had needed to commit such an act to successfully rid of the annoying mew and gardevoir.

Finally, Cassandra's voice returned to her. "What the hell was the point of that?" Her voice was low, but clearly conveyed her fury at how he had touched her without her consent.

After regarding her wordless for a moment, the clone replied in an irritating calm tone, seemingly unconcerned with her anger: "I was providing them with evidence. I told them that you were my mate, and by offering them physical proof of our 'relationship,' I can reject that female and prevent Citlali from continuing his matchmaking antics using a single stone."

Cassandra gaped at him in response – she couldn't believe it! Of all the insane ideas that someone of his intellect could conceive, that was his solution? She voiced her opinion on the matter promptly, and added a large dollop of sarcasm for good measure. "Did chatting with those two fry some of your brain cells? Because I honestly can't think of another way you could have thought up a more idiotic plan. I'm a human, in case you've somehow forgotten. You can't seriously expect them to believe that you, the human-hater (oh wait, that's right, you merely 'despise' humans, as if the milder term makes that much of a difference), have taken a woman as your mate!"

As she continued to express her thoughts on his perceived lack of intelligence, the telepath allowed her rant to go unchecked. After all, it was not doing him any harm, and perhaps if she vented some of her aggravation now, she would not have the energy later to be even more annoyed when he informed her that her task was not yet complete. In a rather perverse way, he found the impending reveal rather comical, for she would undoubtedly be severely displeased once she learned of his full intentions. Eventually, however, he addressed one of the statements she had made earlier in her argument. "Your doubts surrounding the idea of me taking a woman as my mate are flawed, Cassandra, which you would recognize if you calmed yourself enough to give the matter some thought. As an anthropomorphic being, and as a psychic whose subconscious was influenced heavily by your species during my childhood, certain preferences I harbor emulate those of a human male. This openly manifests in how I chose to communicate – through your own language, rather than the mew dialect – but the same principle extends to what traits I seek in a prospective mate. Now given that information, and the fact that you and I are both bipedal mammals, and so would have intercourse in the same way, there is rather little that would prevent us from being sexual partners."

Mewtwo never found admitting that he resembled his creators in any way to be appealing, but the theory he had described acted as a reasonable explanation for why he was the bizarre being he was. Yet if anything could make confessing his similarities to human men tolerable, it was the priceless expression that overwhelmed the agent's face as she absorbed what he had said. She stared at him in open disbelief, the left corner of her mouth twitching…and then she seemed to realize that he was making no motions to leave the guest room. She began to draw away from him slightly, and he could almost hear her cursing within her mind. "And just what are you planning to do now?" she asked as
she crossed her arms, almost defensively, over her fully developed chest.

Infuriatingly, his smirk only widened. "I was not planning on doing anything, although given how you have thus far assisted me, it would only be fair to return the favor by broadcasting the auras of two beings craving carnality. However, in the upcoming hours, I do not intend to contribute any more evidence of our 'relationship' either vocally or physically. The first, as I have implied, is not an attribute I readily employ, and movement on my part is never completely necessary, given my psychical abilities. You, on the other hand, are a being who is constantly in motion and habitually speaks."

Her grey eyes flashed with suspicion. "So just what, exactly, are you asking me to do?"

His gaze nearly glowed with mirth as he replied, "Enunciate."

For a few seconds, she stared at him, processing that…and then she promptly recoiled from him. "There is no way you're going to make me-!"

He interrupted her before her protest could rise further in pitch. It would not do for the visitors to hear them arguing. "I seem to recall telling you recently that you have nothing beneath your clothes that would interest me. Simply because I've stated that women in general are within my range of taste does not change that fact. I will not touch you, Cassandra, and furthermore, if you do this for me, I will return one of your weapons to you, giving you the choice of which. Would that be compensation enough for you simply shift around upon that bed and moan a little?"

Drumming her fingers upon her right arm, the assassin weighed the pros and cons of this situation, and eventually asked, "...And when would I have my right-hand tantō back?"

"In the morning, after Citlali and Nenetl have departed," he said, having considered the details of the deal thoroughly before entering her room.

She gritted her teeth, grimaced, and then raged under her breath, "You're an evil bastard, do you know that?"

He heard, and the comment cemented the smirk on his face. "Yes."

Around three hours later, with the red numbers upon the nearby alarm clock soon to flash midnight, the two lay on opposite sides of the queen-sized bed, placing as much distance between their bodies as physically possible. Thus far, if the way in which the mew and gardevoir seemed to be shunning them was any indication, Mewtwo’s scheme seemed to be working in his favor. Satisfied that he might at last be free of their pestering, he had to force himself to repress a smug grin as Cassandra continued to give her rather amusing – and startlingly convincing – performance, during which she muttered that she would murder him using the most excruciating methods possible when she at last had her chance for revenge. In an attempt to lighten her sour mood, he informed her that due to her admirable acting, the visitors were actually giving them a wide berth, and while it concerned him that Citlali was currently conversing with Psyche (for Nenetl, bitterly disappointed, had long since succumbed to the lethargy of self-absorbed angst), he was certain that, at least during the immediate aftermath of this night, the obnoxious ancient would leave him in peace.

The woman beside him, however, was not soothed by this information in the least. As far as she was concerned, if she must humiliate herself to spare Mewtwo of having a pokémon slut give him head (and there was so much she wanted to ask about that: did pokémon actually have prostitutes who partook in oral sex, or was he exaggerating his point? If not, why on earth wasn't he taking advantage of it, when there was virtually no chance of him siring some progeny? Surely he could not be that much of a prude, but considering that he was often construed as sexless, she supposed she
could not judge him accurately on the subject, right? Honestly, though, given that he was supposed to die within the month, one would think he would take the opportunity enjoy himself thoroughly, but instead, she was putting on this perverted little act for him. Ultimately, she was determined that if she must be tortured in this way), then she intended to bring Mewtwo down with her. It hardly mattered to her that he was, indeed, channeling some rather lewd material for the psychics to tune in to, nor that the series of erotic episodes were nearly complete. No, she wanted vengeance now, and so in preparation for the assault, she turned over and rose onto her hands and knees. The replica paid her little mind until she spoke. "You know, if you had simply put a television in this room, we could have played a porno movie on maximum volume and saved us both the trouble. But since that wasn't possible, I had to endure this disgusting charade alone…and now that it's nearly over, I'm thinking you should be good little naughty kitty and take a larger role in. As I figure it, if you growl with that telepathic voice of yours, then you can certainly groan with it too."

"That would be entirelyunnecessary."

Had he a weaker disposition, her gaze would have scorched the marrow within his bones. "Bullshit! If this were real, you'd be making a very gratifying release right about now.-"

He sounded rather bored as he interrupted her once again. "If you are counting on your embarrassment to invoke my sympathies, and hence make me more willing to bend to your will, you should know that your efforts are futile. I refuse to reduce myself to misery simply to assuage your personal discomfort."

Very much as he imagined a panther might, Cassandra snarled, "Too damn bad, Mewtwo. You're going to humor me whether you like it or not!"

Raising an eyebrow at her, he replied, "You cannot force me to-.

"You want to bet on that, tomcat?"

Of course he did not, but before he could voice further protest, the situation had been taken entirely out of his hands and had been abducted by Cassandra's. In the following seconds, she had swung a leg over him to straddle his hips, her hands had begun running across his chest in lazy circles, and her mouth had pressed hotly, perhaps even passionately, against his. As she began to grind her pelvis into his, causing his loins to ache, and as her tongue lapped against his lips, he shivered beneath her touch and soon grew feverish. After another few moments, he returned her kiss, which, after its initial forcefulness, had smoothed and sweetened. It soon began to warm them both, despite being an act which defied nature and morality alike, but as far as they were concerned in those seconds, what their instincts encouraged was blind to their different species. That was not to imply that either of them lost themselves in the pleasurable sensations: one was merely attempting to arouse the other out of spite, while the one under her ministration was all too aware of her cruel intentions. However, as he began to move in tandem with her, his mind began to crumble beneath the pressure of just how good her antics were beginning to make him feel…!

Yet Cassandra, he knew, was only toying with him. Having been deprived of the flirtatious interactions which most young adults were able to experiment with, this was her first true experience with screwing around with a member of the opposite sex. Unfortunately, in her playfulness she’d forgotten a significant fact: that Mewtwo was not a human, but a fully sexually mature pokémon. In other words, in some ways he resembled an animal or a beast more than a man, which made what she doing to him now rather risky. To be certain, the clone had the ability to prevent himself from taking a sexual encounter further than he knew was wise; if he wished to, he could evaluate the potential outcomes of mating and decide, if painfully, to decline the offer. Yet this capacity for restraint was far lower than that of many human males, for in being what he was, pure and
unbridled instinct ran him on a far higher level, at least once he was stripped of his intellect.

And at present, the woman above him was coming very close to tearing away what remained of logical mind….

It was fortunate, then, that he moaned when he did, and that in hearing this rough, animalistic sound, Cassandra withdrew from him immediately, laughing in triumph. The clone proved to this her by wrathfully grasping her arms and swinging her below him, his body trembling with longing and rage, his face lowering over hers until, even through the darkness, she could see how coldly he was glaring at her. While the exchange that had just taken place had been a mere joke to her, the replica was far from amused, and his anger, she would soon realize, ran far deeper than her own had when he had pinned her beneath him – quite like he was doing now - two days ago. Erasing the smirk from her face, his paws tightened around her wrists hard enough to bruise, and as he began to hiss at her, she sank back into fabrics beneath her, her grey eyes widening as she listened to his words. "Never do that again, Cassandra! Never. I am not some adolescent boy for you to torment for your personal amusement! If you continue to taunt me in this way, I assure you, eventually my body will regard it as an invitation into yours… and if that happens, know that mating with a creature like me will leave you bruised, bleeding, and likely limping for days afterwards!"

His pupils had narrowed into thin, dark slits, and his grip on her did not ease as he continued to snarl, "Understand, Cassandra, I am accustomed to keeping my strength in check, but in such an activity, control on my part is not something you may expect. You'd do well to remember, human, that I am not of your race. My mind, no matter how strong it might be when compared to most other pokémon, can only endure so much before instinct overrides it. So if you wish to avoid something very unpleasant for yourself, I'd recommend you refrain from touching me. Otherwise, the consequences of your actions will be almost entirely of your own making."

Baring his fangs at her one final time, he released her roughly, turned over, and refused to look at her again. In the following moment, the woman stared up at the ceiling and no sarcastic comment rose from her lips. Mewtwo's warning had been delivered with utmost seriousness, and as it began to sink in, she found herself mentally shaken. With all of his civil mannerisms and his scholarly words, she had forgotten that he was essentially an animal, and one who perhaps lacked a soul due to the circumstances surrounding his birth. Indeed, there would undoubtedly be consequences to baiting such a beast…and if the aftermath he had described was completely accurate, then perhaps the Biblical punishment for a human who committed bestiality would prove preferable to the act itself: an execution over violent rape. Given her upbringing and her occupation, the concept of dying had long ago ceased to cripple her with view. Yet extensive violation, on the other hand…shuddering, she turned over onto her side as well, and for quite some time, neither she nor the clone spoke.

Yet eventually, the assassin's brow furrowed as she mulled over his words and her mind stumbled upon an incongruity. He had seemed so certain of what would happen…but how could he know if he had never given in to carnal cravings before…? Summoning up the courage to ask him about the matter, she began with an almost innocuous inquiry: "Mewtwo, you… you said you would mate like a human, correct?"

In the silence of the following moment, she briefly thought he might be ignoring her or had fallen asleep, but then he answered her. "…Yes. Being bipedal, having sex face-to-face with my potential partner would prove the most comfortable method. However, given the extent of the muscle mass in my thighs and hips, there would be some awkwardness no matter what position my partner or I took."

From the edge in his tone, she knew her inquiry had delved into some rather dangerous territory, but her curiosity compelled her to press the matter further. "But you have no external genitalia. How
"Would you-?"

"Like any other feline, I would have to be aroused before I...'unsheathed,' as we shall put it."

That made sense. "Alright, but how do you know that? Did you experiment alone, or-?"

By now, he had become rather aggravated that she was daring to inquire about his personal, private anatomy, and so wryly spat out, "Why do all who meet me assume that I am a virgin?"

Although she had briefly entertained the theory, the implication of his question proved rather startling. Turning over, she peered at his back and asked, "You're not?"

"Answer my question, and perhaps I shall answer yours."

To attempt to explain the common assumption was to attempt to explain the utterly abstract feeling she derived from his person. Yet if she might receive an answer to her own question, she intended to at least try. "You just...you don't seem like someone who would engage in sexual activities, that's all. I have a difficult time imagining you being with someone in that way, regardless of the gender. After all, you're not comfortable with being touched in general, and don't seem to seek out particularly intimate bonds with other creatures. You keep everyone at a distance, even those you consider your friends, like Psyche. So it's hard to imagine you letting anyone close enough to share some form of sexual experience with you."

"Sex does not have to be experienced between lovers. Surely you understand that."

Her fingertips twisted at the sheets beneath her at his word. "Yes, I know that, but...I have a hard time believing anyone could arouse you completely without your express consent. If you felt you were being violated, you'd stop your partner immediately, right? Not only that, but I simply have a difficult time seeing why anyone would...."

Wait...that would be a rather insulting sentence to finish, now wouldn't it? However, Mewtwo realized precisely what she had refrained from saying, and so tossed it back at her angrily, "What? You cannot imagine that any creature in this world would accept me into their bed, the monstrosity that I am? Is that what you are attempting to say, human?"

She squirmed, but she knew there was no use denying it - he had struck the matter on its head. "Well...yes, actually, but at any rate," Cassandra continued quickly, veering the conversation away from that potentially lethal ground, "I can see you researching sex, Mewtwo, but I can't see you actually participating in it. But of course," she admitted, feeling the mood lessen in intensity, "I could always be wrong."

He did not answer her immediately, and so, drumming her fingers into the folds of the blanket beneath them, she asked, "So what about it? Are you a virgin?" Again, he remained silent, and rising up on her elbows, miffed, she cried, "Now don't act childish! You said you'd tell me after-.

"Your conclusions match those I suspect lurk in the minds of others: that because I am unnatural being, I would either deny myself such natural experiences or have no interest in them. At the present time, I suppose you are all correct."

The key words there were "the present time," which begged the question of what his opinion towards the subject was in the past. Asking him as much, Cassandra awaited his answer yet again, and was sorely disappointed when he said, "I see no reason to inform you of that. I merely said that I might tell you, not that I would."

The agent growled at the continued evasion. "Oh, stop dodging the question, you ball-less coward!"
Suddenly, he sat up, and holding himself quite stiffly, he snapped, "I am no coward, woman, and if it will make you cease pester ing me, then very well, I will answer your inquiry." He then seemed to struggle to find the correct words, and when he did, he said, "Citlali, Nenetl, Psyche, you, and yes, even I have committed the most rapturous of sins...and if you would be so kind, spare me your denial about your lack of innocence. The scars between your legs expose your lies, but you needn't fret - I won't openly speculate on how you received them. I have no desire to know what was done to you."

Cassandra Merlo was stunned, both by the replica's unbelievable declaration that he was not a virgin, and by what he seemed to be inferring about her own lost virginity. Ignoring the latter subject completely, for she viewed to be none of his concern (she did not dwell on the hypocrisy of that thought, given the line of her recent inquiries), she said instead, "That's fine, but tell me, who in the world let you fuck her? Or was it a him?"

Mewtwo bristled at that. "I am heterosexual, woman, if my earlier statements did not make that clear. As for who allowed me into herself, that is strictly my personal business."

Sitting up and drawing one knee to her chest, the angel asked, "Did she pity you?"

"No."

Confusion sprung up in Cassandra's mind like a tightly coiled spring, and her expression contorted with her bewilderment as she pressed further, "Did you abduct or hire her-?"

"No!"

"Well, was she some sort of sick pervert who-?"

A rather strange noise erupted from him then, a bark of bitter laughter that cut off her words. "Cassandra, for your own sake, I would highly recommend refraining from insulting her memory."

She tilted her head, not quite taking heed from his warning. "Why? Will you slap me around if I call her something nasty, even though it would probably apply?"

For what seemed to be a full minute, he did not respond to her jib...and when he finally did, he did not react in the way Cassandra had expected. He did not, in a venomous tone, explain to her what he would do if she dared insult the mysterious female, nor did he cast a hostile glare over his shoulder. Instead, he responded with nothing less than a personal request, shedding all the layers of his usual, aloof detachment as he murmured, rather softly, "...Woman, would you just leave me in peace?"

The tone of his voice shocked her then, for it conveyed emotions which he had never before displayed around her. There were no hints of malice, disgust, or even twisted amusement in his words, but instead, the creature she had thought she could never emotionally wound now seemed honestly hurt and spiritually fatigued. As she turned away from him and lay back down, remorse began to stir in her heart for prying so far into his soul, for tormenting him about a being who had – if his current reaction was any indication – had apparently been nothing but kind and generous to the clone. However, that she'd managed to upset him as she had hinted at something even more unsettling. If she were fully honest to herself, Cassandra knew she could not see her target as someone who would fall in love and take a mate for himself. Not only did such a partnership conflict with his fiercely independent and even egotistic personality, but there was also the question of when he could have possibly had the opportunity. Yet no matter what the circumstances might have been, it was clear to her that Mewtwo had obviously been affected deeply by whoever, or whatever, the female had been. And as Cassandra pondered on that, her thoughts formulated the most disturbing
question of all: had he mated with a pokémon bitch…or a human girl? Given everything he had said in the last hour, the latter option seemed to be far more probable….

Shivering at the mental image of him writhing with a nameless, faceless woman, she spoke softly into the dark, "Mewtwo…what happened to her…?"

Long, hushed minutes passed, in which a cleansing rain began to pour over the metropolis. As she watched, heavy droplets exploded against and ran down the glass panes of the window, which was kept illuminated by the mingling lights of several neon signs as well as the setting sliver moon. Listening to the pokémon's slow and steady breathing behind her, she wondered if he truly could have fallen asleep so swiftly, and after a few more moments passed, she rolled out of bed and rose to her feet. Telling him not to turn around, she stripped off her day clothes and slipped into a large T-shirt, whose hem ended mid-thigh, and then she returned to the bed, slipping beneath the blankets and curling up on her side of the mattress. As she snuggled into the soft warmth of lush fabrics and allowed her eyes to drift shut, her heart pounded within her chest, forcing her to resort to meditation to draw herself into the primary stages of sleep. Yet before her consciousness faded into empty dreams, Mewtwo answered her question in a soft voice she almost did not hear…:

"…I…I killed her."

Afterwards, Cassandra did not find sleep for quite some time. Instead, she pretended to slip into unconsciousness just as he had, but within her mind, his words reverberated and made her soul shudder. For now she knew why he was so certain of what would happen to a female he mated with…now, at last, she knew….

Around three in the morning, Citlali stirred from the couch and stretched his tail and limbs towards the skylight above him, pleased that he had managed to nap successfully for a handful of hours. Recently, the intensifying fluctuations of fate had made sleep difficult for him to obtain, so that he had been victorious in refreshing himself this night pleased him. Perhaps, he mused, he had the couch to thank for that; if that was the case, he might have to acquire one before he left this region to observe the charges he watched over in another. Regardless, though, he had to admit the creature he had been hovering over today had managed to outwit him. To be certain, the mew understood that Mewtwo and his so-called "mate" had merely been putting on an elaborate act, but he had to applaud the boy: it had certainly been convincing enough to devastate poor Nenetl, and considering that she was, for the most part, made of concentrated sunshine, this was quite an achievement. Personally, however, he had expected the clone's obvious plot to collapse the moment he had advanced upon that woman, given that she nurtured such open animosity towards him. Yet instead, for some reason which escaped the ancient one, the human had gone along with it! The more he analyzing the situation here, the more Citlali sensed that there was something lurking beneath the surface, but given the limited information available to him, the form and nature of the truth was obscure to him. He said as much to the espeon who had been resting on the cushion beside him, keeping his voice low so as not to wake Nenetl, who was sprawled and drooling across the nearby armchair.

"Espe, espeon, espe," Psyche explained to him tiredly. "Considering that she's here to murder him, her sense of morality can't be that well-developed, so I wouldn't put it past her to secretly be a true and blue zoophile."

"Me. Mew, mew," he replied, suppressing an amused giggle at that. "I don't know about that. But I'm sure my little brother did have to appeal to her in some way to persuade her to go along with his scheme."

"Espe?" the espeon said, her tone permeated with wry humor. "So they didn't fool you?"
"Me mew, mew, mew, mew," the legendary replied humorlessly. "When they kissed, I almost believed Mewtwo for a moment, before I realized that there was no affection between them. There was tension in the sweetest of ways, perhaps, but not a hint of the warmth which true mates share. However, that act in itself rather interests me, because from what I've learned about human displays of affection, that kiss would have been considered an excellent one. What I want to know now is how and when my little brother acquired that level of experience."

"Espe?" she asked, minutely tilting her head to the side as she did so. "What are implying?"

"Mew me mew. Me mew, mew, mew. Mew? Mew me mew, mew," the pink feline continued, summoning a bundle of red grapes from the kitchen and munching upon the faintly sweet fruit flesh. "Nothing specific…It just seems that every time I visit Mewtwo, I'm reminded of the fact that I know very little about him. I don't know what his time in the laboratories was like, I don't know what he did during the year he spent with Team Rocket, and although I was no longer hibernating at the time, I still don't know what happened during the construction of his castle on New Island. Such eras in his life are unknown to me, and I've thus far made the mistake of assuming that nothing truly important occurred during those times. Yet that logically makes no sense, does it? So I suppose I'm merely beginning to wonder if I haven't made a grave error in allowing him to continue harboring his secrets. What happened back then could very well be the key to what will happen in the future, and considering that he's one of the rare creatures who can influence the destiny of an entire world, my negligence could have disastrous consequences."

"Me mew, mew. Mew, mew, me mew," he continued, "It's not as if I didn't have the opportunities to pry; after the incident on New Island, I spent quite a bit of time with him, assisting him in the search for another haven. I first suggested courting Nenetl to him during those months, but he rebuked that matchmaking attempt incredibly forcefully, so much so that I had to wonder about his reaction. To be certain, I understood where such antics might be considered misguided, but I would have thought that his intense curiosity would have urged him to, err, 'try her out,' shall we say. Yet he refused… and sometimes I've found myself wondering if his discomfort with intimacy was not the only reason he decline her offer."

"Espe, espeon. Espeon es, es," Psyche added, her violet eyes growing thoughtful as she contemplated the matter herself. "You know, Citlali, I once asked him directly about why he didn't want a mate. As you said, he rejects even platonic companionship much of the time, and seems unwilling to attempt to reach for more than that. Of course, he didn't respond when I inquired about the matter, but…well, just for a moment, his mental barriers slipped, and I sensed pain in him…a pain which, even now, I think he feels and fiercely attempts to hide."

"Me…mew, mew, mew," the legendary remarked, his azure eyes glazing as he considered that information. "That's…interesting. Personally, I wish I could attempt to unravel this little mystery myself, but my role as a guardian is, unfortunately, beginning to consume increasing amounts of my free time. Yet perhaps that's for the best; you, after all, have already had some success at cracking open his shell, so perhaps the task is better left in your paws." And then, sighing, he admitted, "Me mew, mew," and with that, he tossed the stripped bramble from the grapes into the trash bin with his telekinesis. "Besides, I have to take Nenetl back to her homeland in the morning, and tell her family that once again, I've failed to find her a proper suitor."

Smiling with some amusement, the espeon beside him nodded, and then murmured that she now planned to resume her wanderings in the gardens of Morpheus. Knowing that he himself would probably not sink into that imaginary realm in the upcoming hours, he wished the mother-to-be sweet dreams, and had faith that when the time was right, she would fulfill the role he had given her well. Afterwards, as he levitated up towards the skylight, where the sound of the falling rain was at its fiercest, he peered down at the door to the guest room, and wondered to himself…:
As the legendary posed that silent question, Cassandra drifted awake to the sound of labored breathing beside her. Mewtwo, who had slipped beneath the bedcovers as well two hours ago, now moved fitfully against them, the tips of his tail and feet brushing against her calves. Rising up upon her forearms, the woman peered at the clone wordlessly, and watched as he grasped at the blanket around him fretfully, his pelt saturated in a cold sweat, and his breaths coming in frantic, shallow pants. She vaguely remembered from his medical files that he did not have asthma or lung problems of any sort; despite the frailness of the genetic base his makers had created him with, his body was actually quite healthy. True, he would not live nearly as long as his predecessor was reputed to, but would instead have a lifespan roughly the same as a human's, but that, she reminded herself, was beside the point. He was currently having trouble breathing – but why? Tentatively, she extended her empathic senses, certain that his condition resulted from his emotional state. Given their proximity, a wave of feedback immediately washed over her, and the potency of his distress was nearly enough to make her gag. Jerking the psychical probe back, she then leaned over to him and grasped his shoulder.

As she began to shake him, she asked, "Hey, Mewtwo, are you alright? Are you having a nightmare?"

The notion that he had night terrors was strange to her, but she supposed he had more of a right to them than most creatures, considering the circumstances surrounding his birth. Yet in the following moments, as he continued to gasp and entangle himself in the sheets around him, her frustration began to mount. Neither her whispers or touch were succeeding in waking him, despite the fact his files had labeled him as a light sleeper. Typically, he was acutely aware of his surroundings, regardless of his mental state, and so she should have been able to startle him away with her very nearness. Yet instead he remained clutched within a fit of nightmares, even when she urged him to open his eyes. Then, so suddenly that she did not have time to react, he turned over, and as if sensing her touch, he reached out…and dragged her into his embrace. This surprised Cassandra enough that she emitted an indignant squeak, before she felt the clone's breathing begin to calm…and then be replaced by another action which struck her as even more bizarre, coming from him. His chest began to rumble, the sound rising in his throat as he exhaled, and then, nearly shocking her out of her skin, he began to nuzzle at her hair. Now feeling extremely uncomfortable, she struggled against him, trying to wiggle out of his arms, but in response he only constricted the limbs around her, making it harder to breathe. Given that accessing oxygen was far more important than escape, Cassandra stilled herself momentarily, before realizing that the noise he was making was nothing less than a purr. She then began to struggle again, growling at him as she did so.

"Hey, do I look like a freaking plush doll? Let – me - go!" she hissed, while beating her fists against his spine and shoulder blades.

However, fighting against him turned out to be futile; he ultimately had more than enough strength in his muscles to restrain her if he so desired, and so the woman was forced to admit a very awkward forfeit. To be sure, in the following minutes she snarled at him incessantly to wake up and release her, and even threatened to knee him in the groin if he was still clutching her against him in five minutes (an blow she would later refrain from making, since there was honestly no way of knowing how he would react. He might smother her, crush her, or break her bones if she wasn't careful).

Eventually, however, she calmed and merely settled more comfortably within his arms, and supposed that the situation could be far worse. After all, his paws were not touching her erogenous zones, and his pelt bore the tolerable odors of musk and mint. Furthermore, he was sleeping soundly now as he cradled her against him, so yeah, she mused, it could definitely be worse….
Her drooping eyelids lifted minutely at that. "Dove?" What did he mean by that…?

Yet the replica murmured nothing more in the following minutes, and so did not assist her in finding the answer. Pondering that strangeness of the situation as the morning deepened, Cassandra began to stroke down the groove of the clone's spine without a thought, an unconscious act reminiscent of a nervous individual cracking the knuckles of his or her fingers. Had she realized what she was doing, she would have ceased immediately, but because she remained ignorant, she continued to provide the telepath with her soothing touch. Instead, she wondered vaguely who the clone much think she was within his dreams. From his earlier, affectionate actions, she suspected she must remind him of someone who had once provided him with solace…but whom? Furthermore, what memory had acted as the trigger of such an intense nightmare? As she considered those questions, she pondered the possibility that they might have the same answer. If that were so, then wasn't her inquiry far simpler to answer? Only one being in his life potentially seemed capable of invoking the vicissitudes of pure distress and pure joy within him. Yes, as her fingertips brushed the base of his tail, she became certain of it: he must be dreaming now about the female he had mated with and then murdered.

The notion that he seemed to be associating her with that unknown female was unsettling to her, but in the end, she could not bring herself to feel anger. For she understood him in that moment…she understood the sheer agony of being responsible for the demise of someone you care intently for. And so, with a sigh, she whispered, "Fool…what do you think you're doing? You're supposed to be a monster, not a walking tragedy."

Yet oftentimes, what is supposed to be never is, and what should never be is what we find…and had Cassandra given the matter more thought, she just how much that notion applied to Mewtwo.

Instead, she too eventually fell into tranquil dreams…and for the both of them, it had been years since they had slept so soundly….

When the sun broke through the pewter rainclouds and the fog at daybreak, Mewtwo was the first to awaken. It took him a moment to make sense of his surroundings, and once he realized the new position he and the woman were in, he found himself capable of little more than staring into her face for a time, distantly noting the precise hue of her tan skin, the length of her dark eyelashes, and the way her lips parted. He recalled well how her mouth had felt against his, and wondered if, at this hour of the morning, they would still taste as faintly sweet…. Yet he did not allow himself to give in to the temptation to lap his tongue across them, but instead he slowly and gently disentangled himself from her, not wishing to wake her in the process. As he drew away from her tender body, he wondered if he had been the one to initiate their unexpected closeness as he slept, given the nature of his dreams. Out of the corners of his eyes, he watched as she curled up on her side, shivering at the loss of his warm pelt…but even as the morning air chilled her, she did not stir awake. Turning away from her with a silent sigh, he sat on the edge of the bed and peered at the shadows near his feet, vaguely sensing that Citlali and Nenetl had already left.

However, what did that matter now…? After waking up with the assassin in his arms, he mused that he should have taken the headache he would have gained from arguing with his visitors rather than attempting this foolish scheme. But he had so wanted to outwit his brother, and now, despite having "won" against the pestering mew, he was left with the sour taste of defeat in his mouth. During the twilight he had revealed truths to Cassandra which he had disclosed to any other soul before. Oh, to be certain, he understood why he had disclosed them to the human; he knew the reason behind it as clearly as he did for his actions during these last several days. Still, he wished he could take the
words back. He wished he had chosen to sleep on floor, for if he had, he would not have returned to consciousness to find himself in the woman's embrace with her naked, smooth legs hooked around his. Raging at himself, he reached over to the bedside table and picked up the discarded MP3 Player, thinking, as he turned the device on and pressed the earphones to his ears, that surely she must have one song in her collection which could soothe him. Instead, as the device finished loading and the first song began to play – "Eclipsed" by an alternative band named Evans Blue - the gods of irony proceeded to mock him, reminding him of his folly rather than allowing him to simply forget…

And yet...after he listened to the lyrics, turned the music player off, and took the earphones away from his ears, he realized something: there was no need for him to worry any longer.

His lover was truly dead.

Thank You: Dark Magician Girl Aeris, Miyuutsuu, AnimeFreak2306, AnimeCrazy88, blackwaterII, SmashSista18, and Tomoyo Kinomoto for reading and reviewing the previous chapter. I hope you and my other readers will do the same for this one!

Author's Note: "Piano Fantasy in C# Minor: Ziv" is an actual piano piece, though its proper named is "Piano Fantasy in C# Minor: Tragic" instead. It was composed by Christopher Geddes for both this story and for his academic portfolio. If he releases it to the public someday, I'll be sure to add a link to it. Again, thank you so much for composing it, Chris! It means the world to me!

Second, when Mewtwo says the word "dove," it is not a typo of the word "love." This is an allusion to "The Song of Songs" in The Holy Bible as well as one of Shakespeare's sonnets. As for Dr. Kitadake's name, that was chosen due to the naming scheme for scientists in the Pokémon franchise. Many of them are named after things in nature, especially plants. Dr. Fuji, however, was named after the tallest mountain in Japan. Dr. Kitadake, in reference to this, was named after the second tallest mountain in Japan.

blackwaterII asked a question in her review that I figured I'd answer here. The first reason Cassandra didn't bring Shadow with her is that he's more of a companion pokémon than a battle pokémon. Cassandra's not a legal trainer and, even if she was, she would mostly only be able to train Shadow in the Viridian Forest...which is populated with low-level pokémon, so that wouldn't be very effective. The second reason is that Cassandra cares for him very much and wouldn't want him to accompany her on dangerous missions. She wouldn't want to risk his life or be distracted trying to protect him. blackwaterII also asked about the possibility of Shadow being connected to Psyche. While I toyed with this idea when I was originally brainstorming for this story, I ultimately decided against it due to them being born and raised in very different regions.

As always, I hope you enjoyed the chapter! See you all next time!

Sincerely,

WiseAbsol
"Battle not with monsters lest you become one."

- Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche.

"Do you wish to ask me something, Psyche?"

The espeon, having wandered out onto the roof minutes ago, nodded as she sat down at Mewtwo's feet. Above them rose the gibbous moon, which was thinning in minute layers each night as the month of October entered into its second half. Luna's fading light, the replica noted, emulated the warmth and vibrancy of the autumn, which were seeping away evermore with each passing day. Soon winter would arrive to envelope the land in pristine snow and ice, in frozen wind and smothering darkness, and it would test every creature within this realm to divine whether they were worthy of survival. To Mewtwo, it was an ambivalent season: while it was cruel and knew nothing of mercy or sympathy, its abuse was, at the very least, indiscriminate towards those it touched. Whether one was born or created mattered not to it - the punishment for wandering into its embrace was the same. Yet for those who managed to survive its harsh mistreatment, blessings were provided in how achingly beautiful the realm would prove to be, for when the light of the sun shown over it, everything sparkled like opals and crystal. Furthermore, the clone who so admired the season reveled in the quiet and in the long hours of the night, when he could wander freely and unmolested underneath the stars. Yes, this transient epilogue of existence was welcome to him, and even befitting for a creature like himself, whose soul might be constructed by some as reminiscent of the season - for nothing warm and lush, nothing soft and tender would be permitted to grow within that barren, arctic wasteland.

"Espe? Espeon?" Breaking him from his contemplations, his companion peered up at him and asked, "Why do you do it, Mewtwo? Why do you insist on staring up at the moon whenever it hangs in the sky?"

He glanced down at her for a moment, before raising his eyes to gaze upon the gibbous moon. "...Why? The moon is 'I,' a celestial body I have chosen to consider as an extension of my 'self.' Over the ages, humans have developed an elaborate system of symbols with which they comprehend the worlds around and within them. In the latter case, they have often adopted familiars, signs, and emblems - the external, and often socially-constructed, entities - to represent internal aspects of their souls. In doing this, they convey their personal traits and affiliations to other humans, and thus construct an identity for themselves apart from the collective. In my case, the moon is what I've come to regard as my primary symbol, for I am similar to it in numerous ways. No human has yet come up with a certain answer concerning how the moon was formed, and likewise, no human can explain how I have come to be in my completeness, in both my body and my soul. In addition, the predominant theory surrounding the moon's creation is that it was spawned from the still forming Earth; similarly, I was derived from the genome of another creature. Finally, there is the light of the moon itself, the reflected version of the far purer and truer sunlight. In the same way, I am a reflected version of my predecessor, of a being conceived and born through the will of nature. I am his distorted image cast in a dark pool, a replica crafted and carried into being by the gloved hands of geneticists and the instruments of science."
He blinked, as if suddenly realizing he had allowed himself to ramble, and his eyes gleamed with some amusement as he looked back down at her. "…While not in as many words, I have explained this analogy to a number of my earlier companions, who always viewed it with some skepticism. However, despite how they disagreed with me, I still feel it is an accurate description."

"Espe?" his roommate remarked. "Are you certain there isn't another reason?"

His amethyst eyes appeared to glint as his curiosity was perked. "Such as...?"

"Espe, es, espe. Espe?
Psi" Psyche elaborated, her muzzle wrinkling as she spoke. "Well, there is only one moon in our night sky, and like it, you are the only member of your race. Doesn't that bother you?"

While Mewtwo had considered this notion before now, he had never expressed it aloud to his fellow clones, given its potential to brand him as an outcast within their already ostracized community. However, the espeon's observation had its merits, because unlike their leader, the other members of their community actually bore few to almost no external differences from the pokémon they had been copied from. As such, the probability of them blending into the species they had been derived from proved quite high; only the visible markers of genetic manipulation could set them apart from the originals, and even those mutations could be disregarded as signs of evolutionary advancement. Mewtwo, on the other hand, was not blessed with such a close resemblance to his predecessor. Currently, he was the only being in the universe with his precise physical form and metaphysical constitution, and if he so desired, he could blame the geneticists responsible for his creation for that. However, he refused to spend any more emotional energy upon their memory, and so he answered his companion's statement without giving his late creators the satisfaction of his laments.

"No, Psyche, I am not bothered by that notion. While I differ from the mew I was cloned from in numerous ways (my bodily features providing the most obvious examples), my genome is essentially the same as the species I've been derived from. Had my creators refrained from altering my design to suit their own desires – making my form more intimidating, more suitable for combat, and in many ways, more understandably human – then I would have emerged from my cultivation tank with an appearance identical to Citlali. Instead, the geneticists sought to shape me into not only the ideal weapon, but also into a form similar to that of Homo sapiens. Perhaps they believed that I would be easier to predict and manipulate if I was more like them, susceptible to the same wants and needs as any man. However, the irony of the matter is that even after thousands of years of remaining virtually unchanged, humans can still barely understand each other. Thus, their hope to comprehend me - a creature who was not even genetically similar to them in any way - was almost entirely futile."

"Espeon? Espeon?" the lavender vixen asked, redirecting the conversation and continuing to pressing her point. "So you honestly don't mind that you are the only one out there who looks like you? You don't mind that there is no female of your kind to find companionship with?"

His violet tail lashed out and curled at that. "Perhaps in my youth I might have wished for another, but I've since surmised that the price of her creation would be too high. After everything I endured during my own creation and its aftermath, it would be unforgivably selfish of me to wish that fate on another. The mere comfort gained from such a companion would be tainted after forcing her to endure hell. Besides, were such a creature brought into the world, she would deserve the right to live her life as she chooses, to spend it with whomever she wants, and - if she has the capability – to bear life with whomever she desires. It would be unjust and unfair to condemn her to lingering by my side from some false sense of obligation. Furthermore, Psyche, who is to say her body and mind would even escape the cloning process intact? If she were insane upon her awakening, she would have the power to make the world burn with a single, fractured thought...and if she were sane, who is to say
she wouldn't choose to burn everything and everyone around her? No, I daresay one monster from a misguided science experiment is more than enough in this world. To contemplate creating another is both foolish and dangerous dreaming."

"Espeon: espe?" Her tone mingled wry sarcasm and honest concern as she asked, "Mewtwo, after listening to that rant, I have to ask: do you hate yourself or something?"

His violet tail twisted behind him as he pondered the idea. "...I merely have a realistic view of what I am, Psyche, nothing more or less."

"...Espe, espeon. Es, espe." He was evading a direct answer, and while she wanted to know how he truly felt about himself, she realized it was a subject that might make him shut her out completely if she attempted to pry. So instead, she redirected the conversation once again. "...I don't mean to channel your brother when I say this, but there are other pokémon out there who are one of a kind. If you wanted to, you could court one of them."

This time he frowned noticeably as he stared at the cityscape before them. "You speak of the nearly extinct legendaries, whose continued existence relies upon the practice of inbreeding and their near immortality. I will say this much on the matter and no more: even if I was compatible with some of them, I cannot regard even one of their kind as prospective mates, and I suspect they would view me in the same light. Purebreds such as the legendaries are notoriously capricious when it comes to selecting their mates, and someone with my background would be regarded as filth to them, regardless of my close relation to the mew. Furthermore, while my body is that of a pokémon, my psyche is far closer to that of a human's, and so, strictly speaking, I cannot be accepted into their world nor the world of man, because I am an amalgam of both. Consequently, I must walk along the thin, grey border between these worlds, all the while maintaining a precarious balance...one which, someday, I may be forced to fall from."

"Espe? Espeon? Espe, es...?" Psyche questioned him then, her purple eyes narrowing and her lips curling over her milky fangs in her anger. "Is that why you held back against that woman? Did you believe that it was just your time to die, and so saw no reason to fight against her?" And with a sinking heart, she murmured,"...Espe?" in a low, sad voice. "...Do you want to die, Mewtwo?"

His tail twitched beside her, and after a moment, he murmured, "...I apologize, Psyche, but this is where our discussion reaches its end. You will have to content yourself with my silence, for I refuse to answer any more of your questions tonight. Now, if you would be so kind, I wish to be left alone to my thoughts. Please return to what you were doing before arriving out here."

Realizing his dismissal could not be overturned, Psyche reluctantly rose to her paws and began to walk to the doors of the stairwell, which were propped open partway. After slipping through the gap, making her way down the first six steps, and feeling the bite of the brisk night air begin to ease, the espeon paused and glanced to her side, where a huddled form sat with her back against the rails. An indiscernible expression and clouded, contemplative eyes regarded the mother-to-be wordlessly, but after a moment, the woman gave the pokémon a nod of gratitude for volunteering to do what she could not: the vixen had asked the questions that had been burning in her mind, and had received the answers from the replica – answers which he might never have disclosed to the agent. Psyche, of course, had an ulterior motive for assisting the woman in satiating her curiosity: Citlali had given her the task of unveiling the mysteries of Mewtwo's past, and gentle interrogation of her subject had quickly become the only investigative tool remaining to her. She had learned as much as she could from the records Mewtwo had kept on in his computer, including his recollections surrounding the late Amber Fuji (as she understood the matter, over the years the chemically-induced haze of amnesia he’d suffered from had begun to dissipate, and after drinking from the spring of Mt. Quena, his mind had cleared completely, unveiling his memories of her). However, she had only been allowed to read
selective portions of those files, and no amount of begging had swayed the clone to open the remaining logs for her perusal. Thus her inquiries and observations would act as her only routes to understanding…and musing upon the conversation which had only just taken place, she leveled her gaze at the other female and spoke.

"...Espeon, espe?" she mused aloud, her purple eyes glazed with thought. "...You know, despite that he isn't of the same species and gender as you, he's not so different from you, is he?"

In the following moments, the woman offered no response, and eventually Psyche decided she would wait no longer for one. She had completed the favor Cassandra had requested as well as she could, and with the woman now in her debt, the pokémon inwardly purred with contentment as she descended down the staircase, leaving the human behind. Yet soon enough that human would find herself agreeing with the vixen's declaration, for she would draw parallels between the replica and herself that the mother-to-be would never have imagined. However, for now she analyzed the contents of the conversation which Mewtwo and Psyche had shared, and in doing so, she discovered that the smaller psychic had forgotten to ask one final question about his relationship with the moon. Thus, at a loss, she asked the void before her that last question: had Mewtwo's soul, like the moon during its lunar phases, changed drastically over time…?

Soon enough, she would have her answer...

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Light blue eyes gazed down upon the roof of the dealer's residence, not through the plasma screens in his apartment, but through the clear night air. Beneath the saddle he straddled, thick, powerful muscles covered in a steel carapace rippled as giant, razor wings beat to keep their owner and his master aloft. Clutching the chain reins firmly in gloved hands, the young man inhaled the brisk October air deep into his lungs, feeling a sense of mounting gratification that his pokémon team was finally prepared to confront the white demon who had defiled and murdered his twin sister. For a moment, as though he were bracing himself to the battle to come, he closed his eyes, allowing his mind to be flooded with memories of her, and as images of her ravished corpse soured the bittersweet waters, he felt the black, animal rage within him rekindle into a furious, merciless blaze. Marion...what had she done to deserve such a gruesome fate...? She had been such a beautiful and intelligent young woman, full of vitality and the potential to live a life her brother could only dream of achieving for himself. She had been a source of light in his life, and not even his descent into the darker, crueler world of this region's largest criminal organization had tempered his love and appreciation for her.

He realized now that involving himself with the gang had been a grave mistake, but he had thought himself immune to the potential consequences in the first several months after joining their ranks. His position in the hierarchy had risen swiftly as the leaders had discovered his skills in rearing their stolen pokémon to levels of immense strength in relatively short periods of time. They grew even more impressed after he had shared with them his methods: he did not use rare candies, which could sicken pokémon if given in abundance, but toiled within the muck with the pocket monsters, shedding his own sweat, blood, and tears along with them as they trained. Rather than gaining a dependence upon the potent sugars and artificially-constructed enzymes within the candies, the pokémon under his care gained strength, stamina, and endurance through far healthier – if more arduous – means, and so proved to be far more reliable weapons to be exploited in gang wars. They retained their use after their virgin clashes with the pokémon of other gangs, and their reputation added to the trainer's. That he had numerous connections with the manufactures of technical and hidden machines had only added to his value, and in the end, he had never been subjected to the humiliating and even dangerous tasks which expendable members of the organization were made to endure. Instead, he had been rewarded generously for his work, gaining a fortune in numerous brands of currency, a number of rare "held items," and the promise of having the one of the leaders'
daughters as his bride if his excellent work continued. Elated and believing that nothing could go wrong, he, along with his starter pokémon – his mightyena – had trained the beasts for their masters without a hint of doubt or apprehension.

However, his luck had not held: misfortune struck as his sister drifted into his world. After investigating the situation, he had discovered that her shady boyfriend was the one who had dragged her into his affairs, and even after the guy had left her for more voluptuous and promiscuous partners, she had been mired too deeply into the underworld to willingly leave at her brother's demands. Hooked on the cocaine from one of the newest dealers, Marion began to descend into the depths of the organization, into a realm he had never dared step foot in. Despite his attempts to draw her back to safety, she had become lost in vice, disappearing for weeks at a time before returning to him, her body burned out and her spirit emotionally spent. Finally, she had simply never come back. Instead, her corpse had been discovered in a dumpster, tossed and left to putrefy amongst the maggots and rotting garbage as if she were of no more value than spoiled meat. In his horror and grief, he had severed his ties to the gang and had done what he could to punish those connected with her downfall. He had left her ex-boyfriend maimed in a back room of the bar he had found the disgusting swine in, and had then worked his way through the others until only one culprit was left: the mysterious dealer, who among the monsters was the most dangerous one of all…and, the brother had concluded, the one who was most to blame for her ugly demise.

His final target deserved far more than the loss of limbs and freedom for what it had done. To complete his vendetta, the brother would have the overgrown feline strung up by its paws and gutted, would savor ripping its intestines from its abdomen and wrapping them tight around its neck like a noose. He would laugh as he tore its testes from its pelvic cavity and shoved them down its throat, as payback for the perverse crimes the creature had inflicted upon Marion before killing her. He would amuse himself with slicing off its hands, drying them, and then stringing them upon a cord for a personal souvenir! Yet first he would have to defeat the pale demon in battle…but with his highly-trained team of dark pokémon under his command, he was confident that he would be successful. And so with a shout, he commanded his skarmory to dive towards the building where the dealer lingered, his lips curling over his teeth in a crazed grin as he saw the monster's head snap up as it detected their approach. Taking the pokéballs from his belts, he tossed them to the concrete rooftop below, ordering the release of his team. As the members manifested in flashes of red light, he gave them the command to attack the creature they surrounded. They leapt forward, fangs and claws glinting, their snarls emerging from Thomas Kóbor's violent dream into reality....

The acrid scent of cigarette smoke immediately followed the eruption of noise from the battle launched on the rooftop. Cassandra, having witnessed numerous clashes in the arena throughout her youth - an unavoidable experience in the life of a Gym Leader's ward - understood what was occurring within a matter of seconds, with Psyche following her to realization soon after. While the lavender vixen was certain that her roommate could prevail in almost any struggle with other pokémon, whether wild or trained, that bitter odor aroused her uncertainty as soon as she identified the source: there were dark pokémon in the mob above. This identification was confirmed as she extended her senses to note the writhing voids in the nearby area, markers of the demons to her psychic senses which she would have otherwise passed over had she not forced herself to seek them out. Finding such beings in the vicinity caused her muscles to go rigid with blind panic, and for a moment her mind was overtaken by the instinctual urge to flee from the only enemies her elemental abilities could not repel. She was driven to preserve her life and the life of her kits by darting into her den to hide, and then praying the group would not detect her scent, the delicious fragrance of easy prey. Yet then the terror passed: her thoughts realigned themselves as she smothered the violent reaction, in part thanks to her senses locating a human amongst the pack. The presence of a man meant the mob was ruled by a trainer, implying a specific intent rather than a random attack…and that intent seemed to concern Mewtwo only. However, that she was not the potential focus of the
assault did not comfort her; after all, her friend's signature moves would be ineffective a fight against shades.

The clone himself seemed aware of this fact, and from the vicious snarls and fleshy thuds, she suspected that he was wielding his limbs against the dark monsters. Yet despite the power in his body, he was at a sharp disadvantage: if any of the fangs and claws of the creatures above - infused with dark energy - sank into him, the effect would be devastating and immediate. Like a flesh-eating bacterium, the shadow energy would seep into the wounds and prevent them from closing, would sour them with toxins that would eventually force the near legendary to his haunches. No matter how the replica might attempt to heal himself, his sullied cells would revolt against the psychically-charged recovers…so while there might be a chance that he could manage to repel the invaders by his own power, he would almost certainly gain grave, and possibly even mortal injuries, in the process. He needed assistance from a combat ally, but unlike in the attack from the angel, Psyche could not aid her roommate against this brand of enemy.

Yet what other choice was available to her? How else could she rescue him…?

"Es! Espe! Espeon! Espe!" she yelped as the woman shifted beside her, apparently unconcerned with the events unfolding. "You! You can help him! Please, go up there and fight with him! He might die if you don't!"

The assassin lifted an eyebrow at the mother-to-be, seemingly in bemusement. "Have you forgotten why I'm here? If someone else wants to complete my mission in my stead, I'll hardly stand in their way. Just so long as they give me a souvenir or two, I can't think of any reason why I should interfere with their work. Besides, I'm not keen on getting gnawed at for the sake of that arrogant pussycat."

If Psyche had not used her litter box recently, she would have soiled the woman's shoes to express just what she thought of those callous comments. Instead, she merely sank her claws into the human's leg and hissed, "Espe! Espeon! Es espeon. Espe…," as Cassandra cursed wildly at the unexpected pain. "Even you can't be so ungracious! You owe your life to him, and you owe me for doing what you couldn't! Repay your debts to us, or you're no better than the monsters who made you into a murderer. Repay us, and perhaps….

Yet there was no need for her to dangle the possibilities before the woman's nose: glaring up at the killer, she saw those fierce, grey eyes harden with resignation, and realized that the woman had resolved herself to what was yet to come….

Lashing his tail at the sneasel who had launched itself towards him, Mewtwo struck the egg-eater in midair and flung it back, feeling the edges of its claws run through his fur as he tossed it away. Lucky enough for this first shade, it managed to land on its front claws and back-flip onto its feet, and joined its companions in circling around the clone, not deterred in the least by the heavy blow. Along with the slender weasel, an absol and mightyena snarled as they stalked around him, occasionally swiping out at his limbs and flanks, their maws snapping near inches from his face whenever they leapt at him. Only his agility saved him from having chunks of his flesh ripped free from his hide, but with so many swift opponents around him that were entirely immune to his psychic abilities, they nonetheless managed to wound him, the tips of their fangs and claws searing across his pelt. He growled a low, agonized sound at the burning sensation, at the smell of his own blood in his nostrils, and lashed out in fury at their audacity, launching his heavy tail and legs into their furry bodies, his fists flying to pummel one of them in the muzzle. Yelps arose around him of both surprise and pain, and not lingering to see how the hits had damaged each opponent, he darted beyond the circle, his injuries smarting from the dark energy that lingered within the broken skin.
Had his opponents been among the wild ones, he may have eliminated them with but a few hits, or might have fled if he did not have Psyche and the woman below to be concerned about. There was, after all, no shame in running when confronted with potentially lethal odds, provided one was not fighting for a cause that would render the sacrifice worthwhile. However, the fact of the matter was that he did have people and his home to defend, and thus he refused to be so cowardly as to flee. His pride would not be able to endure such frailness of character on his part, regardless of the reality that his opponents were well trained, having earned enough experience to be at a level where a few blows from another beast could not put them down so easily. No matter how he struck at them, they kept rising and sprinting forward to attack him, and more than once he barely managed to lean out of the way of their crushing jaws. Soon enough he was directing his telekinesis to hurl some of the potted plants and other garden items into their surging frames, but even when he did manage to strike them, they did not seem any less eager to hunt him; in fact, their amber and crimson eyes appeared to gleam with mirth at the futility of his attempts. Having tasted his blood, having its intoxicating aroma within their nostrils, the pack would not cease their assault until they were dining upon his corpse, which would be ever so rich in tenderized muscle and succulent marrow.

Of course, their master wanted to punish the prey creature as well before they made him into dinner, but the wait would not be long after they subdued him. The very perverseness of this notion, of the clone - who would otherwise be on top of the biological food chain if not for these monsters – to fall from being the ultimate predator to easy prey, was not lost on him. However, his ironic sense of humor could find little delight in this particular subject, at least not when a honchkrow descended to drive its beak into his scalp and drag its talons over his vulnerable eyes. Reaching up, he grabbed it by the wing and swung it down, ignoring its outraged caw as he began to tear its flight-feathers from it viciously, reveling in its shrieks of pain as blood beaded from its wings and its pinions were broken. Then, grasping it by its skull and main body, he wrung its neck around like a pheasant's, and tossed its limp corpse aside. The pack was one down, leaving just three more to-.

An unearthly screech sliced through the night air as the skarmory from before, a rider mounted on its back, shrieked out at the murder of its comrade. As it swooped down, it lashed a glinting talon into the right side of the replica's face, and while Mewtwo reeled back from the blow and clutched at his wounded eye, which was soon blinded by blood, he felt its armored talons grasp him around his torso. Lifting him from the roof, the steel raptor rose several meters into the air and then, diving down, drove the psychic into the concrete roof. The intense vertigo and the agony of impact stunned the clone momentarily, causing him to barely register being released and then buffeted by the downdraft of the skarmory launching itself back into the air. However, he could not afford to remain still in the yet raging battle. With a snarl, the absol leapt towards him, and rolling onto his back, Mewtwo kicked the white-furred beast in its underbelly, noting with one eye the black blades, claws, and fangs that might have bitten into his flesh had he not willed himself to move. Beneath the moonlight, those bodily weapons glimmered like jet as he launched the demon over himself, the monster sailing in an arc over the rooftop. If it was lucky, it would strike the lip of the roof and crumple there, unable to continue battle.

Fortunately for Mewtwo, it met a much more gruesome end.

Although its companions attempted to sink their teeth into its fur to drag it from midair, and thus save it from flying into the void, their maws snapped down on emptiness. With a fearful howl, the creature fell over the lip of the rooftop, its disappearance followed by the distinct "smack" of flesh impacting with metal. If the clone had been close enough to the edge to peer over, he would have seen that the absol had fallen several stories into what remained of the rusted-through fire escape, the metal mesh bending upon impact while the body itself was run through by a couple of the broken iron bars. That it died within moments was a mercy, and the remaining mightyena and sneasel, absorbing what had happened to their comrades, stalked around the psychic with far more caution, wary of his potential movements. Although they had the advantage in elemental type and in numbers, it seemed that they
had gravely underestimated the endurance and determination of their prey to avoid being taken
down. If they continued to act recklessly, only seeking to obtain the glory of incapacitating their foe,
they would be killed like the giant crow and the harbinger of disaster. And so with a mere flicker of a
gaze between them, they leapt in tandem at the clone from either side, intending to pincher him.

Mewtwo immediately shifted to face the smaller of the two, who he could see out of his left eye, his
paws whipping forward to grasp the egg-eater by the throat while his tail lashed backwards to knock
the wolf away. As he began to strangle the arctic weasel, his spine arched and he roared in pain as
the canine sank its fangs into his tail. The sneasel used his distraction as an opportunity to force the
replica into releasing it: it shot an ice beam into his face, and in his shock, Mewtwo dropped the
Pokémon immediately, cursing himself for forgetting about its other potential elemental abilities. The
entire pack had likely been varied in their skills, but had merely focused on their dark moves for both
the thrill of a gory hunt and the advantage wielding such attacks against a psychic provided.

Scrambling to claw the ice from his face and eyes, the frigid shards rosy from the blood they had met
and incorporated into their crystals, his howl was muffled as talons slashed into his spine and claws
seared across his stomach. Staggering, he bucked his foes away like a gazelle would to hungry
lionesses, determined even when wounded not to lose to the two creatures. He refused to fall here in
this pitiful way, to be torn apart like helpless calf!

Finally managing to remove the ice from his face, he gazed upon his opponents with reddened eyes,
dodging back from them as they continued to swipe at him. Every motion from his body made his
injuries burn, and he noted distantly how much blood was seeping from them. Sending a wave of
healing energy through his flesh, hoping to mend some of his hurts while his foes plotted their next
moves, he was gratified when the slashes upon his face healed. Inflicted by a steel-type attack, the
broken skin immediately knit back together, his right eye thereafter clearing of blood. However, the
restorative effects of recover were minimal to the remainder of his wounds. He had anticipated as
much, knowing the effects of dark energy within broken flesh, but was relieved that his sight was no
longer obscured. If he had to continue on battered and bloody, so be it – he refused to be defeated by
them! Launching himself at the lupine, who attempted to jump clear of his trajectory, Mewtwo
nonetheless managed to snag one of its hind legs in a paw and dragged its thrashing form back to
him. Then, caring little at how odd it would surely appear, he straddled the wolf's back and threw an
arm around its neck to pull its skull back. Beneath him the canine bucked like a tauros in an arena,
attempting in vain to launch its rider from its back. Wrapping his tail around its hind legs to limit its
movements, Mewtwo then bit down onto the wolf's ear, having read that doing so could make some
of the damnable canine breed submit. Indeed, the wolf did seem to still in his hold and whimper
weakly, although such a reaction might have been from the lack of oxygen rather than the harsh nip,
given how the clone was strangling its windpipe. Glaring up at the sneasel, who was watching the
struggle with narrowed eyes and hissing curses at the psychic, he growled at them both to surrender.
However, the lupine refused, for this was meant to be a battle to the death, not merely one of
dominance. Swinging its head back farther still, its fangs swiped across the replica's nose…and it
was rewarded for its foolishness by Mewtwo twisting around its neck.

As it crumpled beneath him, barely but still breathing, he left the wolf there, dismissing it as now a
non-threatening quadriplegic, and then stood to confront the remaining sneasel. The egg-eater
 glanced down upon its companion, torn between its instincts of self-preservation and the thirst for
vengeance. Watching the clone's body quiver with weariness, the bites and slashes the pack had dealt
clearly taking their toll on him, it foolishly chose the latter option. As it leapt at him, Mewtwo caught
it around its ribcage and clenched his eyes shut as it shot another ice beam at him. Keeping it at arm's
length to avoid any slashes to his torso, necks, and face, the psychic began to squeeze it tightly, using
the strength remaining in his arms to crush it. Within seconds he heard bones and cartilage alike
fracturing within the weasel, and as it screeched with rage and agony, it renewed its efforts to slash at
the psychic. What a fool, Mewtwo thought to himself, and as the broken ribs turned inwards under
the increasing pressure, the clone twisted his grip so that the bones drove into the creature's soft lungs and other internal organs. It squealed once, and then began to gurgle as blood filled its lungs, throat and mouth, its heart struggling to beat after being punctured, the essential mass ultimately only succeeding in pumping the sneasel's vital fluid into its thoracic cavity. Letting the dying pokémon slip from his fingers, Mewtwo strode a few steps away, feeling molten rage welling up within his soul, a rage spawned from the weariness and the miasmic grimness which pervaded him whenever he killed.

In his anger he formed and launched several shadow balls at the still soaring steel pokémon, which the giant raptor initially managed to evade. As it swooped low to target the replica for yet another attack, however, two more swiftly made spheres of psycho-electrical energy hurtled through the air to strike it in its chest. Shrieking as the orbs burst, their destructive energy racing across its form, it crashed into and skidded across the concrete roof, leaving pale scratch marks on the gritty surface. Upon impact its stunned rider rolled from the saddle, momentarily knocked unconscious before he began to stir. Soon managing to stumble to his feet, he peered around, seething as he noted the state of his team: three had perished, one was perhaps irrevocably paralyzed, and yet another would not regain consciousness for quite some time. Returning the latter two to their pokéballs, he mused that if he fled to a Pokémon Center now, he might be able to save his starter and restore health to his skarmory…but to do so would mean allowing the monster to recover as well. Fingering the last remaining pokéball on his belt, he remembered that all of his team had known beforehand how dangerous this battle could become, and had been prepared die fighting if that's what it took to slay the pale demon. And so, whispering an apology to his mightyena and hoping his ace could bring down their opponent swiftly – swiftly enough that they could find a Nurse Joy in time to save his beloved starter – Thomas released the final pokémon in his arsenal.

Mewtwo, having anticipated he would have one more opponent to fight, nonetheless felt his stomach plummet as he realized what the red light from the pokéball was materializing into: before him arose a fully mature, healthy, reptilian giant. In short, Thomas Kóbor's last line of offense was a tyranitar. Capable of leveling mountains with its immense strength, and having a devastating bite which could cleave an onix in two, the clone was facing an opponent that, in comparison – at least in the absence of his psychic abilities – made him appear as helpless as a mewing kitten. Had Mewtwo known any powerful fire, ice, flying – hell, even insect elemental abilities (not that there was many in that latter case) - he might have been able to take advantage of the giant being of the rock element. Yet the clone only knew how to produce a very weak flame for the purpose of lighting candles and cooking, and nothing more. He had no moves in his backup arsenal that would give him a chance at weakening the monster, and given how fatigued he already was, he doubted he had enough strength left in his body to physically pummel the carnivorous dinosaur into unconsciousness. Furthermore, given the armor encompassing the creature's body, such attacks would undoubtedly prove ineffective even if the psychic were at full strength.

However, what else could Mewtwo do but glare and stand his ground? He could not afford to flee with his roommate, his guest, his home, and his pride at risk. For those causes he would battle with the giant and do everything he could to avoid perishing at its grubby hands. How could he consider behaving otherwise, especially when he had another pair of hands he would much prefer to die at, if indeed he must be murdered…?

Jolting him from his wandering thoughts, the tyranitar charged. It barreled into him with the force of a mach truck, its protective carapace was as unyielding as granite, its spikes as adamant as the stalactites of a crystal cave. These rigid spikes punctured shallow wounds into the feline's flesh, making Mewtwo grit his teeth and hiss as he attempted to hold the creature back from bulldozing into the stairwell, which might bring the fight down into his actual home. Strengthened by his desire to protect, his fatigued body quivered at the immense force seeking to run him into the ground…and then he yowled as the monster swung its head down to sink its massive fangs into his shoulder, the
intense pain and the putrid odor of rotting meat on the dinosaur's breath almost enough to make him faint. Stubbornly clinging to awareness, and feeling his blood and the giant's foul saliva seeping down his shoulder, he reminded himself that collapsing now would mean his death. Thus, still with the creature's jaws clenched around him, he continued to fight, ramming his fists into the tyranitar's dense form and jerking its skull forward so he could turn and lash his tail into it. At the blow, it teetered upon its stubby legs, but was otherwise unaffected by Mewtwo's now frail attacks. The psychic's energy was almost entirely spent, with his continued blood loss only further weakening him. His sheer willpower was all that warded away unconsciousness, although eventually, as Giovanni had once pointed out, his mind would surely submit to the abuse his body was enduring. Remembering what else that atrocious man had said to taunt him, seeking to drive him to his breaking point, rage momentarily flooded the clone, fueling him. In a short burst of energy, the psychic ripped himself free of the giant's jaws and soared over the tyranitar, swinging around to smash his tail into the back of its skull, hoping to knock it out.

But all he earned for this desperate effort was a bleeding tail and a bellow of rage as the monster twisted around to clamp its jaws around the limb.

The fresh wave of agony was too much for the psychic's wounded body to take. As he groaned in pain, his levitation failed him, and he fell to hang by his tail in the maw of the dinosaur. Although his spirit demanded that he struggle free and retaliate, his muscles would no longer obey him, and so his body remained utterly limp as the giant swung him over its head and released him to smack onto the surface of the roof, like a slab of dead meat onto a cutting board. And that was exactly what Mewtwo was in this situation: he was a hunk of meat, a feline steak for the greatest of all shades to consume. In one final, frantic effort to escape, the clone attempted to crawl away, only to have the tyranitar respond by stomping upon his right leg. As the dense beam of bone fractured, a short, anguished cry tore itself from Mewtwo's throat. Hearing it, the godforsaken trainer began to laugh, apparently viewing the downfall of the clone of mew to be the most gratifying of all sights. With a triumphant cry, the young man, almost drunken with his pleasure at his seemingly imminent victory, ordered his pokémon to finish the psychic off with a hyper beam. He would take his souvenirs from what remained of the pale demon's charred corpse!

And as the gold, pure energy began to gather in the tyranitar's maw, its blinding light spilling over the feline, making his sullied fur glow ablaze and his spilled blood appear as black as oil, Mewtwo saw her: Cassandra. She stood just outside of the stairwell entrance, staring at the scene before her without a trace of emotion upon her face. Just how long she had been watching the battle unfold was a question he would never ask her. Yet seeing her standing there before him, something within Mewtwo snapped in twain. Perhaps it was his pride, or perhaps it was his resolve; either way he had't the time to analyze it, and either way it didn't change what his potentially last action alive would be. And that action was to call out to her for to save him, for as seductive as death was to him, he wished to be able to choose the manner of his demise… and this was the last way he wished for his life to end.

And so he rasped: "Cassandra, help me...!"

And after that murmur, after proving himself in need of her for the first time since her unwelcome arrival, he could do nothing more. He was spent. Those were the only words he was able to utter before the giant shifted his weight to better position the energy beam, sending a fresh wave of agony through his broken leg that sent the clone between the realms of wakefulness and darkness. Through the shadows that gathered at the edges of his vision, he watched the woman sway as she contemplated his plea. He watched as she unsheathed her recently returned tōtō blade and rushed towards them. He watched, helplessly, as she stood over him, the dagger poised above him as if she intended to murder him before the forming hyper beam could do so....
And then he watched as she leapt upwards and drove the dagger into one of the open heat vents of the tyranitar's armor, driving the razor edge into the soft flesh within.

The energy beam was choked off as the dinosaur bellowed in pain. As it staggered backwards in shock, releasing the clone from its oppressive weight, both it and its trainer howled in outrage at the unexpected stabbing. A creature of unbelievably hubris, the tyranitar tore its attention away from its clearly defeated foe to confront the worthier one who had wounded it, determined to prove itself strong enough to trample her beneath its awesome might. Rather than killing the clone, as its master urged it to, it charged after the woman, blatantly ignoring the blood pooling in the damaged heat vent and sloshing out with each step to join the blood of its comrades and its opponent on the rooftop. The dark angel smirked upon seeing this, and veering out of its path, she sank her dagger into one of the vents of its left flank as it passed, the momentum helping the patterned, Damascus steel edge slice down to the bone. Of course, driving the Japanese blade that deep meant it was nearly ripped from her grasp as the giant passed by, but she nonetheless managed to tear it free, grazing the lip of the armor as it came out. Jumping back, Cassandra felt the blood of the dinosaur burn slightly across her fingers, and as she watched the carnivorous monster staggered, into wounded leg buckling under its weight. She did not give it enough time to regain its bearings; running around to its other side, she stabbed once, twice, into the right flank vents, and ducked as a thick arm attempted to bowl her over into the pavement. Dashing back as the creature twisted around to face her, she leapt upon its tail and tried to keep her footing as the limb bucked unsteadily beneath her. Clenching the tantō between her teeth, and wrinkling her nose at the sour taste of the giant's blood, she reached up and grabbed the nearest spikes, heaving herself up the tyranitar's spine.

Quickly ascending to the highest of the spikes, she clung hard as the monster flailed to toss her off, and then lifted herself up by her arms and looped her legs between the spikes to straddle the dinosaur's neck. She inwardly cursed as its claws sliced through her jeans, slashing at her legs, and taking the dagger from her mouth one hand, she reached around to jerk the top of its jaw back with the other. Then, before it could snack on her fingers, she whipped the blade around and up to pierce deep into the roof of the predator's mouth. Its roar of pain deafened her, and this time as it buckled wildly she allowed herself to be shaken off, nonetheless swearing wildly as the back of her legs were sliced into by the spikes as she tumbled down. For a single moment she felt the base of its tail beneath her, before that too flung her off to the pavement several feet away. Blackness and silence overwhelmed her for what she would later suppose were seconds, before the ungodly howls of a creature in its death throes brought her back to reality. As she lifted her head, she saw the monster crumpling to the ground, its blood pouring out of its mouth and other wounds to soak into the cement. Soon enough, its agonized movements slowed and then stilled altogether, and over her heavy breaths, she heard its trainer screaming in rage and horror. Eying the man, she stumbled to her feet, made her way to the cooling corpse, and jerked her dagger, slippery with gore, from its palate. Then, with a wearied, yet still forceful toss, she flung the weapon at the defeated man.

Seeing the throw, he attempted to dodge the incoming blade, but his sluggish reaction time resulted in being stabbed in the thigh. Well damn – she'd been hoping to hit his guts. Ah well, the leg would just have to suffice – as the saying went, lex talionis, right? As far as she was concerned, stabbing his leg for his pokémon cutting up hers would have to be enough….

As she approached him, he shrieked at her, grasping the hilt of the dagger, at the base of which his blood was seeping around. "You goddamn bitch! You fucking, wretched cunt! You got me in the leg! It hurts, you whore, it really fucking hurts-!"

"You think I give a flying rattata's ass about your leg? I was aiming for your intestines, you dumbass, so the intent was to inflict a rather more painful wound." And jerking the dagger out, ignoring his screech of pain as she did so, she muttered to herself, "Damn, I need to start practicing throwing these blades at moving targets again – I've gotten rusty." Sheathing the oriental weapon with a
grumble, she then glanced over to where Mewtwo was laying. "Hey, pussycat, are you still alive over there? Did you see all of that? That's called strategy, and it's a hell of a lot more effective that the shit you were pulling! You'd think that someone as intelligent as you could pinpoint its weak points, but not so, apparently...hey, are you even listening to me? You'd better not make my efforts in vain by dying now, or I promise you I'll have sure some diseased hobo beats off and pisses on your corpse before I dump it somewhere."

He peered up at her with tired eyes, his muzzle wrinkled in disgust. "I will live, although my brain shall forever be marred by the vulgar imagery."

She smirked at him. "Good to hear. I'll be there in a second, then. I need to take care of the dipshit who tried to steal your valuable organs from me." And spinning around, she swung the hilt of her dagger into the confounded man's skull, knocking him unconscious with a resounding "thud." As he crumpled at her feet, she tilted her head, an expression of mock curiosity on her face. "Huh...somehow, that sounded empty to me. Did that sound empty to you, tomcat? Regardless, I hope this encounter teaches him a lesson: murder is not for amateurs. You'd think the media would make that much perfectly obvious, but it seems some bloodthirsty idiots have to learn reality the hard way. He'd better have a good story, I swear, or else I may just have to play cat's cradle with his guts, since that would undoubtedly prove more amusing that listening to him jabber on senselessly."

As she said all of this, she reached down, snatched the clip of pokéballs from his belt, and slapped it over her left shoulder. Leaving the now sufficiently harmless man to lie among the corpses of his slain pokémon, and quite certain he wouldn't die of a leg wound before she returned, she went over to Mewtwo, who was barely managing to gaze up at her in his fragile state. It would be such a simple thing for her to murder him now, since he was far too weak to resist the edge of her blade...yet she refrained with a sigh, for doing so would mean rendering everything else she had done this night absolutely pointless. And so she knelt down, placed Mewtwo's arm around her shoulders and heaving him up to his feet. Grasping him around the waist with her right arm, she assisted him in limping towards the stairway that lead down into his home, which was proving less of a haven to him with every passing day. Eventually they managed to make their way to the sofa, and carefully helping him lie down, she returned to the roof to repeat the process with the boy (for despite him appearing to be several years older than she could boast, Cassandra had a difficult time seeing him as anything but a foolish child). Stashing him in the guest room with the least amount of gentleness she could manage, tying a makeshift tourniquet around his wound, and binding his wrists and ankles with two of her extra belts for good measure, she exited the room, content that he would be out cold for awhile. Tossing his clip of pokéballs on the bathroom counter, she grabbed the First Aid kit and returned to Mewtwo's side to attend to his considerable wounds.

Neither spoke the entire time.

By the earliest hours of the morning, all of Mewtwo's wounds had been cleaned, stitched, and bandaged, and his broken leg had been set in a firm - and what he assured her would be a temporary - splint. While the assassin did not doubt that his regenerative abilities were as impressive as his medical reports had asserted, she nonetheless encouraged him to rest for a time before he moved into his own room. Hearing that, he leveled a surprised look her way, not expecting such concern from her, but found himself blessing her assistance far too much to question it. Instead he merely watched as she removed her ruined jeans and attended to her own injuries, which were fortunately limited to her legs. Once that task was complete, she threw on a much looser pair of sweatpants, gathered the kit and the blood-soaked fabrics scattered around them – mostly moistened washrags – and tossed them in the bathroom. Giving the clone one last order to sleep, she returned to what had become her room and reclined in the chair she had dragged next to the bed from the dining room. Rolling her eyes when she realized the boy was snoring, she prodded him with the blunt end of her blade,
resulting in a moan of protest. Deciding to be a bit more devious, she pressed the rounded tip to his lips, and inwardly laughed as the boy woke up with a start and jerked away from rod of metal and leather. Whatever the pressure had brought to mind, it had no doubt been unpleasant, for there was an edge of anxiety within his blue gaze as his eyes adjusted to the sudden light. When he saw the woman sitting there, her eyes shimmering with the smirk that her lips did not convey, his expression instantly soured. Had he spent more time watching the replica, he might have realized that her gaze was quite similar to his target's, save that it held a mirthful quality that was altogether more unnerving than what Mewtwo commonly bestowed upon creatures who managed to entertain him.

Perhaps remembering the part she had played in the battle, or perhaps merely annoyed for being woken up so rudely, he spat a curse at her and asked, "Why the hell did you-?"

Her voice oozed with disdain as she said, "Uh, uh, uh, you're going to be the one being questioned here, not me. Now if you answer my inquiries honestly, you'll leave here no more damaged than you already are, and with all of your fragile parts intact. Understood?" Reluctantly, Thomas nodded, for he could see the woman was entirely serious, despite her rather nonchalant tone. Smiling a cold grin that he had agreed so readily, Cassandra continued, "Alright, first, we'll start simple: what's your name and why are you here?"

Guessing this was not a person to lie to or give the silent treatment, particularly because the tip of her dagger was pointing to his nether regions, he replied immediately, "T-Thomas Kóbor! I came here to kill that abomination you defended!"

Cassandra filed the name away and repressed a sigh of exasperation at the latter comment. Obviously he had arrived here to murder the replica; that was evident to anyone with eyes – she knew what he had intended to do, but what she wanted to know was why. She wondered if he was intentionally or unwittingly insulting her intelligence, or merely could not make the distinction between the two questions himself. If that latter was true, such stupidity would probably also explain his lack of foresight in not carrying a weapon of his own, just in case all of his pokémon were defeated as they had been. Musing on this, she remarked, "Yes, well, what you were here to do was blindingly apparent. I simply want to know why, so this time, please give me an informative answer, or I might just be forced to chop your balls off. Sound fair enough?"

Not even close, but Thomas wasn't going to say that and risk of losing his ability to sire children. Instead he glared at her hatefully, but the sharpness of his eyes was terribly unrefined compared to Mewtwo's or her godfather's, and thus she was not affected by it in the least. She expressed that by jabbing him in the groin. "All right, all right! That monster murdered my sister after fucking her up-.

Grey eyes narrowed as she interrupted him. "And how exactly did he mess her up? I don't need the details on the form of sex, but I assume there was some sort of lead-in to her death." Could this boy be a relative of the female who...?

Not noticing her suddenly keen interest, Thomas explained, "Before she died, she used to buy cocaine from that creature every damn week. I figured out her schedule early on, and while I managed to stop her from going a number of times, one week she went to meet it and never returned home. Her corpse was later found in the dumpster of the alleyway she'd buy from the dealer at, and according to the cops, someone had screwed her right after she used and overdosed on the drugs it gave her, so-.

Cassandra's laughter interrupted his forming rant, and eventually gasping with mirth, she mused that it had been a long time since she had heard something quite as ridiculous as that. The bound trainer, of course, did not find the subject so amusing, and fuming with rage, he nearly shouted, "What the fuck do you think is so funny?"
Peering at him with half-lidded eyes, the agent asked, "Did you wait for the criminal forensics team to make a genetic profile for the semen, to confirm that it came from a pokémon?"

He stared at her blankly for a moment, and then simmered as he realized what she was implying. "No, but even if it wasn't that bastard (which I'm certain it was!), it sold her the drug that killed her! It has to pay for that!"

"I never said that wasn't the case. He probably did sell to her, but according to what he's told me, addicts can't overdose on the substance he synthesized even if they tried – it's like weed in that way. No, your sister probably decided she wanted to try something stronger, and was unfortunate enough to use a little too much in one sitting. Whoever else was with her probably thought she was lying back to enjoy the euphoria and decided to have some fun with her while she was high. If I had to guess, he most likely figured out what had actually happened afterwards, panicked, stashed her body into the nearest garbage bin, and is still blubbering and scrubbing himself down in his shower to this day. Trust me, I'm familiar with that particular horror story – it happens with alarming frequency in the gang I'm from. Hell, I had a corpse left in my hall once. The cleaners kept me on hold for an hour before they were free enough to come over to deal with the mess, and my needs are given high priority treatment in the organization! I can't even imagine how busy their days must be for them to get that backlogged!"

The invader just stared at her for a few moments, his jaw unhinged. Then, in a suddenly very nervous voice, he asked, "And, um, is…is that monster from your organization too…?"

Since he had successfully managed to entertain her, she humored him with a reply. "Originally he was, but he left the gang about three years ago. He's a completely independent entity, and beyond his questionable way of obtaining money, lives a relatively moral life, at least as far as I can tell."

By this point she had thoroughly confused the young man. "But if you're no longer part of the same group, then why are you here? Are you his illicit lover or some-?"

The Team Rocket agent scowled at him, growling, "Do I look like someone who would get off by fucking a pokémon? No, you sick creep, fortunately enough for you, my purpose here is exactly the same as yours: I'm here to kill the-.

"Then why did you stop me?" he wailed, utterly dumbfounded by her disclosure. "I was so close to-!

"No, your pokémon was close to killing him," she corrected, her tone gaining a flinty edge as she leaned forward and snarled, "There's a vast difference between the two, which you would do well to acknowledge and respect! And as for why I stopped your tyrantor, that's between my target and me, and that's where it's going to stay." And leaning back into the chair and forcibly calming herself, she said, "At any rate, you and your pokémon will be transported to the nearest Center within the hour, so I'd recommend spending the rest of your time here thinking up a good excuse as to why your remaining pokémon are so gravely injured. Otherwise you may be tossed in jail for charges of pokémon abuse, and I've been told that inmates hate trainers who hurt their teams almost as much as they hate pedophiles. So for your sake, I'd concoct a good story…oh, and I'd avoid this area at all costs, because if I happen to spot you around here again, you won't make it to prison. Now squirm over here – I'll wrap that bump of yours, but then I'm off to make sure the vixen is still willing to be your teleportation taxi."

And that was exactly what she did…although, later, as Thomas Kóbor was being interrogated by a furious Nurse Joy, he thought that she had bandaged his wounds rather more tightly than necessary.
When daybreak illuminated the eastern horizon of the metropolis, some hours after the would-be-slayer was gone, Cassandra seated herself in the cushioned chair near the sofa and explained to Mewtwo what the invader had told her. After absorbing the new information, he confirmed that the female he had mated with was not the drug addict in question, adding absentmindedly that his temporary lover had no known relatives. Within the privacy of her own thoughts, the assassin mused on how convenient that must have been for the clone, and watched him sit up and stretch his limbs out of the corner of her eye. Just barely noticeable under the strengthening morning light, she noted the faint glow of blue light that marked him using recover. She suspected that he had been using it intermittently whenever he had drifted awake over the past several hours, for already his wounds seemed to be mending nicely, the stitches soon to be rendered obsolete. No doubt he would still be convalescing over the next few days, but for now he had gained at least enough strength to straighten his spine and peer back at the woman. He was uncertain as to what he should say to her, however, given that he had not honestly believed she would come to his rescue. Despite that he had begged her to, it had seemed counterproductive of her to help him, yet nonetheless, she had…and though he was unpracticed in the art, he felt an obligation to express his gratitude.

"Cassandra…I do not usually-"

Fingering the hilt of her dagger and guessing what he was going to say, she cut him off abruptly. "Don't thank me, Mewtwo - I didn't do it for you."

His amethyst eyes flashed at that. "Is that so?"

She stood with a nod, and beginning to walk away from him, she said, "Yeah - I did it for me. You saved my life, now I've saved yours, so we're even. If someone else comes here looking to skin you, I'll ally myself with that hunter in a heartbeat. So don't thank me. I'm still your enemy, and I don't see that changing anytime soon." And with that she walked to the guest room…and paused, grinned, and said over her shoulder, "Oh, and by the way: I told you so, tomcat. I told you dealing those drugs would come back to bite you in the ass."

Feeling she'd now said all she had to say on the matter, she stepped into her room and closed the door behind her. Afterwards, leaning against the faux wood, she tilted her head back tiredly and hoped that maybe, just maybe, the rest of this mission could unfold without any more excitement….

Yet somehow, she knew she wouldn't be so lucky. At least one more trial had to be passed…and afterwards, she would begin to wonder if she could actually fulfill her purpose here.

For Cassandra had run out of her medication that past evening. She had downed the last tablets of the experimental drug she had been introduced to when she was sixteen, which her doctor, Ethan Yarrow, had prescribed to her and never managed to wean her off of. Despite knowing that she was resorting to higher dosages than he advised to soothe her hurts, he had continued to supply her with the vice, not daring to withhold the medicine and risk her collapsing on a mission. He had, in fact, given her a new prescription a few days before Giovanni had contacted her about her next assignment, and from his estimates, she would have enough to last her the month before she returned to Viridian City, adding in the time extension she had requested. Thus the medic, unaware of how incorrect his calculations were, continued his work unfettered, ignorant of the fact that nations away, his patient was sickening as she slept. As she succumbed to the first symptoms of drug withdrawal, he remained oblivious to the fact that Cassandra had actually been taking more of her pills a day than he knew, since the disorder she suffered from had intensified to a frightening degree. To keep herself sane and interested in living, she repeatedly swallowed a dangerous amount of the powerful drug, the encapsulated powder consisting of two distinct – and not to be mixed – substances.

The pills she took every day were packed with paroxetine, an S.S.R.I. class anti-depressant…and
laced with an almost infinitesimal amount of fentanyl, a synthetic opiate one hundred times stronger than morphine.

Doctor Yarrow, unsuccessful in finding a different medication that would suit her case, added paroxetine to help defend the adolescent against the lasting psychological damage from her occupation, while the second had been blended in as a last resort: for after countless injuries from her missions, and at least two instances of invasive surgery, the young woman had developed an immunity to the milder, opium-derived analgesics. Nothing else was capable of numbing her pain, and so, minding Giovanni Maki’s orders to keep his assassin fully functional, Yarrow had dabbed with different ratios of the two substances, before finally giving the teenage girl what she would then know as her balm. In the initial two years of treatment, she had followed the exact dosages the man had told her to take…but eventually, her disorder began to overwhelm her, and she ceased to care about what was safe. She needed a reprieve from her grief and anguish, and swallowing just one, and then two more tablets than she should at a time had succeeded in precisely that. Yet in the absence of the drug, which she was mentally and physiologically dependent upon, and without the buffer her synthetic (and only) treatment provided against the disorder – which had horrible symptoms of its own – Cassandra would spend the next five days in her own version of hell. And what made matters even worse was where her collapse would take place: for rather than working through the potentially disastrous situation in the privacy of her own home, she would instead be trapped with her target when she went through substance withdrawal.

Hours passed, and as dread began to overtake her, she heard the sound of muffled screams arising from the depths of her mind, the words defining themselves within her ears as her mind failed to repress them from her thoughts any longer….

"…No! Don’t…please don’t! Sensei, please, no…no…NO!"

Thank You: Dark Magician Girl Aeris, SmashSista18, AnimeFreak2306, AnimeCrazy88, blackwaterII, and Tomoyo Kinomoto for reading and reviewing the previous chapter. I hope you and my other readers will do the same for this one!

Author's Note: Having Cassandra taking down a tyranitar is, admittedly, improbable, but I wanted her to get a chance to show what she's made of. The fact that her previous two on-page battles went so poorly is largely due to, A.) Her not quite having the skillset necessary to counter psychic attacks, and B.) Her being grossly outnumbered by creatures capable of spitting fire at her. Her being in a one-on-one match with a pokémon that relies largely on physical attacks, though, put her on a more level playing field. If her opponents were a group of armed humans, she'd do even better.

Sincerely,

WiseAbsol
CHAPTER 9: THE DEATH OF INNOCENCE

"Guilt is regret for what we've done. Regret is guilt for what we didn't do."

- Unknown.

Although it had been years since he had last been with his lost lover, his dreams nonetheless summoned up the details of her person that he’d almost believed he had forgotten: the light, sweet fragrance of her hair and skin, a taste reminiscent of cream upon her tender lips and tongue. Despite how wild and abrasive her original behavior towards him had been at times, she had long since melted towards him, as evidenced in the soft warmth of her body beside his, and in the moisture of their mingled perspiration and the other bodily fluids that now cooled them as they lay tangled together in the sheets of her bed. So soon after completing their sin – which never seemed like such a dirty act to them, despite what society might have declared – they were still flushed from their lovemaking, their breaths heavy, their fleshes still thrumming with the carnal pleasure that made their skins prickle as they basked in the afterglow of climax. A small yet genuine smile was curled across his muzzle as he nuzzled her shoulder, his paws stroking down her sides, pressing her further against him as he dug his fingertips gently into the small knots between her shoulder blades. She moaned quietly beneath his touch, her nails biting into his back once, twice, before she slid herself down along him, brushing her nose to his and encircling his necks with her arms, her legs running along his playfully.

She knew they did not have much time before sunrise, when he would have to depart, but she seemed to prefer to act as if they had all the time in the world to spend together, suggesting the possibility for either another round beneath the covers or merely that she would enjoy spending the entire day cuddled up with him. There were times when they even managed to do just that, and he wearied himself by using his telekinesis on the simplest of tasks, but on those occasions, the hours they shared were always pleasant. Yet today would not be one of those lovely days, for he had loathsome tasks that needed attending to, and as he understood it, so did she. It could not be helped, but he looked forward to a time when they could live as they desired, rather than snatching at moments of passion in their personal sanctum. With a sigh, he planted a kiss to her lips and began to sit up, feeling her release him as he did so. Throwing his legs over the mattress, he uttered a curse as a shaft of pale sunlight seared across his eyes, and then felt her comforting hand against his back, her fingertips running through his velvet fur lazily. He turned back to meet her eyes, and saw such warmth and serenity in her gaze as to make him, in turn, melt for her, and he reached forward to run his fingers through the feathery strands of her hair....

And then everything changed: instead of being naked in her bed, they stood upon a floor of packed dirt, garbed in casual garments. She was shoving his paws away from herself, her eyes brimming with furious tears, desperation, and most devastating of all, fear. She was fighting against him, and suddenly the tense atmosphere shattered as gunfire erupted and a single bullet buried itself into the body he knew as well as his own.

He howled in outrage as she began to fall, and felt her name forming on his telepathic tongue in what would be a futile plea....

Yet then the scene was dashed aside as something hard and dense crashed upon the bathroom
counter, startling the replica awake from what had begun as an exceedingly pleasant dream. At first he was uncertain if the noise had actually even occurred, given the imagined roar of the weapon at the end of his nightmare, and so he listened intently for a possible repetition of the sound. He knew that unexpected noises were to be expected in a bustling city – especially at night – although to have such a clatter so near his dwelling place was disconcerting to him. After all, he had specifically chosen this area because it was well away from the heavily populated neighborhoods where such disturbances were common. However, that musing aside, the crash did seem to have occurred within the studio, and so he focused his hearing towards the bathroom, where his ears detected a quietly shuffling pair of feet, and rapid pants intermitted with miniscule whimpers of distress and pain. His brow furrowed, and extending his psychical senses briefly, he was swiftly assaulted with the superimposed sensations of nausea, stomach pain, and intense disorientation, as well as with the knowledge of who was carrying the symptoms: the woman was stumbling around within the washroom, and she was very—perhaps even dangerously—ill.

He sat up and teleported into the room immediately, his nostrils flaring as the stench of sweat, bile, and fecal matter hit them, the latter of which had evidently been flushed away perhaps a minute prior. Soon regaining his bearings, he stared momentarily at the sight of the medicine cabinet hanging open, at the First Aid kit flung upon the floor tiles, and at the bottle of pills with its cap torn off and its innards spilling out in a puff of cotton and numerous round pills. Amidst them, with her back pressed against the wooden cabinet of the sink, her naked limbs trembling and her hair lying in damp strands across her scalp, was Cassandra, clad in merely an oversized shirt and black underwear. She had not noticed him materializing like a wraith before her, instead intent upon whatever it was she was fingering within her right hand. Crouching down, he grabbed her wrist and began to tug her fingers open. She attempted to resist him, muttering incomprehensible words under her breath, but soon enough he saw what she was clutching: a handful of pills from the prescription bottle underfoot. Alarm swept through him as he caught a whiff of a sickly sweet scent as she exhaled, and belatedly he realized the obvious: she had downed perhaps dozens of the powerful sleeping tablets in the hopes of escaping into empty dreams from her aches. He grasped her chin between his fingers, jerking her face up towards his, and noted her pale, clammy skin and her dilated pupils, which widened and constricted as they tried to focus on him. Her condition, combined with the potent sedatives she had downed, would make it difficult at best for her to register him...so he had to hope that what he did next would be enough to wake her.

He dragged her over to the toilet, arranged her so she was leaning over it, gathered her hair up in a paw, and then, hoping she was too groggy to bite down hard, curled a finger into her mouth and down her throat, triggering her gag reflex. She heaved, regurgitating a sour mixture of diluted acid, semi-digested tablets, and yellow bile, which burned across his paw. Paying that no mind, he repeated the process until nothing more came up, and only then removed his paw and turned to the sink, intent on washing the foul liquid away. In the few moments that lasted, the woman merely leaned over the porcelain bowl, clutching at her aching ribs and stomach, tears and snot leaking from her eyes and nose, a natural response to the unpleasantness of vomiting. Turning back to her, he knelt down, taking her shoulders in his hands and turning her around to face him. He noted, with an uncharacteristic jolt of panic, that she was shivering more forcefully now, but found some relief in how her eyes had cleared, her regained awareness punctuated by her spitting colorful, if slurred, swears. However, she was having trouble clinging to consciousness, and this concerned him for an entirely more practical reason: he did not know what had caused her to sicken, and so could not know how to handle this situation. Patting her face with a paw to keep her with him, he asked her what was happening to her.

Eventually, she muttered something about having no more pills, and after a moment's confusion, understanding arose in his mind. She must have run out of her prescription, and given what she had been taking...well, if she had become dependent on the drug, then the withdrawal symptoms for
paroxetine and fentanyl would match what he was currently seeing. Yet for her to be suffering this much...just how concentrated were the doses she normally took? Growling out his words and shaking her gently to keep her awake, he asked, "Cassandra? Cassandra, how many milligrams of your medicine were you taking a day?"

While he was prepared to hear that she took more than what her doctor had advised, her eventual estimate stunned him. After a few more curses and light slaps, she lolled her head to the side and said, "...Sixty, last I checked? Less than three pills wouldn't stop the monster with the hard hands from coming 'round anymore, so..."

As he digested that information, the clone could only stare at her in mute horror. Had she gone insane? Sixty milligrams in one day? A patient taking the medication she did – a powerful anti-depressant laced with an even more potent opiate – was never supposed to exceed the maximum dosage of fifty milligrams, and in her case, the recommended dose had been a mere twenty milligrams. She was taking three times the amount she was meant to, polluting her system with a drug harsh enough to banish sensation and emotion alike from her permanently if abused. Expressing his dismay at her stupidity, he hissed, "You fool! You were only supposed to take one pill per day! One, Cassandra!"

No wonder she was in this loathsome condition! Had she even realized what she'd been bringing upon herself when she'd...? She was an intelligent woman, likely well versed in the anatomical and medicinal sciences, so it seemed improbable for her not to have known what the consequences of her decision would be. But of that were so, then did that mean she simply didn't care what happened to her body...? Recalling the demons the medicine was meant to battle, he found himself startled by the implication that the woman he had believed to be a fiery, stubborn, scathing, but most of all, strong and self-assured creature, was neither of the latter two, and was, in fact, in the process of collapsing in front of him.

Yet Cassandra, when seeing the expression on his face and hearing the sharpness in his voice, merely spat at him, "Don't you dare...pity me. I don't want that from someone who...who writhes in his sleep over some girl he fucked and killed. Just let me go...I...I need to sleep. Haven't rested in forty-eight, so let me-..."

Even as she began to struggle against him, and her words seared like lashes across his face, the replica's focus remained on keeping her from the tablets littering the floor around them. "No, little viper, I will not allow you to have your way this time. If I leave you to your own devices, you'll swallow your death to soothe your craving for a substance I don't possess, and I find the notion of disposing of a corpse rather unappealing. Now stand up – we need to move you to someplace where you're less likely to injure yourself."

He was not, of course, expecting her to act reasonable at this point. After all, she was usually defiant to a fault when lucid, so why would she cooperate more readily when she was nearly drunk with fatigue and pain? As he semi-predicted she would, as soon as he made to lift her to her feet, she began to thrash in his hold, using what remained of her strength to battle against him every step of the way. Her palms smacked at him, her fingernails nipped into his thin fur, and if he was not mistaken, she was attempting to pick up some of the pills on the floor with her toes, much to his annoyance. He supposed he would commend her for her determination, even if it was misguided, but soon that irritation sank into an emotion akin to dread as her words slowly became inarticulate as he half-carried, half-dragged her from the washroom, and her struggling began to grow wild. Glancing down at her as she began to kick and hit and wail, he saw the sense she had briefly regained dissolving as desperation for synthetic salvation was denied to her. Her rage cooled and morphed into blind, cold panic, her eyes glazed, and within those unfocused grey orbs he witnessed his own transformation from an irksome interloper to indefinable monster, a shadowy being with the potential
of committing unspeakable acts against her as she was torn from what she perceived as her only remedy from waking helplessness. As she began to spit and shriek and claw into his arms, her bare feet kicking at the floor violently, the clone cursed himself for not keeping any opiates on hand which could have, if only a little, buffered the effects of the manifesting withdrawal symptoms, at least enough to keep her rational. He was almost tempted to bind her to the guest room bed and go fetch some suitable drugs to ease the process, but he knew that desperate people often take foolhardy measures to improve their conditions, and the possibility of her harming herself in the act – not to mention what might happen to Psyche if the woman was left unattended – posed too much of a risk for him to seriously consider. This left only one option for him to take, even if it promised to be incredibly unpleasant and taxing: he would have to watch over the female himself as she began to detoxify from her medication, a process which could take up to five days to complete.

In the back of his mind, he found it ironic that the drug designed to reject anguish and despair from Cassandra's system would now, as an aftereffect, force her through a hellish ordeal rife with the very feelings it was meant to defend her against. But then, he supposed that was the way of experimental treatments these days, wasn't it…?

Regardless, the woman's shouts had the effect of rousing his companion, who arrived in time to see her roommate pinning the scantily dressed and very distressed female onto the guest room bed. Initially she hissed at the scene, her thoughts circling around the notion that the clone was currently attempting to do something rather unseemly to the woman, something that even a killer did not deserve, before she recalled how uncharacteristic of the clone that would be, and smelled the stench of sickness within the room. Her empathic senses filled in the gaps, helping her to surmise that her roommate was not about to violate the human. He was simply trying to restrain a creature who was currently out of control.

Stepping forward, she called out over the woman's frantic cries. "Espe…espeon?" she asked, her lavender eyes wide with shock over the scene. "Mewtwo, what's…what's happening to her?"

Mewtwo's gaze remained fixated on the woman struggling beneath him as he replied, "She is currently entering into the effects of paroxetine and fentanyl withdrawal, which I believe she's slowly been succumbing to over the past two days in the privacy of her own room. I would advise you to stay back, Psyche – in her current mental state, she may well injure you if you stray too close."

The espeon, despite not understanding what the two drugs were, nonetheless understood the dangers of detoxification to both the one enduring the process and those around him or her. While the breeders of the program she had been raised in had never used synthetic substances to "improve" their annual line-ups, she had witnessed the effects such chemicals had on the less fortunate pokémon who had been exposed to them. She could remember countless nights during the multi-day competitions of her youth when she, along with other registered beasts, had witnessed the victims thrashing within the cold mesh of their cages, howling with agony and befouling the tiny unit they were crammed into. Some made it through the ordeal to be punished by their abusive owners, while others had died miserably in the darkness, long cold, stiff, bloated, and covered in biting flies by the time their caretakers arrived to fetch them for the contests. She wondered, as she watched the woman eventually exhaust herself until she could do no more than sob and whisper and writhe, whether Cassandra would be among the ones to make it through the nightmare, for the potential of the body to perish from the shock of discontinued drug use was significant. After a matter of hours passed, in which the clone and his companion both kept watch over the human, Cassandra ceased all attempts at fighting and tightly curled up into fetal position, clutching at her abdomen and stomach, panting and quivering, all the while losing her focus on reality. Soon she no longer saw either of them or the room she was in, her eyes instead darting to different points in space as visions of other entities and places overwhelmed her senses. She began to ramble as her waking dreams and memories blended into a disjointed film playing before her eyes only, each unfolding sequence more disturbing than the
last, until she weakly began to dig her nails into her own flesh, begging her invisible and perhaps unknowable foe for mercy.

"No…stop it. Please, no more…no more!"

Although she felt no love for the human, Psyche was too soft in heart to not be effected by such terrified pleas. She tore her eyes away from the woman, folded her ears back, closed down her empathic abilities, and tried with all that she was to block out the suffering so near to her being. Yet in shifting her focus away from the stricken female, she merely found her attention riveted by something which unsettled her in an entirely different way: for Mewtwo's expression, as he peered upon the fallen angel, was not devoid of emotion. His usually rigid features were not petrified in a deceptively blank slate, which often appeared to so many beings as almost clinical in its detachment. Instead the façade he usually donned seemed to have faded away, exposing the feeling creature beneath…and this fluctuation of self control, to the espeon's observation, became most evident in the replica's gaze. For his eyes, usually so fierce and frigid, so capable of slicing into any soul with the ease of a frozen blade, now gleamed with an emotion she had never before seen within them, not even when he had been attacked by monsters seeking his pelt.

And that emotion…was fear.

Mewtwo, for the first time during all the months she had know him, was frightened….

There are moments and events in every person's life that he or she wishes to forget. In most cases, the memories chronicling these instances record embarrassing or even humiliating moments, which are buried within the depths of the individuals' minds to keep their senses of confidence and dignity intact. Yet these people, concerned solely with how they are perceived by both themselves and others, are among the fortunate beings who rebel against the past. For others, the smothered memories are imbued with shame, horror, trauma, and the offspring of the former: inconsolable and unrelenting pain. Scarcely fading with time, the only ways to cope with the anguish is to either be brave enough to confront it, or, as is more commonly done, to simply conceal it beneath other thoughts, to busy the brain and leave little opportunity to consider what one has survived through. In this latter case, the victim sacrifices true healing over the necessity for continued function, allowing the past to fester in favor of moving forward into the future. In the case of Cassandra Merlo, this later course is the one she chose early on, a course which both her godfather and her doctor assisted her in by supplying her with a numbing remedy. Reminiscent of covering up a mortal wound with mere band-aids, the pills were intended to repress the nightmares which might have driven the adolescent girl insane, and in doing so, constituted as her only defense against the disorder which was swiftly ensnaring her mind.

In short, the drug the agent took was meant to combat posttraumatic stress disorder.

For a person in her situation, developing the condition had probably been inevitable. Having lost what family and friends she had possessed by the age of ten, which was devastating in and of itself, this loss had narrowed her sources of emotional support down to her godfather, who was arguably entirely inappropriate for the task. That this man had then begun to shape her into a ruthless soldier, an assassin designated to murder any who crossed the crime lord – even innocent people – had only damaged her further, resulting in both her disillusionment to the world and a worsening sense of hatred towards herself. After seeing everyone she cared about perish around her, and then acting as the deliverer of death to people who had done her no wrong, depression over their murders and intense survivor's guilt accumulated into the ingrained belief that she was nothing more than a poison, and thus her life had little worth. These feelings had only worsened when not even the other Team Rocket agents around her would accept her, too wary of associating with the goddaughter of
their boss to dare approach her. So they, like the children before her adolescence, had shunned her, and as her reputation became increasingly wicked with each passing year, they grew even more cold and impersonal towards her, regarding her as their superior officer and a living weapon, rather than a flesh and blood teenage girl. Of course, it seemed that one among their number had been compassionate enough to take pity on her: near her sixteenth birthday she had received an eevee from an anonymous source, a runt of a creature who had acted as a balm to her loneliness.

Yet even her fluffy companion could not stop her from caving inwards after the traumatic incident that had occurred within her own home. At that point the agent had broken completely, and had lost herself in her work and her medication to keep herself going. Had she not, she might have submitted to the escape her shattered spirit was whispering for her to take: suicide. Only through sheer willpower, and guilt over what might happen to Shadow if she left, had kept her from killing herself in the hellish months after the event. Yet over the duration of the next few years, the urge to end her life had never quite disappeared…and the saddened voice only grew more insistent whenever she remembered the faces of those she had lost: that of her mother, her smile beautiful yet sad; her best friend, a sister in all but blood; and that younger girl’s parents, so wise and kind towards the strange and lonely orphan. These people were parts of a now eradicated past, a past which few in the world both within and without Team Rocket could recall belonging to a girl who had, at only one decade into her life, simply disappeared. Yet what they dismissed as a tale of unfortunate events continued to torment Cassandra in excruciating detail, the tragedy unable to be overcome by the haunted woman who could not come to terms with the demise of all that had been good and pure in her life. Instead she remained within a cage of tortuous circumstances, shell-shocked, distrustful, and incapable of surfacing from her despair. She continued as a witness, victim, and doer of greater evils than most of the population of the shining world around her could comprehend.

Without a dreg of hope at the bottom of her soul, the visions that flashed before her eyes as she suffered from withdrawal possessed no hints of light or happiness.

Instead, the worse was summoned into her mind, granting no mercy for the ruined young woman….

When she had turned eleven, her godfather began to teach her about the ways of the mafia. "When on a hunt, you cannot allow anyone who has seen your face to live after your kill is complete. It matters not who these witnesses are: random passersby, neighbors, friends, spouses - even the children of your marks must not be spared, since they might someday identify you to the authorities. Additionally, eliminating those close relations, while required more extensive planning and being a far bloodier hunt, can be more advantageous in the end. My colleagues in the Americas, when eliminating dangerous opponents, often conduct a purge of not only the opposing individuals, but their immediate families and dearest companions as well. They do not even allow the infants to escape the slaughter, since, as they say, such children can grow into avengers more powerful than their original foes. However, I would like to think we are more civilized in my organization, so you may use your discretion on whom you chose to kill. However, the witnesses must always meet a quick and lethal end, remember that. As the oldest of the Elite Children, it is your duty to set an example for the rest, and by keeping your hunts thorough and efficient, you can do precisely that."

Seven years after Giovanni Maki explained those principles to her, Agent Merlo stood within the banquet hall of a burning mansion, the air rippling with heat and the white smoke from the walls spiraling up towards the chandelier, its crystals dulled with a thin layer of cinders. Sparks and ashes whirled from the blaze around her, singeing the tips of her feathers and her clothes, but despite the proximity of the flames, she remained tranquil and even unconcerned. Having spent the last month undercover as a servant to the late owners of the grand house, she knew a variety of plausible exits, and thus did not fear being trapped within the conflagration she had started. Careful not to tread upon the corpses littering the room around her, mainly consisting of the mansion’s housekeepers and security guards, she made her way into the hallway that led towards the family bedrooms, where the
shooting had originally begun.

It was at the point where the married couple of the establishment had fallen that her steps faltered, and her eyes widened with dismay: for there was a small figure shaking the corpses, begging them to wake up. With mounting horror she realized that the couple's children must have returned to the house from their relatives a day early - she had been so preoccupied with preparing for the assassination that she hadn't heard news of their arrival. When the shooting began, she wondered, had he hid away with his baby sister, or...? She could not know, and as her heart sank within her, the devastated boy looked up to see her standing there, armed and unmasked. Although young, he realized instantly that she had killed his parents and had set his home ablaze, that she was the reason why his entire world was in ruins. With a cinder-streaked face and wide, horrified eyes, the child wailed at her, asking why she, who he had thought of as his friend, had done this.

He was probably too lost in shock and mourning to realize that he would soon be joining his parents in death, and thus he did not beg for her to let him or his sister live. Or perhaps he knew that his death was now inevitable, and was simply trying to live up to his parents' expectations and be a brave boy. Either way, she doubted that the truth would give him any comfort: that his mother and father had been fighting against Team Rocket's latest campaign, and thus were to be made examples of. Yet the only way to access them when they remained barricaded within their castle was to slip in amongst the workers – the official documents forged and the act practiced to perfection – and, over the duration of many weeks, gain their trust and affection. So she had watched over and laughed with the children, treating them as tenderly as she imagined a sister might, hiding her true intentions beneath a not-so-faked façade. She had snatched at moments of joy with them, but her mission ultimately had dictated that she draw the play into its finale...and so, when everything had been prepared as she desired, she had led them down the path to perdition. Yet hearing all of that would be no comfort to this child, and so she clutched her firearm tighter and, ignoring the part of her soul that hissed that killing the young was heinous, raised the barrel to his forehead.

He was only eight years old.

With a trembling hand, she began to squeeze the trigger, for everything she had been taught by her godfather told her that she must kill this innocent child....

"I...I'm so sorry."

And then there was the blast of gunfire, the warmth of blood splattered against her skin, and the boy crumpled back to rest beside his parents. Even in death, he still wore that horrible expression of disbelief upon his face, and as she gazed upon his corpse, which had been so full of vitality and potential mere seconds before, the protesting voice within her began to screech in horror. Soon over the snarls of the hellfire, a scream arose to fill the ruins of the home of the lost family, conveying all the remorse and self-hatred a single heart could contain before it broke....

Beneath the eyes of the watchful replica, the fallen angel's entire frame trembled as her guilt began to feast on her innards like a starving, snarling beast, her muscles and bones aching from the phantom sensations of being shredded by its myriad fangs. Yet the rabid animal was not content with tasting just one memory, one segment of the guts of her being, and so followed along her entrails, unveiling the recollection of more children and their untimely deaths....

It was winter in Viridian City, with heaps of snow enshrouding the trees, shrubs, and buildings in a white pall, while a layer of ice, scarcely melted from the sprinkled rock salt, made skating rinks of the streets and sidewalks. The inhabitants of Viridian City had been advised to remain indoors that evening, since yet another blizzard had been forecasted to sweep over the metropolis, and thus only a few vehicles remained on the roads, their drivers carefully making their way to their destinations.
One of these cars, an aqua blue subcompact, had stopped a few corners down to pick up a young girl from her lesson with her violin instructor, and through the front window that child could be seen chatting animatedly with her wizened father. Within the sniper scope, the black cross marking the point of fire wavered upon that man’s face, and then swung low to focus on his only daughter. The one holding the sniper rifle was but a child himself, the same age as the frantic girl beside him, who was crying for him to lower the weapon. Yet the first initiated member of the Elite Children refused to do so, for he had been directed by Signore Maki to watch over the man’s goddaughter, and this, as far as he was concerned, included insuring that her first hunt was a success. If she failed, there would be no salvation for her as far as the organization was concerned, and thus at her refusal to kill the intelligence leak, her dearest friend, he had taken up the bloody task himself.

The young Cassandra, who would turn ten within a few short months, had uncovered his plan early enough to find him stationed on the roof of their elementary school building, handling a rifle nearly as tall as he was. With all the strength in her skinny arms, she was pulling at the boy by his thick jacket, begging at him to leave the girl alone.

Shaking her off, his eyes brimming with angry tears, he wailed, "If you won't do it, then I've got to! You know what'll happen if she doesn't die!"

She was crying as well, but in her case, her tears sprung from her sheer desperation to save her friend. "No, Rico please! Don't do it, please—!"

As he took aim once again and began to pull the trigger, she tackled him, hoping the shot being fired would go wide. Yet fate proved both merciful and cruel that way, for while the bullet missed the girl completely, it nonetheless acted as the catalyst for her death: the white-hot bit of metal hit the front tire of a vehicle in the other lane, and as the rubber wheel burst, the two-ton car swerved into the other lane, its remaining wheels squealing as the driver tried to pump the brakes. Yet the ice that had formed on the insufficiently plowed street rendered that driver’s attempts in vain, and within a matter of seconds, the sounds of collision and shattering glass erupted as the vehicle rammed into the passenger side of the little blue subcompact. The smaller car was crushed inwards like a soda being kicked by a steel-toed boot, and as the two vehicles eventually ground to a stop, long moments passed before horrified shouts arose into the crisp air. She saw the other driver stumble out, saw him peer into front window of the car he’d crashed into, and heard him yell about going to call an ambulance. She saw her friend’s father lift her from the ruined subcompact, saw him cradle her in his arms as he sat on the frozen pavement, whispering frantic words to the little girl that Cassandra could not hear. And she saw her friend speaking weakly as she began to hemorrhage in her papa’s hold, the shards of metal and glass from the decimated window once beside her having sliced mortal wounds into her frail body. In the distance, the sirens of the promised ambulance could be heard, but by the time the paramedics arrived, she was too far gone to save.

As the child died on the stretcher, Cassandra howled in horror and grief, and turning to the boy responsible for the shot that marked the end of her happy days, she began to strike him, deaf to his protests and his own pleas for her to cease her assault. Behind him, the rifle was knocked over the edge, and as he turned to note its fall, another punch knocked him back. Slipping on a snow-covered patch of ice, his foot caught on the roof’s edge, and tripping backwards he plummeted to the pavement three levels below with a terrified scream…until his skull impacted with the frozen ground, cutting his cry – and his life – short. Ricardo Corvi, the first child chosen by Giovanni Maki to belong to the group known as the Elite Children or the Grigori Agents, fell from his school’s roof and broke his neck, dying instantly. And Cassandra, the second child chosen soon after him, could only stare down upon him in absolute horror, realizing that she had just committed the same crime as he had, no matter that it had not been premeditated. Thus, after the girl had called Ricardo’s handler and had his help in cleaning up the mess, she submitted to being initiated into Team Rocket – for after being incapable of preventing her friend from being killed, and then accidentally
murdering another child, she was convinced that she belonged among the criminals now. After all, there was no other place in the world left for her to go...and so she fell under the blade, sentencing herself to eight years of servitude to the organization that would break her....

Curling up within the sheets of the bed, like a snake within a soft eggshell, the woman could scarcely breathe for the sobs strangling her windpipe...and Mewtwo could do nothing to ease the ache.

"I'm sorry...I'm so sorry...."

Left unspoken at the end of that sentence were two words, a plea to the ghosts of children who perished in her stead: forgive me. Perhaps if they manifested before her, she might have asked them for such absolution, even though she was certain she did not deserve such a gift. She did not deserve their pardon, nor did she deserve forgiveness from the dozens, perhaps even hundreds of people she had murdered in cold blood over the last nine years. Perhaps if more of their number had been sullied with sin before they had been marked, she might have been capable of justifying the bloodshed she was wading with...but most of the lost ones had been innocent, or at the very least had simply been attempting to do what they believed was right. That so many of them had been children, the victims of circumstance or merely foolish trainers who had - for far too long - been a thorn in Giovanni's side, made her guilt all the more smothering. Naïvely believing this world was what it appeared to be, a shining and fantastical utopia where they could wander wherever they please without consequence, those young victims had held golden dreams: of becoming Pokémon Masters, professional breeders, competition winners, or famous rangers.

Yet those dreams were shattered like brittle ships beneath a merciless tempest, to sink within an ocean of lost chances and opportunities and futures, shattered into ruins that would thereafter only to be glimpsed by their companions, who would muse with nostalgia on whom the young dead may have become, given time. Among those myriad souls, who had obtained their starter pokémon before their deaths? Who had managed to earn badges from the Gyms during the regional competitions? Who had witnessed the miracle of pokémon evolution, or had nurtured and watched an egg hatch? Having taken those adventures and those joys from them, having taken their very flesh and blood from them to retain hers, she had sacrificed her right to return to their bright and beautiful world. Although Giovanni Maki had tossed her to the carnivorous shadows, had preened her within the seedy underbelly of his organization, she had chosen not to turn a weapon upon herself in defiance, and thus had consented to becoming what he desired. Terrified of death, she had placed a greater value to her life than those of her victims, until murder – a crime she had never wanted to commit - became habitual. She had killed until life had become meaningless, a cruel joke from on high that she became the punch line for, and no one could change its outcome.

Not even she would end the cycle herself, although the temptation nagged her in the back of her mind, ever insistent that she had endured enough. Yet to do so would mean admitting to everyone who had ever known her that she was a weak-willed coward, and she refused to let her critics be vindicated by her fall. And furthermore, to take her own life would mean condemning someone else to fill her role in her stead, and would act as the final insult to the memory of her parents, who had never wished to see their child within the organization that had slowly but surely ruined their own lives....

Gazing up an angelic face crowned in sandy brown curls, the strands reminiscent of the downy feathers of a desert bird, the child smiled and asked her mother if they could have some pictures taken together at the beach. The woman, surprised at the suggestion, nonetheless acquiesced with a smile...yet that smile, despite the attempts of her daughter, always held a tinge of sadness as she gazed around at the familiar sights around her, which were imbued with memories many years older than her little girl. Although she attempted to hide the effects of these constant reminders from her loving daughter, Cassandra sensed the sorrow within her, and wished with all that she was that
she could find a way to make that heartache fade….

"…Mama…why…?"

Strange as it was to hear such a word rising from an adult's lips, the replica found no amusement from it. How could he when he could see a distraught little girl speaking through a woman's mouth, attempting to understand how her life had unwoven into tattered threads…? Why, the grown female asked her mother's ghost, had her single parent not taken Giovanni's "offer" and moved into his home along with her daughter? Knowing what he was capable of, having seen over the years how rejecting him could only end in destruction, why had she refused his "request"? Yet by her next heartbeat, Cassandra had her answer: because Selena Brennan had known what would happen to her little girl if he had his way. Although her efforts had ultimately been in vain, she had attempted to shield her child from his evil for as long as possible, and had succeeded in her mission until Cassandra had turned six. Having wanted to believe that Giovanni would respect her husband's wishes in keeping their lives separate from the organization, she had been disappointed – but not shocked – when the Gym Leader's had eventually turned on them. After all, the man had sent Cassandra's father, Caleb, on the mission that had been his undoing. Had it not been for that, he would have remained within their lives, raising and guarding their child against the villain he had once been proud to call his best man. Yet those years of serenity and goodwill had long passed, and after the father had vanished with the South American jungles, the mother followed within the decade, apparently from a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the chest.

Remembering her mother's unceasing sadness, Cassandra Brennan - renamed Merlo upon her initiation into Team Rocket, her previous identity obliterated with the stroke of a pen - had reluctantly accepted the notion that a selfish suicide had made her into an orphan (which was, in part, what had sullied the act for her). Learning what had actually happened had devastated her adolescent self, and recalling the shock of that particular discovery, the woman felt her stomach churn within her. As dry heaving seized her once again, her self-loathing at her gullibility, her naivety, and her idiocy over believing the story she had been told, and for condemning herself to this mess by not retaliating when she had the chance, drenched her like a cold sweat. She despised herself for allowing her life to trickle so far out of hand, for enabling this sickness to ensnare her being, even when she felt that it was, at least in part, befitting punishment for such a wicked person as herself.

Maybe she deserved to suffer like this. Maybe she even deserved…deserved….

"You deserve this after…everything you've done. Be glad I…don't do worse! I could…call my pals. They'd enjoy…humbling…a haunt girl like you. How…would you…like that, you little…bitch!"

The monster grunted out broken phrases, his sentences fractured as they shoved themselves into her ears and shredded the soft tissue of her brain. His touch fell like hammers against her skin, the point he wielded driving into her to spill her blood onto the carpet of her home. Like the victim of this assault, that rug would never again be fully clean, and her apartment would forever be tainted by what happened within its walls. For Cassandra in that terrible and terrifying moment, the sheer agony that was suffusing her body was close to unbearable, her flesh and soul being torn into even as she attempted to struggle away. Yet his bruising grip around her wrists was too powerful for her to break, and the belt around her ankles was too tight for her to squirm free from. Disoriented from alcohol, fatigue, blood loss, and nearly paralyzing pain and fear, she was incapable of regaining her bearings to launch a successful defense or even an escape. Instead, she could only beg him to stop hurting her, and thrash against him as he continued to abuse her. His figure was pale and bulky and heavy over her own, the odor of his perspiration and rage strong enough to suffocate her. Bile rose in her throat his palm covered her mouth, his hard fingers clutching at her cheekbones and mandible, effectively preventing her from biting him and, more importantly, cutting off her screams for someone, anyone, to come to her aid. As he jerked her head to the side, and the waves...
of agony continued to grow fiercer, her swimming vision circled around a button torn from her
nightshirt. Clenching her eyes shut, she prayed for someone whose name she could no longer
remember to save her…and then, when that friend failed to materialize, turned her breaking soul
towards whatever higher power the universe contained to be her salvation.

Please, God, make me a stone…! her thoughts cried.

And God…refused.

Over three years later, she flailed against the clone, whose paws soon wrapped around her wrists as
he tried to restrain her. Murmuring her once muffled pleas aloud, her unfocused eyes shone with
acute dread as his looming form attempted to pin her to the bed, her mind imprisoned in an event
which reality did nothing to dispel. Reliving a time when her flesh had become little more than a
tenderized husk which she ached to shed, she did not hear Mewtwo demanding for her to calm
herself. Beating against his bandaged hide with her knees and feet, pain flared in his still healing
wounds, and his resulting growl only frightened her further. As her thrashing became more frenzied,
he could almost hear her heart racing within her chest, seeming to beat as frantically as a fleeing
hummingbird's wings. As one of her wrists broke free, her fist pounding into his chest, he bowed his
head and closed his eyes.

"You cannot hurt me that way, Cassandra…not like that…"

Her ears were deaf to his words, and as he recaptured her freed wrist and coiled his tail around her
shins to restrict her movements, she continued to descend into her the hallucination. She felt someone
else's hot, moist breath against her face, felt someone else holding her down and the echoes of
anguish racing up her spine. Although the replica distantly realized he was only making the situation
worse for her by oppressing her as he was, he also realized she might bolt in her delusional state, and
might harm herself or others if she was released. So he held onto her…he held on….

"…Sensei…Sensei Biancardi, stop! PLEASE STOP!"

Her shrill scream, so suffused with terror and pain, touched something within Mewtwo which had
long lain dormant, seemingly smothered by his own hands in his attempts to preserve himself. He
would not have believed, prior to that moment, that a single scream would be enough to resuscitate it,
but like a jolt of electricity to a stilled heart, it reawakened that deadened part of his soul. The
composure he had been nurtured for so long, perhaps too long, evaporated as it surfaced, and later he
would speculate that her maddened state had driven him into his own transient fit of insanity. Yet that
was a time after now, and in this moment of chaos, he released her wrists and dragged her into his
arms, taking her head between his hands and feeling the curves of her ears and the oil of her hair
beneath his fingers.

Staring into her face and feeling his insides twisting within him as he did so…he shouted at her.

"LOOK AT ME!"

…Only later would realize how very, very long it had been since he had last yelled so forcefully. Not
even to Giovanni Maki had he raised his voice to such an extent…but he wished dearly for all of this
to come to an end. He no longer wished to be here, to be charged with guarding over her because
only he had the physical capability to. He so yearned to return to a time when his existence was
unfettered, when his bittersweet solitude was close to perfect, to the era before she had wandered into
his home. Yet if there was a god, It refused to grant the wish of an outcast such as him, and so he
remained here and suffering alongside Cassandra. And in the following moments, her quickened
breaths rasped to his ears, her slender frame trembled within his hold, and her darting gaze began to
still. As close as he was to her, she was still blind to him, and so Mewtwo continued to whisper to
her. For he wanted to listen to no more of her begging, to witness no more of the overwhelming fear within her eyes….

He spoke softly, insistently, murmuring the last words she would have anticipated were she lucid. His position in time lost and uncertain, he said, "That man cannot harm you anymore, Cassandra. He is not here, and no one is here who would do you harm..."

"...You...you are safe. So calm yourself...calm yourself for both our sakes...please..."

Longs seconds trickled past...her grey eyes peered into his amethyst ones, still dulled and unfocused...but then as his words, so alien and unbelievable, seeped into the crevasses of her mind, quieting the bedlam of her heaving thoughts, her gaze cleared. When order and sanity began to reassert themselves in her brain, she bowed her head and sank against him, her forehead pressing to his collarbone, her fingertips burrowing into his fur, her fragile form trembling against him. Gasps punctuated her quaking breaths as she sobbed, and within moments he felt droplets of hot liquid against his chest. She was crying...! Lowering his hands from her scalp, he wrapped his arms around her further, allowing her to cling to him. For what else was real enough to her now to hold onto, and what else was trying to keep her from tearing herself apart...? Soon slipping back into the darkness, she remained huddled up against him...but this time when she dreamed, her dreams were not so horribly cold....

A matter of months after the attack, Cassandra drifted awake to the sound of footfalls within her apartment...and while the intellectual portion of her mind screeched at her of impending danger, she found herself unafraid of whoever had entered her home. She knew no dread in those moments, instead being filled with a fathomless, aching sadness, which only intensified the pain of her most recent wound. Although she tried to understand why her eyes were now overflowing with tears, and why she suddenly felt so hollow inside, no answer emerged from the bedlam of her thoughts. Peering up at the ceiling, she raised her fingertips to touch the wetness rolling down her cheeks: the beads of salty liquid burst as her hands brushed them, and staring at the sheen of water across her fingers, she wondered at still being human enough to weep, and over why she was doing so tonight. Yet when a figure shifted near the front door, its form blurred from the tears in her eyes, such musing were scattered...and for a moment, she thought she saw a glint of blue in its steady gaze.

'Thен a quiet voice arose, and the sorrow conveyed in its words only made her own hurts keener. 'Please...please do not look at me with those eyes....'

"Who...who are you?" she asked, the soft darkness before her seeming weaken as she spoke.

Long moments passed, and she almost believed it would not reply...but then it did, and in doing so gave her a comparison which would linger within her thoughts for years to come: '...I am a figment of your tired mind, and nothing more. So close those lovely eyes of you...those eyes of purest moonlight....'

And as those words were spoken, she felt herself drifting into blackness...and yet still, within the depths of those dark, tranquil dreams, she felt sorrow blooming within her heart. But why, she asked the void, why did she feel so very sad...? Why...?

Even years after that enigmatic encounter, which she could not confirm to be the product of reality or merely a deceptive dream, she did not have her answer. In the upcoming hours, she flitted between empty dreams, hallucinations, and restlessness, with Mewtwo cradling her whenever her waking nightmares became too unsettling for her to endure alone. At times he even stroked her down her spine as she trembled, reminiscent of a guardian towards their upset charge. Throughout it all, Psyche spied upon them, her confusion and her alarm mounting with each comforting gesture on the replica's part. Suspicion suffused her at his unexpected compassion, at how he refused to stray from the
human's side even as she slept, although he no doubt was exhausted from his constant vigil. Despite that the espeon had offered to keep watch over the weakening woman, certain that she could subdue the angel with her telekinesis if need be, Mewtwo had turned her down, stating that he would not risk her or her kits being harmed by the crazed agent. While she could understand his reasoning, his words didn't ease the growing sensation within her that something here was amiss…that something, somewhere along the line, had steered Mewtwo far enough from his usual state that only the illusion of normalcy remained.

Gazing upon them both, Psyche's eyes narrowed as she made a promise to herself: she would discover what the source of that upheaval, that wrongness, truly was…and then do whatever she could to amend it.

Two days would pass before Cassandra would regain lucidity, her substance-dependant brain struggling in the absence of her drug. Within those difficult forty-eight hours, she continued to be seized by tremors, muscle pain, and excessive sweating, and fell prey to reliving an array of traumatic experiences, sometimes mistaking Mewtwo once again for the assailant who went by the name of Sensei Biancardi. Yet by lingering at her side, carefully watching for any signs in the improvement or worsening of her condition, this misidentification was perhaps to be anticipated, since she could always feel his eyes upon her and often his paws around her wrists, bringing to mind the anxiety she'd felt when near that man. Eventually her slender frame was rendered nearly motionless from exhaustion and intense pain, and when she did awaken, she gazed up at the ceiling, her grey eyes clouded with thought. Although Mewtwo could sense her frustration and despair at how miserable she was feeling, she managed to appear completely calm, and he noted that this level of composure was perhaps a sign that the detoxification process was nearing its end. Eventually he watched as she pursed her lips, and then lolled her head to the side, wincing from the wave of dizziness and the ringing in her ears at the motion. He imagined that her skull was pounding now, probably causing her more pain than the extensive bruises across her arms from when he had needed to restrain her. He was correct in that respect, but what he could not know was the other unpleasant sensations she was experiencing: her grimy skin, coated with three days worth of sweat, felt as though it were sizzling, overheated and pulsing with electricity. She felt the overwhelming need to take a cool shower, and at the thought of chilled water, her dry mouth and throat urged her to quench her growing thirst.

"Water," she rasped out to the clone, and closed her eyes as he stood from his seat and went to fetch her a fresh drink. When he returned, he brought a couple bottles of water with him, unscrewed the cap of the first one, and gave it to her. Grasping it weakly, she nonetheless managed to tilt the bottle back and guzzle down its contents greedily. After she finished it, he offered her the other bottle, but she shook her head to decline it, feeling the previous cool drink sloshing within her otherwise empty stomach.

Mewtwo, seemingly thinking along the same line of thought, asked, "Would you be up to eating something? You need food to help replenish your strength."

The very notion of a meal made her stomach churn, and with a shudder, she said, "I don't think that would be such a good idea. Give me another day and I might be up to it. Until then, I'll just continue to lose what weight I've gained by lounging around your pad."

Her attempt at humor did not lighten the clone's dour mood - he was still rather worried for her. Nevertheless, he replied, "As if you would allow yourself to soften on a hunt," and continued by saying, "Regardless, I must ask: have you ever been ill like this before?"

She did not meet his solemn gaze as she answered, "…Almost, but not quite. I'm usually much better
Even as she spoke, she contemplated why he seemed so concerned for her, and wondered why he had taken it upon himself to become her nurse. She supposed there could be any number of reasons behind his considerate behavior, reasons he would most likely refuse to share with her if she asked. In that moment, a small part of her found amusement at the irony of him attempting to console and heal a being who cared little for her own life, yet appreciation soon smothered that ungrateful observation. Although misguided, the way he tended to her did touch her, regardless of how he might logically justify his actions. Thus she had to wonder: if he was willing to spend as much time and energy on her as he had over these past few days, then what else might he be willing to do for her sake? Curiosity and a wisp of hope mingled within her wearied soul as she mused upon a particularly fanciful notion, one which - by all appearances - seemed futile, considering the nature of how he aided her now. Yet in essence, he was acting in a manner that would, ideally, ease her suffering…so would it be so unfair to request for him to do what must be done to spare her from any further anguish…?

She needed to ask, if only to see if the possibility could be made into a reality. "Mewtwo, would you do something for me…?"

Her voice carried no hints of sarcasm, arrogance, or anger, and thus contained none of the abrasiveness he had become so used to over what had nearly been the last three weeks. If anything, her tone was one of quiet calm, the tone of someone who has accepted that the situation around her is hopeless, and merely wishes to use her final moments to console a dear companion near to her. Yet more than that, her voice in that instance conveyed an undercurrent of faith in the clone, and while faith in what was debatable and, he thought, entirely undeserved, hearing it nonetheless surprised him into momentary stillness.

After a handful of seconds, however, the shock faded, and regaining his typical aloofness, he replied, "My willingness to assist you depends entirely on what you wish for me to do. What is it you want from me, woman?"

Hearing his brisk tone, she hesitated from answering…but then, as she released the captured breath in her lungs, her gaze resting upon his face, she asked him, "…Would you kill me?"

After a moment of complete silence, she watched as his entire frame stiffened, all the muscles within his body coiling from sudden stress. While her empathic abilities could glean his initial shock, he soon slammed down his mental barriers, barring her from further access to his emotions. Yet both his contorted expression and his harsh tone conveyed his rage when he eventually spoke. "That you would ask me that is pitiful and shameful, human. I would have thought your mind was strong enough to resist being swayed by sensations so insignificant as pain and discomfort, but clearly your illness has driven you mad! I refuse to succumb to such insanity myself by granting such a request. If you truly desire to forfeit your life, then you must do so by your own power. I will not assist you in committing that loathsome deed."

Perhaps it had been intentional, or perhaps he had simply drawn the wrong conclusion from the information available to him. Either way, he had misinterpreted the reason behind why she wished to die, attributing her thoughts of suicide as an effect of the physical and emotional misery of withdrawal sickness. After all, desiring to end one's suffering was a common symptom among similar patients, and with only shreds of knowledge about her past, why would he believe her case to be any different? The corners of her mouth tucking upwards with amusement at his mistake, she said, "Mewtwo, if I was asking you to release me from being violently ill, I would have suggested a strong sedative instead. While my current state is…unpleasant…it's not nearly enough to make me beg for death, so don't offend me by suggesting such. While I admit that my medication (and the absence of
it) has its drawbacks, my mind right now is quite clear – probably clearer than it's been in years, in fact. I'm not 'mad,' I'm just…so tired of living like this."

"…Elaborate, if you will."

His interest surprised her, although in retrospect she might have expected it. As it were, learning more about who she was could help him discover who wanted him dead. Given that possibility, she hesitated from explaining herself to him, but eventually decided to go ahead and do so. For whom else could she tell the truth to…? Shadow was innumerable kilometers away and would only be saddened if he learned his mistress's innermost feelings, and he was the only creature in her personal life who did not hold Team Rocket sacred. As far as Giovanni Maki, Domino, and anyone else in the organization would be concerned, her disgust towards serving the cause of the group could someday drive her to treachery…and if that happened, upheaval would overwhelm the gang, for if the leader's own ward resented and eventually abandoned Team Rocket, then who else could truly be relied upon within their ranks…? Understanding the consequences of voicing her uncertainty and despair to anyone else had long silenced her, but now she had a chance to tell someone the truth…and she intended to take it.

Perhaps afterward, the clone might reconsider granting her wish. Pursing her lips, she began, "…Although I'm used to the life I lead, that doesn't mean I enjoy waking up each day to face it. After everything I've done, most people would say that I don't deserve to live…and after everything I've experienced, I don't think I even want to. You were right in saying that I should end things myself, rather than place that burden on another person, but…suicide has never been an option I can take with good conscience. So that leaves me with only one other option: continue to take dangerous risks and even more dangerous missions, and pray that someone or something will snatch my life away. If it's not you, then I must move onto the next hunt, and keep on hunting until I'm killed. Yet considering that I despise killing innocent people, you'd be doing me, them, and yourself a favor by taking the opportunity to finish me right now while I'm still weak. Murder me, and all of our troubles are taken care of neatly…," she murmured, trailing off at the end. There was nothing more she needed to say after such a disclosure, after speaking the viewpoint forbidden to any devoted agent. However, if everything in the world went as it was supposed to, Cassandra would not have been involved with Team Rocket in the first place. Having not been born into or dedicated to the organization from the start, only the intervention of a greedy man had dragged her into its ranks. Without being willingly committed to the gang, she was perhaps inevitably doomed to fail it at some point.

Mewtwo, after absorbing what she had told him, crossed his arms over his chest. "If you are attempting to sway my decision by painting your situation as utterly hopeless, you will not succeed. Death is not your only option, human, and if you would lift your head to face the others, you would realize that."

She frowned as he pointed out a truth that so conflicted with her personal beliefs and desires. She had not wanted to hear him say that, even though she realized – from an intellectual standpoint - he might just be right. Yet there were so many complications he was oblivious to, and even if she did attempt to live another life, what chance did she have at success? Not only had she spent her formative years in a criminal organization, sequestered from the public and thus lacking any way to get by in the legal realm, but Team Rocket was also notorious for murdering any deserters. True, members in the lower tiers did manage to escape on occasion, but someone who knew as much as she did would not be allowed to enjoy a life of freedom. Her training might keep alive for a short period of time, but she was only one person: she could not conquer an army, despite what her godfather liked to boast. As such, her murder was probably the only real escape she could manage to obtain, and she felt disappointment flood her at the clone's refusal to give her the death she wanted.
Clenching the sheets beneath her in her hands, she said, "Maybe you're right, tomcat... but I'd rather be stubborn and stick to my original opinion. Sorry if I disappoint you by doing that, but I guess that's how it goes. Yet in case you do change your mind, let me know a bit in advance - I composed a threnody I'd like played over what I imagine to be a simple grave, and I would need a minute or so to find the recording of it on my MP3 player."

Despite how morbid that was, the agent seemed indifferent towards it, and only felt a pricking of sorrow when her Shadow came to mind. He was the only being in the universe she would regret never seeing again, but she understood that he'd be alright if she didn't return. He would probably mourn her passing, but he knew the risks his mistress took and was prepared for the possibility of her demise, and would not begrudge her for falling.

And why not have Mewtwo be the one to push her into the nothingness of death? Why not have him be her executioner to ensure his own survival? He could assist her in ending her life with ease, and would incur her gratefulness alone. He would owe her soul nothing, and would furthermore have his own valid reasons for killing her, if any asked him why. Yet as Cassandra attempted to convey all of that with brittle words, the replica turned his back on her, not allowing her to see the contorted expression on his face. Although he spoke to her sternly, with the detachment expected from one's foe, her willingness to die seemed to pain him, and he had to struggle to keep himself from trembling. He did not wish to hear these declarations of despair from her, and lamented the fact that he could not fold his ears back to deafen his hearing. His gaze fell upon the open door as he heard her sigh behind him, and he noted that the mocking face in the grains of the wood continued to laugh at him cruelly.

Eventually and in a distant voice, he murmured to her, "I... cannot. I cannot kill you...."

Even if that was my desire, I could not.... And the thought evolved within his mind, acquiring a truth he held only contempt for: Giovanni... he knew that when he chose you for this task.

However, despite carrying empathic abilities within her arsenal, Cassandra could not discern the shape of his thoughts... and without a reflective surface before the clone, she could not see the defeated expression upon his face either. As such, his statement merely perplexed her, for early on he had made it clear that he was willing to destroy anyone or anything that dared threaten his companions or him. Had something changed over the past few weeks...? As far as she knew, he still found her a loathsome individual, and was perhaps only tending to her now because the art of healing appealed to him.

Still, she asked him, "What do you mean?"

And Mewtwo lied with practiced ease, concealing his reluctance beneath a mask of impersonal and unremarkable logic. "You possess information that could be of use to me. If I were to execute you now, I would lose whatever chance I have at learning who wants me slain, whether that being is a man or God."

She seemed to find some humor in that. "What? Do you think I'm a heavenly angel because I have wings sprouting from my back? I'm far from it, Mewtwo, and besides, if God really does exist, It hardly cares about freaks like us. That It allows us to continue living is probably more due to negligence than anything else. No, it's a human who wants your innards, but that's all the information I can give you on the matter."

"I see...."

Following this exchange was a lengthy silence, but it was a thoughtful one for both beings, rather than an awkward one. After a time, the human seemed to realize that a change of subject was in
order, and after gathering up the courage to voice a question she doubted she would like the answer to, she sighed and asked him, "Do I...remind you of her? Is that why you're caring for me now?"
The thought has been bothering her for days....

Mewtwo hesitated from answering her, but eventually decided he must establish a solid motive behind his actions somehow, and this was as effective a way as any. It would not even be so far from the truth, and while a voice in the back of his mind nagged him that he shouldn't speak for precisely that reason, he broke his silence anyway. "I have numerous reasons for helping you through this ordeal, and I admit that one of them is sentimental in nature. You do indeed bear striking similarities to the woman who was, for a short time, my lover: your appearance, your mannerisms, even your personality is similar to what hers once was. However, you have an undeniably different soul than the one she carried, and you are also...well, you are also older than she was then, but her youth scarcely mattered considering my own age at the time...."

As he trailed off, Cassandra allowed the facts to settle into her mind: his "lover" had been a human who resembled her. She found that revelation, frankly, to be deeply unsettling, and had to forcefully quash the sudden urge to run from the room. Yet she also felt the need to learn more, and settled on diverting the conversation from those disturbing grounds to one she believed was closely related to it. "You have nightmares, Mewtwo. What are they about?"

She was again inquiring into a subject he didn't feel comfortable discussing...but telling her about his dreams, so long as he wasn't explicit in the details, could harm nothing at this point. True, if he answered her honestly, he would again be disclosing to her something he had otherwise told to no one else. However, he reminded himself that this particular information was scarcely significant, since she couldn't understand its importance without knowing the context it was set in. And since he had no intention of sharing that with her, he risked nothing in replying to her question.

When he spoke, his eyes gazed beyond the studio to the site of a golden memory, a memory consisting of sunlight and a shower of yellow willow leaves, which were carried along the wind of an unusually warm, autumn day. It felt like it had been a lifetime since then, but it had only been a few short years....

"...Not long ago, I made a promise to someone...and as of last year, I failed to keep that promise, despite being given the opportunity to do so. My reasons for breaking my word are, in part, what haunt me," he confessed, and then, removing himself from the shining memory, remarked, "Yet what was not done cannot be changed, and while I might subconsciously struggle to accept that truth, I am at least comforted by knowing that I ultimately made the correct choice. To have acted differently would have been foolish and unjust to that person and to me, so my speculations on what might have been are pointless. However, even though I can reassure myself with those valid justifications, that does not mean I am without regret. It continues to stalk me as I wake, and consumes me as I sleep in many varied and cruel ways."

Cassandra, absorbing this, said, "It would be hypocritical of me to say that that was incredibly melodramatic, so I'm just going to suggest that you try to lighten up sometime, Mewtwo. Maybe it would help if I set you on fire one of these days? I know certain people who are fond of burning their enemies alive, so maybe I should try it out myself sometime."

As he turned around to peer at her, she mused to herself that it was probably unwise to push his goodwill as she was, since he could chose to ignore or antagonize her when she lapsed back into the final symptoms of detoxification over the next twenty-four hours. But after all the gloomy talk they had exchanged during the last hour, she wanted to return to their usual bickering. Verbally wheedling at him often amused her, and furthermore seemed to distract the clone from sinking into a somber mood, which she wished to prevent him from doing at the moment. After all, he had been
treating her admirably over the past few days, and had then humored her with answering what she
realized were rather personal questions. To depress him was scarcely a fitting way to repay him for
his kindness…although, on that particular matter, how was she going to return these particular favors
to him? She highly doubted he would become ill within the upcoming week when she was required,
at some point, to murder him, so what could she give him in return for his compassion…? She
doubted he would think his actions warranted anything in return, but despite her criminal occupation,
Cassandra had a sense of honor, even though it was probably skewed in some undefined way.
Perhaps doing onto others what they had done to her, barring the myriad examples of violence, was
one of her ways of compensating for her faults as a person. Yet regardless, what was she to give him
as her thanks…?

Ah…she knew what would be fun to see him react to! Before he could respond to her apparent
pyromania, she interrupted him by saying, "Come here for a second, would you?"

Mewtwo's expression made it clear that he didn't wish to, but seeing the woman's insistent look, he
reluctantly approached and leaned over her, waiting for her to say or do something. Since she was
unarmed, he knew no harm would come to him by complying as he was, but still, he was uncertain
about doing as she wished. Within the next few moments, she merely stared at him, her grey eyes
shining with barely contained mirth, before she made her move and completely shocked him: she
rose up on one arm, placed her alternate hand against his cheek, and pressed her lips softly against
the other side of his face. Sinking back down onto the mattress, she grinned at how his eyes had
widened and his cheeks tinged faintly red. He was blushing from the gentle contact, and the
unexpected sight was enough to make her chuckle as she murmured, "You know, you almost
look cute when you're baffled! I'll bet it doesn't happen often, does it?"

For a few frustrated seconds, the clone appeared to be trying to speak, but his telepathy seemed to
have shorted-out in his surprise. Laughing again, Cassandra sat up and said, "Anyhow, since you're
not going to kill me like an intelligent creature would, and we've filled what I imagine is our
meaningful conversation quota for the week, would you mind helping me to the bathroom? My guts
are killing me, so I'm thinking speed is essential here."

Blinking at that, Mewtwo scowled and appeared to regain his bearings. "Dare I trust you alone in
there? The last time that occurred you sent the contents of my medical cabinet to the floor, and then
had the gall to consume half of my sleeping pills in one sitting."

Oh yeah, he was definitely irked now, but for the life of her she couldn't remember doing what he'd
just said. "Say what?"

"You swallowed enough of my medicine that you would have overdosed if not for my intervention! In
fact, I had to force you to regurgitate to prevent you from accidentally killing yourself, which
was unpleasant, to say the least! Since the remainder of those pills will now have to be strictly
rationed, I've had little choice but to indulge in insomnia over the last few days - I do not have
enough of those tablets left to take each night as I would prefer, and you needed someone to watch
over you to prevent a repetition of the incident. As such, rest has not been a luxury available to me
recently."

She rolled her eyes, and then, grimacing with pain as she attempted to stand, hissed, "Okay, I'm sorry
for depriving you of much-needed sleep, but could you please quit bitching and help me to the toilet?
I really don't want to soil myself…!"

With a sigh, he grasped her around the waist and supported her thin, quivering frame as they
staggered towards the bathroom, helping her as though it was the most natural act in the world….
During the following day, Cassandra's symptoms were far gentler as her system calmed from the absence of her medication, the intensity of her nightmares seeping to a minimum as her mind ceased to panic from substance withdrawal. Although the craving for her drug lingered in the back of her mind, she found herself capable of smothering it, and vaguely realized she would have to do so for some time to come, whether or not she chose to take her pills again when she returned to Team Rocket. Intellectually, she knew it might be more advantageous to her to decrease or cease using the drug altogether, since the doses she had been taking were dangerously high, and even with taking that risk, the medication had sometimes failed to shield her from her disorder and her personal discontent with life. Furthermore, by taking those potent dosages, she risked becoming completely immune to the medicine, which would leave her no escape from the memories and emotions which tormented her…and if that happened, she was certain to be driven insane. So what options did that leave her with...? If she went off of her meds permanently, what could she turn to for solace? She supposed she would have to sort through her options upon returning home – for the remainder of her mission, she had no choice but to go without her medication, despite how uncertain the prospect made her feel….

And that notion was not the only one she was uncertain about: for now, as she gazed up at him from beneath the covers, she found herself wondering about Mewtwo. She wondered about who he actually was, about what he was thinking and feeling as he tended to her, and most importantly of all, if he even deserved to die just to serve her godfather's agenda. Her doubts on this final musing frightened her nearly as much as the nightmare she soon began drifting into….

The winter's night had fallen hours since, and within its darkness she ran between leafless trees and brambles, hearing snow crunching noisily beneath her boots, her footprints leaving a glaring trail for those who pursued her. Her gasping breaths, intermitted with sputtering coughs from the fluid gathering at the back of her throat, erupted from her mouth in pale bursts of mist, which faded as they rose up to the branches above her. Beyond that canopy of blackened bones, flying pokémon swooped, screeching her location to the hounds closing the mere kilometer between themselves and their prey. Thanks to the giant raptors soaring above, she could not take the route of flight to escape, and now the land routes might fail her too. Close behind her, far too close for her comfort, she heard the pack baying at their masters that soon they would catch their quarry, would sink their fangs into her legs and drag her back to them within the next few minutes. Yet beyond the encroaching tree line was a glimmer of hope: the Pokémon Center at the outskirts of the next city glowed welcomingly.

She pushed herself to sprint even faster, never minding the briars and tree roots which sought to trip her up. She had to get to that safe haven before they caught her...she had to, otherwise...! Had terror not constricted both her heart and mind into a nearly blind panic, she might have found humor in realizing that death was no longer desirable to her, even though it would still be a preferable fate to the darker alternatives. For if they captured her now...if he captured her now... then she would not be the only one who would suffer at his hands. If he had his way, then the unexpected life now growing in her womb would be taken from her, and she could not endure that thought. What was stirring within her now was all she had left of her lover, who had been murdered by the ones now chasing her. Slay the father, conquer the mother, and bend the progeny to his will – that was their monstrous intent. Touching her abdomen briefly, she told herself firmly that she would not let them have their way. For the sake of her offspring, she would not allow herself to be taken, for if she did, they'd...they'd...!

As a cool washrag, moistened with water, swept over her sweaty forehead, she jerked awake, her heart racing within her chest from the fear that had suffused the vision. When she blinked her eyes clear, she saw Mewtwo sitting beside her, and watched as he brushed the damp rag over her hot cheeks, where tears had been seeping from her closed eyelids. Seeing her lingering distress, he quietly reassured her that it had only been a dream, and as he spoke, her heart began to ache within
her chest. Why it did so would elude her completely for quite some time to come, but in that moment, the inexplicable sadness nearly overwhelmed her. As she struggled not to sob, she was distantly reminded of the night when *someone* had complimented her eyes in that broken voice, saying they were the hue of moonlight. The grief in both visions, hovering between the real and the imagined, bore the same bittersweet flavor. But what she had seen this time was more bewildering than the previous incident: for she had never had a lover, and had certainly never been pregnant. So why…? Why…?

'Impossible'…'impossible'…!

But what was 'impossible'? And why did she feel such utter loathing when she thought that word? As confusion and disorientation began to overwhelm her thoughts, she tore her gaze away from the clone and allowed her eyes to sweep over the room. For a moment, they rested on the espeon who sat at the doorway, and the woman felt sickness prickling within her stomach at the pokémon's intent stare. Psyche was watching them both without uttering a word, and while her expression was kept completely blank, her narrowed eyes gleamed with what Cassandra could only interpret as accusation. It reminded her of a different, louder confrontation, one in which another's rage seared across her skin and his shouts scathed her ears, his words slicing deep into her viscera, but she could not remember what that obscured person had been so very angry for. *What had he been so angry for?* Suppressing the sudden urge to gag, she turned her head to gaze back at Mewtwo, whose eyes gleamed with concern. Although she was close to collapsing, she knew something was wrong, but as the ache intensified at the sight of him, she rasped out his name weakly.

"Mewtwo…?"

And something in the way she said his name struck him still. She watched him freeze, and then watched as he forced himself back into motion to set the washrag into the bowl of water on the nightstand. Yet the strangeness of his reaction did not sink into her, nor did the way his voice quavered as he whispered, "*Yes, Cassandra?*

Something, like a corpse fiercely attempting to dig itself free from the earth, tried to rise to her conscious mind…but then it fell back into its shadowy depths, and she felt a sob forming in the back of her throat as she whimpered, "Don't leave me…please, don't leave me alone, not now….

She felt one of his hands wrap around hers, his grip warm and his fur soft, and did not notice as his voice quavered again as he murmured, "*I won't…I swear to you, I won't.*"

And squeezing at his paw feebly, she drifted off into another fitful dream, finding comfort in his touch as her sickness began to dissipate at last.

*The rigid bench she was sitting on was lightly polished, with the initials of countless children carved into the pale wood. Several meters beyond her was the jungle gym and swing-sets of her elementary school playground, where clusters of other young students were currently congregating. Upon occasion, one or two of them would glance over and would say to their friends, in voices purposefully loud enough so she would hear them, about how her parents must have left and/or killed themselves from the shame of having such a gloomy, ugly girl for their daughter. Inwardly she winced at the barbs, even though she had heard worse from them over the years, partially from being an orphan, and partially from otherwise having everything they wanted: a big house and free passes to the Viridian Gym, an overabundance of spending money, nice clothes and new belongings, high grades, and, although she did not realize it at the time, cute looks. The first few items, everyone knew, were simply provided to her because she was "lucky enough" to be Giovanni's goddaughter. The last, Giovanni would growl if he heard their insults, was due to a mix of genetics and proper hygiene. Finally, the good grades were from a combination of Cassandra's personal drive to do well...*
in school, for many sentimental and logical reasons, and from having a personal tutor at home. Yet if asked, the nine-year-old girl would have traded all of those blessings to have her parents back… but she knew that regaining them was impossible, so she never voiced this wish, since it would only incur further teasing from her peers.

As it were, she tried not to hear their cruel words, and blinked back the tears prickling in her eyes. She would not let them make her cry…and she would not rise to the bait they were dangling before her nose, having learned the consequences of retaliating against a mob of jealous children years ago. At the memory, an echo of the ache from that beating flared through her flesh, and she comforted herself with the thought that she’d given as good as she’d received at their pudgy hands. Still, although she didn’t want to make friends with the ones who’d once wanted to use her status to their advantage, and who - even now - simmered with bitterness as her refusal to let them do so, she wished she could find a companion among them. She even sometimes found herself gazing after them, loneliness and wistfulness churning within her until she was nearly reduced to sobs. She didn't want to be alone, but it seemed that her social standing amongst her fellow classmates could not be changed. Trying to bury the hurt, she stuffed her empty lunchbox into her backpack and pulled out a textbook, determined to use her time on something constructive rather than continuing to pine over the stupid jerk-faces who took pleasure in her pain.

And as fate was wont, it was at this moment, when she least expected anyone to reach out to her, that a seven-year-old girl practically skipped over to her side. Sitting down next to her with aplomb and a wide smile, the other girl's royal blue eyes glowed with friendlessness, which Cassandra, frankly unused to such pleasantness from another child, momentarily misinterpreted as the glow of creepy interest. Certain the other kid was trying to trick her somehow, Cassandra slid her book back into her pack and grasped the bag tightly to her, determined to bolt if the younger female tried anything. Yet the newcomer, who had recently moved to Viridian City from Cinnabar Island, would turn out to be completely genuine in her intent. Tucking a strand of her teal hair behind her ear, she peered at the girl with the curious collar, and thought the one wearing it to be even more so.

"What's your name?" the younger girl asked, tilting her head slightly to the side as she spoke.

Sheer surprise suffused the lonely child, making answering the inquiry momentarily difficult to accomplish. No nasty comment, no sudden movement preceding a painful jab or theft…? Could this girl really be interested in her as a person? Blinking from her shock, she eventually murmured, "I - I'm Cassandra…Cassandra Brennan."

The new girl blinked at that, and then slowly and determinedly sounded out the first name. "Cass… Cass-an-dra? It's different, but it's also pretty." And then she laughed as a thought occurred to her. "It matches you! You know, my mama says names are really important, so people should put lots of thought into what they name things. Guess your parents did that for you, eh? Wish mine did for me!"

Again, Cassandra had difficulty in responding, and blushed faintly at her own awkwardness and the honest compliment the girl was offering. "Um…thanks, I guess."

The other child's smile widened, and holding out her hand for Cassandra to take, she said, "My name's Amber Fuji! Let's be friends, okay?"

And so they were.

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Author's Note: Yes, that is the same Amber whose clone Mewtwo befriended in The Birth of Mewtwo. The drugs that Cassandra was using, fentanyl (a painkiller as addictive as heroin) and paroxetine (an SSRI class anti-depressant), are also real, incredibly potent, and should never be mixed. Cassandra was prescribed fentanyl after two invasive surgeries and due to injuries sustained during her missions, while paroxetine was given to her to combat her PTSD. Unfortunately, her doctor was trying to fix two severe issues for her at the same time and did not think that drug cocktail through.

Sincerely,

WiseAbsol
"Never be surprised at the crumbling of an idol or the disclosure of a skeleton."

- John Emerich Edward Dalberg Acton.

"Do you have any taste in tea? This is all the cheap crap," Cassandra yelled, her shouts muffled from being half-engulfed in the cabinet she was rummaging through. From her fingers slid thin packets of tea, each pouch stained with the logo of a corporate company she knew to value the quantity rather than the quality of their product. She gazed at them with annoyance, inwardly certain that the clone would never drink anything made from them, and after a moment, the clone confirmed her suspicion.

"Those were left behind by the previous tenants. Since you have gone through what Abigail supplied to us, the only remaining quality tea leaves are those stored on the top shelf," Mewtwo said from over the pages of the book he was reading, which provided specifics on mammalian gestation and childbirth.

He was reading such a tome out of concern for his roommate, who was currently a day overdue in her pregnancy. He knew well that she could begin having contractions at any time in the upcoming hours, and even now, she showed the signs of discomfort that signaled the nearness of childbirth. As such, he was attempting to prepare for the event in what ways he could, as he would be directly involved in the process. Unlike clone rhyhorn and clone nidoqueen, Psyche wished for him to be by her side, forgoing the intimacy of the event in preference for ensuring her safety and, more importantly, the safety of her kits. She placed her full faith in Mewtwo's ability to heal, and reasoned that if anything went wrong when she gave birth, that power would be enough to preserve their lives. Hence, after getting some clean towels out and keeping a pot of water simmering on the stove, he brushed up on how precisely the process would go, while listening to the weakened woman with an ear as she searched through his cupboards.

As matters stood presently, Cassandra was still weary from enduring opium withdrawal, but had blatantly refused this morning to accept any more care from the clone. With all the stubbornness she could muster, she had dragged herself from the covers of her bed, had showered, dressed, and had attempted to eat a nectarine. Unfortunately, her stomach had rebelled against the fruit, and it had taken all of the woman's self-control to keep the sweet flesh down. Yet in the aftermath, she had determined that she could simply nibble on some substances and, more importantly, find a drink that would soothe her senses and warm her. Naturally, she had chosen tea for this task, and had lamented the discovery that they no longer possessed any of the leaves freshly picked and dried in Abigail's garden. Afterwards, she had begun the arduous process of scouring the replica's kitchen for an alternative, and now, finally, found some of a brand she could appreciate.

"Ah-ha! *Roselia's Green Tea* – very nice. I have a box of this at home…now where's the mint…?"

He glanced up to find her fingering through the packets, ignoring the peach and berry flavors in favor of the spearmint. As she found a pouch to make her favorite brew with, she grinned and plucked it out, putting a kettle of water to boil on the stove. After placing the leaves into the soon bubbling water, she leaned over the kettle, breathing in the faintly fragrant steam, and as she did so, strands of her ebony hair, yet saturated from her earlier shower, hung out before her. As she brushed
them back over her ears, he noted how they clung to her skin with their wetness, how the rest of her dark mane lay cool against the back of her neck. Her sweater and jeans hugged her flesh even more closely, attempting to defend her against the chill of the studio, despite that the kitchen was warming from the use of the stove. Her feet, he noted, were bare, which conveyed that she was not worried about spilling scalding water onto her toes. Her hands, as it were, hung far nearer to those scorching waters, for she placed them near the kettle, intent on absorbing some of the heat radiating from it. Yet her expression, in that moment, conveyed to him the greatest shift in her demeanor: her eyes were warm and unguarded, and her lips tucked up on the sides in a hint of a smile.

As far as coping with the cravings for her medication, she was handling the yearnings quite well; in fact, rather than being irritable as one would expect, she seemed to have uncoiled instead. Much of her ire had seemingly melted away, only to be roused if the clone provoked her, and, wishing to maintain the new, pleasant calm in his household, Mewtwo did all he could to avoid angering her. This included not asking her about the kiss on the cheek she had given him, for he knew she would not respond well to any perceived insinuations that it had meant anything. It had been her way of expressing her gratitude for the care he had provided to her during the withdrawal. He knew that, but nonetheless, it haunted him and aroused his confusion.

Yet regardless of that curiosity, he had discerned one truth from it: like him, she was not the type of person who often uttered words of thanks. In his case, he avoided saying such sentiments to keep them potent when they were murmured. Repetition, as he had learned, had a way of rendering such meaningful phrases void. Such meaninglessness was most shameful when it concerned expressions of love, apology, and forgiveness – for these declarations were meant to be the most cherished ones to be exchanged between people, but due to overuse, they often lost their special power. However, he also suspected that the woman, even as she sought to avoid this sorrow, was simply unwilling to speak those words to him. As far as she was concerned - and as far as he was concerned, for that matter - there was no need for her to voice her thanks to him. Her actions had done so well enough, and he would not ask for more than she was willing to give freely.

As she stirred the brew, ensuring that the essence of mint diffused throughout the waters properly, he felt a quiet peace spread through his chest as he watched her. Long minutes passed in this way, until finally the beverage was deemed ready, and she flipped the dial from that section of the stove off. Picking up the kettle by its black, plastic handle, she surprised him by taking out not one, but two mugs from the cupboard. Placing them on the table, she poured the freshly made tea into the cups and moved one in front of him. Setting the kettle back on the stove and taking her own mug, she sat down in a chair near him and warmed her hands on the pale ceramic. After blowing cooling breaths onto the hot surface of the tea, she brought the drink to her mouth and took a sip, closing her eyes in enjoyment. After a time, he drank as well, trusting that like the kiss, this too was a show of goodwill…that, and he doubted she could have poisoned the tea, given that she was drinking from the same source, and there had been no residue at the bottom of his mug. Unless she had immunity to whatever drug she might have slipped into the hot beverage (and immunity which he doubted she would attempt to exploit, given her frail condition), the tea must be safe. Indeed, as the minutes passed, no adverse effects overwhelmed him, confirming that she had meant him no harm by the gesture.

After a time, she spoke, "You have good taste."

…In what? He glanced at her, curious and somewhat amused. "What do you mean?"

Taking another sip of the revitalizing drink, Cassandra replied, "The specific strain of tea plants used to make this brew is only cultivated in one small region of the continent. Due to its scarcity and its pleasant flavor, the demand and the price for the leaves remains high, but in the end, it's always worth the price. To be quite honest, though my experience with different types of teas is limited, after
drinking this, I'm always hard pressed to revert to cheaper brands. This has been, and likely will always be, my favorite...though I'll admit, the leaves Abigail provided nearly rival it."

He contemplated her explanation, and then said, "So because I agree with your viewpoint here, you conclude that I have good taste? That infers that you, even in your inexperience, are skilled in divining which tealeaves are of the best quality. That seems arrogant of you, Cassandra."

She shrugged. "You might be right, but even so, this is a rather pleasant coincidence. Maybe I'll gain one good thing from this mission: I'll be able to take the tea after you're dead!"

He nearly snorted into his drink. "How charming...although, with your occupation, you must be paid well to compensate the psychological maiming, at least well enough to pay for the purchase of expensive tea."

Her mood mellowed as she answered, "That's true...I could have anything I want. My funds are virtually unlimited, but I prefer not to use them."

Mewtwo raised an eyebrow at that. "And why is that?"

"...Why? Because it was blood money, that was why. Her funds were the profit earned from taking the lives of other beings, lives that apparently were not priceless, but had a predetermined worth in cash. With that understanding weighing on her, she found that she could not spend those earnings lightly. Yet she did not explain this to the replica, instead choosing to dismiss the question. "Why I don't should be obvious to someone at intelligent as you're reputed to be. Besides, if it interests you so much, can't you just read my mind?"

"I prefer to avoid such invasions, since I can never predict what I might find in another's mind. If I'm not careful, I might glimpse something which could scar me in the process, and I would prefer to avoid that if at all possible. Besides, you know as well as I that your mental barriers are nearly indestructible. While it is within my abilities to shatter them, doing so would likely render you insane, and if your thoughts are an incoherent whirl, than destroying the barrier in the first place would then prove counterproductive. It is easier, by far, to simply maneuver you into revealing bits of information about yourself. Most of the time you do not even notice that."

For a moment, she simply stared at him in response, before her mouth curled into a sneer and she snarled, "I've never told you anything I didn't wish for you to know."

"Of course not...but the fact remains that you have revealed personal facts about yourself to me. That you are partial to mint tea is one of them," Mewtwo said, and watched with some hidden amusement as her eyes narrowed.

Yet after few moments, Cassandra leaned back into her chair with a sigh, and pressed her fingertips to her eyelids. "...Well isn't this fucked up? You're an assassin's worst nightmare: you defy all logic. Here I'm supposed to be an excellent profiler, but you're the one who is doing the profiling. Well,damn you, Mewtwo."

The corner of his mouth twitched upwards. "...I am long since damned, for more reasons than you know. Yet regardless, tell me, what more do you intend to take from me when you leave this place?"

Had he said 'when,' not 'if'...? Within the waters of her tea, her cautious, reproachful eyes absorbed the color of the grayish-green beverage, capturing the hue of the stem of a dying, night-blooming flower. Setting the mug down, she said, "I was joking, Mewtwo – I am not the kind of killer who takes trophies from my victims. As far as I'm concerned, that practice is extremely perverse, and is also unnecessarily risky. Stolen items can link me to a crime, and I find that just as undesirable as my
superiors do. However, in this case, I won't lie to you: your implications are correct. I can't return to my group empty-handed this time." And sweeping her eyes over his person slowly, she admitted, "My boss wants physical confirmation of your death – more specifically, he wants me to harvest one of your vital organs. It's a gory detail that rather disgusts me, but his concern is understandable: photographs can be faked, after all, and so can fatal wounds. By bringing him your lungs, or perhaps even your heart, he will have the evidence he needs of your demise. What exactly I will take is still something I am deciding, but the point is that your body will not be left whole after your execution. Your corpse will be dismembered, and afterwards, what remains of you will be disposed of in some other way."

She appeared sickened at the prospect of becoming such a butcher, and keeping her gaze downcast, she said, "Yet if I don't do this, I won't be able to return within the deadline…and if that happens, reinforcements will arrive to fulfill my work, which I am sure you realize is a far less desirable prospect than simply dealing with me."

Perhaps this way her way of indirectly telling him there would be no escape for him unless he acted now. If he murdered her and fled from this city, perhaps he had a chance to be free…but that freedom would likely be marred with other hunters, humans and pokémon alike, who sought to obey the will of their dark idol. Only if that entity was destroyed might he shake his pursuers entirely, for they would balk at the notion of confronting the monster who had murdered their leader – the head of the viper would be destroyed, and so the rest of the serpent would simply rot and unravel. By taking Giovanni Maki's life, the clone would at last and truly be liberated from the grasping hands of the organization.

However, Cassandra did not voice such a treacherous notion, but left him to infer it…and, fortunately for him, he had some idea of just how terrible a situation was facing him. He probably knew it better than even she did….

"Without the body which harbors it, I am certain my consciousness will no longer exist to protest against you gutting and picking through my corpse. While I do find the notion rather unappealing, if I am no longer alive, then I cannot stop you, no would there be any reason to: I would no longer need my organs, after all. However, I do have one request."

She blinked at him, curious. "And that would be…?"

His eyes hardened as he met her gaze and told her his final desire. "In the event that you take my life, along with some integral piece of my insides, then burn the rest. I do not want my corpse to bake in the sun and be feasted upon by insects and scavengers. If I am doomed to leave this earth, this life I was brought into without nature's consent, then let my remains at least be eradicated in the way I wish. Cremate me, and scatter my ashes to the winds and the sea, where they will remain unbridled and unable to be repossessed."

"…Do you understand what I am asking, Cassandra?"

Holding his gaze and hearing those words, the assassin suddenly felt as if she at last could understand where the clone was coming from. He was a creature who could not endure being contained in any way - not even in death – for he had long ago obtained the freedom that she herself had given up the hope of gaining. Unlike Cassandra, he was no longer bound by sentiments such as duty and honor and lawful contracts; he had forsaken his loyalty to the man who had placed him in both visible and invisible shackles, and in doing so, in casting aside the roles of servant and weapon, he had become an noble and wise creature, having risen with grace from the depths of the hellish organization. To rebel in such a way, for her, was something she could barely conceive of doing, for where and to whom would she go after liberating herself from Team Rocket? As always, no answers
supplied themselves to her thoughts, and so she continued upon the course of inaction, avoiding persecution from both sides of the law for her extensive sins.

Yet even so, she understood the appeal of freedom, and why he did not wish to lose it simply because his life was at its end. Thus, when she answered him, she answered him quietly, musing on what it must be like to have that same, defiant resolve that he did, given how difficult it had been for him to gain. "Yes…I understand." More than he could ever know, she understood…and so as her gaze fell away from him, she vowed to herself that she would grant his final wish: she would set him aflame, and enable him to continue to defy the enslavement he so abhorred.

Afterwards, they spoke no further, instead simply savoring the mild and bitter flavor of the tea, its faint wisps of aroma, and its liquid warmth, which graced their cold insides and reminded them both of times during which they had known true warmth, half-forgotten experiences that were largely unknown to the world….

Eventually and without much warning, the tranquility of the sanctuary was disrupted as a cry arose from the living room, and as waves of sheer agony flowed from Psyche's aura to wash over the empaths at the dining table. Giving their actions little thought, they rose together from the table and strode over to the vixen, where she lay sprawled on her side in her makeshift nest of towels, her lavender body shuddering with contractions. As she noted their hazy forms above her, she hissed and lashed out at them with a claw, until she seemed to recognize them through the fog of pain. Settling back down, snarled at them that they had best call a truce between themselves while they assisted her in this task – otherwise, if they dared even bicker with each other, she would scratch their eyes out in their sleep as soon as she recovered from the impending childbirth.

Setting a soothing paw lightly upon her side, Mewtwo replied, "You needn't worry, Psyche. Nothing of the sort will happen, will it, woman?"

Cassandra nodded in response, and then rose to fetch the hot water and some fresh towels. When she returned, she checked the espeon over, feeling gently for each kit and parting the mother-to-be's hind legs to see the aqueous bubble representing the first child in its amnion being pushed from the vixen's womb. Mewtwo, meanwhile, noted with some satisfaction that his roommate's breathing was steady, and despite the pain of the contraction, was showing no hint of panic or distress. At most she was simply nervous beneath the layers of instinct that were assisting her in bringing her children into the world. After a couple more pushes, the first, slimy bundle slid out of its mother: a tiny and fragile skitty stirred beneath the transparent skin of the amnion, eager to be liberated from its hold. Using her slender, delicate fingers, Cassandra tore the sac open and pulled the kit from it, and then cleared out its mouth. Patting its saturated body to make sure it began to breathe and move about, and smiled with some satisfaction as it began to mewl noisily, which revealed that its lungs were fully functional. She then handed Mewtwo the little one, who set it against Psyche's undulating belly for further warmth. Although its eyes were not open, and so could not see its parent, it nonetheless curled closer to her soft, cozy fur…and with that, the entire process began all over again.

The three adults worked in silent tandem, save for a handful of sniping comments the enemies directed towards each other on occasion, which mostly concerned Cassandra being the one to attend to the lavender vixen, which she believed to be more appropriate given her gender, regardless of Mewtwo's closer relationship to the espeon. Yet these arguments were barely half-hearted, voiced more to cover the raspy breaths of the laboring pokémon then to dig under each other's skin. In all truth, the two midwives were focusing far more of their energies on assisting Psyche than on snarling at one another, far they were far more anxious about the espeon than they espeon herself was. However, they kept their concerns well concealed, not wishing to expose the fact that they had honestly come to care for the small female. Cassandra especially did not wish to reveal the fact that
she now felt sympathy towards the laboring feline, for she could not explain the feeling to herself, let alone another. Perhaps she was eager to assist the espeon because the mother-to-be was the clone's friend, and given that she was planning to murder Mewtwo, then perhaps the least she could do was insure that his companion and her kits would survive. Despite the threats she had made against the vixen, she did not want more innocent blood on her hands. As for Mewtwo's own feelings toward this event, he had long since associated Psyche as something of a replacement for his seconds-in-command, Meowthtwo and Pikatwo. Like they had, Psyche often debated with him and had set herself apart from others with her streak of rebelliousness against him. An otherwise fiercely independent soul, Psyche's willingness to stay beside him, despite his cold exterior, had made her endearing to him. Even her abrasive attitude at times had proven comforting, for even when it served to irritate him, it proved that someone cared for him as a person...it proved that he was not alone.

Perhaps he even had other reasons why he cared so for her, but he certainly could not distract himself by musing on them now, could he?

After another hour, the ordeal was over. Of the four kits that had been born, three of them were female skitty, having taken on the baby form of their father, a delcatty. Their skulls, backs, and flanks were powder pink in hue, while their faces, round bellies, and tiny paws were creamy tan in color. All of the tips of their ears bore tufts of fur, while their tails ended in heavy, ovoid weights with gold orbs hanging from them. The final infant, in contrast, was a small, male eevee with bushy brown and creme fur, large ears, and a white-tipped tail. Fortunately for this last kit, he would not have to fight with his sisters for a teat, for the number of available glands was greater than the size of the litter. No one would be deprived of the nutritious milk their mother produced, and so after Psyche had licked their moist, shivering forms clean of amniotic fluid, they each cuddled up next to her and latched on to teat to suckle their first meal. As they did so, the vixen chewed on their amnions, which would ultimately provide her with some of the nutrients necessary to restore their strength. Meanwhile, Mewtwo and Cassandra, having already looked over the kits and their mother to find all of them healthy, if exhausted, sat back, content with their work. They had already learned that each of the placentas had come out whole and intact, so the risk of them putrefying within the mother's womb and poisoning her was no longer probable. Furthermore, none of the umbilical cords had coiled around any of the kits on their way out, but had instead been chewed off by Psyche. In all, the birth had gone quite well, so the three counted their blessings, and found four of them now sleepily nuzzling up against their single parent.

In these moments, nothing was said, yet the quiet was far from awkward; instead, as the enemies watched the tiny family curl up in their nest of towels, the hush felt warm. Over the next few hours, the clone and the woman would remain where they were, leaning against the couch next to one another with their hands sticky with birthing fluids. If anyone had asked, they would simply say that they were lingering near the group to make sure everything was truly well, watching for any hidden, negative conditions to emerge from the young one and their mother given more time. Yet while a logical reason, to be certain, it would have been a lie...for in reality, over the years of their lives, so rife with death and darkness, new life proved astonishing to them, and was even something to gaze upon almost wistfully. The replica and the assassin knew well that they would never experience the wonder of parenthood, of raising children who bore their own flesh and blood. Admittedly, neither longed for the responsibility, and it was a subject they rarely allowed themselves to consider - and in the few instances when they did, it was to simply acknowledge that such an experience was not for them to know. This world was far too hostile towards them for them to dare entertain the dream of bringing their own offspring into the fray, and so they rejected the notion, wishing to be fair and merciful to the unborn children they might have conceived with another. For them, there could be no new life for innumerable reasons, perhaps the greatest reason of which was that creating new life required a partner. They were outcasts in society, however, and sullied by their very natures...so perhaps nurturing loneliness was a better alternative than involving someone else in their dirty lives,
in conceiving more souls through undoubtedly misguided bonds. This was the horrible truth entangled with their existence, a crime which could seemingly not be altered – it merely was, and so they looked upon the new family with forced detachment, repressing their mutual longings for the sense of belonging integral to such a group.

Yet if they someday realized where to look, and if they then dared take a step along that more uncertain path, they could access a loophole in their seemingly unyielding fates…but it would take some more time before either saw and were prepared to take that opportunity, and afterwards embrace the consequences of their choice.

For now, however, they merely watched the kits flail about, testing the strength of their tiny limbs. Blind and particularly energetic, the antics of the eevee caused him to tumble from the nest towards where the human sat. Cassandra, understanding that touching a baby animal, regardless of whether it is wild or tame, will not make its parents abandon it, took the kit in her hands. As she placed a hand beneath its bushy tail and around its chubby belly, it squeaked out a small, pitiful cry of confusion. In response, Cassandra gave the infant something incredibly rare and indescribably beautiful: she blessed him with a true and genuinely happy smile.

Chuckling as she gazed at him, she told him, "You remind me of my Shadow before he evolved into an umbreon. He was a bit on the small side too, you know," and as if insulted that she had implied he was a runt, the fuzzy newborn began to squirm and whimper in her grasp. Her smile widened, and she said, "Now don't fuss, little guy. I'll place you next to your mother, alright?"

And in the following moments, she did precisely that, setting the young male back in the nest. Her smile thenceforth faded, yet warmth remained within her eyes, striking and undeniable…and seeing it, Mewtwo could not help but gaze after her as she stood and announced she was retiring to her room. As she crossed over to the guest room and shut herself in, his expression appeared largely blank…yet even so, something leaked through his usual impassive mask. An emotion, vague and perhaps unidentifiable, softened his eyes, hinting at deeper feelings which Psyche had suspected some time before that he harbored. Yet what was the nature of those feelings he attempted to conceal? For weeks since the assassin's arrival, the espeon had debated with herself over the subject, applying and discarding various names she thought might describe what she believed she witnessed. Did the clone feel the stirrings of lust for the woman, or was it fondness? Did he long for the woman's flesh, or for something far more intimate and intangible? Whatever it might be, the human seemed too weary as of late to catch the looks he sent her way, especially tonight, when rest was all that the agent truly yearned for.

Yet Psyche, remaining wary and watchful, saw what the woman had missed. As her newborn children began to fall asleep against her flatter abdomen, her eyes narrowed, and she murmured, "…Espeon. Es," and her forked tail flicked behind her, revealing her agitation. "…I've had enough of this. Spill it, Mewtwo."

His eye focused and hardened as they turned towards her. "'Spill' what?"

"Espeon, espe." Nuzzling each of her kits further into sleep, the espeon peered up at him and said, "You've been acting strangely ever since that woman arrived, and I'd like to know why that is."

In response, he rose to his feet and glanced away from her. "I fear you mistake my anxiety for a human being here – and one who intends to murder me, no less - for something else."

Psyche did not have to use her empathic abilities to sense his evasion, and frankly, exhausted and still aching from the ordeal her body had only too recently endured, her response to his casual dismissal was to become rather pissed off. What the hell was his _deal_, anyway? Why wouldn't he simply explain the situation to her so she could understand what was actually wrong? "Espeon! Es, espe-,"
she snarled, trembling and she rose to her own paws and jumped out of her nest. "Spare me the psychological bullshit, Mewtwo! Personally, I don't like being lied to by a friend-.

The clone, irked at her presumptiveness, was torn between aggravation and the urge to scoff and laugh wryly. He chose aggravation and growled, "I am not lying, and even if I was, you are certainly not powerful enough to derive that information from me."

"Es, espeon!" she snapped. "Perhaps not, but there are a hundred little things you have done recently that validate my beliefs!"

Refusing to rise to her bait as she desired, he did not respond. Seeing that he would not budge easily, she pressed on. "Espe, es espe…," she murmured, her forked tail lashing. "This human is different from the others to you somehow….

That captured his attention, and he cast a fierce glare towards her out of the corner of his eye, as if daring her to elaborate. She did so: "Espeon, espeon. Espe, espeon es…," she ranted, describing the incongruities to his behavior that had arisen since the woman had appeared. "You refuse to injure or kill her, despite the danger she poses to you. Excluding the first day of her captivity, you've made no further attempt to interrogate her to discover who sent her and to what end. You're willing to touch her and chase after her in ways which completely baffle me. You ask for her help, you heal her, you discuss matters with her that aren't any of her concern. You bicker with her in an almost playful manner, and allow her to do as she pleases in your own house. Yet most striking of all, you comfort her - you hold her and feel fear when she's distressed. You, the great and mighty Mewtwo, are concerned about a member of the race he supposedly hates!"

At this last comment, she chuckled wryly, exposing her feelings for the matter openly, while Mewtwo stared, incapable of defending himself against her accusations. Yet Psyche was not finished. "Espe…es espeon! Espeon es," she hissed, her eyes glinting with zeal. She knew she was right about this subject! "And if all of that were not enough, there is the way you looked at her just now, as though you were aching from some sort of yearning I can't decipher. Even if everything else could be considered a mere act, that look was undoubtedly sincere…and this is not the first time I have seen you gaze at her like that either. Those looks alone expose the fact that she is not as despicable to you as you want everyone else to believe."

"Es, espe. Espe espeon," she continued, her eyes gleaming with wry humor. "No, if anything, she seems desirable to you. Yet I can't see you falling in love with or craving someone, especially not her, so I am obviously missing something here."

Mewtwo could stay silent no longer. "It is not your concern, Psyche!"

"Espe. Espeon," she retorted with a snort. "Somehow I knew you'd say that. I suppose I'll just have to bring the matter up to her then, since it concerns her well-being-.

"NO."

As his roar filled her mind, his tail lashed out to strike her in the side, with enough force to knock her breath from her and send her tumbling. When she ceased rolling and opened her eyes, she discovered that the replica had teleported them to the roof, and now stood towering above her, his eyes glowing with fury and malice. Before she could ask him why the hell he'd struck her, he seethed his frustration, his voice was low and frigid as he said, "You will tell her nothing! That woman is already suspicious of my actions as it is, and the situation will only worsen if you dare provoke it." And turning away from her with a frustrated, guttural growl, he cursed, "Damn you, Psyche, leave it be…!"

However, that was something the espeon knew she couldn't do. If his unexpected, nearly uncontrolled rage was any indication, then what he was concealing from her now was something of
great importance, something he was struggling to stash away where no one else would ever uncover it. Clearly, his roommate was drawing too near to the truth for his comfort, and that his only logical response to her inquiries was to lash out suggested that whatever it was, it had sliced deep into him, and was now festering bitterly. "Espeon," she almost pleaded with him then. "Mewtwo, please, just tell me what's going on. I'm your friend, and I can tell that whatever it is you're hiding is doing you nothing but harm. That you're trying so hard to deny it merely proves I'm right."

During the weeks when the clone had tended to her injuries and had, if reluctantly, opened his home to her, she had come to care for him dearly. Now he in turn was the one who was lost and hurting, and in what way she could, she wanted to repay him by prying the metaphorical thorn from his paw. She wanted him to disclose the secrets that so pained and sickened him, and when he did not respond in the following minute, she worried the thorn once more. "Es…espe es," she murmured, "Please… confide in me, just this once."

In a manifestation of his emotional distress, Mewtwo's eyes no longer saw her or the world around him, and he shuddered under the chilled breeze of the night, which smelled of the saline-saturated, murky sea, the depths of which harbored a mysterious and largely unknowable darkness, whose secrets few could unveil. After several more moments had passed, he returned to reality and bowed his head with a sigh, placing a paw to his brow. "…You will not stop asking me, will you?"

"Es, espe, espeon," she responded seriously, inwardly relieved that his stubbornness seemed to fading. "No, I won't, and I am willing to start asking questions in front of the woman, if that's what it takes."

At her words, his entire frame stiffened. She had maneuvered him into a corner, leaving him only two avenues of escape: he could either potentially risk maiming her mind in a search-and-suppress procedure, which would ideally bury her memories of the instances when he had evidently incriminated himself...or he could simply tell his companion the truth. Given that she was one of the few beings on this planet he considered a friend, he knew that the first option was not truly an option at all.…. 

While he summoned up the willpower to commit to the latter path, Psyche derived a truth from his reaction which she had only previously entertained as an absurdity. "Es es espe?" she asked, the notion shedding the first few rays of light over what was occurring. "Wait...you know her, don't you?"

That he had teleported them onto the roof to avoid the woman overhearing them was clear to her, though why this was necessary she still could not guess. Yet this idea - that he might have know the assassin from a time before she had arrived seeking his blood - had the potential to explain all of the unprecedented quirks in his behavior since she had entered into his home. He was not reacting to the woman as he would a murderous stranger, like he had with the trainer who had sought revenge against him. No, he was reacting to the huntress as someone might with an old and senile companion who could no longer recognize him. He was reacting to the memories attached to a familiar form, and as the clone's eyes turned downcast and his paws clenched, they exposed his lie as he spat, "Do not be absurd."

Yet even as he spoke the untruth, he seemed to know that further denials were futile. Psyche was too close to defeating him, and when she regarded him in that moment, she noted that he seemed frailer somehow, and more than anything else, utterly wearied. "Espe. Espeon, espe?" she whispered, her eyes softening. "No, I'm right this time. You really do know her, don't you, Mewtwo?"

His reply was delivered with utmost reluctance, as if it were a shard of shrapnel he had to tear from bone. "...Of course I do...and I know her quite intimately at that."
While Psyche did not grasp the full implications of that statement, she now understood why the telepath had refused to interrogate the woman himself: he had already known the answers to all of the questions. Now, as his willpower decayed after voicing the first confession, she too would come to know the answers, for the clone's defenses had been breached, and the protective walls surrounding his secrets would soon collapse in upon themselves. Yet in a last ditch attempt to preserve himself, he asked her if she was certain about what she intended to do, for there would be consequences in gaining this knowledge, in dragging his shame into the open as she wanted to. He gave her one last chance to abandon the subject, which he prayed she would take: "Do you truly wish to know, Psyche? Truly...?"

As close to the truth as she was now, she refused to walk away. "Es," she replied with a nod, thankful that he was going to disclose to her what was hurting him at last. "Of course."

Yet for one final, precious moment, Mewtwo held onto the key to the truth. He gazed up at the nearly full moon above, whose ghostly light seemed to age his body until it matched the maturity of his soul. Finally, as his tail swept soundlessly through the air, he allowed himself to embrace the memory of what haunted him so...:

He sat amongst the lush, charcoal-colored blankets of the bed, his fingertips sweeping over the soft cotton which smelled strongly of vanilla and mint. Around him, dust particles were glowed silver from the moonlight filtering in through the only window of the room, and the atmosphere swelled with the final notes of a song played upon the viola. After the music faded, the young woman standing before him opened her beautiful eyes, and lifted her ivory bow from the taut strings. "...Did you like it?" she asked softly, her lips curled in a self-conscious, yet hopeful smile.

In response, he rose to his feet and closed the short distance between them, and wrapped his arms around her, savoring the warmth of her body against his. With his telekinesis, he gently pulled the instrument and the bow from her grasp and set them within their case, and then he lifted a paw to her face to stroke her hair back from her eyes tenderly. Afterwards, running a thumb over her lip, he murmured to her, "It was a beautiful piece, so yes, I enjoyed it very much. Tell me, what inspired it, dove?"

Beneath his thumb, he felt her lips curl into a wider smile, and she lifted her arms to curl them around his necks. Something soft and warm wrapped around them both, its edges tickling across his back, and as Mewtwo found his own scent within her hair and across her skin, a pleasant thrill rushed through him at finding such evidence of their closeness...and in the following moments, that feeling only strengthened as she leaned upwards and murmured her answer against his mouth: "You."

And as she kissed him tenderly, lovingly, yearning, and he clutched her even closer, he felt an emotion that he wondered if, even then, they deserved to share:

Happiness....

Beyond the memory, Mewtwo stared up at the stars with tired, saddened eyes as he confessed, "Once, Psyche...I had a mate."

"Espeon. Espe? Espe es...?" The vixen blinked, not quite grasping why he was telling her this now. From him, the declaration that he had once had a lover was shocking, and would in almost any other situation stun her to silence. Yet given the topic of their conversation thus far, this revelation seemed to lack any true relevance. "I'm not certain I understand, Mewtwo. What exactly are you trying to say? What does that have to do with Cass...?"

And that was when she made the connection. As horror seeped into to her core, her eyes widened...
and she took a step back from him, her thoughts awhirl. *No...dear legendaries, he can't mean...!*

Mewtwo, seeing that she had stumbled upon the truth, smiled a weak and bitter grin. *"You understand now, don't you, Psyche? You understand what I've been trying so desperately to conceal from you, and more importantly, from her. Yet I will say it aloud, if only to confirm your suspicions,"* and staring up at the pale and frozen moon, who had witnessed his every sin and, like himself, had not yet forgiven him for what he had done, he said, *"Once, I had a mate of my own, a woman who I treasured and who treasured me in return...and the name of that woman was, and remains, Cassandra."*

*"She was the very same Cassandra who now sleeps below us...and the same woman Giovanni has sent here to end my life."*

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**Thank You:** Dark Magician Girl Aeris, AnimeCrazy88, Leone the Infernal, and Tomoyo Kinomoto for reading and reviewing the previous chapter. I hope you and my other readers will do the same for this one!

**Author's Note:** I know some of you guessed this, but for those of you who didn't, surprise! With this reveal, we are now leaving arc one of the story behind and entering arc two. The next three chapters will expand on Mewtwo's history with Team Rocket and then we'll be returning to the present.

My goal in writing this story - besides exploring Team Rocket and the Fuji family more than I had in other fics - was to explore how Mewtwo would realistically be involved in a romantic relationship. How and when that happen? By the time his second feature film ends, he doesn't seem open to connecting with someone that way, preferring to maintain a solitary lifestyle instead. As such, to make a believable romance for him, I needed to look back instead of forward: I needed to go back to the year he spent with Team Rocket. During that period of his life, he was young, naive, and lost as to his place and purpose in the world - but even more importantly, he was still open to trusting and caring for humans (I had already written a few "Mewthree" fics before this, so continuing in that vein didn't interest me. Him being with a human also just rings truer to his character - despite him professing to dislike humans - than him being with a pokémon does). While we glimpsed what happened to him during this time, much of it was glossed over and unclear. The only other shadowy area in his life was what happened to him between his first and second movies, but by that point, he'd not only closed himself off, but also had the other pokémon clones to protect. He wouldn't have allowed himself any distractions from that goal - and falling in love would probably qualify as one. Since he was willing to give his life for them, I don't think it's a stretch to say that he'd be willing to give up his happiness for them, too. While he was with Team Rocket, though, he would have no such reservations.

As always, thank you for reading!

Sincerely,

WiseAbsol
Forgotten Memoirs - Part 1

Chapter Warning: There is sexual harassment and rape in this chapter. If this content is triggering for you, please skip over the last scene of the chapter. Also, due to the length of the flashbacks in the "Forgotten Memoirs" chapters, they will not be italicized. Instead, select flashforwards - which take place after Mewtwo's conversation with Psyche about his past - will be.

CHAPTER 11: FORGOTTEN MEMOIRS - PART 1

"Sometimes you put walls up not to keep people out, but to see who cares enough to break them down."

- Unknown.

Psyche's kits mewed and nuzzled at her soft, warm belly, their toothless mouths latching onto her swollen teats to suckle their liquid breakfast. As the aroma of milk filled her nostrils, and as their contentment caressed the fringes of her empathic senses, the lavender vixen dipped her head to lick their fur, cleaning them as she contemplated everything Mewtwo had disclosed to her over the past several hours. She now knew the story of the replica's youth, now knew how the affections between him and the girl had grown, and now knew how their relationship had systematically been edited out of all documents and most memories. Between those whose knowledge of the bond had remained intact, and those who had overcome the obstacles to learn the truth, only five people could claim to know what Mewtwo and Cassandra had once been to each other: Giovanni Maki, Agent Domino, Shadow, the clone himself, and now, Psyche as well. As for Cassandra Brennan, who'd played such an integral role within those lost events, she remembered nothing of her short-lived romance with her fellow outcast, a creature who was, to many others, little more than a monster.

As she considered the situations of the parted lovers, she wondered which was worse: not knowing that you'd been separated from your beloved, and thus spared from the pain at the price of never remembering being loved and accepted...or, in contrast, harboring the memories of what you'd once enjoyed, at the price of suffering daily as you perpetuated a lie. If the couple had belonged to the same species, then this mess probably wouldn't have been made. After all, relationships between different species of pokémon were commonplace both in captivity and in the wild, and relationships between humans of different races and of the same sex were becoming more acceptable with each passing year. Certainly, there were those who frowned over such relationships, but the number of protesters was shrinking with each new generation. Within the century, it was probable that no one would give a damn anymore about the metaphorical lines anymore.

Yet a romantic, sexual relationship between a human and pokémon was an entirely different matter. Documented only in ancient mythologies and present-day illegal pornography circles, it was regarded by even the most open-minded humans and pokémon alike as unspeakable perversion. Regardless of Mewtwo being a sentient being, bearing a humanoid body and capable of feeling the vicissitudes of human emotion, most others would see only what he appeared to be: an animal. Unlike Cassandra, they could not look past his shape, and that's he'd done so had merely condemned her as a debauchee, a sick fuck who was one or more of three things: mentally ill, tragically misguided, or simply warped at her very core. Knowing the possible retribution that would descend upon them over their relationship, they'd done everything within their power to conceal it...but try as they might, it had only been a matter of time before they were discovered and separated. That they'd
lasted as long as they had was a blessing, for their time together had given them a measure of solace, which was sorely needed in their otherwise barren lives. Perhaps that was why they'd chosen to pursue a relationship, despite understanding the risks they took in embracing one another. In the end, they'd both needed somewhere to belong…and in finding that in each other, they'd found happiness and hope alike.

In retrospect, those treasured gifts had been the cruelest ones for them to receive during their doomed, young love….

In the moments following Mewtwo's confession, Psyche stared up at him with wide, disbelieving eyes, her mind struggling the process the implications of what he'd said. Although she could sense and see from his naked expression that he'd spoken the truth, she shook her head and rasped, "Espe? Espeon?" her forked tail lashing wildly behind her, expressing her agitation. "What are you saying? How can that be possible, when she doesn't even know who you are?"

To this, Mewtwo was silent, but when he glanced away as if ashamed, the espeon felt her stomach sink with dread. "Espe…espeon?" she murmured with a shiver, "Mewtwo…just what exactly did you do to her?"

As he closed his eyes, the memories of his previous life floated before his gaze like a mirage, and inwardly he laughed, cursed, and howled at the creature he'd once been. Despite his frustration, however, he kept his low as he replied, "…I did what I thought was right."

Psyche, knowing that he was ready to tell talk about it, encouraged him to do so. After hiding the truth for all these years, perhaps it would be a relief to tell someone everything that had happened - so Mewtwo, hesitantly at first, then with a stronger voice, began to tell her everything....

Nearly two months had passed since he'd awakened and joined the world outside of the laboratory, and in that time, the replica had concluded that it was a loathsome one. Having been brought to life among beings who would have seen him reduced to a laboratory specimen, who would have taken biopsies from every portion of his body and made him endure countless tests, he was inclined to view the dominant race of the planet as a corrupt and arrogant one. After all, nothing he'd encountered during the last several weeks had given his reason to alter his opinion: during the nights when he was allowed to wander around the base, he saw countless humans indulging in their vices and abusing those around them. Crimes of every sort were committed before his eyes, leaving the twisted souls of these monsters, the scum of the earth, stained from their myriad sins.

In theory, he supposed that if such atrocious beings existed, there must also be individuals of supreme good out there. However, in his limited experience he had yet to encounter such examples of purity, and had surmised that innocent people must be rare indeed…and if they even did exist, then they were either too fragile or simply unwilling to fight against the corruption around them. Indeed, even the children who challenged Giovanni Maki, thrusting their frail servants to the clone's mercy, seemed polluted in his eyes. Their thirst for glory, wealth, and fame apparently would only be quenched through bloodshed, through forcing their captured pokémon to fight against other members of their kind, until they no longer had the strength to stand. And they did this not once, but countless times until they reached the Viridian Gym, where Mewtwo would use his psychic powers to overwhelm them, effectively proving his own superior strength while rendering their wayward efforts in vain.

From these battles and the society around him, a harsh lesson was ingrained within his mind: to have your way in this ruthless world, you must be capable of wielding great power to your advantage. Otherwise, you'd be crushed beneath the heel of a more powerful foe, to be ridiculed, enslaved,
maimed, or even exterminated, depending on the preferences of the dominate being. Even as he studied the governmental and social systems of the countries around Kanto, he only saw miniscule variations between them, with that supreme law remaining constant at their core. Those with strength and skill defeated, manipulated, and consumed the weak and powerless...and while, for a time, he had found following this edict amusing, he had soon found the pursuit to be an empty one. After experiencing the rush of forcing his opponents into submission enough times, the thrill had faded, and the act became banal and repetitive. Gratification was soon replaced by the sensation of a growing, murky hollowness within him, the abyss having formed the moment his dreams had evaporated on that island. Perhaps there was an irony to that: by joining the living, he’d forfeited the incandescent beauty he'd once cherished, and now was made to enduring a gritty, waking nightmare.

In retrospect, which choice did he find preferable: the heavenly illusion of a reality, or this bitter world where thoughts and sensations were crisply defined? He was uncertain which was more desirable, and to further agitate him, several seemingly unanswerable questions haunted him whenever his eyes drifted shut. Who was he? Why was he here? What was his purpose in life? As far as the greedy geneticists had been concerned, his reason for existing had been fulfilled by surviving to become the fruit of their unhallowed, ungodly labors, providing them the key to recreating life, he'd already granted their grandest dreams. In their eyes, his powerful heart beat only to lift their own, and for that insult, he'd incinerated them, allowing their ashes to mingle with the sands on that island of filthy creation.

His new partner, the leader of Team Rocket, appeared to understand his troubles, and had given him simple tasks with which to fill his time. Through these services, perhaps he'd find a role that suited him, and would discover something to live for. Yet so far, he'd unearthed no divine meaning for his labors, and was growing evermore disillusioned with this place and these people. Certainly, he was mastering his abilities as he searched for the answers to his questions. He could split the very atoms around him, he could wander within the minds of other beings, he could sense entities of immense power thousands of kilometers away. However, developing his psychical skills and learning his limitations were the only two positive aspects of remaining here, and neither gave him a great deal of pleasure or direction. They were but necessities, and could conveniently be gained here with only his time and energy as the costs. Beyond learning control over his abilities, he had no plan for his future, and this unsettled him. For surely there must be more to life than this…?

Yet that thought begged another question: can a creature lacking a past even have a future…? As he mused on this point, Giovanni Maki called him from his quarters in the Viridian Laboratories to the Gym, a summons which he obeyed, even allowing his frightened "trainers" to transport him there in their designated van. As he crouched and leaned his weight against the rigid, carpet-covered wall between the front seats and the cushioned loading area of the van, he fidgeted beneath his suit of armor, still not used to its constraints after nearly two months. The segmented parts were cold, bulky, and despite being thinly padded, their edges and the wires running between them scathed at his pelt. While there was a machine that could remove the armor from him, there were manual latches he could also press that would release him from the confining pieces of metal. Every time he donned the rigid suit, he itched to shed it within moments, in part from how it restrained his motions and from its acrid smell. From what he'd been told, it was imbued with a substance imported from the western land of Jhoto, an oily fluid which, with a current running through it, would "focus" psychical energies and allow young telekinetics to maintain control over their budding abilities.

Privately, he was certain the substance was actually acting as a dampener, but regardless of his discomfort, he continued to wear the armor, knowing it offered him further protection in battle and kept his true appearance obscured. Furthermore, the visor of the helmet had numerous additional functions than mere eye protection, allowing him to see the world in infrared and ultraviolet wavelengths, in varying shades of temperature, and in other intriguing ranges. Truthfully, he needed none of these optical devices, since his empathic abilities allowed him almost omniscient sight: with
them, he could pinpoint his opponents even is all his other senses were impaired, could see their shifting emotions in their auras, and could feel them leach away the energy around and within them when preparing an attack. However, seeing his surroundings in different ways fascinated him, and this somewhat redeemed the many faults of the armor.

Still, he looked forward to the day when he had enough control over his abilities to make the steel carapace obsolete. Only recently had he managed to persuade his "trainers" that he would no longer sleep within the armor, despite their insistence that he should. As it were, he could no longer tolerate attempting to doze while standing, and didn't wish to be blinded with reflected sunlight when he awoke. Even as they arrived at the Gym, and he stood and leapt out upon the cooling asphalt lot, he ached to return to his sparse rooms to rest. However, as he strode down the hallways to the arena, he reminded himself that Giovanni wouldn't have beckoned him here for a frivolous purpose. Whatever would occur next would surely be important, and indeed, as his paws stepped out on the dirt-packed battlefield and he allowed his eyes to roam, his suspicions were confirmed. While the stands were deserted of spectators, Giovanni stood at the center of the arena, his shoes planted firmly into the dust, his arms folded behind his back to expose his broad, muscular chest. He held himself in stance which exuded indomitable power, conveying his certainty that no one would dare attempt to take him down. And his faith was not unfounded – in this place, no one would.

Yet soon enough, Mewtwo's gaze was drawn to the figure a meter behind the man's right side. The person was robed in a black outfit, its hands gloved and its face concealed behind a mask. From the faint curves of its slender frame and the longer hair, the dark strands reaching to the being's jaw, he surmised that it was female. He confirmed this by allowing his empathic senses to brush her aura, and as he watched her stiffen in response, he gazed at her eyes with some interest. They were the almond shape of someone of Asian descent, yet the lashes were long and the irises were a pale-grey hue, which was more common among Europeans. Furthermore, what little skin she exposed was quite dark, far darker than the light beige of the people of the east. Perhaps she was of blended race; she was, at the very least, certainly too tall to have purely oriental genes.

As he inhaled the aroma of vanilla into his nostrils, his pupils narrowed slightly; it was a pleasant fragrance, he mused, and breathed it in silently, deeply, yet again. Yet as he watched the woman shift herself into a more aggressive stance, her muscles coiling as the distance between them closed, he thought to himself that despite how appealing her shape and scent seemed to be, her personality didn't seemed to match them. She seemed rather stern and, as she lifted her chin, quite proud. Moreover, there was a fire in her eyes that belied her displeasure at being here. He noted then how her fingers twitched, brushing the sheathed, oriental daggers at her waist. Yet although she seemed to want to wield them against him, she restrained herself as a gesture from her companion. Mewtwo halted as well as the motion, but nonetheless felt the atmosphere between them charge with wariness and animosity.

The crime lord, seemingly immune to the negative energy, nodded to him and said, "Thank you for arriving here so swiftly, my friend. I appreciate your promptness."

The psychic was not in the mood for such politeness, preferring instead to discover the point to this meeting. "Why have you summoned me here? I see no trainer to be defeated. Am I to assume that you have a different reason for beckoning me here at this hour?"

Giovanni Maki smirked at that. "That's correct. Simply put, I have another avenue of training for you to pursue."

Was that so…? His violet tail flicked behind him, belying his budding curiosity. "And what 'avenue' might that be?"
His partner turned halfway to peer at the woman behind him. "You will learn the arts of physical finesse, combat, and self-defense from Trainee Merlo here, while you, in turn, will teach her how to make use of the psychic talent I've recently been informed she possesses: empathy. In short, from this day forward, you two will be training partners."

Within moments, Mewtwo would conclude that despite arriving with Giovanni, the woman – or rather, Trainee Merlo – hadn't known about the crime lord's intents either. She protested against the idea along with the feline, and with a sigh, Giovanni raised a hand to silence them. Reluctantly, they quieted enough to let him to continue speaking. "While this arrangement will doubtlessly disrupt your usual patterns, it would be to your benefits to hear me out." With that, his gaze first settled on the clone. "First, you need options in battle, Mewtwo. While your psychical abilities are powerful, to depend so heavily on them is foolhardy at best. If your usual moves are disabled during a fight, or if you come up against an opponent who can resist psychical energies, you would be helpless on the battlefield. Since there are new species of pokémon discovered every day, I believe it's safe to assume that there are creatures out there who have the advantage over psychic types. As such, being well-rounded in your skills could ensure that you maintain the upper hand."

Leaving the replica to muse over the validity of this argument, the man then spoke to his companion. "And you, Cassandra, must learn how to control your talent. As I understand it, that particular ability can be a blessing to an agent, enabling you to sense the emotions, the intents, and even the personal details of your opponents. However, while this can provide you with an edge on your missions, it can also make you extremely vulnerable to being influenced by others and, more importantly, to psychical assaults. As my personal assassin, such weakness on your part is intolerable...and as such, you will accept Mewtwo as your mentor. He's the most powerful psychic in this organization, so I believe you will be in good hands...or paws, in this case."

While she appeared to submit to her leader's will, Mewtwo merely snarled. "I understand why you would have her learn from me, but why must I be her student, rather than learn the physical arts from someone stronger? This female looks as though she would crumple from a single blow."

With alarming speed, the woman sprang forward, dodged his swinging tail, and pressed the edge of an unsheathed blade to his neck. Giving him a moment to feel the weapon nip against his throat, a potentially lethal kiss of steel, she hissed, "You should think about bathing more, pussycat – if you're going to insist on talking out of your ass, then for my sake, make sure you don't make the arena stink with your arrogance in the process. It'd be difficult for me to rip you a new one when I'm gagging from the stench."

Giovanni's onyx eyes twinkled in amusement. "Language, my dear, and I think you can let him go now - I believe he understands your, err, point. This is precisely what I meant: you are both at the top of your fields, and by training one another, you'll be able to conquer your enemies with ease."

Removing her poised blade from Mewtwo's neck and sheathing it, she stepped away and glared at the man. "You're not going to give us a choice, are you?"

The Signore of Team Rocket's eyes continued to glimmer with mirth. "Not in the least. You two will meet every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday evening from 6:00-10:00PM, provided you have no prior commitments. I would recommend beginning tonight – after all, I'm certain you have much to learn from one another."

With that, he turned and walked to the stairwell that would lead him to the upper levels of the building, tucking one large hand into the pocket of his burnt orange suits, with the other lifted in a wave of farewell. As he disappeared up the steps, the clone and the trainee stared after him, somewhat stunned at the unexpected turn of events, before they slowly shifted to face one another.
For a handful of seconds, they merely glared at one another, each of them considering the possible consequences of departing in protest of the apparent relationship Giovanni wanted to forge between them. Yet soon the urge to prove just which of them was stronger overwhelmed them, and one in thought, they began to circle each other, awaiting the eventual advance of their foe. When the first steps were taken, when the first blows were landed, when their first battle began to be waged, for the first time Mewtwo could recount, he began to feel fire – wild and exhilarating - surging in his blood. For as the assassin sprouted wings with which she could rival him in flight, as she used her acquired skills to pound him into his place, he realized he had encountered a new purpose in this corrupt city: to clash against and someday overpower this young woman using her own methods, so the next time she dared flash a blade toward him, he could return the favor by clamping his fangs over her throat. As a dark form of satisfaction and yearning gripped him at the notion, he mused that for the beads of blood now trickling down his neck, he would one day taste that same amount of her blood across his tongue. So as she battered him, striking at the joints of his armor and at the exposed areas of his body, he savored the thought of what he was determined would someday be, and allowed her to enjoy the present while she could…not knowing that one day he would, in fact, know the taste of her blood in his mouth. He simply wouldn't shed it in the way he was currently imagining.

Indeed, much would change between this night and then…but for now they fought like vicious curs, their bloods boiling with their disdain as they sought to conquer each other….

As the neon signs of the buildings around them began to flare to life in the late hour, the clone eyes reflected the red light of the nearest one. The crimson gleam, his companion thought, was strangely appropriate when discussing the moments when his bloodlust had been so openly expressed. Seeing her raised eyebrow, he smirked slightly, before the thought of the crime lord made him sober. "Since she and I were of different species, Giovanni never considered the possibility of us becoming…attached. Admittedly, his assumption was not mistaken: at the time, we were both only interested in defeating one another, rather than attempting a seduction. However, as is natural in any relationship, we became inured to one another after spending enough time together. We even began to savor the hostilities we exchanged, since they disrupted the monotony we experienced most days. Consequently, while we found the premise of our meetings distasteful, we ultimately swallowed our pride and accepted our responsibilities. We followed our objective and taught one another, delivering our lessons in the harshest atmosphere we could generate. And in doing this, we learned from - and about - each other in many ways."

Weeks later, the battles between them had grown even more brutal, in part because he was no longer allowed to wear his armor to their training sessions. While he welcomed his newfound freedom from the steel carapace, he had to admit that shedding it had its hazards: by the conclusion of their meetings, his entire body was tender from her beatings and aching from fatigue, and while his bruises were healed by the next meeting, that hardly meant he wasn't growing increasingly frustrated with his failures. Compared to what he now recognized were calculated and disciplined strikes, each one sinking into his weak points, his physical attacks were wild and ungainly, and though potentially powerful enough to knock her unconscious with a single landed blow, she was agile enough to dodge nearly every time – and when he did manage to hit her, they always seemed to be mere glancing blows.

To be fair, he was getting better: his could spar against her longer, could block and endure more of her attacks, and, he believed, was even becoming faster and more gracile in his movements. However, he still had a long way to go, which she never failed to point out – especially when she planned on teaching him a variety of fighting styles and techniques, and perhaps, if she gained enough confidence in his abilities, they might even move on to actual weaponry. Yet that was a big "if," and
her eyes seemed to shine with glee as she launched a flurry of blows into his torso, making him stagger back. As pain blossomed over his ribs and stomach, he reacted instinctively, swinging his tail towards her. Again she leapt back, and he heard the tinny sound of her laughter behind the mask she continued to wear. Not that he was planning to slug her in the face anytime soon, so that she retained it hardly mattered; it merely aggravated him somewhat, but in truth, he was still more concerned with her throat, an interest the woman had swiftly noticed and punished him for. Had his jaw not been so sturdy, he might have even lost a few of his milky-white teeth from the excessive amount of violence she'd used.

As it was, he felt that this particular lesson was degenerating, which he believed might be his fault this time. After the extensive hurts she liked to inflict across his form, he was often equally nasty when it was his turn to be her teacher: after showing her the basis of mental shielding and probing, he often assaulted her mind ferociously, tearing apart her fragile defenses and thrusting his psyche into hers, at times viewing some of her more banal memories. He never strayed too far into her private thoughts, but instead did something much more devious: he left her fully aware that he could decimate her from the inside out if he pleased, and even, when he was feeling especially antagonistic towards her, injected different sensations within her and forced her to feel.

Heat, cold, agony, euphoria, despair, delight, revulsion, lust – he made them blossom within her just to prove that he, and by extension other psychics, could manipulate her with ease if they wished. Unless she constructed impervious shields around her soul, concealing herself or even rejecting him from entering her, then he could know everything there was to know about her, and could, from there, make her do whatever he wanted, no matter how humiliating or self-destructive it might be. These were harsh and sometimes terrifying lessons for her, but she had a strong will, and he was confident that someday she'd make herself completely invisible to his senses. Already she'd made leaps in her progress, and each time they met it took his a little longer to dominate her...yet he would not tell her that. Instead, he overpowered her, allowing her to know how he felt when she tormented him. And in turn, after he released her from his psychical hold...she turned violent.

Now he was losing ground to her, feeling her fist sink into his soft gut and her fingernails raking over one of his eyes. As he reeled, his stinging eye clenching shut, she crouched and spun a leg into his ankles, tripping him backwards. As he fell and landed on his tail, lancing pain running up its length, he felt her weight settle over his midriff, and while lashing out with his paws, felt her mask move beneath his fingertips. As she captured his wrists in her hands, he suppressed a groan as her rear shifted over the sensitive region between his legs. One of the many curses he learned from her rose in his mind, and he wondered if she even realized that simply because his genitals were tucked away did not mean he was sexless. As reluctant pleasure rippled through him at her moving hips over his, he begrudgingly surrendered, hoping she would soon remove herself from his person and not proceed to embarrass them both.

But when he finally opened his eyes, his worry concerning his possible reaction to the pressure faded – because he noticed, at that point, that he'd knocked away that damnable mask to reveal her face. Blinking with surprise, he stared up at her with wide, amethyst eyes, noting how smooth her skin was, having been certain that she wore that mask to conceal an abrasion of some sort, be it extensive scarring or some hideous deformity. However, although sweat-streaked, flushed, and contorted with fury, the face that peered down at him was nonetheless the most genial and quietly gorgeous one he had (at least by that point) the pleasure of seeing. Albeit, he knew her prettiness was entirely deceptive, given her taciturn personality, and could probably be outdone by many a common woman, were he to view more humans than his currently restricted lifestyle allowed. But in that moment, she stunned him with the vitality and youth her profile conveyed. How old could she possibly be? Fifteen? Seventeen at most? Either way, by wearing that masked it seemed she'd wanted to hide what she truly was: a fiery, feisty, but nonetheless celestial creature.
A blazing angel who then proceeded to lean forward and hiss at him unpleasantly, "I win, you mutated freak."

He mused that something he had overheard one of his trainers say about her was quite apt: oh, the contrasts! Shaking himself inwardly, and reminding himself that her beauty was probably only skin deep, he thoughtlessly snarled in return, "I am not the human with wings."

In the following second, pain erupted across his left eye as she drove her fist into it. After giving him what would turn out to be a black eye, she rose from him, snatched up her mask, and crossed over to the side of the Gym, where her blue duffel bag and a towel were sitting. Distantly, as his remaining good eye stared up at the skylight above him, he heard the water beginning to run in one of the shower stalls in the woman's locker room. Yet as he focused his hearing further towards the noise, he almost thought he heard…the woman sobbing. The notion that his careless insult could have injured her so was utterly incongruous with everything he knew about her…and yet, the more he listened, the more he became certain that he'd hurt her.

To be certain, he didn't care for the female in the least, but the thought that he'd done her actual emotional harm bothered him, like a pestering, biting insect flitting around his ears. His comment had been accurate enough, for she wasn't a normal adolescent girl in the least – this conclusion was affirmed by how the other Team Rocket members whispered about her in hushed voices, calling her far more slanderous names than anything he'd ever muttered. Yet she'd always appeared unaffected by these slights, brushing them off like dust from her jeans…and in his naivety, it seemed he'd believed her constant act. Although she pretended those verbal barbs didn't wound her, they did – if they hadn't, then he wouldn't be lying in the dirt with a swelling eye, and she wouldn't have stormed away over an hour before their session was meant to conclude.

His words had cracked her rigid exterior, and while this was something he'd wanted to do for quite some time, it was not as pleasurable as he'd thought it would be. In fact, for the first time in his life, Mewtwo felt…remorse. So when he finally picked himself up, and heard the water cease to run, he resolved himself to treat her more kindly - for she, just like he did, had a young heart, and did not deserve undue punishment from what could instead be his gentle hands…

Spying the confusion etched on his companion's face, Mewtwo fumbled to explain himself, his tail lashing behind him as he did so. "She intrigued me, Psyche. Up until that point, I had believed that humans were fairly predictable creatures, with no man or woman much different from the next. Yet she represented an enigma, and in my boundless curiosity, I was compelled to learn more about her. Over the next several weeks, my attempts gave me insight into what she was receptive to, and she, after noting my changed behavior, sought to understand me as well. Becoming civil towards one another was the natural outcome of this, and from there, our relationship shifted onto a different, and thoroughly more pleasant path..."

Nearly a month passed from that decisive fight, placing them in the midst of what was thus far a rather mild winter. Only a light dusting of snow had fallen across Viridian City and the surrounding countryside, the crisp air barely cold enough to keep it, along with the cover of frost over the grasses, from melting. On that Friday evening, the replica followed the trainee up the northern routes that would, eventually, give way to the forest the fresh trainers wandered into the capture the first members of their pokémon teams. Bundled in a hooded long-coat, the thinly furred feline nonetheless shivered as the brisk wind blew through the fabric, and cast the female ahead of him an envious look. She seemed quite cozy in her exercise sweats and leather jacket, and her feet - unlike his - were snug in what appeared to be rather comfortable hiking boots. The pads of his toes were already numb from the chilled ground, and he was thankful that the weather was mellow, having heard that the Pewter
and Cerulean Cities were expecting to be hit by an onslaught of blizzards over the next several days. Seeing as how the upcoming two weeks might be all that was left of decent weather in the city, Trainee Merlo had decided they should leave the Gym during their next few meetings and enjoy training outdoors. After assuring the Signore that they wouldn't be seen, she'd provided the clone with a suitable outfit, and thus - as prepared as they could be for the chill - they'd begun the hike up the hills.

They passed by a couple trainers as they went, but when seeing what appeared to be two civilians on a simple jaunt, the Team Rocket members had conveniently been ignored. As the minutes passed, they weaved down increasingly deserted and unused trails, until they finally crested a cliff overlooking the sea of trees below. Pausing to watch a pidgeotto soar over the canopy, the teenager eventually turned to face Mewtwo, spying that the ascent had not tired him. That was good – his stamina had increased considerably from what it had once been, which she mused aloud was a welcome development. Over the past month, they'd begun to soften towards one another, offering reluctant compliments and, on occasion, a word or two of encouragement when feeling particularly sentimental. Both had silently accepted that while their relationship remained professional, there was no longer any need for malevolence between them – it served no purpose, and only made this arrangement more stressful than it needed to be. In a display of goodwill and openness, the teenager had even ceased wearing her mask altogether, which the clone found he preferred: her expression revealed the subtle nuances in her emotions, allowing him to know when to push her and when to ease the pressure he placed on her during their sessions. Furthermore...he found he enjoyed the rare smiles that flickered over her mouth at something he did or said, even when those smirks merely belied her amusement at his ignorance or foolishness.

For her smiles, at the very least, were honest ones. He could not say the same concerning everyone else he'd met since his awakening.…

Clearing her throat to catch his attention, Cassandra turned to the drop and said over her shoulder, "Here’s the plan, tomcat: if you can catch me without using your psychical powers at all, I'll give you a reward later tonight."

He quirked an eyebrow towards her at that, intrigued. "And what might that reward be?"

The corners of her mouth turned upwards, and shedding her jacket and wrapping it around her waist, she fiddled with her collar until her wings materialized. As he watched, the glossy, feathered limbs emerged from the slits in the back of her sweatshirt, sweeping out to their full, magnificent length. The clone resisted the childish urge to reach out and stroke them, knowing they were nowhere near close enough for such an intimacy. Instead, he kept his paws to himself and listened as she replied, "You'll see... or you will if you're fast enough. Now show me, clone: just how high can you jump?"

Launching herself from the edge, he heard her whoop with excitement as she flung her wings wide and began to glide away, her powerful wings flapping to keep her aloft. Within moments she seemed to be kilometers ahead of him, far beyond the distance he believed he could sprint to catch up with her. However, he'd never been one to forfeit a challenge, and with the promise of a reward from her if he succeeded in capturing her, he was determined to be the victor of their match, if only just this once. Leaping into the canopy below, he caught a branch between his paws and used his momentum to swing forward, leaping into the next tree. There his feet found another sturdy branch, and he continued to dart forward, trusting that his paws would find purchase within the support of the canopy, a realm which he felt, to the depths of his primal core, that he would always be safe within. From what he knew of the race he'd been derived from, this sensation of familiarity was natural, for the mew had been primarily a tree-dwelling species, having spent a majority of their lives amongst the uppermost boughs of the Andes rainforests of South America. As such, he traveled amongst the branches with natural ease, his movements reminiscent of a kangaroo hopping over the terrain of the
Australian outback.

Admittedly, there were sometimes gaps between the trees he could not hope to leap across, and in these cases, he descended to the stretches of open meadows and routes below, before ascending once again. Eventually he glimpsed the young woman ahead of him, and urging himself to move faster, he continued to pursuing, following her closely as she spotted him and attempted to veer away. They continued on like this for some time, until the temperature dropped as night began to fall, and it became more difficult for the angel to remain aloft – without the updrafts to support her, she had to exert much more energy to remain within the air, and was tiring quickly. And although the clone was similarly fatigued, he was resolved to catch her, and soon enough, as her altitude above him dipped momentarily, he coiled the muscles of his legs and launched himself upwards, his arms grabbing her firmly around the waist. With his additional weight, her wings failed her, and like two heavy stones, they dropped to the frozen ground below, which flew up to meet them before she could even shout at him properly.

In retrospect, Mewtwo thought as he lay stunned on the cold earth, he should have buffered their fall within his telekinesis. As it were, he was lucky his skeleton was as sturdy as it was, and she was lucky to have landed on top of him. Had that not been the case, then he could be certain his reckless move would've ended in broken bones. Yet as it were, he'd managed to beat the girl at her own game while following the rules she'd laid out. So despite the stars bursting before his eyes, and despite having had the breath knocked out of him, he could at last say that he'd won a round against her, and he felt a great deal of satisfaction at that.

Hearing her curse and moan, and feeling her stir above him, she eventually grumbled, "Fuck that hurt! By God's blue and throbbing balls, why the hell didn't you set us down gently?"

Try at he might, he couldn't help it - he smirked. "Had I done so, you might have claimed that I defied your rules. Now you must admit that I defeated you fairly."

Folding her wings close and rolling off of him onto the grass, she snorted and remarked. "You know, you shouldn't do everything that people tell you to do. You could end up completely miserable or dead that way."

If he'd learned anything from her since they'd met, it was how easily humans could trap you with words. "Yet in this case, you would deny me my reward if I broke your edicts."

Lolling her head to the side to face him, she slowly smirked. "You're probably right. But fine, I guess I've got no choice now, do I?"

The question was rhetorical, and turning her eyes towards the sky, her fingertips toying with the strands of grass beneath her, she seemed to contemplate just what that reward should be. Then, seeming to arrive at an idea, she sat up and turned to him, asking, "Do you like Chinese food, by any chance?"

Two hours later, Mewtwo found himself standing in one of the hallways of the Team Rocket dormitories, with the trainee unlocking the door to her apartment, Unit 150, before him. Glancing down to either end of the hallway and casting his senses over the level, he was intrigued, but not necessarily surprised, to find that most of the rooms were vacant. Evidently, there were not many in the organization who felt comfortable living in close proximity to the assassin. He wondered if the teenager found this to be a convenience or not, but before he could voice the inquiry, she'd swung open the front door and knelt down to pick up the mail on her doormat. Standing back up, she offhandedly flicked the light switch on and began sifting through the envelopes, and noting his hesitance to follow her, she beckoned him inside, asking him to shut the door behind him.
Doing as she said, he watched her set her mail on the counter along with her keys, and along with her, removed his coat and draped it over the wall divider…and then stood somewhat awkwardly by the closet, not precisely sure what he should do. Having never been invited in another person's home before, this was a new experience, and seeming to realize his discomfort, she glanced back at him and gestured for him to have a seat at the table. On her landline phone, she called the local Chinese restaurant and placed her order, giving them the building address for the delivery, and after a pause, assured them that yes, she would go out to the front doors to pick up the food. Although most of the members of Team Rocket were civil to delivery guys or girls, a few of them hadn't proven so polite or friendly, which had - much to the lamentation of the others, who simply wanted to enjoy a decent meal at home – fostered anxiety among the local businesses. Some chains had declined servicing the base entirely, and Trainee Merlo made certain to tip well, hopefully encouraging those who did risk coming out here to continue providing to the people here. Since she had no talent at cooking, it was partially a matter of survival, rather than mere convenience.

As she explained all of this to the replica, he allowed his eyes to wander over her home, which, although small, seemed efficient and decorated tastefully. The walls were painted in a warm crème hue, the filmy curtains of the single window a richer goldenrod, while the plush carpet was a comfortable off-white color, exposing its age. Her queen-sized bed was covered in thick blankets and pillows, and the remaining furniture was made of a light-grained, and admittedly false wood, which included the dresser beside her mattress, which no doubt contained her various outfits. As he leaned back into the thinly-cushioned chair, seeing her riffling through a drawer and head into the bathroom to change, he averted his eyes, attempting to ease his anxiety by breathing slow, deep, calming breaths. Yet this only brought the aroma of vanilla into the depths of his lungs, which, while pleasing, reminded him that he was in her home. As she stepped out of the bathroom, wearing a fresh set of cotton pants and a loose T-shirt, he stared at the casual garb for a moment before glancing away. This was so different from what he was used to, and distantly, he heard her ask him if he'd like something to drink.

"Tea, if you have any. It matters little what kind."

She grimaced at the request. "Hot water and boiled leaves…? Alright, if you insist, but don't expect me to enjoy it – it's far too bland for my tastes."

Amusement warmed him at that, and later would continue to do so as she eventually acquired the habit of drinking tea with him. For now, however, once the steaming beverage was set before him and she returned with the food, which they divided between them, he explained his preference to her. "I favor this drink above all others. Its taste is light, fragrant, and not so different from the waters of the cultivation tank that housed me during my childhood. After I emerged from that fluid, my senses proved overwhelming, especially in regards to what I consumed: everything proved far too rich to tolerate. Tea provided a welcome relief from the intensity, and helped me adjust to the world beyond the antiseptic laboratories. That is why I appreciate it so, although it is, as you say, little more than hot water and boiled leaves."

Contemplating that, she sipped from her own cup of the bitter stuff and grimaced. She supposed that if she tried, she might be able to grow used to it – "might," of course, being the key word there. "I suppose that makes sense," she murmured, and after digging into the carton of egg noodles with her chopsticks, asked, "So, how do you like this food? Is it too spicy for you?"

"Yes to the first inquiry, and no to the second. The meal is enjoyable, so…thank you." Having never uttered such polite words to another, they sounded stilted to him, but despite his awkwardness, she seemed to realize he meant what he said.

She smiled at that, and watched with some amusement as he fumbled with his chopsticks. Reaching
over and correcting his grip, she leaned back and said, "You're welcome, I suppose, but it's not as if I did all that much. I just phoned in an order, after all."

Successfully managing to pick up a pot sticker, he bit into the stuffed noodle and chewed thoughtfully, mulling over the flavor of pork. Eventually, he replied, "True, but inviting me into your apartment was unnecessary. You could have sent the meal to my residence instead."

The notion seemed to entertain her. "Ah, yes, I can just imagine that: the squints gasping in horror as you struggle to eat all of this food, breaking countless pairs of chopsticks in the process. Beyond driving them insane, who knows what this stuff is going to do to your system? Hell, you might even get sick, which would be rather depressing to everyone involved."

He shook his head at that final comment. "I am an omnivore with a resilient digestive track. I can probably tolerate a wider range of food sources than you can."

"Well see, Mewtwo. Regardless, it's nice having someone over - I usually eat alone," she admitted, and for all the lightness in her voice, there was an undercurrent of sadness to it.

Peering at her wordlessly, he swallowed the mouthful of fried rice and tangy orange chicken in his mouth. She was probably correct in saying this meal was horrible for him, but it was delicious, and as far as a good meal went, that was all that mattered. That, and the company one shared while savoring it, and after a moment, he asked her, "...Do you ever feel lonely, living in this manner? From what I have observed, humans are social creatures, so your particular lifestyle appears unusual. Tell me, does it ever bother you?"

Gazing at the tabletop, she traced the pattern of the grain with a fingertip. "...Sometimes...but despite how it hurts on occasion, it would be selfish of me want anything more. After all, it's not fair for anyone I might befriend to be associated with the up and coming assassin of Team Rocket. At best, they'd be targeted as hostage candidates, and at worse...well, suffice to say that none of the outcomes of being captured would be pleasant for them. Plus, I could be killed at any time with my occupation, or come back maimed or insane. It'd be cruel to ask someone to embrace those risks, so being alone...," she trailed off, and then shrugged. "I'm sure it's better this way," she concluded, taking another sip of her cooling tea.

Mulling over her words, the clone eventually bowed his head to take another bite of his meal. "...I merely asked if you become lonely at times, Trainee Merlo," he murmured.

Setting her cup down, she replied, "I know...but I might as well explain why it's unavoidable while I'm at it. And by the way, it's Cassandra to you, got it, kitten?"

Inwardly, the pokémon smiled, and with a curt nod to show that he understood, he continued to dine on the feast before them....

In the following two months, the previously strict teacher-student bond between them began to melt into a far more comfortable and comforting friendship, despite each of their lingering concerns about forming a close bond to the other being. Eventually, however, the potential dangers were dismissed as needless worries. After all, they were both strong beings, so what did they honestly need to fret about...? Rather than dwell on the potential consequences of finding a companion, they instead began to tentatively explore what it meant to have a friend of the opposite sex. At this point, of course, their relationship was purely platonic, which was perhaps to be expected of two individuals who were, A.) inexperienced in sensuality and romance, and B.) also of different species. Admittedly, there were moments when they were aware of each other's sexuality, but those instances were often (but not always) the result of reminding themselves about certain social taboos.
Beyond these accepted boundaries, however, and their independent inclinations towards personal privacy, they hesitantly began opening up to one another. Having no one else to speak to about subjects that intrigued or bothered them, discussing matters between themselves was something they began doing without consciously realizing it. Although the practice was unusual for them, it nonetheless consumed many of their initial meetings outside of their training sessions, in particular on Friday nights. Although they remained cautious of inviting themselves into the other's presence, the hours after their final training session of the week were quickly established as theirs. After that first dinner together, they made a tradition of sharing a meal during those nights, the foods coming from a different cultural background each time, all in the hope of expanding the clone's culinary horizons. Yet more than that, these hours warmed them as they simply relaxed and savored their unexpected, but nonetheless enjoyable, companionship.

Whenever the replica left her home on those nights, usually in the early hours of the morning, the fading stars would gaze down at the friends and find nothing amiss with what they witnessed. To them, and to anyone else who became aware of what was happening, the angel and the clone were merely two outcasts, two shadows who'd found a temporary reprieve from their otherwise perpetual solitudes. And while time promised to see their bond transform into a far more intimate one, for now Mewtwo was merely learning about what it meant to be human. Although he read extensively on the topic in philosophical texts, gleaning an array of ideas from those classical sources, it was from her spirit that he learned the meaning of that word, rather than the jumble of phrases that would provide the varied, yet ultimately flat, definitions. And the more he learned from the young woman, the more he realized just how empty her life actually was, despite appearing to have so much at her fingertips…and soon, he yearned to somehow improve her situation, to give her something to look forward to when she woke up each day.

In short, he wished to give her something to care about, and after much deliberation, he found precisely what he was searching for when he was given a mission in the Safari Zone. When he arrived along with the poaching team around midday, having departed from the metropolis before dawn in one of Giovanni's V.T.O.L. capable aircraft, he flew down to the rugged terrain and immediately set to work subduing the herd of tauros stampeding towards him. Having been driven from the grasslands by another team, the wild cattle now stampeded into the canyons for shelter, only to be lifted from the earth by Mewtwo's telekinetic grasp, where they were quickly captured in the illegal pokéballs the operations unit had carted into the national park. Giovanni, overseeing the mission, appeared satisfied by this gathering, and his pleasure only grew over the next several hours as they continued to explore the wilderness for rare pokémon, conveniently unmolested by the park rangers. Those bothersome employees, fortunately, had been forced to surrender control to the visiting Gym Leader, and with the region closed to everyone but him for the day, they could wander throughout the brush entirely unhindered. With the assistance of the replica, they managed to snatch a couple hundred specimens from the available selection of endangered species, even including a few dratini.

Given that the crime lord was enjoying some fine, celebratory white wine throughout the day, which he shared with his employees as the afternoon drew to a close, he nearly skipped for joy at the final addition, which only the clone would remember the next day. He, after all, was utterly sober and rather miserable: the sun that had long been overhead was now finally setting, but during its reign over the sky, it had made the armor encompassing his body swelteringly hot. In fact, he felt a bit lightheaded from heatstroke, and as he ambled half a kilometer away from the tents towards the shore of the nearby lake, he lifted his helmet from his face and set it aside. Splashing the water on his face, and taking the glass he had snitched from one of the drunkards back at the tents, he dipped it into the cool waters, and then gulped the liquid down. Distantly, he was aware of the fact that there were creatures living in there, and so this was hardly a pristine pool, but the humans had gone through all the bottled water already. This would have to suffice for now, and if he grew sick from some
bacterium or parasites, then there would doubtlessly be medication to cure his ills later. For now, he refused to collapse from dehydration in front of those triumphant and, to echo what Cassandra would say, "plastered" humans.

Some distance behind him, he could hear them shouting and laughing, apparently joyful over how well this short endeavor had gone. However, while it had been gratifying for the clone to subdue the beasts of the Safari with his now controllable powers, he knew what their eventual fates would be, and found a tiny place in his heart to pity them over it. He justified his own part in this hunting expedition by noting that if the wild ones had allowed themselves to be acquired, then they scarcely deserved to retain their freedom…but nonetheless, they destinies were most unfortunate. He knew for a fact that most of the tauros, at least, would be butchered – he’d heard their meat was quite tender and sweet when smoked right. Sighing, he stood, grabbing his helmet as he did so, and momentarily watched the half moon’s reflection shimmer on the sapphire surface of the lake. This region, in being allowed to remain untamed, was a beautiful one in his eyes, especially in the areas where the jungles overwhelmed the grasslands and brushed along the sides of the plateaus. Perhaps he would ask Giovanni if he could bring his goddaughter here (for he now knew what the relationship between them was); he was certain she would enjoy the majestic scenery. Yet perhaps that was a thought for another time. For now, he should enjoy strolling through this wild park, until it was time for them to depart.

In the following minutes, he savored the sensation of the tall grasses and brambles brushing against his tail and legs, the feeling of the coarse dirt between his toes, the warm, moist air against his face. Before him, the smaller pokémon who’d lingered in the area, most likely to tend to their nests, scurried away, crying out that his approach equaled their enslavement. He snorted to himself at that, for he wasn’t the one they should fear, but the humans who’d come with him – they would do well to apply blame to those who truly sought to capture them. At some point, as his foot fell onto a gathering of dried grass and sticks, he peered down into the small clearing he’d stepped in, noting what appeared to be an abandoned nest. At least these inhabitants, he mused, were intelligent, and had fled when they’d the opportunity.

Giving it no further thought, he lifted his foot, intent on continuing on…when he heard a soft squeak, so quiet he initially thought he’d imagined it. Yet when the sound repeated itself, he glanced around and extended his empathic senses, attempting to glean where the noise was coming from. Eventually, he pinpointed the source about a meter away, and drawing closer, he knelt down, running his fingers through the grasses…and found fur. Leaning forward, he peered into the dark and saw, curled up into a tight ball, a kit of brown and white fluffy fur, no larger than a peach. Scooping it up into his paws, the child, a young male, squeaked and peeked at the creature holding him with dark eyes, and then curled up tighter with fear. He must have thought his parents had returned for him, Mewtwo mused, but evidently they’d left their runt behind, opting to take the larger, stronger, more durable kits instead. Now this kit was utterly at his mercy, and probably believed he was going to be eaten at any moment.

Amusement glinting in his eyes at the notion – for Mewtwo was not, nor ever intended to be, a baby-eater – he said to the child, "Be at ease, young one – I have no intention of doing you harm. Instead, answer me this: would you like a place to belong, a place where you will be cherished? If you accompany me, I can give you both. Would that please you?"

After a moment, in which the kit seemed to consider his options, he unfurled and mewled a timid affirmative, scarcely daring to believe his luck. The clone, fortunately for the nameless child, intended to fulfill his word, not disappoint the little eevee, and so carried the kit with him as he returned to the camp. Later, after everything had been packed away and the fleet was soaring back to Viridian City, Mewtwo sat across from Giovanni, who was much bemused at the sight of the clone holding a child to his chest. With a flushed face and a lifted eyebrow, he said, "May I ask why you
brought along that kit, or do you intend to do unseemly things to it that I'd rather not hear about?"

For someone who was nearly falling out of his seat, Giovanni managed to remain quite articulate. The replica supposed it had to do with his experience in countless dinner parties. Nonetheless, cradling the young one tenderly, he replied, "I plan to present this child to someone important to me. I assure you, he will be of no hindrance to her."

The Italian man grinned widely, showing a remarkable amount of his perfectly straight and - for a cigar smoker - strangely white teeth. Another one of the perks of wealth, it seemed. "So you've become fond of my Cassandra, is that correct?" he asked, and before the clone could reply, he went on, "Well, I suppose that's understandable – she has the same allure as her mother did. I was always envious of Caleb for holding her attention like he did, although personally, I prefer woman with red hair. That's probably why I haven't fired Miyamoto's girl already, excluding the fact that my mother's ghost would never let me rest for tossing out her favorite agent's daughter. Not that the girl even needs to work, since she's practically married to that rich blueberry she partnered with – if he'd just swallow his pride, they'd never have to scrounge for food like they do. Of course, if they used their paychecks properly, they wouldn't be starving in the streets either, but regardless…what was I originally saying? Right, I was asking if you found my goddaughter preferable to other people."

Mewtwo, had he been in an anime, would have had an enormous drop of sweat rolling down the back of his head in response to this ramble. As it were, he merely surmised that the talkative crime lord must have passed his typical alcohol limit by a few bottles and, murmuring to the child to take heed of the dangers of the drink, remarked, "She and I are…close." If the clone had been more truthful, he might have admitted that there were times when he found the girl attractive. However, even he wasn't ready to consciously acknowledge the thought, let alone verbalize it.

Not that Giovanni, in his current state, would have remembered such a comment anyhow, but providing the clone with a glimpse of what he might think on the matter, he winked and chuckled, "Well, so long as you two aren't too close – I have plans for the dear girl when she's a little older, so I'd prefer if she remain...well, not innocent, but certainly untouched, shall we say? Yet I doubt your intentions toward her are so dishonorable, so I see no problem with the idea. Go ahead and do as you wish." As he stood up, not noticing the flicker of uneasiness that passed over the feline's face at the comment, he mused to himself that such affection could prove convenient indeed, if only to tie the clone further to Team Rocket and make the creature less likely to rebel. Happy slaves are obedient slaves, as Madame Maki used to say, and there was some merit to her advice.

Shaking his head at her memory, he stretched his beefy arms and said, "Now if you'd excuse me, my bladder is demanding I visit the porcelain throne. If you want my heartfelt advice, boy, never allow a party to get the better of you. I'm usually far better at holding my liquor than I did this evening, but since it's been ages since my last outing in the field, it appears I got somewhat carried away. When reminiscing about your youth, make certain your supply of wine is limited – otherwise, you may wake up in a strange manor wearing a tutu. And if you ask, Mister Amundsen, I shall shoot you in the groin, regardless of the fact that you're flying this helicopter! I shall return shortly, gentlemen."

As he left for the washroom, Mewtwo stared ahead of him, experiencing a sensation he'd never felt before: it felt as though the man had reached into him and squeezed at his innards. While most of the crime lord's speech had been delivered lightheartedly, and the threat punctuating its conclusion had not been directed towards him, the replica found himself growing agitated over the initial, flippant words that had been uttered. Had his partner just given him a veiled warning? Why did that notion unsettle him so? And if Giovanni had been advising him against becoming closer to Cassandra, what would happen – hypothetically speaking – if the clone chose to defy his wishes…? And what precisely had the man meant when he'd said he had plans for his goddaughter…? Beyond being overcome by the prickling sensation that he'd been caught doing something illicit, that last inquiry
especially unnerved him, and as he considered its implications, he set the eevee down momentarily to put his helmet back on. Although he was proficient at keeping his face expressionless, he didn't want to risk giving the man any hint of his sudden discomfort. If asked, he would merely reply that he wanted some shuteye, and would leave it at that.

By the time the fleet arrived back at the base, however, the replica would be overcome by other worries entirely, namely surrounding the gift he intended to give to his training partner. As he stepped down the hallway towards her apartment door, his heart beating frantically in his chest – in another new and uncomfortable sensation – he wondered if she would like the tiny eevee. He was certain an intelligent pet was the ideal present for her, but how would she react? Would she want to attempt to train the frail child in battle? Since she appeared to disapprove of the practice, he doubted that, but more importantly, would she be willing to take care of him? Having promised the young one a happy life, he prepared himself for the possibility of having to persuade her. However, surely the fibers that made up her very gender would incline her to embrace this tiny and, he would admit if pressed, adorable creature? Yes, that was one of the sexist stereotypes she would argue with him over making, but he'd yet to find an example among his (admittedly limited) encounters with females that would prove the notion wrong. By the time he stood before her door and was holding the kit behind his back with one hand, the clone had thoroughly managed to make himself nervous, and exhaling to steady himself, he knocked on the door.

Why she thought it was appropriate to answer the door without pants on, he would never comprehend.

Yet barely, he lifted an eyebrow at the sight of her long, toned, bronze legs, and after blinking groggily at him, she muttered, "It's fucking…four in the goddamn…what the hell, Mewtwo? I thought you were a normal person who slept at this hour…oh, Christ, don't just stare at me all bright-eyed like that! It's goddamn freaky and so not fair…oh alright, fine, just give me one sec…," and she then closed the door in his face. Ten minutes passed, in which he heard water running, much grumbling, and the rustling of fabrics, which he hoped meant she was getting completely dressed. After reassuring his charge that, yes, the scary woman was merely upset at being woken up at this early hour, the door creaked open once again. Cassandra, her hair now brushed, her face freshened up, her thighs now covered in shorts, with a mug of tea in her hands, snarled, "You'd better have a good reason for dropping by at this hour. Otherwise, I will end you. That said, you can come in now, but don't expect me to make tea for you. I am not happy enough right now to make you a…wait, what are you holding behind your back?"

He found himself smiling softly. "A holiday gift."

She blinked at him again, not knowing precisely what to say, before she sputtered, "Do – do you even understand what giving a present on Valentine's Day is supposed to signify?" Before he could reply, she shook her head somewhat, rambling, "Actually, I'm sure you don't, because any amount of research would tell you that it's the girl who's supposed to give chocolate to the guy she…um…hey, Mewtwo, maybe you should say it's a late Christmas gift, or an early birthday one instead? I mean, that might be more…." Then she spotted his raised eyebrow at how flustered she was, and responded by slumping, cursing, and as they went inside, growling, "And you couldn't have given it to me when the sun was up?"

Mewtwo shook his head. "I believe that would be…unwise."

Her grey eyes narrowed at that. "…You're not giving me some hideous wool sweater, are you? Please tell me you're not planning on handing me something horrible, and then running away before I get a good look at what it is. Because there were kids in my class who used to do that, and I swore
back then that I'd strangle the next bastard who tried getting away with that shit."

There was laughter in his eyes when he answered her. "No. After placing as much thought as I did into your gift, I intend to linger to see your reaction to it. Furthermore, what I have for you is... cuddly, to use the colloquialism. Now please, if you would close your eyes...?"

After giving him a look of suspicion, she reluctantly did so, and for one brief and fleeting moment, the replica wondered if he could nip her throat as he promised himself he would someday do. Dismissing the desire as childish (when it was anything but), he lifted her arms out with the tip of his tail, and carefully placed the warm, furry kit into her hold. As her eyes flew open and she gasped in surprise, the little eevee squeaked and snuggled against her chest, trying his best to make a good first impression. Shifting her arms to gain a better hold on the young one, she glanced between the pokémon and Mewtwo, her jaw slightly unhinged. "Mewtwo, what...this is...huh?"

The clone's amethyst eyes shined more brightly at her response. "This eevee was abandoned by his family, and is in need of a secure and loving home. I thought you would be able to provide appropriately."

This only appeared to bewilder her more. "But - but Mewtwo, I've never taken care of a pokémon before! I don't know how to-!"

This time he chuckled openly at her dismay. "You will learn. This child needs you, and besides... caring for him may help soothe your loneliness."

For several seconds, she merely stared up at him, still in complete shock at what he was suggesting... before her eyes softened and warmed, and holding the small eevee closer, her fingertips stroking along his pelt, she glanced down at the child and sighed in forfeit. "Alright, I'll do it. I'll take care of him. You've obviously made up your mind about this, and since this little guy needs a home, it would be cruel of me to turn him away." And then the young woman stepped closer to him, close enough that the replica could feel the heat of her skin radiating from her, close enough that the sweet fragrance of her was washing over him, close enough that he could feel the dark strands of her hair tickling against his chest. She drew closer and leaned upwards, and before he could understand what she was doing, her lips - tender, moist, and warm - were pressing to his cheek in a soft, chaste kiss. Even as she drew away, the sensation of them lingered...and perhaps it was simply an aftereffect, but when she spoke next, there seemed to be a subtle intensity to her voice that would haunt him for some time to come. "Thank you. And while it's not very original, I think I'll name this little one Shadow - he's not so different from us, in a way."

Although his breath was still caught in his lungs, he nonetheless murmured, "Does this mean you are pleased with your gift?"

Smiling widely, genuinely, she nodded...and then laughed aloud, backing away and calling him a smartass as he asked, offhandedly, if that meant she would serve him tea. Yet soon enough he was sitting at her table, sipping the hot, mint beverage and watching as the teenager and the child curled up beneath the covers of her bed. They were both quite content with sleeping until well after dawn, he suspected, and as they drifted off, the replica felt another new, yet this time pleasurable feeling expanding within his chest. By the time he finished his drink, he had placed a name to it: joy. He, too, was happy, and as that happiness exorcized all the worries he'd gathered in the night, he set his empty teacup down and drifted over to them.

Petting the top of Shadow's scalp gently, he then, hesitantly, lifted his paw to stroke along a strand of the female's dark hair, and wondered at how the scent of her shampoo rose up to him at the light touch. Holding the faint fragrance within his nostrils, he drew his fingers away and crossed over to the table, picked up his teacup, and walked into the kitchen to set it in the sink. As he did so, he
missed seeing how Cassandra's eyes drifted open slightly so she could gaze at him, and didn't glimpse the hesitant smile that curled over her face, which she buried in her pillow before he turned around. After he left, however, she sat up and gazed down at the child - who would be the first physical representation of the bond between them - and mused that by giving her this tiny life, a being who could provide her with purpose, love, and joy, Mewtwo had made the kindest gesture towards her that she'd ever received. And for that, she held her friend that much dearer.

As the clone finished conveying the memory, Psyche found herself smiling. "Es, espe. Espeon?" she murmured, pleasantly surprised at the kindness Mewtwo had shown to the adolescent girl. "That was very sweet of you, Mewtwo. Did you two share many adorable moments like that when you were young?"

One corner of Mewtwo's mouth twitched upwards in a weak, transient smile, before his eyes rose to trace one of the star constellations shining above them. Perhaps it was the faint silver light, or perhaps it was an emotion he wouldn't admit to harboring in that moment. Yet either way, his gaze shimmered and his shoulders sank minutely as he contemplated the events that came next in his story. He wanted to lie once more, wanted to tell her that the era of tenderness had been left unspoiled…but that would not be the truth, and so, steeling himself for what came next, he shook his head and said, "Unfortunately, the world we were living in had far different plans for us. We could not remain children within it, despite how we wished to cling to innocence."

Concealed beneath the hooded long-coat she'd given him, Mewtwo stood among the audience lining the edges of the sparring mat that covered much of the room's floor, the hard cushion dyed black with a giant red "R" adorning it. The central base of Team Rocket had many facilities whose sole purpose was to nurture the fitness and combat capabilities of the gang's numerous agents, and chambers such as this one, which was dedicated to the use of staff weaponry, often drew dozens of humans and pokémon alike to train. However, even the laziest of the thugs would visit on the mornings when the elite were scheduled to clash. In this case, the crowd had gathered to watch the renowned jōjutsu master among their ranks, Sensei Belial Biancardi, spar with one Trainee Cassandra Merlo, who had been his pupil since she'd first been brought into the Signore's house. Over the years – and especially in this last one – she'd made incredible strides towards rivaling his abilities, and while some might say he was merely losing his touch with age, the teacher knew there was more to it than that. Certainly, his pale body wearied more easily these days, and his movements were slower and less graceful; but he had decades of experience over the teenager, and this would normally insure his victory over her, regardless of her superior stamina and agility.

Yet this girl, he was certain, was something very special: for when she fought against him, her lean body and weapon danced, with every swing of the rod and her slender limbs exuding extraordinary grace. Each of her motions, her blocks and strikes, appeared to flow effortlessly into one another, in a seamless choreography of lethal violence that was glorious for him to behold. As he retaliated against her movements, pushing her closer and closer to her limit, he felt shivers of pleasure racing along his skin at seeing how she'd taken his beloved techniques into herself. His flinty eyes smoldered as she fought back fiercely, as his queen panther bared her fangs at him, and he knew that soon she would escape his grasp completely. This cunning angel with pale eyes would not be contained for much longer, not like the others…and just as the despair of that thought washed over him, her thin staff whipped out against him in a flurry of strikes, and no matter how hard he tried, he could not defend himself against her. Yet even as she humbled him, coaxing him over the precipice of defeat, he admired and coveted this young creature, who invoked every level of desire within him.

He wondered if she knew she enthralled him so. There were times he thought she might have guessed…he remembered each of the times she'd dashed away at the end of their sessions, after he'd
dominated her in yet another match. Yet although he'd won the game, his awe at how she'd struggled had nearly overwhelmed him, until he was nearly quivering with anticipation for the next time as he gazed after her….

Spying that the man was losing himself within his thoughts, Cassandra surged forward and dealt the most vicious blow she could, lashing into the side of his skull and forcing him to stumble back. As he staggered, she swept the rod into the back of his knees, forcing him to kneel before her – like a priest to his goddess – and pointed the tip of the staff to his throat. Although blood was trickling through his dirty blond hair and down the side of his face, he nonetheless felt euphoria, and acquiesced his defeat with a nod. He had taught her all he knew about combat, and she had used those lessons to conquer him with his own moves. She'd won the game at last.

And as her teacher, that should have been enough to satisfy him. However, her victory here meant that she could now roam wherever she pleased, free at last of the master who'd taught her all the tricks she knew. She no longer needed his company, would no longer obey his summons if he called, and as his discontent began to fester within his reverent soul, tarnishing it with frustration and grief, his pupil did the one thing she'd always ached to do, but still shouldn't have done:

Quietly, her voice quavering as she did so, she said, "I won, Sensei – so from now on, just stay the hell away from me!"

So she did know of the effect she had on him…but rather than express her gratitude for the ten long years he'd devoted to preening her, to doting on her, to insuring that she could defend herself against the lusty boys who might seek to penetrate her lovely body and defile her, she spurned him. She uttered no words of thankfulness, did not slip her hand into his to lift him up, and did not even smile at him for a game well played. Instead she turned away from him and threw the staff to the mat, rejecting his continued existence and his arts now that their lives were becoming disentangled from one another. That she did this was damaging enough to him, but to rub salt into his wounds, she pummeled what remained of his dignity by disrespecting him in front of so many witnesses. What would they think of their once glorious mentor now, laid low by an arrogant teenage girl? What would they conclude about his nature, when one of the highest ranking members of the organization treated him like a deplorable thing…?

Adoration was soon replaced with rage as he watched her walk away, her callousness and lack of shame making him seethe with revulsion. For all the lessons he'd taught her, it seemed she'd shunned the basics of courtesy towards one's ally, which he'd warned her might someday make her an enemy out of a cherished friend. And as he considered that notion, he reminded himself of the filthy work that the Signore had her conduct, and remembered belatedly that she was not to become a proud warrior on the battlefield. Instead she was to continue committing a coward's task of slaying noble men within their sleep, and he was merely the most recent among them to fall prey to her wicked wiles. Yet unlike the others, he was in a unique position: as her mentor, it was his duty to correct her faults and demonstrate what the consequences of her mistakes would be. If he had to force her down on her knees before him, if that was the only way to drive in his point, then he must do so.

He was not finished teaching her yet. He still had one more lesson yet to give…. 

Mewtwo, seeing the glow of depravity in the teacher's flinty gaze, blocked the man's view of Cassandra the instant she passed him down the exiting hallway. Leveling the coldest glare he could muster at the human, he felt a chill pass through his gut as the monster stared back, entirely unaffected by the frigid look that would normally paralyze anyone who fell beneath it. Yet such a glare was only effective against the sane, and he could see that his dear friend's teacher was decidedly not within his right mind. Nonetheless, his next words, delivered in an almost demonic growl, would surely be capable of slicing a clear message into the Belial Biancardi's whirling
thoughts: the man was not to approach the girl if he valued his life. If he did so, then the pale devil standing before him would do whatever was necessary to defend her, including severing the hands of any man who laid even an unwelcome finger upon her. Such was the nature of Mewtwo's devotion towards his closest friend: he refused to allow any harm to befall her if he could shield her from it. She'd suffered enough as it was, and the replica would tolerate no further injury…especially not from a man who she'd specifically ordered to remain far away from her.

With his threats spoken, he stepped after his companion, catching up to her within moments despite her brisk pace. When they were well beyond the sights of the teacher and their audience, having turned down a number of corners to arrive at an exit to the building, the sweat-streaked teenager sighed in relief as the stepped out into the cool air of the pleasant, early April morning. As they strode down the cement walkways and crossed through a few lawns, the grass having been cut for the first time this year, they eventually entered one of the dormitories, taking the elevator to her floor. It wasn't until after they'd entered her apartment and Shadow was eating his breakfast that Mewtwo broke the silence.

"I do not like how that man was gazing at you," he murmured, his eyes fixated on the carpet.

Through the bathroom door, where Cassandra was stripping off her drenched clothes, he heard her say, "...Neither did I. Why do you think I was in such a hurry to get out of there? At least this was the last time I'll have to deal with it. You have no idea how thankful I am for that!"

Actually, he thought he might understand her relief more than she realized. After arriving at that chamber to act as emotional support, and then witnessing the unsettling way her teacher was behaving towards her, he would've been quite concerned about her having to be in such company again. That she would no longer be required to be eased his anxiety considerably. Attempting to focus on the lighter side of the matter, he said, "Am I to understand that this was an important victory for you? By surpassing your teacher, how does this change your status?"

"In this case, it was the last hurdle I had to overcome to complete my training period. As soon as Giovanni is informed about it - which will probably be within the next hour - he'll plan my second initiation party, where he'll hand me a tiny pin indicating my promotion from a death squad member to an independent operative. As a result, instead of hunting in a team to assassinate a mark, I'll be working on my own instead, which has its pros and cons. At any rate, after the presentation, he'll make his proud godfather speech and will start mingling with the guests, drinking and tell humiliating stories hailing back to my childhood. They'll all reminisce at how very far I've come, pretend to be amazed at how young I am – as if they weren't preening me into this position from an absurdly early age – and by dawn the next morning, will have made their way through a good dozen barrels of champagne. Speaking of which, I think I'll take the opportunity to try some. I'm not sure how else I'll make it through the 'festivities.'"

"You are underage," he reminded her.

"I don't think anyone will begrudge me a glass of champagne at my own party," she pointed out, to which he had to agree. "But if you're really worried, you could always come join me. Hell, I might actually enjoy it if you did."

He attempted to imagine the scene for a moment: the servers carrying trays of inedible French appetizers, the heady odor of golden ambrosia and aromatic candles rising from every table, the endless loops of centuries-old music, the clusters of proud villains in their finest garments. Only the thought of beholding his companion in dress clothes appealed to him, and although his curiosity was strong, it was not intense enough to make him willing to endure through what would doubtlessly be an otherwise bland event. "Forgive me, but I must decline the offer. Perhaps we might celebrate on
our own after it concludes…?” he asked, somewhat hopeful. While he would prefer to pass on the
criminal gathering, he still wanted to acknowledge this milestone in her life, even though she
appeared inclined to disregard it entirely.

Despite his attempts to decline politely, he heard the disappointment in her voice as she remarked,
"I'll probably be too tired by then, but maybe sometime later the next day."

Belatedly, the clone realized that the casual suggestion had actually been an invitation. The urge to
withdraw his earlier words immediately descended upon him, but he could predict how their
conversation might disintegrate if she were to misunderstand the motives behind his sudden change
of heart. Not wanting to trigger what could well be a wounding argument, he knew it would be best
for him to keep along the path he'd committed to. Nonetheless, he couldn't keep the wistfulness from
his voice as he said, "As you wish, Cassandra. However…merely know that if you send word for me
that night, I will arrive at your side as quickly as I can. Although the event itself might be unpleasant,
the time I spend with you rarely is, so I would accompany you, if only you said it was your wish. If
you would prefer to be alone, though, I would have but one request: if you insist on drinking, then
put my mind at ease and be careful."

If something were to happen to you, do you not yet realize that your pain would be mine as well…?

There was silence from the bathroom, before the switch to the overhead fan was flicked "on," and a
steady hum smothered the sound of her movements. Then, over the white noise, the teenager called
out, "Thanks, but it's bad enough that one of us has to go through it, so I'll spare you the nightmare.
You'll probably have to battle the next day anyhow, so you can't afford to stay up all night. And
besides…everyone would ask all sorts of questions if you escorted me, and I'd rather not put either of
us through that. Our friendship is too important for me to allow them to finger through it, so…this is
probably the better option anyway. Just make sure our own celebration is more entertaining, okay?"

As he heard the squeak of a metal knob turning, after which the cleansing spray of the shower began
to pour down, she added, "Now I have a lot to do, Mewtwo, so if you'd be kind enough to leave me
alone for the next several hours, I'd appreciate it. I'll probably see you sometime tomorrow, but in the
meantime, try not to worry about me, would you? I know how to handle myself - I'll be just fine."

If only she'd been right.

Although Psyche was paying close attention to her roommate, she found herself rather amused at
how thick his adolescent skull had been, and missed how his muscles were slowly coiling as he
conveyed what had occurred during those hours. Her tail curling in the air behind her, she asked him,
you change your mind and show up at the party, proceed to get drunk with her, and after getting
back to her place, make sweet, sweet love with her? Because it's obvious you two cared for each
other – the fact that neither of you admitted it just indicates how much of a teenager you both were."

Clenching his jaw, he shook his head curtly. "As lovely as your version sounds, we were not so
fortunate. If we had shared such a night together, what actually happened after the celebration
would have been prevented. However, I remained within my quarters, leaving Cassandra to attend
her graduation without a friend beside her. As you suggested, she did become quite drunk over the
course of the evening, and was eventually assisted home to sleep off the alcohol. From there, our
choices…and the decision of one man…ruined us."

Regret, sorrow, anger, moroseness – all mingled within his voice, and realizing that the next part of
his tale was going to be a dark one, Psyche did what she could to steel herself. "Espeon…?” she
asked, drifting near enough to the clone to press her shoulder to his paw if necessary. "And what did
the man decide…?"

In the following minute, he seemed incapable of answering her. Noting his reluctance, Psyche pressed her fur to his in a comforting gesture, and felt him shiver from what she was certain was more than the cool night breeze. Above her ears, he clenched his right paw into a fist, and with effort the words formed. "]...He decided to enter her home uninvited. He decided to hurt Shadow, and when he could not harm the child anymore, he,...]" and when his voice faltered, she nuzzled his paw, urging him to continue. After a moment, during which he gazed out at the metropolis bitterly, he whispered, "]...He decided to destroy her."

Despite how the clone had cautioned her to take care while drinking, Cassandra declined from doing so when she attended the celebration of her "coming-of-age" in the organization two nights later. She didn't allow her godfather or her guests to see her disheartened mood, of course, but as the hours of mingling passed, more than one of the individuals she spoke with asked her why she kept glancing at the main doors. Was she expecting someone else to arrive…? Did she have somewhere else she wished to be…? Each time those inquiries were made, she merely smiled and shook her head, assuring her fellow agents that all was well. Yet as the night wore on, and as their attention faded from her, she lingered near the dance floor, nursing her glass of golden, bubbly, melted joy and wishing this evening could have been spent in a different way. While she had many reasons to view this event as an unwelcome one (and admittedly, reasons why it wasn't so bad), she would have like to share these twilight hours with her friend, who she secretly hoped would decide to arrive at this gathering anyway, despite the arguments they'd both made against it. There were moments when she even thought to ask one of the servers for a cell phone so she might call the laboratories, and if he was still awake, ask him to join her…but a combination of pride, stubbornness, and uncertainty left her wordless.

Although she ached for him to be there, she'd wanted him to come of his own volition, not by her request. She'd wanted someone who sincerely cared about her (and who she cared for in return) to be happy to attend this occasion with her. Yet her companion had declined – perhaps understandably so, since this was a human celebration, and an uncomfortable one at that - and thus had left to spend this evening with the people she'd known most of her life, but neither liked nor understood. Consequently, the champagne became her substitute companion in his place, numbing her displeasure and helping her last through the duration of the party. By the time she reached the bottom of her last glass of the night, she had even managed to cease fretting over the replica's absence, her thoughts instead turning towards brighter subjects. For example, just how might he be planning to make this up to her…?

Eventually the celebration drew to its end, and as the guests dispersed and the staff began cleaning the room, her far more sober godfather took her by the arm and led her out to the car waiting for them. In a rare display of parental concern, he even escorted her up to her apartment when they stopped at the dormitories, and after advising her to get some rest, he even left a bottle of water and a couple aspirin tablets for her to down in the morning, since she was certain to have a hangover when she awoke the next day. Slurring out her thanks, she reached for a change of clothes, kissed the dozing Shadow on one of her pillows, and after she heard the door to her apartment "snick" shut, she changed into her night garments. Curling up under the covers soon after, light sleep overwhelmed her mind, and the passage of time became indiscernible, she lost herself in the murky waters of thin dreams and muddled thoughts, experiencing a mild amount of nausea and confusion as she drifted within the shallows of her imagination. At some point, which she believed to be seconds due to disorientation, she heard the spring lock, and then the deadbolt of her front door, turn over. Certain Giovanni must have forgotten something, as he was the one with her extra house key (excluding, of course, the original keys the superintendent of the dormitories kept), she jerkily stirred and sat up, asking him what he'd left behind. Yet there was no answer from the figure who stepped into her
home, the door left slightly ajar behind him, and as she peered at the man with clouded eyes, she felt her stomach plunge at the skin tone: rather than her godfather's dark brass complexion, this individual's complexion was milky white, his hair dirty blond, and his eyes...his eyes were a smoldering, flinty black.

Recognition, followed stomach-plummeting sensation of sheer terror, made her surge back with a scream. As Shadow sprung awake at her screech she could only stare with wide, horrified eyes at the monster stepping towards her. What was he doing in her home? WHY WAS BELIAL BIANCARDI IN HER HOME?

As he lunged forward over the bed, a heavy hand attempting to cover her mouth while the other grabbed her shoulder, she lashed out at him wildly, fear making ice gather in her veins. Her young eevee, determined to protect his "mother," leapt forward with a yowl, sinking his teeth into the man's hand, determined to force the invader to release Cassandra. As the pain from the bite registered, her ex-teacher stepped back, swinging his arm, attempting to make the stubborn child let go. Eventually he tore the kit away with a harsh, crushing hand, ripping the creature's milk teeth through his flesh as he did so, and promptly threw the pokémon into the closet doors, where it fell into a furry heap on the tiles below with a yelp. As her ex-teacher cursed, shaking his now bleeding hand, he grabbed the bottle of water on her dresser and pitched it at the crumpled eevee, missing the kit by a matter of centimeters. Cassandra, forgetting the terror she was feeling for herself, jumped from her bed, screaming as she did so. "No! You leave him alone!"

Her little Shadow was barely more than a baby! She refused to let this man continue to hurt him, even if it meant turning his malice on herself instead! As she barreled into the man, knocking them both over onto the floor, she glanced over to the battered eevee, who was now staggering to his paws. As the child stared at her with wide, dark eyes, taking a step forward towards the struggling humans, Cassandra shrieked with frustration, knowing the man would probably kill the kit if he tried intervening again. As she stumbled to her feet, intent on grabbing the eevee and fleeing from the apartment, dizziness swept through from the mix alcohol and sheer panic, nearly making her fall back to the carpet. Yet despite the disorientation, she managed to stagger past the table, the gap between her and her companion closing to less than a meter...before a burly hand closed around her ankle to yank her to the floor. As Biancardi began to drag her back towards him, she screamed to the kit, "Get out of here, Shadow! Go find help!"

Because no matter what was going to happen next, she was certain she didn't want her little one to stay and witness it.

After a moment's hesitance, the young pokémon seemed to realize that following her order was the only thing he could do to help her. Limping away as quickly as his paws could carry him, he soon slipped out of the door, and Cassandra felt relief momentarily wash through her as he vanished. At least he would be safe now...but as for her.... Glancing back, she saw Biancardi's blurred figure staggering to his feet, and as she floored her stomach like icy water, she kicked back at him, managing to sink her heel into his gut. He grunted at the hit, but nonetheless tightened his grip on her other ankle, her thigh flaring with pain as he yanked it back across her pelvis, flipping her over onto her side. Within the next moment, his grip on her released, and as she struggled to lift herself from the floor, his boot crashed into her ribs, viciously fracturing bone and knocking the wind from her lungs. As her pupils constricted and her stomach heaved in shock, she felt him looming over her, before hard fingers grabbed her by the hair and lifted her skull, only to slam it back into the floor, stunning her. As her face was ground into the threads, she distantly heard the sound of a belt buckle being undone, of leather sliding through denim loops. Understanding began to seep into her brain, and the horrified, terrified teenager attempted to lash back at him with legs and arms, her swings wild and sluggish from intense disorientation. At their close proximity, she managed to batter his arms and hips, but the man seemed entirely unaffected by the hits; his bulk was reminiscent of a bull's, his
sturdy frame unyielding to her frail struggles.

Forcing her onto her stomach, his knee began to dig into her lower spine, and bucking beneath his weight, she jerked her head back and shrieked at him to get off of her. Instead he silently, methodically, grabbed at one of her ankles, then the other, and wrapped his belt around them, tightening the loop until her feet began to prickle and cool from the lack of circulation. Grabbing her shoulder and flipping her back over onto her back, he kicked apart her knees and settled himself down between them, his hands soon ripping open the nightshirt she wore to access her rapidly bruising flesh. His breathing quickened as he squeezed at her breasts harshly, as he pinched her nipples, and as his mouth crashed into hers, his teeth biting at her lips, her entire body shuddered from the violation. Twisting her mouth free from his smothering, wet, sour kiss, she attempted to knock him away, her arms beating into him, her fingernails raking across his face, digging into his eyes. Reeling back with a curse, he backhanded her across the face, snapping her neck to the side, stunning her. With a growl, he caught her flailing wrists, clutching them in one hand while the other slid down her panties, his unwelcome fingers probing her sex before yanking the fabric down her thighs, tearing the fabric as he did so.

She began to beg him to stop with faint, desperate words, but although they filtered into his ears, her ex-teacher had no plans on heeding them. As she squirmed and tried to keep fighting him, her nausea and fear at his actions intense enough to make bile flood the back of her throat, he only seemed to grow more eager to see her naked, exposed, and at his mercy. His eyes gleamed with excitement and lust, a grin curling across his mouth at the feeling of her inner thighs pressing against his jeans as she struggled. This felt heavenly to him, and he hadn't even taken her yet…! With a leer, he laughed as he heard her babbling for others to come to her aid, for her parents, for some doctor and Giovanni, and especially for that overgrown feline who he was almost certain she rutted with in her free time. He was willing to bet it pounded into her from behind like a dog after every one of her missions, and while the notion was tempting for him to contemplate doing as well, he wanted to see her face when he began to truly humble her. Maybe he'd try it if he had the chance to ravish her a second time; after all, no one had come around yet to stop him, and while he was certain her beast was strong enough to rip him from the girl, so far there was no sign of her beloved defender. And why would there be…? That eldritch abomination was kilometers away, securely locked in the Team Rocket laboratory. The little bitch could cry for her "Mewtwo" as much as she wanted. The monster couldn't hear her screeching from this distance, couldn't feel the terror pouring from her like Biancardi could. As such, he certainly wasn't going to be coming around to save the girl from being put in her rightful place.

And so, utterly unhindered, the possessed human continued to molest and beat Cassandra, his hands groping at her tender flesh as he pleased, or falling across her as fists when she began to screech too shrilly from his ears to bear. He savored how she sobbed from him to stop, savored how her thrashing body felt against him, and within minutes, it was too much for him to continue to endure. Frantically reaching to his waist, he jerked the zipper of his pants down and pushed down his briefs, freeing his erection. For a split second, Cassandra felt what he planned to force inside her brushing against her thigh, felt what she'd thus far been incapable of defending herself against. Her whole body coiled against the impending invasion, all her whirling emotions rising into her throat in what would have been a piercing scream…before, with one vicious motion, her attacker made her world go dark with acute, ruthless agony.

With a simple jerk of his hips, the most intimate parts of her body and soul were ripped into, anguish bolting up her spine and the sound of flesh slapping against flesh scathing in her ears. The scream forming in her throat was extinguished, her innards churned sickeningly, and her pupils shrank to pinpricks as shock, pain, horror, fear, and shame all slammed into her. Seconds passed as the man began to pull out, but as he thrust back into her with a satisfied grunt, her entire being rebelled. Despite the vomit threatening to rise to her mouth, she screamed and began to buck wildly, biting
and scratching at him, all of herself fighting to get him out. She needed him out of her body, out of her soul, out of her head, because she could feel more than just him moving inside her. His insatiable fury and lust, his yearning to humiliate her, his satisfaction in dominating her – like his heavy body over hers, these miasmic feelings blanketed her empathic senses, incapable of being blocked out at this proximity.

With every moment this continued, he was defiling her, the words he spoke between his grunts sinking into her thoughts, perhaps irrevocably staining them.

"Take it...take it...you...goddamned cunt! Be glad I...don't do worse! I could...call my pals. They'd enjoy...humbling...a hauntly girl like you. How...would you...like that, you little...bitch?"

When she responded by begging for him to stop, he merely sneered and covered her mouth with a hand, muffling her pleas and forcing her to shatter in silence. Soon his expression began to contort with his growing need and pleasure, his eyes rolling back and his thrusts quickening, his movements made smoother from the excessive blood seeping from her. Nonetheless, rage returned to his face soon enough, suffusing him as he soon noticed the tears running down her cheeks. "Stop crying! You don't...have the goddamned right...to cry over...this! You should enjoy it! Enjoy it like...I'm...oh, take it! JUST TAKE IT AND SHUT THE FUCK UP!"

Yet her tears would not be dammed up, despite his roared demand. Even as he plunged a fist into her sides and stomach, even as he threatened to ugly her so no one else would want her, she couldn't force herself to cease weeping. She merely turned her head to the side, trying in what little way she could to hide the fluid running from her grey, dulled eyes. Incapable of doing anything more, she trembled beneath the man, her failing spirit overwhelmed from the myriad, accursed sensations of being raped. For any person, being violated like this has always proved far too much to calmly endure...and in being a sixteen-year-old virgin, knowledgeable of exactly what was happening to her, knowledgeable of what its potential consequences could be, yet never before knowing the experience of sex, it seemed especially devastating. Damaged as she was from everything else she'd experienced, being raped would be what finally broke her...but for now, during the act itself, she was still in the process of rupturing.

Growing increasingly detached from her aching body, she nonetheless choked on the overpowering stench of sweat and sex and blood. She shivered as the monster's moist breath rolled over her chest, as his calloused hands clutched at her tender flesh. She yearned to deafen herself to the animalistic sounds he made, to the squelching noise made as his member rammed in and out of her. Her soul drowned in the flood of his poisonous feelings and her hopeless ones, and she beseeched whatever higher power existed to make her a stone, to kill her if that's what it took to end this ordeal. Yet if there was a god, It chose to ignore her plight, condemning the helpless child to be victimized by the devil on top of her. In an evil and destructive act that made most forms of torture pale in comparison, her tormenter gained exactly what he wanted from her. No vengeful angel descended to slay him for his crime, and so Cassandra's prayers quieted, her hoarse voice no longer rising heavenward. She merely whimpered, her limbs shifting in her final, futile attempts to push her rapist away. Against this much-weakened resistance, he remained where he shouldn't be, where she hadn't given him her consent to be...and in remaining there, he stole away the last bit of purity she'd managed to hold onto.

Unable to handle any more, Cassandra blacked out for an indiscernible time, and distantly hoped that she'd find herself abandoned on her apartment floor if she woke. Yet she would not be so fortunate: when she returned to consciousness, his groan filled her ears as he rammed into her core, the liquid of him searing within her. After a few moments, he pulled out and rose from her, reaching into his pockets to take out a cigarette and lighter. As he lit and began to drag from the stick of tar and tobacco, she slowly, feebly turned herself over onto her side, feeling her blood and his semen coating
the inside of her thighs. Nausea rolled through her stomach, and with a smirk, Belial Biancardi
leaned over her and blew smoke into her face. She only just managed to lift herself on an arm to
avoid vomiting all over herself, instead drenching the carpet in a mix of alcohol, bile, and stomach
acid. Her ex-teacher cursed and kicked her away, and as she rolled to lie on her stomach, she nearly
gagged at the noxious odor rising from her battered skin, at the residual sensation of him within her.

Yet she was still alive…she had survived. Yes, she was hollowed out now, and in so much terrible
pain…but at least it was over and done with. She was still clinging to life, and surely that must mean
something…? Yet as she considered the thought, whatever solace she found in it drained away as
she realized she only had more suffering to look forward to. She would forever be haunted by this
heinous experience, both in her dreams and in the waking world. At best, her shame for being unable
to stop him would be amplified by others, who would regard her with mingled revulsion and pity. At
worst, the aftermath might drive her insane or to suicide, depending on how Morpheus, the people
around her, and she herself would torment her over it. Even if, in the following minutes, the rapist
lingering within her walls departed, and no one else learned of his crime, Cassandra would never rest
soundly again – if only for fear of his return.

As it was, Belial Biancardi was not ready to discard her and leave her to her fate. Grinding the lit end
of his cigarette into the bloodstained patch of carpet, he gazed at her with cold eyes, contemplating
what more he might do with her while her was here, the lurking predator in her desecrated sanctuary.
Remembering an idea, he smirked, and leaned forward to reach for her again….

When Cassandra next blacked out, she didn't awaken even after the man had finished. Incapable of
tolerating further injury and fatigued from blood loss, her mind shut down, sparing her from
consciously suffering through rape again. As the devil unwound his belt from around her ankles,
stood, tucked himself away, and zipped up, he looked down at the prone teenager, musing on what
they'd shared. For him, the experience had been exhilarating, gratifying, and ultimately left him
feeling as though he'd accomplished something sublime. He'd successfully dragged the young
woman from her lofty perch, and felt the keenest form of pleasure at how she now lay prostrate
before him, having had his final lesson to her engraved into her very skin. Crouching back down, he
curled a strand of her dank, dark hair around a finger, and yanked it free, filling his nostrils with the
now bittersweet scent of it. Smiling to himself, he tucked his keepsake from their encounter away,
intending to reminisce with it at a later time. For now, however, he would need to erase the evidence
as well as he could manage. He was fairly certain he'd remembered to warn the girl against
disclosing their union to anyone, since he'd be forced to punish her if she abused his trust in such a
way. However, cleaning up the mess couldn't hurt, and would make it harder for his pupil to
convince anyone that he'd been the one who'd taken her.

Striding into the washroom, he turned on the bathwater and set the plug in the drain, adding some
soap to the waters. Rummaging through the sink cabinet, he found the bleach and was soon pouring
it across the stained patches of carpet and the girl's sullied clothes. When the fumes began to bother
him, he opened the apartment's only window, and spent the next few minutes removing his
fingerprints from anything he'd touched, barring the woman. Tossing the drenched fabrics in the
trash, he crossed over to the unconscious female, picked her up, and took her to the bathroom.
Setting her into the cool, sudsy waters of the bath, he took the nearest towel and began to scrub her
down. He even went so far as to shave her genitalia, insuring that no condemning fluid would remain
matted within her pubic hair, which was promptly flushed away. That he sometimes applied too
much force, slicing shallow cuts across her sex, was irrelevant to him. Having lingered there long
enough, he wished to depart quickly, and thus didn't realize he was leaving her with physical scars in
addition to psychological ones. In his hurry, he etched marks upon her - marks that would forever
remind her of what she'd failed to save herself from, and marks that would forever remind her
eventual lover of the atrocity he'd failed to prevent.
And then the monster left, fingering the strand of her hair within his pocket as he went….

Sometime later, Cassandra awoke to find herself floating within the now cold and rosy water. After reacting violently to the memory of the attack, she dragged herself from the bathtub and limped over to her bed, collapsing onto the mattress and curling beneath the sheets. Feeling the nexus of her thighs becoming sticky with new blood, she clenched her eyelids shut and attempted to banish the nightmarish images floating before her eyes. As she curled up into the smallest size possible, her clammy frame quaked as sobs overtook her…and when she eventually slipped into uneasy sleep, her dread at facing the upcoming days made her hope, at the depths of her heart, that she would never wake.

In those moments, as the last, bright dredges of innocence were washed away by tears, the Cassandra that everyone knew withered and perished…and in her place was left a mere shell, empty inside and ever so easy to grind into dust….

Thank You: Shattered Silence, AnimeCrazy88, SmashSista18, Leone the Infernal, Dark Magician Girl Aeris, AnimeFreak2306, blackwaterII, Sneaky Admiral, keeper-of-the-triforce, Tomoyo Kinomoto, sapphire espeon, and Rizaidym for reading and reviewing the previous chapter. I hope you and my other readers will do the same for this one!

Author's Note: Regarding the rape scene - I'm of the opinion that writers shouldn't shy away from writing about it if they've made the decision to include it in their story. I'm also of the opinion that writers then need to explore the consequences of it afterwards, which the chapter following this one will do. The assault will also be mentioned throughout the rest of the story - it will not be forgotten about, because it is not here to be used as a shortcut for character development, or for cheap drama, or to drive the romance forward. I admit - because I am writing this note several years after posting this chapter - that I may not have handled it as well as I should have (or even put it in here for all of the right reasons), because I was a young and inexperienced writer and didn't fully understand the gravity of sexual assault. I always tried to treat it sensitively though, in respect for those who have gone through it. I hope that that, at least, comes through the writing.

Sincerely,

WiseAbsol
Forgotten Memoirs - Part 2

Chapter Warning: There are sexual acts between a human and a pokémon in this chapter. If this content grosses you out, you should skip the last scene of the chapter.

CHAPTER 12: FORGOTTEN MEMOIRS - PART 2

"When you smiled you had my undivided attention. When you laughed you had my urge to laugh with you. When you cried you had my urge to hold you. When you said you loved me, you had my heart forever."

- Unknown.

Years after the attack took place, the espeon listening to the story shivered, a great swell of compassion, tinged with pity, rolling through her. As another female who had lived with the threat of rape looming over her from a young age, she could understand the dread of Cassandra the teenager, and realized how close she'd come to sharing the girl's nightmare. Like the mist rising from the asphalt below, she remembered wisps of how the grown woman had behaved, both in sickness and in spite, and felt as if she could understand how the agent had become so anxious and bitter. To suffer through a sexual assault was one of the worst fates any person could experience, especially for those whose sexualities might forever be stunted through such violence. For Cassandra to have been dragged down and violated, just as she was entering into an era of her life that was almost overflowing with potential...well, beyond making Psyche feel ill, it demonstrated just how corrupt Team Rocket was. She wished she could yowl at Giovanni Maki for placing his goddaughter near such a monster, but even she grasped the futility of such an act. All the members of that organization were villains in one way or another - it was merely a matter of how well they hid their skeletons that determined how respectable they seemed. And Belial Biancardi, the espeon was certain, was probably someone who'd concealed his victims behind a wall of stone and mortar, never giving the leader of the crime syndicate any reason to fear for his goddaughter....

Unless he'd known and simply decided the gain was worth the risk, that making Cassandra into a weapon was more important than keeping her safe. After all, she couldn't see the girl keeping the rapist's prior, inappropriate behavior to herself. She would have told her guardian. Yet given how that same man had also sent her on potentially lethal missions, never batting an eye at the dangers...well, perhaps he'd simply not heeded her worries to the extent he should have. And for his negligence, Cassandra had paid a brutal price....

Although, as she contemplated what she'd been told, she wondered how the replica knew the details of what had happened. Some detective fieldwork, even speaking to the victim might have given him some insight, but to have learned so much about the thought processes of those involved...just what exactly had his methods been? Glancing up at her companion, she decided to wait and see if the rest of the story would unwind that little mystery. For now, she would simply listen as he continued to recount events from his youth, and hope that his heart would lighten when he reached the point where his romance with the angel had begun.

"Espeon?" she whispered, seeing that he needed to be prompted to resume speaking. "Were you the one who found her?"

His fingers flexing above her ears, he remarked in a listless, somber voice, "I was...and sometimes I
In the hours that his mistress spent in nightmares, her wounded Pokémon did not remain idle. Having visited the lair of the clone briefly before being carried to his new home, Shadow spent the darkest hours of the morning returning to that place, limping down the gravel road that led to the Team Rocket laboratories. In the trees and brambles of the forest around the path, he could hear predators of the night stirring and crying out, but he paid them little heed. Although he was barely more than a kit, only just grown to a healthy size, and was now trembling from his injuries, he pressed onwards, picking himself up each time he stumbled. His breaths came in sharp pants, his limbs quivered beneath him, pain overwhelmed his tiny frame, fatigue made shadows dance at the edges of his vision, but he refused to falter or collapse. There would be time for rest later, he knew, but right now, his "parent" needed him to keep going, and he was determined not to fail her.

Over the past few months, the young woman had given him his identity, had nurtured and adored him, had welcomed him beside her, and had never asked the child for anything in return for her kindness. Even as a devil bore down on her, concern for his sake – for the sake of a runt! – had proven more important to her than her own. Like a mother - a true mother, so unlike the bitch who had birthed him - Cassandra had done what she could to protect him, and when she could no longer capable of doing so, had pleaded for him to run. This he had ultimately, reluctantly done, but he had felt no relief upon leaving the invaded apartment. Instead, he felt guilt and self-loathing gnawing at him for abandoning her, and only through struggling to reach Mewtwo, the only one he knew who would help, did those feelings ease.

Yet even as the distance closed, frustration and anger suffused him at his inadequacies: if he were stronger, then he could have protected her without the replica's help, and if he were faster, then she would have already been saved. Yet in being what he was now, his progress was sluggish at best, and hours passed since he'd fled, as evidenced by how far the new moon had fallen in the night sky. For all the eevee knew, the one he yearned to rescue might have already been victimized and killed, rendering his current desperate efforts futile. Yet whenever the child began to despair at the thought, he reminded himself than his "mother" was strong, and should be able to hold out until Mewtwo arrived to help. She might even defeat the invader or escape, and be holed up in a place the demon could not follow.

Allowing these latter thoughts to buoy him, he eventually arrived at the end of the road, at the gates to the laboratories, and squeezed his body through the gaps between the bars. Limping onwards, he circled around the building, his frantic gaze darting over the windows, searching for the one that looked into the chambers of the clone. Once he found it, he stumbled beneath it and began to call for the partner of the fledgling agent, praying that his frail voice would reach his other guardian. As he yowled, his legs collapsed beneath him, and he sank into a furry heap against the concrete wall…but even as exhaustion and anguish threatened to make him faint, his wounds agitated through his travelling, he continued to keen for the replica. For his knew that Mewtwo, who was like a father to him in the way Cassandra was like a mother, could defend his friend in way that the kit could never hope to. And he knew, without a morsel of doubt, that the replica would fight for her sake without even a request - for like Shadow, Mewtwo was devoted to the girl, if in an entirely different way than the kit was. Imbued with the intuitiveness of youth, the little eevee understood what the clone – what both of his parental figures, actually - refused to acknowledge: that slowly but surely, and hindered every centimeter of the way by uncertainty, the bond between them had surpassed platonic friendship. They were now hesitating before the resolution, keeping their suspicions about the nature of their relationship at bay, frightened of realizing and pursing the possible outcomes.

Had they any more time to remain young, to continue brushing along the possibilities with a light touch, a lingering glance, a warm smile shared between only them, they might have come to accept
and embrace what was forming between them, and known no regrets. It all might have even begun
with the celebration they'd been planning for the upcoming day, as one of them surrendered to a
desire flitting at the edges of their mind. Yet that was a tender tale, of friends learning the wonder of
their sharing their hearts and bodies with each other at their own, leisurely pace…and while Mewtwo
and Cassandra would share a version of that experience, it would not be lightly or freely savored. For
them, their time of innocence was at an end, cruelly cut short by one of the monsters who'd stalked at
the fringes of their world, awaiting the opportunity to plunder it. Now that he had, what might have
been was almost assured to remain that way, for already one of them had been transformed for the
worst.

The other would soon follow.

Mewtwo, still wearing his armor from the impromptu, time-consuming tests the humans had asked
him to endure during the evening, soon heard the eevee calling for him, and soon enough had
crossed to the window. Peering down though the visor, he noted the heat signature of the kit huddled
against the wall, and as surprised bolted through his stomach, he reached to wretch the bay window
inwards. At metal bent like straw and the glass shattered, the shards bouncing off his shields, he
levitated out of the cleared opening and settled beside the child, kneeling down to pick the kit up into
his arms. Shadow ceased to keen at that, and mere stirred restlessly, his aura whirling with fear, rage,
pain, desperation, and weariness. Spying the kit's injured, frenzied state, the clone felt dread slide into
his stomach like cubes of ice, and over the child's mewling, he asked, "Shadow, what happen-?"

Yet before he could finish the thought, the eevee rasped, "Ee…eevee! Eevee!" his small body
convulsing as he spoke. "No time…she's in danger! Help her!"

And the clone moved, clutching the eevee close as he flew to the base's medical wing. Within
moments he was snarling at the veterinarians to attend to the kit immediately, and after impatiently
waiting to see that the child was cared for, he raced away towards the dormitories, ascending the
stairwell to Cassandra's hall as swiftly as his paws could carry him. Only when he reached her
apartment door, which remained ajar, did he falter as his senses, both psychical and physical alike,
were assaulted. As his fingers fell against the doorframe, a miasmic, swirling cloud of scents and
feelings snatched the breath from his lungs and continued to suffocate him. Residual auras mingled in
one another, blending innumerable emotions and sensations, the most potent of them – at least to him
– being those of terror, anguish, and shame. Throwing up his empathic shield, which scarcely
numbed the atmosphere, he pushed open the door and stepped into the unlit apartment, nearly
gagging from the stench that burrowed into his nose: caustic bleach fumes, the pungent reek of
vomit, sweat, and blood, and another scent he could not place. The combination seared his nostrils,
and gasping through his mouth, he moved forward, shudders running up and down his spine as he
gazed around. His eyes immediately fell to the carpet, where the atmosphere almost seemed to
coagulate: within the fibers were stains, from blood so dark it was almost black, while the edges were
snowy white to contrast the carpet around it. Similar patches could be seen nearby, leading into the
bathroom where the wounded had apparently been dragged. Yet his senses had already determined
that the chamber was vacant, and so he didn't drift towards that side of the room. Instead, he walked
over to the bed, the pads of his feet growing wet from the fluids that had soaked into the carpet. Yet
he didn't care how this place sullied him - all that mattered to him was finding Cassandra.

And within a matter of seconds, he had. In one corner of the bed, she lay huddled beneath the sheets,
trembling as she heard someone approaching her. Mewtwo immediately felt his strength leave him as
he peered at her through the visor - she seemed so small and frightened then, so completely different
than the being he'd spoken with the previous afternoon. Reaching out to her tentatively, he rested a
paw on her shoulder, only to jerk it back as she flinched under his touch.

Her thin frame coiling with dread, she whimpered out a frail, soft plea, "Please…no….."
"…Cassandra," he murmured her name, conveying that he was there and lamenting her changed state all at once.

At the sound of his voice, the teenager was drawn from her muddled thoughts, and opening her grey eyes, she gazed at the wall her bed was huddled against. Despite her closest friend having arrived, however, she found no comfort in his presence…in fact, him being here only made her feel worse. As he watched, the muscles of her back tensed beneath the sheet she'd wrapped around herself, and she turned her face into the mattress, as if she were frightened of glimpsing his face, or of him glimpsing hers. His chest aching as he noted her fear, he reached forward again to grasp her shoulder. She trembled beneath his touch, like a bird poised before flight….

"Cassandra, I must see…," he whispered, even as he realized that he didn't truly want to. However, only if he knew how she'd been brutalized could he know how best to help her. He already understood that her injuries would be grave – anything less would not faze her. As such, the question became whether or not he could risk moving her to the emergency ward (since this place was far from hospitable anymore) or if he had no choice but to drag the paramedics here instead.

Yet his companion seemed entirely unconcerned about being attended to now. She only pulled the sheet, soiled with crimson wet, around herself firmer, doing what little she could to conceal what Belial Biancardi had done to her. For she couldn't bear the thought of Mewtwo seeing how she'd been broken and defiled. If it had been anyone else, excluding the young Shadow, she might have been able to endure their prying eyes, but…but this was her dearest friend. This was the creature she shared some of her happiest memories with, and the creature whose opinions she respected above all others. If she allowed him gaze down at her battered and violated flesh, if she allowed him to see her at her weakest and lowest point, then what would he come to think of her? Would he turn away from her in disgust, and perhaps even begin to shun her entirely? She heaved at the thought, and as pain swept through her stomach and ribs at the motion, and as dread drenched her being, tears ran from her eyes in thin, salty rivulets.

"No…Mewtwo, don't…don't look at me. Please don't look at me…!" Her plea, desperate and quavering, made the clone hesitate from exposing her to his eyes….

Yet in the following moment, he reminded himself of the necessity of inspecting the damage, and so, murmuring an apology, he tugged the fabric from her frail grasp. The cloth slid through her fingers, over her arms and knees, her shoulders and legs, her sides and back, until all of her was revealed to him…and almost immediately, he wished he'd heeded her request. Seconds trickled by, long and torturous to both of them as he made no movements, his paw still raised and clutching the bed sheet, the visor of his helmet reflecting the shadowy image of the adolescent curled before him. Her hair, somewhat matted and glistening with soapy residue, clung to her sweat-streaked skin, which prickled as the chilled air now molested her. Purplish splotches had spread over numerous patches of her bronze skin, her face included, with the darkest bruises being found across her hips, sides, chest, and wrists. Chaffing marks could be seen around her ankles, while across her cheeks, breasts, buttocks, and her labium were nicks and cuts, the deepest having been sliced into her shaved, pubic region.

Yet these had not been the source of most of the bleeding. The vital fluid that had soaked into the carpet, the bedcover, that coated the inside of his friend's thighs, had spilled from the most intimate part of her body, and with an understanding born from countless texts, Mewtwo grasped that she'd not merely been beaten. The young woman that meant so much to him, who had taught him so much about this world and about people, had been brutalized in one of the worst ways possible. Someone had ravished her, had forced themselves into the private nook of her, and if the amount of blood was any indication, she'd been a virgin before being so ruthlessly invaded. For the first time in his young life, sickness rolled through the clone's stomach, and it was only by some small miracle that he managed to avoid vomiting into his visor. As the nausea began to fade, however, and as he
rewrapped her in the fabric, rage began to suffuse his innards, making him tremble from the overwhelming force of it. Leaning over her, he asked her quietly who'd hurt her like this, keeping his voice low and steady to avoid frightening her…and as she whispered the name, confirming the lurking suspicion within the depths of his brain, she sentenced her attacker to a gruesome and gory execution.

Gathering her carefully into his arms, and wincing inwardly at her gasps of pain, he levitated them out of the apartment and over the distance to the medical wing, not wishing to jar her by walking. Once they arrived at the ward, the clone ignored the stares of the human around him and approached the supervising medic, Ethan Yarrow, M.D. In private telepathy, Mewtwo conveyed who he was holding and what had happened to her, and although the man's eyes noticeably widened in surprise, he followed the replica's cue to be discreet, and wordlessly led them to a private room. As they stepped into the antiseptic chamber and the door was closed behind them, Yarrow gestured for the clone to lay the girl onto the paper-covered hospital bed, and reaching for the phone, called Giovanni Maki's home line to inform him about his goddaughter's condition. To his credit, the Signore immediately ordered him to cease jabbering and attend to the girl's injuries, and after declaring he'd be down there shortly, he disconnected the call.

Replacing the phone on its cradle, the medic pulled on a fresh pair of gloves and grabbed a kit from his cabinet, and glancing at the armored pokémon – who'd removed his helmet - asked the creature to help remove the fabric around the teenager. Like Mewtwo, he had to know how bad her injuries were, and when their actions roused the girl, she began to struggle against them, hissing at them to leave her alone. Warning her companion that he would give "the patient" a sedative if she didn't calm down, Mewtwo leaned over the girl and, meeting her eyes, began speaking soft and reassuring words to her. Eventually, he took her hand into his, and as she began to still, Yarrow finished stripping the sullied cloth from around her, packing it into a paper bag, and mentally noted the extensive bruising and cuts. His concern immediately flew to internal bleeding, and while he'd doubtlessly be testing for it over the duration of the morning, right now he needed to gather the biological evidence of the rape. He knew that this victim only need utter a name, and that would be all it took to convict someone of a death penalty in this organization. However, his habits from his years as a trauma surgeon still ran strong, and so he would follow standard procedure.

"Ms. Merlo, I need to administer a rape test. If your attacker wasn't wearing a condom, or if it broke under duress, this will provide us with a semen sample, and with it we can confirm his identity through DNA analysis. As you know, everyone is required to submit multiple DNA samples upon entering our organization, so a match is almost guaranteed. I'll need you to do a few simple tasks, but I'd like to get the most unpleasant one out of the way first. All I'll need you to do for this one is bend your knees, place your heels together, and allow your legs to fall apart. I realize this will make you uncomfortable, and I'll do my best to make this as quick as possible. Afterwards, we can run through the other procedures, get you cleaned up, and treat your injuries, alright?"

Intellectually, Cassandra understood why this had to be done…but she had no desire to open her lower limbs to anyone, especially not a male doctor. Her partner was the one who ultimately persuaded her to follow orders, resting a paw against her face and turning her head so her eyes saw only him. Caressing slow, soothing circles across the back of her right hand with his other paw, he murmured to her, "Look at me, Cassandra. Look only at me, and trust me when I say that no harm will come to you here. After the doctor is finished tending to you, you can rest easy, I promise...."

Her gleaming grey eyes locked onto his, and reluctantly, she did as they requested. Before administering this part of the test, the doctor handed the pokémon a steel bowl, telling the girl to vomit into it if she felt the urge, and as her legs fell apart, he used several cotton swabs to gather biological evidence from her vagina, anus, and – later – her mouth as well. As he did this, Cassandra's eyes grew moist and her stomach heaved, but she managed to keep the bile down. After
the various swabs were placed on a small drying rack, he took a couple blood samples, telling her she'd have to provide a urine one at some point in the following hours. Flossing came next, then fingernail scrapings and cuttings, and now that her hair was nearly dry, combing through it for fibers or foreign hairs commenced, along with plucking samples of her own hair for comparison purposes. Photographs were also taken to document her injuries, and after she was sponged clean (since forcing her to stand and take a shower seemed cruel at this point, given how tender her body was), and her injuries were tended to as well as they could be, a short recording was made where Cassandra detailed what she remembered happening to her. For this last bit, the clone was not privy to the interview, and was made to wait outside while the doctor and his patient spoke. When he was allowed back inside, his companion was struggling to fight back tears, and he immediately went to her side and then, after a moment of awkward hesitance, drew her to him.

Embracing her was unprecedented for him, and considering he was doing so in his armor, probably wasn't comfortable…but it was also, he mused to himself, undoubtedly necessary in this case. She needed someone to hold her, and he was more than willing to be that person. Yet with each new procedure, it had been Mewtwo, rather than Cassandra, who'd grown more and more distressed, for the implications of each collection had burrowed under his skin, pestering his mind with unspeakable images. Yet now that all of the evidence was placed into envelopes and boxes, now that she'd been cleaned and bandaged, it was her who was crumbling in the aftermath, and he could not blame her for that. Instead he lingered by her side as she dressed in a patient gown, and held her hand as she fell asleep, having been given a sedative that promised her dreamless rest. He stayed to show her that she was not alone, to show that someone cared for her enough to help her endure these sometimes invasive procedures, despite the discomfort he experienced concerning them. Even as he drifted from her side, he thought only of continuing to help her, informing the doctor of the evidence that was doubtlessly still at the site of the assault. Yarrow nodded, telling the young male that he'd send the crime scene analysis unit to the apartment in the upcoming hours. Content with that, the replica left Cassandra to her empty dreams, trusting that she'd be safe under the care of this man. That Giovanni was allowed into the room at this point, and came to sit by his goddaughter's bedside to watch over her as she slept, only secured his faith. She wouldn't be harmed while he was away, and by the time she awoke, he would have returned, leaving her none the wiser to his absence.

In all honesty, he wished he could have avoided leaving her entirely…but what he was planning to do must be done. Placing his helmet back over his head, he strode forward, passing the medics and other patients alike without a spare glance. For as one of the mottos regarding the higher rungs of the organization went, "Here be dragons!"

And one of those monsters needed to be slain.

"...Espe, es?" Psyche surmised, unconsciously moving herself away from the clone as she felt malice seeping from him. "...You killed him, didn't you?"

Over his fierce eyes, his brow wrinkled, and his lips curled over his fangs in a snarl as he mused on the subject. "...Yes," he admitted, and as he swung his tail behind him, his voice gained an edge of steel as he growled, "And I have never once regretted being the one to do so."

When the armored pokémon reached Cassandra's apartment, he lowered his mental shields, his empathic senses flooding outwards to sift through the quagmire of auras for the one he knew to be Belial Biancardi's. Finding the man's aural signature, he followed the residual traces that had been left in the rapist's wake as he travelled away from the main dormitories. Eventually, the trail led him to the apartments of some of the senior agents – predominantly the battle officers – and venturing into the building, he ignored the stares of the men and woman occupying the various lounges scattered
throughout each floor. Minutes later, he reached the apartment where the aural traces were most concentrated, and glancing at the door, had his estimate confirmed: beneath Unit 616 was a plague bearing the name of his companion's once teacher. Turning the locks and the doorknob with his telekinesis, he let himself in silently, and shut the door behind him as he stepped into the entrance hall. The apartment itself was furnished tastefully, with artwork from a variety of cultures and framed educational degrees hanging from the walls, and books on various martial arts filling the bookcases throughout the home. Schedules, business documents, and newspapers were in separate piles on the coffee table, situated in front of the soft leather couch, with a coaster – imprinted with the emblem for the famed Viridian City football (soccer) team – resting near the files. Beyond this, the only evidence of the man's presence was in the vaguely familiar, smoky odor of cigarettes, and in the clothes and towels tumbling in the laundry washer. Beyond the hum of the machine, he heard the sounds of voices seeping from down the hallway to the left, which held a couple bedrooms and a dining chamber on either side. Drifting down to the master bedroom, the door of which was slightly ajar, he could see lights flickering in the darkness, and sensing his quarry within, he pushed open the door, allowing the morning light to pour into the room.

And as that light exposed everything within, Mewtwo felt the rage that had been simmering within him erupt violently, eradicating all rational thoughts from his brain.

There were three aspects to the bedchamber which fractured his mind, the first being the walls, or rather, what covered a majority of the walls. Rather than choosing more cultural art for the decorations, in this most private and personal room were hundreds of photographs instead, pinned into the plaster with red thumbtacks. Yet rather than snapping moments from his social and professional lives, these snapshots were some distant pictures of young girls, not one of them appearing to be older than seventeen. All of them were slim and vibrant with youth, each having dark hair ranging from chestnut brown to ebony, and skin tones ranging from a light tan to a rich bronze. Yet for all of the pictures, some of which seemed faded with age (perhaps this was part of the reason for the thick curtains covering the windows – to keep the photographs vivid), there only appeared to be nine "inspirations" featured in the glossy images. And one of these, showing her growth over the years, was Cassandra Merlo: walking through the base, eating at the cafeteria, talking with other agents, framed in the window of her apartment, training at the gym, swimming at the pool, changing in the locker room, even some where she was spending time with Shadow and the clone. And over the passage of time, the photographer seemed to draw ever closer, until he was sometimes glanced out of the corner of her eye, making her face contort with disgust, anger, and most vividly of all, fear.

The monster had been following her for years, and had finally managed to sink his claws into her, like he had with all the others.

And this train of thought led to the other observations which shook him to his bones: the first was that at least one of these earlier victims had been abducted as well as raped. Otherwise, the clone had difficulty seeing how the man could have gotten video footage of the assault. The audio, on low, nonetheless conveyed the girl's sobs and screams for help as her body was penetrated, and as the man and the teenager writhed on a mattress, the clone found himself superimposing his friend's face onto the girl's. In flashes, he remembered finding her curled up on her own bed, remembered her eyes fixed onto his as the doctor gathered samples from her, and remembered the way she shook in his arms as she cried. He remembered her suffering and her shame, and around him, the figures in the photographs began to cry out in pain, terror, and despair, just as she must have been. Now on the precipice of a mental break, only one thought managed to rise above the chaos: that the man laying on his bed before him, watching the recording with a smile, fingering a strand of dark hair – Cassandra's hair – beneath his nose, his other hand toying with his pants zipper, had been the one to victimize them all. He'd violated them, brutalized them, reduced them to being mere objects of sexual conquest that he must
dominate, claim, and control. He was a being of unspeakable heinousness, his true nature concealed beneath an immaculate social standing and the countless achievements that had earned him a place among the elite.

Yet the replica knew what Belial Biancardi truly was, and wouldn't allow the man to live to see tonight's blackened moon.

As the clone mused on how best to murder the man, the older male tucked the strand of hair away, sat up, and glared at the armored pokémon with groggy eyes. Reaching towards his nightstand drawer, he growled out, "Why the fuck are you in my home?"

One of the replica's paws lashed out then, the glow of blue light accompanying the use of his psychic powers nearly indigo from the sheer wrath churning within him. The jōjutsu master was flung from the bed into the television panel, the screen bending inwards and cracking, the mechanical innards behind it shattering and hissing with sparks. Releasing the grip of his telekinesis, the man plummeted into the table below him, crashing his full weight into the expensive disk counsel and surround sound speakers, which made a satisfying crunch as they broke beneath him, their blunt edges digging painfully into his flesh. As the teacher groaned and began to rise, Mewtwo opened the drawer to find the handgun stashed within, and promptly crushed the squat barrel. Afterwards he began to dismantle the metal bed, removing the long strips of metal with made up the frame. By this point, Belial Biancardi had stumbled a few frantic steps towards the door…but not-so-sadly, he would never make it out of the room alive. The replica, turning his head towards the man, sent the first strip of metal at the man, who tried in vain to dodge the telekinetically propelled strike.

The bar merely dropped down half a meter and plunged forward, the strip effectively nailing the staff user to the wall by the tender flesh just below his right shoulder. The punctured plaster behind the man was soon stained with blood, and as the man howled his curses and attempted to pull the bar out, the armor pokémon merely angled another strip and sent it into his left forearm, leaving that limb pinned to the wall, while the other dangled uselessly at his side. The color of the man's face, ruddy with pain and rage, reminded the clone of the wings of a Cymothoe sangaris, a red African butterfly he remembered seeing in the local museum's collection of winged insects. Like that unlucky insect, the man was now pinned to a white backing, which proved a lovely and ugly sight to behold. Yet whether or not the body of this particular insect would remain intact, or would slowly and torturously be pulled apart, depending on how deeply Mewtwo hated this man…and to say that his hatred extended the distance to the moon and back would be a grave understatement.

Striding within a meter of the serial rapist, the armored clone, the pupils of his eyes narrowed into mere slits, responded to the question the human had asked earlier. "I am certain you can ascertain my intentions. Last night you desecrated the body of my dearest and most trusted companion," he murmured, twitching his wrists to drive two more bars of metal forward, one sinking into each of the man's kicking legs. A sharp "crack," along with the wave of intense pain in the man's aura, indicated that the metal had broken through bone as it pierced those muscular thighs."And you will find that I do not believe in the saying, 'an eye for an eye.' First you will know her pain, and then you will know a pain so terrible that your twisted mind will fumble to comprehend it. My sole regret is that I will be unable to draw this out for days, as you rightfully deserve. However, Cassandra will wake within a matter of hours, and I must be there when she does."

And although the monster couldn't see his face, the smirk that Mewtwo donned – complete with fangs - was a truly nightmarish sight as he hissed, "Consider yourself dead as of this moment, Belial Biancardi. I am the demon who follows at an angel's heels, and I shall be the one to drag you down into the inferno!"

With a single pulse of his psychical senses, the clone shattered the human's mental barriers, tearing
into the man's thoughts and memories to find each and every example of remembered pain – both physical and emotional anguish alike – and forcing the monster to relive each moment in vivid detail. Within three seconds, the sequence was looping in random patterns, and after disorientating the teacher's sense of time, the replica allowed several minutes to pass while the monster shrieked and thrashed, his mind crumbling from its own worst, waking nightmares. When psychological torment ceased to provide a cathartic sensation for the clone, Mewtwo reluctantly released the man from the sequence, having successfully flooded the man with acute despair and terror. After this, the actual bodily torture began: additional shafts of metal flew forward, ramming the monster between the legs, sinking into his guts, stabbing into his torso, and at varying intervals, the clone amused himself by twisting the bars, his ears soon growing used to the insect's screams. Over time, as he moved onto shredding non-vital body parts, the bedroom air soon grew saturated with the scent of blood, and specs of the vital fluid fell in a fine mist across the photographs around the two males. Yet while the images of Cassandra and the other victims were speckled with their attack's blood and gore, only the armored pokémon's psychical shield came in contact with the mess… and it instantly incinerated the moist particles upon striking the glowing barrier.

Eventually, the clone settled on murdering Belial Biancardi by crushing his chest and skull, extinguishing the man's life as easily as a child crushes a beetle. Only after his actions settled in did the clone's flesh begin to crawl and his stomach churn, and exiting the chamber without a backward glance, Mewtwo left the remains of the corpse to putrefy where they lay. He offered no religious words to put the man at rest, shed no tears over his demise, and felt no remorse over his heartlessness, for the monster deserved none of those gifts, especially not from him….

Removing himself from the memory of the execution, Mewtwo opened his eyes midway, staring into space as traces of that unquenchable rage seared beneath his fur. "…I will not attempt to deceive you, Psyche: I found an ungodly amount of pleasure in torturing that man. Remembering what he had done to Cassandra, I derived great satisfaction from making him feel her anguish tenfold, and in seeing his despair as his shrine was decorated with his innards. Yet after he was dead, I felt no relief. While I may have avenged her, and while he would never again be able to threaten her, I could not undo what had already been done, " he admitted, his expression turning somber. His displeasure only deepened as he went on, " I had enacted justice in its most brutal form, but I could not mend Cassandra's hurts - or the ones I had gained by extension – through such savage means. For both of us, the months ahead would prove to be our most difficult...."

A fortnight passed within the hospital, and during that time, the clone visited the healing Cassandra daily. Since visitors to the Viridian City Gym were not frequent, and the Team Rocket scientists were only allowed small portions of his time, Mewtwo had several hours per day where he could sit with his friend and give her company. Along with him, Shadow had - after being released from the pokémon medical ward - remained with his "mother," which the head doctor was more than willing to allow. After all, the fluffy kit reduced his patient's stress level, continued to linger during the hours when the ward was quiet for the night, and furthermore, couldn't return to the girl's apartment anyhow. Having already been processed for evidence, it was in the final stages of being scoured clean for the agent when she returned, and the custodians couldn't have a pokémon wandering underfoot as they worked. As such, the kit's presence here was ideal, as was the clone's… although, in this later case, sometimes the doctor wished it would act… well, less intense.

The creature never smiled or laughed from what he could observe, and while he understood that this situation scarcely merited a lighthearted approach, the way it gazed at and spoke to the agent, the manner in which it occasionally touched her, was unsettling to Ethan Yarrow. While he could understand the value of his patient having a close bond with another being, the vibe he received when they were together didn't seem particularly innocuous. He hesitated to speculate that their
relationship had any element of romantic or sexual interest to it, since he scarcely knew the two and thus couldn't accurately gauge their behaviors...but he knew common body language, and while his patient seemed entirely cold and closed off, the replica was less so, and indeed, seemed to soften when around her. Yet whatever might have been occurring between them, the attack seemed to have made Cassandra Merlo fold into herself. While she opened up somewhat when the replica was visiting her, her eyes gained no warmth as she peered up at him, and only the fact that she allowed him to slip his fingers between hers told that she still considered him a friend. It was more than she allowed her guardian, at the very least, and besides the lead doctor, the man was the only human she'd spoken with over the last several days.

The medic understood what was happening to her: she was withdrawing into herself and shutting down emotionally. After the initial shock, rage, and despair had faded, she was building up walls to keep everyone out, and was simply attempting to focus on being functional. If anyone asked her, he doubted she would admit that anything was wrong, for even scathing remarks were becoming rare for her. Instead of sniping back, which might even be a more welcome response, she might just reply that her body was healed, and that, since her rapist had been punished for his crimes, they could all move on and give what had happened no further consideration. But her doctor knew better, and like her godfather, he was watching the adolescent girl with growing concern.

As the men went into his office to speak about her condition, he poured himself a mug of bitter coffee and said, "As I mentioned over the phone, she's physically healed enough that she should be released from the medical ward. While I agree that she's in a fragile state, we need the room for other emergency cases, and for high-ranking members of the organization who've made private appointments. Their needs must be met as well, at least if you want your gang to function properly. As such, we can't favor her over them...and besides, I think it's time your goddaughter's psychological needs were looked after, now that her physical ones have been taken care of. After all, as far as the damage to her body went, she was quite fortunate-.

The crime lord's onyx eyes narrowed as anger flashed through him. "Excuse me? How can her condition have possibly been 'fortunate'? She was-!"

"Let me assure you that I know better than anyone what she endured; after all, I was the one who mended her wounds and took her statements. However, as vicious as Belial Biancardi was, he ultimately only gave her a few scars and fodder for nightmares. I've had the various samples I've taken from her over the past two weeks screened thoroughly, and she hasn't contracted any sexually transmitted infections from the encounter - although I want her to finish the antibiotic regime she's on, just in case I missed something. But more importantly, while I'll still need to have her tested for H.I.V. over the duration of the next year, her attacker's final medical reports indicated he tested negative for the virus. So I'm comfortable saying that the likelihood that she has the disease is slim to none. Hence my original point: while no one deserves what she went through, she was lucky to emerge from this so clean. She doesn't even need any reconstructive surgery, which some of the other rape victims I've seen can't boast."

As what he was hearing sunk in, the Signore of Team Rocket reluctantly had to agree with the medic. Yet one worry continued to niggle at the back of his brain, thus far left unaddressed. "You said he didn't leave her with anything. Does that also mean she's not pregnant?"

Reaching into his pocket, Yarrow grabbed the pen within and signed his portion of the release forms for his patient. "We would've detected the hormonal variations by now, so no, her womb is empty, and I'd prefer if it remained that way. It isn't safe for her body to carry a child to term, at least not right now. Maybe in a few years, but...well, that's all beside the point, Signore. As I said, I'm more concerned about where her head is right now, especially if you plan on sending her on missions anytime soon. You've indicated that that's your desire, and even though I've selected a drug regime
that will, in part, soothe the psychological trauma of what she's been through, as well as the chronic
pains she's been developing; substances can only do so much."

"So what would you suggest?" Giovanni asked, crossing his arms over his chest.

Handing the man the papers to sign, the doctor said, "I would recommend scheduling her in for
weekly meetings with a counselor, but as I understand it, the last therapist who tried working with
Ms. Merlo found her to be entirely uncooperative. If she refuses to talk in those sessions, there's no
use in forcing her to go, which doesn't leave you with many options. Now you could leave her be,
and continue sending her on missions and making her attend various galas with the same frequency
you did before, but I fear she'll deteriorate rapidly if you do so. Never mind if she says she's fine;
she's not, and treating her as if she is will end up getting her killed, either by her own hand or
someone else's. If I may make some radical suggestions, I'd recommend spending more time with
her, as a concerned parent would, and keeping her workload and social scenes to a minimal. She
needs some time to recuperate mentally, and putting her in situations where she's either in mortal
danger, or among many unfamiliar faces, would risk causing a breakdown."

"Furthermore, she needs to confront what happened to her somehow. Returning to her home - the
scene of the rape - is a good start, but she'll need more than that to move past this. She needs
someone who will support her and care for her, someone who won't take advantage of her or leave
her alone for extended periods of time. As such, this person has to be reliable and devoted to her, to
the point where they'll do whatever's necessary to help her heal, even if she doesn't want their help.
To give this a chance at working, however, this person has to be someone she currently tolerates,
preferably even likes, but even more importantly, trusts. Otherwise, you'll have another body on your
hands, though whose it will be depends entirely on how she lashes out. And she will lash out,
Giovanni – her temperament is conducive to it, so this person better be strong enough to subdue her
too. Of course, we both know that not many people meet the requirements I just listed. You just
might be able to, but I daresay you're too preoccupied with other duties than to be her caretaker, am I
right?"

Giovanni Maki had to repress a wince, despite how casually the last remark was said. For the other
man was right; as much as he wished he could do more to aid his goddaughter, running Team
Rocket was the Signore’s primary duty, and he couldn't shrug off his responsibilities to play nurse to
a traumatized, sixteen-year-old girl. Or rather, he could, but he'd risk losing his own organization if
he did so, which was entirely unthinkable. Yet who else could do the job? Who else would be
appropriate and willing, and had enough time and patience to give the girl the amount of attention
she obviously needed? After all, Giovanni knew the supervising doctor well enough to know that he
rarely said anything in jest, and never joked concerning his patients. So who’d be right for the task of
keeping his goddaughter sane? Who could…?

The obvious answer hit him like a geodude to the face, and he almost wished to slap himself over his
momentary stupidity. Yet the thought made him wary nonetheless, and to the doctor, he posed the
notion worming its way into his brain. "Do you think the clone would suffice?" He almost hoped the
man would veto the idea, for the healer wasn't the only one who'd noticed the body language the
clone exhibited around Cassandra.

It seemed that the medical doctor didn't wish to meet his eyes as he said, "Given how she allows it to
be near her, and even takes its words into account, I think it would be a suitable choice – perhaps the
only one, actually, if the lack of other visitors she's had is any indication. That eevee certainly won't
be able to stop her if she does something rash, and considering the emotional bond the clone shares
with her…yes, it probably would be your best candidate. However, as her godfather, it's your
decision alone how to proceed. I merely advise you to consider it, for her sake."
However, for all his uncertainties about the proposal, Giovanni Maki knew that Doctor Yarrow was correct: there was no other appropriate candidate he could select. Having already failed atrociously at keeping his goddaughter safe within his organization, the crime lord resolved himself to do what he would to keep her from harming herself. If that meant assigning the clone to be her caretaker, so be it – she was too precious for him to lose, especially because of negligence on his part.

Yet even after the replica consented to the idea, and left with the eevee to insure that Agent Merlo's apartment was prepared for her return, anxiety niggled at the back of the Signore's mind. Ordering the medics out of the room so he could speak to the teenager in private, he responded to her inquisitive glance with a question of his own. "Cassandra, just how close are you to the clone?"

Her grey eyes, which had long been vacant in recent days, abruptly focused on his face. "...Are you trying to insinuate something?"

His eyes narrowed at her brazen tone. "Don't sass me, young woman. I merely wish to make something clear to you: I have no problem with you being its friend, or with it acting as your servant. From what I've seen, the relationship you share with it is beneficial, which is why I'll be staying with you until your recovery is complete. However, Mewtwo and you are of entirely different species, so I will not tolerate you two engaging in any...unseemly activities. In the past, I've been lenient towards how you chose to spend your spare time, but behaving inappropriately with it will have severe consequences. Is that understood?"

Understanding, and even a hint of reproach, was conveyed in the expression she donned. "...So you're forbidding me from being his lover, is that it?"

Crossing his arms over his chest, he nodded. "Precisely."

For several long moments, Cassandra could only stare at her godfather in confusion, before searing anger began to rise within her at his words. Although she viewed Mewtwo differently than any other male, and although he was the most important person in her life, she'd never actively considered doing what Giovanni was suggesting. Even before the attack, when the potential between them had been at its fullest, she'd never dreamed of experiencing carnal bliss with Mewtwo, and that hadn't changed over the last two weeks. She had, however, reevaluated the bond she shared with her friend in that time, and had concluded that her feelings for him were no longer platonic. Whenever she reminisced on the moments they'd shared, and whenever he'd lingered at her bedside, his hand around hers, a tenderness blossomed within her heart that she could neither prune back nor ignore. This affection, quiet yet powerful, had been nurtured into bloom by the solace his presence provided, had budded over the duration of the past several months, and now - like winding ivy - refused to release its grip over her. When she'd finally acknowledged this, she'd been assaulted by the potential consequences of that warmth, the good and bad alike, and these possibilities had, in turn, made Mewtwo's daily visits bittersweet for her.

On top of her general melancholy, her newfound worries had hindered her from speaking at length with him. Despite her silence, however, he hadn't been discouraged, and as she'd gazed up at him, seeing the concern within his amethyst eyes, she'd mused that what lay within her own soul - if allowed to germinate any further - could awaken if he merely whispered to her a few, short words. In the past, such a stirring would have proven unthinkable, since the expectations of society, and the expectations she placed upon herself, would have been affronted by the soulful yearning. Having those expectations imbedded within her mind, she'd refused to consider being attracted to him, even as the fibers of her being beseeched her to look past what he was to see, instead, what he could be if she offered him the chance. However, after she'd been assaulted, and after lying within that hospital bed for several days, those expectations – suddenly deemed irrelevant – had been uprooted. After seeing the way so many other humans looked at her, like a befouled thing, admitting to herself (and,
she was willing to bet, to them) how alluring she found the clone could hardly degrade her any further. Already ruined, she would ultimately consider herself fortunate if Mewtwo, who possessed far more compassion than most of the humans she knew, would be willing to embrace her tainted form. If her attraction to such a creature meant that some part of her was twisted and vile, then she'd prefer to confront and deal with it, rather than worsen her suffering by continuing to deny it.

However, even as she accepted the truth, she'd had no intentions of plunging forth and acting upon it. Instead, she simply wanted to give the matter time, and see how it would eventually work itself out. Whether she would reject or embrace the idea of sharing herself with Mewtwo was, in the end, unknown to even her. Once upon a bright, spring day, she might have been discontent with that uncertainty…but her current condition wasn't conducive to fornicating with wild abandon, at least not anytime soon. Right now, the mere thought of sex was enough to make her stomach churn, which anyone with a functioning brain could understand! Yet here Giovanni was, insinuating that she was planning to bed Mewtwo as soon as the opportunity arose. Here he was, peering down his nose at her as if she were some cheap slut, rather than his goddaughter and, more to the point, a victim of rape. His insensitivity made rage flare within her like an oil fire, and as her thoughts whirled from indignation, those flames only burned hotter. For what gave him the right to condemn her over feeling something for Mewtwo, or over anything else, for that matter? If they were to compare their sins, his would outweigh hers by several stones! And what gave him to right to imply that the clone was a senseless beast, rather than the thoughtful, caring being he was? Her guardian had barely spent any time with her friend, and had certainly never known his smile or laugh!

Furthermore, what made him think he had the right to dictate the most intimate part of Mewtwo's and her life: the people they chose to be with? He'd already decimated her childhood – did he intend to make her adult life just as miserable? After making her train under that – that monster – probably knowing the bastard's history, probably knowing the types of girls the sicko liked to pound into, how dare he order her to maintain her distance from her dearest friend! Besides her eevee, Mewtwo was the only creature who could still make her feel a hint of warmth. While she'd admit that engaging in a romantic relationship with him was improbable, for rhetoric's sake, what if kissing the clone, caressing him, and having sex with him would make her happy? After everything she'd endured because of her godfather, how could he justify forbidding her from anything that could potentially give her joy…?

As she began to tremble with outrage at the unfairness of it, she remembered the thrill of excitement she'd felt whenever she'd thought about celebrating her gradation with the clone. Before the attack, that notion had always managed to brighten her mood…and now, with the idea understandably forgotten, it reminded her that Mewtwo had been – and still was - a source of hope for her. While she didn't believe she would pursue the clone, having none of the confidence, strength, and bravery to do so, she nonetheless loathed her godfather's audacity. After all, he was not her father, and while he'd been given the right to end her life, he didn't have the right to interfere with her personal one!

Clenching her hands into fists, she opened her mouth and hissed, with shocking venom for someone who'd been a living corpse for the past two weeks, "And what if I defy your command? What if I go right ahead and fuck my best friend until neither of us can leave my apartment without limping? What would you do about it, Giovanni? Humor your goddaughter, since that's the only thing you've been able to do for me these days."

The ire and bitterness in her voice temporarily shocked the Signore, before he regained his bearings and glared at her. Stepping around the end of the bed toward her, he grabbed her shoulder with a crushing hand and snarled, "Then I will terminate the perverse relationship immediately. I will not allow your reputation to be degraded by some sordid fetish! While I would prefer to keep that animal alive and well, if you force this matter, then I'll have no other choice but to have it put down."
Her eyes widened, and even as she yearned to ask him why such an extreme measure would be taken, she already knew the answer: there was no other way for her godfather to insure that they'd be separated. After all, Mewtwo was in the process of learning how to teleport, and once he mastered the ability, no amount of restrictions placed on them both could keep them from meeting. To his credit, Giovanni seemed reluctant to consider the idea, but both he and Cassandra knew that he'd go through with it if necessary.

Seeing that she understood this, his voice softened as he murmured, "Cassandra, understand that I sympathize with your emotions. You've been brutally used and treated as subhuman, and if it had been my choice, I would have endured the pain and humiliation in your stead. But even though you've suffered terribly, it won't excuse turning to that clone for comfort. I want you to achieve great things in your life, and for that reason, I've cared for you and trained you since you were a child. Replacing you with someone else – someone whose reputation befits the role you are to play - would be far more difficult than simply recreating that pokémon. After all, its corpse would provide more than enough genetic material to manufacture dozens more of its kind. Making another from its flesh would only require time and money, and I'd be willing to sacrifice both to ensure the end of a scandal."

Releasing her shoulder, he stepped back and handed her the clothes lying on the bedside table. After she changed out of her medical gown, she could return to her apartment. Yet before he would leave and give her some privacy, he needed to confirm that she understood the gravity of the situation. Settling his gaze upon her face, he said, in faultless and professional monotone, "Now acknowledge the fact that I've given you due warning, Agent Merlo."

He saw her bite her lower lip, and as she closed her grey eyes, turning her face away, she answered, "I…I've been warned. I'll do as you've ordered, Signore."

Sighing inwardly with relief, a small smile tugged at his mouth, and turning around, he began to walk away. Before he closed the door behind him, however, he whispered, "For both of your sakes, I hope you do, my dear girl."

And as the door snicked shut, leaving Cassandra utterly alone, she clutched her fresh clothes to herself, feeling her heart pounding within her chest. Fear and sorrow mingled into a sour broth, gathering in the back of her throat, making the slick flesh tighten and ache. Before she knew it, her eyes were stinging with tears, and when the memory of Mewtwo's smile flitted within her mind, a soft, shuddering gasp escaped her at the thought of her godfather's threat. If she ever held her dearest friend within her arms, then having him ripped from her grasp would be an almost certain eventuality. The bitter irony did not escape her as she shed her medical gown, immediately pulling her own garments over her to conceal the faint shadows of old bruises and the gleaming white of new scars. For in Mewtwo's and her case, to gain one another meant losing one another, and in losing one another they would gain nothing. For unlike Belial Biancardi, the Signore of Team Rocket did not hold to the idea of equivalency, rendering any sense of fairness – at least in his actions – utterly irrelevant. Indeed, if karma could be said to exist, then Giovanni Maki probably bribed it not to bite him in the ass. Someday, perhaps, he'd know the suffering he'd inflicted onto others, but this was not that day. So for now, his goddaughter merely swallowed the emotions rising within her and left to join the creature occupying her thoughts, and tried not to wonder about what the future would bring them….
were parts of a person's life that should never be controlled. Even if the potential lover is supposedly a horrible individual, with no account praising their hidden goodness...even if the guardian merely wants to defend their treasured charge from potential danger...there are simply some boundaries they should respect. When they do more than criticize, when they do more check up on the young one, when they begin to rip the reins away from their proper owner, then they deprive their "precious person" of a fundamental, innate, and even primal right: the right to chose one's own partner, and to experience the positive and negative consequences of that choice. Even if the protector is correct about the suitor, and ultimately succeeds in their objective - of trampling on that passionate portion of the soul – neither wronged, almost lover will forget what was done. For the protected, their trust in the defender might never mend, and the esteem they placed in them will certainly no longer be held as high; and as for the rejected, while some plots might be foiled, the hearts of others might be crushed, to reform in any number of ways after that one special person, the only person who truly reached out to them, was forced to draw their hand back.

All in all, love was already messy enough without outside interference. To become involved in such a private situation, spurred by scarcely more than heresy and self-righteousness, was to invite more grave outcomes than good down the road. Psyche knew that better than most, and given Mewtwo's current situation, she was certain that he was also aware of how wrong such interventions could go. Drawing her from her thoughts, the clone told her, "By the time I learned of this conversation, it would be too late to salvage my relationship with her. However, even when I was losing the little faith I had in mankind, I convinced myself that Giovanni's harsh words had merely been said to deter her, to keep her from acting in a scandalous way. Despite catching glimpses of his true nature, despite finding his treatment of his goddaughter deplorable, I dismissed my suspicions and Cassandra's own warnings, certain that I was..." his muzzle wrinkled with disgust at where that thought lead, and after a moment, he spat, admitting, "...that I was different to him – special. And while I was both in his eyes, he viewed me as an expensive, all-purpose tool he had commissioned someone to forge, rather than as a fellow construction worker, if you will."

Later, the random thought of her roommate as a hammer-like - yet still angst-ridden - robot would reduce her to nearly hysterical giggles, but for now, she merely urged him to continue. His muzzle still wrinkled with aggravation, he elaborated on an earlier point. "Regardless, after the attack, Cassandra's and my arguments about him ceased, along with most of the other conversations we had once shared. We no longer talked about many aspects of our lives, rarely mentioning our perceived purposes, our pasts, or the ones who had made us. We returned to the site where many of those discussions had taken place, but that place was undeniably different from what it had been. Although it had physically been cleaned, it was tainted by the gruesome memories it now held...but even so, Cassandra refused to move elsewhere. So for over a month, I stayed with her there, persuading her to eat, to drink, to take her pills each day. Whenever need be, I helped her cleanse and clothe herself, and remained nearby to keep the frequent nightmares she suffered from at bay. Yet of all of my responsibilities, perhaps my most essential one was to encourage her to speak about what she was going through. Since she declined seeing a counselor, and refused to confide in anyone else, that left me as her sole source of guidance. Yet I was neither a wise nor experienced individual, so the clarity I could provide her was limited. As time progressed and she was sent on solo missions, it soon became apparent just how muddled her mind was, and how much she had changed...."

In the month that followed, Giovanni did precisely as Doctor Yarrow instructed: he began spending more time with Cassandra, sharing his dinners with her a few times per week, and permitted her to decline attending any and all of the social events taking place within Team Rocket. Having never particularly liked parties and business meetings anyhow, the teenager took full advantage of this new freedom, spending as much of her time outdoors with Shadow as possible. During these ventures to Viridian Forest, Mewtwo could be seen guarding over her whenever the gym did not require him,
and had, on more than one occasion, needed to carry his sleeping friend back to her apartment. As it was, only recently had she begun to reside comfortably within her own home again, the anxiety that overtook her each night eased by Mewtwo's company. Rather than returning to the laboratories at night, he'd taken to sleeping on a roll-out cot against the one open wall of Unit 150, his makeshift bed padded with several blankets and pillows. From there, he was simultaneously situated in front of the entranceway, capable of preventing any potential invader from making it into the main chamber, while still being the direct line of sight from Cassandra's bed. Thus, whenever she jerked awake from a nightmare, her eyelids flashing open in the murk, she soon found her gaze falling upon his resting form, and felt her anxiety melting at the soft sound of his breathing. Over time, this routine might have helped her convalesce completely…but for all the reassurance it offered, the missions she was sent on made her backtrack several steps, until it became openly apparent that Cassandra was, despite how she acted around the males in her life, becoming increasingly unstable.

If anything demonstrated her fractured mental state, it was the death toll from her most recent assignment. Over thirty individuals had been slain, with the young assassin being the sole culprit behind the slaughter. Despite ordering homicides on an almost weekly basis, Giovanni was nonetheless disturbed as he read the news report detailing the murders. After all, only one woman had been the target of his goddaughter's assignment, and now three dozen people were resting in freshly dug graves. Had she chosen to hunt down and kill everyone she could find in the area…?

When he asked for the motive behind the gory deed, his assassin had merely replied that it had made the "screaming" stop…and somehow, he was almost certain the "screaming" she was referring hadn't belonged to her victims. As she handed him her report, answering his question in a cool, emotionless monotone, he felt a shiver run down his spine. Just what kind of criminal she was turning into…?

As the rumors about the mass murder spread throughout Team Rocket, he began to hear the title his subordinates were giving her: the Archangel of Death. Given her codename, he understood where the title had originated from, but never before had it fit her so well. Not only was she ruthless during her missions, but even when she returned home, she remained frigid to those she could call her comrades…and the ones who made the mistake of slighting her were often wounded in the end. While the gangsters around her had always maintained their distance, they were now going out of their way to give her space. Yet all the same, their whispers followed her, and from what his intelligence agents could gather, most of Team Rocket considered the enigmatic Mewtwo to be her demon pet. Remembering what the creature had done to Belial Biancardi, Giovanni Maki had no doubts about the clone's devotion to the girl. His prized pokémon would probably maul anyone who even looked at Cassandra wrong, and if she were to order it to torture someone, it would probably do so within the next hour.

Considering that the teenager did nothing to unravel such suspicions, he suspected that she was intentionally trying to strike terror into their ranks. After all, even the dumbest of thugs knew not to approach a potential psychopath, and given how Cassandra seemed to want no one besides the clone near her, their fear was working to her advantage. So, as Giovanni Maki sat at his desk, his eyes resting upon the unopened report from his goddaughter's last mission, he wondered which thought unsettled him more: the one that suggested that Cassandra, who he had preened since she was six, was going out of control; the one that suspected she was premeditating extensive homicides – far beyond what he'd originally assigned - that, in effect, would be of means of isolating herself; or the one that insisted it was a mix of both, making her a ticking time bomb that could, if she were left to her own devices, detonate at any time, regardless if she was around friend or foe.

Abruptly, he was assaulted with the memory of her as a newborn infant, with her parents smiling down at her. She'd radiated peace and purity then, and now…well, now Mewtwo might be the only one who could keep her in line. For the sake of Selena's and Caleb's only child, the Signore would have to take a gamble and hope for the best. He could not intervene…and least not right now, while Cassandra was in such a fragile state, as likely to shatter completely as she was to mend….
Thus, one dreary evening, with rain splattering on the kitchen windowpanes, Mewtwo and Cassandra remained undisturbed in her bathroom. During that moment, Shadow was curled upon one of his mistress’ pillows, while the clone sat on the rim of the bleached bathtub, the warm, sudsy water whirling around his feet. Before him sat Cassandra, her legs folded up against her chest, her arms wrapped around them, her chin resting on her kneecaps. Around her naked body, the soapy waters swirled lazily, the diminishing soap bubbles forming dreamlike images across the surface of the bathwater. With a soaked washrag, impregnated with vanilla body wash, he wiped away the grit and traces of blood from her newest wounds. While he did this, she remained still and silent, not shifting a millimeter or uttering a sound as he took the showerhead from the stand above and, turning on the lukewarm spray, rinsed the shampoo and conditioner from her hair.

As the water washed over her, banishing the suds from her hair, the strands drifting down to rest against her skin, she closed her eyes, focusing on the sound of the cascading fluid. Unclothed and exposed as she was, emptying her mind of all thoughts, allowing herself to take in only the minute details of her surroundings, was the only way to make the process of bathing bearable. After her caretaker finished rinsing away the soap, she reached out to touch his arm, which had become her way of signaling her desire to leave the tub. Replacing the showerhead and opening the drain, he stepped out of the waters and onto the tiled floor, reaching into the nearby cabinet to get her a towel. Her change of clothes, already set out on the counter, remained untouched.

When he turned back to her, he saw that she'd left the draining waters as well, and was now standing in front of the sink. Approaching her, she surprised him by looking up at him and saying, in a soft and somewhat confused voice, "…Why are you doing this, Mewtwo?"

As he wrapped the white, fluffy towel around her shoulders, he mused that there were so many reasons he could give her. He could tell her that her godfather had asked him to do so, but even if the man hadn't posed the possibility, Mewtwo would still have volunteered to attend to her. He could say that he trusted no one else to treat her kindly, which they both knew was probably the case. He could confess to her that, for all the respect he had for Shadow, he didn't believe the child would be capable of stopping her from harming herself. Yet in the end, he doubted those reasons would give her comfort, and so he settled on the truth that made up their core. Brushing the wet strands of her bangs back from her face, he murmured, "…I care for you. That is all the reason I need to be here."

"I see….

Something in the ways she said those words made his brow furrow. When she glanced away from his eyes, he rested his paws upon her shoulders, able to feel the ridges of her clavicles through the cotton fabric. She did not, he was relieved to notice, shrug away his hands, but as the silence between them stretched on, he asked the question that had been bothering him for some time. "Cassandra…why have you been treating others so coldly? Even towards Giovanni, you have grown rather distant. Why is that…?"

Several moments passed before she answered him, and when she did, he found himself cursing the Signore for the second time. "…If you'd have asked him, you'd already know why. With the exception of trained doctors, my godfather always told me that the only person who can heal your hurts is yourself. This is just how he taught me to cope, and since I wasn't close to anyone else in Team Rocket anyway, rejecting them now isn't much of a loss."

He supposed he could understand her hesitance to turn to other criminals for solace, but there was more to the matter than that. Over the past month, he'd made another observation that concerned him just as much as her treatment of others, if not more. Tightening his grip on her shoulders, he asked,"Did he also say that a reassuring hand upon you could do nothing to help you heal? Is that why you refuse to be touched by them…?"
He felt her shiver, and surprising him, she leaned herself against him, her body warm and moist against his pelt. He felt her breath ripple over his chest, her exhalation quaking as fear crawled up her spine, creeping into her alto voice as she replied, "No…that's not why."

So what was her reasoning? As curiosity and concern saturated his mind, he prompted her to explain. There was a flicker of white as she bit her lower lip — a nervous gesture she'd recently gained — before she tentatively whispered to him, "Every time…every time just reminds me of him. I can feel him touching me again, forcing himself inside of me, and I… I just can't… I can't…!"

She trembled against him, trying to staunch the upset, disgusted tears beginning to well up in her eyes, but soon enough the salty, warm wetness of those tears began to saturate his fur. Yet even as she bowed her head, ashamed of showing weakness after a month had passed since her release from the hospital, Mewtwo didn't turn away from her as she began to break down. Instead, he wove his arms around her, drawing her naked, quaking form against him, and rested his muzzle upon her hair. As her fragrance filled his nose, as the warmth of her flesh radiated into his pelt, he vaguely realized that in any other situation, the close proximity between their unclothed bodies might have aroused him. Yet in this case, as the solemn, even mourning atmosphere settled around them, he suppressed any feelings of lust from stirring in his loins. As far as he was concerned, allowing himself to crave her at this moment — when she'd finally lowered her barriers to express how much she was hurting — would have been a betrayal of the trust she placed in him. Besides, having already witnessed what a man's unrestrained desire could do to her, he had no intention of doing anything that would remind her of the experience. He cared for her too much to allow such a thing….

And as he contemplated the depths of his affection, a simple truth unfolded within his soul like a paper snowflake, its unique beauty forged from dedication and loss alike. Later, he would muse that this was indeed a strange setting in which to make such a revelation: an unadorned apartment washroom, its only charm being the lingering aroma from the vanilla-scented bathing products. Yet nevertheless, it was there, standing upon the cool floor tiles with his dearest friend, his arms and tail protectively wrapped around her quivering frame, that he made his realization. He identified the emotion he'd been harboring within himself for months now, the emotion that had filled his soul until he was nearly brimming with it, its heavy, sticky warmth barely capable of being concealed and contained. Even now, he wondered if it weren't seeping from him, this impossible and unrelenting feeling which made him yearn for everything there was of her - her soul, her mind, her heart, her flesh, and all other traces of her that existed. In that bittersweet moment, he finally recognized that what he was feeling for her was the most precious, intimate, and sensual emotion known to humankind.

And that emotion, which transcended their physical shapes and current circumstances, was what her kind had named "love."

As he cradled her against him, her sobs catching in his ears, he mulled over the thought: that he, Mewtwo, the clone of mew, a shadow of life, a companion to a few, select outcasts, was in love with her. He needed no time to collect himself from shock — for he'd always known she was special to him — and calmly dissuaded the whispers of dissent rising from the depths of his brain. For even if he were to debate the matter with himself, his knew this conclusion would remain valid and unchanged, and instead chose to accept his feelings for Cassandra in silence. That was not to say he didn't experience some uncertainty. After all, romantic love was not a feeling he should be capable of feeling, especially for an adolescent human. However, its potent force was what made him long to comfort and protect her, and had nearly driven him mad when he'd found her bloodied and broken. It was enough to make his hands into those that healed, into those that killed, and continued to draw him to her, even as the knowledge that they could never be together sobered him. For despite the similarities between them - their social statuses, their outlooks on the world, their typically taciturn natures — they were of two different species, and as much as he might yearn to do so, this fact could
not be overlooked. As his heart became leaden with sorrow, another thought drifted into his brain, reminding him that even if they both chose to ignore what they were, there was something else that would keep a union between them incomplete: and that was that Cassandra, quite simply, was no longer able to endure physical intimacy anymore.

And so he began to shut the emotion away, just as he always unconsciously had, hoping to conceal it for as long as he could. Yet as he inhaled her warm, vanilla scent, aching to express what he felt for her, he found himself incapable of closing the door on them completely. To do so would wound his already scarred heart, and besides, there was one thing he needed to know before a choice could be made. In a soft, hesitant voice, he asked, "...And when I touch you, Cassandra? Do you remember him then?"

She raised her eyes to meet his, and as she formed her answer, he saw something indecipherable flicker within her grey gaze. "...No, I don't. You don't have human hands, so no...your touch doesn't disgust me."

In his heart, he was grateful to hear her say that…but only time would tell if that would change anything between them.

Above the two psychics, the moon had begun to set, mingling its cool light with the western breeze. However, neither the replica nor the vixen felt its invisible caress anymore, instead knowing only the dull ache of remembered sorrow. Tilting his head back, Mewtwo regarded the descending lunar orb, his violet eyes gleaming from its spectral glow, and from the bitterness those days had left within him. Yet of all the creatures he'd encountered during his travels, the female sitting near him could probably comprehend how he'd felt, for in essence, her story was not so dissimilar from his. After a quiet moment passed, he addressed that truth, alluding to his reason for eventually accepting her into his home.

"I am certain you understand, Psyche – you, who yearned for someone you were not supposed to take as your one and only mate. Like me, you attempted to maintain your distance, not wishing to be the cause of your partner's pain. Like me, you learned the torment of living so close to your special someone, yet still being unable to be with them, due to circumstances that were largely beyond your control. Like me, you know how that type of longing sickens the soul and body, how it pesters your mind and heart, offering no reprieve unless you make a crucial choice." And then, with a hint of steel entering his telepathic voice, he murmured, "You can either decline taking any risks, instead doing everything you can to redirect, dismantle, or simply forget what you feel for that person...or you can chose to accept those risks, doing or saying the one thing that will, for better or for worse, transform your relationship with the one you care so dearly for. And as I am certain you can surmise, although I intended to take the first option, I ultimately decided upon the second...."

Poets have often described the relationship between lovers as akin to a flame. Bringing light, energy, and heat into the lives of the individuals involved, love - like a literal fire - is capable of burning continuously if nurtured, of slowly fading into ashes over time, or of swiftly being extinguished by a variety of means. After building up the connections between them, as one might a pyramid of timber, and adjusting their own behaviors to make a potential match, they test that match to see if it can ignite the space between them. Sometimes the kindling they use flares immediately, burning through the timber while throwing the couple into a thrilling, whirlwind romance which will, more often than not, burn out just as swiftly as it had begun. But in other instances, that kindling hesitates to catch, and when it finally does, the flame spreads slowly, steadily, until it has encompassed its makers entirely without them even realizing. For Cassandra and Mewtwo, the latter analogy would prove the better fit: after a rough and stubborn beginning, their relationship had taken its time to strengthen and
warm, until it had been banked to the point where it could flare high and hot with only a bit of prodding. And perhaps it would have done so in the spring, had the attack not reduced their fire to little more than embers. By mid-June, while that undertone of glowing coals remained, signifying that the potential to reignite was still there, the only way to achieve that flare was to add a catalyst.

So when their relationship did, at that point, shift into its final, searing form, it did so with a suddenness that caught them both off guard.

On the night of that month's full moon, with the crickets chirping across the lawns, and the moths fluttering around the streetlights, Cassandra decided to visit the Team Rocket Laboratories. At that late hour, the facility was devoid of all but a skeleton staff, none of whom detected her as she made her way through the antiseptic hallways. After finding her way into the security surveillance room, whose guard had conveniently chosen that time to fetch a cup of coffee, she set the video feed to her friend's quarters into a loop, not wanting anyone – especially her godfather - to learn that she was stealing away the clone in the night. While she knew her intentions were innocent, she doubted he would believe her if she told him the truth: that she'd merely wanted to stargaze with her friend again, and maybe even play him the opus she'd composed on her viola. Having returned to orchestral music for therapeutic reasons, the newest piece she'd created was a gentle, soulful tune, and one that she dearly wanted Mewtwo to hear. Having made it specifically with him in mind, she privately hoped it would adequately express her gratitude to him. Without him, these last three months would have proven unbearable, and she was certain she wouldn't be functioning right now if not for him. While she was still far from alright, and there were days when she needed to repress the urge to scream and destroy everything within arm's reach, she had at least regained some level of self-control.

The fact that she'd become slightly more stable was why Mewtwo wasn't staying with her every night. Her godfather figured that as long as she wasn't at risk of hurting herself or her pet (as if Shadow was ever at risk. Her furniture, yes, but her beloved eevee? To quote one of the imported agents, "not a snorunt's chance in hell," whatever the fuck a snorunt was), there was no need for his prized pokémon to be "sleeping over," as he put it. Cassandra had wanted to not-so-respectfully disagree with his assessment, for while she'd readjusted to daily life as an agent for Team Rocket – her missions had given her little choice in the matter – the nights she spent alone contained a special brand of horror for her. While she wouldn't compare her friend to a reliable guard dog, she did feel… safe…when he was nearby, and in his absence, her paranoia and nightmares returned to their original potency. She was lucky to get four hours of sleep a night, and while the drugs Dr. Yarrow had given her helped to some degree, the reassuring presence of the clone proved far more effective.

That was part of the reason she was awake at this hour: she'd spent the last several tossing and turning in bed, and had finally given up on resting entirely. Instead, she hoped to make the remaining hours of the twilight into something of a respite. By sharing this time with Mewtwo, enjoying some music and the stars, surely she would gain some amount of peace…? Even if he chose to use that time to brood, which had become his habit lately (presumably because he couldn't watch over her like he used to), she nonetheless wanted him to accompany her tonight. As she snuck into the quarters where her companion was, she found him standing under the main chamber's skylight, the moon above casting a ghostly glow upon the armor encasing him. Hearing her footsteps, his helmet tilted upwards as he lifted his head to watch her approach. He said nothing, neither greeting her nor asking why she was even there, which momentarily perplexed her. In the following seconds, he confused her further by shifting back when she came within a few steps of him, as if he were uncomfortable with her proximity. However, this theory didn't compute; after all, this was the creature she'd trained in close-combat exercises, and who'd held her naked body to his on more than one occasion.

Dismissing herself as the probable cause of his discomfort, she immediately assigned blame to the metal suit he wore. While there were thin cushions on the insides of the plates, it couldn't be
comfortable, and quietly chastising him for not shucking it off sooner, she closed the distance between them and began removing the armor herself. Despite how he shifted back, she nonetheless caught his arms, undoing the latches of the first forearm guard, then the next, and soon had set both on the concrete floor. When she straightened, she ran her fingertips along the line of his jaw to find the best place to grip the edges of the helmet, and after removing the headgear from him, placed it beside the forearm protectors. Glancing at his face, she noted that he had donned an almost...was it bored?...expression, which neither encouraged nor protested against her actions. If telepathy had been amongst her psychical skills, she would have realized he was actually arguing with himself. He was debating which option would have the worse consequences: fleeing and quite possibly angering or hurting her, or staying and being tempted by her as she essentially undressed him. When she undid the clasps and unhooked the wires at his sides and shoulders, he remained undecided, and tensed as her fingers brushed over his torso when she lifted away the chest plate and shoulder guards from him.

He believed the word for this experience was *tantalizing*. The skin beneath his light fur *tingled* with her feather light touches, rendering his breath shallow from both pleasure and his frantic attempts not to purr. Gritting his teeth, he reassured himself with the thought that this process would be over soon, and she wouldn't even be in front of him for the next part. She would have to circle behind him to undo the...wait, what was she doing? Why was she kneeling down before him like that? In the following seconds, he distantly felt tickling sensations as she removed the anklets – *distantly* because what he was mainly experiencing in that moment was the feeling of blood rushing to the opposite ends of his body. However, when she leaned forward, close enough that strands of her hair began to cling to the pelvic armor from static, her hands reaching to his waist, Mewtwo acted.

Placing his paws upon her shoulders, he shoved her away frantically, his heart almost palpitating at her nearness of her mouth to his groin, regardless of the sheet of metal between them. He was painfully aware that if he didn't end this now, while he still retained some level of self-restraint, that he would begin responding to her in ways that would - at best - only confuse and distress her. Despite how tranquil and even normal she sometimes seemed, despite that she was beginning to regain her feisty personality, despite how her smiles were slowly strengthening, he understood what everyone else preferred to ignore: that she was not the same woman she had been, and was certainly not okay. Having consoled her after countless nightmares and violent fits, the last one being as recent as three days ago, he knew that even the slightest reminder of what she'd experienced was enough to render her inane.

Ultimately, there was only one reason why she could touch him and be touched by him without quivering with revulsion – and that was the perfect trust she had in him. She trusted him to never hurt her or violate her, to never put her in a situation where she could be hurt or violated, and if she were to ever discover how *desperately* he *yearned* for her, she would be lost. She would no longer have anyone she could rely on, and would likely relapse into despair upon remembering all the times she'd been vulnerable before him. As she currently was, still healing from the result of another male's desire for her, it was wrong and immoral for him to want her as he did, the fact that she was a human aside! Yet no matter how wretched it was of him, he yearned for the feel of her hands against him, for the feel of her mouth pressed tenderly to his, for the feel of her lovely body stirring in his arms. Because unlike the monster who'd dreamed of her because she was the object of his lusts, Mewtwo lusted for her because she was the woman of his dreams. No matter how scarred her soul and her flesh now was and might yet become, no matter that she wasn't and would never again be the same, fiery female who'd taught him so many important lessons, she was *Cassandra*, and to him, that name had transformed into a synonym for everything that could ever matter to him. So he would do anything, say anything, give anything, if only he could keep her safe, and – someday – ensure that she could feel happiness again.

If that meant maintaining some distance between them, he would do so, no matter how he ached for
While he was arriving at that conclusion, Cassandra was sprawled out on the concrete floor, stunned at how the clone had pushed her away. She couldn't understand it - why he had done that? Belatedly, she remembered that he'd been acting moody around her quite a bit lately, never seeming to want to stay around her for extended periods of time. Had she been doing something wrong? Whatever it had been, tonight had apparently been the final straw, for rather than simply avoiding her, he'd now outright repelled her, as if she weren't...wait, was that it? Did he see her differently than he used to, not as a friend, but as something else, something...much less valuable to him? Somewhere along the line, had he wearied of taking care of her, the damaged and dirty rape victim, and had simply decided that enough was enough? Had he decided that as soon as she was able to live on her own, he would calmly and quietly dismiss himself from her life? As she recalled what she'd originally travelled here for – the stars and the song – her fingernails scraped against the cement beneath her, her innards feeling as though they'd been scooped out with a giant spoon.

Rising to her feet shakily, she gave him one momentary, lost look, and whispered, "Mewtwo, why...?"

Hearing how faint and sad her voice sounded, alarm lanced through him painfully. Did she not understand the type of response she'd been provoking with her actions...? If that were so, then perhaps it would be better if she returned to her apartment for the night; at least that way, he would have some time to regain his composure. Settling on that course, he began to turn away and said, "Leave this place and return home, Cassandra. Whatever it was you wished for us to do, we can attend to it some other time.-"

"Some other time? What about now, Mewtwo? Why can't we just be together right now?" With each question, her voice became increasingly shrill and frantic. There were tears gathering in her eyes when she lifted her head, exposing her contorted expression of anger, confusion, and most of all, fear. Already speared with alarm, the clone felt as if the point were being twisted in cruelly. Yet before he could ask her why she was acting this was, she nearly yelled, "The last time we had this conversation, 'some other time' never came, remember?"

His brows knit together in bewilderment. When had they had this discussion before? Stepping towards her, he murmured, "Cassandra, what conversation are you refer-?"

Before he'd even finished his inquiry, she was shouting at him with raw and searing words – words which were as difficult for her to speak as they were for him to hear. "I wanted you to come with me to that goddamned graduation!" she began, her hands clenched into fists and shaking at her sides. "I wanted you to be there, but didn't know how to tell you that! But you said we'd celebrate some other time, just the two of us, and I looked forward to that when I went to sleep that night. I kept thinking that even though you weren't there, whatever you were planning would be so much better than if you had been. So I was happy and excited and then...."

At that point her arms flew up, wrapping themselves over her chest, her fingernails digging into her upper arms as she rambled on, "...and then he came and forced me down and shoved himself inside me, and you weren't there when I needed you to be there! I called for you, begged you to make him stop, but instead you came too late. You found me broken and filthy and you forgot all about our plans. And I know, I know why you forgot then, but I don't want this time to be forgotten too! Not when I've been trying so hard to get better, so you won't ever look at me like the rest of them do! I don't want you to think I'm garbage too, but –," she clenched her eyes shut, unable to bear seeing his face as she uttered her next thought, "but if you already do, then just lie to me about it! Lie to me and pretend I'm worth something to you and just stay with me. I can handle anything else, but please don't leave me. Please, Mewtwo, I - I don't want to be alone again!"
Her slender frame and alto voice were shaking hard by the time she finished, and as silence fell between them, the replica felt as if his heart were being crushed. Having once known the bitter ache of loneliness quite well, he comprehended the toll it could eventually have on someone afflicted with it. Yet unlike the clone, who'd only spent a matter of months "alone," his companion had experienced years of having no one to turn to, neither to confide in nor receive something as simple yet profound as an embrace. The young woman crumbling before him was the result of that isolation, and unable to tolerate it, Mewtwo stepped forward. He reached out to her, gently tilting her chin up with a paw, making her watering, grey eyes meet his amethyst one. As he contemplated what he should say to her, he decided to focus on reassuring her, rather than addressing every part of what she'd said. Although there was obviously much more that needed to be discussed, soothing her was his foremost priority. The rest would simply have to wait—for now, he would do what he could to calm her.

When he spoke, he did so in a steady, yet gentle voice. "Why do you believe that I no longer care for you? That I am planning to go where you are not? How could either be a remote possibility in your mind? Since this year began, everything I have done has been for your sake, so do not doubt my sincerity now. You are my dearest friend, and I will not abandon you."

Following his proclamation, relief and hope tinged her aura, and her trembling abated. However, after she considered his words for a moment, her overwhelming response was to become even more confused. Lifting her hands to wipe her tears away, she sniffed and said, "But— but if that's true, then why have you been acting so strangely? Tell me so I can understand what's going on with you!"

While she wasn't directly questioning his feelings for her, those feelings were ultimately the reason he'd been acting differently around her. So he was now confronted with a dilemma: unless he decided to evade answering or simply lie to her - both of which she might be able to sense and, from there, completely foil - his only response could be to confess to her. Just as before, a sizeable portion of his brain considered this an unthinkable option, given the high likelihood that their relationship would be ruined if he told her the truth. However, even as that part of his mind demanded he remain silent, another part brushed and infected his thoughts with a single image: of Cassandra breaking down before him, weakened by the suspicion that he was planning to leave her. While her dread of being alone again could explain away her pleas for him to stay, the rest of what she'd said indicated something else entirely. Yes, as her closest friend, it made sense for her to value his company above those of strangers, for her to view him differently than she did everyone else, for her to trust and care for him far more than any other. Perhaps it was even unavoidable that she had singled him out so exclusively, and implied nothing about how she felt for him. Yet he couldn't reason away the sense of longing, the sense of need he received from her words, which made him wonder to himself if she'd ever strictly branded him as only a friend.

Whenever he'd looked back on the moments they'd shared, mostly those from before she'd been broken, he'd mulled over their exchanges, discovering possible hints that she might be as attracted to him as he was to her. Perhaps she'd even had an inkling about how alluring she was to him, but after the attack, whatever confidence she'd had in his interest in her – regardless of whether it was platonic or romantic – had been undermined. She doubted everyone now, her fellow agents, her godfather, her best friend, and perhaps most of all, herself. The only one she had any margin of faith in was Shadow, but considering the kit regarded her as his mother, and would never - and could never - do anything to harm her, this came as no surprise. However, while both the eevee and the clone of mew were pokémon, Mewtwo was different in that he was a humanoid with a human-esque soul. After enough time had passed, she'd stopped seeing him as an anthropomorphic monster and more and more as just another person. Ultimately, that he looked like the beast from that old French fairytale proved inconsequential to her heart, and only remained daunting to her mind.

However, as admirable as her transcendent view of him was, it had its own price: for like any other
human, she doubted he would choose to stay beside her for very long. No matter that the thought of departing seemed ludicrous to him, and no matter how many times he might tell her that, without knowing the source of his loyalty, her dread over the possibility would endure and magnify over time. Her confidence in him would remain frail, and even when she smiled at him, she would continue to wonder when he’d leave her behind. After all, she didn’t know what anchored him to her, didn’t know that his fiercest wish was to remain near her – how could she when he hadn’t told her? Despite his tender vows and consolations, he hadn’t spoken those three precious words to her, nor dared show her the extent of his desires. He’d feared such actions would disturb her, would cause her to shun him, and yet…what if they didn’t? What if she yearned for him in the same way he did for her, and would welcome his affections? Wasn’t there a chance that his confession could – rather than tear them apart - make her realize that she never needed to be alone again, unless she herself craved such solitude?

As he felt himself teetering on the precipice of indecision, he asked himself a question: dare he take the risk and find out what would happen?

In that moment, she called out his name, drawing him from his escalating thoughts. Lowering his gaze to her face, he saw worry and frustration etched there, his lengthy silence having only perturbed her more. If he didn’t answer her soon, she might very well curse him or flick him on the nose, either of which would startle him as much as they would a carefree, devoted puppy. Warming somewhat from amusement at the thought, he felt that warmth spread as he took her in: her dark, glossy hair, which was streaked with the moonlight from above; her light bronze skin, so smooth beneath his fingertips; her pale grey eyes, shining and soft with tenderness; her supple body and the luminous aura surrounding it, the language of both telling him that she was comfortable with – and perhaps even craved - his closeness. Within his mind’s eye, he saw flickers of the memories he shared with her, the moments haphazardly arranged, with none of the following the rules of chronology or similar content. Yet all of these details combined formed a picture of them, of him fiercely loving her and her quite possibly loving him in return. And as he viewed that picture, he asked himself another question: was being with her, was doing everything he could to heal her, worth the risk of losing her?

The answer was a resounding “yes.” All at once, he felt himself giving in to her and everything he felt for her, and damning the consequences, he drew her against him and committed a very human act of affection.

He pressed his mouth to hers, and murmured, "I love you, Cassandra."

And for a moment, he allowed himself to be lost in that kiss, knowing it might be the only one he would ever share with her. He savored the pleasure of the tender contact, savored the softness of her lips against his, savored the sweetness of them as the tip of his tongue darted out for a small taste. When she whimpered in surprise, tensing in his arms, he desperately flung down the shields around his aura, yearning for her to understand that his affections were sincere. As his adoration, devotion, warmth, passion, and desire all washed over her, his partner extended her empathic senses – honed from the countless lessons they had shared - and found them genuine. Discovering this, Cassandra felt herself begin to melt, even as a tight, icy knot of fear formed in her stomach. He wanted her…her treasured friend wanted her, and she didn't know if she could give him what he craved. Even as her soul reveled in the blissful, wondrous sensation of being embraced and gently kissed by the one who meant so much to her, her anxiety grew and gained a burly, familiar form, clothed in burnt orange: Giovanni. Although the idea of being intimate with anyone, even her precious Mewtwo, was terrifying, her godfather's threat frightened her far more. He'd threatened to have the clone killed if this very thing happened, and for a few seconds, she tore her mouth away, mumbling that they shouldn't be doing this - not couldn't, they both quickly noticed, but shouldn’t - and soon found her lips being captured by Mewtwo again, who murmured that what others thought about them was irrelevant. He only wished to know what she thought of this, because after longing for her for
months now, he wasn't certain if he could rebury his feelings. He would certainty attempt to do so, if that was what she wanted, but…damn it all, he ached to be with her. Was that so incredibly wrong of him…?

Feeling him trembling against her, Cassandra's concerns about her godfather faded from her mind, to be recalled some other time. As they parted under the skylight, the feel of one another lingering upon their mouths, it was Mewtwo alone who occupied her thoughts. He was awaiting a response from her, awaiting a sign of being accepted or rejected as her potential lover…but in the end, no matter how afraid Cassandra might be of what could happen, she also knew she couldn't stand to be without the clone - especially not after what they'd just shared. Whispering to him that it wasn't wrong at all, she inhaled a quaking breath, resolved herself to press forward with him, and moved to give him her response. She leaned upwards, curled her arms around his necks, and then drew his mouth down onto hers, savoring the sensation of kissing him hungrily….

And there was a sense of growing hunger within both of them, somewhat unfamiliar, yet recognizable nonetheless. During their first meetings together, there had been flashes of fire between them, fueled by boiling blood and dealt with through furious violence. As time had drawn on, the heat between them had cooled to a comfortable warmth, but now as they clutched at each other, drawing their mouths apart only to take in quick gasps of much-needed oxygen, that heat returned, spreading down their gullets and seeping outwards to suffuse their flesh. With a low moan, Mewtwo slipped his tongue past her lips to explore her mouth, circled one of his paws over the small of her back, the other entangling itself within her hair. He heard her fingernails scrape over the metal plate over his back, and soon after felt her toned arms drift downwards, her hands fumbling at the last clasps of his armor. Having begun the process of removing the armor from him for entirely innocuous reasons, she was now doing so because the bulky metal was uncomfortable for both of them at present. As the pelvic armor fell to the concrete noisily, the clone reluctantly drew back from her, casting an irritated glance over his shoulder and pulling the fused segments of vertebral armor away with his telekinesis, tossing the extensive backing aside as soon as his tail was free of the metal band at its base. When it crashed to the floor just as loudly as the other piece, Cassandra winced and made the universal gesture to be quiet, placing her index finger upon her lips.

Giving her an amused look, he stepped back towards her, wrapping his arms around her and pressing another hot kiss against her mouth. Largely starved of any sort of affection touch, he found the feel of her lips moving against his, of her tongue caressing his own, of her breath across his muzzle to be quite addictive, and vaguely wondered how the rest of her would feel and taste. At some point, his kisses strayed, moving over the line of her jaw, brushing across her throat, nestling in the crook of her neck. As she moaned in mingled surprise and pleasure, he clutched her tighter to him, able to feel the gentle curves of her body against his front through her thin, summer clothing. At the pleasant pressure, he felt her fingernails bite into his shoulders, and heard her mumble his name and curse. Nipping at her left jugular vein, he murmured, "...Tell me when to stop, and I will obey you."

In the end, she never told him to.

After a minute or so more of standing in that chamber, they decided they wanted to spend the rest of the morning somewhere else – preferably, in Cassandra's far more comfortable apartment. Quickly reassuring her that he'd mastered his ability to teleport, the clone transported them back to her home, the both of them materializing at her bedside. While the unsettling feeling of vertigo and winter cold passed over them, momentarily cooling their growing lusts, after a bit of shivering in each other's arms, they began to resume their activities. Had Shadow happened to be there when they arrived, they might have ceased their amorous behavior immediately, since neither of them found the thought of having an audience – especially not one consisting of a child – particularly arousing. Fortunately for them, the kit was currently wandering the base, having predicted that his "parents" might be
wanting some time alone that night, if for an entirely different reason than the current one. In any case, the little eevee was spared the sight of both of them stumbling and falling into the bed, practically drunk on their newfound intimacy. After Cassandra shucked off her shoes and socks, their legs became entangled, their fingers trailed over one another, and the clone eventually, hesitantly, slid his paws beneath her shirt, sweeping his palms over her stomach, her ribs, her sides, her spine, feeling the muscles beneath her silky skin coil and loosen. There were instances when his caresses made her squeal with laughter, his fingers unintentionally tickling her, and finding the sound delightful, he memorized those spots for future reference.

After awhile she sat up, pulling the shirt over her head and setting it aside, and shivered as she saw his eyes darken with desire. Drawing her back down to him, he kissed her down her collarbone, brushed the implant in the left side of her chest, and after receiving no determent from her, nuzzled at her breasts. He heard her whimper at that, felt her nipples hardening through her black bra, and continued to move downwards, trailing his mouth between her ribs, across her stomach, over her abdomen. When he reached her waist, her hands came to cradle his face, and when she whispered his name, he moved over her, kissing her mouth again. As her hands began to wander over him, his fingertips tracing the ridges of the boney armor over his chest, shoulders, and upper back, his palms rubbing down his ribs, stomach, and midriff, he found himself purring softly, the skin beneath his fur burning wherever she'd touched. When her hands fell away just short of his waist, he nearly groaned with disappointment, but then heard the distinct sound of a belt being undone and a zipper going down. As he felt her shifting beneath him, shoving her jeans down her legs, the denim garment soon little more than a wrinkled bundle at their feet, his eyes widened while his pupils narrowed into slits. He glanced down to find her staring up at him, nervous, anxious, but also very certain about what she'd just done. As she trailed her bare legs against his, one of her knees brushing between his legs, he felt his groin tighten, and mumbling a faint, unintelligible curse, he settled himself over her and began kissing her ravenously.

He couldn't seem to satisfy his hunger for her, and while he knew how he was supposed to be satiated, he was torn over venturing that far. On one hand, the thought of mating with her was something so sublime that he'd hesitated to even dream about it. To consider what it might be like would have only haunted him, but now that they seemed to be heading that way, he craved it dearly. He wanted to make love with her, to experience all of her and claim her as his own. He wanted to know how it felt to move inside of her, to make her keen and quiver with bliss, to find rapture with her as they brought each other to climax. And he knew they could do so if she let him in, for despite their inexperience and somewhat awkward movements against one another, they had always been good together in everything else, and were most definitely sexually compatible. Their currently aroused states - flushed and sweaty and panting – proved that they were quite capable of stimulating one another. Yet no matter how sensual and exciting their activities were, no matter how her bra was soon discarded so he could access her bare breasts, he couldn't simply take that as an invitation to pull her panties off and thrust himself inside her.

That he'd gotten this far with her was a miracle in and of itself. He'd scarcely expected her to return his first kiss, and had never dared imagine that they'd soon after find themselves intertwined in her bed. At every wandering caress and impassioned kiss, at every advance they'd made in exploring one another, he'd expected her to demand they stop for now, and simply content themselves with cuddling beneath the sheets. Yet here they were, clutching one another close as their hips ground together, their swollen genitals separated by little more than a measly scrap of cotton. Here she was, writhing in his arms and gasping with delight, seemingly unafraid of having a sexual encounter not even four months after being raped. He couldn't understand it – did her trust in him simply run that deep? While it was an appealing thought for him to consider, even he feared that he might lose control and accidentally hurt her during sex. So why was she allowing this? Wasn't she frightened…?
With a sigh, he drifted down her scarred yet lovely body, listening to the sounds she made as he stroked and suckled her as he craved. He circled his tongue around her dark nipples, needing her to enjoy this experience as much as he was - because if she didn't, then he would be no better than the man who’d violated her. His expression contorting at the thought, he buried his face against her breastbone, able to feel her quickened heartbeat against his cheek. Soon feeling her fingers traveling down the back of his skull, down his second neck, he spoke the question pestering his mind. "Do you intend to bare all of yourself to me tonight, Cassandra?"

Her caresses paused, and after a few quiet moments, in which only the sounds of their breathing carried through the apartment, she murmured into his ears, "Yeah…yeah, I do, Mewtwo."

Hearing her confirm his suspicion only made him harden further, and trailing a paw down her side, he asked, "But why…? After what you suffered through, I cannot understand why you would...."

When she didn't respond, he glanced up at her, and was surprised to find that she was blushing. Shifting to wrap his arms around her waist, to press his forehead to hers, he prompted her to explain herself, going so far as to take a nibble at her ear to provoke a reaction. As she groaned and shrugged her shoulder up to make him stop, she admitted, "I…well I actually have four reasons why, two of which I'm not telling you until later. Number one," she began, encircling one leg around his hips and making his brain short-circuit, "is that you'd probably rather castrate yourself than hurt me in any way. Knowing that, I'm not worried about you doing something I won't like. As for number two," she continued on, pausing to plant a kiss upon his shoulder, her tone getting softer as she spoke, "I…need to confront what happened to me. I need to be brave and work through it, and with you, I…I know I'll be safe. You'll help me through this, so I just…I want to get lost in this with you."

His eyes softened as she murmured that to him, and forgetting that she was holding two other reasons back, he rested a paw against her face and kissed her, slow and sweet….

In the following minutes, their explorations of one another grew even more intimate, with Cassandra's panties and her collar soon discarded, rendering her just as naked as him. As her wings materialized, Mewtwo lowered his muzzle and nipped her pinions, his fingers preening through her feathers gently, his touch sending tingles of pleasure throughout the limbs. His partner soon began to itch for more, and pulling him down so he was flush against her, she tilted her head back with a moan, astonished by how good this was making her feel. Yet should that truly have been any surprise to her…? Mewtwo knew precisely how precious the gift she was giving him was, and was determined to treat her body with the utmost care and tenderness. He slowly drifted over her, learning every nook and hollow and abrasion she possessed, sighing against her as she did the same in return. She kissed his neck, his chest, his stomach, her hands traveling over his hips, this thighs, the base of his tail, feeling as much as hearing him purr in response to her touch. She was able to make him stir with need and ardor, and this power to make him thirst for her, to make his tremble like a priest before an angel of God, exhilarated her in a way no battle with him ever had. After a few more moments of relishing one another, swaying and running their bodies together, the aches they were experiencing became nearly unbearable. No matter how anxious she was about continuing on, no matter how she flinched slightly as she felt his hard length brush her, she gasped for him to keep going because…this was what she wanted. With anyone else, she wouldn't be able to stand it, but with him…with him she was melting, her inner thighs moist from how much she was craving him. She wanted to clutch him to her, wanted to make him yowl with pleasure, wanted to know what it would feel like to be one with him….

Peering up at him through the murk, she found his eyes smoldering like blue embers, his pupils constricted into mere slits from the sweet agony they were experiencing. Moaning at the sight and closing her eyes, she smothered his mouth with hers and wrapped her legs around his hips, drawing his unsheathed member against her nook. As a hint of pleasure washed up into her core, she dug her
fingernails into the small of his back, and biting back a gasp, she whispered, "Now, Mewtwo… please…"

Instinct and desire made him grind against her, the blissful sensation making it difficult for him to form coherent thoughts. While he'd felt aroused by her before, these sensations were utterly new to him, and could quite easily muddle his brain. Yet even so, he managed to keep himself from entering her then, determined to ask her one last time, "…Are you certain?"

When her eyelids drifted open, he saw that the pale grey irises had darkened to the color of mercury. While there was some apprehension there, desire and determination overrode it, and lifting a hand to cusp his cheek, she murmured her third reason for letting him in. "Yes…I want memories of you inside me, not him anymore, so…be with me. Just be with me."

That was all he needed to hear to continue, and hushing her with a searing kiss, he wrapped his left arm beneath her back, his right paw lifted one of her knees, and he moved himself forward. Slowly, surely, he sank himself into her, groaning at the ecstasy that raced through him as she enveloped him, the flesh of her sex hot and wet and silky around him. For Cassandra, however, the feeling of him entering her didn't have the same purity to it. Although some satisfaction rushed through her at being filled by him, the itch of lust beginning to fade, discomfort and a hint of nausea swept through her, making her grimace and go limp in his arms. She flashed back to how it felt to be violated, of anguish suffusing her sex and shrieks of protest on her lips, and felt tears pooling in her eyes. Yet as Mewtwo's worried voice carried through the memory, drawing her back to reality, she tore herself from that experience and focused herself entirely on feeling him instead. She refused to let her teacher, dead and gone, ruin this moment for her. And so, inhaling a quaking breath, she stared up at the clone, noticing that his brows were furrowed with concern and uncertainty, and gave him a weak smile of reassurance. She would be alright, so long as he kept moving and drove that demon from her being. Nuzzling her cheek, he nodded and obeyed the urges rising within him, drawing himself back and plunging forward, repeating the motion in long, unhurried thrusts, shivering at the heavenly sensation of moving himself deep within her.

As he moved in and out of her, she began to clung to him, concentrating on the primal sounds he was making and the trace of pleasure beginning to suffuse her sex. Through the echoes of remembered pain, it began to gather, intensify, and spread through her core, and soon she found herself actively seeking to strengthen it. Whimpering at the unprecedented, glorious feeling, she began to rock her hips against his, driving him further into her core, making his pelt rub against the bud of her deliciously. Kissing at her hair, her face, her neck, her chest, he panted against her skin, growing evermore confident that she was experiencing the same growing pleasure as he was, and felt the pace quicken between them. Without conscious thought on his part, he lowered his mental shields, exposing every emotion and sensation he was feeling to her empathic senses…and soon enough, she followed his lead. In the moments that followed, they trembled and gasped together, basking in the superimposed feelings of their partner's bodies, of their lover's mutual ardor, their souls mingling just as their physical beings were. Writhing against one another, they forfeited themselves over their lovemaking, allowing their union to take them wherever it willed. Their grips on each other tightened as they moved together, riding the waves of the ecstasy and need, the desperation and pressure within them mounting, their motions bringing them to the precipice of rapture. They reached their peaks soon after, and one after the other, they tumbled over the edge….

Enfolding Mewtwo in her wings, Cassandra arced her spine as her core convulsed, sending charges of pleasure racing throughout her body, making every cell of her tingle. Crying out his name, she murmured the words he'd longed to hear, giving him her fourth and final reason for agreeing to be his. Mewtwo's heart, already brimming with impassioned joy, overflowed in that moment, and clutching her firmy to him, he thrust into the one he loved one last time, and groaned at the sweetness of release. In the shock of that newfound height, he sank his teeth into the curve of her
neck, breaking the outermost layer of skin, drawing a trickle of blood into his mouth. After realizing what he'd done, he lapped at the superficial mark, apologized for losing control, and replayed her confession in his mind. When her amused, breathy laughter began to resound in his ears, he found himself purring in response, for as they began to bask in the afterglow of their lovemaking, the happiness he felt was complete.

After he withdrew from her, and they sank into the bedcovers to catch their breaths, Mewtwo pressed his forehead to hers and stroked at her flushed cheek gently. Beneath his fingertips, he could feel the moisture of her perspiration and her tears, and nuzzling her cheek, he whispered, "Say that again, Cassandra…?"

He so wanted to hear her murmur those words once more, to confirm that he hadn't heard her wrongly the first time. With an understanding smile, she reached upwards, stroked his muzzle, and brushing a kiss to his mouth, she breathed out, "…I love you, wildcat."

And the smile he gave her then, tender and filled with wonder, would remain one of the most beautiful sights she would ever witness.

Eventually, the couple managed to find their way to tranquil dreams, drifting off together beneath the blankets. Hours later, when the goldenrod light of the morning sun poured through the kitchen window, the unseen yet noisy birds chirping their greeting to the dawn, Cassandra awoke to the feeling of a cold, wet nose being pressed to hers, and opened her eyes to find Shadow's face a matter of centimeters from her. Seeing that she was conscious, he drew back, waved his bushy tail once, and mewed that it was time for breakfast. Blinking at him, she vaguely noted that his big, dark eyes were twinkling at her, as if he were amused by what he was seeing. Feeling the arms and tail wrapped around her, her lover having spooned up against sometime during the night, she merely snaked an arm out from underneath the covers and scratched the eevee behind the ears. As he mewedled with delight, she smiled and mumbled that he'd have to go eat crickets for his meal or something, since she, quite frankly, didn't want to get out of bed. For the first time since being taken in by Giovanni, she felt utterly content and relaxed, and didn't want to disrupt the peaceful atmosphere for anything. In response to this, the kit merely licked her cheek and jumped down from the bed, determined to find something to fill his pining stomach.

That discovering her in bed with Mewtwo didn't seem to bother him…well, she felt gladdened and grateful to him for that. However, she knew his reaction – or lack thereof – was likely to be a unique case. Having seen how they interacted in private, he'd gained insight into the nature of their relationship, and had been wordlessly supporting them over the last several months. Knowing how much they cared for one another, knowing how mutually beneficial their relationship was, and having long regarded them as his parental figures, seeing them like this seemed acceptable enough to him. However, his opinion was not likely to be shared by anyone else, and especially not by the one who'd already made his thoughts on the matter clear.

Displeasingly enough, her godfather (for it could only be him, since no one else had the gall to call her at this hour) chose that point to call her on her apartment phone. As the landline began to chime, she buried her face into her mint-scented pillow with a groan, and then slipped out of Mewtwo's comfortable arms, giving his sleeping form a regretful, backward glance as she did so. Grabbing her bathrobe from the nearby chair, she threw it on and tied it, and tried – mostly unsuccessfully - to comb her hair flat with her fingers. Although she was barely presentable right now, not answering the phone would automatically make the man suspicious, and moreover, the ringing would wake Mewtwo if she didn't pick up soon. Stepping over to the machine, whose video-cam was angled to face into the kitchen, she picked the receiver off its cradle, and forced herself not to scowl back as her godfather's glowering face was transmitted over the screen.
Unsurprisingly, he didn't wish her a good morning or the like, but merely demanded to know where the clone had gone, asking if 'it' was with her.

And with an equal lack of ceremony, she lied and hung up.

When she returned to bed, sitting on the edge of the mattress, she saw that Mewtwo had awoken, and was now peering up at her with contemplative eyes. Leaning forward, she trailed a hand from his collar to his abdomen, and as her touch drifted back to his chest, he took her palm and pressed a soft kiss to it. "...I understand."

If they were to remain together, then no one could learn about them. This fledgling romance of theirs would be their secret, would be nurtured within the security of Unit 150, and would be a union that might take more than lies for them to defend. Yet both of them were willing to do whatever was necessary to keep each other close, because - as the saying went - there were things in life that were worth any risk to gain and hold onto. And love, at least where they were concerned, was definitely one of those precious things.

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Author's Note: Below is an alternative ending to this chapter, which I wrote for laughs. You don't have to read it, because it's not canon compliant to this story, but if you want something lighthearted, you might like it.

Sincerely,

WiseAbsol

Alternative Scene: Do You Think About that Often?

He believed the word for this experience was tantalizing. The skin beneath his light fur tingled with her feather light touches, rendering his breath shallow from both pleasure and his frantic attempts not to purr. Gritting his teeth, he reassured himself with the thought that this process would be over soon, and she wouldn't even be in front of him for the next part. She would have to circle behind him to undo the…wait, what was she doing? Why was she kneeling down before him like that? In the following seconds, he distantly felt tickling sensations as she removed the anklets – distantly because what he was mainly experiencing in that moment was the feeling of blood rushing to the opposite ends of his body. However, when she leaned forward, close enough that strands of her hair began to cling to the pelvic armor from static, her hands reaching to his waist, Mewtwo acted.

Placing his paws upon her shoulders, he shoved her away frantically, his heart almost palpitating at her nearness of her mouth to his groin, regardless of the sheet of metal between them. In a strained voice, he growled, "Cassandra, explain to me what you think you are doing. Now, preferably."

She blinked her wide, grey eyes up at him, and gaped at his panicked outburst…and ultimately, her surprised look only further degraded his self-control. "What? After that clasp is undone, you can step out of the rest of that over-elaborate, bulky suit. Why you're wearing it at one in the morning is baffling enough, but didn't you also tell me once that you hated this thing? So why are you fussing
How could she possibly not know what was alarming him? Did she honestly believe he was asexual? Depressed by the thought, he supposed that he should explain to her that he was, in fact, a sexually mature male, before the situation completely got out of hand. Gritting his teeth, he said, "While it pleases me that you are once again capable of teasing me, I would prefer it if you not tease a certain other portion of my being with the nearness of your mouth. So if you would please get off your knees, I would greatly appreciate it."

For a few lengthy seconds, Cassandra merely stared at him…before, almost comically, she flushed crimson and turned her face to the side. Unable to meet his eyes, she eventually regained her ability to speak, and when she did, only made matters worse by mumbling, "Oh…so, um…do you think about that often?" Her adorable shyness in that moment made his mind go blank, to the point where he didn't notice the corners of her lips tugging upwards into a wicked grin as she purred, "Because you know, I still owe you something for White Day, and it would only be fair if I…oh, Mewtwo, get back here! Can't you take a joke?" For the clone, feeling every muscle in his body tighten at her suggestion, had abruptly whirled away to keep her from seeing his flustered expression. Soon enough she seemed to realize how he'd interpreted her jibe, and said, "Wait…oh, god, I didn't mean it like that! I meant giving you a hentai video or comic as a gag gift, not…! I wouldn't even know how to do that right anyhow, so…um…no?"

He would later muse that she definitely hadn't been fishing for a compliment there. However, his instinctual need to comfort her compelled him to respond, and when he did, he only made their conversation even more awkward. "…I am certain any male you attempted that on would disagree. You have a nice mouth, after all."

If there was ever a time when he wanted to face-palm, that would have been it. What the hell had he just said…? Even Cassandra seemed at a loss, for how exactly was a girl supposed to respond to that? "…Er…thank you? Is there anything else I should know, Mewtwo?" she asked, her curiosity blending with her wariness. At least around her, the clone had never expressed this side of himself before, so she hadn't the faintest idea of how she should react to it. Yes, she cared for her friend dearly and even considered him attractive, but she wasn't certain what to make of this...

Yet while Cassandra was mulling over her uncertainty, Mewtwo had reached the end of his. No longer able to endure the tension between them, and no longer able to tolerate the distance they maintained, his resistance concerning her buckled and caved. All at once, he felt himself giving in to everything he felt for her, and drawing her to her feet, he committed a very human act of affection.

He pressed his mouth to hers, and murmured the answer to her question. "I love you, Cassandra."

And after that they made sweet love, although neither of them were daring enough to use their mouths on each other like that that night. As for the other nights to come...well that was their business.
As Psyche listened to Mewtwo's tale, her reaction to hearing that the two had finally gotten together was to feel joy and satisfaction swelling in her chest. Just imagining the young couple resting in bed together, utterly contented with their newfound closeness, left the vixen practically purring at her roommate's side. However, when her excitement began to settle into placid satisfaction, her mind had the chance to catch up to her heart, and her pleasure rapidly dimmed. Once the facts and implications filtered in, her thoughts began to grow unsettled…then began to heave…and finally began to wrestle against one another for dominance. Through the turmoil, she grappled for level ground – a solid outlook, a firm judgment concerning what she'd just heard – and eventually found stability within her mind, her calm returning just as the clone's fractured.

For the first time since their discussion had begun, Mewtwo expressed anger towards her, his inquiries making the source of his ire quite clear. "...Do you find it disturbing that I mated with her? Or do you find it more atrocious on my part, considering Cassandra's delicate state?"

Fortunately for his companion, she understood that he wasn't aggravated at her, per se, but at her potential view on the subject. Would she, he must be wondering, disregard everything he'd disclosed to her thus far - the hardship and beauty of it all - and simply condemn his past relationship with Cassandra as sickening? Or would she, like the other once-eevee, decide to be sentimental and throw in her support? Blinking at him once, twice, her forked tail flicking behind her as she formed her answer, she said, "Es, espe, espeon. Espeon; es, espe, es...," allowing her honest opinion to be heard. "Yes, I'm a little squicked out, but not for the reason you seem to be accusing me of. I'm actually more concerned about how young she was; at only sixteen, she was still a child according to most human laws, so..."

The male didn't seem to know whether to peer at her incredulously, or bristle at what she might be insinuating. Already irritated, he settled on the latter reaction and growled, "To clarify, I was not even two years of age at the time, so that particular point of contention is irrelevant. However, if you intend to argue with me, allow me to save us both considerable time and effort by saying one thing: while I had no doubts about what I felt for her, I did mull over the details numerous times. I took into consideration her species, her age, her personality, her mental condition, and even her physical build and life expectancy. Yet despite my concerns, I craved for everything about her…and spare me that doubtful look, Psyche. It was not easy for me to come to terms with that attraction, to find myself swayed by an emotion I did not comprehend, nor desired to feel for a human. Before that night, I was desperately attempting to quell that ardor: I avoided her whenever possible, I turned to pain to distract myself, I battled until I was too fatigued to dream-..."

"Espe, es," his friend noted, her voice flat and sour as she interrupted him. "But in the end, you
His retaliatory glare would have petrified lesser monsters, and left her with the distinct impression that he would have liked to roll his eyes. Lashing behind him violently, as if aching to pummel something, he snapped, "Of course I failed! How many others before me have tried to stifle their passion? How many among them have succeeded and not left a piece of themselves behind? There cannot be very many, and no matter how hardhearted I might have been around others, I was soft where she was concerned. So yes, I failed, but tell me, little espeon, what else could I have done? What would you have done in my place?"

"…Es…espe," she mewled, startled by the question. Confronting her uncertainty, she scrounged her brain for another option he might have taken, and had quickly realized that she had no answer for him…which was, perhaps, what he'd been attempting to make her understand. "…I…don't know."

Her honesty seemed to pacify him, and as the angry gleam in his eyes faded, he nodded and murmured, "Precisely. You know as well as I that no one has a choice about who they come to love. Our choice comes when we decide what to do with that love…and despite attempting to reject it, embracing my emotions – and her – was the route I chose. In my defense, I tried turning away from such a path, so you cannot accuse me of being purely selfish."

She supposed he was correct, and in a display of defeat, she lowered her tail and said, "Es, es…espe, es? Espeon?" nudging him to move his account onwards. "Fine, fine…so what happened next, anyhow? How did you two handle your relationship?"

Mewtwo shifted his feet, somewhat discomforted by the thought of recounting the events that followed, even though they made up what was, quite possibly, the happiest period in his life. "…Since conveying our emotions with words was not easy for either of us, we allowed our actions to speak instead. In the privacy of her apartment, we spent our time savoring the happiness we could provide one another, scarcely straying from each other's sides. In public we maintained a greater distance, but even so, there were times when the facade nearly slipped, and we almost revealed what we had become. This typically occurred during our occasional training sessions, but after two months had passed, we had fallen into a comfortable pattern. Whenever our schedules allowed, we shared our nights together, sometimes extending these trysts into the morning hours. And as for the physical intimacy between us, we were usually quite gentle with one another. The only exceptions happened after her missions, when we were desperate to confirm that we were both still alive, and that our hearts were unchanged…"
hold her in his eyes again. However, that same relief was never enough to curtail his concern for her. While the sight of hastily bandaged injuries was not, thankfully, very frequent, the dried blood smeared on her skin, as well as the vacant gaze she possessed, were common features she’d gained after a hunt. Each served to alarm and anger him, and it always took all of his restraint not to reveal just how perturbed he was in front of her godfather. From there, remaining composed until they were in her apartment again, where he could freely express how much he’d worried for her, required an equal amount of self-control.

Once the door to Unit 150 was locked shut behind them, however, his behavior would change entirely. After one particularly gruesome hunt, he immediately embraced her to him and buried his muzzle into her hair, asking her if she was alright. That she remained motionless within his arms, and responded only by mumbling that she needed a shower, demonstrated to him that wherever her mind currently was, it was a dark and distant place he would have to coax her back from. Determined to do such, he accompanied her as she made her way to the bathroom, and assisted her in peeling off the clothes she wore, which were dank with sweat, mud, and blood. Following her soon after, he removed the hooded long-coat she’d given him, and once the pouring water was at the proper temperature, entered the spray with her. In the next several minutes as they worked to cleanse her, neither of them resumed their conversation, preferring to complete this despicable ritual in silence. Even after all the impurities were swept away from her skin, and even after they traded the lukewarm waters for fluffy towels, they didn't speak to one another, their only exchanges imparted through Mewtwo's lingering gazes and Cassandra's averted ones. However, the persona of the assassin, which the adolescent girl donned in most of her interactions within and without Team Rocket, could only be upheld for so long in the clone's presence. With one touch to his arm, the disquieting calm was broken, with both of them were soon grasping at one another frantically, desperate to ensure that the other was there and, just as crucially, that nothing had changed between them in her absence.

And while their affections for one another never did change, there was a growing feeling of despair between them, spurred - at least in part - by the sense that their time together had a limit, and that this limit was steadily approaching. For Mewtwo, his dread was that his mate would be killed, maimed, or rendered insane during one of her missions, with him helpless to do anything to preserve her. For Cassandra, her fear was of returning to find her lover dissected by the Team Rocket researchers, her godfather having somehow discovered their relationship and, from there, taken retribution while she was away. When her assignments ended and these worries went unrealized, their response was to lunge for one another, which usually resulted in hurried and semi-rough sex.

Such as the kind unfolding between them now, with both of them engaged in a nearly asphyxiating kiss, with their fingertips digging and dragging into yielding flesh, with their motions against one another more reminiscent of unregulated wrestling than a sensual dance. Tearing her mouth free from his at one point, Cassandra hissed at her lover to make her feel something, anything, to banish the numbness away and show her that she hadn't died and gone to hell. Needing to prove the same fact to himself, he pressed forward, running his paws over her and nipping at her shoulders, eventually making them stumble back into the nearest wall. Pinning her there, his forearms flat to the plaster, his paws lost in her wet hair, he suckled at her neck, her chest, her breasts, savoring the feel of her hands running down his torso, rubbing in circles over his groin, stroking him until he felt himself buck forward into her palms. With a throaty growl, he lowered his arms and grabbed her beneath her backside, lifting her up so she was straddling his waist. Without any further warning, he thrust himself forward, sinking into her was one fast, smooth motion, the pleasure of it making his tail curl and twist wildly behind him. Covering her mouth with his to quiet her cries, he drew out and plunged back into her, soon rocking his hips in hard, quick movements, feeling her fingernails tearing into his back as he did so.

This lasted until she drew a leg back with a moan, pressing her heel into his hip and kicking outwards, her hands similarly forcing him away. When she was standing again, her knees quivering
and her skin pricking with goose bumps, she responded to Mewtwo's bewildered, somewhat frustrated look by stepping forward and shoving him back. Within a few moments, he felt the edge of her bed behind him, and as his mate pushed him once more, he tucked his tail between his legs and fell into it, dragging her down with him. After hitting the mattress, several sensations assaulted him at once: of his second neck bending inwards, of bunched-up blankets beneath his back, of teeth nipping at his lower lip, of hands clenching at his shoulders, and of Cassandra sliding herself onto him, her hips soon rocking to drive him into her. Groaning against her mouth and resting his paws on her hips, he forfeited dominance over to her, allowing her to do what she pleased with him. For if she couldn't even take the lead within her own bed, then was there anything in her life that she could control…?

He doubted there was, and knowing this was what she needed, he gave it to her without a hint of resentment. In the following moments, he felt her shallow breaths - coming in pants - roll across his collarbone; felt him mind become muddled as the mingling scents of sweat, sex, and vanilla filled his nose; felt his arousal deepen as he heard the little sounds she made when lust possessed her (those animal noises that only he'd ever heard her make); and felt her aura wash over him like a tidal surge, her spirit so permeated with desperation that his spine tingled with anxiety. Yet as carnal ecstasy swelled between them, as their motions growing frenzied and erratic, that sense of helplessness began to leach from her, and burying her face into his chest, she whimpered out small cries of need – for gratification, for warmth, but mostly just for him. When their movements brought her over the edge, he clutched her to him, groaning as he felt her convulse with bliss around him, as he began thrusting up into her to arrive at his own finish.

During this time, she muffled her cries against his pelt, and it was only after the tumultuous sensations of his peak settled, after they both stilled and their breathing quieted, that he realized she was mumbling into his fur, repeating a soft manta to herself. After several seconds of listening carefully, he picked up the words, and felt his heart ache for her when he realized what she was trying to convince herself of: "…I'm here…I'm here with him…I'm here….

Wrapping his tail over the small of her back, he stroked through her hair and murmured, "Yes, you are. Welcome home, dove."

While it would take some time, and quite a bit of cuddling together beneath the blankets, he would eventually calm her enough so she could get to sleep. However, even as she drifted off in his arms, she gained no semblance of peace, instead being tormented by the nightmares he was never able to fully banish from her. Cradling her to him and occasionally whispering reassurances into her ears, he wondered to himself how long they could go on like this, hiding and suffering from the spiteful workings of the world. He suspected that if something didn't change soon, their souls would begin to starve and disintegrate, incapable of surviving on the scarce moments they managed to obtain to be with one another. Yes, the snatches of happiness they gained were beautiful, like fireflies flickering in the dark…yet both knew that chasing after fireflies was no way to live. What they truly needed was the morning sun, but with little hope and an overabundance of worry, that daybreak seemed unreachable. And this, in turn, might be their undoing; for despite that the clone was young, and naïve concerning many subjects, he understood that their current lifestyle was undermining them. No matter the adoration and devotion they shared, it would amount to nothing if they crumbled from the stress and dissatisfaction of serving the organization.

Rooted though they were to Team Rocket, those roots were beginning to rot, and Mewtwo didn't want them to succumb to a similar decay. Contemplating possible solutions, he found only one route that provided a feasible escape, and so, when his beloved briefly stirred awake hours later, he asked her if there was anything she cherished within the yakuza. Was there anything she treasured enough that she'd never want to leave the gang behind…? In her groggy, unfocused state, she pressed her face against his neck and blabbered that he shouldn't be asking her such a stupid question. Of course
she had something like that, and he should damned well know what it was! As tempting as the thought of deserting might prove, he and Shadow were here, weren't they? They were why she tried so hard to return from her missions, for they were worth coming back to. Amused, touched, and relieved by her answer, he kissed her forehead, asked her to forgive him for his thoughtlessness, and told her to go back to sleep. After giving him a blurry-eyed look, she muttered for him to get some rest as well, and did as he'd suggested without another word.

Before allowing himself to follow her lead, however, the replica began to plot out a course for them to walk along. He identified the obstacles and landmarks they would encounter, considered the potential twists and forks along the way, and by the end of his musings, he nurtured the hope that she would chose to journey down that path with him. For if she did, then perhaps they would at last gain what they so coveted: a glimpse of that rising sun in the distance, which promised them the life they hadn't dared yet dream of….

Contemplating the warm memory that came next, Mewtwo fell silent, musing that out of everything else that had occurred, it was by far the most precious, sacred, and bittersweet recollection of all. Simultaneously filling him with joy, sorrow, and unspeakable shame and remorse, he quickly realized that he wouldn't be able to describe it to his companion. Despite having already alluded to two of the sexual experiences he'd shared with Cassandra, he was unable to revisit this one memory, which somehow seemed far more personal than those of their lovemaking. Deciding to merely provide a loose description of it, he justified his actions by reminding himself that it wasn't necessarily needed to convey the essence of their story. Over the last several hours, he'd allowed the ghosts of his past to wander freely, but this one…just this one…he could hold back, preserving it so it would haunt only him.

And so, in a reserved and hushed voice, he merely said, "…In my youthful arrogance, I believed that my abilities would enable me to achieve anything I desired, so long as I had a goal in mind, and a purpose driving me towards it. Cassandra provided both of those to me, and confident that I could turn my ambition into a reality, I made her a precarious offer. I promised her that I could find a way for us to live however we wished, and that all she needed to do was give me the chance to so do. Despite likely recognizing my intention as a pipe dream, she nonetheless humored me and accepted it, wholeheartedly agreeing to my plan. And for a short while, we possessed more hope and joy than we had ever known before."

He could almost see her sixteen-year-old self standing before him, her grey eyes and her smile alike shining up at him. Thin shafts of sunlight and small, teardrop-shaped yellow leaves - shed from the hanging boughs of a willow tree - had encompassed them both in a soft, amber hue: the color of healing and change, and of a happiness they need only be patient to obtain. Closing his eyes, he wearily brushed the image away, not wanting his soul to sicken any further, and eventually told his companion, "However, while we became lost in our happiness, we overlooked a crucial danger: the daylight. In the shadows, we could hide our relationship with ease…but in the light, after being cautious for months, we made a terrible mistake. We celebrated in a place we thought we would remain unseen, a place we believed was ours alone…but though it was a difficult place for most to reach, it was still out in the open. While it would take me some time to comprehend what had happened, it was there, in the place where we had spent our day of bliss, that our end began….

How dare she? How dare she disobey him like this?

Those questions, infused with fury and revulsion in a magnitude he couldn't begin to measure, repeated themselves within Giovanni's mind. As he watched the video recording play on his computer screen, his clenched fists shook on the surface of his desk, itching to wrap around his
goddaughter's throat, while the urge to smoke and spit rose within him to a nearly irresistible level. Considering what that select, minute-long clip revealed, however, he felt that his rage was more than warranted. Captured three days prior by one of their surveillance cameras, amidst their sector of Viridian Forest, the scene exposed the amorous nature of Cassandra's relationship with the clone, conveying the unsavory details in pixelated grayscale. While he may have suspected that the two were interested in one another, he had dismissed his concerns about them months ago, certain that they'd never act on their attraction. After all, the girl had been warned against behaving in such a fashion, and the clone had even begun to avoid her after June rolled around. Rational musing dictated that they were drifting apart, perhaps having understood that their affections for one another were misplaced, and that it would be best to limit their interactions in the future.

Yet it seemed their common sense had been tossed to the wayside, to rot with the first of the fallen leaves of autumn. Having duped him for who knows how long, they'd finally slipped up, revealing their private liaison in the course of a few hundred frames. As the clip looped before his eyes, he gritted his teeth, incapable of tolerating the lewd images: of Cassandra and Mewtwo enwrapped in one another, rutting like wild animals upon the grass, their expressions contorted in hedonistic bliss. Had the crime lord less self-control, he would have thrown the monitor in front of him across the room. As it was, he considered himself fortunate for not having had a glass in hand before watching the recording; otherwise, its broken shards would surely be imbedded into his fingers and palm.

Growling to the blonde sitting on his desk, who'd brought the clip to his attention, he asked, "What do you think of this, Domino?"

The girl before him was one of the final recruits among the Elite Children, but despite the late start and her sketchy background, she'd swiftly surpassed a majority of her colleagues since her initiation. Although he was uncertain of her exact age, supposing her to be thirteen or fourteen at most, she'd proven herself far more capable than most of his senior agents, excelling at infiltration and tracking assignments. While his goddaughter, to be certain, continued to occupy his thoughts on the matter of succession, he felt comfortable taking the time to preen this other promising girl into one of his leading intelligence agents. Making her less specialized in her skill set, as well as eventually granting her more commanding power, would someday make her into a formidable force…and that she came in such a small, cute package would only assist her in gaining her objectives.

At the very least, she currently seemed far more trustworthy and reliable than his best friend's whore of a daughter! After fiddling with a purple tulip for a moment, the petals of which matched the color of her eyes, she answered his question. "Well, I daresay there are some perverts in this gang that'd love to get their hands on this, but since I'm not among their group, I'm open to calling it nasty shit. While I'd heard rumors about something like this going on, I doubt even the worst gossips really considered it plausible, so…yeah, I never thought they'd do anything like this. Actually, I can't speak for the pokémon, since I've never met it, but I would think she'd know better."

The Signore had come to a similar conclusion, and minimizing the recording, he leaned his elbows upon the desk, steeping his fingers just below his nose in a pose reminiscent of a famous anime character from a recently aired, psychologically disturbing, robot show. However, there was no arrogant smirk playing across his lips, for he found no amusement in this subject. "…We cannot allow this footage to be leaked. If you have not already done so, destroy the original recording and any other copies that may have been made. If you need to take extreme measures to insure that this matter remains between us, do so. I don't want this discovery leaving my office, Trainee 009."

The young teenager understood, and rising from his desk, she left the violet flower behind, silently offering him her condolences. Making a short list of the individuals who'd brought the clip to her attention, along with their closest acquaintances, she mused that a "bonus" was always the best way
to get them all together in one place. After that, the possible information leaks could be eliminated with ease, and contenting herself with the notion of a satisfying job awaiting her, she glanced back at her boss once before reaching for the door. Finding him ejecting the disk from his computer, his brow furrowed with thought, she paused before leaving, and spoke the only thought that had occurred to her when watching the video. Rising out of the depths of her disgust, she admitted to him, "...She seemed happy with that creature, Signore."

Taking out a bottle of his most expensive, imported whiskey, Giovanni poured himself a glass of the amber beverage and replied, "...Of course she was happy, my dear. The clone was giving her everything she's been craving for the last six years: companionship, warmth, affection, and all for the price of her already defiled body. That she accepted its offer comes as no surprise, and had Mewtwo been a human, I may have been of the mind to overlook it. However, I gave her explicit orders concerning the clone, and now she'll have to face the consequences of her disobedience."

For while he couldn't risk disrupting his "partnership" with the clone, he could sure as hell confront his goddaughter about her behavior…!

Hours after the man had calmed himself with a hearty drink, Cassandra sat frozen in the chair in front of his desk, watching the lurid video clip looping on the computer screen. After seeing its contents the first time, horror had rendered her incapable of moving or uttering a single, flimsy excuse to explain herself. Instead, she'd continued staring at the recording with widened eyes, her heart palpitating in her chest and her body paralyzed from the cold, unrelenting panic sweeping through her. On the verge of hyperventilating, only her meditative exercises, which her lover had encouraged her to learn, kept her thoughts from growing frantic, taking her breath along with them. Despite her attempts to remain collected, however, she nearly flinched as her godfather abruptly asked her, in a low and chilling voice, to clarify what he was seeing. Not daring to turn and meet his gaze, which was boring into the base of her neck, she attempted to form a response, her mouth opening and closing as the words failed to come…and before long, the Signore lost his patience with her. Grabbing her by the elbow, he wretched her out of the chair and spun her around…and in the next moment, she was crashing to the floor, her neck and the right side of her face flaring with pain. As the taste of copper filled her mouth, the inside of her cheek sliced open by her own teeth, she lifted her gaze to find his hand still raised from backhanding her. Lifting her right hand to her cheek in shock – for he'd never, not once in the years she'd spent with him, struck her – she felt a cool kiss of metal against her burning flesh, and hoped he wouldn't ask questions about the ring she'd begun wearing.

Had it been on her left hand, he might have done so, but as it were, he merely glared down at her with searing, onyx eyes, and snarled, "What the fuck were you thinking?" When she remained wordless, only wiping away the blood trickling from her lips, he knelt down, dragged her up by the hem of her long-sleeved blouse, and shook her violently. "I asked you a question, Cassandra! Answer me!"

Having also never seen her godfather this angry before, not even after learning she'd been raped - and he'd been absolutely murderous then, so what could he be capable of now? - the teenager felt fear crystallizing in her veins like ice. What was she going to do? Oh god, more importantly, what the hell was he going to do? Attempting and failing to keep herself composed, she nonetheless summoned up what vestiges of courage she still possessed and said, "What – what do you want me to say? That we were just goofing around? I'm certain you can tell that wasn't the case."

The Signore looked as if he was barely able to restrain himself from striking her again. A shiver crawled up her spine as his face reddened and he growled, "That isn't what I asked," while his large fingers fisted around the fabric of her blouse, as if yearning to constrict around more than those light fibers.
Clenching her eyes shut, she wished that she could vanish from his office, wished that she could fly back in time and alter how events had played out. Yet she was merely an adolescent girl, and despite having been trained to handle stressful and volatile situations, coping with her guardian's wrath had not been among the list of hypothetical scenarios. Trying not to tremble and show weakness, she reluctantly lifted her eyelids and met his gaze, and in hardly more than a whisper, she said, "I...I was thinking about how happy I was to be his mate. I was thinking about how much I loved him and needed him. And...and damn it, even now when you're shouting at me like this, I don't regret that!"

There, she'd answered him, and while she doubted that was what he'd wanted to hear, she refused to take her words back now. Yet instead of erupting with rage, instead of hitting and bellowing at her again, he shoved her away and barked an unpleasant, unfriendly laugh. "Is that so? Then allow me to clarify something for you, my pitiful, foolish girl. You cannot be its 'mate,' because 'mates' is what a pair of pokémon or animals is called. You cannot be its lover either, since 'lovers' refers to a pair of humans. There is no term that can nicely label the 'relationship' you have with that soulless clone, and you would do well to recognize it for what it truly is: an abominable, frivolous distraction, where you are using that pokémon as nothing more than a sexual plaything. If you honestly loved that creature, Cassandra, then you would have placed its life before your own, and kept in mind my warning. Now you've given me little choice but to follow through on my word."

Remembering his threats, the ice in her veins spread through her quivering frame, freezing the air in her lungs. "No...," she breathed out, "No, you can't!" For if that happened...if anything happened to Mewtwo, then she'd...she'd...!

Leveling a dour look at her, he spat, "Why not? Your precious 'mate' belongs to me, and I have every right to dispose of my property whenever I please. While the loss of the prototype would be unfortunate, if that would be enough to secure your obedience, then I would have no regrets in calling the snipers to blast that monster's brains into sludge."

And with those words, he pushed his goddaughter over the metaphoric edge. However, instead of collapsing and begging for his mercy, her terror drained away, leaving a silt of hatred coating her innards. Straightening her spine and lifting her chin, she ceased shuddering and, glaring at him viciously, hissed, "If that happens, then you'd better make sure to shoot me too. If you exterminate him like a goddamned animal, I'll do everything I can to annihilate you, regardless of the cost to myself! I'm not afraid of humiliation, torture, or death anymore, so I'd have no reservations about enduring every last one if I can avenge my partner in the process." And spying his startled expression, she grinned at him wryly and said, "But that would be a senseless waste, now wouldn't it? After all, there's a bloodless option available, which I'd recommend you consider. Simply leave Mewtwo alone, and furthermore, release him from the lies you're blinding him with. If you do that, then I'll do whatever the hell you want...but if you refuse, then I'll make you regret all these years you've spent grooming me into an executioner!"

Blinking his coal-black eyes at her, his lips eventually tucked upwards on one side, and he lifted an eyebrow at her. She was actually serious, he realized, and suppressing a chuckle, he asked, "Is this your attempt to bargain with me, Cassandra? If the clone dies, then I'll lose you and more besides? Now that wouldn't prove favorable for me, would it?" With that, his lopsided smirk turned into a sneer, and stepping towards her, he growled, "However, you still have much to learn about the subtleties of brokering, little raven. You need to offer me something more than 'mercy from your wrath' if you want me to agree to your terms. Fortunately for you, I'm an opportunist and a businessman who loathes wasting resources. I'd be willing to spare your precious pet, and shatter his blissful ignorance to his status, but only if you meet two conditions. First, you will sever your relationship with him within the week and never resume it. I care little the means you employ to do this. Second, when the day comes when I seek to match you with a proper partner, you will ultimately obey me and accept the suitor. These are my only demands - which are exceedingly
generous, I might add - and if you honor them, I will in turn honor those you've asked of me. Do we have an agreement, goddaughter?"

While those conditions weighed heavily upon her, Cassandra forced herself to keep the situation in perspective: she would lose Mewtwo, but he would be out of danger and would know the truth. Once he learned what Giovanni thought of him, he would free himself of the shackles he wore and embrace a better life for himself. To her, that would be enough…and besides, once he left the organization, then she'd have all the time in the world to rebel against this devil, destroying herself along with him if the hand he dealt her was cruel. Clenching her hands into fists, Cassandra nodded and took a step back from the crime lord, loathing him with every fiber of her being. Everything was beginning to ache now, far more than her struck cheek, and the cold suffusing her was deepened at the thought of what was still to come. But even as the man told her he would be placing their agreement into a legally binding contract, one which she would have to return to his office the next day to sign, she remained steady and focused on her prize. Yet she could tolerate the hurt and humiliation, so long as there was some hope that her lover would be safe….

As she turned to leave, however, Giovanni lashed out at her with an entirely new, unexpected, and equally as poisonous barb. "By the way, if I discover you've become pregnant by that creature, I'll have the fetus terminated immediately. You will not give birth to a half-breed abomination – any attempts to bargain with me on that will be met with failure. Have I made myself perfectly clear?"

There could only be one response to that. "…Yes, Signore."

After that, nothing more needed to be said between them, and she left his office with a swelling cheek and a leaden heart. Passing down the hallways, she ignored the stares she received from her fellow agents, and once the corridors grew vacant, she begun to run, determined to further the distance between herself, her godfather, and everything he represented. When her muscles finally began to weaken from fatigue, she turned into an empty, unlit hallway and leaned against the wall, panting for breath. Yet as she caught sight of the ring she wore, her gasps shifted into sobs, the weight of what she needed to do only then beginning to devastate her. Barely a few days ago, she'd been given every reason to look forward to the future, and now…now she could only mourn its inevitable arrival. Sinking to the floor, she drew her knees to her chest and, crossing her arms over them, muffled her cries against her sleeves, her bitter tears soon saturating the snowy fabric….

Gazing towards the western horizon, Mewtwo watched as the moon slipped behind the skyscrapers, and distantly noted how its light occasionally glinted through the windows of one of the office buildings as it descended. Breathing in the cold night air, he mused about that meeting between the angel and her godfather: long since passed, the injustice it represented had served to infuriate him, and even after years had passed, he still nursed a potent anger towards the man over it. However, time and greater emotional injury had dulled the intensity of that rage, and glancing at the lavender vixen, he sighed, "She said nothing to me about that confrontation - not directly, in any case. Instead, she chose to carry that burden alone, and struggled daily with the dilemma he had placed on her. In the week that followed, she behaved erratically, drawing me into her bed in one moment, and shoving me from her home in the next. She would erupt over the smallest of trifles, and no matter how I attempted to discover what was upsetting her, she refused to confide in me."

"In retrospect, her behavior is understandable: no matter what she decided to do, she would lose her lover, which would have been – no, was enough to drive me insane, once I was faced with the reality of our situation. Had she informed me about what was happening, perhaps events would have unfolded differently…but in all honesty, I doubt the conclusion would have changed. If anything, her actions resulted in the most favorable outcome possible, with us both alive and well at the end. If I
had learned what Giovanni had ordered, I probably would have reacted rashly, even violently, and signed my own death warrant in the process. After all, like most adolescents, I believed I was invulnerable, untouchable, and no warnings from my more experienced mate would have convinced me otherwise. In my mind, death inflicted only the weak, the sick, and the unworthy, and could not hope to conquer me. Yet Cassandra had known the reaper all her life, and knew her godfather equally well - so unlike most, she comprehended how feeble her own mortality was, as well as how transient mine could be. Consequently, she was willing to pay any price to preserve my life, even if that meant sacrificing our relationship."

After speaking those words, he turned his gaze away from his companion, and then added, with a sad and brittle smile: "For that, I daresay she was the stronger of us…."
how to make her request. Yet shyness seemed inconsistent with her personality, even when she was at her most uncertain, and watching her, his brow furrowed upon noticing that she was shivering. Keeping in mind that she didn't have the benefit of a fur coat, he removed his long-coat and wrapped it around her shoulders, a gesture which she seemed to accept readily enough. Beneath his worried gaze, she pressed her face into the dun-colored fabric, hesitating from answering his inquiry, perhaps not wanting to disturb the tranquility of that moment. Yet when he reached out to her, resting a paw upon her arm, she shifted away from his touch and, refusing to meet his eyes, stood and fidgeted in agitation, clutching his garment around herself tightly. Following her to his feet, he closed the space between them and encircled his arms around her from behind, encouraging her to tell him what was wrong. When her silence stretched on, he buried his muzzle into her hair, determined to wait patiently until she spoke, no matter how concern was eating away at the fringes of his thoughts like starving rodents. Minutes passed in the quiet, their surroundings only shifting when vehicles passed down the road outside, the glow from their headlights drifting through the windows and over the walls, like weary, lonely ghosts.

When she finally answered him, her voice rose in a whisper, tentative and tinged with sadness. "I need you to let go of me now."

To this, the clone's initial response was to be confused: did she mean to release her from his arms right now, or something else, something more…? Cassandra answered his unspoken inquiry by taking one of his paws and pressing a small, cold, round item into it, which he immediately recognized as the ring she'd accepted less than a fortnight ago. She was returning the symbol of the promise they'd exchanged, and in doing so, conveyed that she no longer desired what it entailed: a future with him in it. Stunned and hurt by the unexpected and - one he gave the matter a second's thought - inexplicable rejection, he didn't attempt to hold onto her as she slid from his embrace. After she'd taken a few steps away, and as the moonlight gleamed from the inscribed band, however, his shock was replaced by bewilderment. He couldn't understand what was happening, and vaguely wondered if he were dreaming. He couldn't think of another logical explanation for her actions! Despite her strange behavior as of late, which less confident lovers might have characterized as doubt or uncertainty, the replica knew her feelings for him were genuine, and that her happiness at his offer had been sincere. So why was she turning away from him now, after they'd spent almost three months as mates, and, more importantly, after they'd agreed to work towards forging a brighter life together…?

What had happened? What had changed that was making her act this way…? Finally finding the words, he inwardly winced at how harsh his voice sounded as he asked, "Why are you doing this…? After everything we have shared, do I not deserve an explanation?" When she refused to look at him, he reached out and grabbed her wrist, turning her around to face him.

He was not prepared to see her eyes moistened with tears, which she was struggling to blink back. Tugging her wrist from his grasp, she snapped at him, "If I had a good reason, I would have said it by now! I've tried figuring out what to tell you all week, but I don't have any answers for you! You'll just have to trust me on this one: it'll be better for both of us if we…if we just forget we ever met. I'm sorry, but I have nothing more to say about the matter."

She understood how unsatisfying and unconvincing that answer would be to him, since she – the one uttering it - found it downright pathetic. But what else could she say to him, when she could neither lie to him nor tell him the truth? If she spoke dishonestly, he would sense it, and if she concealed her aura to hide the fact that she was speaking dishonestly, he'd realize she was trying to conceal something from him. On the other hand, if she told him that her godfather – his "business partner" – was intending to murder him if they didn't separate, Mewtwo would probably react in a number of rash (and ultimately futile) ways. Option number one: he might not believe her, insisting she was mistaken and questioning her godfather on the matter - which would get him shot. Option number
two: he might believe her and still confront her godfather (nonviolently or violently, it made no difference) - which would also get him shot. Option number three: he might decide against arguing with the crime lord, instead choosing to avoid her for a majority of the time, keeping their interactions as minimal and discreet as possible. However, since Giovanni was undoubtedly preparing for that possibility, the replica would probably be shot before they even realized they'd been caught. So that left option number four: they chose to stay apart, biding their time until she could safely leave Team Rocket with him, which wouldn't happen for at least two more years. Yet that plan, like the ones before it, was equally inclined to backfire: for if they ever accidentally encountered one another, the Signore would convince himself that they'd intended to meet; and if they ever caved and purposefully met up, then they'd be back in the position they were currently in. So all in all, Cassandra couldn't think of any other plausible solution.

Consequently, being vague and praying Mewtwo would accept her words…well, this method could also fail rather easily, but there was still a better chance of it working than one of the alternatives. As such, she was willing to try it, despite the fact that it would leave her psychic wildcat completely in the dark. Again murmuring an apology, she turned to leave, not seeing her partner's lost look as she began to walk away. As his mind scrambled to decipher what she'd said, the memories he'd made with her - numbering in the thousands - whirled amongst his thoughts, each one deepening his certainty that their relationship, in every form it had taken, had been meaningful and well worth holding onto. To forsake it now, so soon after it had begun…the thought was unbearable to him. After all, he remembered what it felt like to be alone, to matter to no one and have nothing to care about, with only the pursuit of power to fills one's days. He remembered how stagnant and purposeless that existence had been, and how fulfilling forging a path with Cassandra had proven. And finally, he remembered how the angel had affirmed his beliefs beneath the willow trees, how she'd agreed that they were better together than they could ever be apart. She understood, but for some reason had decided to abandon them, preferring to pretend that they'd never met, let alone shared a bed.

She hadn't even justified her choice to him, and unless she did, how could he accept losing her, his favored partner, his dearest friend, his beloved mate? He'd probably go mad if she forced such a fate on him, and so, before she could further the distance between them anymore, he bolted forward and grabbed her by the shoulders. Turning her around to face him once more, he implored her to wait and reconsider, to allow him to debate the matter with her, to perhaps even grant him the opportunity to persuade her to remain his precious dove. Yet the young woman's resolve didn't waver. As she fought to free herself from his grasp, she demanded that he let go of her right now, and insisted – in an increasingly shrill and frantic voice – that he leave her alone. There was nothing he could say, nothing he could do that would change her mind, so he should resign himself to parting and do whatever else he could to find happiness. There was no way he could find bliss with her anymore, so he needed to let her go…let her go...damn it, damn it, damn it…!

"God damn it, Mewtwo, let go of me!" she shrieked, outright panic now engulfing her. She'd known this would be difficult, but she hadn't anticipated he would be so persistent. His personality was more conducive to brooding than rebelliousness, so why, why did he have to switch to defiance in this situation? Actually, she could guess why, but if he didn't release her soon, he might be targeted and riddled with bullets – and even though parting would undoubtedly wound him anyway, she would rather hurt him than watch him be killed.

And so, flailing her arms against his torso, she continued to fight against him, and inwardly despaired when he began to encircle his arms and tail around her. By enveloping her in his warmth and his spearmint scent, he gave her what she was desperately craving, but urgently needed to resist. No matter how much she wanted to be embraced by him, she'd be endangering him by allowing it…and not for the first time that night, she cursed her godfather for intervening in this most precious part of her life. What did it matter to her if people believed her to be a pervert, if her reputation was ruined
by their whispers, if she lost the chance to be more to this organization than an assassin as a result?
She hadn't wanted to be a part of Team Rocket anyway, and didn't give a damn if its agents sneered
at her; she would much rather be with the person she loved instead. Yet now the only way to keep
him safe was to drive him away...and even as venomous words gathered in her mouth, loathsome
and sour, she couldn't find the resolve to speak them, to poison him with the same bitterness she was
experiencing. Continuing to struggle with him, she cursed herself for not being stronger, for not
persevering when they most needed her to….

But soon she had no choice but to act: from one of the balconies above, a glint of metal flashed,
signaling that their time was at its end. Glimpsing the gleam out of the corner of her eye, she moved
without any conscious thought, fear for her partner driving her into motion. Shoving his arms aside
and pushing him away with all her strength, she watched him stumble back a couple steps, heard the
thunder of a shot being fired, and felt herself falling as pain exploded in her left side. As she hit the
dirt-packed floor, feeling heat spreading through her shirt, smelling copper wafting into her nostrils,
she distantly heard Mewtwo shouting her name through a din of bewildered, flurrying thoughts.
When he knelt beside her, gathering her into his arms, she bit back a shriek as agony pulsated in her
side, her hand flying to claw at the source and coming away bloodied. Staring at the sight of the
bright red, vital fluid coating her fingers, she realized what had happened, and nearly laughed in
disbelief. Had she just been shot...? Holy fuck, had she really just been shot? Hadn't that idiot ever
heard about checking their fire? And what the hell had they been aiming at in the first place? Were
they so fucking blind that they needed to aim at the torso for a kill shot, when they had a sniper scope
and everything to ensure a proper head shot? She couldn't believe this...! What the fuck?

Hearing Mewtwo shout her name again, she blinked at him and snorted at the horrified expression on
his face. Well, she supposed she'd found option number five, now hadn't she? - Get a bullet in the
side and demonstrate the gravity of their situation to him. This was why they had to separate: if they
didn't, they'd have more iron pumped into them than any diet required! With a weak and delirious
smile, she mumbled, "Skedaddle, pussycat...unless you'd like to be shot up too."

Even though his thoughts had been thrown into chaos, Mewtwo understood what was happening to
his mate: she was going into shock, and needed immediate medical attention. Not pausing to glance
around for the sniper, he teleported them both to the hospital wing, and bellowed for someone to
come and help her. Almost as if they'd been expecting his arrival, the paramedics rolled a gurney in
front of him, and with Dr. Yarrow rushing to join them, demanded that he release the agent to their
care. After doing so, he attempted to follow them as they rolled Cassandra into the emergency room,
only to have his way blocked by several others medic and their pokémon assistants. In varying levels
of pitch, each of them insisted that he leave the others to operate "in peace," and return to his quarters
to wash away the blood that had been smeared on him. Resisting them, he snarled that he wouldn't
leave until he was certain that she'd be alright, and began charging his psychical powers to teleport
into the operating room...and then felt a stinging sensation burst upon his thigh. Swatting at the pain,
he felt clenched hand and needle, and as darkness clouded at the edges of his eyes, he realized that
one of the damnable humans had drugged him. Growling at them, he attempted to lash out with his
telekinesis, only to have his concentration fail as unconsciousness began to overtake him. Swaying
on his suddenly gelatinous feet, he felt the swooping sensation in his stomach as he lurched forward,
felt the pain of crashing into the ceramic floor, and then felt nothing at all....

He awoke hours later with a throbbing headache, with a parched mouth and throat, and with patches
of his fur and coat alike stiff with Cassandra's dried blood. Discovering that he'd been brought to his
quarters, he picked himself up from the floor and staggered into the washroom, turning the knob for
cold water from the sink. Dipping his muzzle to drink straight from the tap, he felt his mind begin to
clear as he quenched his thirst: those gutless snakes had sedated him and dragged him away from his
mate! She'd been bleeding badly, possibly even dying from blood loss, and they'd forced him to
leave her side...! As fury blended with his anxiety, he growled and turned off the tap water, storming
through the rooms to reach the front door, determined to return to the medical ward somehow…only to catch sight of a blinking, red light to his right. Realizing it was coming from the telephone he’d never used, he stepped over to the machine, peering through the murk incredulously to read the words scrolling across the panel above the light: "…one missed call…one new message"…? The sequence that followed, usually a several-digit caller number and I.D., had been scrambled to provide autonomy. After staring at the unprecedented and bewildering words for a moment, he pressed the button to hear the recording, and heard a foreign, masculine voice carry through the speakers.

Listening to what the man had to say, he felt a prickling sensation - like the tips of a thousand icy pins - crawl up his spine: "...Given your attachment to Agent Merlo, you will probably be relieved to hear that her condition has stabilized. However, my colleagues and I ask that you refrain from approaching her and resuming your…distasteful relationship with her. As Leviticus 20:16 declares: 'If a woman approaches an animal to have sexual relations with it, kill both the woman and the animal' - but in this case, we will be more merciful than even God, and merely ask that your sinful behavior ceases. If you refuse to obey our wishes, we will arrange to have the device within your lover triggered, which you surely know will result in her excruciating death. Understand that this isn't a route we wish to take, but will follow if you force our hand. We have already given Agent Merlo a similar ultimatum, albeit with your life as the price instead. She's already agreed to our terms, and for her sake, you must do the same. Along with the shot we have already fired, this will be our only warning to you...."

Even after the ending tone sounded, Mewtwo continued to stare at the telephone, his stomach churning from the sinister message. Yet as the disorder in his mind began to settle, and his heart began to numb, one thought rose above the rest: so this was it then, wasn't it…? This was the reason why Cassandra had been acting so strangely, why she'd insisted on them parting, and why – even as she lay in the dust, bleeding from a bullet wound – she'd told him to flee for his life. This unknown group had managed to coerce her into obedience, and now, after proving just how serious they were, was attempting to do the same to the clone. Rather than having the decency to confront him directly, to aim a gun at his face and threaten to pull the trigger if he resisted, they were exploiting his love for Cassandra instead, just as they had with her. They knew that love was a selfish beast; that people would gladly sacrifice themselves to prevent their loves ones from being sacrificed. And so, cunning and cruel in immeasurable proportions, these faceless humans were hitting the couple where they were weakest, skillfully maneuvering them into a corner that they couldn't escape from…unless they went their separate ways, forfeiting the bond that nourished and elated them. Left with no other route to take, Mewtwo and Cassandra would be forced to leave behind what they'd shared, what had meant so much to them, and return to the life they'd known before meeting one another.

No…that's wasn't right. Their relationship had already passed checkmate, and the pieces were being systematically reset. The black queen was returning to her original square, was being surrounded by the powerful elite and pawns alike, and he, the black knight – so near to her yet still out of touch - simply hadn't noticed because he was just another one of the pieces being toyed with. With his eyes, ears, nose, and mouth all painted shut, he couldn't know how the world had changed around him, only given hints at its state whenever his throat was clasped. And now, curled in the palm of an unknown person, he could feel himself being smothered as he was carried back to his "proper place," his furred form surrounded by calluses and a film of dirt. Unable to even bite at the hand of their manipulator, he would be forced to submit to his will and accept defeat. For no matter how he denied it, raged against it, tried to bargain with that greater power, and even languished in despair, he couldn't change that reality.

They were finished…and there was nothing he could do now that could change that fact.

Nearly a week passed before Dr. Yarrow released his patient from his care, her gunshot wound
having mended enough for her to return to her apartment. During those six days, she'd steadily succumbed to despondency, while her lover – not given due warning about their impending separation like she'd been - had only fared worse. Coping with his unhappiness in the only way he knew, he battled ruthlessly within the arena, wounding trainers and pokémon alike during his matches. Yet no matter how viciously he fought, no matter how much blood he spilled, the bitterness writhing within him – like thorny, stinging vines - would not be appeased so easily. If he'd allowed himself to grieve, to weep at the loss of his mate, perhaps then he would have found some semblance of peace. But Mewtwo only gritted his teeth and swallowed down his hurt, refusing to whimper and shed his tears. After all, crying wouldn't bring his mate back to him, and certainly wouldn't evoke the mercy of his enemies. As such, he saw no point in yielding to the urge, and resolved himself to keep pressing forward, no matter how doing so might pain him.

Ultimately, the sorrow he was struggling to suppress began morphing into resentment - for why hadn't Cassandra trusted him enough to tell him what was going on? Why hadn't she had faith that he could protect them both, regardless of who they were facing? And why hadn't she just believed in him, when he'd never ceased believing in her? After everything they'd gone through together, how could it have come to this…? Were even the best of humans so indecent and flawed that they would, under the right circumstances, willingly betray the ones they loved? And if they could intentionally hurt their beloveds so terribly, then what were they capable of doing the people they cared nothing for…?

Yet even as those rancid questions seeped into him, tainting his soul further, he couldn't bring himself to take the easy road and hate her. While she may have doubted him, he couldn't ignore the fact that she'd taken a bullet of him, and begrudge her for supposedly "not caring enough." She did care, and she was hurting just as keenly as he was (if not more so, thanks to the role she'd played in their separation). No, he only wanted to pretend that she was cruel, because that way he could lick his own wounds without remembering the extent of hers. And therein lay what was eating him away: for just as Cassandra had suggested they do, he wanted to forget about what they'd shared. He wanted to forget the countless hours he'd spent with her, to forget the experiences of befriending her, of falling for her, of making love with her, of hearing her murmur his name while she dreamed. As precious as those memories were to him, they only tormented him now, reminded him of the paradise he'd lost. How many times in the past six days had he caught himself preparing to head to her apartment…?

Even now, he was yearning to be by her side, to hold her tenderly and bury his muzzle in her hair, to hell with what their foes desired. At this hour, she was probably curled up in what had become their bed, resting her head upon his pillow and, like him, wishing she could just forget….

And that…that was a gift he could give her. With his refined abilities, he could erase the hurt and the shame from her, and could ensure that he'd never again feel the temptation to visit her in the night. All it would require was one last encounter between them, and then…then she could be free of the heartache, at least for a time….

Hours later, he dressed in the long-coat she'd given him and teleported into her kitchen. Outside the window, the new moon had begun to set, and closing the curtains to the blackened orb, he turned to face the entirety of Unit 150. Nothing had changed since the last night he'd spent there: his mate's clothes were still scattered on the floor, her composition drafts were still spread out on the table, and their pictures were still heaped within the open shoebox beside the table. And she was still sleeping on her side of the bed, leaving enough space for him lie down beside her if he wanted…and by god, did he want to. Yet he refrained from doing so, and when he reached the mattress, merely sat down on its edge, and reached out a paw to touch her cheek. His fingers found wetness there, and indeed, she'd either cried herself to sleep recently, or had simply been crying in her sleep. As he stroked her face gently, trying to sooth the furrows away, she stirred and whimpered one, but did not wake. Still fresh out of the hospital, the walk to her apartment had probably exhausted her, so for once, she was resting deeply, if laden with sad dreams. For him, her current condition was a godsend, and would
make what he was about to do far easier to accomplish.

Preparing his newly developed ability for use, he leaned down and pressed his forehead to hers, and sighed against her lips. He then carefully, tentatively, eased his will into her mind, and started searching through her memories for the ones relating to him. As he gathered them together, their contents flickered before him like dimmed strobe lights, impressing themselves into his brain. Some of these memories he experienced immediately, learning what she'd thought and felt during those instances, while others would be perused at a later date. Yet by the time he'd completed the collection stage, and had begun the stage of burial, he'd become certain of an awful truth: that no matter what kind of pain Cassandra was in, she wouldn't have wanted this. She would have wanted to remember the moments she'd spent with him, not have them sealed away…but now that the process had begun, Mewtwo couldn't bring himself to reverse it. Despite how she might have disapproved, his priority was still to ensure their safety – and his meddling, as it were, would accomplish that. Perhaps someday, he could lift the memory block and they could begin anew…but for the time being, this was for the best.

When she awoke the next morning, she'd remember nothing of him. From this point on, she'd begun drinking mint tea for no discernable reason. From this point on, Shadow had been left to her by a compassionate stranger. From this point on, her pleasant nights had mellowed into black and empty dreams. And from this point on, the entity known as Mewtwo would simply not exist to her. The loathsome task completed, Mewtwo withdrew his psychical energies from her, and opened his eyes to peer at her for a few moments longer. This was the woman he loved, the woman he'd lost, and the woman he could not forget…and dipping his muzzle down, he pressed a kiss to her mouth one last time, and murmured his goodbye. Drawing back from her still sleeping form afterwards, he stood and began gathering the evidence of them from around the apartment, not wanting to leave anything behind that could unveil a memory. Soon added to the shoebox of their photographs were little things: the penciled drafts of "Ziv"; the ribbons from the boxes of peanut candies they'd shared; the dried-out flowers pressed between the pages of her books; and the short notes they'd written each other, sometimes telling the other where they'd gone, and sometimes expressing their love in haiku form. These items were nothing fancy, but had been more precious to them than any gems could hope to be…but even so, their fate would be the fire.

With a leaden heart, he found the last of the remnants, and tucking them into the box, began to step towards the door…and then saw Shadow sitting by the closet. How long the eevee had been watching him work, he couldn't guess, but regardless of if it had been one hour or one minute, it made no difference. In the end, the kit's reaction would've been the same: utterly confused, he asked the clone what he was doing. When Mewtwo reluctantly answered the child, the kit could only stare up at him with wide, reproachful eyes, unable to believe that his "father" could be so cruel. How could he force his mate to forget her precious memories, and take away some of her most treasured things? How could he justify doing that to his mate…?

The clone would not patronize the eevee, and say that he'd understand when he was older. Instead he dismissed that issue, and nodding to Cassandra, whispered to the kit, "Make of my actions whatever you will. All I ask is that you take care of her for me, since she will need you now, perhaps more than ever before. Will you do that, Shadow…?"

Recollecting somewhat from the older pokémon, the eevee nodded nonetheless and went to his "mother," leaping onto the bed and snuggling up against her belly. And perhaps it was from feeling the kit's sudden, fuzzy warmth against her stomach, or perhaps it was from hearing the clone's footfalls upon the tiled floor, but either way, Cassandra once again began to stir awake. Yet this time, her eyes drifted open, and blinking through a haze of inexplicable tears, she reached up to wipe the moisture away…and stilled as she caught sight of him. Keeping his hood in place to obscure his features, he nonetheless felt his heart quiver as she gazed at him, with sorrow and trust shining in her
pale grey eyes. Eventually he murmured to her, "Please...please, do not look at me with those eyes," because he knew, he knew that he didn't deserve her trust anymore, not after what he'd done to her, not after he'd...

"Who...who are you?"

...It was the most obvious response she could have given him, and yet somehow all the more awful and wounding for it. From an intellectual standpoint, Mewtwo had known how his manipulations would affect his dove, and should have been able to anticipate this inquiry from her. Yet instead, he could only stare at his angel in silent anguish, appalled by the lack of recognition within her eyes. Like Victor Frankenstein when gazing upon the Creature he'd labored over, having committed ungodly acts to imbue that being with life, the clone only wanted to flee from the site of his unnatural crime. During the seconds that trickled by, he managed to curb that flight response, and eventually found his voice again. Keeping his words hushed and reassuring, he told the angel that he was nothing more than a dream, and again, implored her not to look at him with her moonlight eyes. He could no longer endure her teary gaze, and in an attempt to rid himself of the sight, he lulled her back into sleep with hypnosis...and then, clutching the box of their belongings to him, he teleported back to his own chambers, and prepared to turn them into ashes....

Bright as molten copper, the candle flame licked and consumed the papers and photographs the clone held over it, causing them to curl and blacken as they were reduced to ashes. Similarly, as Mewtwo glanced at the words and images before incinerating them, he felt the softer part of his soul warp and burn away, until it was nothing more than a mote within his twisted spirit. After working to the bottom of the box, until there was only one picture left to destroy, even that particle would soon vanish...but here he paused, keeping the photograph just beyond the reach of the tiny flame. He allowed his eyes to trace each detail of the image, to take in the captured scene of his beloved and himself resting beneath the bedcovers, just stirring awake to the dawn, whose rosy light was filtering through the kitchen window. After gazing at it a few seconds longer, he drew it away from the lit candle, deciding that he could afford to save at least one tangible snapshot of their time together. While he retained his memories, and while he'd decided to keep their rings and the chain, he still wanted a way to see her face as the morning light caressed her skin, as she smiled softly with contentment and peace. Since he could no longer do so in person, and the vividness of his recollections might fade with time, he would hold onto these few treasures, hiding them away where they wouldn't be found nor damaged, where he could retrieve them at a later date.

After that task was completed, a week would pass before he allowed himself to ask the question, that one uncertain, frustrated, painful inquiry he hadn't wanted to confront: for if his purpose wasn't to walk next to her for all of his days, then what was it? Having long ago mastered his abilities, he had no further training to pursue anymore, and this left him entirely directionless. So how was he to spend his life now? What purpose was he living for...? As he asked that inquiry aloud, the voice of his remaining "partner" answered him from the balcony, making it quite clear what the cloned pokémon was supposed to be: not an equal to the man, but a tool for his use. To Giovanni, the replica was nothing more than a weapon, just like his own goddaughter was.

Yet unlike the girl, the clone of mew knew he could break away from Team Rocket, could leave this hellish place and pursue his own destiny, whatever that might be....

So as his rage at the cruel and ugly world boiled over, he shouted that he would never be enslaved by human beings, and unleashed his psychical energies upon the laboratories. Headless of the lives that might be lost, he destroyed the facility and soared away from its ruins, passing through the cinders and smoke in an instant. Streaking into the sky as a blue-flamed comet, he shed the armor meant to control and subdue him, like a wasp emerging from its pupae. Having grown considerably
and lost the tenderness he'd so recently possessed, the simile was appropriate enough, for he would no longer be a caring and vulnerable creature whose heart could love. Turning to bitterness and wickedness instead, he vowed to strike back against those who'd injured him, to reshape the Earth into a paradise where outcasts like he could happily exist. Perhaps once the current system was purged, when only the worthy remained, he could find his companions and give them the life he'd promised them. For surely they would survive the encroaching storm, for their souls transcended those belonging to the filth around them, and would preserve them until the sun again shone. However, if they succumbed like those around them, then that would prove what he currently suspected: that he was meant to live alone. Lacking a companion at "birth," he might simply be destined to die without one…and if that were the case, he'd accept it without complaint.

Either way, he was determined to never look back…because in the end, wondering what could have been was the saddest fate of all….

Years after his hatred, his insanity, and his musings of genocide had been quelled, Mewtwo's shoulders began to ease, as if a great weight had been lifted from them. "So now you know," he finished, sorrow and relief mingling within him in equal measures. After concealing the story of his first and only love for so long, it was surprisingly cathartic to recount it to someone, despite the fact that doing so probably wouldn't change his current situation in the slightest.

Saddened and appalled by how his tale had ended, his companion scarcely knew what to say in response. "Espe? Espeon?" she eventually whispered, wondering at his initial, non-violent solution to the conflict. "Amnesia? That's how you resolved things?" She'd suspected as much, but it was distressing to discover that her friend had invaded and manipulated his precious mate in such a way. If he could do that to her, then she shuddered to think of what else he might be capable of.

Lowering his gaze to meet her horrified one, he sighed and said, "Had I not, the temptation to see each other again would have proven irresistible. By erasing her memories of me, it eliminated the possibility of her seeking me out, and made it impossible for me to consider doing the same. After all, how could I bear to face a Cassandra who did not know me…? After that night, our relationship ceased to exist in her mind, as it later would in the minds of Giovanni and his blonde-haired beta. And while Shadow retained his memories, he had not been present during the more private moments I had shared with her, which gave me sole possession of those events. That meant that if anything happened to my mind, the last place in which they continued to survive, then it would be as if they never occurred…as if she and I had never been mates at all."

At the wretched thought, the corners of his mouth tucked upwards in an inexplicable, wry grin. Had Psyche been privy to his thoughts in that moment, she would've heard him recall a human saying: that to be forgotten is worse than death. Having stumbled across it months ago, he'd immediately surmised that this belief of theirs was valid, since he had firsthand knowledge of how it felt to be forgotten. While he may have brought such a fate upon himself, it was nonetheless a virulent one; for while it had spared him from being hunted down by certain humans, it also meant that his potential demise might go unnoted and unmourned. He might even be denied the most basic and earthly form of an afterlife, of living on within the memories of those he'd met over the years. In a way, he thought that might even be appropriate, since returning to oblivion was befitting for someone who'd been created from it. Yet no matter how that ending suited him, he still wanted his death to matter to someone in this world, for his soul to linger in another's heart. Having drifted across the globe, observing its chaos but rarely engaging in it, he'd discovered that such a life – no matter how liberating – was ultimately meaningless to him. Without anything to give it value, he'd merely filled his days with empty things - and now that his days seemed numbered, he was determined to engrave himself into the heart of someone else, be it friend or foe.
Because in the end, if he could not find someplace to belong in life, then he wanted to ensure that one was waiting for him in death.

And if that home could once again be Cassandra's heart, then he could die without regret…because she would give it meaning.

"Espe?" Psyche eventually asked him quietly, drawing him from his thoughts. "Do you regret it now?"

"…I regretted it the moment I began sifting through her memories, when I learned just how precious they were to her," he confessed to the espeon, unable to meet her gaze. "And now that I must gaze upon her again, knowing what we were and seeing what my actions did to her, I am positively sick with remorse. For despite how strong and how beautiful a woman she has become, she is no longer the creature I cherished. By removing my presence from her life, I led her to believe that she was alone during the worst period in her youth, with only a little eevee to comfort her. As a result, all of the progress she had made, all of the warmth she had gained, all of the reasons she had found for continuing to move forward – all of that was eradicated within minutes, completely altering the path she was wandering down. With the power at my fingertips, I turned my mate into a ghost, and undermined the person she had been turning into."

"Admittedly, there are similarities between who Cassandra was and who she is now - that much cannot be denied. There are even moments when those likenesses are so strong that I long to approach her and embrace her again. Yet I am merely fooling myself each time, for she is not the same person anymore, and neither am I. We have both changed from the dreaming children we once were, and if she could recall our past together, I am certain she would agree."

Mulling over his words and everything she'd learned during the twilight, Psyche felt fatigued in a way that had nothing to do with recently giving birth and then staying up the entire night. On the eastern horizon, the sky began to grow bright and rosy, the fiery light weakening the darkness in the city. However, even as daybreak approached, the temperature of the autumn air remained frosty, hinting at the snow that would soon settle across the lands of the northern hemisphere. For a matter of months, half of the Earth would begin to quiet, lulled into lethargy by the long, cold nights, until spring arrived and renewed the vigor of the natural world. Yet until that happened, the winter would continue to drain those under its sway, careless of the lives the ice snatched away. It was during this time when creatures needed another beside them the most, to warm them and whisper that eventually, the most forbidding season of all would end. The sun would rise and reclaim its heavenly kingdom, and life on earth would flourish vibrantly once more; for that was the miracle of resurrection, which the patient were entitled to bear witness to. Yet without someone to wait out the ice with, there were those who chose to succumb to the seemingly endless night…and Mewtwo, the vixen worried, might be among those who considered doing so.

Anxiety gnawing on her innards, the new mother reviewed her companion's situation: the woman he'd once adored, who'd been his student, his teacher, his partner, and his mate, had been sent to his doorstep to murder him. Given everything that Cassandra had once meant to him, she could understand why he'd hesitated to fight her, why he'd spared her life and treated her considerately. Struggling to see her as anything but an angel – his angel - he was incapable of thinking of her as an enemy, which left his methods of coping with her limited at best.

"Espeon?" she wondered aloud, realizing how he'd been maneuvered into a corner. "What are you going to do?" What could he possibly do…?

"…If your mate appeared and attempted to end your life, would you be able to resist him? Would you be able to murder him so you could continue living?"
Were it not for her kits, the espeon wouldn't have the strength to do…and even then, tearing out his throat would tear her apart as well. Closing her almond eyes, she shook her head once, and heard Mewtwo sigh into the chilled, morning air. "This is Giovanni's way of punishing me for my misdeeds, both proven and perceived alike. He knows that Cassandra has forgotten me, and will deliver a killing blow without a moment's hesitation. He knows that even if I fight with her, I cannot murder her, because I have no resolve to do so. He knows that she is my Achilles' heel, the arrow I cannot repel, and believes that she will succeed in her mission here. And for once, he and I are in complete agreement - for I am almost certain she will kill me."

And when his friend opened her eyes, just as the ruby sun breached the ocean, turning the grey waters bloody, she saw him smile sadly and heard him say, "That would be a hellish and merciful way to die, would it not? To perish beneath her hands, with her eyes being the last I see…? Yet if there is anyone who has the right to end my life, if there is anyone I could request to commit the deed, then it would be her a hundred times over. Even if that might be cruel of me, it can only be her…just her, Cassandra, the woman I once called 'dove'…and no one else."

As her kits finished nursing, settling into dreams of soft things and sweet scents one by one, their mother licked them clean, wondering what would happen next. Her roommate appeared to have accepted the notion that he might soon be dead, and didn't even seem bothered by the thought. After learning his perspective, she could understand his reason for calmly facing the reaper: to him, the alternatives were simply unacceptable. As a proud being, he refused to lose his composure in front of Cassandra, wanting her current memories of him to reflect the person he'd matured into. And as a noble being, he refused to choose his life over that of his once-mate's, no matter if she was the one threatening him. Yet as admirable as his conduct was, Psyche couldn't help but think of him as a fool: for he'd decided to give up, rather than fight to preserve what he had and regain what he'd lost. Weary from battling all of his life, and dejected from losing his sources of solace time and again, he now found the thought of death just as appealing as the thought of life, due to the peace it promised. Adding Cassandra to the already stark picture only worsened his mental state, thanks to the remorse, guilt, and lingering warmth he felt for her, and thanks to his solemn belief that she had every right to murder him.

Certain that he didn't deserve to know happiness again, he'd chosen to forfeit the possibility entirely, insuring that he'd never again know the sweetness of being with his beloved. In doing so, he shunned the lesson he'd learned years ago: that once we gain something or someone precious to us, there will come a day when we'll lose them. No matter how hard we might struggle to control and hinder the process, that outcome – and what often happens as a result – is unavoidable. Driven insane by our grief, we almost always then seek to refill the void within us, and in doing so, merely set ourselves up for the next fall. We continue circling down this arduous track, ever questing to find happiness and hope just one more time…and for these efforts, we are sometimes rewarded with both, at least for a short while. Even knowing that it will all someday end, perhaps never even to begin anew, most of us find ourselves content with this beautiful and ugly cycle, for to us, it represents the essence of life: the pursuit of heaven through hell, which we can choose to forgo at any point.

Yet while the clone had the right to walk off that track, never to resume his journey, Psyche couldn't accept him doing so...because in the end, it was not only his happiness that he was sacrificing. By withholding their history from Cassandra, he was limiting her options, denying her the chance to reclaim the bliss she'd once shared with him. And though Psyche couldn't know how the woman would react to learning the truth – hell, she might even find the idea of murdering the clone even more appealing – that didn't change the fact that her current ignorance was unmerited and unjust. No matter the consequences, the human deserved to know about her past with Mewtwo, deserved to remember the wonder and passion she'd experienced with him, and deserved to understand what he'd once meant to her before trying to kill him again. Resolved to accomplish that much, Psyche
rose from her slumbering kits, nuzzling them and breathing in their scents before she left. Although they smelled so much like her, she was certain she could detect traces of their father's scent from them. Taking strength from the memory of Eros, she walked to the guest room Cassandra was staying in, knowing that Mewtwo was too far away to intervene. Having wandered into the city to reorder his thoughts, this was probably her only chance to guide the human to the truth.

And perhaps from there, the clone and the angel would find a way to save themselves....

As the lavender vixen opened the door and stepped into the room, Cassandra sat up and peered at the pokémon with ash-grey eyes.

"...Espeon?" Meeting the gaze that so haunted her roommate, she asked its owner, "...Do you want to know who Mewtwo's lover was?"

Surprise flickered over the agent's face at the inquiry, and for a moment, she merely stared at the vixen warily, before nodding for Psyche to continue. While she didn't know why the espeon was willing to give her such information, she was far too curious about the subject to turn down the offer. And seeing the hunger growing in Cassandara's eyes, Psyche wondered over how eager the woman was to learn what would be – to her – such an earth-shattering truth. Yet by agreeing to this route, there would be no turning back for her now, just as there wouldn't be for the espeon. And so, unflinching as she did so, the pokémon gave Cassandra the key to reclaiming her lost memories. For before the clone had journeyed into the city, he'd admitted to his roommate where the last, tangible fragment of his past with the angel was. Held within the leather-bound book upon his nightstand, its pages filled with haiku and theories and quotes, was the one photograph he'd spared from the flames.

And the espeon, resolved to correct the wrong her friend had committed, told his dove exactly where it was....

As their conversation reached its close, Psyche had only one more question she needed to ask her companion - not because she had any doubts about the answer, but because she wished to know what he believed that answer was. After recapturing his attention, the ruby sun casting fire into his eyes as he turned towards her, she quietly spoke that final inquiry, fully understanding just how personal the question was.

"Espeon, espe...?" she murmured to him, watching him closely for some form of reaction. "Do you still love her, Mewtwo...?"

His paw twitched…but he did not speak. Yet even so, his silence proved strangely eloquent to her in that moment, as the dawn continued to strengthen behind him. For as it always did, the sun was continuing to rise, continuing to exile the darkness of all things, including the shadows surrounding one's heart...

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Author's Note: Some readers might be wondering why Mewtwo didn't erase Giovanni's and Domino's memories instead of Cassandra's. The first reason is that he simply didn't do so in his first movie, given the events we saw in the second. The second reason is that this wouldn't have fixed the problem. If his and Cassandra's relationship was discovered once, it would have been discovered
again the moment they slipped up. Others might be wondering why Mewtwo didn't simply take Cassandra and Shadow with him when he left. The reason for this will be revealed in a later chapter, though again, the meta reason for this is because he didn't do so in the first movie and I'm trying to comply to canon when I can.

Sincerely,

WiseAbsol
"You hold the answers deep within your own mind. Consciously, you've forgotten it. That's the way the human mind works. Whenever something is too unpleasant, too shameful for us to entertain, we reject it. We erase it from our memories. But the imprint is always there. Nothing is ever really forgotten."


Agent Cassandra Merlo, the assassin of Team Rocket, stood before her target as nothing more than a lost young woman.

She trembled beneath his gaze, struggling to suppress the emotions rising within her, struggling to determine which actions she should take next, struggling not to show weakness by crumbling in front of him. Yet even though she tried to uphold a strong front, she couldn't bring herself to meet his gaze or raise a hand against him. However, he knew she would lash out at him if he tried to comfort her as he had when they were younger. In her mind, he no longer had the right to touch her, having forfeited that privilege the moment he'd begun meddling with her memories. And Mewtwo, certain that he'd committed an inhumane crime, could scarcely argue with her reasoning. After invading her mind, after having his way with her thoughts, after stealing away her remembered smiles, he'd become a variation of her worst nightmare. Once her beloved wildcat, he'd transformed into a monster disturbingly reminiscent of Biancardi…and ultimately, this likeness was enough to drive her mad.

For now Cassandra had to wonder if monsters were the only beings drawn to her, and if she secretly craved their abuse. Perhaps she'd lived in the underworld for too long, becoming warped to the point where healthy humans could only shun her, and she, in turn, rejected them outright. For like Belial Biancardi, the clone of mew was not human, and arguably didn't possess a soul. After all, God hadn't conceived of him; Its defiant children had, committing deicide in the act of stealing Its powers of creation. Once they'd begun to decipher the mysteries of life and cosmic matter, of the way the spirit is formed, they'd spurned the thought of a divine being, having uncovered no empirical evidence to prove Its existence. From there, as the number of Its worshippers dwindled, the entity Itself had begun to sicken and die, weakening until Its remains were finally buried beneath the ruins of memory.

Similarly, the love between two people is no different from that fading deity: for without a foundation of faith between them, their feelings will eventually wither away into nothingness. Or at least that's what happens most of the time. Unfortunately, Mewtwo's and Cassandra's case wasn't so simple: for despite all the ways they'd harmed one another, the undertones of attraction and affection remained within each of them. Certainly, these had been muted within the woman, but after her memories began reasserting themselves within her mind, they'd stoked up those feelings with renewed zeal. She might have even wept and embraced the clone again, if it weren't for that fact that he'd willingly reduced her mind to cinders.

But since he'd done exactly that, she reacted with anger and disgust, and quaking from those poisonous emotions, hissed at him, "...What the fuck is wrong with you? How could you possibly justify doing that to me? You – you manipulated me, you lied to me, you hurt me and had me
tortured - oh god, you had me tortured! Why the fuck would you do that? Why?"

Yet even as she asked him these questions, she could think of several reasons he might give. Hell, if she’d possessed his abilities, she might have even done something similar in his stead! However, she hadn’t wanted to forget about him, no matter how much the thought of him had made her heart ache. She’d wanted to bask in the memory of their short-lived romance, to keep herself breathing by remembering the happy moments they’d shared…but Mewtwo hadn’t given her a choice in the matter, instead callously depriving her of that bittersweet joy. He’d victimized her, had disregarded her innate right to know her past, and now had the gall to appear distraught over her reaction! He even attempted to apologize to her, as if he’d merely destroyed some material possession of hers, like a bicycle, rather than something as valuable as her memories.

In a low voice, with regret permeating his words (but oh, she wouldn’t take pity on him, for he’d brought this on himself!), he murmured, "I wanted to protect you, from both the heartache and from Giovanni's wrath - and to this day, my reasoning remains unchanged. Yet even so, I am sorry. You chose me as your partner, believing that I would never consciously do anything that would harm you…but that is precisely what I did. For that, I do not expect your forgiveness, nor do I believe I am worthy of it. Yet all the same, I…please Cassandra, I…"

Daring to risk her wrath, he reached towards her, intending to rest his paw upon her cheek…and felt his heart sink as she jerked backwards, denying him the sensation of her skin beneath his fingertips. For a moment, his arm lingered outstretched, before he slowly and faltering retracted it, allowing it to fall back to his side. Between them was little more than a meter, but that meter represented a chasm he knew he could no longer cross; for he had burned the bridge he’d built with her, to her, in a way none of their enemies could have hoped to achieve. For years he may have managed to overlook the destruction he’d wrought, having persuaded himself that if she someday did remember him, she’d welcome him back into her life. But that had merely been the hope of a fool. Hearing how labored her breathing had grown, as if she was being strangled, he understood that he’d actually wrapped his fingers around her throat years prior, and only now were they both feeling the pressure. Yet even as sobs threatened to overtake her, as she shuddered at the realization of how she’d been betrayed, he doubted she would allow herself to cry. She was well past the point where tears would adequately express her revulsion. But as her fury strengthened at his perceived insolence, it became a struggle for her not to lose control…and although he admired her ability to restrain herself, he dearly wished she wouldn't do so: for no matter how harsh her retaliation might be, he’d earned it in full. Furthermore, there were times in someone's life when it's far more gratifying to collapse than to remain dignified, and he wouldn't think less of her if she broke down now.

And as the silence stretched between them, punctuated only by her sharp gasps, that was precisely what she did. Rushing towards him with clenched fists, an irate cry tearing itself from her throat as she sprung, she began pounding at his stomach, his ribs, his chest, never pulling her punches nor minding the pain that was pulsating through her knuckles. Yet even as she battered him, bruising her hands and draining herself in the process, it wasn’t enough to quell the hurt and resentment she was feeling. Eventually, as her blows grew weaker and slower, she shook off the arms surrounding her and withdrew from his reach, and then finally, finally lifted her eyes to meet his.

Gleaming like molten lead, her gaze incinerated what remained of his hope, while her words scattered its ashes in the murky space between them. "...You can’t...you can’t come back for me now, not after putting me through hell just to make yourself feel better! Even though you gave me back my memories, it doesn’t excuse what you did! It doesn’t make up for you stealing them in the first place, and then choosing to keep hiding them from me, so...so don’t you dare try crawling back to me! I’m not the person you loved anymore – you buried that girl with your own hands - so just leave me alone! After all these years, surely that can’t be so hard for you to do?"
With the keenness of any hunting blade, that inquiry gutted the wildcat, leaving him cold and empty as his blood, bile, and innards all spilled onto the floor. Unable to think of a suitable response, he mutely watched as Cassandra stepped away from him, retreating into the guest bedroom and securing the door behind her. In all likelihood, she understood how complicated their situation had been, and understood how much it had pained him to live without her...but right now, she simply needed to think of him as her enemy. Her duties to Team Rocket aside, this was the easiest way for her to cope with what he'd done: as a wronged woman, rather than as his wounded dove. In taking this stance, she was almost insuring that they would never regain what they'd lost, and that their violent beginning would be matched with a violent end. Clenching his jaw at the thought, the clone teleported outside into the bitter cold, and lifted his gaze to encompass the waning, indifferent moon.

And beneath its fading light, he remembered that he'd once been given the chance to save them from fading completely....

"I think you'll be quite pleased with the progress we've made," Dr. Kitadake boasted as he led his superiors deeper into the Viridian Base laboratories. When they reached the observation room, he gestured for them to take two of the seats. He remained unruffled as the blonde teenager declined one, opting to lean against the wall instead. After several months of having her observing his committees, he'd grown used to her little quirks, and was content that her boss, at the very least, was willing to follow his suggestion. Sitting to the man's left, the scientist grinned as he peered through the bay window before them: through the eight-centimeter thick glass was one of the testing chambers, where some of his "disposable" interns were fretting over their latest specimen. Wearing hefty biohazard suits, insulated with a Kevlar mesh and coated with flame-retardant, and armed with injections of sodium thiopental and tasers alike, they were as prepared to deal with the creature strapped down to the steel medical table as they could be. All the same, they moved warily around the creature, who was stirring from what had previously been a nearly comatose state.

"Since we received the personnel transfers from Committee Kuroi, our group has made several improvements to the G.V. serum, namely concerning the catalyst: its effectiveness has had around a twenty percent increase since our last report. However, despite our efforts so far, the incubation period is still continuing to fluctuate around sixty hours. In the upcoming months, we believe we can whittle down the average rate another twelve hours or so, but for now, we're more interested in how the serum manifests, rather than the when," he explained, and nodding to the specimen strapped to the table, continued, "The current case you are viewing was, incidentally, exposed to the serum fifty-eight hours ago, and is now progressing into the third and final stage."

The wiry doctor, with slicked-back dark hair, slanted green eyes, and features as narrow and sharp as a razor, breathed out a satisfied sigh as he watched his labors come into fruition. Illuminated with a harsh, white light from above, the infected specimen - an arcanine who'd been rendered lame in a recent battle - was beginning to thrash against its bonds, its black lips curling over its fangs in an agitated snarl. Lolling its head against the steel table, flames began to whirl within its maw, seeping out to char the leather bindings around its snout, the straps soon snapping from duress. As it forced open its jaws, its snarling became a full-fledged roar, with flecks of spittle flying from its mouth, while its claws dug into the metal beneath it with a high-pitched screech. Convulsing and bucking against the other restraints, it eventually clamped its fangs into the leather around its left front paw and yanked back, tearing one claw free, and moved on to the next. Soon rising up on its forelimbs, it twisted around and began gnawing at the other restraints, shaking off the electrical shocks from the tasers like bothersome, biting flies. By the time the alarmed interns realized the futility of their efforts and began reaching for the loaded needle-guns, the situation in the room was spiraling out of control. Viciously tearing itself free from its restraints, the infected canine coiled its limbs and launched itself at the nearest human, sinking its fangs and claws into the man's dense suit.
Even through the layers of nomex and Kevlar, it could smell the blood in the intern's veins, hear the frenzied pounding of his heart, could almost taste his viscera from here. It merely needed to tear through the artificial cocoon to reach the tender meat within, which it longed to ravage like a starving wolf did to an unprotected yearling. But this attack wasn't in retaliation for what this human and its colleagues had done to it, for how they'd poisoned it less than three days prior. No, this arcanine's desire to maim and kill, to taste their gore and entrails, was driven by another source entirely – a source which was eating away at its remaining elemental energies, self-awareness, and vitality.

Bestowed with a rabid lust for the hunt, it needed to fulfill a single, simple purpose: to spread the contagion it carried to another, and another, and another, until that contagion finished incinerating it from the inside out. Brimming with adrenaline and endorphins, the diseased canine could neither sleep nor feel pain, and would – if given the opportunity - continue to prey upon others until exhaustion and dehydration ruined its body.

Watching the feral dog continue to assault the screaming intern, Giovanni rose to his feet to get a better look, and asked, "This one was infected by the bite of a previous specimen, was it not?"

Following his superior to his feet, Dr. Kitadake took his reading glasses out of his front pocket and consulted his notes on this particular test subject. "...Yes, that's correct. Naturally, we intend to eliminate such a drastic method, since you wished for the serum's transmission to be subtle. A gaping wound it hardly inconspicuous, but for now, we're focusing on increasing the aggressor response, which that Cinnabar intern is demonstrating for us quite nicely."

The crime lord grunted in agreement, and motioning for Agent 009 - who was peering into the testing chamber with narrowed eyes - to come to his side, he said, "You've done well thus far, Doctor. Now, since you decided to demonstrate your progress to me personally, should I surmise that the compound's prototypes will be ready for field tests soon?"

Nodding once, the scientist murmured, "My committee is confident that we can begin large-scale trials within the upcoming year. We already have several sites in mind that would be suitable for such tests; zones that are reasonably isolated, with limited human populations. We can simultaneously contain an outbreak, observe its natural progression, and take note of how the civilians and governmental officials respond to its spread. In all, refining the strains and their delivery strategies in these smaller areas would prove...informative...before moving on to larger, more vital targets. It may take time, and we may lose the element of surprise, but we'll gain a completely viable product with such a tactic, and stir our neighbors into a panic as a bonus."

The Signore, having already discussed that same approach with Domino, stated that that would be perfect. Musing that both the doctor's primary committee and Committee Kuroi were progressing nicely, he meditated on the part Committee Shoroi was to play, and thought aloud, "Now all we need is the sample Agent Merlo is bringing to us. Once she returns, we can begin working on the final part of this project. Soon you will have even more to oversee, Kitadake, so do try not to disa-.

Startling the trio, the canine in the other chamber threw itself into the glass, having surrendered its previous prey to the other interns. Perhaps it was merely lashing out at its reflection, or perhaps it had somehow detected the three through the looking glass - either way, it wouldn't make it through the barrier to its new target. Pressing a needle-gun into its neck, the nearest researcher pulled to trigger, injecting a lethal dose of sodium thiopental into its system. As unconsciousness began to overwhelm it, it wavered on its paws, stumbled, and then crashed to the tiled floor. In mutual cautiousness, the Team Rocket Elite and their subordinates peered down at the beast, watching as its saliva dribbled from its maw, as its quickened breathing began to slow and fade away. Even as it began to go into cardiac arrest, it continued to stare through the window at them with its completely gray eyes, its corneas clouded with cataracts, and the sclera and the irises of the orbs having turned a smoky hue.
And then, slowly, it closed those eyes to the ones who'd killed it, and sank into the peace of lifelessness….

"Espe. Espeon, es. Espeon? Espe...?" the lavender vixen had told her a day ago, her eyes clouding with some vague, unknown emotion as she spoke. "Within Mewtwo's bedroom is a small, moleskin notebook that holds a photograph of his former partner. Since he's absent for the time being, I'd recommend taking a good, long look at her face while you still have the change. After all, Mewtwo probably won't let you near that book if he's around. We both know he's much too fond of his privacy for that, right...?"

Intoxicating and sobering like a rich, red wine, the espeon's words flowed over Cassandra's curious mind, seeping into its crevasses until her thoughts were stained and saturated. As she approached the doorway into Mewtwo's bedchamber, she remembered – through a haze of anticipation – the oddities she'd encountered during this particular mission: the contradictory, ambivalent way the clone behaved in her presence, and the instances of familiarity she felt in his mannerisms, his movements, and even his gracile form. Many of his actions, she supposed, could be a reflection of his affections for the other girl, that female he'd seduced and then destroyed. After all, he'd admitted that he found her similar to his late lover, which might explain why he was drawn to her and repelled in equal measures. Yet what about the sensation of **déjà vu** niggling at the back of her brain, which had proven incessant during her fevered dreams and that melancholic song he'd played? Having never known the clone before being briefed on him, the agent found herself confronted with an irresistible enigma…and the key to solving it, it seemed, might now be within her reach.

Reaching out to the doorknob, she wondered if she might recognize the woman he'd treasured. Psyche's words seemed to imply that might be the case, but she couldn't be certain. If he'd been involved with the female when he’d been a member of Team Rocket, she supposed she might have seen the girl wandering through the base, and had simply never noticed her absence. True, she would have thought that news of the clone murdering a member of the organization would have quickly spread throughout the gang, but with his abilities, he could have disposed of the body quietly. That, and the girl might not have necessarily been missed; her rank, after all, might have been quite low, and without a family to worry over her absence, no one would have bothered searching for her. However, there was just as much of a chance that he'd seduced the woman outside of Team Rocket. There were years in his life that were still unaccounted for, after all. Despite having had other clones to care for, he could have always teleported away for a time, intent on courting the female and being taken into her bed. That scenario might actually be the more likely of the two – perhaps the photograph would provide her with some clues on which it was.

Distantly, a part of her was alarmed at how invested she'd become in learning Mewtwo's secrets, since she wasn't supposed to take an interest in his life, his death being her only concern. Trying to learn more about him like this – about a subject that had nothing to do with her mission - meant that she was allowing his life to become relevant to her, that she was starting to build a relationship with him, rather than keeping herself detached and doing her job. Profession killers, after all, were not supposed to grow attached to their victims, and were certainly not supposed to postpone the murder because they've gained a sense of wonder where their victims were concerned. And yet, she thought to herself, this wasn't like one of her other assignments. This one was different. Something was wrong with the world she'd stepped into, and she had to find out what it was - it was a persistent itch in her mind, growing ever more insistent as the days went by.

As she stepped into the clone's bedroom, her eyes landing on the book in an instant, she almost felt as if the air was growing denser with every step she took toward it, time beginning to still as her nerves trembled with eagerness. As she reached out and touched the thin journal, her fingertips roaming over its leather cover, she felt a shiver crawl up her spine, the way it did when she was
about to indulge in some immoral act. It seemed to feel heavier than she remembered when she
picked it up, perhaps because she now knew that it was filled with private thoughts, emotions, and
memories of the one she was hunting. Hesitating for only a moment, she flipped open the book and
began paging through it, glancing at the innumerable poems, quotes, theories, and ideas that filled its
yellowed pages, distantly hearing a soft voice whisper in the back of her mind: *curiosity killed the
cat, remember?*

And when she finally found the photograph, time stopped. She felt the cement crumble away
beneath her, felt herself plummet even as she froze in place, felt herself reeling as if her wings had
been clipped and no one was there to catch her before she hit the pavement. In that moment when
her mind smashed into incomprehension, when illusions and lies disintegrated against a cruel truth,
Mewtwo found her standing there, the book having tumbled from her hands, the Polaroid clutched
between her shaking fingers. He halted upon spotting the *thing* she held, upon sensing the miasmic
emotions whirling around her: confusion, shock, revulsion, *fear*, because now she *knew* that
there *wasn't anything wrong* with the world she'd stepped into.

Instead, *everything* was wrong with hers.

As she heard him step up behind her, she ceased writhing in a bloody mess within her mind (*"it isn't
the fall that kills you, little raven, it's the sudden stop"*) and asked in a harsh, quivering voice,
"What…what is this?"

The creature behind her said nothing…and really, what *could* he have said to placate her then?
Spinning around, she held the photograph in front of his face. "Is - is this your *sick* version of a
practical joke? You make a fake photo with…with *me* in it, and egg Psyche on to - how the hell did
you get a picture of me when I was-?"

"*I haven't nearly enough experience in photo-rendering to have done what you are suggesting, nor
would I have had the desire to do so. That image is authentic - its faded quality and the wear it
possesses should be enough to make that clear to you, even if you do not comprehend what it
shows.*"

She stared at him for a moment, stunned, and then took a step back, shaking her head disbelief.
"You're lying. I never…not willingly…not with *you*-!"

His eyes flashed and narrowed with an emotion akin to anger at that, and thrusting his paw outwards,
he pulled the picture from her grasp as she flinched back. Grasping the Polaroid delicately, he
 glanced down at it, allowing his gaze to linger over the scene it had captured: the bed being softly
illuminated by the morning sunlight, its grey comforter pulled up over the waists of the couple within
it, who were only just then stirring awake. The clone was lying on his back among its covers, his
arms wrapped around the creature resting on top of him…and neither of them was wearing anything
that even remotely resembled clothing. True, nothing was revealed as far as private regions of their
anatomies were concerned, and their actions in that moment were innocent enough…but even so,
their nakedness clearly conveyed what their activities must have been in previous hours. Perhaps
remembering the night before, the girl blushed as her fingertips stroked at his shoulders, as the
faintest gleam of platinum shone from her ring finger, as he pressed his muzzle into her hair, his eyes
closed as he breathed in the scent of her. Her own eyes were half-lidded and still glazed with sleep,
but despite the wretchedly early hour, she was smiling with contentment. It vaguely amused him now
to remember how his spine and tail had been *aching*, but having thought to himself back then that it
was worth it, just waking up with her like that….

It had been one of those rare *perfect* moments, and as he'd held the photograph near the flame like
the others, he'd been unable to eradicate it. Now, it seemed, his sentimentality and weakness would
exact an ugly price; for he knew that if Psyche had simply told Cassandra the truth, the woman wouldn't have believed her. But now, faced with incriminating evidence that she had been his partner, she could only make a flimsy attempt at denial. As he lifted his gaze to peer at her, he saw that she'd also seemed to realize this, and was gazing at him with dread. Her eyes silently begged him to lie to her, to retract his earlier statement and say – perhaps - that this was all an elaborate social experiment, a method of psychological torture he'd devised specifically to invert her reality, all just to see how she'd squirm. Such a machination, heinous as it might be, would have been easier for her to accept than the alternative she was now being faced with. And for an instant, he considered being merciful and telling her just that, for either way, he would still have done her a grave wrong. But now that their past had risen from its grave, he hadn't the heart to rebury it…and he wasn't even certain it would be fair for him to do so. Try as he had to prevent it, verity would no longer be hidden away, and now he would have to deal with the consequences of his deceit.

He moved forward before she had a chance to speak again.

There was a flash of white before Cassandra found herself trapped against the clone, his tail wrapped around her legs, his arms constricting around hers, preventing her from both escaping and lashing out at him. Then, in a sharp and silver sensation, moist and heated, she felt his mouth against her neck, his teeth nipping into the skin of her throat just above her choker. She jerked before instinctively stilling, knowing on a primal level that his canines were poised to rip open her flesh. The act itself would be easy enough for him to commit, though she'd never imagined that he'd resort to such a predatory method to kill her with. For him to tear out someone's throat just seemed so primitive of him…but she supposed he was capable of doing so if he wished. He had more than enough strength in his jaws to bite through her windpipe, even with his omnivorous teeth slightly hindering the process. Yet instead of crunching down and savoring the taste of her as she bled out, he merely held her there, saying nothing as she grew increasingly unsettled and irate.

"What are you do-?"

A low inquiry sliced through her mind. "You are not afraid of this, are you…?"

As bewilderment flooded her brain, he elaborated on his meaning. "…The prospects of pain and death, which usually fill other beings with dread, have no effect on you any longer, do they? The thought of me killing you here and now does not make you feel even the slightest shade of fear, for over the last several years, you have shed your attachment to your own life. As a result, many consider you to be fearless, because not even these primal dreads manage to chill you…and as far as they know, you are lacking in more irrational phobias."

"And yet…I know that you are not without fear. You are simply able to hide what frightens you better than most." And here he hesitated, realizing that if he continued he'd be crossing a very distinct line…but that reluctance soon passed, and he pressed forward, feeling her pulse beating against his lips. "…After all, who would suspect you of being afraid of being intimate with another person? Of experiencing something as sensual as this…."

And the feline brought the implications in the photograph – the implications which had so disturbed her – into reality as his bite changed. He wordlessly withdrew his fangs from her throat, replacing them with lips and tongue, his mouth caressing the sensitive skin of her neck in a passionate kiss that shook the woman to her core. His arms around her loosened slightly, shifting into an earnest embrace, his paws straying over her form, caressing the areas of her body he knew would most respond to his touch. Years had passed since he'd last truly experienced her, but he still remembered how to invoke unbridled desire in her, having been taught by her just how to stroke her and make her keen. And unlike the incident earlier in the month when they'd shared insincere kisses, toying with each other in a detached and mock playful manner, his actions now were sincere, committed in
his desire to make her tremble and flush from craving...and indeed, she was beginning to quiver, a faint cry rising from her throat as he slid a paw over her breasts. At one point, he even traced the kanji symbol for the word "regret" upon the small of her back, despite realizing that she wasn't in the proper state of mind to read and recognize it. She was beginning to fret and panic now, unable to tolerate his sexual advances.

Indeed, when she ceased making inarticulate sounds of protest, she began to beg for him to cease. "Mewtwo...Mewtwo stop! Please stop...!"

It was a frail and pitiful plea, and hearing it, he ceased his actions and sighed into her neck. 

"...You wished to know the truth, Cassandra? Very well – I will return it to you. Yet if you cannot stand this act, I cannot conceive of how you will tolerate something far more passionate."

He released her abruptly, shoving her away from him and lashing out with his psychical energies before she had a chance to regain her bearings. He tore through her mental defenses with ease, his metaphysical claws shredding them as if they were made of gossamer, and pressing onwards, he located the barriers he'd erected around her memories of him. Heedless of how she was stumbling back, he dissolved portions of those psychical walls, breaching their integrity. While they would now begin to fail, they would not fall all at once, instead crumbling away steadily, allowing her to regain her memories over an extended period of time. Eventually they would all reassert themselves into her mind, but for now, they would begin returning in flashes, summoned by the tiniest of sensory triggers. The corrective damage done, he withdrew from her mind and watched as she collapsed, a hand grasping onto the interweaving threads of his hammock, her breaths coming in shuddering gasps. Her eyes were wide and glazed as she stared at his feet, the first of her buried memories rising within her mind's eye, their contents splintered and interlaced and making little to no cohesive sense.

As the initial rush began to stem into a thin trickle, she barely heard Mewtwo - her once beloved and her current mark – tell her, "Your memories will return to you slowly. If they flooded your mind all at once, I have little doubt that you would go insane from the onslaught of information."

She couldn't even begin to formulate a response to that, and fortunately, Mewtwo did not expect her to. Instead, he lifted his journal and their picture from the floor and, placing the Polaroid back among the pages, went over to his nightstand and set the book where it had previously lain. Afterwards, he began to walk out of the room, not even giving the shocked and shaking woman beneath his hammock a backwards glance…but upon reaching the doorway, he looked over his shoulder, and with a hint of sorrow and remorse in his eyes, said, "...Cassandra...you have nothing to fear from me...not anymore."

And with those words, he left her there, leaving her alone to grapple with the memories of their past...

Over a fortnight had passed since the man had last visited Unit 150, and during his absence, he'd learned just how far along the Signore had progressed with his plans. Having taken great care to keep himself concealed, he'd managed to watch the experiments being conducted, had read through the confidential files on the three projects, and had reluctantly accepted the validity of the premonitions his companion had conveyed to him. Knowing what would happen when Cassandra Brennan returned to Viridian, he understood that he couldn't afford to linger here any longer – there was simply no more time left. Even so, he risked one detour before departing: he visited Cassandra's apartment for the last time, determined not to leave empty-handed or alone. Quickly gathering what he believed to be her most valued possessions, he peered at her umbreon and murmured an apology – for like the dark fox, he'd wanted to wait until the woman returned home, but that was simply not to be. As he mused on the grim nature of things to come, he grimaced and turned to the pokémon.
"You have my word, Shadow; you'll be with your mistress again someday. But for now there's work that has to be done. Are you ready?"

With obvious reluctance, the dark pokémon nodded, and – giving his home one last, long look, his heart heavy as he remembered all that had occurred within its walls - he followed at the man's side as they left, closing the door to an era of both of their lives behind them...

Filtering through the skylights, the late October sunlight illuminated the studio in shades of amber, the half-light reminiscent of the color of ambrosia. Slightly intoxicated by its warm and by the scent of their mother's milk, the espeon's kits nursed at her side, their tiny paws kneading into her lavender fur. From the shadows, Mewtwo watched the peaceful scene for a moment, before stepping forward and calling the mother's name in a low, cool voice. Having expected this confrontation for awhile, Psyche lifted her head and peered at him, her eyes showing no sign of remorse over betraying the clone's trust. Instead, they shone with solemn satisfaction, which only made the clone grit his teeth as his disgust deepened.

"Why...? Why did you reveal it to her?" It was a senseless question to ask, for he knew what her answer would be. Still, he wondered..., "Psyche, do you fully understand what you have done?"

"Es espe. Espeon, espe. Espeon," his confidant said, her forked tail flicking behind her, reminding him then of a serpent's tongue. "Yes, and I think it'll be better this way. If she doesn't automatically try to kill you out of anger, then maybe she won't try to kill you at all. Perhaps the memory of how much you meant to her will stay her hand."

He scoffed at that notion, which – in his bitterness - sounded so childish and naïve. "...You are a fool, Psyche."

In truth, there was a part of him (however deeply buried) that did desire for both Cassandra and him to live through this. However, he also knew that the matter wasn't nearly as simple as the espeon would like to believe. If Cassandra didn't succeed in completing her mission, that was one thing – a hit to her reputation, perhaps, but it would be understandable if she failed under the circumstances. However, if Cassandra refused to complete her mission, that was another matter entirely, and ultimately one with far more disastrous consequences. Her godfather, while it was doubtful that he would execute her for disobeying him, would likely make her punishment quite grave, to the point where death might even be preferable. And despite how much she and he had changed since they were younger, Mewtwo couldn't tolerate the thought of making her suffer in such a way. True, he was guilty of causing her undue pain, as he could sometimes be incredibly selfish and make terrible choices, but he would rather die than allow her to take the fall for him. He had even once expressed a similar sentiment to Giovanni himself, when the man had managed to ensnare him again. Crucified by shafts of lightning, Mewtwo had chosen to break a promise he'd made to his once-mate, hoping that he could defend her integrity in doing so...but now that everything was beginning to unravel, he was forced to wonder if he hadn't made yet another mistake back then....

Within the Mewtwo's makeshift lair, Giovanni Maki watched the screen displaying the clone's brainwaves intently, silently (and futilely) willing them to fluctuate from their fixed zone. Despite several hours having passed since the electroshock torture had commenced, the powerful jolts firing along the feline's ligaments, arteries, and nerves, the pokémon was somehow still managing to retain its sanity, despite the excruciating pain it was being made to endure. While the crime lord had anticipated that it would possess a strong will, he hadn't expected it to be this stubborn, and found him seething at the creature's unwillingness to bend. Rather than simply submitting and returning to servitude (a certain way of making its suffering end), Mewtwo seemed to be welcoming death instead, preferring to let its body break before its mind. As he told Agent 009 this over their...
hand-held radios, he grimaced as she berated him, saying that they couldn't allow the specimen to be destroyed – it could take years to successfully clone again! Yet Giovanni wasn't in the mood to listen to reason; to him, this had become a personal battle for dominance, and he was determined to be the victor. Even if it meant destroying a desired weapon, he would prove that Mewtwo was no god, that it had its breaking point, and that its strength was ultimately inferior to that of its master.

Yet brute force obviously wasn't working – the Signore would have to resort to cunning instead. Uncoiling from his seat, Giovanni made his way through the caverns and onto the grounds beneath the clone's suspended body. His voice carried up to feline with ease, his words sinuous as they attempted to persuade it to submit to the prospect of pleasure, rather than to the mere cessation of pain. "It has occurred to me that I am being rather inhospitable towards you, Mewtwo. Perhaps resorting to these primitive methods of persuasion was unfair of me – they certainly don't seem to convincing you to return to Team Rocket, in any case. So allow me to change my approach and make you a one-time offer: if you come to work for me again, I will give you back your…partner. I'm certain you've realized by now that I was responsible for separating you from her in the first place; in retrospect, that may have been insensitive of me. This time, rest assured, I will turn a blind eye on whatever you choose to do with her, and will not intervene with your potential happiness. For your services, she will be returned to you. Does that seem like a fair enough trade?"

Peering up at the clone, he saw its amethyst eyes open as it contemplated with he'd said. When it closed its eyes once more, Giovanni checked the neurofeedback device he was carrying and noted, with some satisfaction, that its brainwaves were growing increasingly erratic as it remembered the girl who'd bedded it. Would the clone, he wondered, take the bait…? What was more important to it? Its freedom or the female it believed it loved…? Minutes passed, and as it reached its decision, its brainwaves slowly fell back into the fixed zone. It opened its eyes again…and then, infuriating, proceeded to laugh at its once-master.

"You are lying," it intoned, giving the man a wicked smirk. "And even if your offer was made in earnest, I would not accept it. You know as well as I that she would not embrace me now, nor would I force myself upon her merely because that option would be available to me. Do not insult me by suggesting otherwise. Besides, Giovanni, you cannot 'give' her to me, because she is not yours to give. She is neither your possession nor your daughter, despite the farce of a relationship you share with her. Despite what you would like to believe, you have no inherent right to her, and someday she will make you see that." And as it noticed the man beginning to tremble with barely concealed rage, its grin widened with ill humor. "Now if you are done attempting to sway me with false promises, I would ask that you end this tiresome game of yours. I am growing weary of your attempts to crush me."

What it had suggested about his goddaughter aside, its blatant disrespect infuriated the man past the point of rationality. No longer interested in anything beyond watching the abomination writhe, Giovanni increased the energy outputs of the capture drones to their maximum levels, the charges they unleashed growing intense enough to sear flesh and bone alike. He no longer cared if the creature was destroyed, Agent 009's protests be damned. He'd already given the abomination ample opportunities to chose life (regardless that it would have been a life of servitude), and it had chosen to reject his generosity, preferring to be tortured to death instead. And now, seething from its words, the Signore was all too willing to grant its wish - as far as he was concerned, it deserved to suffer for resisting him and touching his goddaughter in such feculent ways. So as he began walking back into the caverns, he took great pleasure from listening to the animal scream, and smiled as he left Mewtwo behind to perish and rot….

Yet sometime late, having survived despite the odds, Mewtwo gazed up at the waning moon and thought to the one who rested below, I could have come back for you, Cassandra. I could have returned to you then, on the pretense of his lie, and kept my word to you. I could have, but I declined
doing so because...what use would it have been, when you would not have remembered your vows to me and kept them too?

What use would it have been, dove...?

Thank You: Leone the Infernal; Shattered Silence; Dark Magician Girl Aeris; Dakota Watts; SmashSista18; Sneaky Admiral; Selena Teamo; AnimeCrazy88; keeper-of-the-triforce; Mewtwolover; Marie; Anon; Amanda Jewell; Secret13; Cosmic Mewtwo; Kayasuri-n; A Black, but Shining, Star; Resuri; Tomoyo Kinomoto; cloudfightback; sapphire espeon; and Kaster99 for reading and reviewing the previous chapter. I hope you and my other readers will do the same for this one!

Author's Note: I think this should be clear in the story by now, but in case there is still any confusion on this point, Mewtwo isn't exactly a good person. He means well most of the time and rationalizes some of his more questionable decisions as being in someone's best interest, but he doesn't know how to recognize when he's breaking someone's boundaries. This was a problem we saw in the first movie (with everything having to do with Nurse Joy and his decision to erase everyone's memories at the end), but it wasn't entirely gone in the second (when he thought he knew what was best for the other clones). However, he did molest Cassandra in the chapter, using their past intimacy as his justification for doing so. He thought it was okay and Cassandra - who is too confused and conflicted about him to know how to react - couldn't really tell him what was wrong. She didn't like what he was doing, though, and made that clear, and he should have listened and stopped. He didn't do so and that will come back to bite him later on.

Sincerely,

WiseAbsol
"Under the harvest moon,
    When the soft silver
    Drips shimmering
    Over the garden nights,
    Death, the gray mocker,
    Comes and whispers to you
    As a beautiful friend
    Who remembers.

Under the summer roses
    When the flagrant crimson
    Lurks in the dusk
    Of the wild red leaves,
    Love, with little hands,
    Comes and touches you
    With a thousand memories,
    And asks you
    Beautiful, unanswerable questions."

- Carl Sandburg, *Under the Harvest Moon.*

Cassandra had been avoiding him for four days straight. She also hadn't even been trying to hide what she was doing.

Like the phantom pokémon *his* body had been derived from, the woman seemed to flit through the studio, never lingering in one place long enough to be engaged in a conversation or caught by the wrists. With a stubbornness she'd likely learned from her godfather, she refused to come near the clone, with the only exception to this behavior being when she'd confronted him the day after her memories had begun returning. However, for all that she attempted to shun him, that didn't mean she was ignoring his presence; there were moments when he glanced over to catch her staring at him, her expression contorted from what he could only suppose was ambivalence. Her grey eyes would roam over him, igniting with anger and disgust, only to cool and soften as she seemed to remember what he'd once meant to her. On a distant level, he could relate to the internal conflict he was going through, having experienced a similar struggle after remembering his (and, at one point, Cassandra's) childhood friend, Amber Fuji.

In the months after the incident on Mt. Quena, he'd struggled to cope with his memories of the girl and the resulting emotional turmoil he'd experienced: his fury at having been forced to forget her; his chagrin at the callous actions the humans had taken to ensure it; his horror at the girl's second or perhaps even third death; his sorrow and loneliness at having had a loved one being torn away from him – all mixed into a miasmic draft which, once swallowed down, had sickened his soul. Having already hardened his heart by that point, he'd managed to resist breaking down…but a fracture had formed within him, his views of humanity having twisted, his loathing and yearning for them both growing in equal measures. Even so, he hadn't allowed himself to wonder how his life would have changed had she survived - he dared not. Such a dream, like the dream he'd once shared with
Cassandra, would have only eaten away at him until he was little more than a vacant shell, an artificial being who had lost his grasp on reality.

Yet in some rare moments of weakness, he'd wondered to himself if insanity would have been preferable to struggling with the memories…and he knew Cassandra was probably now wondering that same thing. After all, the woman had been taught to silence her heart, to rule herself with her mind and her training and never fall prey to the fallacy of love. As far as her godfather had been concerned, love – especially romantic love - was a needless and dangerous emotion, its only use being found in exploiting it in others. The affection shared between friends, on the other hand, had been viewed as far more valuable, as friends offered each other stress relief, solace, and guidance. To be certain, love could provide similar gifts, but it also clouded one's judgment and influenced one's most important life decisions. Blinded by passion and need, people who loved one another would happily allow themselves to be led astray, and would willingly sacrifice their lives to protect (and in some cases, be with) the ones they loved…and to her godfather, this made love the equivalent of a mental disease. And in truth, he was right: that is exactly what love is; just a mix of chemicals in the brain that can make people behave in the most irrational of ways. It can cause people to move forward with disastrous plans, can give them pause in crucial moments, could make them willing to burn the world to cinders, with the terminal cases – the loves which neither fade with age nor experience – being the worst of these offenders. Giovanni, knowing this, had been determined to never allow himself to fall into such a delusional state. He'd done everything within his power to suppress his heart, and had tried to quiet Cassandra's too, not wanting her to be swayed by such an unpredictable thing.

Yet Cassandra has been infected with the disease from the start, having spent parts of her childhood with her mother and her friend's family. In the years after he'd cut them out of her life, Giovanni had probably thought he'd cured her, only for Mewtwo to arrive and demonstrate that her heart had merely been lying dormant. The clone had eventually caused it to run rampant within her, first by giving her that eevee to care for, and then by giving her all of himself. In doing so, he'd undermined Giovanni's careful rearing of the girl, and even after erasing his influence from her life – seemingly 'correcting' the "damage" he'd done – he'd left a trace of the infection behind. He'd made certain her Shadow remained at her side, giving her someone to care about who cared for her in return. Yet now Mewtwo had to wonder if that little eevee been enough. Had the child managed to keep her heart stirring, or had Giovanni managed to succeed in his aims? After all, if placed under the right pressures, a few months could be more than enough time to transform a person entirely, and the man had now had years to crystallize her into the hardened being he wanted. Certainly, there had been indications that she wasn't so different from the woman she'd once been; but those features were buried deep down, and in the end, he couldn't rely on them to determine who she had become.

But there was one thing Mewtwo felt he could be certain of: right now, she hated him more than she could possibly love him. After what he'd done to her, this didn't surprise him…and in a strange way, he was even grateful for it. It would make their situation so much easier to resolve in the short time remaining to them. Tonight, after all, was Cassandra's last chance to complete her mission: tomorrow would be her deadline for leaving the country, preferably with one of his vital organs in tow – otherwise, her organization would arrive to do the job for her. That thought in mind, he raised his eyes from an anthology of poems, meeting her gaze from across the room, and held it as he would a strand of wisteria…and was unsurprised when she broke that contact, that delicate connection and turned away from him. She knew, just as well as he did, that he would probably die at her hands tonight. She knew that and she said nothing, so he allowed himself to wonder, for just a moment, how she felt about that.

But he didn't ask.

He didn't want to be the type of person who rubbed salt into the wounds he'd made.
There was a certain amount of masochism in waiting out the hours until dusk. Cassandra knew this, but even so, she persisted in spending the afternoon that way, staring at the clock and feeling herself growing increasingly fretful as the sky grew dark. Her agitation was, she knew, stemmed from the fact that she had a limited number of hours in which to kill her mark, harvest and package one of his organs, and prepare for the return flight to Kanto, all of which she needed to complete an hour before noon the following day…and yet here she was, stalling. Admittedly, she'd struggled through previous bouts of procrastination on her missions, but at least during those instances, she'd still been preparing for the last minute execution. This time, she was merely lying down in bed, sometimes taking tiny naps between the hours, but mostly just watching the shadows creep up her walls. In the back of her mind, she was furious at herself for being so careless and apathetic, but for the most part, she simply felt tired. Physically, this exhaustion was a result of not getting much (any) sleep over the last four nights; mentally, the strain of having a year's worth of memories welling up in her brain, as well as being in such close proximity with the subject of those memories, proved stressful to say the least. The resulting emotional turbulence aside, the combination of the two made her want to do nothing but sleep for about a month (or ten, who's counting?). Unfortunately, slipping into a virtual coma wasn't something she could afford to do right now.

Instead, she would eventually have to leave this room, corner the clone, and gut him like a game animal (which, for all intensive purposes, he was). In theory, it was a straightforward enough plan, but at some point over the past four days (weeks?) it had stopped being a simple one to execute. Admittedly, she'd been incredibly off-balance on this mission from the start, having been deprived of her weapons for a good portion of it, and then incapacitated for another part. As such, she had a number of valid excuses for why it would have taken her this long to kill her mark. But as she stared at the now familiar ceiling of the guest room, she wondered if there had been more to it than that. Was it possible that she'd known, somewhere deep within herself, what Mewtwo had once meant to her? Her subconscious and her body had certainly sensed a sort of familiarity where he was concerned, enough that her conscious mind had eventually taken notice and begun hungering for answers. Yes, her curiosity over him had definitely been a contributing factor for why she'd put off his murder for so long – she couldn't deny that. Hell, the last time she'd honestly tried to kill him had been in that bar, and even then, that had proven to be more of a playful tussle than a serious attempt on his life. Otherwise, she hadn't even tried catching him unawares over the last few weeks, never using what was readily available to her to complete her assignment. She could have broken a chair and tried clubbing him to death with a wooden leg…she could have tried poisoning him by slipping a cleaning solution into his drinks…she could have tried smothering him as he slept…. Could have, could have, could have…but in the end, she hadn't done any of the hundred things she could have done. Instead, she'd stalled for a reason she hadn't even been aware of (still wasn't aware of), content to exist in this home so far removed from the one she'd known. She'd been content to threaten the clone, to bicker with him, to hurt him upon occasion, and as the days had passed her by, she'd been content to allow her purpose for being here slip away. What might her underlying reason have been for allowing this to happen…? She could analyze the matter all she liked, but even if she discovered the cause of her aberrant behavior, the end result would remain the same: she'd wandered astray on this mission, had indulged in a life that wasn't hers to have, and was now at a loss over what to do.

In a wearied motion, she grasped her right-hand tantō and tried to imagine how it would feel to plunge it through fur and flesh, to feel it rip through muscle and organ tissue, to feel it scrape against and fracture bones. As she held the blade within the fading light of sunset, colored crimson from impending snow, she could almost see his blood trickling down its honed edge, over the hilt and onto her bare hands. And that image was what made her stomach begin to revolt violently – she dry heaved, because she remembered how his fur, moist from their perspiration, had felt against her bare skin. She remembered the feeling of his breath rolling over her chest, remembered the feeling of his
heartbeat pounding against her palm, remembered the feeling of him moving against and within her (oh god, did she remember that!). She knew his body too damned intimately, having learned from medical files and body scans the layout of his insides, his weak points and his strong points...but also knowing, just as well, where he responded to being touched, what would make him purr, and how to bring him to his fall.

She'd made love to that body, and the thought of now having to wound and dissect it made her skin crawl. The closest realm of comparison she had would be slicing open Shadow and picking through his corpse, which was wrong on far too many levels for her to even contemplate doing. Yet that was what she'd have to do where Mewtwo was concerned, and despite all the horrible and unforgivable things he'd done to her, she didn't know if she could do it! This wasn't just some stranger, damn it, it was him! So how could she do this? Could she even do this? Did she even have any choice in the matter? She remembered Giovanni (damn him, damn him) repeatedly telling her that she had to complete her assignments, no matter what the cost might be. But did that still apply when the cost might be her sanity...? Knowing his answer to that would have been "yes," she heaved again, tasting bile in the back of her throat, and tried to steel herself for the monstrous thing to come. And time, as it had during the rest of the day, continued to trickle by, forever unable to be reclaimed....

Eventually, after what might have been hours of sitting alone in that room, someone came and broke her out of her thoughts: the espeon, whom Cassandra wasn't certain whether to curse or thank. She watched as the now slimmer vixen slid into the room, watched as she sat on her hunches in front of the bed, watched as she flicked her forked tail to the side, and watched as her eyes darkened as they fell on the dagger in her hands. Feeling strangely self-conscious under that intense purple gaze, Cassandra slipped the tantō under her pillow and asked Psyche why she was here.

The answer made her stomach turn over and sink in rapid succession. "Espe, espeon. Espeon...espe. Espeon. Espe," said the vixen in a flat and even tone. "Tonight is your last night here, and from what I've gathered, Mewtwo intends to make it a pleasant one. Once he's done making dinner, he'd like for you to join him...and I think it would only be kind of you to look nice for him before you slit his throat. So unless you have some formal wear stashed away somewhere, you're coming with me to look for some decent clothes. You're not going to him in jeans and a sweatshirt."

Cassandra wasn't sure she understood - the idea simply seemed too ridiculous in light of what was supposed to happen that night. "What's the point? I don't see why-."

"Espeon. Espe?" Psyche murmured, a low note of sadness in her voice. "Because it will matter to him. Isn't that enough?"

Cassandra considered that...and then, with a barely audible sigh, rose from the bed and agreed to accompany the other female. In the end, she thought at the espeon lead her down into the lower (and welcomingly vacant) levels of the building, what harm could any of this do? She would lose nothing in complying, and perhaps by humoring him tonight, they both would gain some sense of peace before the end came. So when the espeon lead her to the racks and crates containing the "decent clothes" she'd mentioned, Cassandra searched through them with a critical eye, looking for an outfit that was still in fair shape and seemed suitable for the evening. Most of the clothes were moth-eaten and musty, with creases and wrinkles no amount of ironing could press out, but some of the more carefully packaged pieces remained intact and were respectable enough. As she mulled through these, she and the vixen didn't speak - frankly, since neither had grown particularly fond of the other in the month they'd spent together, they preferred it that way. Their association with each other stemmed from their mutual acquaintance, and if that mutual acquaintance ceased to exist, so too would that connection...and why put effort into something that could vanish in an instant? Why try when there might only be pain and resentment in the end...?
"This will do," Cassandra said, breaking the silence as she examined one of the dresses that had been folded up in one of the crates. The size would fit her, the fabric itself was pleasant to the touch, and its hues seemed to suit the tone the evening was likely to possess. Looking up from where she was laying, Psyche glanced over the garment and nodded in agreement. It would do quite nicely. Now all they would have to find was something to go with it….

The half-full moon drifted over the eastern skyline, sighing a cool and sleepy breath onto the city below. Yet though the chill permeated the building on its lower floors, the studio belonging to the clone was warm and fragrant with the aromas of the meal he was preparing. Although Mewtwo rarely partook in cooking, usually preferring simple meals and not having enough ingredients to make anything extravagant anyway, he nonetheless found a certain enjoyment in the activity, and had managed to become proficient at several dishes over the years. Usually these consisted of seafood and stir-fry, as he favored lighter and crisper meals, but upon occasion he'd indulged in the challenge of richer foods. To him, cooking like this was an art reminiscent of chemistry, containing countless formulas which, if followed correctly, arrived at predetermined (and flavorful) outcomes. Yet there was still room for experimentation, and during the times when he'd found himself bored with daily routine, he'd done precisely that. The results had, admittedly, varied each time, but between personal experience and the tips offered from outside sources, he believed his hobby had – to excuse the borderline pun – bore fruit. At the very least, the creation of the meal – as well as the promises of satiety and agreeable tastes and scents – soothed him during that evening. After sprinkling the last of the herbs on the main dish, Mewtwo left it to finish cooking, making sure the rest of the portions were kept on a low heat. He then began setting the table, and noted, as he laid out the silverware and glasses, that his companions had returned from their excursion. He had a suspicion of what they were up to, but whether he was right or wrong scarcely mattered to him. So long as he could enjoy pleasant food and company this evening, he would be content….

Twenty minutes later, he heard the door to Cassandra makeshift bedroom open, and glanced over to see his guest walking towards him. Surprise flushed through him at her appearance, and he quickly regulated his expression, not wanting her to accuse him of ogling her. Yet even so, he would readily admit to himself the truth: she had an almost terrible beauty about her as she drifted toward him in the candlelight. She'd pulled her hair up into a loose bun, with several strands purposefully let free so they'd fell over her ears and across her neck and choker, like wisps of smoke sweeping over her olive skin and the metal accessory. Over her shoulders and upper arms rested a semi-transparent, charcoal-colored shawl, which appeared as light and easily brushed away as gossamer. Flowing over her body itself was what he could only describe as simple, yet still elegant dress, long in length and held up by thin straps, which crossed over her otherwise bare back. She was also wearing black sandals, which – while not nearly as dressy – likely proved comfortable to her, quite like the fluid fabric of that dress. As the candlelight shifted over the dark material, it flashed with hues of midnight green and nightshade, reminiscent of the underlying colors of her wings. Making a mental note to himself to fix her choker before the night was over, he pulled out her chair with his telekinesis, silently reminding her that while he would do her no harm, he certainly wasn't powerless. All he wanted from her was a few tranquil hours, and considering what she would receive in return, surely that couldn't be too much for him to ask for…?

Cassandra understood, and as she sat down, she thanked him for the polite gesture…but she didn't lift her gaze to meet his. That wouldn't do, and with a sigh Mewtwo stepped over to her and gently tilted her chin up with a paw. It heartened him when she didn't withdraw from his touch, but when she did look up, he found that her eyes were disconcertingly vacant of emotion. Yet that was nothing he hadn't seen before, and not allowing it to unnerv him now, he said, "No, thank you for this. I appreciate the effort you have made tonight, even if Psyche did have to persuade you into it. You need not have…dressed up." The phrase was an odd one for him to utter, but fitting nonetheless. In truth, he would have been fine with her arriving in little more than an overly large T-shirt, but this
was a more than welcome alternative. Forcefully quelling the desire to stroke her face, as he'd once done when they'd dined together years prior, he found he couldn't quite suppress a different thought that rose to mind. "…You look lovely, Cassandra."

The corner of her mouth twitched at that, and quickly looking down to hide that reaction, she said, "Yes, well, I'm not going commando right now, so don't expect a repeat of what happened the last time a girl dressed nice for you."

She remembered all too well some of the incidences from when they'd been involved: of how they'd spent their one-month anniversary not so different from this, with them eventually sharing their dessert. The vanilla bean ice cream had melted in both of their mouths, and at some point, he'd leaned toward her and licked the trace of cream from her lips…and it had progressed from there, with her joining him in his seat and him pushing up the kimono she'd worn just for him and she killed the thought there before it progressed much further. Yet it hadn't been quickly enough to stop her face from burning, though whether that was from embarrassment, shame, or perhaps even arousal, she wasn't sure. When she glanced up at Mewtwo, who was in the process of serving the food, she thought she glimpsed the faintest hint of a blush forming over his cheeks. Evidently, he too remembered that particular occasion. After an awkward pause, he muttered something about them being rather exuberant back then, and added that he expected this dinner to be rather more formal than that. She agreed with him readily, since straddling him had a prominent place on her list of things-not-to-do tonight. Experience and common sense, after all, dictated that such a thing would not end well…at least not in this particular situation.

Shaking her head to clear it of those thoughts, she focused her attention on the foods that Mewtwo had served. There was a fillet of grilled sea bass, doused in lemon juice, ground pepper, and others seasonings; an assortment of stir-fried vegetables, with mild peppers and asparagus being the most prominent; a loaf of freshly baked bread, some slices already covered in a garlic cheese spread; and a chilled dessert of vanilla crème and raspberries. Recognizing the last item, she found herself somewhat surprised by the choice of ingredients, since a chocolate crème was usually preferred as the complement to the berries. While she supposed the selection might have something to do with Mewtwo being unable to eat chocolate (at least in large doses), she couldn't help but ask why he'd decided to alter the recipe.

Mewtwo, who'd been taking a sip of what he assured her was sparkling grape juice, gazed at her over his glass for a moment. Then, setting it down, he replied, "It would have been inconsiderate of me not to change it. After all, you do not enjoy chocolate – or rather, you do not mind the taste, but what you associate it with makes you sick."

He said it casually, as if it were something as trivial as which football team had won the last game… and Cassandra couldn't help but shiver in response. Because he was right about that – she did have an aversion to chocolate – and him knowing that only strengthened the validity of her emerging memories. He knew she didn't avoid chocolate because of a non-existent food allergy, which she often cited was the case. He knew that the scent of it made her queasy, that the taste of it made her gag, and she was willing to bet he knew why that was as well - something which neither Giovanni nor the Fuji family had ever managed to pry from her. Despite the rest of their meal clearly appealing to his tastes, he'd kept her preferences in mind while deciding on the dessert, purposefully selecting one he knew she'd love. He'd catered to her long-standing infatuation with vanilla…and actually, now that she thought about it, he'd even hinted at knowing this preference of hers early on: when they'd ventured out into the city, he'd bought her those lemon-and-vanilla drops as a treat, hadn't he? Inwardly, she felt somewhat touched by the gesture, even though her overriding response was to be baffled, both at how he'd slipped and how she hadn't caught on sooner.

Shaking her head in bemusement, she turned her attention back to her food, spearing a morsel of fish
from her plate. Her eyes widened slightly as the white flesh fell apart across her tongue, bringing with it the flavors of lemons, butter, sea salt, and an almost infinitesimal amount of smoky sweetness – either from the grill or perhaps from fresh paprika. Glancing up at Mewtwo, she saw that he was peering at her curiously, evidently interested in knowing what she thought of it. "This is…quite good." She vaguely wondered if the note of surprise in her voice would offend him. "I didn't know you could cook."

It was faint, but she saw the amusement in his gaze – he had a way of smiling with only his eyes. "I saw the value in learning how quite early in life. Over time, I taught myself many of the basics, with Psyche eventually giving me lessons on Western dishes. Before she joined me here, she used to amuse herself by watching chefs as they worked, and this pastime led her to learning some useful 'tricks.' Incidentally, if that bread and cheese spread is any good, she is to thank, not I."

Not knowing how to respond to that, Cassandra went back to savoring her food: the tender and faintly sweet fish, the crisp and lightly buttered vegetables, the warm and flaky bread, and eventually the sweet and milky dessert. She washed these down with a couple glasses of the sparkling grape juice, the carbonation burning as it swept down her throat. At some point as they dined, she came to the realization that Mewtwo had set out real utensils and dishes for her to use - a sharp fork and knife, and glassware which could be shattered into cutting shards. Yet when she did notice, she dismissed the thought of killing him as they ate. There was no reason to ruin a perfectly good dinner with violence, since she had all night to complete the execution and more efficient ways of doing so. His murder had waited this long…it could wait a little longer.

Between the two of them, Mewtwo finished first, and watched with amusement as she ate her food in small and dainty bites, not allowing a single crumb or oily residue to compromise her appearance. Considering he'd seen her slurp ramen, slam down milk, and noisily chew on the whole of a peanut, the shell and all, he couldn't help but find some humor in how she was behaving. He knew that in more relaxed environments, she was anything but a well-groomed young lady…but here she was, using the dining techniques taught to her so she'd behave properly at dinner parties and negotiations. He highly doubted she'd ever been intended to use such skills on the person she was supposed to murder, especially on an inhuman creature such as himself….

After she'd finished, swallowing down the last of her drink and wiping her mouth with a napkin, he rose from his seat and motioned from her to follow him. She did so, ascending the stairs with him onto the rooftop, and as they walked out into the night air, she cast her gaze heavenwards. The city lights had subdued the stars, had stained the horizons bronze and the expanse above into a tainted maroon, which faded into black around the half-empty moon. Taking in the sight, Cassandra found herself longing to vanish into its shadowy depths, to ascend on her wings and soar away as fast as possible. She was no longer content to be in this place, to be ensnared in a situation which held no promise of a happy ending…but if she ran away here and now, she had no way of knowing if she'd be able to stop. She had no way of knowing where her path would take her, and after years of having one laid out in front of her by others, that uncertainty was frightening, daunting, and perhaps even unbearable. Yet despite that, she continued to allow the clone to lead her forward, even knowing that her compliance would make her objective that much harder to fulfill when the time came.

Perhaps she really was a masochist.

Yet if that were true, than Mewtwo was no better, for he seemed to take delight in torturing himself with the memory of moments long since passed. As she gazed as the table set up beside the flagpole, she felt pain pulsate within her chest as her gaze fell on the items there: a viola case and a radio. Having a suspicion of what both were for, she glanced at the clone and found that he was eyeing her with an almost hopeful expression. He wanted her to perform the opus she'd composed for him.
Admittedly, of all the short pieces she'd created, some for her mother, some for Amber, some for Shadow, and some for others she liked far less, "Ziv" was most one of the more refined and elegant songs...and while she would undoubtedly be rusty at it, she was nonetheless curious about playing it again. So, in a silent forfeit to his wishes and her interests, she took out the viola and ran the bow over the strings, taking a couple minutes to tune it in the cool air. The instrument seemed to be well-used (though perhaps not quite as much as her own was), and after taking a few more minutes to warm her fingers up with some simply exercises, she breathed in and began to play.

The first notes of the song cried out in a slow and haunting progression, rising into the darkness and hanging there, before slowly dissolving away into nothingness. As she played, pressing her fingertips into the strings and running the bow along them, each beat seemed to last an age, with the opus itself extending into eternity. Although only a few minutes actually passed, they seemed to last far longer to the violist and the listener, who were peering at each other through the dim. Four days before, their picture was worth the thousand words that were once spoken and then unsaid…but not even a thousand pictures would convey as much between them as this song, which had remained ingrained in both their memories. For one, it brought forth the heartache that she was struggling to suppress, and for the other, it calmed the turbulence that had long been in his. She saw that calm fill his being, smoothing the furrow of his brow and riddling the tension in his shoulders…and as a ghost of a smile appeared on his face, she wondered if he was happy. That was a strange thought for her to consider, since her usual concerns were focused on his life, his death, and even on his misery…but never had she focused on his happiness.

Considering what she'd come here to do, the matter should have been irrelevant to her. But after everything that had happened, she wondered to herself: what about his happiness? What about hers? Somewhere along the line, had they lost their right to be happy when they'd killed other people and damaged one another? Or was that arrogant of her to even ask? Perhaps their being happy simply didn't matter, and shouldn't be something to pine for. After all, by their very definition, golden times are always suspended within a progression of darker ones, providing transient moments of light and hope which make life worth living. They are treasured because they will inevitably fade, and that is why they haunt us once they've passed. When confronted by these cyclical endings, some might even conclude that it's better to shun these times than embrace them; for there can be no pain without the experience of bliss, no evil without the experience of good, and no darkness without the experience of light. Without these dualities, there would only be monotony, devoid of meaning and feeling and spiritual weight.

While living in such a state barely constituted living, Cassandra had to wonder if – at least in their case – that wouldn't be preferable, if only to numb them to further pain. She didn't know, and as they song reached its concluding notes, she marveled at the instrument in her hands, so carefully formed and capable of conveying the emotions of its wielder. The ruddy grains of the bow and body of the viola, carved from maple wood and thinly varnished; the strap that glided across the catgut strings, woven from horsehair and bound by nickel and ebony. They seemed like such simple constructs, but the effort gone into creating them had been extensive and arduous, and the results had not always been assured to be glorious. Life was also like that, wasn't it…? Her heart grew solemn then, finding peace at the price of discarded gold, and as she carefully set the instrument within its case, she reached over and turned the radio on. She twisted the dial, flipping through the channels for one whose music suited the mood, and eventually found one that was playing classical music.

She turned to Mewtwo and offered him her hands.

"You wanted to dance with me, didn't you?"

She knew what he was doing. She knew and she was willing to accept it, because he wasn't the only one who wanted to cling to a delusion now. He wasn't the only one who wished let go of everything
except the dream of what might have been and pretend that it had once unfolded. He wasn't the only one wanting to fulfill a moment long since lost, and he wasn't the only one who wanted to lose themselves for just a little while...

Understanding that, his eyes softened as he drew closer to her, the raven gilded in moonlight. "...I owe you a dance. So yes, I did."

And although she donned a playful smile, there was sadness in her eyes as she replied, "Then let's see how nimble you really are on those paws of yours."

With her consent in mind, he placed a hand on her waist and intertwined his fingers with hers, and felt her other hand come to rest on his shoulder…and then, moving with the music, they began to dance. In the time they'd spent together, they'd shared many things, but they'd missed their chance at this, and had then never had the heart to revisit it. Yet despite that, their movements were measured and fluid as they stepped together, keeping their motions in time with the tempo of the current song.

Soon settling into a slow, loose waltz, their feet didn't falter as the tune increased its pace, their motions merely quickening and their arms shifting, with his paw rising to cusp her shoulder and her arm resting over his. They spun, swayed, brushed together, heat gathering beneath their skin, eyes lingering on one another, ghosts of smiles curling across their mouths as he dipped her and lifted her into twirls.

Eroticism was absent from the display, but it was undeniably still a private one, suggestive of a closeness that shouldn't be there. As they moved into more complex sequences, their breaths mingling as they held each other tighter, she vaguely wondered how he'd come to learn these steps – she, after all, had never had the chance to teach him. She supposed he might have absorbed something from watching her spar and dance with others, since she'd often spotted his cloaked form within the crowd of spectators, appreciating the grace her training had instilled her with. She herself had discovered how much could be learned from such observations, since watching him battle in the arena had often given her insights into his mental state at the time, sometimes with sobering results.…

Erupting from the mouth of a charizard, the fireball hurtled towards Mewtwo, and rather than raise a barrier or dodge to the side, Cassandra watched in horror as her friend allowed himself to be engulfed by the flames. The blaze whirled as it swallowed the clone, and as the fire faded into black smoke, the trainer on the other side of the arena cheered, believing that the attack had taken the armored monster down. While Cassandra knew better, her hands nonetheless remained fistled at her sides as a shadow orb was launched from the murk, hitting the winged lizard in the chest and sending it into the nearby wall. By the time the charizard was gripped by telekinesis and slammed into the dirt-packed floor, the agent was already making her way to the back rooms, where Mewtwo would eventually return. When he did, his armor stained with soot and still hot to the touch, she gritted her teeth and removed the plates from him, cursing as she saw the superficial burns beneath. Despite how he bristled at her demands, he nonetheless obeyed her orders and sat down, allowing her to clean and rub healing slave into his injuries. As she progressed to applying the gauze, she asked him why he'd allowed one of his opponents to hurt him – again – when they both knew he was more than capable of repelling their attacks.

She'd watched him battle before, and until recently, he'd always impressed her with his conduct…but now he'd pissed her off. Just what was he hoping to accomplish by behaving rashly like that? Was he under the impression that she'd dress his wounds every time? She most certainly wouldn't, and if this was some sort of bid for attention, then he'd better cut it out. There were other, more effective ways of dealing with his problems, like opening his damn mouth (well, his telepathic one) and telling her what was going on. Or was he going to persist in acting like a stupid animal and pretend he didn't understand her, instead shying away from and hissing at his caretaker? As she predicted would be the case, these last barbs were enough to make Mewtwo snap. Tearing his arm out of her grasp, he
asked her why she cared. Why did she give a damn if he was truly nothing more than a beast to her, no better than any of the other monsters who fought for Giovanni? As he began to rant at her, questioning her actions and their friendship, she listened for a time...before eventually standing up, reaching into her pack, and chucking a canteen of water at him. Consumed by his mounting frustration, he didn't notice the incoming steel container until it hit him square on the nose.

Reeling back, he hissed wildly at her and rubbed at his muzzle, for a moment honestly seeming to consider chucking the canteen right back at her. Yet when he looked up and found that her eyes were swimming with angry tears, he could only sit mutely as she spat at him, "Don't be a dumbass! You're my best friend! You were the one who found me...you were the one who took care of me and...and you were the one who made sure Sensei couldn't hurt me again. After all of that, how could you think that I don't care? I do care, so don't you ever give me this bullshit again, Mewtwo! Or next time, you can just lick your own wounds. I sure as hell won't help you with them!"

It was only after she'd stormed away that it registered in his mind that she'd started crying over him, verifying her words with her tears.

He was sick with guilt until their reconciled five days later....

Drawing her from the memory, the music she and Mewtwo were dancing to faded, replaced by the jovial voice of the radio host, who began announcing the weather forecast ("there might be snow coming in - look out for cancellations!"). And perhaps the clone was responsible for the volume turning down, or perhaps she was simply falling deaf to the words emanating from the speakers, but as they slowed to a stop and peered at one another, the world beyond the roof grew hushed. Years melted away and the seasons flowed in reverse, the night warming as they fell together again, shucking off the negative emotions that their situation, that the cynicism of adulthood, had encased them in. For a moment they were children again, sharing a kiss that tasted of sweetened crème, with Mewtwo wrapping one of his arms around her waist to hold her flush to him, his other paw slipping from her hand to rise to her hair, undoing the bun so that her hair fell back down to her shoulders. His fingers ran through and became entangled with the dark strands, and as his tongue lapped at hers, he relished the feeling of her adult body pressed snugly against his. Somehow, she seemed to fit with him better than when she'd been sixteen, and there was something heady to the flavor of her mouth. Was that the raspberries, perhaps, or something else entirely...?

Despite being an equal participant in that kiss (he'd felt her trailing the tip of her tongue along his teeth), Cassandra didn't give him enough time to reach a conclusion. Her body stiffening as she seemed to come to her senses, she pulled away from him, gasping, "...No! No, this can't happen, not again! You're my target, Mewtwo. I'm supposed to kill you, not-!"

"So you focus on that issue instead of the far more relevant one? How intriguing of you." He would have thought her hatred for him would have proven a greater deterrent.

Her brow furrowed at that. "How the fuck is me having to kill you not-?"

"It is still a significant issue, but if you must insist on rebuking me, I would prefer for you to do so for your own reasons, rather than those that are dictated by circumstance." There was gravel in his voice as he spoke, which he blamed on his mounting frustration. He could still feel the pressure of her mouth against his, and curse it all, he enjoyed the feeling...!

Cassandra considered what he'd said for a moment...and then let out a bark of laughter. "Okay, fine, you want a personal reason? I'm engaged, so my being involved with another male, let alone one of a different species, is extremely inappropriate. You're monogamous, Mewtwo, so you should agree that it's improper for a promised woman to be getting cozy with someone other than her fiancée."
To be honest, she hadn't thought about Zachariah in weeks, and when she had, it had only been to muse that there was no need to hurry back to Viridian City. However, she could use her status as a bride-to-be against the clone effectively enough...and indeed, once he'd absorbed what she'd said, he didn't seem to take the news well. His expression contorted with shock and displeasure, before both gave way to a look of reluctant inquiry. Yet rather than ask about whom she was marrying, and more importantly, ask what exactly she felt for her "fiancée," he merely growled, "Is that so? Then tell me, when will you become a man's wife?" He couldn't say the words without his tone going flat from distaste. For she had been correct about his romantic preferences: he believed in taking only one mate in his life, and as she'd once been his...well, the idea of her becoming another male's lover nearly made him quiver with revulsion. Yet he knew he no longer had any claim on her – he had turned their relationship to dust, after all, so for him to protest this development would be hypocritical of him.

Perhaps sensing that her opponent was losing ground, Cassandra attempted to end the argument there. "When I return to Kanto. Now if you're done picking a fight with me, I'm going back inside. It's getting rather cold out here."

But Mewtwo wasn't satisfied with that. Before she could wander away from him too far, Mewtwo called after her, "So you will not confront this - me - maturely, as you should? You are going to shun the difficult situation again, rather than working it out with me like an adult? Running away is the response of a frightened child, Cassandra, and one that I had hoped you'd overcome by this point. Yet here you are, incapable of facing me when you feel threatened. I admit, I am rather disappointed – I had always thought you were braver than this."

She stopped walking...and turning back around, her eyes flashed as she stalked towards him, her temper flaring at the condescension in his voice. What more did he think was there for them to say? What the hell did he want her to say before she took a knife and slit open his throat? Stopping within centimeters from him, she glared up at him, her muscles quivering from the nearly overwhelming urge to smack the smug look from his face. "You really think I'm frightened of you? Of you? Don't flatter yourself, tomcat. You're the last person I'd let myself be scared of."

She demonstrated this by leaning upwards and capturing his mouth with hers...and this time, she didn't intend to be the one who pulled away from the kiss. At the sensation of her lips moving over his, Mewtwo felt a jolt lance through his stomach, surprise and pleasure and confusion all contributing to the shock. Considering he'd purposefully insulted her integrity, he'd expected her to punch him or knee him in the groin, but now she was kissing him hungrily, barely providing him with the chance to breathe. As he felt her hand cusp the back of his primary neck, her fingertips digging into his fur, he forfeited himself over to the act, despite his lingering bewilderment over her motives. While he suspected there was probably more to her behavior than she was letting on, he was loath to disentangle himself from her merely to discover what her true intentions were. After all, there was always the chance, however slim, that she might be justifying her passion as an expression of fury, and if that were the case, then it would be foolish of him to disrupt that. So for however long it lasted, he would savor the small pleasures she was giving him: of the milky taste of her mouth, of the warmth of her palm on his chest, of the vanilla fragrance from her hair and skin stirring in his nostrils. His arms and tail encircled her, and trailing his mouth up her jaw, he brushed back her hair and kissed her beneath the ear. He felt her shiver in response, but she didn't tell him to stop; in fact, she drew him firmer against her, and murmured in a coy voice – an undertone of anxiety mixed in - for him to take them to her bed.

It amused him how she, out of all those who'd tried to control him over the years, could still bend him to her will with ease.

As they materialized within the unlit room, Mewtwo reached for the shawl she wore and brushed it
from her shoulders. Neither of them noticed where it landed on the floor, too engrossed in their heated kisses and fleeting caresses to care. After kicking off her sandals, Cassandra swept her hands over his face and chest, her fingertips dancing over his ribs and resting on his abdomen. She soon felt low vibrations radiating within him as he purred, the sound of it filling her ears. Feeling his paws gathering up the hems of her dress, she slowly lifted her arms, allowing him to slip the garment over her head and, like the shawl, discard it as well. Now almost entirely naked, she shivered at how exposed she felt…and that feeling didn't fade as she looked up into his eyes, the pupils of which had grown wide and round in the dark, the look of them reminiscent of those belonging to another human. Yet his gaze itself remained warm, and though he was more bestial than she was, his hunger for her then didn't seem as intense and feral as he'd warned it might be. In truth, in comparison to the other who'd known her, he was showing remarkable restraint…. Swiftly banishing that memory as Mewtwo wrapped his arms around her, his paws tracing patterns up her back, she whimpered as he nipped her shoulder, that kiss of fangs being wretchedly arousing to her. This was what she got for being his one and only, wasn't it? - He knew how to please her too damn well. Over the following minutes they continued these exchanges, until finally he drew her to the bed, only making a slight moan of protest as maneuvered him into being on bottom – his spine was going to be quite sore after this, provided there was an after. Soon enough, Cassandra found herself breaking her earlier promise to herself, with his hips cradled between her legs. A shiver crawled up her back as he ran a paw between her shoulder blades, feeling the tension in her muscles and attempting to ease it away. He didn't seem to notice her hand slipping beneath the pillow as she leaned over him, her lips pressing and her pelvis grinding into his…. But when she took out the dagger and swung it forward, there was no surprise in his eyes, and that in itself gave her pause. She hesitated as she held the oriental blade above his chest, her hand shaking around the hilt. Knowing that she needed reassurance, Mewtwo guided the tip of the tantō to his throat, where his flesh would yield and severed arteries would bleed out in moments. "Here. I will not stop you, dove."

The utterance of her pet name made pain lance through her chest, and a part of her hated him then for trying that make it into his last word. It wasn't fair for him to be so sentimental in his final moments, for him to make this harder on her by complying like this. Why couldn't he resist her like everyone else, engaging her in mortal violence and forcing her hand? Why couldn't he be kind to her by being cruel…? A small sound, inarticulate and not quite human, escaped her throat, which had constricted to the point where it was now difficult for her to breathe. Even as she became lightheaded, she drew back the blade, the muscles of her arms coiling as she prepared to plunge it forward, to make the metal bite into his throat (like her teeth had, many times within their summer love). Struggling to regain her usual, detached calm, she rasped at him to push her away, to do something, anything to stop this from going any further. Yet he wouldn't obey her now – he merely lay there, prone before her, literally embracing his death as he peered up at her. In a way, it was pathetic, both of him to be so willing to die, and of her being so reluctant to do the deed.

After all, hadn't she been angry enough to rip him to pieces mere days ago? Hadn't her hands been itching to drive a knife into his guts? She felt a spark of that recent rage flicker within her, casting light on the memories she'd set aside over the evening. She remembered her rage upon learning he'd erased her memories, betraying the trust she'd placed in him by violating and undermining her mind. She remembered her rage upon realizing that he'd lied to and manipulated her for nearly a month, never once considering approaching her with the truth, only doing so after someone else had forced his hand. And she remembered her rage upon grasping the fact that he'd also beaten her, had had her tortured, and had then – knowing exactly how it would unsettle her – chosen to molest her. He'd even shoved her to the floor after the deed, and if she hadn't been in shock over her mind being torn open, she would have probably worried that he was planning to do even more to her!
As far as she was concerned, he deserved to pay for abusing her in those ways. He deserved to be gutted like an animal, and knowing she had his consent to do whatever she wanted with him, she swung the blade down as hard as she could. An inhuman cry tore itself from her throat as the tantō bit deep, and pulling the dagger free, she stabbed down again and again and again, shrieking out curses each time the weapon descended. And in the end, at the end of it all…

…There was no blood.

The dagger had bitten deep into the mattress around Mewtwo's neck, sinking into fabric and feathers and between the springs, never once having sliced open flesh. She'd had every opportunity to drive the blade into his throat, but she hadn't taken any of them. Instead her wrists had twitched each time, redirecting the blade into bloodless trajectories. Now trembling above him, it became a struggle for her just to breathe, let alone attempt to speak…but between sharp and shallow breaths, that was what she did. "I…I can't…damn it!" the words were like broken glass in her throat. "After…after what you did…I should be able to do this! You'd deserve it! So why…? Why can't I…? What the hell did you do to me?"

His expression was solemn as he gazed up at her. "…I merely returned to you what was rightfully yours."

That didn't comfort her any, and, still shaking, she rose from him and left the bed, wrapping her arms over her breasts as she stepped over to the window. Taking care to avoid the blade beside him, Mewtwo sat up and stared after her. The moonlight lit up her skin and streaked silver in her hair, and he ached then for to return to him. Yet before he could ask her to, she spoke softly, so softly that he almost didn't hear: "Could…could you please leave me alone for awhile? I can't…not after everything that…I can't, Mewtwo. What he wanted, what you want…I just…I've failed at one, and I don't think I could succeed in the other right now - probably not ever. So I'm...I'm sorry, I….""}

She was trying not to cry in front of him. It hurt.

"…I understand."

And as he had before, he would let her have her way. She'd spared his life, so obeying her wishes now was the least he could do in return. Yet even so, it was with reluctance that he left the sheets that smelled of her, that he moved into the cool air and felt the warmth she'd left him with fade. As he stepped away, he struggled to rid himself of the feel her skin and hair beneath his fingertips, of the taste of her across his tongue, of the sound of her quiet moans in his ears, all of them phantom delights that were almost tangible but still ultimately out of his reach. Yet no matter how he attempted to shed those lingering pleasures, they continued to surround him, lending their strength to the maddening thoughts of dreams left unfulfilled. They magnified the sinuous voice within his head, the voice that whispered of how easy it would be for him to walk over to her, for him to draw her into his embrace and ask her to stay. She'd already made the choice to let him live, had already defied her godfather in doing so, so why not ask her to complete the crossing, to spend her days here (with him) for however long she wished…? As he glanced over at her and saw her shoulders hitching, that sinuous voice attempted to overtake his own, and it took him several long moments before he managed to wrestle it down.

He knew he couldn't ask that - it wouldn't be fair for him to ask her that. So as he reached the door, he said something else entirely. "…This was not what I had intended for tonight. I had not planned to-.""}

"I know, Mewtwo. Just go, okay?"

He heard the weariness in her voice, and giving her one last look, he left the room and shut the door
behind him. Hearing the latch "snick" shut, Cassandra bowed her head and placed a hand over her eyes, and felt moisture gathering over her knuckles. Quickly wiping the wetness away and sniffing, she continued to focus on just breathing, even though her throat felt swollen and her eyes were burning. Inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale – she went through the motions, but she still felt as if she was suffocating, as if she were trying to breath within a vacuum. Lightheadedness overtaking her, she staggered back to the bed and lay down on the sheets, sickness crawling through her stomach, a choked scream rising in her throat and muffled by the pillow. There were white hairs on the cover, and though it was faint, it was there: the mint fragrance of his pelt, and within her thoughts arose a cackle, for how was it that she couldn't breathe in but she could still manage to smell him?

It was absurd, but even more ridiculous was how her lungs were beginning to open now, as if that scent was the key to unlocking them. It was so absurd, yet the scent of him made the feeling of sickness fade, even as it worsened the turbulence in her thoughts. Through the upheaval of shattered memories and conflicting emotions, she agonized over how she was supposed to move forward. What was she supposed to do now? What could she do now…? The path she had been walking down, which had grown rugged and twisted as the weeks had gone on, had now vanished into the dirt completely. She didn't know where it was safe to step, didn't know which direction to travel in, and had no means to find her destination. Unable to murder or watch someone else murder the clone, her mission here couldn't be completed…and given how important it was to her godfather, she knew he wouldn't accept failure. Yet even though she balked at facing him empty-handed, and at returning to Team Rocket in general, she also didn't feel as if she could abandon everything and stay here.

She wasn't sure if she was strong enough to live like that, free of the man and the organization which had reared her…and right now, she felt too uncertain to try. She shied away from the possibility, even as her mind reminded her that she'd once been willing to walk away from both. Yet that had been another time, she had been a different person, and moreover, she'd had someone who'd promised her a better world. She'd had a Mewtwo who'd been filled with confidence and certainty, and who – although troubled – had nonetheless been much more open and warm than his current counterpart. She'd spent hours training and speaking with that Mewtwo; had enjoyed his loyalty and compassion as a friend; and had found first love and sexuality with him. He'd accepted her, damaged as she was, and had promised her a bright future…but that future had never come, had it? Even though he'd challenged her to rise to her potential, even though he'd painted her days in polychrome, even though he'd carried her after she'd fallen low, he'd ultimately left her far behind. Looking at his life here, she doubted he'd ever even intended to come back for her, but had instead resigned himself to letting her go and letting her rot.

Perhaps that had even been the healthier choice for him, and represented an example she'd do well to follow. But even as she tried to set her thoughts along that more pragmatic path, keeping recent events in mind, her memories of their past contaminated the order she was trying to achieve. Ambivalence continued to dominate her, maddening her with the compulsion to go to the current Mewtwo's side, even though she'd only just driven him away. The feeling paralleled what she'd felt after taking a bullet for him: confined to a hospital bed, she'd longed to curl up his arms and be cared for. Despite having pushed him away mere hours before begin wounded, she'd craved his companionship – she hadn't been immune to that longing like Giovanni had wanted her to be. Instead she'd been, and, she realized, still was assailable to the desires of the heart.

And as much as she wanted to reject them now, those desires were undeniable. As much as she wanted to regain her calm on her own, to raise her familiar mask and lose herself behind it, she could only manage to grapple at its edges – it weighed too much for her to lift alone. So with sluggish and shaking hands, she wrapped the sheets that smelled of him around her and moved to the door. She watched the floor shift from carpet to concrete to concrete of a darker hue, and looking up as she entered Mewtwo's room, she watched him rise from his hammock. He regarded her silently, his expression unchanging despite her continued state of undress, and only reacted when she trembled.
He stepped over to her, arms twitching as if to open for her, eyes filled with a question he did not voice.

She couldn't stop shaking, and with a faltering voice, she said, "I…I can't get to sleep. I haven't…I haven't slept for four days, so I need to, but my brain just won't…it won't shut up. Would you…would you help me like you used to…? Please…?"

It was the "help me" and the "please" that struck Mewtwo the hardest, and wrapping his arms around her and pressing his muzzle into her hair, he promised he would do so. He would give her peace and more in the upcoming hours, and as she fell asleep beside him on the floor, he remained awake, determined to meditate until he found a way to save her now that she'd spared his life.

It would take him until dawn to find his solution….

Sunlight streamed through the gap in the curtains, falling across Cassandra's eyes and blinding her when she awoke. Lying amongst the blankets Mewtwo had placed on the floor hours before, she put up an arm to block the light, blinking rapidly to clear the grogginess from her eyes. Once she could see again, she glanced around - Mewtwo was nowhere in sight, but her suitcase and changes of clothes had been laid out next to her. Grabbing for the clothes, she dragged them under the blanket with her and clutched them to her chest, hoping to warm them up before slipping them on. After fighting with the covers for a few minutes, the woman emerged fully dressed, and checking through the contents of the suitcase, was pleased to find that all of her possessions had been returned to her. Wondering if her choker had similarly been attended to, she fiddled with the switch and, as a faint "click" sounded, was rewarded when her wings rematerialized after weeks of their absence. Stretching them out, she moaned from the pleasure and pain of it, as the muscles and tendons stretched and oxygenated blood flowed through the veins and arteries of the limbs. Although reluctant to rid herself of them again, she nonetheless did so as she heard padded footfalls in the studio. Going over to the door, she pulled it open and gazed out-.

And jerked back upon seeing not only one Mewtwo, but two of him standing in the main room.

For a brief moment, she wondered if Mewtwo had given her booze instead of water before she'd fallen asleep – that would certainly explain the double-vision and her growing headache. But double-vision wasn't nearly so selective in its focus, and, moreover, the clone knew better than to give her alcohol. Which meant that she was without an explanation for what she was seeing, and had the start of what might be a migraine on top of it. So far, this morning sucked…and as she watched Mewtwo A take a syringe from the coffee table - which also held an ice box printed with a hospital logo, as well as a round white stone, the size of an egg and riddled with tiny perforations - she doubted it was about to get any better. Focusing on the syringe, she watched as Mewtwo A inserted the point into Mewtwo B's arm, who hissed at the pricking sensation.

That eliminated Mewtwo B as being her Mewtwo, and indeed, as Mewtwo A spoke, it was with the telltale tone and dictation as the original. "I assure you, you will fare far better if you take this than not. We will wait a few moments until it reaches its full effect."

After a couple minutes had passed, the other mewtwo nodded, indicating that he was prepared for whatever would come next. The clone then sent psychical energy into his paws, claws of azure light extending from his fingertips, the sight of which made the other one shudder and clench his eyes shut. Even so, he spread his arms as if in welcome…and Mewtwo tore into him, his claws slicing through skin and muscle and bone alike, cauterizing the wounds even as he ripped open the ribcage, his paws soon saturated with gore. The other mewtwo, she noticed as she averted her gaze from the mess, was being held firmly by the clone's telekinesis…but for some reason, even as it flailed, it didn't shriek in pain like she would have expected. As she heard bones snapping and what sounded
like innards being pushed around, she winced and deduced that the injection it had been given had obviously been a very, very powerful painkiller.

Hearing a sound she couldn't identify, she looked back at Mewtwo, who had finished mauling the creature and was now pulling something from his thoracic cavity. Releasing the dying mewtwo, whose stomach and intestines were in the process of spilling out, she focused intently on what the actual Mewtwo was doing. She watched him slip the purplish mass—the liver, she realized, vital to the body but not immediately fatal to lose—within a plastic bag, vacuum-seal it, and secure it within the icebox, which was then also bound shut. Looking back as the other mewtwo, she stared and felt her stomach churn upon seeing that the thing was melting, the fur and flesh and bones liquidizing into a pool of...pink? Wait, what the hell? She watched with mounting bewilderment as the mess gathered itself up into gelatinous blob with beady little eyes, and it was only then that she finally identified it. Mewtwo had, in short, acquired the assistance of a ditto.

Not seeming to realize he was being stared at, Mewtwo cleaned his hands of the plasma and took the stone from the table. Tossing it to the shape-shifter, who caught it with a trendily eagerly, he said, "Here is you repayment, ditto. May it serve you as well as your contribution will to me."

There was a gurgle in response, before the ditto transformed once more—this time into a pidgeot—and scraped the stone up into its beak. Beating its wings, it then took flight and soared through the open skylight above, soon vanishing into the morning sun. Staring after it, Cassandra felt a familiar ache spreading between her shoulder blades, and touching her choker lightly, she lowered her gaze to the clone.

And found the clone gazing back. Levitating the icebox as he went, he walked over to her and set the package at her feet. "...I take it you saw all of that?" he asked. When she nodded in response, he glanced down at the icebox with a grim look. "Then I am certain you understand what this is for. The item I gave in return was, in case you were wondering, an Everstone, which has a similar effect on transformed dittos as it does on pokémon who have yet to evolve: it extends the duration in which they may remain within their current forms. For that reason, it is highly valuable to them. As for the organ I took from it, initial testing will indicate that it belonged to me. However, if anyone attempts to use it in other procedures—cloning in particular—they will only end up creating an unwanted ditto. Since it's in stasis for the time being, the organ itself will not revert back to its natural state for another thirty-six hours. That should be enough time for it to be delivered to a laboratory, tested, and then either 'misplaced' or 'accidentally destroyed.'"

She nodded. "That shouldn't be too difficult to manage."

One corner of his mouth lifted into a faint smirk at that, and moving past her, he glanced back and said, "If you would follow me? I have a couple, far more pleasant gifts to give you before you leave." And reentering his room, she watched him cross over to the nightstand and grasp something within its only drawer. Turning back to her, he handed her the moleskin notebook first, and indeed, when she checked, their photograph was still within its pages. Seeing her shock, he explained, "Despite my similarities to your kind, Cassandra, I am not a human. As such, a possession like this is not suitable for me to continue clinging to. Furthermore, I do not believe it would survive my ownership in the coming months, since I intend to resume my wanderings. That Giovanni managed to find my location, despite being on the other side of world, tells me I have stayed here much too long. In the end, that makes you a far more suitable owner for this, so...keep it safe. I trust you not to burn it."

Distantly, she realized that that last part was meant as a joke (which he'd said he never did—perhaps he was trying now, for her?), but she couldn't manage to laugh or even summon up a smile for him, even though she wanted to. Instead, she slid the small book into the inner pocket of her coat and
zipped it shut. The jacket was impervious to the elements, and by keeping it on her person, she could more or less insure that it would be kept from harm. As she looked back up at him, Mewtwo then held out his paw and presented her with the other gift: a necklace. Silently agreeing to wear it, Cassandra gathered up her hair and looked at him expectantly. Since his rounded fingertips weren't nimble enough to open the clasp, he used his telekinesis instead, and placed the piece around her neck. His touch, like the thin chain that made up a majority of the necklace, left trails of ice over her skin. That same chill gathered over her breastbone where the decorative piece lay, and taking hold of it, Cassandra lifted it so she could take a better look at it. The piece was a cross of gothic design, with the signature diamond-shaped shafts, raised frontal ridges, and an emphasis on the point where the shafts converged. Within that intersection was a spherical gemstone, which shimmered with a dark and iridescent fire from within its bed of platinum. It would undoubtedly have had great monetary worth, but for Cassandra, it was its sentimental value that would make it a treasure.

Mewtwo's eyes gleamed with satisfaction as he noted how it looked upon her. "Good...it suits you."

Cassandra ran her thumb down the cross, feeling the systematically raised bumps on the back – those were letters and numbers in Braille, weren't they? "...What does SS:8:6 mean?"

"It's referencing a passage from the Bible – Song of Songs 8:6. While the entire book was exquisite, I thought that verse was particularly suitable for us. Perhaps you will look it up sometime." As he spoke, he seemed strangely unable to meet her gaze, and his tail twitched behind him as if in agitation. Either he was being dishonest, or he was feeling self-conscious, and given how easily he managed to lie to others, she figured it was the second case.

If the necklace had been forged by him, using the jewelry he'd already had in his possession, then she could understand why he was reacting this way. While he'd always had a taste for the romantic, this had the potential to be borderline saccharine, at least if her suspicions about the piece's origins were right. Yet even so, she was touched, and placing a reassuring hand on his arm, she said, "Thank you, wildcat. It's beautiful."

"...As I said, it suits you." It was the sweetest thing he'd said to her since the night he'd lost her, and now he was going to lose her again. Despite that their parting was of his own volition, he suddenly found himself wanting more time, and wishing that the snow had come early. Perhaps her plane would have been cancelled for a few hours due to the weather, and then maybe...maybe...?

The hesitant question she asked then - for it was now or never - hardly made his desire for (creating) a blizzard any less. "...Mewtwo, if...if everything had gone differently, do you think we might have...?"

He knew what she was asking. It was something he'd often wondered as well over the years, and compelled to give her an honest answer, he said, "...I cannot know what might have happened, Cassandra, but...I would like to think we would have lasted. I would like to think that we would have been happy." And perhaps in some other dimension, or in some other life, they had been able to achieve their own version of paradise. But this was how things were, and so, setting that subject aside, Mewtwo forced himself to focus on reality. "...Your flight leaves in forty minutes. I will teleport you to the airport now if you wish."

There was a moment of hesitance before she nodded – she too wished for more time, but knew there wasn't any left. And so, as he placed his paws upon her shoulders, concentrating on moving her and her luggage to the airport lobby, he watched her slide her mask back into place. Her posture shifted in increments, her expression became impassive, her grey eyes grew steely, all of them giving off an air of dispassion. Yet when she pressed a hand to his face, when leaned up and gave him a kiss goodbye, he found himself associating emotions with the taste of it. To him, it tasted like pain. It
tasted like sadness. It tasted like regret.

She doubted she would ever see him again….

And in the next moment, when she was gone…and when he, alive and alone, remained…he found himself wanting to reshape the world all over again.

But instead, he merely whispered, "…Farewell, dove."

And for some time after that, he stood there, motionless, before slowly crossing over to the window. Staying out of the sun’s direct glare, he peered through the glass at the expanse of sky, and soon enough found a plane that was flying easterly. Intellectually, he realized how unlikely it was that she was on that specific plane, since there would be dozens lifting off at this hour. Yet as he watched it cross the sky, a part of him was convinced that she was within its iron hull, and that he was now watching her soar away from him. They were absurd thoughts, but they were there all the same, and they aroused in him the feeling that some piece of him was sinking and falling dormant, that some window inside him – a window that had only just begun to reopen – was closing once again. This was for the best, he told himself…but for a moment, brief and later unacknowledged, his fortitude failed him. His expression contorted, his spine bent forward, and as he wrapped his arms around himself, he moaned from a pain that had nothing to do with a physical ailment. From the doorway behind him, his roommate watched him tremble and begin to cave, and felt her heart break for him…but then the moment passed. Mewtwo stilled and straightened, his arms returned to his sides, and his expression returned to its normal state. Psyche shuddered at the sight, because there was something a little too fixed to his current composure, and that gave lie to his seemingly calm state. As her stomach churned, she wondered how often he'd forced himself to swallow down the anguish and loneliness he'd felt, and if anyone had ever noticed when he did.

She wondered then if only she had seen him hold a funeral for a dream and a burial for his heart, each in the service of returning everything to how it used to be...

After verifying the legal documents she'd handed them, the airport security workers directed her towards her boarding gate, making certain she never opened her suitcase – containing her tantō daggers – and that the medical package she was delivering would be placed in a secure location on the plane. Letting them take both containers from her without a word, she handed her ticket to the gate worker and found her seat for the return flight. As she searched for the pillow and blanket that was supposed to be tucked beneath it, fully intending to get as comfortable as possible, she considered what she'd learned over the last half an hour. Although she'd been absent from her hotel room for the past month, the manager she'd talked with had proven quite amiable, reassuring her that she hadn't been billed that entire time. They'd received her check-out notice early on, and as such, had given the room to other clients over the last few weeks. When the manager had asked where she'd been staying instead ("I'd merely like to learn who our completion is, that's all"), her answer had rather excited him. He'd asked if she'd seen the "warehouse fire" that had occurred early this morning, a massive conflagration that had taken firefighters hours to subdue. The news had later reported that it had been the work of an arsonist, and despite the damage it had caused, no one had been injured or killed.

She supposed that explained his interest - so long as the fire didn't burn anyone, it was an "awesome" spectacle. Explaining that she hadn't seen it, she'd hung up and mused that, indeed, Mewtwo must have been quite busy during the pre-dawn hours. He'd made certain she had material to add to her cover story, and considering how Giovanni would react if he suspected her ruse, she was grateful to him for that. While it wasn't the first time Cassandra hadn't followed orders to a tee, her disobedience here was on another level entirely. She was abandoning her mission here completely, and had – at
times – contemplated what it would be like to embrace a free life, a life far removed from the organization that had created and destroyed her. She was being treacherous and almost treasonous, and all because she’d been entranced by her prey.

She supposed it was a good thing that the crime lord had taught her how to lie convincingly, eh…? She tried to smile at that thought, but her lips seemed to have forgotten how.

Maybe that was because the taste of crème was lingering within her mouth…. "…You seem sad."

Drawn from her thoughts by the high voice, Cassandra blinked and looked towards it source, and found a girl with flaxen hair staring down at her. The child was standing on the seat in front of hers, and in the distant recesses of her mind, the agent remembered speaking with a little boy on the flight here. Looking back on that conversation, that boy had also commented on her appearance, though he’d focused on the color of her eyes, rather than on her emotional state at the time. This child, it seemed, was similarly observant. "Do I…?" she asked, and sure enough, she heard a note of remorse in her voice. "…Heh, I suppose I am, aren't I?"

"Why?"

Children, she reminded herself, were not the most tactful of creatures. They were too inquisitive for that. "…It's probably because I'm going to miss what...no, who I'm leaving behind."

The little girl tilted her head at that. "Are you coming back anytime soon?" Cassandra shook her head. "Well why not?"

Considering how complicated the situation was, as well as how mature some of its contents were, Cassandra doubted it was a suitable subject to discuss with a child. As such, she went for the simplest explanation available. "People would have gotten hurt if I'd stayed."

The girl's eyes narrowed, and giving her a suspicious look, she asked, "…Are you a scarlet woman?"

Say what? What kind of a question was that? And where the hell did a child even learn term that from, anyhow? "No, I'm not! That's not it at all."

"Then what did you-?"

"Little lady, what did I tell you about bothering the other passengers? Leave her be, or there'll be no television for you for a week!" And the father of the girl, who'd returned from talking with the flight attendant, lifted the child and plopped her into her seat.

Said "little lady" pouted up at him with her big blue eyes, and squirmed as the man apologized for his daughter's rude behavior. Giving him a small smile, Cassandra said it was alright, and then leaned back into her seat. As the engines began to whirl and the airplane rolled forward, she closed her eyes, feeling the strain of the last few days catching up with her. Fortunately for her, she had thirteen uninterrupted hours ahead of her, and while she spent the first one struggling to quiet her mind, she soon after sank into a dreamless sleep. No apparitions of a white feline appeared before her, nor did his voice resound within her ears…but somehow, even in the depths of unconsciousness, she could still feel the necklace he'd given her across her skin, cold and strangely heavy for something so small and seemingly inconsequential.

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Author's Note: No one had sex in this chapter, just to clarify.

Sincerely,

WiseAbsol
Vows

Chapter Warning: There is attempted rape in this chapter. To avoid reading this content, skip the scene after the wedding scene.

CHAPTER 16: VOWS

"Relationships-of all kinds-are like sand held in your hand. Held loosely, with an open hand, the sand remains where it is. The minute you close your hand and squeeze tightly to hold on, the sand trickles through your fingers. You may hold onto some of it, but most will be spilled. A relationship is like that. Held loosely, with respect and freedom for the other person, it is likely to remain intact. But hold too tightly, too possessively, and the relationship slips away and is lost."

- Unknown.

"Love does not claim possession, but gives freedom."

- Rabindranath Tagore.

The first week of November passed tranquilly, its hushed atmosphere empathizing the clone's sudden muteness. As he refused to speak, his roommate could only gather his thoughts from what her empathic senses could decipher: his silence did not stem from severe emotions. He did not permeate the air around him with anger, sorrow, contentment, or any other sensation of the spirit. It was as if he had been hollowed out, and his once clear, keen eyes lost their luster as they roamed over the urban scenery in random paths, futilely searching for something that was no longer there. Timid understanding blossomed in Psyche's mind as she puzzled over him, revealing a hidden truth that, in weeks before, had been concealed by her ignorance. This behavior was not a new development: the clone was living as he had in the months before the angel had arrived and shaken his passive lifestyle.

Realizing this, the new mother's heart sank as she watched him stare out into space, forlorn and without hope. He had always been like this, hadn't he? She simply hadn't known any better before. Instead, she had always mistaken his mellow nature for thoughtfulness, and not for what it actually was: listlessness. It was a foreign and difficult notion for Psyche to believe that a single human could bring such life and light into her charismatic companion, and in her absence steal it away… however, the proof was evident before the female's eyes.

In the morning glow, he stood alone, expressionless, a witness to the paling of the land as a chill spread over it. The time of sunlight was fleeing; the leaves of the trees below were turning to dusty gold; the first flurries of pristine snow were swirling in the ivory sky. Psyche's kits grew fatter by the day from their mother's milk, and during this dawn slept in the warmth of the studio beneath the adults' paws. The espeon sat several feet behind the clone, her forked tail whipping out at the frozen white falling in the still air. Mewtwo's own fifth extremity, in contrast, was raised and motionless, yet her eyes followed his paw as he lifted it out before him. As a cottony snowflake landed in his palm, the downy ice instantly melted into a droplet, and the male gazed at the liquid as if it was the most holistic element of the universe.

"Espe, espeon?" his friend murmured, saddened by his display. "Mewtwo, what are you doing?"
The clone did not respond - what could he say? He lifted his head and turned his gaze upon Psyche, if only to acknowledge her presence. The snow floated down around them, covering golden leaves in a white pall.

"Espe? Es! Espe…espe," Psyche ventured, her voice carrying her aggravation at his behavior. "Why don't you just go after her? That can't be so hard! It's obvious you wish she hadn't left...and I doubt she wanted to leave you either."

For the first time in days, the clone's eyes focused, hardened, and his brow furrowed with anger. "You dare presume that she and I…? We've all made our choices, espeon, and we've made the most reasonable ones we could to ensure our survival! And don't act as if that woman and I have fallen back in love - that is not a valid assumption, at least not for me."

"Espe! Espe…? Espeon...es espe! Es espe. Es…espe: 'es,'" his friend argued back, "That's not what I'm saying! Are you really that dense…? You couldn't have fallen for her again because you…you never stopped loving her in the first place. You may have buried your feelings, Mewtwo, but they never died. And as for her…well even if you blocked it out, I sensed it: she didn't want to go back 'home.'"

The female lifted her muzzle, staring up at the frigid, unyielding creature before her. Her almond eyes watered with frustrated tears she fought to blink away. Why couldn't the clone see that he should be beside that human? Why couldn't he understand that he now had the chance she would give nearly anything for: the chance to have his mate once more? The lilac pokémon smiled bitterly, her purple irises meeting her companion's amethyst ones. "Espe? Espe…espeon?" she murmured, "Yet you'll ignore that, won't you? Despite its implications, you...god, Mewtwo, do you even remember when you last smiled and were genuinely happy?"

For the espeon had recently mulled over all of her memories of the clone and had not found what she'd sought within them. Yes, she had seen Mewtwo quirk a grin numerous times, and had heard him laugh - but those incidents had been in expression of ill humor, triumph, gratefulness, or bitterness. Never, not once, had she seen him truly joyful, and she now doubted anyone had...or at least anyone who had known him before or after he had possessed a loving partner. Psyche's words, after a moment, seemed to penetrate Mewtwo's mind. As she watched, the clone's face blanched and his eyes widened minutely. He turned away before she could see the extent of how her question had affected him, yet his tail twisted sharply behind him as if to dismiss her, which little concerned his companion - she had said all she had wanted to say. Wordlessly she turned away from him, returning inside to her own warm and soft worlds, and wondered if Mewtwo would be strong enough to go after his....

For what was freedom worth without happiness...?

A few days later, her roommate's behavior shifted. He began to purge the information from and dissemble the machines he had created, and began to sift through the other possessions in his home, removing items that seem indicative of his character, as if desiring to erase his presence from the place. He began to arrange the furniture to be more suitable for smaller creatures, and asked if he could do anything that would make Psyche and her kits more comfortable. When she said there was nothing more he could provide them, the clone then worked on his garden furiously, transplanting dirt, hardy vegetation, and seedlings to the roof. When he had completed the project, the level held the potential of blossoming into a makeshift park. When the next year's harvest arrived, it would bear tubers, berries, and nuts for the young family. He had meant to complete forging it well before now, but recent events had understandably distracted him. Eventually, after making certain that the building's electricity and the water pumps were still operating efficiently, the replica sighed as he stood within the abode that would no longer be his home. Certainly, he needed to leave it anyhow.
for his safety, but now he had a vastly different reason for departing.

He even cradled his new destination at the forefront of his mind….

Empty-handed but for his travelling cloak, which he threw on to keep at bay the chilly bite of encroaching winter, he came to kneel before Psyche and her children. His baritone voice was low and quiet, mindful of the sleeping kits as he said, "I trust you will take care of this place, as it will be your sanctuary for however long you choose to dwell in it. My hope is that your family will be comfortable here now that my renovations are complete, Psyche."

"Espe. Espe, es. Espe," the sleek, lavender pokémon said, her eyes gleaming. "I'm sure we will be…and if trouble comes along, we have friends in the area. They'll help us if we get in a pinch."

Nodding, the clone of mew stood as he charged his powers of teleportation. His pale fur and irises began to frost with icy, blue light when he spoke again, "I have enjoyed your company, little vixen. Since I doubt we shall see one another again, I wish you the best of luck for the future."

"Es! Es, espe?" Upon sensing the influx of his psychic energies, which marked that he was about to vanish from her presence forever, she called out, "Wait! Mewtwo, what are you going to do?"

One last time, the creation graced his companion with his telltale smirk. "I, Psyche? I will keep a vow I made, that's all."

"Farewell, little espeon."

With that goodbye, the cold power around him swelled and imploded, and he departed from his sanctuary at last, a wanderer once more. For a time after his disappearance, his friend stared at the empty space where he had stood, before lowering her eyes slowly to her kits, who were curled into tiny orbs of fur beside her. Slowly she lay down fully and nuzzled them for solace, and feeling her touch, they squeaked softly in their sleep and flailed their limbs gently. Their mother knew as well as Mewtwo did where he had chosen to journey to: he was returning to his homeland, to his personal Gehenna, to defiantly follow his partner. Although saddened as she murmured her own farewell to her new ex-roommate, the espeon smiled from the strange contentment that accompanied the bittersweet thought.

Outside, beyond her notice, the moon had begun to rise.

Twilight beat down upon the day, bruising the sky navy blue and charcoal black as the bloody sun fled over the western horizon. Cassandra, having phoned the Viridian City Gym to announce her arrival in Team Rocket's hometown, was escorted to a glossy, dark limousine awaiting her outside of the flight terminal. Boarding the vehicle after her identification was confirmed, she buckled in and ignored the tentative attempts of the driver to begin a conversation with her. He was evidently new to his position; otherwise, he would have known how unresponsive she was after returning from her missions, and so wouldn't have wasted his energy. The first person she would actually speak with was Giovanni Maki, and that would only be to give her superior her report. Until then, her lips would not flutter open with anything but single phonetics.

As she leaned her head against the window, able to feel the smooth coolness of the glass beneath her dark hair, she watched the drifting pokémon and humans returning to their homes after a long day at work. Everyone on the streets and within the clustered buildings seemed identical in that they were all grinning and laughing gleefully. Certainly some must be faking, Cassandra supposed, yet still they struck her as oblivious to the darkness of her world, and to the eternal night that her soul was trapped
Within. In an expression of the truth that misery hated the joy of others, the assassin closed her eyelids and let her remaining senses usurp vision's control. Even through the thick, tinted glass, she could hear the heavy, driving beats of urban music from the radios of the local college campus, where students sought to drown out each other's choice artists by upping the volume. In contrast, the interior of the limousine was quiet, and the leather beneath her was warm and soft, and smelled richly of a spice that could very well be cinnamon. The recycling, heated air vaguely tasted ashy like cigar smoke, and was tainted with the sharp and sweet fragrance of wine.

Considering Giovanni's ideal vices, these trace elements seemed natural of him to impart upon the vehicle, and so did not surprise her. Fortunately, her godfather had spared her from having to endure the more repulsive odors of wild sex. That, luckily, was strictly reserved for his bed, and as she knew from when she had been little - for she had stayed with him for years before moving into her own apartment - he was, if nothing else, a cleanly man for one of his sinful nature. Indeed, his bedding was replaced weekly, if she recalled accurately, and now that she thought on that attribute, she could detects the smell of citrus cleaners in the car. As well, not a bit of trash littered the carpet - not even a gum wrapper - although various treats and drinks were offered in the shallow bar attached to the dividing wall. However, she reached for none of the edibles: she was not hungry or thirsty. She'd dined on the plane.

Too soon for her liking, the limousine reached the cluster of buildings that marked the base of her organization. The driver announced that they had arrived, but the woman did not lift her eyelids: she did not want to gaze upon the familiar area, and so waited for them to pull up to the main building before opening her eyes. Letting herself out of the car and trusting that her luggage would be returned to her home, the Grigori Agent walked purposefully to the reception counter. Spying her entrance, the receptionist merely nodded to the assassin and motioned to security to allow the female into Giovanni's office unhindered. The giants obeyed dutifully and did not bother to check the young woman for weapons. What need was there? This was their superior, the left hand of their commander, and a trusted soldier to the cause of Team Rocket. Cassandra Merlo was among the membership of the Elite Children, and as of such, her loyalty had never been questioned.

Cassandra mentally snorted at the irony of that faith as she stepped before her godfather's desk and handed him the mission detail she had filled out during her return flight. Coal eyes raced over the contents, analyzing and deducing; his bronze face remained expressionless as he did so. Without inquiry, he seemed to accept her words as she described the obstacles she'd encountered during her time in the foreign land. What less could be expected of their ex-fighting machine than a few failures in successfully hunting it down? All that mattered was that, in the end, his assassin had succeeded: the proof lay within the icebox on his mahogany desk, and that was enough to satisfy him. Already his geneticists had checked its contents and had confirmed that the vital organ was the clone's, and still viable for sampling. So if Giovanni suspected any fabrication in her story, he never voiced his suspicion. He merely handed the file to Agent 009 to read through at her leisure. As the blonde began to skim, the crime lord pulled other files from a cabinet of his desk and spread them out before his assassin.

The dark angel's mouth twitched downwards at the sight of the manila folders. Was Giovanni planning to send her on another mission so soon? True, she'd go if that's what he wanted, but she felt extremely tired right now. Yet no, the files were merely filled with updates on Team Rocket's doings in the past month of her absence. Two of them were sealed, and she left those for when she could savor the privacy of her own residence. Instead, her eyes caught on the sheet ordering that she bring Shadow into the Team Rocket Pokémon Center: apparently, like all of the pokémon in the organization's ownership, the dark fox needed some new vaccinations as soon as she could get him in. She wondered vaguely if the confidential files she now possessed played some role in the surprise demand.
However, when she found the moving and wedding details that she was to participate in, thoughts of Giovanni's newest schemes fled her mind. Apparently, her apartment was being emptied out and her possessions made to endure two separate shipments. The address they were being sent to was downright infuriating, but she kept her anger in check – still, the idea that her possessions would mingle with those of Zachariah's condominium was rather disgusting. Of course, since they were going to be hitched soon, the assimilation shouldn't have come as a shock to her… All the same, she braced herself as she looked over the wedding plans. Thankfully, it would be small, held at the organization's own chapel (she had to keep herself from snorting at the hypocrisy and unbelievable gall of their priest) with only a dozen people attending. These attendees included Giovanni, the remaining members of his family, some of the Elite who were not on missions presently, and a select few of Zachariah's friends. It could have been far worse, she mused. True, the extent of the preparations made it appear a far larger event, but that was merely Giovanni's style of not half-assing anything. At least he respected her personality enough to take it into regard: her wedding would be minimal yet spectacular, and that was a kindness.

Domino's scathing voice broke her from her thoughts. "You cut it a little close, Agent Merlo. Any longer and we would've had to come and save your sorry ass from the mutant kitty."

Grey eyes narrowed as they focused on the younger female. "There were some complications during my stay, which you'd know if you did more than glance at my report," Cassandra said evenly, not rising to the bait. "But ultimately, I succeeded where you failed, didn't I?"

The other woman sneered at her. "Right… well, good job, I suppose. I know it must have been a difficult mission for you."

Cassandra purposefully kept her face blank, though she did growl out. "Thanks, Domino." For nothing. "Now may I be excused? I apparently have some packing to do."

Giovanni nodded her away, encouraging her to attend to the task, but as the assassin turned her back on them, Agent 009 called out again. "So what was it like, killing Mewtwo?"

Cassandra paused, trying to find the correct words to respond with. "It was...strangely satisfying." Or rather, it might of been if she'd the guts to do it.

Suddenly their boss looked up, and gave his goddaughter a searching look. For a fleeting moment, a kernel of fear formed within the depths of her belly: did he suspect something was amiss? Yet no, it seemed not - he had merely remembered a detail that had eluded him earlier. Regaining her attention by calling her name crisply, he tossed her an item from within his desk: it was a full bottle of her pills. "Your doctor said your prescription should be low, so I took the liberty of delivering them to you myself," he said in explanation, before returning his attention to the file before him. "Now go. You have tasks to complete, Agent Merlo."

She obeyed her elder and walked from the office with the files tucked firmly under her arm. Once she was well out of sight, the fingers of her left hand reached upwards to softly touch the cross beneath her shirt. With the oddly dense weight of the pill bottle rattling in her pocket, she found passive comfort in cool metal of the crux….

Three days later, Giovanni held the handset of his office telephone in a white-knuckled grip that threatened to shatter it in two. Even stronger than his hold was the roar of his voice as he angrily shouted into the receiver, his tone carrying enough venom to make a viper wither. "What do you mean the sample was 'accidently destroyed'?" he snarled. "That organ was invaluable to our – the preservative batch was mixed wrong? Well tell whoever was responsible to enjoy their last day breathing: I'll be sending one of the internal affairs agents to deal with the incompetent fool shortly!"
Once he had stemmed his following flow of cusses, he leaned back into his chair and questioned stonily, "Was any of the genetic coding mapped before this incident? No - that was the task for today?"

Cursing once more, the crime lord hung up the phone heavily, and glanced over at Domino, who looked as if she had just stuffed a handful of sour candies into her mouth. In a low voice, he growled to her, "If Agent Merlo's report is correct, that was the last of the clone's biological remains, and now some imbecile has botched it beyond our use. No genetic material can be removed from it. Apparently, the chemicals it was submerged in dissolved the 'nucleic material.' And since Dr. Fuji's data on Mewtwo was destroyed along with his facility, and Cassandra apparently burned the rest of the creature's corpse and its lair, we can't create another. That part of our plan, it seems, is no longer available for us."

Had this disaster not occurred, they might have perfected methods to insure a willing soldier out of a fresh clone; brainwashing techniques and careful education would have been keys in working such psychological wonders. However, Giovanni's resurrected vision of possessing a replica of the almost god, mew, at the point his army had been murdered once again. Now the force he was gathering for the coming days would have a different, weaker creature in that position in his shining operation. This undesirable detail made the Team Rocket leader seethe in disappointment, for he had intended this now averted stroke in his plan to mark total dominance over the demon at last. Yet even in death, Mewtwo had somehow gained a semblance of victory and evasion from the man's control.…. "Perhaps this isn't a bad thing," his right hand soldier commented. Seeing his aggravated look, she continued, "Well, clones are unpredictable – we've learned that extensively over the last few years, haven't we? If the new Mewtwo eventually turned on us, then all of our efforts would've amounted to squat."

Giovanni, understanding her point, was forced to grin bitterly. "You might be right, but the idea of having that creature's power at our command again…even you must admit it was a seductive thought!"

Leaning forward, he sighed. "We'll manage regardless of this failure. The G.V. and D.I. serums should be more than enough to overwhelm this nation's pathetic government. Kanto's system - and any system for that matter - can only endure so much strain before buckling, especially when its foundation is taken out from underneath it."

Yet both knew they must wait until they had obtained the ideal weapon to bring about such ruin. Close as they were to gaining it, more time was needed before blessed flawlessness was reached… and inevitably, smaller goals were certain to arise in the meantime. Once such prizes came into their sights, it would make lingering on the edge of chaos that much more enticing…and within the next three months, they would discover the existence of a trophy they dared not pass up. In their avariciousness, in their distraction, the country would receive a short reprieve from the war it didn't realize was approaching. But once they had all they wished, Giovanni Maki and his followers would move forward to strike…and although they were still unaware of the matter, the events preceding chaos would begin in the following weeks.…

Although still ignorant of the intents of her superiors, Cassandra had stumbled upon another set of facts that no less disturbed her. For one matter, it seemed that despite being alive for nearly two decades, the angel owned few personal possessions beyond the tools of her trade. This notion was made exceedingly obvious once the movers had finished categorizing and packing her belongings, with only one small box having to be dedicated to miscellaneous items. As she watched the group load the cardboard crates into the elevator, she frowned at what this smallest one seemed to insinuate.
Although she knew that people shouldn't grade the value of their lives based on the objects they owned, objects were markers in a life, and evidently, hers had been quite empty so far. Would that hollow existence, she had to wonder to herself, change for the better in the upcoming days…? The cynical part of her mind doubted it. With an agitated grumble, she reviewed the schedule ahead of her: her belongings were now being transported to Giovanni's estate, where she would spend the remaining weeks before the wedding. After the ceremony took place, Zachariah and she would leave for their honeymoon, and her possessions would then be assimilated with Zachariah's while they were gone, a mingling that would act as the material proof of their union.

The very thought irked her to the point where rolling her eyes and gagging wasn't out of the question. However, her irritation over her impending marriage was soon overtaken by worry over another matter entirely. As her unwelcome guests descended to street level, her indifferent mask slipped away, revealing an anxiety close to panic: for she was missing things. She couldn't know whether the invaders of her vacant home had misplaced or stolen them, but her most treasured possessions could no longer be located. The photographs she had of her parents and the Fuji family, a few treasures from her early childhood, Selena's engagement and wedding rings, her viola – none remained. Yet compared to the final missing component of her life, these were mere superficial trinkets: for inexplicably, after three years of his faithful presence, her beloved Shadow had disappeared, leaving her not a single hint at where he might have strayed. The loss of the dark fox, now that she remembered his true history, created a smarting and bitter wound within her, torn deep by her longing for his company. Where was he? Had her little one wandered away, believing her dead or turned traitor when she hadn't returned home in those initial weeks? Surely that couldn't be the case; he was too loyal for such abandonment! No, he had to be somewhere nearby…and yet no matter how desperately she searched and called for him, her pokémon, her surrogate child, did not appear before her.

Eventually the virtual mourner drifted into her now stripped bathroom, fighting the urge to regurgitate from the intensity of her loneliness and dread. Clearly her dear one had vanished, and without him as an anchor of comfort, her life seemed to be whirling out of control. Before realizing what cycle she was moving automatically into to kill the ache, she found herself clutching her medication bottle in one hand and three pale tablets in the palm of the other. Her eyes already consumed them emptily, her mind on a detached level understanding what they offered her: the repression of emotion and memory, and from their burial a sweet lack of physical feeling. All she needed to do to obtain oblivion was swallow the pills…. Lifting her hand, the nauseating sensation of falling into a familiar hole arose, a hole she would be nearly incapable of escaping once she tilted the tablets into her mouth. Yet still she proceeded, and turning on the tap, she filled her mouth with water. The pills floated across her tongue, waiting for her to swallow them so they could release their chemical contents into her system….

And at this point, she hesitated, suddenly torn. The longer she waited, the more likely it was she would gulp the capsules down, her will to do otherwise crushed beneath habit. However, resistance was there, like words of protest on the tip of one's tongue, needing only a breath behind them to be spoken. Did she truly wish to suppress her soul again? Did she truly want everything to return to the way it had been before: into an unfeeling void? Cassandra hesitated in the monotonous, yet potent act….

…and then she spat out the tablets into the sink, and purposefully unscrewed the cap of the prescription bottle and poured its contents into the waters of the toilet. As she pressed its lever down firmly, her eyes traced how the capsules whirléd down into the porcelain drain until they were entirely flushed away. For a brief moment, upon seeing the last one vanish, her mind panicked: what had she done? Automatic, inexplicable craving for the lost tablets arose potently within her system, but the young woman stood her ground, refusing to move. This was the first time in years that her body was clean of the substance, and she was well aware that the worst of the drug withdrawal had
already taken place. Certainly, she would yearn for the opiate for months to come, possibly even for years. Yet presently she was liberated from its chemical hold...and she wanted to remain free. She would not allow herself to take a step backwards, no matter how tempting, and so used this moment to cement her choice. Later she would muse that, despite the pain it had birthed, the time she had spent with Mewtwo had given her something good in return, and would indeed have some positive impact on her life. For now, she would not fall prey to the opiate once more - she vowed that to herself as she stood within the gloom.

When she finally wandered from bathroom, she chose to occupy her thoughts with the home she was leaving behind rather than the drug. So many horrible atrocities had occurred within the pale walls around her...yet, also as true, it had been her haven with Mewtwo. She drifted forward, coming to stand where the bed used to be, and recalled in vivid clarity the thrill of the first time she had made love with him. They had been just as uncertain as eager for intimacy that night, neither of them knowing whether they could truly fit together as they yearned to...and perhaps that quality of the unknown had helped Cassandra to clasp her beloved to her without a sense of imminent doom curled within her. Instead, in those tentative, initial hours of their newfound relationship, she had allowed the exchange of caresses, the physical expressions of their need for comfort and for one another, and had allowed them to slowly wander down a path they could not possibly step back from. Yet the reason why she had consented to the union so soon after the attack now perplexed her. She remembered murmuring her desire to have memories of him replace the ones she had of Belial Biancardi, and this remained a valid point. Yet perhaps her reasoning had exceeded that wish. In those months after the rape, she had felt as worthless as the dust gathering on her windowsill, valued by no one and despised by herself. Perhaps with that viewpoint, it would not have mattered if someone else entered within her body again, inflicting in her the same sensations of pain and violation. What difference would a repetition of the gruesome nightmare have made to her broken being? Yes, Mewtwo had never harmed her in his lust, but she supposed this indifference to further degradation would have been enough for her to allow his closeness. As well, she had to take into account not only the state of her spirit but her mind: her thoughts after the hellish experience had been of a similar chaos – at no point in the time up until the kiss Mewtwo had given her had she truly been aware of her actions, nor had she cared about what she did: she had merely allowed events to unfold around her. Some of that indifference, perhaps, might have played a part in allowing herself to mate with a pokémon.

Yet she knew just as well that disinterest and ignorance hadn't been what had led to their bodily unions. It instead been something far sweeter, for out of all those she had known, she had trusted the clone completely, and had cared for him to the depths of her soul. From a combination of those two feelings, their acts of intimacy became far more meaningful to them both, and were removed from a mere desire for transient pleasure. Indeed, sex between them had rarely been for entertainment, as enjoyable as it proven. It had instead represented their mutual love and faith in one another. Despite her fear, she had invited him in, had become his mate because of the warmth he'd brought into her life, because of the certainty he embodied in a chaotic existence. Together they had shared a beautiful experience, had enjoyed the happiness, pleasure, and adoration they gave to one another, not daunted by the potential views of outsiders. The Bible, she understood, declared that they'd committed an unspeakable sin in being together, and that it should be rewarded with death...yet they had not been struck down by God, had they? Yes, their relationship had been forced to end, but that demise wasn't due to the work of the divine - it had merely been the work of prejudiced humans. Abruptly, it seemed to Cassandra that her own species was more powerful than a dead or uncaring God...and strangely, instead of feeling lost and alone at that idea, the thought gave her some extent of relief and peace, and expressed to her how she must live: in the present, thinking not of the past or the future.

Yet in the coming days, the past was all she thought about because - to her mind - she no longer possessed a future.
Sitting in one of the sunrooms of Giovanni's estate, the women attending to the bride-to-be fluttered about like excited fairies, darting around her in flashes of dazzling color. The angel remembered none of the faces of those who spoke to her in pleased voices, or who complimented her on her loveliness. For the most part, these other females seemed overflowing with glee and gossip, for it was exceedingly rare that the organization officially held any type of holy event, and being a part of the preparations was something they'd long lusted for. So they happily debated on how to style her hair (deciding to curl it slightly so it brushed her shoulders in waves), over what hues to thread into her white dress, and which formal sandals she should wear. To the assassin, these light-hearted discussions were banal talk, and the only incident in which she grew attentive was when they had suggested removing her "gaudy" choker. Seeing her fierce glare, they'd merely settled on wrapping a royal blue ribbon about her neck (as she had hissed that she hated red). As she fell back into listlessness, she listened to the music playing in the background, completely indifferent to the preparations. Yes, even though she had consented to this, that didn't mean she wanted to go through with it, and making that obvious was her only triumph in the matter.

At some point, one of the songs playing captured her attention, and gently she took one of the woman's wrists and asked its name. Surprised that the young woman had willing broken her silence, the attendant immediately told her its title and artist ("Paradise" by Vanessa Carlton), and later allowed Cassandra to borrow the CD it was recorded on. Days passed too quickly, and the angel listened to the song repeatedly, musing on its meaning as she allowed her mind to wander into unearthed memory….

Mewtwo lay with her under the covers of her bed, his arms wrapped about her waist and hers about his, and slowly, tenderly, their mouths graced fur and flesh alike. Her lover nuzzled her glossy hair as she kissed his throat, her tongue tasting him soundlessly: he was sweet, like mint tea. As he shifted over her, his fragrance, also of mint and mingled with the clean scent of soap, washed across her skin and left her feeling strangely clean. Their actions this night went no further than simple cuddling; during the day, he had battled for Giovanni, and they never mated after he had done such. Why this was she wasn't certain, and she could only surmise that Mewtwo's mood was not conducive of sex, as warm as his form was as he curled close to her body. Yet although he did not incite in her uncontrollable bliss, her flesh still thrummed with pleasure at his light caresses. Pressing her cheek to his, she sighed into his ear, finding comfort in the understanding that their relationship was not based solely upon their lovemaking. In that hushed moment, she could feel him purring through his thin, velvet fur, and she savored the vibration the low noise made within him.

Eventually he began to rise from her hold, as if intending to fall asleep at her side as usual, but she held onto him firmly. As she shook her head in protest, her mouth brushed at the curve of his primary neck. "No...," she whispered to him. "Stay like this, wildcat."

"I weigh twice as much as you. If I obey your desire, I might smother you as we sleep, and that isn't something I wish to do."

She smiled somewhat as she lifted her face to bestow a gentle kiss upon his muzzle. "You wouldn't, not even involuntarily." And softly she rested her palm upon his face, and placed a small amount of pressure against his cheek so he would lay his head against her shoulder. As he did, his mouth brushed her neck, his lips able to feel the pulse in her left jugular vein.

"And you call me a fool, my dear."

At the term of endearment, he felt the body beneath his go rigid, and curious at her response, he lifted his face to stare upon her, his brow furrowed in question. Evidently, he had said something wrong, and brushing her dark bangs from her forehead, he inquired quietly as to what it was. After
a moment, Cassandra's eyes refocused onto him, and she murmured haltingly, "Don't...please don't call me that. That's the term of endearment Giovanni uses for me, so...call me something else, anything else, just...not that."

He rested his forehead against hers and closed his eyes. "Of course," he sighed, understanding. Then, a faint grin spreading on his lips, he pondered aloud, "Hmm...then what shall I call you instead? Would 'my dove' be more acceptable to you, Cassandra?"

His lover blinked up at him, a trace of confusion evident in her gaze. "'My dove'? That's unusual... where...?"

Mewtwo chuckled lowly, the deep rumble echoing in her mind as he settled himself down against her and pressed the side of his face to her collar. "Perhaps someday I'll explain it to you. For now, I would prefer to sleep...it has been a long day, dove."

And so he drifted off listening to the comforting sound her heart beating steadily within her chest. Smiling faintly in her victory, Cassandra pressed her mouth to his ear and, musing tiredly that she would have to give him a pet name in return for the one he had given her, she soon fell into peaceful dreams with him....

"...So, sis', I hear you're getting hitched. And to Zachariah no less! Isn't that incest, to get with your cousin?"

The angel glanced up from her seat, her eyes widening slightly as she found none of her usual attendants within the sunroom. How long had she been drifting off? Shaking her head to clear it of the fragile memory, she gazed at the speaker, surprise registering on her face as she did: before he stood Silver, Giovanni's disowned son, who she had not seen in several years. After the boy had rebelled against the organization, claiming it to be filled with weaklings and forsaking his position as his father's heir, the stoic leader had refused to allow his bastard, redheaded progeny any stake in an inheritance. However, someone with primogeniture rights had to be named, and as Giovanni had been unable to sire more offspring shortly after Silver's conception, this had left the man in a nasty predicament. In the end, Zachariah - the son of Giovanni's late brother and several years Silver's elder - had become the next in line to perpetuate the Team Rocket criminal empire. As soon as the shifting of power had been established in law, the true heir has vanished, presumably to pursue a career as a pokémon trainer. Cassandra herself, barely acquainted with the boy, hadn't been under the impression that he was even in the country - the last she'd heard, he'd been spotted wandering in the countryside of Johto. As of such, his reappearance here was rather shocking, and she doubted he could possibly be staying long: if he was caught on the estate, he'd be thrown out promptly and violently.

Mulling over his statement, she replied, "It would only be incest if I belonged to your family already, Silver. But I'm not Giovanni's daughter, thank god."

The redhead smirked, his onyx eyes flashing as he teased, "Could fool anyone though, with your looks and that attitude of yours – you kind of resemble the tyrannical buzzard. And let's not forget that he treats you better than his own kid! If you didn't have medical proof, even I'd-.

"Why are you here, Silver?" she snarled, her voice having gained a sudden edge of impatience and displeasure at his inferences.

Her companion fiddled with one of the pokéballs at his belt as he drawled out, "Officially, father told me to return to his fiery underworld to have my pokémon vaccinated against a new superbug. I'd have probably told him to stick those needles up his ass, but when I heard about your good fortune, I decided to stop by and wish you luck. After all, Zach's not really your type."
Seeing the droll look she bestowed upon him, he spat out in explanation, "Oh, come on! You're not into pigs, last I checked!"

The assassin smiled in faint amusement in response. "No, I'm not... I've never enjoyed pork. Or pulling meat in general for that matter."

He snorted at that, and then stunned her by striding over to her and gathering her into a fleeting embrace. Feeling how she stiffened in his hold, he released her and backed away, evading the potential gut-punch he might have been about to receive. Stuffing his hands in the deep pockets of his jacket, he glanced as the carpet and said, "Seriously though, whatever you decide to do, you have my support, 'Sandra. Though I was an ass when I was younger – sort of still am, because some things never change - you supported me when I went against my father's wishes. I just thought I'd do the same for you, that's all."

Her reluctant grin evaporated from her face. "Silver," she murmured firmly, "I'm not planning to-..."

His black gaze met her grey one. "Aren't you?" he inquired, and then growled out before she could respond, "You've a choice, you know. You may not see it now, but it's there. Maybe someday you'll take my advice and get out of here while you still can. Death doesn't have to be your only means of getting out of Team Rocket, you know."

Words she might have uttered died in her throat, and only able to stare at him, she noted how he glanced at the door with glinting, coy eyes. "Well, I'd better head out before someone discovers where I darted off too. Oh, and before I forget: you look smoking hot in that dress, sis."

She threw one of the pairs of shoes at him, and seeing how its heel punctured through the wall, he quickly winked goodbye and darted out the door. Then, as her attendants returned, she lost herself in memory once more, trying not to take to heart the words the teenager had voiced....

The hot water hit her naked, sweat-streaked skin, warming it of the chill that had penetrated it after she'd rolled out of the cozy covers of her bed. In about an hour, she had to attend an official meeting with the other elite members of Team Rocket, and arriving there smelling of sex was certain to raise questions that were best left unasked. Taking an unused washrag and saturating it with body-wash, she began to rub herself clean, and repressed a shudder as she felt the thin scars that streaked across her intimate parts. Soon passing those areas, she scrubbed her scalp with shampoo and folded one wing at a time before her, feeling the water trickling across her feathers. Her soapy hands preened them carefully, and over the roar of the pounding rinse and the quiet hiss of steam, she did not hear the shower curtain open and close. Yet soon she was aware of her beloved's presence as he stepped behind her and wrapped his tail and arms around her, his fur growing damp from the liquid surging from the faucet above them. He was attentive to press himself between her wings, having no desire to accidently place pressure on and crush the fragile extremities. Standing together in the spray, they swayed wordlessly, and Cassandra bit back a whimper as Mewtwo took over the cleansing of her sensitive wings. He was gentle with them, very much aware of how easily her feathers could break and of the resulting pain that would cause her. Yet though difficult to manage with his round fingertips, he preened away the bits of sullied material that clung to the ebony shafts. In a manner, he was far more thorough than she herself was in the task, for he could reach the entirety of those limbs without difficulty. However, when his paws began to stray elsewhere, she turned around to face him and shook her head.

"Not right now, Mewtwo. I have to go soon."

Yet even as she declared that, she checked the clock to see how much longer she had left. Upon noting the exact time, she figured she could do one small thing for him: she could cleanse him in return for his gesture. The clone closed his eyes as she rubbed shampoo into his pelt, and sneezed as
he accidently breathed some of the suds up his nostrils. His mate laughed at the sound of it, and
continued to scrub lower and lower along his form.... In the end, the process not only wound up
using all the warm water, but also resulted in her having no time to eat breakfast as she'd intended.
Cassandra had only a few minutes to dry herself, throw on formal clothes, and dart to the meeting.
Ultimately, she was late arriving to the gathering, but thankfully, her colleagues dismissed her
untimely arrival due to sleeping in, and not the consequence of pampering the creature still in her
shower.

As for that feline himself, he remained chuckling at his mate's vows of vengeance for causing her
delay - he had no fear of her wrath...!

In the preparation room of the chapel, the angel stood before the full-body mirror, taking in the sight
of the wedding dress adorning her. A simple, snowy white garment, it possessed no ruffles or lace,
and used a single tie around the neck to hold the front to her. Its silky material hugged her form
lightly, and was run through with ribbons of blue and strands of pearls, which added beauty to the
otherwise plain fabric. Finally, the misty veil over her face obscured her vision slightly, but she cared
little about this hindrance: she did not care to see the details of this day, for it was not the happiest
one of her life as it should be - this was merely another act of duty. Her wedding was nothing more
than an elaborate façade, one throw to conceal the degradation she was facing. Soon she would
become something less than a respected agent of Team Rocket: she would be made into a
toy...although perhaps she had always been a plaything, one manipulated into being a machine of
massacre. However, if what she did presently could somehow keep Mewtwo safe, she could accept
being forged into a mere object, and could endure being treated as such until her death. Certainly, the
concept left a revolting taste on her tongue, but she would commit herself to this regardless.
Afterwards she would move forward...although along what path was not something she knew in
such certainty.

Although she must admit, she was surprised at how simple this ordeal was, despite how much
influence it was to have on her future. She supposed that in following orders as she was, there
resulted a calm sense of purpose. Under the commands of others, she could live her life without
questioning anything, for her world then became a simpler one of black and white, which held no
room for the grey emotion of doubt. She would never need to struggle with herself at night for a
decision made wrong, as obedience freed her from that burden. For many years, she had lived in this
manner, as a detached being run by her thoughts and not her heart. Indeed, if she had ever dared
stepped out of such behavior, her being would have tore itself apart with uncertainly and screamed
for its existence to end. Unable to allow this to occur, she had chosen to become a refined weapon,
and had lost her ability to weep in the process...but then Mewtwo had entered her life and inverted
the colors of her universe. He, only half a man, had given her humanity back to her, and in doing so
had blessed her with the ability to shed tears again. As she thought of him, she wondered who might
do the same for him now that he was free of eternal night....

Once the final preparations were completed, and as she was coached on the proceedings of the
ceremony, the parallels in their lives struck her. She mused to herself that it was almost humorous
how alike Mewtwo's life and hers had been for a short span of time. For one thing, neither of them
had known a great deal of parental guidance or possessed a full childhood. Also, they had both taken
lives at a young age, and had both become members of Team Rocket shortly after committing the
unforgivable sin. Yet at that point, the independent likenesses began to fade. Unlike Cassandra,
Mewtwo had rebelled against the organization to gain his freedom, had torn himself from it to obtain
the roles of a pacifist and defender. The young woman, on the other hand, had remained the same
person she had been for nine years: a poisonous moth, attracted to the glow of a flame, but
instinctively knowing it would be her doom if she tried to pursue the flickering, golden light.

And so the angel sunk further into crimson darkness, unresisting as others began to chain her to the
When she next regained true awareness, she found her attendants gone, and heard the church organ playing out in the traditional tune of the wedding march. Giovanni stood in the doorway before her, and beyond him she saw people with unfamiliar faces standing, all waiting for her to begin to step down the aisle. With a soundless sigh, she made the first slow motions forward, the train of her dress trailing behind her, and without a word, she offered her arm to her godfather. The Italian man seemed strangely pleased, almost happy in fact, as if this truly were more than a polite way of making her into his nephew’s whore. Perhaps the crime lord actually viewed her as he might a true daughter, and this ceremony as the culmination of his dreams for her. Yet though she plastered on a false smile as she gazed forward, she felt her heart squeeze tightly with bitterness: for what about her dreams, her hopes? What about her few, miniscule wishes…?

As she halted before her groom, she comforted herself with the notion that she and her dearest had tried…yes, they had failed, but they had tried nonetheless. When the priest began to speak, his voice low and purposeful, and the audience retook their seats, the angel stared into Zachariah's unremarkable face with a vague sense of déjà-vu, and wistfulness curled in her chest as a golden memory arose in her mind's eye, blinding her to reality. For Mewtwo and she had once yearned with all their hearts to share a binding akin to matrimony, even though such a wonder was - like every other treasure couples might be provided, and they denied - sadly impossible for them to obtain….

Her partner woke her as the first of dawn's pale rays were dashed upon the eastern horizon, as he nuzzled at her face, her chest, even nipping at her gently in his desire for her to rise to consciousness. At first his dove steadfastly refused him, her body too wearied from her recent mission to yearn for anything but sleep in their shared day off…but perhaps because of their rare free hours, Mewtwo was insistent. He murmured to her in a teasing tone that he had a surprise for her, and if she did stir to greet the day soon, he would withhold it from her for another week. Cassandra was sorely tempted to disappoint him, but the clone was too stubborn a creature to allow her to do so: first he stole away her warm covers, and after she determinedly curled herself into fetal position with one of the pillows, he gathered her into his arms and proceeded to carry her into the bathroom. He blatantly and cheerfully ignored how she hissed at him that he'd better not do what she thought he was planning on, and swiftly turned on the cold water and stepped into the icy spray with her held captive in his arms.

She shrieked in the shock of the chill and thrashed into his hold, cursing at him to release her, and once he had, she turned around and smacked at him with her palms. But this abuse lasted no longer than a few moments; abruptly, she spun back around and turned the water onto warm. As he stepped out, chuckling to himself, she shouted that whatever his surprise was had better be worth him being neutered over. Mewtwo only smiled at her mock threat, and remained silently amused as she grumbled and glared at him throughout breakfast. Shadow, their little one, merely munched on cooked tuna at their feet and smirked up at his mistress occasionally – the kit, it seemed, knew precisely what was going on. At one point, he hopped on the camera Mewtwo had purchased with his considerable salary, photographing a shot of their brushing feet. In a few hours time he would snap far better ones of the pair.

Afterward eating, the couple wandered out into the private gardens of the base, each savoring the sunshine and the autumn air, which became rife with shimmering gold whenever the wind lifted colored leaves into the fray. Concealed in a hooded cloak, Mewtwo remained a few strides behind his mate, both of them wordless as they stepped down along the concrete paths, over trickling manmade streams and onto crisp, dry grass. They drifted under the shade cast by fiery maples, oaks, elms, cherry trees, and even a couple naked, silver birches. Eventually, the clone led Cassandra away from the public pathways and into a small groove of willows. Hidden almost entirely among the drooping boughs of the largest one, with yellow leaves and rays of sunlight raining softly down
Knowing they could not be seen in this place, the angel accepted his tender kiss, and wondered at what he was up to. When the male finally pulled away, he seemed, to her surprise, almost nervous in how he regarded her. His violet tail twitched minutely behind him, betraying his sudden anxiety.

"Cassandra," he began, "I've been meaning to propose something to you for the past few weeks, but given our...schedules...this is the first formal opportunity I've had to speak with you on the matter. I brought you here for a reason, and I would appreciate it if you'd listen to the whole of my speech before responding to my offer, do you understand?"

Her curiosity aroused, Cassandra nodded her agreement. Pleased, her partner slowly too from the pocket of his cloak a small box of black velvet. His mate's grey eyes widened as her mind filled with the connotations of the sight, and forgetting her promise she opened her mouth to say something - but the expression etched onto Mewtwo's face made her snap her jaw shut. Her being quavering slightly, she watched as he telekinetically opened the jewelry box: it held a pair of identical, inscribed, platinum rings, one of which was the decorative piece of a chain necklace. Gazing into her face, he stated, "Your kind, I have learned, exchange rings such as these as a mutual display of lifelong commitment to one another. The pieces are supposed to be a precedent to a holy ceremony in which the couple is bound together by law, yet...you and I, being what we are, could never hope to be married. Even if those around us could possibly accept us, no priest could condone the union of a human and an 'animal.' Also, another form of binding exists that we cannot provide each other: we cannot conceive children, Cassandra. You and I can mate as lovingly as we wish and still never form new life between us to raise and cherish. Shadow is as close as we can ever come to having a family - we both know that well enough."

After all, although they had never used any contraceptives, Cassandra had bled from her monthly menstruation only two weeks prior, confirming that no offspring could come from their physical unions. If an infant had formed, she would undoubtedly have missed that part of her cycle; yet it continued, as it surely always would, and so Cassandra nodded and allowed him speak on. "Despite these facts, I wish for you as my mate in all the years to come. These rings would symbolize that desire, provided it is mutual between us," he said, the fingers of one of his paws intertwining with hers, warm and certain. "It's not even as if our own vows would be unique to us either; after all, those of other 'illicit' bonds share this gesture as well. Regard it merely as a promise, dove...one which, if you accept it, will keep me at your side for the remainder of our lives."

The dark girl's throat constricted painfully, and she felt herself shaking as she wondered over what he had declared: he was serious in this proposition, and each word he uttered to outline it intense in feeling. A tentative response formed upon her tongue, but Mewtwo quieted her with a slow shake of his head, for he was not yet finished in his speech. "Furthermore, once you are a legal adult and the curse Giovanni has placed in you is no longer endangering you, I will take you from here. We shall make a haven of our own somewhere in which to spend our days - a true home where we belong, and where he will never find us," he murmured, and his eyes seemed to soften minutely with sadness as he confided, "I know how you hate the current life you live, so I wish to provide you with a better one. Regardless if you decline the rest of my offer, I will help you regain your freedom when the time comes. That much is independent of your acceptance, so you needn't allow the notion to sway your decision. On that matter, if you need to take time to consider..."

Yet Cassandra needed no such thing. She shook her head and leaned upwards to kiss her mate soundly on the mouth, the touch tender, sweet, and passionate. Like golden rain - the tears of rejoicing angels – willow leaves fell upon the pair, the flecks of pyrite catching in the folds of the male's cloak and in the yet damp, black strands of the female's hair. When the latter parted from her dearest, she breathed out, "I don't need any time, you silly cat. I accept, and I'll do whatever I can to make it work. I can wait a two years, Mewtwo. Just as long as you're here with me, I-."
He peered at her, his gaze heavy with lingering doubt, his paw stroking through her hair and brushing from it the fallen leaves. "Have you thought it through?" he asked, and reminded her, "If you agree, you will never have children of your own, and you cannot."

She brushed her fingertips over his muzzle, silencing him, and smiled, the sunlight casting a fire into her eyes. "Each love is different, Mewtwo," she said. "Ours just won't have children in it, and it'll be honorable even if it's not official. It's still ours, and that's all I need, so yes. You're mine, wildcat, always."

In response, her partner's mouth curled into a genuinely happy smile, and gently took her left hand, placing the ring he had forged for her onto her slender ring finger. It fit well, as he had known it would, hugging her coffee-and-cream flesh in a cool embrace, the unyielding metal of it smooth and gleaming under the sun. His joy contagious, Cassandra laughed of it and took the necklace from the velvet box, undoing the clasp and redoing it once the chain was wrapped about his primary neck. As she wrapped her arms over the clone's shoulders, she mused that once he had his armor on, no soul besides her would know he wore it – it would be concealed and protected from prying eyes. As well, who would ever realize that her new piece of jewelry was proof that she had accepted an unlikely proposal, his proposal? Oh, everyone else would remain ignorant but their Shadow. This would be another of their secrets, their greatest one, for it promised an end to remaining trapped in the dark.... And as they gazed upon one another warmly, Mewtwo embraced his dove close to his heart and teleported them to their favorite place in the world, their spot upon the crown of the cliff which overlooked the Viridian Forest, and there they celebrated their vows, bearing hope within them for once in their shadow-filled lives....

Returning to the present, long removed from that golden memory, she remembered the bitter, sobering truth: Mewtwo had never returned for her, and now as she spoke vows to a man she barely knew, he did not come either. Her beloved had broken his promise, had discarded his hallowed oath, and did not even appear to possess the decency of arriving to object to the wrongful union that she was being made a part of. However, even as the final, binding words were uttered, the betrayed female found she could not hate or loath the clone for his decision...because as long as he had a chance to wander under the sun once more, she would possess some small victory against the injustices that were being committed against her.

"...I do," she whispered, and felt a vast weight settle upon the shoulders of her soul, cancerous to her spirit. Yet she found she could bear the burden and resist the sickness it sought to infect her with, for it was weightless and impotent compared to others she had been forced to carry across her back.

Then - nailing her to the position as wife, as one might hands to dogwood - so too did Zachariah say the words. From there the priest concluded the ceremony, erected the holy crux of matrimony, and with the man's consent, Cassandra's husband leaned forward and kissed her mouth. The young woman accepted the touch warily, and involuntarily tasted him: unlike Mewtwo, the flavor of the man's lips was butterscotch sweet...too sweet, really, for her liking. She also noted that his fragrance was of freshly brewed coffee, which she supposed was befitting of his mocha skin and his dark cinnamon hair. His irises, it seemed, were also of a warm hue, resembling deep amber or topaz – they were the exact opposite hue as Mewtwo's eyes. Aversion rose strongly within her at that realization, and surprisingly he seemed to sense this and pulled away, forcing nothing more in this moment: he was already triumphant. Later, once the party was over, he would surely reap the rewards of this win, but for now, he left her alone, never pressing the whole of her to himself, and never allowing his hands to stray across her person.

This restraint was far more than she had expected of him, but she knew better than to fool herself into believing such respectful treatment would last long: from what little she knew of Giovanni's nephew, it was not in his character. Fighting agitation, the angel drifted through the following celebration,
signing the official papers, taking sips of punch, and nibbling on the exotic snacks being passed around. Wherever she strayed she was met with congratulations, and Giovanni seemed especially lively, to the point of teasing her over her stubbornness and thanking her for giving in to their agreement. Trying not to allow her discontent and revulsion show at this unnerving display, she had merely chuckled and stated she was planning to retire to her new quarters soon for sleep. She wanted no more part of this event, and so she quitted it as soon as she was able to make her escape, and within minutes lay down in the bedroom. For a short while, feeling the moon's rays upon her skin, she drifted off, comforted with the idea that somewhere out there Mewtwo rested under the moonlight too, safe forever from his past….

Around midnight, Cassandra became aware of someone sitting on the other side of the bed she lay upon, and felt a hand rest on her shoulder. She stiffened immediately at the uninvited touch and pulled away from Zachariah's hold, and asked him in a quiet, weary voice for him to leave her alone. For a few minutes, he did not speak a single word, nor did he depart, until finally he stated in a smooth, tenor voice, "You're sad, aren't you? Why is that? I thought this was supposed to be the day every girl looks forward to since they learned what a wedding was."

"Not all of us," Cassandra replied, "and it's a mistake to associate me with normal women."

The angel felt his fingers running through her hair, coming to trace the wires of her choker. "Yes, that's right…and you know, I'd very much like to see those wings of yours sometime, but I'll wait until you're ready for that. For now I'll just content myself with other things."

Her husband leaned down and kissed her cheek softly – but abruptly, despite the gentleness of the touch, Cassandra felt fear bolt through her stomach, cold and nauseating. Who was this man to bestow a kiss upon her without her consent? Forcefully she tore away from him and sat up, glaring through the gloom at him. "Absolutely not. Just because we're married doesn't mean I'm going to be fucking you anytime soon. If you desperately to go for a romp, go stalk one of the bridesmaids or have a date with your right hand. I'm not going to have any part in it."

Zachariah frowned faintly in the dull light, his tender exterior replaced with annoyance. "But you're my wife. You have to-.."

She gritted her teeth and stood, walking away from the man. "No, I really don't," she said, and added, "If you want the bed, though, you can have it. I'll go sleep on one of the sofas."

But before she made it to the doorway, she felt firm, strong fingers wrap about her wrist, and was tugged back towards the one they belonged to. The momentum of the sudden jerk spun her around to face him, and having lost his courteous façade, Zachariah growled lowly, "You're upset, I understand. My uncle didn't leave you any choice in this, but the least you can do is attempt to make the best of your situation. You're obviously hurting, somehow…but I can make you feel better. Though first, I've got to admit, I've been rather curious about something."

Her eyes narrowed as she felt his other hand slip up across her collar, take the chain she wore, and pull the bejeweled cross out from beneath the front of her dress. "Tell me," he inquired, "what's this trinket? It's of very nice quality. Who gave you-?"

Searing anger rolled through her, and forcefully she took the necklace from his grasp and backed away, snarling out, "That's mine! Don't you dare touch it!"

She never wanted his filthy hands to grace Mewtwo's gift to her ever again…!

As if to soothe her, his fingers brushed down her face, and then the man grabbed her arm again, hard enough to darken her tan skin with purplish bruises. "My, you have quite the temper…do calm
down, wife. It was an innocent question, that's all. But if you don't want to talk to me civilly, that's just fine. I do have numerous alternatives for that mouth, after all, and there's no reason why you can't enjoy doing them with me." And before she could pull free once more and spit out a "no," Zachariah dragged his bride against him and smothered her mouth with his.

Now Zachariah was a handful of years older than Cassandra was, and most certainly physically stronger, since he lifted weights for numerous hours each week to hone his muscles. As of such, although the young woman he crushed to his frame tried to thrash from his grip, he held her to him firmly, if awkwardly. Eventually she managed to tear her mouth away from his to breathe, and when she did she cursed him violently, but soon her words were stifled by yet another fierce kiss. Not even Mewtwo in his most lust-ridden state could compare to the animal hunger in this now uncivilized creature, who was nothing like the clone in the covetous manner in which his hands roamed over her form, undoing the single tie and the zipper of her wedding dress and tugging the top down to her waist to expose her upper body. By this point, Cassandra trembled with revulsion – how dare he…? Infuriated the assassin tried to knee him between the legs, but the man was prepared for such tactics and caught her leg before she could inflict any damage. He then stroked at her smooth skin, inching his hand between her thighs, making her shake noticeably with rage and, now that the rest of her clothing was being torn from her, with fear too. She did not know when he forced her onto the bed, and in her panic at his relentless approach and at how he ignored her shouts for him to stop, she was unable to fight back. As his fingers simultaneously tugged at her panties and undid his belt, as he removed much of his own clothing and forced her beneath him, Cassandra froze.

In that sickening moment, the entirety of her being - her body, her mind, her soul - all regressed back into the hellish memory of how her late teacher had violated and abused her, for in Zachariah there was so much of that same monster. They were both devils wearing human skin; both unimaginably cruel; both boorish and suffocating. At some point, the exposed young woman felt her husband's erection brush against the inside of her leg, and she flinched visibly at the thought of imminent penetration, hearing her voice shrieking for the nightmare to stop…!

Yet then events shifted from the pattern of repetition: for Cassandra was not the same girl she had been the first time she had been threatened in this way. She was utterly sober, more experienced now in the art of self-defense, and held more than enough willpower to deny the male above her what she refused to give him willingly. Breaking herself free from her terror, she curled her knees between them and shoved her legs forward sharply, sinking her heels into Zachariah's pelvis. Seeing surprise register on his need-contorted face, she punched upwards into his stomach and struck his shoulder with her other hand to flip him off her. Freed of his weight, she staggered to her feet, and when the man tried to rise, she kicked his skull brutally, hoping to knock him unconscious with the blow. She failed in that respect; enraged and sexually frustrated, her husband rose to his feet and charged her, his fist slugging her in the face and the studded ring he wore opening up her lower lip. Yet though tasting her own blood, the assassin ignored the pain; this man was clumsy, she could-.

He knocked her to the ground and sprang over her, this time forcing her knees open, as if he believed that driving himself within her would result in her submission. However, Cassandra intercepted him before he managed to do so, and grasping his private tightly and twisting him, she snarled at his yelp of pain, "What? I thought this was what you wanted, you perverted son of a bitch!"

Once more she kicked him away, and then upon rising became the dominant aggressor in their struggle, for she did not intend to leave him capable of attacking her again. The feared assassin of Team Rocket pinpointed the male's weak spots, thrusting her palms and heels brutally into his yielding flesh. Whether she was intending to merely incapacitate him or kill him became obscure as her hands and feet became smeared with blood, but as she struck down on him she felt strength and confidence, not guilt, flood her as she established a glorious certainty within her soul: the crime the pummeled creature beneath her feet had attempted to commit would never again be done to her. She
could fight against such invasive advances successfully, could avert being defiled... no longer did anyone possess the power to force her to surrender herself to their lusts. This was her body, not theirs to do with what they desired, and she and only she would decide whom she would give it to!

And she most certainly would not consent to sharing herself with a disrespectful pig who thought the law gave him the right to rape her! Gasping for breath as he fell, she hissed out vehemently, "I... said... no! You won't come inside of me... unless I say you can!"

With that declaration, finally, after three long, agonizing years, Cassandra felt the memory of being raped and the terror it had invoked in her fall silent – the nightmare she had endured, worse than any the mind could conceive, would no longer haunt her. Like Zachariah, it was where it belonged: behind her, beneath her, and no longer in her way of pursing a future with whomever she might choose to have by her side....

And in her triumphant exhilaration, she made the mistake that she, trained to deliver the final blow to all enemies, should never have made: she underestimated her fallen opponent before he ceased to breath, and when she began to walk away, he grasped her ankle and yanked her down. She fell to the carpet with a shocked cry, and his hands, bruised and bleeding, flipped her onto her back, but instead of attempting to ravish her, his fingers wrapped around her throat and began to squeeze, digging the metal of her collar into her neck. Sudden terror flooded her, and she thrashed against him as her windpipe was cut off, lashing out as him with limb and nail, but the monster seemed immune to the blows, and dread filled her at the sight of his eyes, gleaming with a ferocity that bore no hint of human consciousness. He wanted to harm her for the pain she had inflicted upon him, and as rage and a lust for her blood rather than her body ruled him, he began to strangle his wife as an outlet for all those base and inhuman feelings. Her nails drew welts down his coiled arms, and as her vision began to dim, she cursed at the notion that this was how her life would end: having at last claimed victory over her demons, only to be destroyed for an instance of misplaced mercy....

But then a voice she knew so well, too well, roared through the room. "Release her!" And without waiting for an answer, a massive weight barreled into the man pinning her down, knocking him from her. The once unyielding hands around her throat were ripped away, and as she inhaled a deep breath of the copper-scented air, she rolled onto her belly, coughing, and began to lift herself up onto her arms. Over the thudding of her pulse, she heard the sound of meat being battered, of yelps and growls and harsh, curse-inlaid hisses. A shadow swept over her, and hearing glass shattered she looked up, finding a crumpled figure lying against the patio doors, whose surfaces were decorated by spider web fractures from the impact of the body. Her husband himself did not stir or twitch, his chest did not rise or fall, his wounds seeped no blood... and his neck was bent at an unnatural angle, broken perhaps when he struck the steel frames of the patio doors. Her savior from the man had his back turned towards her, and as the night breeze flowed through where the glass shards had fallen from the doors, his cloak rustled softly. Yet the male, she could see, was also trembling - his head was bowed, but not, she thought, from horror or grief. He was relieved and, as she had, was recalling the nightmare they had once endured in their youths... a nightmare that, this time, he'd managed to help avert.

With that important triumph gained, the weight of the guilt that had always lingered on his soul began to lessen. Although some part of it would always remain with him, it wouldn't haunt his being as it once had – for before them lay his closure, lay his redemption for failing her when she had once needed him the most. This time he had protected her, and that would have to be enough....

After a moment, he murmured, "Are you alright, Cassandra?"

Staring up at Mewtwo in shock, she whispered, "No, I'm not... but I will be."
And with one final glance at the corpse of Zachariah (she vaguely wondered if she should call up Guinness. This might just have been the shortest marriage in history, so maybe they'd give her a prize to "console" her with. Regardless), the clone turned and walked over to her, offering his paw for her to take. Grabbing her clothes from where they had been tossed on the carpet, the angel gasped his paw without a hint of doubt, and felt a momentary chill wash over her as he teleported them away. When they rematerialized, she stood with him upon the cliff that overlooked the Viridian Forest, with frost melting beneath her bare feet. Above them, the cool breeze made the barren branches of the tree sway, and shivering at the low temperature, Cassandra tugged her undergarments and dress in place, and then stared warily up into the clone's eyes. As he watched her, concern crossed his face as he noted the forming bruises darkening her tan skin, yet eventually this worry melted into relief as he realized she was otherwise unharmed. If he had arrived any later, he might have lost her completely….

After a few moments, in which the night breeze was the only sound rising around them, the woman said to him, "Mewtwo, can I ask you one little question?"

"Certainly." He was somewhat surprised she'd even ask. She'd always been one who spoke her mind rather freely.

"Okay," and then, after a slight pause, she turned to him, smacked him on the head, and shouted, "What the fuck are you doing here? Seriously, what the hell? While I'm grateful to you for helping me out, I thought we agreed that you'd remain far away from Kanto – like an ocean and continent away, preferably. Maybe you forgot while you were brooding - and don't look at me like that, that's so what you do when you're feeling pissy! - maybe you forgot that it's really not safe for you here anymore."

He reached out a paw to smooth the strands of her mussed hair, which she made no move to make him cease, despite how she was glaring at him. "If the scene we left is any indication, this place is no longer safe for you either. Yet to answer your question, I'm here because I once made a promise to you, Cassandra. I intend to keep it, although I am sorely late in doing so."

Hearing that, she starred up at him incredulously. So he'd returned here, ruining the security that he'd just gained from their efforts, merely to make an attempt to free her from the organization? If he hadn't seemed so serious in his intent, she would've laughed at him, but she repressed the urge with a sinking heart. They'd been little more than children when he had sworn that vow to her, still young enough to believe that they could find a way to achieve their goal without bloodshed. Yet presently the immaculate dream was too far removed from reality to be a true possibility. She knew well that if she departed with him now, defying the contract she had made with her godfather years prior, Team Rocket would hunt her down as lionesses would a lame gazelle. Regardless of the fact that Cassandra was a legal adult and no longer held under Giovanni's curse, she was an owned being, a soldier in a campaign she had signed away her soul to support. Officially bound by legalities, by duty, by honor, she could not simply flee from the organization to obtain her freedom. What the replica suggested doing would accomplish nothing…unless he was considering doing more than simply running away.

"Mewtwo, that's sweet and all, but how are you going to go about doing that?" she asked, a suspicion growing in her breast.

He met her gaze solemnly, and then spoke the words that rendered her suspicion valid. "I will do what must be done for you to live as a free being: I will slay Giovanni Maki, and so render your contract with him invalid."

When he saw distress flicker across her face, he continued, "If there was another option that could
insure that you have a free and fulfilling life, I would take it. However, we both know that as long as your godfather remains in a position of power, you will never know peace. If I were to simply take you from this region now, you know that within a matter of days he would direct his forces to find and reclaim you – and while I am confident that we could repel their advances for a time, fighting and fleeing to maintain our freedom is no way to live. Furthermore, our efforts against those hunters would be futile, for destroying the lower tiers of Team Rocket will not fully exterminate them – the agents sent after you, after all, will be the expendable ones, the soldiers who Giovanni can swiftly and easily replace. However, if the head of Team Rocket is cut away, then the rest of the gang will unravel from the loss. The organization will either become a mere shell of what it was, led by someone who dares not confront the ones who assassinated his or her predecessor, or it will simply fall apart completely from the internal chaos. Yet no matter which outcome occurs, you will be liberated from their ranks, and will no longer be ground beneath your godfather's heel. If only for that reason, that is why I intend to bring that man's life to an end."

He stood before her, resolute and brimming with dark purpose, and in that moment, she felt a certainty that he would, and could, do as he proposed. Still, although his argument was founded upon logic, her thoughts warred as she considered what he was suggesting. Her almost lover wanted to murder a devil who she considered godlike in stature, and more importantly, who had raised her from childhood. Irrational as it might be, and as much as Cassandra loathed what the man had done to Mewtwo, to numerous others, and to her, a part of her reared up in the monster's defense at this threat. Yet when it did, the rational side of her psyche reminded herself of what he had done to her alone. He had caused the deaths of her parents and of her dearest friend. He had placed her, for eight years, under a curse that would have exacted lethal retribution if she'd dared defy him. He had made her endure torturous training to become an assassin, and afterwards had sent her on countless missions in which her soul had become drenched in blood. Finally, he had tried, with all that he was, to keep her from the one she cherished more than any other. At the hands of her godfather, she had known torture throughout her youth, never knowing a life of peace, joy, and blissful ignorance of the greatest evils in this world. Her innocence and her heart had been sacrificed mercilessly, with only wealth, glory, and power offered as compensation. Yet to Cassandra, and to the others who shared her unfortunate tale, these tainted gifts were meaningless, and so the trade they had been forced to make lacked any worth...

Such suffering must come to an end, and if the death of Giovanni Maki was the only way to achieve that, then so be it: she would make that man the target of her final assassination.

Besides…as she gazed up at her companion, she understood that she had an even greater, far more personal reason to destroy the man…one that, she knew, would ultimately be what motivated her to drive steel into the dragon's heart. A reminder of that underlying reason - of their bond, of their dream- lay cool against her chest, whispering to her of the vow she had once sworn in earnest to the clone. Even now, years after she had uttered the words, it remained compelling, and if only for it alone, she would commit the betrayal against the one who threatened it….

Her companion, sensing her arriving at a realization, asked, "Will you help me, Cassandra?"

She closed her eyes, inhaling a deep breath of the late autumn air: it smelled of snow, pristine and soon to be sullied. "This is insane. This is so fucking insane, but okay, I'll do it. But I'm only going to help you under one condition."

His brow furrowed. "Which would be…?"

Meeting his gaze firmly, she said, "That you're not going to kill him - I'll do that. After all the assassinations I've carried out for him, it only seems fitting that his assassination also be my responsibility. He should be my last kill - I think I need that as much as my freedom, Mewtwo."
His shoulders coiled at her declaration, but she spoke sincerely, so he wouldn't deny her this kill. However, he worried about the motive behind why she felt the need to murder the man herself. She had a multitude of reasons, the least of which was to avenge those she had lost to the man's thirst for control over her life. Yet was the act to be committed one of justice or revenge…? In this case, did the two mingle? Yet as he gazed into her eyes, her soul, he found it devoid of a thirst for blood, and filled with a need to right the wrongs she had committed as a member of the gang. She could not hope to be redeemed for all she had done in her godfather's name, but this would be a start. By cutting off the viper's head, by dashing the organization to pieces in the process, she would take a large step from being a villain into someone altogether more human, despite that the path to regain her soul was drenched in blood. Yet in committing this act, she would begin to regain the humanity that she had lost, and so become a person who merited a life of light, of love, and of peace. Comprehending this, he nodded, bowing to her condition; he would allow her to slay the demon when the end drew near – after all, between the two of them, Giovanni Maki had done her the most harm.

Cassandra, seeing his acceptance, sighed. "Alright. So now that that's settled, how are we going to do this? With fire? Brimstone? Maybe with a dash of lightning on the side? Giovanni has a lot of guards to hide behind, and he's also quite capable of keeping his own hide intact. Please tell me you came here with a plan, Mewtwo?"

"I did, but it will require a certain amount of manipulation on our parts."

A wry smile crossed her face at that. "Considering you came up with it, I guess it would. So what are you planning?"

As he told her his intentions, he watched as her expression shifted from surprise, to fear and anger, to understanding, and then finally to resolve. She did not approve to all the elements of his scheme and voiced the frailties she saw, and they worked out the weak points as well as they could. Yet with the corpse of the heir of Team Rocket cooling in a mansion not miles away, they had no time to formulate a more solid and well-conceived plan, and would work with what they had. Yet they did time to speak about Shadow, for the replica had ached for his makeshift child nearly as much as he had for the woman, and was sorely disappointed when Cassandra revealed that the dark fox had gone missing, not leaving any signs of an imminent return. Had there been, they may have attempted to stall for his arrival, but as the situation currently stood, they had to content themselves with the knowledge that the umbreon was a strong, clever, and loyal creature, and would surely manage to find them sometime in the near future. Once they let that matter rest, and felt they had memorized the details of their plan, Cassandra took his paw in preparation for teleporting back to the base, and gazed over the moon-bathed forest with him for a few quiet, tranquil minutes as they braced themselves for the chaos that would soon erupt. Eventually the woman glanced up at the replica to find him already peering down at her. In that moment, as their eyes held one another, trust, faith, and the faintest glimmer of hope passed between them. If all went correctly, they would soon be free….

"I have one more question for you, Mewtwo," Cassandra whispered to him.

"Ask it. Preferably without shouting at me this time," he said, his tail shifting behind him and his eyes gleaming with moonlight.

"…Why are you doing this? Give me the real reason."

Around her hand, his grip tightened, and after a moment's hesitance, he inhaled deeply and said, "I have two main reasons, the first being that I cannot accept allowing another to suffer merely so that I may remain free, not if another option is available." And then lifting his gaze to the gibbous moon above, he remarked, "The second reason, however, is more sentimental in nature. After you left,
Psyche made a valid observation: never once has she known me to be truly happy. Although I have the freedom I so yearned for, although I may do as I please, it is not enough, Cassandra. Strangely, it seems as if I require a certain human to live my life fully."

And at that, his eyes fell onto her, and he quirked a miniscule smirk. "Do not misinterpret my meaning, though. I can live without you, woman. I've done so for years now, so I by no means need you. However, I do hope, after all this is over, that you will remain beside me."

He would say no more than that, for expressing how deeply he yearned for her now would only add weight to the already heavy burden they had decided to shoulder. He did not wish to add an additional element of desperation to the situation, to give her cause for losing reason in the upcoming battle. Instead, he would merely touch upon the truth and not force her to exchange her ties with Giovanni for ones from him. He would give her the choice, upon her liberation, to remain with him or leave him, even though he knew, intellectually, that she had already made her choice many times over on that count. She had made it the night he had spared his life, had danced with him in the gloom…and she reminded him of that when she stepped closer to him and kissed him soundly. As he always had, he savored her warmth and her taste, and gained strength from the understanding that even after all this time, after all of their struggles, their closeness had been strengthened and they were, again, what they had once been: partners.

When they parted, nothing more was said, and so the clone teleported them from the cliff back into the room they had previously vacated. There they released each other's hands, and Mewtwo became the catalyst to the entire scheme. He threw a powerful shadow ball into the wall of the balcony, which exploded with a thunderous "boom!" and sent shockwaves throughout the mansion rooms as it hit. Against the shield that he had raised to protect Cassandra and himself, bits of wood, concrete, and flaming insulation collided, none harming them, and over the crackle of igniting fire, they heard heavy footsteps pounding up the nearby stairway. Mewtwo lowered the barrier in the moment when the bedroom door was forced open, the lock shattered by the sheer force thrown against it, and the six guards who were stationed near the wing filed into the bedroom with their guns raised. Cassandra met their calculating eyes through the clearing smoke, and knew what they must see: near the flames, amidst the debris, lay the bloodied corpse of Zachariah; her own body was battered, her dress tattered upon her form; and in the middle of it all stood Mewtwo, looking as if he had barged into the mansion through the force of fire and brimstone.

She glanced at him, the rabid intruder in their eyes, and then sprang to charge the six. She smacked down the barrel of the weapon from the first's hand, pain flaring across her palm as she did so, and then wielded a swift uppercut into him to knock the would-be-protector unconscious. Dodging the instinctive punch throw by the second, the assassin dropped to her haunches and swung a leg to knock his feet out from underneath him. Although the soldier caught himself, his wrist twisted beneath his weight, sprained upon hitting the carpeted floor at such an awkward angle. She quickly knocked him unconscious with a lightning blow to his head, and bolted up to barrel into the stomach of the third man, ultimately ramming him hard into the nearby wall. His breath knocked out of him, he wrapped his arms around her in a crushing, bear-like hold, and was rewarded for the effort by being bashed in the face by the tail of an agitated, protective clone. Cassandra tore herself free in time to watch Mewtwo throw a scorching shadow ball into the gut of the fourth and then take hold of the remaining two with his telekinesis. He proceeded to throw the men into the charred, oaken banisters of the bed, upon which they crumpled with twin groans.

The group taken care of, the fighter glanced at her and said, "More are coming."

She nodded and watched as a dozen more Team Rocket thugs filed into the room, their gazes staggering on the unconscious forms of their fallen comrades. Spying that the safeties of their guns were off, Cassandra glanced at Mewtwo and signaled for him to stand down, which he did as one of
the uniformed men radioed to their superiors the situation they had encountered: the heir of the Team Rocket empire had been murdered and was half-buried in rubble; his widow was potentially his dispatcher, and had certainly given their fellows a fair beating; and among the scene stood a strange pokémon, who may or may not prove curious to Giovanni. Of course, the clone was very much in the crime leader's interest. When he arrived, with the ever-faithful Domino by his side, for a moment his expression contorted into a rare display of shock at the incredible scene…but then it shifted into a mixture of rage and carefully concealed pleasure. His eyes burning like black coals, he glared at his niece-in-law, ordering his inferiors to escort her to a holding cell for the time being. His goddaughter, ducking her head, went without a word of protest, and Mewtwo made no motion to hinder the process. Giovanni, he knew, would not harm her, at least not before "official" judgment had been passed.

As for the psychic himself, he consented to being taken prisoner. His captors, as the almost lovers had hoped, proceeded to lead him into the packed-dirt arena of the gym he had fought within during his youth. Although this was their desired outcome, returning to its confines aroused in his mind memories he would rather have remained repressed, and musing upon them, he growled aloud, the animalistic noise making the humans surrounding him edge away from him, as if he were a disease-ridden wolf. Those with more bravery wrapped him in chains and shackles, the irons encompassing his wrists, ankles, tail, and necks in heavy bands. The dense metal and the currents running through it were reminiscent of the armor he had once shrugged on, for it drenched its captive in power-suppressant fields. Yet these bindings where comparable to bracelets to the clone, for they had not been designed to hold at bay a pokémon of his strength – his muscles alone could rip through them as if they were braided straw. Regardless, he slackened his body as if they effectively sapped his psychical energies from him, and dropped his head in mock weariness. For now, he would remain here, waiting for his dove to return to the sight of their first encounter. He knew she would arrive before him in due time.

She always had.

Dr. Kitadake and his superior stood upon the balcony overlooking the battling grounds of the gym, both of their gazes lingering upon the creature who, up until an hour prior, they had both believed had perished. Casting a glance at Giovanni, the scientist repressed the urge to flinch back at the intensity of the Team Rocket leader's stare, for his dark eyes scorched with loathing and calculation as he stared down at the clone, and in almost a nervous tick, he tapped a thick, hard finger to the steel rail, his teeth grinding audibly. Obviously, the monster had faked its gory death, and Cassandra had played a part in act of deception. Had the matter of its murder not been so integral to his plans, her guardian might have been perversely pleased with the young woman's gall and cunning nature - he had long yearned for her to adopt some of his prized attributes.

However, he found no pleasure in the continued existence of the psychic, and the implications of its survival did not suit his tastes at all. Did his goddaughter, he wondered, remember what the pokémon had meant to her? Or had his treasured agent another motive behind allowing the feline to live? He admitted to himself that after discovering what Mewtwo had done to its lover years prior, he had sighed in relief, for no longer did her feelings for the animal and the threat of a scandal risk compromising the integrity of his assassin. She could not pursue a being she did not know existed, and her godfather, in the end, had felt almost grateful to the replica. Not only had the abominable relationship been taken care of more flawlessly than he could have hoped, but he no longer needed to carry through with the threat of ridding his organization of the priceless creation. It seemed that all had worked out for the best, and the proof of the debacle was soon edited from the clone's profile, as if it had never occurred….

Giovanni acknowledged that he had made a dangerous gamble when selecting Cassandra to
exterminate Mewtwo – he had comprehended the risks at the time. There was no way of knowing what could unearth her buried memories; even now, he still was uncertain the extent of her remembrance, though he had questioned her on the matter in the past hour. Regardless, he needed to remove the power Mewtwo represented from the metaphorical chessboard; he could not afford to allow the rouge piece to fall into enemy hands or move against him on its own, nor could he allow the white knight to take his black queen.

True, the rulebook stated that for disobeying his orders, Cassandra should be removed from the game anyhow. If she was not, it would suggest to the rest of his pieces that he was willing to harbor a potential traitor on his side. However, Cassandra was, although he could barely admit it to himself, far more than a simple piece for him to manipulate. After all, she was the one he wished to continue his work…and now that Zachariah had been tossed from the playing field, albeit more swiftly than he had planned, she could achieve the title of heir without hindrance. Who else was more befitting for the task than she was? As his ward, as the child he had trained since she was five, she would be the ideal creature to succeed him! Yet now Mewtwo threatened to destroy her to Giovanni’s cause, threatened to steal her from his side - and that notion the leader could not endure!

The man could think of only one certain way that would both cement Cassandra to his organization and rid them of the problem that was Mewtwo: bring her here into the arena, provide her a loaded gun, and order her to shoot the clone. If she did not…well, if that ultimately was the case, he would have no choice but to eliminate her as well, for he would prefer her dead than taken by a the feline monstrosity. Truly that was the sole form of relationship Giovanni could grasp: one of the controller and the controlled. The crime lord could obtain satisfaction, warmth, and even joy from those who followed him loyally…but if they strayed and broke free from his grasp, those emotions turned black, ugly, and cold. If individuals were of no use to him, if they would not serve him solely, than his tolerance for them was nonexistent. He lived by the adage that if someone was not with him, then he or she was against him. As of such, he would destroy those who did not bend to his will, no matter who they were…even if the one struggling for liberation was someone he considered a daughter. Although it might wound him to lose her, he would not make an exception for her in his dark heart.

He never would….

"Do you think those chains will hold it?" he spoke suddenly, his inquiry directed at the doctor beside him.

Dr. Kitadake pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose with his index finger. "Honestly, we could be singing straw instead - it's not going to make a difference," he said with certainty. "It's faking being restrained right now. I think its biding its time, waiting for something."

To Kanto's top crime lord, this was translated as: Mewtwo is waiting for her.

Nodding his agreement with the observation, Giovanni Maki took from his burnt orange suit his cell phone, and dialed the number to the interrogation facility's main office. When the head of the faction answered, the Gym Leader said, "This is your Signore, Mister Amundsen. I would appreciate it if you release Agent Merlo after informing your subordinates, loudly, of the whereabouts of the pokémon who invaded my estate. Then, once she's departed, gather as many of your available men as you can, arm them adequately, and come to the Gym. Wait there until you receive further orders," then, realizing that he had forgotten something, he added, "Oh, and one more thing…..."

After providing the final detail, he hung up. The scientist regarded him grimy and asked, "What do you intend to do, sir?"

Giovanni Maki looked not at his inferior, but down at the shackled replica, as he declared, "I intend to discover where Cassandra Brennan's loyalties rest. Regardless of her choice, however, you're free
to do as you please with the clone's corpse, provided I'm still given what I desire."

"Of course," the other man replied as he too looked out upon the arena. He would not leave until this showdown was complete. No matter how it ended, he understood that this evening would reverberate through the ranks of their organization, for it would mark a single, integral point:

They had reached the beginning of perdition.

As ordered, the interrogators soon released the potential traitor and blinded themselves to how she tucked the discarded weapon they had left out, as Giovanni had wished, beneath crossed arms. Running through the hallways of the base away from the facility, the agent ducked into random turns and backtracked, her movement made to ensure that no one followed her…but that no one did only bolstered her suspicion, and she mused at the irony of feeling threatened by people who were, for lack of a better term, her family, and these structures their home. All the same, she felt as though she were teetering on the brink of chaos as she darted through the buildings and tried to avoid encounters with other beings. When she did race past the living, she received a fair number of odd looks due to her outfit, the conspicuousness of it something she planned to remedy promptly. Dashing into the estate of her godfather, she repressed her feelings of awkwardness at being in the home of a man who knew of her disobedience. Still, as blissedly alone as she was, she encountered no difficulties when she headed into her own temporary quarters and ransacked her belongings for a change of clothes. She fleetly threw on fresh undergarments, a pair of sturdy jeans, warm socks, firm boots, a dark-hued sweater, and finally her jacket. As a last touch, she attached one of her holsters to her belt and inserted into its hold the weapon she had taken; she knew from its weight that the gun was loaded, and had eight rounds she could dispense of in the upcoming struggle. Although she wished she had more, it would have to suffice. It was all she had to arm herself with immediately.

Afterwards, keeping herself shrouded in the shadows, Cassandra ran from the Team Rocket base into the outskirts of town, evading the headlights of passing cars. Upon arriving at the gym, she found its doors open, which suggested that the building was occupied by more than the captured cat. Giovanni was setting up an ambush, as she had predicted he would. Yet this was fine – it played into the plan Mewtwo and she had devised. Moving forward, she cast searching eyes into the gloom as she sprinted through the hallways, her ears listening for the minute noises of foreign shooters, but no gunfire erupted in her race towards the doors into the arena. Reaching the exit, she carefully turned the metal lever, pushed it…and then stepped onto the packed-dirt floor of the battling grounds. To the far end of arena stood who she meant to join. Hearing her footfalls approaching him, the clone lifted his head to gaze upon the new arrival. The chains wrapped about him trembled as he corrected his posture, standing straighter, prouder, not allowing the woman to feel pity for what they had done. They had anticipated this treatment, after all, and knew that it could have been far worse - a whipping had always been high on the list of possibilities. Yet her grey eyes softened all the same…they had chained him up like a dog!

She reached upwards, touching his face with her palm, and murmured, "Well, shall we get you out of these, tomcat?"

He nodded. "Yes. It's time to conclude this little drama."

With that, she stepped back and watched as he snapped the shackles and chains around him apart with a surge of psychic energy, and then ducked when one of the lurking shooters pulled the trigger of their weapon in response to the monster freeing himself. That single round struck one of the decimated chains at their feet, and with a snarl Cassandra reached for the gun at her waist, only pausing when Mewtwo rested a paw on her arm and smirked slightly.

"Save your energy. I'll take care of the underlings," he declared, and with those words, he hurled a
bolt of psycho-electrical lightning to the source of the shot.

His aim was true: blood splattered out from the shadows, and as if the sight of the liquid gore had struck a match over gasoline, hellfire erupted in the arena. The previously still air reverberated with the cracks of gunfire, and as bullets began to pelt the dirt around them, Mewtwo threw up a psychic barrier around Cassandra and himself. He then charged a shadow ball in his paws and glanced at his partner. She was ready. Lowering the shield, he fired the dark orb into the balcony where a majority of the shooting originated from: in a flash of flame, gore, and rubble, the structure became a smoking crater in the wall. From there the firing only intensified, and as his partner crouched behind him for cover, he gathered up his psychic energy, which hissed and spit between his fingers, he threw the unstable sphere at the soldiers gathering on the sidelines of the arena.

In his nostrils seared the odors of gunpowder, of burning hair and flesh, of blood and ozone, the stench arising from the decimated humans and the Pokémon they unwisely released, all cut down by the clone's psychic assaults and friendly fire. As the violence escalated, bodies blow apart and incinerated, so too did the sheer chaos and insanity of the struggle as Mewtwo fought to defeat the army closing in around them. Yet he had not been called the ultimate weapon for nothing; even with the odds against him, he managed to keep the enemy at bay and protect his partner with minimal difficulty. She had fired a handful of rounds at stray targets that had managed to break the invisible line surrounding them, but had saved the final bullet for their true target. She only needed one round to dispatch of the demon in their midst. As Mewtwo continued to decimate the waves coming at them, she breathed easily. It would not be long before Giovanni himself was drawn out, and then--

Abruptly, as if summoned by her thoughts, a godlike voice boomed throughout the gym: "CEASE FIRE! CEASE FIRE! GOD DAMN YOU ALL, STOP ALREADY!"

As the dust billowing up from the dirt floor settled and the echoes of gunfire quieted, Mewtwo and Cassandra, at each other's backs, still in their motions, although the assassin held her weapon at the ready, and the creation cradled a hissing orb of destructive energy between his palms. The dark angel's frame trembled at the sound of the voice that had long dictated every detail of her life, the voice of the man she was determined to murder. She wondered if Giovanni would believe that shaking was from fatigue, for she could hear Mewtwo breathing heavily behind her, his psychic energies having been taxed in the previous fight. If he misinterpreted her shudder as a sign of weakness, however, more the better; he would underestimate her in doing so.

As she watched, the agents surrounding them saluted upwards, and gazing to the primary balcony, she noted Giovanni standing there, perhaps present to observe the entire event. Seeing that he had captured the duo's attention, the crime lord stood from his seat and strode to the railing, where he loaded the barrel of his favored pistol with utmost care, as if polishing shattered glass. Once done with the process, he folded his muscular arms behind his back and placed his left hand around the wrist of his right arm. In that stance, he was an unmovable titan, and regarded the two that had fought below with cold yet admiring eyes. In a previous time, the pair had been the prized treasures of his collection, the most refined weapons in his arsenal. Yet as he knew quite well, every weapon had its undermining flaw, and they, he understood, were each other's Achilles' heel. Not that one would derive such information from watching this particular battle: here they had fought confidently and had defended one another with collected ease in the onslaught. If it had not been such an abomination, it might have even been pleasant to watch. However, he had grown thoroughly weary of this conflict.

"As always, you've both fought quite well," Giovanni said, his strong voice carrying throughout the confines of the gym. "But this has gone on long enough. I'd like you to clarify your intentions here – not you, Mewtwo, I'm quite aware of what's driving you to give up the safety Cassandra gave you. I'd like to understand what my goddaughter believes she's doing, though. Is she trying to liberate you
from me again, but doesn't intend to leave my order, or is she breaking her oath entirely? Does she properly understand the consequences of her actions here?"

When neither fighter answered, the crime lord said, "Cassandra, if you stay in the organization, I'll allow you to live. I won't even demote you, since your trickery proves you've got a spine and the makings of a sly leader. If you chose me, I'll forgive the recent mistakes you've made. After all, I can understand how passion can cause someone to go astray. If you just learn from your errors here, you can still live within Team Rocket comfortably. I'm even inclined to retire you from the life of an assassin early - risking your life seems senseless considering your budding potential as the heir to my legacy. There's no need to continue burdening you with murders in my name – you'd be far more useful at my side in the new campaign Team Rocket will be waging! Besides, you're the daughter of two of my most valued friends, and practically my own child if one discounts blood. Doesn't that count for something to you, my dear?"

"In comparison to the blessings I can give you, what can Mewtwo hope to offer? Choosing it might earn you a few months of bliss, but eventually we'll catch up to you. I won't lie and say I'll let you go, dear girl. I'll send my agents to drag you back and kill the one who's taken you from me – I'm a jealous man like that. As such, you'll have no peace; you'll be forced to continue killing if you choose him. And even if you somehow managed to elude me, what hope do you have of being accepted by society? They'll only see you as an indiscriminate killer and a traitor to the federal government. In the eyes of the court, the crimes you've committed merit capital punishment. If you choose that clone, Cassandra, you'll be seen as vermin by both sides of the law. Only that creature beside you will embrace you…and tell me, is it worth that suffering? Perhaps what you'll share with it will be whole and beautiful and good, but will that brief period of wonder be enough to sustain you the rest of your life?"

He scowled at them then, and not providing his goddaughter with the chance to reply, spat, "No, it won't be. Choosing that path would be utter madness, and I'd like to think I've raised you to be a reasonable woman. Yet I won't force you to choose what is clearly the logical path - you have to decide that for yourself. If you're going to follow in my footsteps, then you need the freedom to do so without my interference."

Gazing at her alone, with almost gentle eyes, he asked, "So what will it be, Cassandra? Your rightful place here with me and the organization, or the road to insanity with your supposed 'partner'? Do the right thing, child."

Cassandra, meeting his gaze, has two thoughts in quick succession: Thank god he's finally stopped talking, and then, more hesitantly, Do the right thing...? Well yes, that was her intent…it had always been her intent when she was stripped down to her core. Now, finally, she'd be able to show that fact to him.

After mulling over his (many) words for a few more moments, she nodded, stepped forward, and called up to her godfather. "I've made my decision, Signore. Would you come down here for a moment?"

Intrigued, the crime lord nodded, and soon enough stepped out from the stairwell doors to stand several meters before the woman. Giving Mewtwo a heavy glance, she turned her back to him and approached the Italian man purposefully. Then, within three meters of him, she halted and slipped her wedding ring off her finger. Tossing it at his feet, where it settled in the dust, she then said, loud enough for everyone in the arena to hear, three small words: "I choose him."

And before realization fully registered on her godfather's face, the young woman had raised her weapon and aimed it towards his skull, had pulled the trigger that would fire off the final, decisive
bullet meant to end the plague that was Giovanni Maki….

Yet instead, the unthinkable happened.

The sound of a gunshot split the air, the smell of black powder rose from the hot weapon, and the final bullet streaked towards her enemy…only to collide harmlessly against an invisible wall.

In a matter of seconds, horror sunk in as Cassandra realized what it was: a psychic barrier. From the darkness beyond Giovanni Maki, she saw a pair of orange eyes flash, but before she could voice a warning back to Mewtwo, the situation before her unraveled. The energy wall fell, and she had just enough time to register the twisted smirk on her godfather's place, mingling pleasure at his trumping her and his disgust with her betrayal, before she felt a bolt of pain tear through her right ribcage, and the blast of gunfire resounded in her ears. All strength fled her, and falling slowly as the burn and the blackness overwhelmed her, she grasped her mistake: she had forgotten that Giovanni never trusted his own soldiers to defend his life. He did everything in his power to build an independent defense for himself, which apparently had recently entailed acquiring one of the unpredictable, largely unmanageable psychic types he so detested.

His pokémon team was now complete, and the new addition had likely been chosen specifically for this purpose: to guard him against his own goddaughter if she returned from the west as a traitor. No matter that Mewtwo and she had made the first moves, had drawn the first blood in this conflict, Giovanni had ultimately manipulated pieces and events to affect this end game. He had let the battle play out for just long enough for her to fire every bullet save one, leaving her with a single chance to blast his life away. He had had merely played along with them, maintaining control and his own invulnerability even in the final moment when he had stepped within the firing range of his goddaughter, not knowing if she would indeed betray him completely. Seeking to be the victor of this struggle, he had ultimately left nothing to chance, and so when all was said and done, it was she, not him, who stood defenseless within the shooting distance of the enemy.

In this way, he'd insured her defeat.

Her body crumpled into the hard-packed dirt of the arena floor and didn't stir. She didn't hear Mewtwo howl for her.

As she descended into unconsciousness, the replica darted forward, gathering her in his arms and raising a barrier to prevent the oncoming bullets from his once-master's gun. Blood began to seep into the fur of his chest from the gunshot wound, and pressing his paws tightly over it to stop the flow, he glared at Giovanni murderously and desperately tried to end the conflict swiftly and successfully in their favor. Thrusting the concealed pokémon back into the staircase viciously, where it shrieked and fell silent, he then turned his telekinesis towards Giovanni, intending to grasp the man and implode him into a pile of shredded flesh and broken bones…yet like Cassandra, he failed to assassinate the crime lord. Horror flooded him as his psychical powers slipped from the man as if he were sleek soap, unable to be clenched in his grasp. He fired a psychical wave at him, only to watch the guards around him being struck down, while the demon himself stood tall and proud.

Seeing Mewtwo's distress, Giovanni Maki began to laugh, the sound hoarse, grating, and borderline hysterical, and he then shouted out, "I'm sorry to disappoint you, Mewtwo, but your psychical tricks won't work on me anymore, nor, soon, will they work on anyone else belonging to Team Rocket. Neither you nor the rest of the world will be able to fight us through those means."

"How...? How have you...?"

Giovanni pulled a small glass vial from his coat pocket, and shaking the dark purple, almost black liquid within, he mused aloud, "Dark pokémon have a unique capacity to resist psychic attack. After
careful analysis, my researchers discovered that a dark pokémon's cells produce a protein that gives them their immunity, as well as gives that dark bite to their own attacks. We've merely harvested and synthesized it, and while it took quite some time to make the substance compatible with non-dark beings, we managed to accomplish the difficult task. Right now, my geneticists are distributing the substance and finding a way to make its presence in the body permanent. They're toying with the idea of creating a virus that will inject the genes responsible for creating the proteins into other genomes. So far, it - and the brother serum in development - is coming along nicely."

"So here's my suggestion to you, boy: surrender now, and maybe I'll save the girl and keep you as a lab rat for my geneticists to play with! Otherwise, I will find and destroy you both, if not with man-made machines than by pure, elemental power! You can't conquer me now, you despicable abomination, so make your pick: live as a worm, or die as one!"

And Mewtwo saw it then, the glow of madness in the man's eyes, and knew that Giovanni Maki had at last lost what shred of humanity he may have once harbored. Perhaps his insatiable thirst for power, the loss of his nephew, his goddaughter's betrayal, or the introduction of something so unnatural into his system had done the deed…or perhaps he had simply gone insane long ago, and had managed to conceal his instability. Either way, he was set to destroy everything in his desire for dominance, and Mewtwo tried one last act to do the deed Cassandra and he had intended.

"Perhaps you cannot be touched by my abilities – but your immunity does not extend to the walls around you!"

He grasped the blocks of cement that formed the balcony and, with a mighty wretch of his telekinesis, hurled them down upon the demon, intending to bury the Gym Leader alive. The human guards shrieked and were crushed, bone and flesh alike being ground under the weight of the man-made boulders. As the dust began to clear, Mewtwo felt a wash of relief as he saw the tons of stone heaped over where he had last seen the man standing. Surely Giovanni could not have escaped the avalanche…?

Yet then he felt the oddest sensation – a tickling in the back of his mind. Recognizing it to be a psychical probe, he slammed his mental shields in place and felt the connection fade. Yet the probe, he knew, had managed to glean some of his aural signature, and with a howl of frustration, he spun towards the source…and found Giovanni standing at the other end of the arena, completely unscathed, with a gardevoir at his side. Behind them, a dark vortex closed, and with alarm the clone understood what the man's servant had done: she had used her powers to distort the arena's dimensional folds, allowing them to phase to their new location whole and untouched. Rather than teleporting her master, which was no longer plausible - since her psychical energies couldn't keep his dematerialized atoms intact during transit - she had generated a tunnel in space and time instead. To astrophysicists, this passageway would be called a "wormhole," and sometime later, Mewtwo would muse that making a miniature one was not so different from what else was within the creature's abilities. For her kind were known to create tiny black holes in battle, and so creating a marvel that transported matter, rather than merely ingesting it, required only a few small adjustments to the move, including forging the necessary backdoor.

Glaring at the deceptively innocuous-looking being, he clutched Cassandra tighter to him and kept pressure on her injury, feeling his stomach sinking sickeningly. Underneath the moonlight, his psychical foe glimmered, different, he saw, from Nenetl in her coloring, for she possessed icy blue hair, arms, and undergarments, with orange, piercing eyes and an equally orange-hued bosom. The shiny pokémon, battered and quaking from her fresh injuries, glared at the creature who had threatened her master, and then focused her gaze to the woman he held. Knowing her intent, he rapidly attempted to shield Cassandra from the probe as well, but even as he did so, he knew that the effort was futile. The creature had been concealed in the shadows all of this time, gathering the codes
to their aural signatures while their mental processes and energies were distracted in the battle.

Now, he knew, she would be capable of tracking them, and, were she to fall, was capable of transferring the knowledge she possessed to other psychics in a matter of seconds. He had used similar tricks himself in the past, and gazing at them, he felt his heart go cold with dread. He could not touch Giovanni Maki now, could not hope to find a way to dispatch of him swiftly enough to ensure he could still escape in time to heal Cassandra's potentially fatal wound. But if he left now, he might never have the chance to take the crime lord down again, for soon his abilities would be rendered useless against the forces of Team Rocket. He would soon be utterly incapable of fighting them with his greatest source of strength, which rivaled on the power of a god. Everything, if he ran now, would be as Giovanni had said - they would be pursued, likely captured, and then executed. They would not be able to hide for very long, no matter where they went. This time, Giovanni would be the victor...they were doomed unless he found a way to stop the demon now!

But Cassandra was hemorrhaging in his arms, her blood seeping through his fingers, and would die within the next few minutes if he dawdled in the futile effort to defeat the man now. There was nothing more he could do here, not if he wanted to save her. The only option left to him was simple: run. And Mewtwo, giving the duo one last look, did exactly that – he teleported away from Viridian City in its entirety, fleeing as far as he could in a single jump.

In the arena that he left, Giovanni and the gardevoir remained where they were, not bothering to attempt to follow. Someday soon, the crime lord mused, he would make the lovers regret their dispersal from his ranks. After all, with or without them, his campaign would move forward, and all the duo had done here was place themselves against him. For that, he would annihilate them, just as he would with all those on the opposing side. Still, what had just unfolded stung at him like biting insects: Cassandra, his Cassandra, had deserted him. She had defected from Team Rocket of her own violation to be with that abhorred monstrosity! Like a deadly infection, the mingled black emotions of fury and hate began to pool and fester within him, saturating him until he was within an inch of brimming over and turning on the nearest living creature to channel his anger on. His hands itched to maim, to kill, but he held at bay the urge, abstaining from it until he once again had the couple within his reach. While a part of him did hope Cassandra herself would meet her demise from the round he had fired into her chest, he prayed she would stay alive long enough for him to get a hold of again. Clearly, she had not learned the lessons he had sought to teach her, and before she left the earth completely, he rather wanted to see if he could remedy this shortcoming before finishing her off. He supposed he would have to wait and see if she survived the wound first, and then determine how best to ruin her….

Breaking him from his thoughts, one of the remaining squad leaders called out from the sidelines. "Signore, what are your orders? What do you wish us to do?"

Shooting the man a glare, Giovanni Maki snapped, "After you clean this place up? Make this public announcement: Agent Cassandra Merlo, former member of the Elite Children and the Grigori Agents, has deserted our organization. She, along with her pokémon companion, must be dealt with. Any units without prior assignment is hereby ordered to scour the continent for them! Once they're captured, our agents may use their own discretion in deciding how to punish them. As far as the clone is concerned, go ahead and exterminate it - so long as I have its corpse in the end, I don't care what happens to it. However, I want the girl brought back to me alive, is that clear?"

The followers around him nodded their comprehension and immediately flitted away, like leaves on a fierce wind, to act as heralds of his words. Giovanni, in contrast, stayed in the bullet- and gore-strewn arena and stepped over to where Mewtwo had been chained. There he stomped a heavy boot upon the broken links, grinding the metal into the dust, and imagined how it would feel to do the same with the clone's shattered, bloody bones. To him the notion was an exceedingly pleasant
thought….

Mewtwo and Cassandra…you’ll both suffer dearlly for what happened here, I promise you that.

He turned and, motioning for the injured gardevoir to follow, walked away.

In that devastating night, innumerable vows had been broken, created, and remade, and only fate would decide which ones would endure the coming epoch….

Thank You: keeper-of-the-triforce, AnimeCrazy88, Azure Neko, Leone the Infernal, AvianKnight93, Cosmic Mewtwo, Dark Magician Girl Aeris, blackwaterII, Selena, dani's random fox, Khaos, Blackmasked Angel, Tomoyo Kinomoto, and Kirlien for reading and reviewing the previous chapter. I hope you and my other readers will do the same for this one!

Author's Note: This chapter marks a major turning point in the story, with us officially rounding the bend in the next chapter. I hope to see you then!

Sincerely,

WiseAbsol
By the Firelight

Chapter Warning: There are sexual acts between a human and a pokémon in this chapter. If this content grosses you out, please skip the scene following the kiss.

CHAPTER 17: BY THE FIRELIGHT

"Here we are. All of us, basically alone, separate creatures just circling each other, all searching for that slightest hint of a real connection. Some look in the wrong places, some, they just give up hope because in their mind they're thinking, 'Oh, there's nobody out there for me.' But all of us, we keep trying over and over again. Why? Because every once in a while, every once in a while two people meet and there's that spark. And yes . . . , he's handsome and she's beautiful and maybe that's all they see at first, but making love? Making love, that's when two people become one."

- Josh Berman, Bones episode "Death in the Saddle."

Forming the northern boundary of the Kanto region, rocky crags thrust up from the wild forests and hailed welcome to the powerful blizzards of winter. Even in the middle of November, the ice and snow had settled in thick, pale dunes across the mountains, and any who dared stray too far from the outskirts of the cities risked falling into a lethal sleep from exposure. As such, few of man or monster's ilk found the concept of penetrating the frozen depths of the Mt. Moon Range alluring: no seasonal sport was worth courting death in the heights. No smooth slopes provided safe stretches for sledding or skiing, and hunting game proved nearly impossible, as many species migrated south or had begun hibernating well before this bitter month. Perhaps in the lush green of summer the peaks would prove agreeable, for they were rife with cascading waterfalls and scenic hiking trails…but such an Eden was buried now under a white, unforgiving desert. Only the most confident - or foolish - of creatures walked within the frozen terrain currently, for the deadly nights now lingered, the sun having ceased to crest over the peaks in weeks past.

However, to those fleeing danger, the difficult terrain offered a promise other than doom: sanctuary. Surely here amongst the crags was a place to hide, to heal, and perhaps escape the ones who pursued them….

Such was one such being's hope as he appeared among the churning, black sky, whose clouds warred against one another. Shrieking winds, laden with scathing snow, buffeted him and the one he held, for a moment stunning him in the shock of their force. He was blinded abruptly, for no moon or stars were detectable, and after the merciless force of the elements fully registered in his mind, he swiftly erected a psychic shield around them. Beyond blocking the violent assault, the glowing orb cast a faint, blue light into the murk smothering them. Shuddering in the sudden, wet cold, the male watched as the icy tirade whirled around them, as it beat against the barrier, attempting to plow the intruders of the heavens from their current altitude. In its sheer power, it began to freeze the melting vapors gathering around the energy sphere - frost began to crawl across the sides, reminding the creature that the barrier was not infallible. Yes, he could keep them suspended here, difficult as it was against the wind current, but although the air within stilled and even warmed to an extent, the spherical defense would only weaken as more time passed. It was permeable, after all - it must be to provide fresh oxygen to the ones within it. As a result, the subzero temperatures would also seep in, a fact made visible by the creeping ice. Gritting his teeth against his own shivering, he felt his strength waver - the orb was tossed into the fray several feet, disorientating him, and he grappled to regain
control over their position in the skies. He barely managed it; when they ceased tumbling, he cast out his senses, searching frantically for some semblance of shelter. They needed to land soon – to remain in this storm was suicidal! Beyond his own quivering muscles, he felt the female he held tremble, her form unconsciously huddling closer to him for warmth. Further insisting that he needed to find a haven was the persistent flow of blood from the gunshot wound in her side. He must find somewhere warm and dry in which he could attend to her injury – but where?

Lowering their altitude, he scanned the emerging landscape below fervently, trying to find a place where they could take shelter. Discovering none, his brow furrowed; all he saw were rigid cliffs, barren trees, and seas of ice. Essential seconds passed as he turned in place, analyzing the terrain with his keen vision and his extrasensory powers futilely. He felt the female he cradled against him was beginning to breathe shallowly, and her extremities were stiffening with the cold…and, perhaps, with death. She was attempting to cling to life and failing, and tightening his grip around her, he glanced down at her with worried eyes. For her sake, he could not linger here much longer…he would make one final effort to pinpoint a safe area in this region, and if it failed, he would resort to another jump of long-distance teleportation. However, making such a leap posed a risk: after spending his energies so extensively in the past few days, first to reach this nation and then in battle, his psychical powers were nearly stretched to the point of failure. They might not reappear the next time…and if they did, but still could not uncover a sanctuary, it was all too likely that they would be captured, and that would be the equivalent to death for them.

That dreadful possibility in mind, the male gathered and unleashed a wave of benign, yet blinding energy, the light of which temporarily washed across the miles below. As the light began to fade, his eyes dashed over the terrain, searching, searching-.

There! A handful of miles east lay a tiny clearing, which cradled what seemed to be a ranger's cabin. It would suffice their needs. In a reckless burst of speed, he flew towards the wooden abode, landing within the snow seven feet before its single door. The white dune nearly rose up to his knee joints, yet determinedly he strode forward, ignoring his numbing toes. Attempting to keep his wavering shield in place, he tore the door open to allow them entrance, ignoring how its hinges shrieked at the sudden abuse. As he leapt over the final bank into the lightless room, he swung the door shut behind them. Now immersed in quiet, the male breathed out a long, relieved sigh, which rose from his muzzle in a lilac mist. His eyes swiftly adjusted to the gloom as he glanced over the cabin's innards. It was scarcely furnished, possessing only one table in the dining area to the right, which contained a sink, counter, and cupboard space. Firm wood made up the floors beneath his paws, and in the rafters were five rolled up blankets. On each wall, excluding the one that he now faced, were windows, the one near the door large enough for someone to perch upon its sill. Yet most importantly, the shelter was dry, which was better than he had expected from what was clearly an abandoned building – he even spied a pile of firewood and kindling stored in one corner under a tarp, which looked eager to be burned.

With what remained of his telekinesis, the male pulled the blankets from the rafters, unrolling and piling them onto the floor. He immediately laid the woman upon them, and then unzipped her jacket and tore open her shirt, exposing the gunshot wound that was still seeping blood. With his telekinesis, he reached inwards, probing for the bullet, and upon finding it, teleported in into the hearth. After this, he pressed his paw to the wound, sending waves of healing energy into it, urging the damaged bone, muscles, and flesh to knit together. Yet even as it did so, leaving a scar low upon the right side of her ribcage, the clone felt no relief. Although the bullet had pierced none of his partner's vital organs, she had lost a great deal of blood, as evidenced by her appearance: her normally tan skin was ashen, and her chest undulated slowly and shallowly as she breathed. She was not out of danger yet, and if he could have done so, he would have poured his own blood into her veins to help he regain her vitality. However, he knew well that her body would only sicken and reject his gift if he did so, so he did what else he could do instead. He buried her completely beneath
the blankets to maximize potential warmth, for she needed all the insulation they could provide to her. In those same moments, he tossed a hefty pile of firewood into the empty hearth, added the kindling to the logs, and sent blue flames into the heart of the arrangement. As the wood caught, the fire became golden-hued, and soon the sweet smell of burning timber, along with blessed heat and light, spilled into the room.

Not yet satisfied, however, the male staggered into the dining area to check the pantry. Other than canned foods, which were well past their expiration dates, and a couple bottles of wine, the only reasonable sources of nourishment were packages of dried venison and fruits from the previous season. Opening the ration seals, he sniffed at them experimentally: they did not seem spoiled. Of course, he could not be so lucky as far as water went: the intake pipes no longer functioned, evidently having been cut off to avoid pipe damages from freezing fluids. Tossing the food packages onto the counter, he searched though the dishes in the cupboard, finding amongst them a dusty kettle. Grimacing, he went back outside, packing the tin with fresh snow. Returning inside, he placed the brimming container near the fire, the contents of which soon began to melt. As it did, he felt his aggravation melt also, and turning back to the female, he uncovered her, pleased to see she was regaining some color. Shredding the hem of his own cloak into washrags, he sat beside her and began to clean her of blood….

Sometime later, the female began to drift awake, her body agitated underneath the stifling heat of the woolen weight above her. Opening her heavy eyes, she blinked up at an unfamiliar wooden ceiling. Bronze light danced amongst the grain, shadows undulated in their wake, moving in the telltale flickering of firelight. For a moment Cassandra did not move, instead choosing to lie there, although sweaty and uncomfortable. It seemed she was still alive, and was now in a place far different that the arena she had last known. As the events associated with the battle site filtered into her brain, she closed her eyes slowly, mourning her failure to complete her goal. As far as she knew, Giovanni was yet alive…but so was she, and that, she realized, was something. Considering where she had been shot, she was inclined to believe that was a miracle….

Lolling her head to the side to face the light, she remained silent as she spied Mewtwo standing beside the hearth. He was in profile, leaning against a forearm, which was pressed to the stonework of the mantel. His other arm was lifted, his paw clutching a chunk of jerky, which he tore into and chewed upon slowly. Glancing to the floor beside her, she found a small meal of dried meat and fruit laid out, a cup of water beside it. Hunger grumbled in her stomach, and so she reached out of the blankets tentatively, grasped a few pieces and stuffing them into her mouth. Salty-sweetness flooded her tongue, making her salivate, and she began to consume the meal greedily, sipping down the water soundlessly. All the while she watched him – he soon finished eating and stared into the fire with contemplating eyes. He had undone some of the ties of his cloak, so the front was partially split open, revealing him from collar to navel. His paws and tail also escaped the fabric confines, but he did not move, or even appear to realize that she was now awake, though she had eaten and drank his offering. He was too lost in thought presently to realize, and so her eyes swept over him once, twice….

The firelight was doing some rather…interesting…things to his appearance, she noted. His features appeared warmer in the fiery glow, his fur silkier somehow, and he no longer held a ghostly parlor in tone. At the same time, the contrasting shadows and light made even the slightest of ridges and curves of his muscles firmer, more pronounced, reminding her that though he was a slender creature, he was most definitely male. She felt herself flush as she gazed at him, and realizing the implications, she tore her eyes from his form to gaze up into his face once more. He looked as if he were musing on some subject intently, and considering the events in Viridian, she could not blame him for that. So deep into his thoughts, it came as no surprise that he was proving inattentive to her waking.
Glancing around their surroundings, she found some amusement in the fact that they were in a cabin...as if the unavoidable firelight wasn't suggestive enough. Once more, her eyes settled on him, and again came the damnable heat and a faint itch. It was almost like God was telling her to jump the clone already, or at least give Mewtwo a chance to pounce on her. Within her mind, she cursed the perverted deity, and then finally asked, over the crackling of the flames, "Mewtwo, where are we?"

Hearing her low voice, he turned towards her. His eyes softened minutely, and his faint smile almost seemed peaceful, but strained as he returned his gaze to the fire and answered her inquiry. "We are about three hundred kilometers north of Cerulean City, in the depths of the Mt. Moon Range. For the most part, this region is vacant and inaccessible during this time of year, and with the storms that have been raging the past few days, no one should be able to pursue us immediately. Any roads that weave in this direction are now covered, and travel by air and foot is too reckless. We are safe, for now, but soon we'll doubtlessly need to move on."

Cassandra tilted her head to look up at the ceiling...and then sat up. "Wait, did you just say 'days'? Holy shit. "Just how long have I been unconscious?"

The clone didn't answer for a moment, but then he said, "You've been recovering for the past two days. How do you feel, Cassandra?"

In response, the woman winced soundlessly. The itch was still there, damn it. "A little warm, but other than...", she trailed off, noticing abruptly that her jacket, shoes, and socks had all been removed and were sitting by the fire. Glancing at her companion, she raised an eyebrow and said, "What the hell, Mewtwo? First you frisked me while I was asleep, then you molested me...twice...and now you've taken my clothes off while I was unconscious? You really must be desperate."

There was a ghost of a smile on his face as he said, "You know my celibacy has nothing to do with it. Removing your clothes was unavoidable - they were soaked in blood, for one. I admit, in my desperation to heal you wound, your shirt was torn apart quite thoroughly. I washed them and mended the shirt to the best of my abilities, but they remain stained and somewhat tattered. However, I was certain you wouldn't mind, considering the alternative to not removing them promptly. Yet once they were dry again, I did dress you to give you the added warmth. You were shivering for quite some time...."

"I see...."

Her strange tone made him peer at her closer. Her gaze seemed to be focused, not on the blankets beneath them, but on something farther away. He noted how the firelight danced over her complexion then, turning her dark skin into deep bronze, and threading her black hair with gold. All of her form, even her clothes, seemed softer and smoother...the dim light was the culprit, riding her imperfections more obvious in greater exposure. Her eyes, though...they were what made him tilt his head slightly and stare: her grey irises caught the hues of the flames, glimmering with pyrite and scarlet, which swirled in fiery waves around her pupils. Amidst his admiration, he felt a soul-deep sorrow clutch him, for his days with this creature might now be limited, and each minute shortened their remaining time together. How long could they elude and survive the force set on destroying them...? How could they fight Giovanni now, considering the abominations he had committed to ensure his invulnerability?

Her gaze rose, catching his suddenly. Lifting her head, she released a soft, quiet breath and looking towards the windows asked, "What happened, Mewtwo? You look like someone just ran over your dog and made it into dinner."

For a moment, Mewtwo hesitated from telling her what had happened, but then, sitting down beside...
her, he told her of everything that had occurred after she'd fallen. She listened intently, her expression
darkening as she took in the implications and the dangers now facing them. After he was done, she
bowed her head with a sigh, and asked for him to come closer to heal her remaining injuries – she
needed to be in peak condition to have a chance at successfully resisting the organization now.
Coming to settle behind her, he did as she requested, stroking down her legs with his tail, and loosely
wrapping his arms around her, he ran a paw slowly across her stomach, soothing the aches and the
tension in her form. Unintentionally, as minutes passed his strokes, his embrace, became ever more
sensual.
Leaning back against him wordlessly, Cassandra closed her eyes, savoring the tingling sensations
that arose from his caresses; her nerves fired off at the slightest brushings of his fingers. He was
warm, she mused, but as a feline, she supposed that Mewtwo's body was naturally at a higher
temperature than hers was. She felt his palms weave up her arms, press through her sleeves…she felt
him pull against the neck hem of her shirt, revealing her bruised, bare shoulder. Her eyes opened
wide in surprise as his mouth, his tongue, brushed the area, making the stinging in the tender flesh
fade. Of course - he did not need to use his hands for this – the previous use of his tail was evidence
of that. Any physical contact with him would encourage her cells to mend, for the healing energy
dispersed off his skin, which was only lightly covered with fur. Evidently pleased that she had not
given him any reproach for animalistic kiss, Mewtwo lifted his muzzle, brushing his mouth to the
fading bruise across her right cheekbone. Light and warmth seeped into her skin, and the soreness
faded as he used a gentle recover to heal her. As he did so, his scent washed into her nostrils: it was
that minty smell again, she thought. It was really kind of nice...
Her companion paused then, wondering if he should cease his actions or continue. Cassandra had
said nothing to dissuade him, and had seemed to enjoy his touches, but he was not someone who
desired to pressure another for physical intimacy. After all, he had seen what force could do to a
female, and as such could not understand the appeal of it. What joy was there in seeing an unwilling
mate shed the tears of pain? What joy was there in listening to her begging you to stop? What joy
was there in witnessing her terror and hatred? Perhaps it provided a sexual predator a demented, cold
form of satisfaction in triumphing over another creature so thoroughly, and the scent of blood
provided sick delight. Yet to feel the one you yearned for fighting your presence, biting you,
scratching you, doing anything within her power to shove the one boring into her away…no. He
could not comprehend how anyone sane could gain joy from that. The assailants' minds clearly did
not realize the true form of ecstasy that could be derived from the act. They had never known the
sensation of a lover holding them tightly, urging them closer…they had never heard their partner cry
out their name in bliss…they had never felt their female moving with them until they could scarcely
bear the pleasure of the rhythm. And afterwards, they had most certainly not been allowed to hold
her, nor had they seen her smile. Mewtwo had, and to him those latter details brought him happiness
in mating. Anything else was merely intolerable anguish.
His companion leaned more heavily against him, her muscles completely relaxed…she trusted him.
What an oddity that seemed - they had been at each other's throats for weeks, had demolished one
another's normal existences, but now they had utter faith between them. Mewtwo, his muzzle buried
in her hair, wrapped his arms around her tighter, the insides of his legs pressed to the outsides of hers.
Cradling him to him, breathing in her faint vanilla fragrance, he wondered if she was as weary as he
was. Yet no, she could not be: she had slept the last two days, while he had remained wakeful,
watching over her, barely resting while keeping guard for the enemy. He was mentally and
emotionally exhausted, but even knowing they were safe for a time, he had been unable to sleep
deeply. His mind had raced with contemplations of their next possible moves. Ideally, he wished to
keep them both alive as long as possible, but in the end…no, he dared not consider those lines. He
would keep them safe…leaning back against his coiled tail, he sighed, resolved to that. Yet what
were they going to do? What could he possibly do that would truly protect her now that the devil
had…?

Shaking his head, he instead turned his thoughts upon the creature in his arms. A bit of wonder suffused him as he gazed upon her, and he reached up, stroking her hair gently. She turned to face him, just enough to look at his lifted paw.

"Cassandra…will you explain something to me?"

One corner of her mouth twitched at that. "Wow, you're asking me to explain something? You must really be befuddled, aren't...,” and seeing the exasperated look he was giving her, she nodded and said, "Yeah, if it's a question I can answer."

The backs of his fingers brushed her face, coming to rest beneath her chin. "Why did you consent to my scheme? You could have declined and demanded that I return to the west, yet you agreed without question. While I have my suspicions as to why, I'd like to hear your exact reason. Did you do so to accomplish justice for your loved ones, your redemption, for your freedom, or something else...?"

These were her logical motives, and while he was certain they had played some part in her agreement to take down her godfather, he also suspected she had done so for him, just as he had done for her. For Psyche had been entirely correct; the espeon's words were more valid than he'd allowed himself to understand, for the notion they'd suggested had unnerved him. After all, if she was correct, it would mean that he was helpless to control his feelings for another being once more. As well, it would entail once again assuming the responsibilities of being a human's mate...a strange human, to be certain, but still a human. Yet this he could have accepted...but now he was forced to face a consequence that truly frightened him: for his actions, he might have doomed her to die at Giovanni's hands. Her discarded organization, empowered beyond comprehension, now regarded them as vermin, and would exterminate them as such. He cared little for his own demise, but for hers, hers...! If they succeeded in murdering her, he would not pardon himself of the blame, for it would almost directly belong to him....

Cassandra, of course, already knew her answer to Mewtwo's inquiry. However, she could not say it to him; it was too fragile, too sensitive a declaration for her. Perhaps if they had not been in their present situation...but they were, and murmuring it to him now would accomplish little. So Cassandra would not say the three words that were her underlying reason...she would not say she'd wanted to be near him for his warmth, his comfort, his affections, and so would slay any dragon to accomplish this goal....

Instead, she merely turned to him and said, "All those things you just said? They were parts of my reason why, but in the end, I guess I was driven by another desire entirely."

And to make it clear which she was referring to, she leaned upwards and pressed her mouth to his. Tenderness and sadness mingled in the kiss, the blend heartbreaking in everything it conveyed between them: they were facing terrible odds, and might just perish for taking a stand to be free to live with one another. Were the risks to their lives worth these moments between them...? Yes, they thought, they were.... After an instant of the bittersweet contact, Cassandra began to pull away, and felt her companion's grip loosen around her. Yet within that second, she paused just as swiftly, and thought on what she had just murmured. It had been ambiguous, yes, but she knew what she did not have the nerve to say: that she had broken free of her enslavement primarily for him, and anything else was merely collateral gain. And that being true, then why did she part from him? She had given up everything she had known for him, and now must face the consequences of her loyalties to this creature. So why not make the most of it? After all, they were very much alone in this place. They had at least the next several hours ahead of them in which there was no chance that they would be
discovered, interrupted, and torn apart….

The realization was like an electric jolt shooting through her center, hot and startling – she jerked back in the shock of it. Mewtwo himself seemed to have expected the movement, for he made small motions of moving away to give her space. He was used to her physical rejection; although they had come close to sharing their bodies fully with each other in recent times, she had never allowed them to consummate the union between them. Always at the last moment, she'd closed herself off, though it proved painful for both of them to endure. Fear had barred her from surrendering herself to their mutual cravings…but now she wondered at that. What was it she feared: pain? Considering her occupation, that notion was ludicrous. Had the clone been correct to say that closeness terrified her? Again, that did not seem incredibly accurate; not unless that intimate proximity was a violation of her wants, a state forced upon her against her will. Yet not even Mewtwo could enter her without her consent anymore. Those who would attempt to force her to submit she could fight off successfully, and those who had unnatural power would not commit such a violent act without torturous repercussions. After all, for psychical beings, the act of sex was not merely a union of the body, but of the psyche as well, and so the pain of the sufferer became the pain of the inflictor. And the clone, for all of his seemingly masochistic tendencies, did not enjoy pain. So what then was left that made her pause…?

Humiliation…that was it. She feared the shame of being used as an object of carnal pleasure, and in having a person inside of her who cared nothing for the stability of her soul. She feared being made into a toy and abused liked one, of being less than a person to the one she would give all aspects of herself to. In that comprehension, the woman felt her flesh warm as she looked back at Mewtwo, and then quickly averted her gaze, feeling her mouth dry with nervousness: because Mewtwo would never make her feel so inferior and worthless. Hence, simply put…she had absolutely no reason not to be with him completely. She had chosen him over her life in Team Rocket...so how hypocritical was it for her to continue shoving him away? Why would she not let him in when he had also given up everything for her? For god's sake, even now he wasn't trying to seduce her, though the situation was ideal for that form of surrender. No, he was far too honorable when it came to her, and that very nearly infuriated her. Only her appreciation for such considerate gestures kept her from deckimg him and growling at him to pounce her already. His respectful regard was more than others had willingly given, unless fear or obligation insisted they provide it. As of such, she supposed that made him a rarity, and terribly endearing to her.

So as her craving began to grow more insistent, she accepted it rather that repressed it…and that, she found, made quite a difference. A hint of excitement arose in the concept of being with him, and vaguely she wondered if he would even wish to, considering how weary he appeared. Yet not allowing that thought to level her sudden courage, she leaned up again to kiss his mouth soundly, allowing the desperate heat of it convey her desires to him. She felt him jerk minutely, surprised, and then she began to quiver softly as his embrace became firmer, almost possessive and unwavering. When the need for breath became too great to deny, she broke their kiss, gasping, and met his eyes: their violet depths glimmered with numerous emotions she couldn't interpret, but they seemed to be positive ones, which was encouraging. Still, she had to say something before they….

"Mewtwo, just...go slowly. My memories of when we were younger...sometimes they're clear enough I can remember every detail, but in other ones, I...I can't tell them apart from the dreams I've had, so..." 

He cupped her face in a paw, his thumb caressing her mouth softly, making her lips tingle. "...If you are certain of this, I intend to savor it, so...do not worry. I will not rush you."

Cassandra's mouth formed into a small, somewhat nervous smirk at that. She remembered that before their first time together, they'd made a similar exchange.... "I'm sure, damn you."
He chuckled, his laugh short and low as he pulled her to him, brushing his mouth to hers. There was a deeper intensity to his voice as he murmured, "Then let us make some new memories together, dove."

Before she could make a retort to his usage of the pet name, his mouth covered hers, and she swiftly forgot what she would have said in response. Their lips cradled each other, a little bit of tongue darting out, soft and sweet against teeth and mouth. One of Mewtwo's paws curled into her silken hair, which remained styled from her now meaningless wedding, and for a moment, he grinned at the irony of her binding herself to one male and consummating the union with another. But such thoughts were smothered as she pressed herself closer to him, leaning her body into his hold. With him seated as he was, and her position on her knees before him, neither of their faces was higher than the other, ideal for their lengthy kisses. He wrapped an arm about her thighs, holding her firmly to him…she was breathing quicker, her heart beating rapidly…he forced himself to keep in mind that this was essentially their first time all over again. He found the thought not an unpleasant one, for the thoroughness their first night together had been absent in their explorations of one another in the months after they’d initiated their first romance. After all, they had swiftly learned where everything was and went, and so a certain amount of the original thrill of discovery had been subsequently lost. Yes, other pleasures had replaced that aspect as experience and skill were gained; however, he enjoyed memorizing her with his mouth and paws. God help him, he savored touching each centimeter of her before taking all of her for himself….

The sensation of her hands at his face returned him to the present, for which he was grateful. Her palms and fingers were gentle and soft as she smoothed the taunt lines of his brow. She stroked his muzzle, beneath his eyes, moved her hands behind his head towards the bases of his necks. Tingling sensations arose as she traced her fingers down the second one, making him shudder; he was intensely sensitive there. His reaction pleased her, and smiling she kissed him again, her hands slightly shaking as they found their way to his collar and ran across the bony plates of his shoulders and chest. He leaned back slightly to enjoy her gentle rubbing, and felt her begin to pull at the remaining ties of his cloak, her touch inching down his ribs, his stomach, and his midriff as she worked. He rolled his shoulders, releasing her long enough to slide his arms from their sleeves so his cloak pooled around his waist. This would do for now…feeling her fingers against his sides, running across his back, was delightful enough for the moment. Sighing, he pulled her against him, pressing his muzzle to her collar briefly, before letting his paws slide under her shirt. She lifted her arms then in an almost automatic response, allowing him to remove the now uncomfortably hot sweater from her upper body.

Not spending time to note it where it fell in the blankets beneath them, the clone regarded her undulating chest wordlessly before embracing her to him. It was wondrous, the sensation of her soft skin against his fur. He let his fingers wander across her flat belly, between her shoulder blades, and he hesitated only for a moment before stroking her breasts. She closed her eyes for a short while, tilting her head back, whimpering somewhat at the pressure. Smirking, he allowed his telekinesis to undo the fabric between them…his fingertips were, unfortunately, not dexterous enough for that work. Still, the undergarment was removed swiftly, and as he admired her, he saw the chain of her necklace against her skin, the decorative cross hanging above her cleavage. For some reason that struck him as somewhat comical: was she trying to ward him away somehow, as if he were a demon? Of course not…he had given that to her, after all. When he made the motion to undo it as well and set it aside, she stopped him, shaking her head. It was a material symbol of their bond - why remove it as they completed it in other ways…?

He let it be, and slowly ducked down and kissed at her navel, nuzzling her flesh and feeling her muscles grow taunt. Now she was the one bracing herself, her arms thrown behind her to keep herself from falling onto her back. A soft moan rose from her throat as his lips moved across her ribs, and then between her breasts…the sound became a sharp cry as his long tongue licked at her dark,
hardening nipples slowly. She tasted sweet, he mused…like cream with a dash of salt from the thin sheen of sweat beginning to adorn her. When he ceased nipping at her, he lifted his muzzle, seeing her tan flesh had darkened as a flush had spread across it from internal heat…and then he noticed the first obvious scar. It stretched from beneath her choker at the left side of her neck and down across her chest, ending at her right breast. The pearly line had not been there when she'd been sixteen. Indeed, now that he searched for them, he noticed several new markings as he swept his gaze over her, one of which extended over her left breast, many of the others forming shallow creases in her back. Yet this one…someone had come close to her with a knife. Someone had tried to slash her throat, and she had only just managed to pull away in time to evade mortal injury….

His expression contorted as he breathed against it…she had endured so much pain…but no more. He would make certain of that…he would make certain she never gained fresh scars again….

He licked along this one, kissing occasionally, taking her shoulders in his paws as he nuzzled her, encouraging her to expose her throat to him. When she did, he found another reminder of the suffering she'd endured: that damned collar she had been forced to wear, the silent symbol of her being owned by her godfather, as nothing more than a prized pet or servant. Seeing it made him quiver in rage and disgust, for she was a slave no longer. That accursed man no longer controlled her, but the wretched choker was yet wrapped about her neck like a dog collar. He reached upwards, intent on removing it and pulling it away, freeing her fully from Giovanni's enslavement-.

She stopped him, a frightened look on her face. He then remembered the purpose of the binding: her wings. If he removed the choker, her dark, feathered wings would be exposed. The strange, twin limbs set her apart from other humans, marking her as a mutation…but why should she care if he beheld them? Did she think he minded them and what they represented: her ability to soar against nature's usual creeds? No, he had always savored stroking her pinions, had always enjoyed preening her...so why did she attempt to stop him? Did she mistakenly believe her wings disgusted him, though he had never once shown an aversion to them…?

Nuzzling her face with his, and kissing her eyes and cheeks, he murmured, "Let me do this...you needn't hide anything from me - especially not an integral part of yourself."

And so her hands fell to their sides, and though she quivered as he concentrated on the clasp with his telekinesis, she did not stop him from removing the collar. She whimpered softly as he pulled it from her and encountered resistance to the action...he soon enough saw why she had not wished it removed. He scarcely noticed her wings appearing in black folds behind her when he saw the skin of her neck. The flesh once hidden beneath the choker was bruised, torn, blistered, and bloodied, almost certainly from being scratched and burned by the choker's hot wires and metal plates over time, as well as when her late husband had attempted to strangle her. Excluding the latter incident, removing it several times a week had once helped avoid any damage greater than simple agitation, and he could not help but blame himself as much as Giovanni for her current injuries. After all, he had forced her to wear the godforsaken device for the past month, never allowing her a reprieve from its harmful grasp. Cursing under his breath, he tossed the collar away violently, not caring if it broke. His sole concern was for her raw flesh, pink with scar tissue failing to heal properly.

Regulating his breathing, he whispered, "This will only hurt a moment."

He reached beneath her hair, placing his palm against the back of the wound. She cried out at the stinging pain, but her gasp quieted as the flash of hurt faded as he allowed another recover to wash through her skin, replacing the damaged cells with whole ones…and then he kissed her remaining hurts away until her neck was whole and smooth again. No more pain...he wanted her to feel no more pain from what her devil of a guardian had inflicted upon her….
He kissed her beneath an ear, his hands and tail rising up her shoulder blades to the base of her wings...her down, dark as thunderclouds, was incredibly soft against his fingertips. He ran his paws through her feathers, across the ridges, the tip of his tail brushing her wingtips. She sighed into his collar, her breath warm and moist, her pleasure at his touch emanating from her as she did. Her wings were incredibly sensitive—they could detect the tiniest shifts in the wind and in temperature, and so his touching them like this provoked nearly as much bliss in her as him caressing even more intimate parts of her body. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders, clutching him close, dragging her hands along his muscles...was he purring? The thought fled her mind as his paws fell to her legs. They tickled against the soles of her feet briefly, raced up her lower legs, resting at the base of her thighs, before cautiously beginning to rise up. She closed her eyes, letting him continue, leaning against him as his fingertips skimmed over her rear lightly, then slowly graced between them. The pressure of his paws there— even though her jeans - made her quiver. Encouraged by her response, he eased a paw beneath her belt...she did not shift away as his palm ran against the bare skin of her hips and thighs, nor as his hand slid between them, gracing the tender flesh there. Her nails dug into his shoulders as she began to gasp at his fondling...she was slick to his touch, yearning for it. She displayed her readiness by next helping him to undo her belt and slip off her remaining clothing. The final bit of undressing was over in a matter of seconds as she laid back, both their hands pushing the garments down her legs. Like her other clothes, these were discarded, unless items now in the act they intended to commit. For a moment, Mewtwo admired her fully, smiling at what he saw. In minute ways she had changed, her form shaped fully into that of an adult's. Although her skin was marred with scars, he did not care...she was his partner. She always had been....

By god...I have missed you....

He drew her into his arms, and her naked form yielded to his, as if the very patterns of their muscles fit together. She was tense now, not in fear but in apprehension. He was not surprised...who would not be nervous? It had been years since they had done this; three years, in fact, and that was a long time in the life of a young adult. Holding her close, he traced the scars on her back, and felt Cassandra's hand slip again to him to rid him of his cloak entirely. Her fingers stroked at the base of his tail, up his thick legs, resting at his waist. They kissed once more, savoring the taste of it and the hot moist of each other's mouths. This...it was a good thing, what they shared...why anyone would call it a monstrosity was beyond their comprehension. They held each other tightly, caressed one another, limbs rubbing, forms quivering, their breathes coming in what was closer to pants. At some point Mewtwo felt her reach down, rubbing almost painful circles between his legs. Blood pooled, the area growing hot enough to make him growl with pleasure as the smoothness of his anatomy bulged outwards. Complete arousal would come to him soon, he knew...but he removed her hands for the moment, wanting to enjoy her just a little bit longer before completing them both....

His mouth trailed downward, his tongue licking at her skin, which seemed to pulse beneath his muzzle. He felt her arms wrap around him, felt her moving against him for the sensation of it...by the time he kissed her navel, he needed to pause. Her sweet scent had been strengthening in his descent, and now he realized with a start that he recognized it...and as it had always done times previous, he felt it begin to affect him. In the past, he had hated the aroma and how it had made him yearn for her, but currently it seemed fitting that this was the time of month when she was most vulnerable to carnal cravings. Automatically his muscles tightened, and he moaned quietly as his member slid free of its pelvic sheath. The wait would not be long now...but while it lasted, it would be torment for them both. They were aching for one another...the longing way they gazed at one another, the manner in which their movements had gained an edge of desperation, displayed that fact aptly. How much longer could they remain separate like this...?

Cassandra wasn't certain. As she leaned against him, feeling his length slide against the inside of her thigh, they both shuddered with yearning. Her own trembling had stilled earlier, but now he had taken up the involuntary shaking as he fought to keep himself from rushing forward and penetrating
her. Running her fingers along him, she heard him hiss out in response…was it from pleasure or pain, or a mixture of both? She sighed against his neck, wondering why he hesitated now. They were ready…why didn't he move? Why did he continue to wait, prolonging the cold and their suffering…?

He was waiting for her, she realized suddenly; he was waiting for her consent. But he had it and then some, for she wanted him desperately now despite her wariness. It struck her then that his need to hear her say "yes" wasn't right; he was always held himself back for her, never acting out of his own desire…and this was supposed to be an act between equals, between two parts of a whole, both sides joining together in mutual lust and affection. Yet he would not forge the connecting motion unless she allowed it, and while there was merit and value to that, it now proved an unnecessary and unwanted hitch in the act. No, she did not want his fear of forcing her to be an issue any longer…she did not want to make this difficult for him.

Besides, hadn't they waited long enough…?

"Mewtwo…"

She said his name quietly, capturing his attention. His back straightened as he lifted his face, and she kissed him tenderly, warmly. Her small nose pressed against the side of his muzzle as their gazes locked together, silver to amethyst. Continuing to peer into his face, she shifted position in his arms, keeping balance with her hands by grasping his shoulders to steady her movements. She slid one leg, then the other over his hips, her knees clasping his sides. Her body hung over his, and she felt both their grips on each other tighten as she moved forward, feeling the tip of him prick into her sex. His fingertips dug into her hard as she slowly and deliberately slid herself down onto him, drawing him deep inside, stopping only when their hips brushed together. Her limbs locked around him tightly once they were joined…the feeling of him, hard, hot, and pulsing within her made her gasp sharply with pleasure as her body arched into him. She murmured his name again, and wondered to herself that if what they shared was such an unnatural and perverse thing, then why, why did they fit together as perfectly as they did…?

Her partner's arms wove around her waist, his hands at her hips as he pulled away slightly and rushed forward, moving himself into her core. The rocking of his hips into hers was slow at first as they both sought to grow used to the almost unbearable waves of pleasure washing through them with each thrust, but then quickened as need took over the rhythm. Skin moved slick against damp fur, soft cries of ecstasy were smothered against each other, in a residual habit from a time where silence equaled their safety. Fingertips dug into one another, limbs swept against each other, mouths kissed and bit and pressed passionately together. Their breaths were equally hitched, quick, shallow, and intermitted with moans of bliss. Their hearts raced within their chests until they could beat no faster. Occasionally they murmured one another's names, and as the pace sped between them, their bodies moving together in ways learned and remembered, the rapture and grace between them built up deep inside, ever higher….

They had both nearly forgotten what it felt like to be so intimately connected with another being…yet now fresh experience burned the memory into them, one which would not fade in time. As they swayed together, Mewtwo murmured his mate's name…he had a way of saying the word in those moments which made her thrill and ensnared her full attention. She met his eyes fully, and in the entirety of the universe, nothing else seemed to exist but them in their private tryst, drenched in firelight and making love together. For what else could this act between them be called…? Blunter terms held none of the connotations descriptive of the feeling in their mating…! They gazed into each other's faces as they moved together, the intensity of their displayed emotions almost frightening: the marrow-deep yearning, the blended happiness and sorrow, the pure, shared bliss…and something far more soulful, far more meaningful. Affection, warmth, and devotion mingled and deepened until the
mixture bore another name...and discovering it in Mewtwo's eyes, Cassandra lowered hers and buried her face into his shoulder. She breathed him in, felt him stroking her hair, and watched his tail twist behind him in slow, erratic patterns. Neither of them would acknowledge in spoken words what that beautiful and bittersweet emotion was, although both knew in certainty that it was there between them.

After all, they were both empathic creatures...as close as they were now, they could sense what their partner felt, and each sensation, each emotion became superimposed on the other until their individual experiences melded into one. What walls that had stood between them were lowered now, leaving them both vulnerable and fragile...and so they treated each other gently, not repelled by the faults each possessed...they accepted these flaws and embraced the other regardless. They passed no judgment onto one another when their souls were laid out bare before them - stains of sin were unavoidable in life, and rejecting each other now would be a naïve and heartless cruelty. So as heavenly minutes passed, they found something perfect in their complete liaison of body, heart, soul, and mind, a perfect pleasure, a perfect joy:... They were not alone anymore. Each caress, each movement, each gasp drew them closer together, in a spell of bonding they were loath to break. As the final moments of the act approached, Cassandra clung to her beloved harder, her body writhing against his in desperate motions. Her partner slid one of his paws beneath her left knee, his other arm wrapping around her shoulders, each grip to hold her firm as she reached the highest point of her bliss. He then buried his face within the crook of her neck, his teeth sinking into her tender skin in a painless nip. His movements quickened further, becoming stronger and more erratic, the pulsing of it making the primordial sea they shared, already turbulent, heave in swells of ecstasy that threatened to drown them both. His angel succumbed first under the waves; the building pleasure within her crested, crashing down into her. As she quivered uncontrollably in his hold and arced into him, her wings folded him into their embrace, and a thought entered her mind, surfacing over the final waves of rapture....

Mewtwo...I....

She felt him follow her, his body tensing suddenly, his grip on her tightening enough to leave faint bruises, the growl of bliss he'd been voicing cutting off abruptly as he brought his full weight against her. As he shuddered, Cassandra clutched him tightly inside, feeling his warmth burst into her core; he had followed her into surrender, unable and not needing to curb the urge any longer....

As the waters began to settle and their movements slow, the thought completed itself in her quieting mind:

...I don't want to lose you.

With that, at last, they ceased to sway, and separated with reluctance. Their souls disentangled, and Mewtwo slid himself from his beloved's still burning flesh with a heavy sigh. Weakness followed them both now that their lovemaking was complete, and they leaned against each other for support, their limbs yet clutching one another firmly. Both of their forms yet experienced twinges of residual pleasure, physical echoes of the bond, and the perspiration over them helped to cool their heated forms. Their faces remained flushed, but their heartbeats began to return to normal and their breathing slow as silent minutes passed. Eventually Mewtwo realized the woman he cradled in his arms was trembling...and then a hot, salty droplet ran down his cheek. Lifting his muzzle, he pulled away just enough to gaze into her face. She...was crying. His brow furrowed as he leaned closer to her, gently kissing away the tears she was shedding. Why...? Why did she...?

"Cassandra...?"

She opened her eyes and stared for an instant into his face, before she curled herself up to him, her
hand stroking at his cheek. Her mouth pressed to his, warmly, tenderly, and she smiled…but it was a sad smile. Quietly, she whispered, "Don't talk right now. Let's just...enjoy ourselves, okay?"

They could not know when Giovanni's forces might come for them...perhaps at dawn, perhaps in a week, perhaps in months. They might be captured or killed at any time, and she wanted to savor the time they had fully so she could face that darkness without any regrets. Slowly she drew him down and lay out onto her back below him, her wings spread out beneath her. Her lover crouched over her, and closed his eyes as she ran a palm from his face down to the violet hue of his midriff. They were both exhausted...but that didn't mean they couldn't share each other again....

In the coming hours, the two joined a few more times, and writhed together within the soft covers of the blankets that made their bed. Each union proved slower and sweeter than the one preceding it, as dark hair and skin and pale fur mingled, as muscles coiled about each other, and eyes and mouths and bodies met. In those moments, as the two rose and fell against one another, as they clutched each other close, as they lost themselves in their mutual passion, they forged creations between them that, if revealed, would be viewed as unholy by those around them. Even then, the pair realized that within them the spiritual aspect of their bond became an almost physical tie, like a cord woven between them. Its ends were firmly wrapped around their beating hearts, and the inevitable breaking of the connection made them treasure it even more. Yet at the same time, they made together creations they knew nothing of, creations that could alter their world if discovered.... However, the pair remained ignorant of this, and so merely savored the night in which they freely could be as one. Tonight only their union mattered, of two opposing parts joining a complementary whole: one of female and male, human and pokémon, angel and demon, dark and light, fire and ice...and in their meeting arose their personal heaven on Earth, no matter what others believed it to be....

Resting across from each other later, they stared upon one another, their fingertips brushing skin and fur lightly in comforting, affectionate touches. Mewtwo traced the silver line of the chain necklace he had given her, and she closed her eyes, burying her face into the blankets beneath them as she turned over onto her front. He sat up, suppressing the dizziness the motion resulted in, and gazed down at her, running his fingers through her feathers and down across her back in random patterns. His beloved peered at the fabric she was clutching, warmed in her heart and core at his touch. Yet despair underlay her joy, settling like a dense fluid, thick and heavy, under bright water. How much longer did they have? How much longer would it be before the organization found them and she might lose her mate...? As the gruesome scenarios ran through her mind, she shuddered and curled her limbs close to her. She did not want to witness his death...she couldn't bear that...!

Remembering the events preceding her decision to betray her godfather, she murmured softly, to no one in particular, "Giovanni's planning something...and not just how he's going to get back at you and me, Mewtwo."

The pale feline's hand stroked between her shoulder blades as he thought on that. After a time, he replied, "I know...but Cassandra, it's not our task to save the land from him. Such a responsibility is too much for us to bear upon our shoulders alone, especially when surviving and maintaining our freedom will be enough of a struggle for us. If he rears his maw at us, then for our sake, we must strike back at him...but otherwise, let us not concern ourselves with the schemes of the dragon. There are other, far more appropriate candidates to take up that mantle than us."

He was right...but still, she worried....

At some point, she rolled over to face him. His violet eyes were shockingly soft as he regarded her, his expression warm...but he too dreaded what was to come. She could see that in the creases around his brow and mouth, could sense it. Their hearts ached for one another, longed for a shared future, but were resigned to the possibility that they might not have one. At least they harbored the
memories of this twilight to provide them solace... these stolen moments, and those yet to come, would have to be enough. Slowly then, Cassandra rose onto her arms, and reached out to grasp the choker they’d discarded earlier. She put the device on wordlessly, allowing her wings to vanish in a flash of black light, and then lay back down, her back to her mate, and moved closer to his warmth, as if desiring him to curl up behind her. He did just that, pressing his chest and navel to her back, curling his legs by hers, and wrapped her in his arms and tail, his muzzle resting in her hair. For an indiscernible time, they watched the fire burn as they lay together like that, before Mewtwo noted his mate's expression, which was clouded with heavy contemplations. He kissed her cheek and asked her not to dwell on dark thoughts for now, but rest again. They would need their strength for the coming days. She merely looked back at him with a soft smile, and murmured that she would try. Eventually they drifted off together, taking comfort in being able to feel the other breathing next to them....

And before them, the fire flickered and cast its light over them, mimicking their ardor in golden heat....

High above the lovers, above the swirling clouds of the raging blizzard, the brother of the replica hung suspended in the thin, frozen air of the stratosphere, the moonlight making his fur glow as if lit by white fire. Adding to his luminescence, the psychical energies he was employing diffused his cells with iridescent light, but blinded from redirecting his sight towards the metaphysical pathways of the future, the creature could not see how he shined. Yet the external world of the present did not concern him as he navigated along the interweaving threads of fate. What was coming, he mused, was far more worrisome. He had long since mastered the ability to direct his consciousness into the forests of time, having tutored underneath the lineage of the celebi throughout the past several millennia to gain access to its trails and accomplish their understanding of its secrets. With his own mastery over the fields of life, recognized by his ability to encompass entire nebula in his mind, and by the ability to superimpose his will into the smallest of living beings, he knew how to accurately search existence for knowledge of the possibilities of what might someday be. For quite some time, he had sacrificed this wisdom for the peace of hibernation, but now he had another of his kind, albeit a strange one, to watch over.

After learning their story from the espeon in the west, and after observing the recent turn of events surrounding the boy and his beloved, the mew's attention had been completely ensnared, and his brow furrowed as he noted the myriad paths that the couple would be made to chose among in the coming day. One, he noted, was steadily increasing its certainty of being fulfilled, and following along its track, he saw that it would be the doom of Mewtwo... for while Mewtwo would survive the coming onslaught to fight against the organization that was preparing to smother Kanto and then the continent, the girl would perish within a year from the choices they had now made. Her body would fail her when she most needed it to endure, and the loss of her would leave the clone a vessel of grief and rage. He would lash out at their enemies, lash out at himself for being what he perceived to be the cause of her demise, and, to some extent, he would even lash out at what he had gained from her despite the destruction of her person. He would once again become a monster set on the destruction of pieces of the world, and while he would have some success in his battle, the war to come would overwhelm him. If he did manage to emerge from the bloodbath, he would have lost everything of value to him: his companions, his soul, and the precious gift the girl would have given him before she died.

This path, the mew named Citlali thought, could not be wandered down. Yet as he set his sight down the other paths near that one, the ones that had the most likely chance of occurring, he saw similar tales of sorrow, fury, violence, death, and perdition. No matter what trail Mewtwo and his angel walked down together, the trail would progressively grow bloodier and drown them in shadows... and they would not be the only ones who suffered for what their possible fates entailed. If the evil of
Giovanni Maki and his organization was not purged within the next decade, so much would be lost, and only when both human and pokémon voices alike cried up to the heavens in their torment and desperation would the legendaries gain permission from their creator to intervene. Yet the mew race, Citlali recalled, had never been among the children who followed the laws of their maker perfectly. Yes, his race had kept their creator's advisements in mind, but in the end, they had exploited their free will whenever they saw fit. This, perhaps, had been why their kind had been ruined, and their last, pure child knew that they had brought that degradation upon themselves. As such, perhaps he should follow the advice of their leader: do not involve yourself in the destinies of the earthly beings, for those are their affairs; they should not be touched by the divine. The star children had their own tasks to concern themselves with in the universe, and should tend to them instead, for that was their place.…

Yet as said, the mew were a race which had often defied that notion – and their surviving heir, Citlali, knew that now, after thousands of years of remaining as a strict observer to this world, he must become a player in this game. For the sake of Mewtwo, whose blood remained clean, who could give his kind a fresh start, the ancient would stretch out his hand and do whatever was necessary to preserve the boy. As he implanted the necessary suggestions within their minds, he wondered whether manipulating their fates to their favor made him a moral or immoral being. He supposed the matter was debatable, for as the humans were apt to say, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions," was it not? Regardless, as he felt the miniscule, gentle bursts that marked the clone's life being altered down the dire path, he finished his work on the couple and murmured his apologies.

They would, years later, not accept his reasoning behind what he had done. They would vilify him, especially Mewtwo, who carried within himself the surest certainty that his power alone would somehow be enough to keep them safe, despite the forces working against him. Someday, perhaps, they might forgive him, but even if the ancient one would forever be shunned by the lovers, he was willing to make that sacrifice to keep them alive. So when the hunters would arrive the next morning, when the clone would take desperate measures to protect the female he cherished, Citlali would redirect the path that female would be forced to take…and he would implant into her a vision of her mate as he fell to their enemies.

She would not know, as the brother would, that the clone would survive this defeat. When the replica was engulfed in flames, when his frail barrier was no longer strong enough to keep him from being burned half to death, when he at last learned that he was too weak to successfully battle against Team Rocket as he was now, she would not see that in that moment, the last mew would save him, would teleport him far away to a place where he could heal, and, from there, learn from his brother was he needed to know. She would not see, and the mew would ensure that she would never guess, for when his brother fell, he would reach between them and forcefully sever their spiritual connection to each other. Doing so would almost certainly cause them pain, and he knew, an echo of their bond would remain, but there was he could do nothing about that now. Finally, he would take one more step to isolate the boy from the immediate conflict completely: he would erase from the minds of all the empaths on the continent the codes of Mewtwo's aural signature, sparring only the espeon in the west and the other pokémon clones from this purge. He would do the same for the woman's metaphysical codes to ensure her safety and freedom…but he would only do so after the couple was set apart, and after both had learned the lessons necessary to ensure their continued survival.

He would manipulate circumstances into their favor…but ultimately, it would be up to them to make the best of the scenario.

He would only go that far, and no further….
Dawn was breaking in the east when Cassandra awoke beneath the covers alone the following morning, the sunrise's pale, blue light filtering in through the cabin's windows. As she opened her eyes, she groggily realized that the fire had gone out, and was now nothing more than a pile of cinders in the hearth. If it weren't for the fabrics that encompassed her, she knew she would be shivering with cold, her naked flesh proving little defense against the chill that pervaded the room. Slowly she sat up, wrapping one of the blankets around herself as she did so, and blinked as she gazed around the cabin. It seemed frozen in still life without the lively, flickering light of the fire, but soon enough she found what she sought within its walls: her partner sat on the sill of the largest window, staring out into the wintry landscape that surrounded their secluded tryst.

The sky, she noted, was of clear and perfect azure hue, with only feathery wisps of white within it. The snowstorm had passed, and while on any other day the current weather might have been regarded as beautiful, Cassandra now found the open firmament loathsome. Dread pooled in her chest – was their time of safety at an end…? Evidently, Mewtwo had woken sometime earlier, perhaps with the intent of standing watch for the approach of the ones surely pursing them, for the empathic trackers would surely have sensed their presence in this region. Now that the weather was calm, nothing remained to hinder their advances into the territory after the duo. Cassandra's hands clutched the blanket around herself tighter at the thought…and then, shivering from more than the low temperature, she rose to her feet and searched for her clothes, swiftly finding them and pulling them on.

Her companion, noticing her movements, regarded her current actions with a smirk, and called out, "Getting dressed so soon?"

Peering at him with a droll look, she chuckled quietly as she pulled on her dried socks. "What? You're not tired of making the naked pretzel yet? You really are an animal - I envy your stamina."

His grin widened for a fraction of a second, before he turned his eyes back to the lightening firmament, searching for what had yet to invade the mountains.

Turning her back to him, the woman fastened her belt, and then slipped on her jacket. "How long have you been keeping watch?" she asked as she zipped up.

In an equally casual tone, the white demon replied, "I slept perhaps six hours after drifting off with you...so, about four hours now."

She frowned, contemplating how drained he must be, both physically and psychically. "...You shouldn't've slept more, Mewtwo. It's not healthy for you to--"

"As I mentioned to you once before, I often suffer from insomnia. Furthermore, you were in more need of rest than I was, and I didn't wish to force you to remain awake to keep vigil over me. Do not worry so, dove. Haven't we already established that I recuperate far more quickly than you do?"

As soothing as he attempted to make his voice, she noted fatigue in its depths, and could see a dullness in his eyes that bespoke of weariness. As of such, his words provided her no great comfort or reassurance. With a sigh, she walked over to her beloved and paused before the one who loved her regardless of the stains to her soul, who extended his right arm and invited her to his side despite her sins. She stepped forward and leaned into him, the warmth of him flowing through his cloak like a poultice to her worry. Outside, the edge of the sun's brilliant disk illuminated the peaks and forests, and cast golden light onto their faces through the glass. Held by him, she pressed her face into his shoulder and mused that it was not fair: it was not fair that they were being forced to return to the shadows just after finding miraculous light within each other, a light with which they longed to form a future. Yet existence was not fair, and they would have to attempt to make the most out of this world as possible.
Yet disrupting the tranquil atmosphere, Mewtwo's demeanor shifted abruptly: his body tensed, his muscles coiled, and as she watched, the hackles on the back of his neck raised. His jaw clenched, and in his eyes, which now stared intently out the window, his irises narrowed into slits. Dread and anger suffused through his aura, and resting a palm on his shoulder, the angel asked him what was wrong, although she suspected she already knew what his answer would be. Indeed, just as she had guessed, the clone soon spat that a fleet belonging to Team Rocket was travelling through the mountains towards them, and would arrive within the hour at the velocity in which they were traveling. Standing, he withdrew from her touch and crossed his arms, glaring out the window with unfocused eyes, dimly lit with the use of his psychic abilities, and after a few more minutes had passed, he turned to his partner and said, "It seems that Giovanni and his gardevoir are in the center of the convoy. I can't sense them specifically, since they're both dosed with the immunity serum, but their companions are not similarly immune. Their thoughts betray their leaders."

She stepped over to him. "You're not planning to do something stupid, are you? Like try attacking them? Because they already handed your ass to you once before, and I'm pretty sure having missiles added to the mix won't make things any prettier. But let's say - you know, just for shits and giggles - that you actually manage to wipe them all out. It's not like Giovanni's going to 'go down with his ship!' Knowing him, he'll just teleport away with that gardevoir, and be back in Viridian City before his helicopter even hits the ground. And besides, where would this hypothetical attack leave me? I wouldn't be able to back you up - I don't have any weapons on me, remember?"

"Which is why I don't think you should be involved in this particular struggle: you're vulnerable without any firearms, and can't protect yourself from the heavier firepower. I'm certain you could dodge some of their attacks, but not all, and I'd rather not senselessly risk your life if I can avoid it."

Her brow furrowed with bemusement and aggravation at that. "So what are you suggesting? That I stay behind while you go fight the monsters? Excuse me if I think that's a shitty idea! After everything we just went through, being separated here would be a rather huge step backwards. Let's just play it safe and teleport away. We can think up a better plan later."

He met her gaze, regarding her brimming anger, before he said, "Yes, that does sound reasonable, doesn't it? But as I said last night, we need to strike our enemies when the chance arises, before resisting them becomes entirely impossible. Here's one such opportunity...and besides, even if I fail to destroy your godfather in this battle, perhaps I can overwhelm the psychic at his side. If she's not dealt with, she will continue to detect our locations no matter where we flee, thanks to her ability to sense and track our auras. Try as we might, we can't conceal those permanently: our mental shields lower in sleep and when we're intimate with one another, and we can only resist both needs for so long. She hinders our ability to obtain true freedom - and without her, Giovanni would have no compass pointing to us. As I see it, we'll have a far better chance of escaping Team Rocket's scrutiny once she's eliminated."

Now Cassandra truly was beginning to grow angry. "So basically, despite being told how reckless you're being, you want to leave me behind and ambush them? What if that's what they want? What if - while you're off getting you face beaten in - they teleport here and take me down? That would screw over whatever 'noble' attempt you'd make at leaving me 'out of harm's way.'"

"You assume that I intend to leave you in this cabin while I go off and fight a war. That is incorrect. My intention is to send you somewhere where I know you'll be safe. I won't leave you vulnerable to attack," he said, stepping over to her and drawing her into his arms. Despite how she squirmed in his hold, he pressed his muzzle to her cheek and murmured, "Cassandra, please...I want to ensure we can have a future together, despite the malice of that man. I want you to be able to step into the
sunlight without worrying that doing so will make you into an easier target. I want you to live a life of peace instead of one of dread. If I must take risks to accomplish that goal, I will do so. Please try to understand."

She trembled in his hold. "I get that, but Mewtwo, this...this is so stupid! Don't do this. If something happens to you..."

"Nothing will happen to me, dove. Have faith. I will not abandon you, for you hold something of mine I can't be without."

Yet now, he knew, was not the time to utter such sentimental declarations – they were tantamount to saying goodbye, and he was determined that their lives together would not end here. But they had argued long enough...he would send her away before her will shattered his resolve, and his crumpling heart would take strength from the idea that at least she would be alright: she would escape Giovanni's immediate wrath. Murmuring an apology, he turned away from her warmth, and with heavy steps, opened the cabin door and floated over the snow. The brisk, frigid air cut through his fur, and the sound of helicopter blades beating in the distance buried the sound of his quavering breaths. A world of white stretched before him, contrasting the wretchedness of the situation with its purity, and made him feel akin to the most repulsive of creatures for deciding on his course against her wishes and against his own desires. Then, although he had warned himself not to do so, had told himself to teleport her away and move forward, never showing a single sign of uncertainty, he looked back at her. Cassandra's image imprinted itself into his memory: of her expression contorted with mingled fury at him, confusion at his actions, and most evidently, with fear for him; of her wading through the snow after him, her entire frame shuddering in the intense cold as she struggled through the dunes; of her hair being blow about by the wind, of her skin pale from its bitterness. Her clothes, coated in a fine layer of snow, glimmered while concealing the flesh he had felt writhe against his pelt in previous hours.

And then her voice, brimming with desperation, called out to him. "If you insist on going through with this, at least let me come with you! I'd rather risk everything here than stand idle anywhere else in the world. Mewtwo, I...I...!"

She nearly broke his resolve with those declarations, and teleporting to her, he grasped her arms and kissed her mouth firmly. The sweet taste of her lingered on his tongue as they parted, and he murmured, "You know I would gladly have you at my side in any struggle. But Cassandra, I care for you too much to place you in danger when doing so goes against common sense. I won't allow my feelings for you to cloud my judgment like that. However, I will allow them to drive my actions: no matter whether I win or lose this battle, I refuse to perish here. I will come for you, I promise...and when I do, I hope you'll forgive me for this."

With that, he stepped back from her, focused his energies on her person, and then teleported her away. His heart heaved as the despicable act was completed, yet now that it was done, he turned and flew from the white dunes, sending a wave of ice flying behind him as he propelled himself towards the encroaching enemy. He soon was soaked and hot from the reckless exertion of his energies, but he pressed onwards, making a path for himself through the wintry landscape. As the sounds of the approaching aircraft overwhelmed his ears, as he saw their shadows float over the icy crags, he reveled momentarily in the feel of his body burning, at the corpses of the trees near him that somewhat concealed the potential beauty of the dawn. He fled from the site of the necessary evil he had committed and into the jaws of the bestial organization, feeling his sickened heart thundering in his chest in time with the pulse of the helicopter blades....

Then the first aircraft, the scout, appeared over the tree line, and soaring upwards to meet it, the clone charged an orb of psychical energy and hurled it at the hull of the vehicle. It exploded in a cloud of
fire, smoke, and burning debris, which whirled into the land with a deafening crash, and soon other helicopters in the fleet appeared on the horizon. He saw the weapon carriers on each gleam in the sunlight as they were directed towards the destruction, he heard the whistles of missiles streaking towards him, and glimpsed, just before they impacted the shield he flung in front of him, the beams of red light bursting from the aircraft, which he knew would materialize into a malignant army of pokémon…an army, he knew, that may be immune to his psychical attacks….

And then the missiles struck and exploded against his shield, the flashes from their strikes blinding him to the force that would soon descend upon him.

The first battle of the war had begun.

The teleportation was unlike any she had experienced before: unlike the smooth, momentary transits through the void, the leap she now unwillingly made seem careless and uncalculated, for midway it seemed as if the pathway crooked sharply, and her momentum made she crash into an invisible wall before she spun down the proper pathway in descent. Emerging into reality, she stumbled and fell prostrate into the snow, and began to retch as vertigo overtook her. The world whirled and tilted, and as it began to stabilize, she wondered to herself what had just occurred. The transit had not been gentle as usual, and as she began to pick herself up from the dune, her breathing labored as she sought to regain control over her stomach, she wondered what Mewtwo had been thinking. He had hurled her away with the declaration that she could do nothing to fight the enemies…he had recklessly charged into battle upon finding the presence of her godfather and his gardevoir in the opposing ranks. He had thought he could ambush them and find some way to destroy them, even though he more than likely knew the potential futility of such an attack. Hadn't the battle in the arena taught him that…? Yet now he wanted to take the opportunity that presented itself, even if it seemed to her as if Giovanni and the empath were there purely to act as bait to lure the clone to his death….

"Stupid! Mewtwo, you stupid, fucking tomcat! God damn it!"

Why hadn't he teleported along with her…? Why hadn't he fled as he had in the Viridian Gym? Why hadn't he stepped back, along with her, so that they could plan this potential strike in safety? She could understand why the possibility of taking down the adversary now, when the chance presented itself, was so alluring, for if it succeeded, they would be clear of danger, but if it didn't…if he failed…if they took him down…. God, if he died in this foolhardy attempt…!

If he died…the notion made her heartbeats quicken, made her stomach churn with fear, and leaning against a nearby birch tree, she wrapped and arm tightly around her torso. As different scenarios of his demise played in her mind, the dread began to escalate, and keen sorrow sliced through her at the possibility of losing the one she had just found once again. For what would she do without him? Where would she go…? She yearned and craved for his company, and to be permanently without would blow a gaping hole into her heart that she doubted she could recover from. She had already lost so many of those she cared for…she could not lose him too. She would not be able to endure that…

Please…please come back to me. You promised you would, so come back. Don't you dare leave me like you did before…!

Biting her lip hard to suppress the pitiful urge to whimper, she lifted her face to her surroundings, seeing that she was within a forest quite like the one she had just left, but the ground beneath her was dirt and the landscape smoother. Although still bitter, the winter air was not as sharp, and the skies above were overcast. Not far from her, she heard the sounds of a river, and heading towards it, she tried to keep herself from panicking over her mate. Mewtwo was, after all, not an unintelligent creature, despite what she had shouted earlier. If he saw that he could not overwhelm his opponents,
he would teleport to her side rather than stay and attempt to fight a losing battle. He knew what his priorities were, and being a martyr had never been on his lists of statuses to gain. He would no doubt arrive before noon, unharmed, for he was strong, agile, and clever, so he could not fall to the organization. He would not be defeated by them…!

In the coming minutes, as she found her way through the trees to the shores of the river, she repeated that phrase to herself as if it alone would be enough to ward away the clone's destruction. By the time she knelt among the pebbles of the shore, reaching her hands through the thin ice to cup the clear waters of the river so she could drink deeply of them, she had almost convinced herself that this would be the case. She quelled her dread with the belief that Mewtwo would soon step through the trees to stand by her side, his form wearied and his eyes conveying what had occurred in the mountains. Soon he would be here…soon, she was certain…!

But it was not to be.

Without any warning, a vision slammed into her mental shields and overwhelmed her mind: she saw Mewtwo lying in a heap on the ground, his body battered and bloodied, his eyes dulled with hurt and despair. She saw the shadows from circling aircrafts and flying pokémon sweep over his form, their mutual cries deafening to the ears. She watched helplessly as white fire illuminated him, and then, with utter finality, engulfed him completely, cremating him alive. And then pain, like a sword thrusting through her torso, ran her through, and doubling over she vomited up bile, the stink and taste of it making her heave again. Yet what she had seen - more than the anguish that was now slowly beginning to dissipate - tormented her. It could not have happened…he could not have been beaten into submission and then mercilessly burned to death! It was inconceivable…and yet….

If it was false, then why did the nightmare seem to have a ring of validity? She analyzed the contents, the feel of the vision over again, trying to decipher it to find the flaw that would reveal its fabrication, some hint of fogginess or discoloration, the misplacement of shadows or the marks of the surreal…however, visually, there was nothing that contradicted itself and revealed it to be a lie. Furthermore, the sense of it vision was cool and detached, with no hint of pity or remorse. This, the sender seemed to declare, was what had happened, and from this incident, she had best be warned: if Team Rocket found her as well, she would meet the same fate as her mate.

In that moment, Cassandra semi-consciously associated the sender with a nameless member of the opposing army, seeking to taunt her with the vision of how her lover had died. For if it was true, how could he have survived that blow…? Incapable as he seemed of using his abilities to defend himself, it was not possible for him to have fled or protected himself from the assault, and as resilient as his physical body was, even he was made of vulnerable matter, of fragile flesh and breakable bone. He could not have survived…and in evidence of that cruel, merciless truth, the empty place within her chest pulsed sharply, making her hunch over in anguish. Their bond, the metaphysical cord that had been palpable until seconds before the attack, now lay in tatters, no longer binding her to anything. Mewtwo…her Mewtwo…was gone, and from somewhere beyond the smothering darkness surrounding her, she realized she was weeping, calling his name, begging God to make his death void, begging for her partner to be alive in some distant region of the world. Yet truth overwhelmed her delusions, and beneath her inhuman howling memories of him surfaced: of his amethyst eyes gazing down into hers as he moved within her, sending waves of bliss deep into her core...of the feel of his arms embracing her, firm and warm...of the scent of his fur in her nostrils as she buried herself against him...of the sound of his voice, filled with need and passion as he murmured her name...of the taste of his mouth on her lips, faintly sweet....

Yet now her mate was gone, and her own will to live was consequently foiled by his demise. Vaguely, she realized that she soon might possess the chance to join him in the grave, for she'd be unable to elude the organization for long, and when they did find her, it would be her turn to die. All
she needed to do was reveal her presence and wait for them to send her into the abyss after him...she might even thank them for the kindness. For what point was there in living in a world in which he no longer existed, in one in which her final possession – her connection with him – had been stolen from her?

And yet something within her, so miniscule it was barely noticeable, like a kernel floating in a black ocean, was pleading for her to hide, to flee to somewhere safer...to live.

Staring into the memory of the ashes sullying the snow, she questioned that plea. Why? What's the point? He's gone, so why bother resisting them when there's nothing left to protect?

Regardless of her thoughts, that shard of her persisted in its cry: hide, flee, live!

_There's no point!_ Her soul screamed back.

But the voice did not fall silent - it retorted that her lover would not have wanted her to give up, and to that, Cassandra laughed bitterly. Where could she go that Team Rocket could not find? Who could she go to that would not condemn her as a traitor or a murderer? Whether she remained here or ran, there was nothing in the universe she would gain by either route; the peace of oblivion would just arrive sooner if she chose the former route, while she would only suffer longer if she chose the latter. What did continuing to survive matter when agony would prove her sole reward…? And why, realizing those cruel realities, did she rise from the ashes of the vision and stare down the river flowing before her, as if honestly contemplating moving forward?

_Hide...flee...live!_

And then Cassandra Brennan did what she regarded as unthinkable: she stepped forward and began the search for sanctuary.

Meanwhile, thousands of miles away, a wounded being thrashed upon a bed of moss, growling as his burned flesh smarted against that soft surface. His fur and skin had been seared terribly, and his dark blood stained the moss beneath him black as he struggled. Bitterly he snarled at the cavern ceiling from the anguish his injuries brought him, and gazing into the clone's deadened, unfocused eyes, his elder brother willed Mewtwo to regain some glimmer of sanity though the hurt. Yet even when Citlali spoke to him, the young male remained ensnared in the feral, animalistic behavior that the intense shock of heat, pain, and defeat had reduced him to. So, in a display of mingled mercy and kindness, the legendary increased the air pressure around the wounded one suddenly to knock him unconscious. He knew that for some time to come, the clone would experience no serenity, for it would be months before his body healed and even longer until he regained the full use of its elemental abilities. Yet when he finally regained both, he would began the search for his beloved, a search that would end in the fifth year of their division. Only then would he find her in the ever-changing world at last…and by the time he did so, every detail of their lives would be changed.

Every last detail, except for one.

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**Author's Note:** Fair warning, but we're going to have some Mewtwo-less chapters ahead of us. I'm going to be bringing in some more characters in the meantime, so please bear with me until I can...
bring him back.

Sincerely,

WiseAbsol
"And the earth spins round while the people fall down
And the world stands still not a sound (not a sound)
There is love, there is love to be found
In the worst way, in the worst way, in the worst way

[ . . . ]

From a little shell at the bottom of the sea
With the earth and the moon and the sun above me
But the world fell down with some people still around
There is love, there is love to be found
With the gods all gone and the souls making sounds
In the worst way, in the worst way, in the worst way."

- Lisa Germano, From a Shell.

Upon calendars throughout Kanto, all days preceding February the twentieth had been crossed out. However, despite that nearly a week had passed since Valentine's Day, Doctor Aurora Joy, the head of Saffron City's Pokémon Center, was still struggling to eradicate pink hearts from her clinic. Although she had been warring a crusade against them for the past seven days, remnants of their pastel force still clung stubbornly to the glass doors and windows of the facility, hung from the ceiling far above her head, and had retreated from the walls to hide beneath the front counter, the tables in the cafeteria, and the benches in the hallways. In her opinion, the war against these obnoxious decorations was worse than her encounters with their Christmas and New Year's Eve counterparts – for the holidays of those decorations, at the very least, held meaning for her. Yet as she had been, sadly, born into an extended family with strong resemblances in the female line, she was typically forced to suffer through the enduring stereotype that she, like some of her more renowned cousins, had chosen the life of a nun. As such, the males who crossed her path had an annoying tendency to dismiss her as a potential match, even though she had more going for her than many of the other females whose skirts they might chase: with a double degree of medicine and biology, she had a title far above that of simple nurse, and with an extensive circle of friends among the leaders in her community (which gave her a say in the Saffron City council), she would have been quite a catch…yet as far as romance was concerned, Aurora had no luck finding a match.

Not that acquiring a partner was her main priority – in fact, a part of her rather savored being single and emotionally independent. She could live her life how she wanted, without the interference of any lover. As such, given her pride in being a bachelorette, the process of ridding her Center of the sappy decorations - which silently inferred that one was to be pitied if he or she wasn't sickeningly in love - was an act she positively loathed…especially when her assistants, who had riddled the building with the paper and sticker hearts in the first place, had all disappeared, leaving her to clean up their mess. With another sigh, Aurora pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose and put her long, red hair up into a ponytail. As the adhesive on the backs of some of the decorations was now akin to superglue, impossible for her to pry off with her nails, she readied a bucket of warm, soapy water and abrasive sponges. Releasing her kangaskhan, Joey, as well as Primrose, her chansey, she directed them to take up the spots beside her and begin scrubbing. Soon suds, carrying shreds of stickers, began to slide down the surface of the window that looked into the recuperation room. Within its darkened hold, pokémon of all sorts rested and healed, the fatigue from recent battles having overcome them as soon
as they snuggled into their cots. Their trainers, participants in the current Indigo League Competition, would be sleeping in the Center's dormitory at this hour. In fact, Aurora noted, it was nearly time to lock up the entrance doors for the night. However, as she had yet to turn in herself, she would not close the building quite yet. After all, some stragglers might still be approaching on the Routes, with emergencies to attend to when they arrived, or an old friend might drop by to chat for a while….

"Need any help, 'Rora?"

Jumping with surprise, the ginger-haired doctor spun around and fired her squirt-bottle into the face of the speaker. However, instead of sputtering with shock or cursing with annoyance, the man merely said, "Thanks, I needed that," and wiped his peach-toned skin dry with his sleeve.

Although now slightly dampened, his short umber hair nonetheless remained unmanageable across his scalp, as if he had just woken from fitful sleep. Lending credit to this theory, his cobalt blue eyes were unfocused and bloodshot, as if he had been slumbering in a smoke-filled room. Fine stubble grew across his face, and his clothes, consisting of a golden-orange sweatshirt, plus dark pants and a jacket of the same hue, were rather creased and wrinkled. At his waist she noted, with exasperation, that he was carrying his firearm, a Saffron-crafted glock, while in his breast pocket was the unofficial license he held to own the weapon: his S.P.D. badge. Either her favorite detective had yet another relationship go sour, or he had, yet again, been spending far too much time poring over case files. Either way, he revealed the source of the affinity between them, which nourished the friendship they shared: Detective Michael Lagorio, like her, commonly placed his work before his pleasures, to the point where some had labeled him as obsessed with his occupation…but she supposed the situation could be far worse. At least he savored his job – that was more than most could declare.

After apologizing for spraying him, she smiled and said, "Would you mind taking that spot right there? I need all the help I can get."

With a yawn, he nodded and grabbed a sponge, soon doing his share of soaping up the window and scratching at the stickers. After a few minutes, she glanced at him, noting his distracted, still unfocused gaze. "Alexius is doing better," she informed him, referring to the officer's partner houndour. "He should be ready to go back to work soon."

He smiled. "Good to hear. I've missed that devil dog." With that, a yawn erupted from his throat - it wasn't even 10PM.

Knowing well what he must be spending most of his energy on, she commented, "Hitting the Rocket files hard again?"

"Yeah…considering their movements the last few months, my superiors keep pressuring me to figure out what's going on. Team Rocket's activity in Kanto keeps increasing, and without knowing what set that off, it's hard to know where they're heading. So my superiors keep sending me memos saying, 'Go look through the files again and figure it out!,' as if I haven't already done that about…oh, thirty-thousand times. If I have to look at another file, I might have to gouge out my eyes."

"...Michael, if I walked into your office now, would I find about thirty pencils hanging from your ceiling?"

"Um...maybe? You're never going to let me live that down, are you?" And for a moment, the deep furrows that creased his face smoothed, and laughter shined in his eyes.

But soon enough he began scowling again, and she couldn't blame him for that. Kanto's most notorious criminal gang, which had previously "officially" contented itself with theft and the organization of drug and prostitution rings, was beginning to step up into more malicious fields.
Rumors circulated of illicit wares being smuggled from Cinnabar Island, which was the Indigo Nation's main trading port with the territory of Orre - and Orre, a country largely destroyed in the last great war, was nonetheless one of the world's largest producers of man-made weaponry, including elaborate guns and explosives specifically designed to take down elite pokémon teams from other, more prosperous lands. Even the Pokémon Masters of Kanto were wary of dealing with the denizens of the wastelands, and that Team Rocket was doing so on an immense scale, as well as taking pointers from their shadowy brethren in arranging their personnel into a militarized core, suggested that they were preparing for a mass assault – possibly war.

Of the dark agents which law enforcement had apprehended, a majority had remained tight-lipped, and those who had talked had only confirmed what the informants and undercover officers had disclosed: there had been an upheaval in the ranks back in November. Now, over three months later, the shock waves had settled, and the resolve and determination of Team Rocket had strengthened. Among its ranks an army was stirring, its intent obscured, and distracting the investigators from this growing threat was the decoy front of the gang, which had moved their activities into the open. Already Cerulean and Celadon were occupied by this force, with thugs terrorizing the civilians under threat of abuse or murder if they refused to cooperate with the gang. Although the government had responded by declaring the cities under martial law and had flooded them with their own forces, the threat of the organization continued to swell. Worse, in their hurry to aid the people of Cerulean and Celadon, the government had channeled officers from law enforcement departments around the country into the overrun metropolises, depleting the strength in the other towns. Both Aurora and Michael now harbored potent dread that the attention of Team Rocket would soon be directed towards their hometown. Cradled between the two cities, the prosperous capital of Kanto was the most probable next target. Unless the law found a way to drive the organization back underground, the coming months grew ever darker with each passing day…and the duo knew instinctively that if the gang was not dismantled soon, they would have more than mere riots to worry about. After all, beyond the firearms, the resources that Team Rocket gained from Cinnabar remained largely unidentified, and that whispered of a campaign they still remained blind to. Yet whatever it was, it involved pokémon, for the theft and illegal capture of the elemental creatures had tripled in recent months, and none had been recovered from the gang….

By February, although life continued on, fear had saturated the atmosphere of Kanto, seeping through the nation like a malignant mist, making the winter seem longer, colder, and darker than in years before, and even the information that trickled in from their sources brought no reprieve: it only revealed that the situation was even grimmer than once suspected, and so decimated the already low morale of those on the side of light. And the longer they remained on unsteady footing, they knew, the greater the likelihood was that when Team Rocket made its intentions clear, they would be unable to battle its corruption effectively and successfully….

Dearly did the doctor and the detective miss the days when the organization had merely ruled the black market - at least in those times, matters were simple and straightforward, and the threat of terrorism and war far from possibility.

With that dreary contemplation in mind, Aurora turned her head to glance at Michael in concern. Although he was only twenty-eight, several years her junior, he already appeared older than her, which creases etched into his face and hints of white in the bristles of his beard. During the past two years, he had gone from a fresh graduate into the force to an investigator mired in the cesspool that was Team Rocket. After a chance encounter with one of the organization's Elite near a crime scene, he had self-inflicted a sentence of intense research into the gang's activities and membership, hoping to track down that Elite agent and let justice ensnare her in its coils. For the masked soldier had cremated a family by torching their home around them, sparing only the couple's infant daughter, which she had ordered for Michael to take. Otherwise, the child would have met the same fate as her parents and brother, consumed within the blaze. Keeping his priorities straight, the fresh officer had
saved the baby rather than pursued the murderer, and had watched, seething, as the woman had fled into the night. She had eluded the backup he'd called to apprehend her, and had ultimately become the source of his obsession, his motivation for annihilating Team Rocket. For the sake of his "godchild," renamed Sarah and adopted by one of Saffron's patrons, he would strip the fringes of the organization away until he uncovered the destroyer of her family, who he intended to destroy in turn, but not before asking why….

Yet the agent he searched for was a ghost, and rumor persisted that she was now dead. For her sake, Michael hoped that was the case….

Then from the hush of the murky, winter world beyond the duo, the haunting howls of wolves lifted in the night air, as if to summon a lost soul back to Earth from the ghostly plain. Peering out into the dark woods of the Routes through the front windows, Michael and Aurora frowned as the calls grew louder. This was unusual, for wild canines typically skirted Saffron City, shunning the metropolis' chaotic lights and sounds in preference for the untouched mountain range to the north. Straying to the glass doors, Aurora reached out a hand to their locks and turned them over, barring the denizens of the moon from her facility...and afterwards, as she scanned the edge of the trees, her stomach jolted as the brambles nearest to her quivered and erupted, and a dark form burst from the briars and began to race towards her. In the instant she had to analyze what she was seeing, she realized that the runner was human in form, and upon stepping into the entranceway light and finding the doors locked, the person, a woman, looked through the glass at the stunned Aurora, and in a desperate, frustrated shriek, shouted:

"Let me in! Dammit, let me in already!"

Like a blade slitting her down her spine, the woman's scream sliced into Aurora, and the doctor scrambled to turn the locks back over and allow the girl sanctuary from the creatures that were surely hunting her. When she glanced up after fumbling over the last one, she saw more figures emerge from the trees, several of which began to race towards them on boots and claws, while winged shapes swooped closer from above the forest. Swinging open the door, the doctor tugged the girl inside and shoved her towards Michael, who she promptly told to call for his fellow cops. As she slammed the doorway shut and turned the locks over, she glanced up to see an arcanine leap from the gloom and throw itself into the glass! Before her the barrier shattered, glittering shards fell around her like razors, and the weight of the bear-dog impacted her and brought her to the floor. Breath was knocked from her lungs, her body lay stunned, she felt claws prickle into her shoulders and moist breath on her face, which smelled of rancid meat – then a gunshot resounded through the room, and the dog of flame yelped and leapt from her.

Freed, she rolled to the side and attempted to rise to her feet. After a couple stumbles, she managed to stand and saw the beast whirl towards her friend and stalk towards him. Yet its eyes, she noticed, were not fixed upon the man who had shot it…no, it glared at its true prey solely, whom Michael was attempting to guard. Yet this situation held no horror in comparison to what was occurring at the entranceway: as Aurora ran for cover, the shards of glass crinkled as they were crushed beneath the feet of the new invaders, which included an array of highly evolved pokémon and their masters, who wore clothes of ebony with a crimson "R" emblazoned upon their chests. They shouted for the "whore" to be captured alive – all others could be consumed by the beasts. Ducking behind the registration counter, Aurora released her own pokémon, ordering Primrose to wake the pokémon in the resting chamber, so they might help fend off the invaders, and commanded Joey to barrel into the hounds prowling in the entranceway.

As the kangaskhan leapt over the counter and into the midst of the unsuspecting arcanine, he bellowed out a battle cry and began to swing his thick, armored limbs into the dogs. Flames erupted from their yawning jaws and they sprung back and began to circle, in intervals darting forward to
snap at the goliath – but their fangs barely scratched his thick hide. Two of the pack were soon struck down by heavy punches, while another made the fatal mistake of leaping onto the giant's back and aiming for the neck. The kangaskhan, feeling the insect, fell backwards and smashed the canine beneath him. Bone cracked, blood billowed from its jaws, and it twitched and then lay lifeless on the now charred and sullied tiles. As its comrades fell, the final dog snarled and launched itself at the warrior's throat, seeking to take vengeance for his pack members…but Joey smacked it down as one might an irking fly, and then turned to roar triumphantly at the hounds' trainers, who had taken cover behind the lobby furniture to avoid the bullets fired from Michael's glock.

He and the woman had taken shelter behind the counter adjacent to hers, and as he reloaded his weapon, reinforcements from their camp arrived: the Indigo League trainers, many decked in pajamas, began to spill from the hallways that led to the dorms, having detected the sounds of battle and choosing to answer the bloody call. Spying the newcomers, the Team Rocket agents – for their uniforms exposed their allegiance – unleashed the rest of their teams to match those released by the vagabonds. Chaos erupted in the lobby as elemental attacks filled the air, as fangs and claws and talons flashed, as howls of the arena drowned out all other sounds. Wounds were swiftly inflicted on both sides; blood ran in rivulets in the creases between the floor tiles; and beyond the building, in the once pristine night skies, the fight waged in equal fury. Sirens, barely audible over the mayhem, signaled the arrival of Michael's brethren, and soon gunfire erupted around them. As she watched, a trainer near her took a hit in the stomach, and so, obeying her own calling, she recklessly darted forward to drag the boy to safety. Once she had tugged him around the counter, she began to attend to his injury as best as she could, and noted vaguely that as she did so, the din of battle seemed to be dying. Individual sounds rung out, and one, clear over the bedlam, was a shout from one of the leader Rockets, evidently intended for the one who had brought this destruction upon the Center:

"You've nowhere left to go, you treacherous little slut! We'll drag you back-!

"Oh stuff it, you melodramatic creep! You just leave me the fuck alone already!"

And for now, they'd actually do just as she demanded, for they weren't blind: they saw how the Indigo League vagabonds and the police were surrounding them. If they didn't retreat now, there would be no escape for them...and so, firing off a final slew of bullets and elemental assaults, the dark agents and their teams receded into the woods, melting into the dark and the briars. Although her own allies raced to pursue them, Aurora doubted they would manage to apprehend their adversaries and bring them to justice. However, as she looked at the destruction and carnage the battle had spawned, she was determined that she would have more success than they would. Keeping firm pressure to the stomach wound of the boy she had dragged to safety, she shouted out for the remaining trainers to call for the hospital ambulances and retrieve the medical supplies from the storerooms. Given that more than one of their number had known injuries in their journeys, knowledge of basic first aid was widespread, and cleaning and patching up minor wounds was completed swiftly enough for the head doctor's tastes. Of those whose blood was pooling over the crumbling tiles, however, little could be done then place thick tourniquets on their wounds and hope that the paramedics would arrive with time to spare – for Aurora was just one woman, and could not properly attend to the dozen of causalities, both human and pokémon alike, surrounding her on all sides. When the telltale sirens and flashing red lights swept through the demolished entranceway, and the wounded began to be carried out on stretchers (including the boy she had been tending to), the doctor stood and rested her gaze on the catalyst to this perdition.

Dirtied with street grime and blood, the young woman, edging warily away from her protector - who was recounting the invasion to his fellow officers – jumped as the older female gently, but firmly, took her arm. Glancing over the girl's frame, seeing it trembling like that of a frightened lamb, Aurora mused that, in addition to bearing numerous, still-bleeding cuts, the creature was probably going into shock. Catching Michael's attention, she leaned towards him and murmured, "I'm going to take this
He shook his head minutely, and then whispered back, "Just put her somewhere where the trainers won't find her. I've been having enough trouble trying to get a word out of her; I don't need her to clam up entirely because a bunch of pissed off kids decide to harass her. Now if you, with your wily ways, manage to pry something from her, let me know. I'd love to hear what she did to piss Team Rocket off so badly."

As she peered at the girl again, making notes of all the tiny, yet telling markers the creature gave away, the doctor's eyes grew thoughtful. "...I think I might already have an idea about that. If I'm right, you'll be the first to know, okay?"

With a nod, the detective gestured for them to depart. Steering the young woman down the hall, the doctor brought the vagrant into her office and locked the door behind them. Once more, she swept her gaze over the young woman, analyzing her physical features: her skin, wasted and pale from malnutrition, was coated with grime and blood, while her dark, tangled hair carried debris and hung in oily threads. Her frame, thinned and frail, was nearly drowned in the clothes she wore: a long coat, which hung over the inner layers of a jacket and tattered jeans, as well as worn boots and gloves that seemed to have more holes in them than fabric. Yet most telling of all were the eyes: dark blotches had spread beneath them from prolonged fatigue, and the gaze itself was distant, haunted, and most evidently of all, feral. Yet that wild fury was not directed upon the doctor; instead, it seemed focused on the enemy beyond these walls, and so when Aurora offered the stray a fresh towel, a set of clothes, and some basic bathing supplies, the girl accepted them willingly enough. She even followed the doctor's command that she strip off her rags and shower in the adjoining bathroom – for only after she was clean would her scrapes and cuts be bandaged and her stomach filled with dinner. Once the water was going and the female within the spray, Aurora announced that she would be taking the creature's sullied clothes and burning them. Through the shower curtain, the girl hurriedly cried out:

"Leave the jacket!"

As she sorted through the foul-smelling garbs, Aurora ran her hands over the article of clothing in question, noting that its pockets were heavy with unknown items...but she would not expose any private possession the girl might have to the light just now. Gathering the remaining garments into her arms, she rose and, for a few moments, lingered in the doorway, peering at the shadow of the female behind the curtain: her hands swept over her skin with the bar of soap, at times lingering before swiftly moving on. Turning away, Aurora sighed silently, now certain that her forming suspicion was valid, and with that thought in mind, she closed the bathroom door, leaving the girl to her privacy. After disposing of the soiled clothes, she found Michael sitting in one of the chairs near the office door. Spying the faraway expression on his face, she invited him in.

As he sat down in one of the chairs by her desk, he leaned his head back, shut his eyes for a minute or so, and then said to her, "...I've been assigned to guard the girl. My superiors seem to figure keeping her with me would be better than passing her around like a baseball. They think she'll be more inclined to trust me than anyone else on the force...with the doing my job and protecting her bit."

She frowned, seeing the logic to such a notion, but wondering if the situation would indeed work out that way. "I'm not sure she's going to stick around long enough to be protected like that."

Rubbing calloused fingertips to his eyelids, he sighed wearily. "You're probably right. They called her 'treacherous,' which implies that they once considered her an ally. If that's the case, then I doubt staying with a police officer is anything less than terrifying to her. She'll probably run rather than risk
staying around and being charged with something."

Clucking her tongue, Aurora said, "Well, I'll try to knock some sense into her. Sometimes fear can have the opposite effect of what you predict, after all." And disregarding her friend's confusion, she pulled up a chair and asked him, in a low voice, "Regardless, tell me: how many casualties were there...?"

Beyond them, the woman blinked in the lukewarm spray of the shower, carefully scrubbing her flesh and hair clean of impurities. She highly suspected that her attempt to cleanse the latter was a futile effort, and when finding her suspicion correct, she stepped from the shower, her skin crawling with a shiver, and rummaged through the cupboards of the sink, searching for the razor she was sure would be there. Finding one, she removed a blade and, rinsing it off, began to take it to her hair, hacking off the strands until they merely hugged her scalp like shaggy fur. Having long since ceased being concerned with her appearance, she instead nodded with satisfaction its practicality, and scrubbed with renewed vigor and shampoo to remove the surplus oils. Upon occasion, she grimaced at the stinging as the suds met her superficial injuries, and then, merely for the sake of feeling human again, she swiped the blade over areas of her skin, ridding herself of the finer hairs she had grown over the last three months.

As she neared the end of her preening, she felt the animal husk she had maintained this winter begin to peel away – she had used it to survive, but here, in this hospitable place, she dared to become "civilized" again. Turning off the shower, she dried herself and slid on the clean cotton clothes the doctor had given her. They were thin, yet so deliciously soft in comparison to the second skin her own garments had become, which she had shed with as much relish as a serpent might its outgrown hide. True, the fresh clothes were a bit short on her, but they were comfortable, and that was all that mattered. Perhaps tonight, with the promise of safe harbor until dawn, she might even sleep for more than five hours. Glancing at herself in the mirror, as if to see if the miracle of this twilight might extend to revive her sickly body, she nodded with resignation upon finding herself still appearing for all the world like a walking corpse. However, no longer was she an unclean tramp, and musing that that was all she could have hoped for, she opened the door and stepped out into medical ward.

Immediately her gaze darted to the familiar police officer in the room, and with some amusement, she noted how his eyes widened as he saw the change a shower and clean clothes had wrought on her. Seeing that hint of a smile, he mused that perhaps if her parlor had not been so deathly, she might have been pretty; it was understandable to him why she had been deemed fitting in the role of a prostitute. As she stared at him, she tilted her head as if in uncertainty, and then gave him a nod of gratitude for what he had done for her earlier. Beyond that, she could not spare concern for him. He was a cop, and while she suspected that her years of conditioning to avoid his kind was the source of her wariness of him, she still found herself harboring and obeying the instinct to avoid his scrutiny. As such, when he tried once again to question her, she ignored his inquiries, and said nothing as he departed soon after, wishing the doctor, Aurora, a good night as he left. After he relieved them of his company, the woman motioned for her to sit down on the medical table. As she did so, the thin paper over it crinkled, and in the following minutes, Aurora located and placed bandages on her cuts. When the redhead raised an eyebrow at the cross and the choker the vagrant wore, the female turned her face away, silently declining to answer why she continued to wear the hideous collar along with such a necklace.

After another half an hour they had moved into Aurora's actual quarters, and as the woman laid dinner out on the table before them - leftover stir-fry from her refrigerator - along with hot tea, she watched with satisfaction as the girl immediately began to feast ravenously with barely concealed glee. As she settled down to eat her own food, she asked the vagrant, "Would you mind telling me your name?"
With her chopsticks lifted halfway, the other female blinked and pondered whether or not she should answer. Deciding it would do no harm to tell the truth, she replied, "It's Cassandra…Cassandra Brennan." This was the first time she had gone by her birth name in years…and somehow, doing so felt good, felt right...

Aurora nodded, her eyes gleaming with pleasure at having managed to acquire that important bit of information about the vagrant. Bringing a clump of sauce-saturated rice to her mouth, she munched on it shortly, swallowed, and then said, "Well, Cassandra, since you won't answer my friend's questions, that means I'm going to have to ask my own. First, why is Team Rocket after you? Considering they destroyed a wing of my center, I think I deserve to know that much."

The young woman raised an eyebrow at her. "Didn't you hear them? I'm a traitor and a-.

The doctor shook her head sharply, and her right hand tightened around her teacup as she stated, "Team Rocket has many traitors, but they don't get a special operations unit chasing after them, now do they? Thugs are usually sent after turncoats, but you…no, you have the higher agents on your heels. Why is that?"

The young woman did not respond, instead lowering her eyes, huddling into herself, and seeming to lose her appetite. Spying this, Aurora reached over the table and pushed her bowl and cup towards her, wordlessly urging Cassandra to eat and drink; the female needed the sustenance. Resuming her own meal, she said between her bites, "It can't be that you have information they want to keep quiet. I'm pretty sure they wouldn't bother to take you alive in that case. I suppose retrieving information is a possibility, but they seem to be more interested in your person than your mind. Now it could be that you're carrying something valuable that they want…but you'd think they would've had a stealthy pokémon take it from you, rather than launch some flashy, all-out assault. It doesn't make any sense. Why are they so intent on capturing you? Are they intending to exact some form of capital punishment? Somehow, I can't see them putting so much effort into punishing one lowly prosti-.

Cassandra, feeling threatened by this line of reasoning, interrupted with a snarl. "Shut up. You don't know what you're talking about, so shut the hell up!"

Aurora, noting her tone, backed off with a shrug, and said, "Fine. If you don't want to talk about it, I'm not going to pry. Not with you having that attitude. Just do us all a favor and eat up, would you? I want these leftovers finished off."

"Us all," not "me"...? Dismissing the woman's word choice, Cassandra nevertheless did as instructed and consumed the rest of her meal in silence, all the while purposefully ignoring the unnerving way in which Aurora was peering at her. When she was done, she pushed her empty dishes forward, the chopsticks placed on top of the bowl, thanked her companion for the meal, and as she rose to her feet, asked where she might spend the remainder of the night. The older woman motioned to the door that opened to the guest room, saying that she was welcome to use it during her stay.

And then, just as the young woman's hand fell on the doorknob, Aurora shocked her by calling out and asking in a soft, gentle voice, "...How far along are you, Cassandra?"

For a moment, the vagrant froze in shock and panic, before she managed to regain her composure. "Ex-excuse me?"

"You're pregnant." And seeing the girl's horror at having those two words spoken aloud, Aurora surmised the cause of her fear and continued on, saying, "Don't worry, you're not showing enough to make it obvious to anyone without a medical background. I can see it in how you walk: your pelvis is widening to accommodate the baby and make childbirth easier, and that changes how you move. I'd guess that you're maybe three months along at most, since your abdomen is still relatively flat. Am
"I…yes." Cassandra had wanted to deny it, to laugh in the woman's face and tell her she was delusional - but what was the point? As she confessed the truth, her heart hammered in her ribcage and her free hand fell to her belly, which was firm and only marginally curved. Shivering, she remembered when another confrontation of this sort had occurred, the morning when Team Rocket had revealed that they knew about the life she had been trying so desperately to keep secret, and so keep safe, within her womb. As the doctor approached, she again shivered visibly and shied away, as if fearful for what the medic might do at such close proximity.

Aurora tried to keep the worry and pity stirring in her soul from her face. "Is it the child? Is that what they want?" In response, the young woman jerked away, as if to hide from the deplorable notion.

This motion, along with the reluctant nod the mother-to-be gave, confirmed the suspicion that had been forming in Aurora's mind. Then, in a raspy, almost choked voice, Cassandra said, "They'd be getting more than they'd bargained for. I'm carrying twins, a boy and a girl."

"How can you possibly know-?" Aurora's brow furrowed in confusion. It was far too early for this girl to know the sex of her offspring, and considering she had probably had no prenatal care…!

Bitterness entered the other female's voice as she replied, "You live in a city where some of the most powerful psychics in the world are, don't you? You do the math."

Ah...now Aurora began to grasp why Team Rocket had valued this girl as more than a conduit for carnal pleasure. She, like Sabrina of the Marshes, possessed some psychic inclinations, specifically empathy from the sound of it. From what she knew of the skill, it was as much of a curse as a blessing, a metaphysical double-edged sword. Considering its effect on its user – feeling what others feel – it had the potential to enhance any shared experience, whether it be one of pleasure or anguish. Sympathy filling her heart at how this might have plagued the girl before her. How old could this creature be, anyhow? Was she eighteen, twenty? Either way, she seemed far too young to have endured a life within that heinous gang, and far too young to be enduring a pregnancy, and eventual motherhood, all alone...

"Are they…." Realizing that was the wrong way to begin that question, Aurora rephrased her inquiry. "Those men called you a slut. Why? Do your kids belong to someone important, someone who hurt you…?" She had, when she was checking the girl over, seen numerous scars...

The young woman bristled visibly at the inference. "No," she growled. "No, they don't belong to any of those bastards. They're mine and M-."

Yet she cut herself off before speaking the name, and abruptly some of the defiant spirit stirring within her seemed to evaporate. She bowed her head, closing her eyes and turning her face again, and as she did so, she wrapped a protective arm around her belly and trembled again...but this time not with fear. Instead, the atmosphere around the young woman seemed to grow heavy with anger and grief, which made it clear to Aurora that the father was no longer capable of standing beside his partner. In fact, if the venom in Cassandra's voice was any indication, it seemed highly probable that the woman's lover had been killed by the ones she was trying so desperately to escape. In that moment, Aurora wanted to hold the other female, to murmur to her that no one here would allow Team Rocket to succeed in taking her children from her...but the woman before her did not seem the type to tolerate such an embrace or fragile promises. Indeed, as the mother-to-be lifted her head, the fire in her eyes had returned, blazing through the tears she struggled to fully blink away. In a low, rough voice, she growled, "I won't let them be taken away from me. I've lost enough as it is - I'm not losing them too."
And as she turned more fully towards the door to the guest room and began to open it, Aurora asked her quickly, "Are you planning on leaving this Center tomorrow?"

The young woman paused, and then said, "That kind of was the plan, yeah. They know I'm here, so it's not like I can stay and twiddle my thumbs."

Aurora placed a hand on her shoulder, and tried to meet those wild eyes as she said, "But where will you go? Even if you manage to get enough resources to keep all of you healthy, you'll be too heavy to travel in a few months. And when you're forced to slow down, Team Rocket will come and snatch you up, and that'd be game over for you. And let's say you did manage to evade them until the nine months are up, what then? Where will you give birth? In a hotel room, in the woods...? You won't be able to keep them safe when you're weakened afterwards, and you'd be hard-pressed to do so even after you've recovered. Besides, you all need medical care! You've been running for three months, and from the looks of you, you're not doing so well, are you? I'm willing to bet your kids are also suffering - fetuses are resilient, but they'll be the first thing to go when you reach a crisis point. So at the very least, stay here for them. If you don't, there probably won't be anything for Team Rocket to take in the end."

As she watched, the young woman's hand shook around the knob, and her eyes widened with dread at the concept being suggested. Desperation filled her face as she tried to decipher what was the greater risk between the two paths before her, and gulping down her uncertainly, she murmured, "I'll...I'll think about it."

With that, she left the room, and Aurora hoped, even prayed that the mother-to-be would not be gone come morning….

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Ten weeks earlier, Cassandra watched snowflakes fall into the sea. They melted into nothingness in the foamy waves pummeling the cliff, the edge of which she stood upon. As the frigid wind battered her face, she closed her eyes against it and the sight of the overcast sky. She'd followed the river to where it drained into the sea, and by following these rocky beaches south, she would reach Cerulean City. If she stayed on the routes north of the town, she could make her way to the Rocky Tunnel and from there to Lavender Town. It was much less likely that she would run into her enemies there, unlike in the City of Water, which was sure to be swarming with Rocket thugs.

However, the practical part of her mind reminded her that she would not be able survive the deepening winter without the proper supplies. It might take weeks to reach Lavender, and she needed food, warmer clothing, and quite possibly weapons if she wanted to make it to spring. Water would not be an obstacle in her travels – it lay frozen in the white dunes around her. That thought in mind, she crouched and scooped up a handful of snow in a quivering hand, allowing it to melt somewhat before tipping it into her mouth. The icy liquid tickled as it ran down her throat, and when she coughed, needle-like pains shot through her lungs. This in turn led to more coughing, and hunching over her ribs, she hacked into her arm. Mucus was flung from her wet lungs, seeped from her nostrils and eyes: exposure to the elements and gnawing hunger, she knew, were beginning to take their toll on her, and she suspected she had the beginning stages of frostbite in her toes, as she had stopped being able to feel sensation in them hours ago. Hypothermia was her foremost concern, however. Through constant movement and a couple makeshift shelters, she had managed to make it to civilization, but she needed a reprieve soon, or she would no doubt succumb to a lethal, frozen demise.

Not that she altogether cared whether she lived or died - but if she must die, then she at least wanted to die fighting *them*. The notion of revenge was the only thought that gave her solace in a bitter world: she would battle to avenge her mate and, to some extent, herself, and by shedding the blood
of the organization that had been their undoing, she would make the most of her status as a traitor. Yet at the moment, she was in no condition to wage war; she needed to regain her health, as well as acquire resources. Otherwise, she would deteriorate before she gained the chance to launch a counterattack...

Months from this point, she would not remember how she had made it through the Routes and into town. Whether she saw anyone or anyone saw her on the roads would be unknown to her, for this period in her life would a grey fog, intermittently with glimpses of color and clarity. Despair, which shadowed her steps, was likely the culprit who countered her short-term memory, but the instances where the gloom lifted, Cassandra recalled breaking into a retail store and snatched up a thick, winter trench coat, waterproof boots that she would fill with newspapers, and mittens to protect her pale, thin hands. Every article was a dull, brown hue that allowed her to melt into the crowd, and with her wings concealed and her skin acquiring layers of grime, she became no more remarkable than any other homeless individual who wandered the streets. Like the other strays, she drifted towards no destination, and like them she stole food from whatever source she could find, as well as slept in public buildings whenever possible. Yet unlike them, she fought with the criminals she had once considered her family, for in the depths of the City of Water they often attempted to corner her. When they did so, she lashed out with the fury of any threatened predator, and then turned tail when those who had trapped her were either dead or incapable of pursing her from their serious injuries. Early on, she took the guns belonging to her stalkers to use in her defense, and in another life, they would have forfeited them to her willingly, would have obeyed her order that they leave her be. Yet this was not that life anymore, and so she remained the feral animal they sought to drag to the pound and pummel into submission.

Fortunately for Cassandra, she had been trained well, and so knew which methods to employ to avoid their clutches. Over the next two weeks, she continued to run through the metropolis of Cerulean, knowing that she soon must depart. They knew she was lingering in this city, and as such, it was past time to move on. However, the notion of returning to the Routes filled her with dread. Rather than improving her health, this stay in the City of Water had caused the opposite: her cough had worsened, her fatigued body was gripped with fever, her menstrual cycle had halted, and whatever she managed to eat was promptly regurgitated. Essential nutrients were not being gained, and every time she attempted to pinpoint the cause, it receded from possibility. Influenza, the most likely culprit, was highly improbable; it would have only lasted a week at most, and by now, she had been plagued with the ailment for roughly a month. Perhaps some other viral disease was slowly killing her; after all, the cold, the lack of sleep, the constant stress, and the lack of hygiene would make her an easy target to be nailed with some fatal sickness. Yet if it this were an illness, it would have to be a recent acquisition, as she had never shown symptoms of it while under Giovanni Maki’s command. Her bill of health in Team Rocket had been near immaculate according to her doctors - they would have told her if she had something life-threatening creeping in her system. So this had to be something else, something new...perhaps something transmitted when she had been at her most exposed to another...

Her steps halted in their progress as she considered the notion. Had Mewtwo given her something malignant when they'd mated...? It seemed unlikely, as his own health had been clear throughout his stay with Team Rocket, and he had undoubtedly taken good care of himself afterwards. Yet still, she wondered and worried...and also found her heart heavy as she contemplated her mate again. Doing so hurt terribly, and she had often avoided thinking about her deceased lover if she could help it – for not only did it make her ache, but it also muddled her ability to concentrate and note her surroundings clearly. Yet as she crossed over to and sat upon a vacant, frosted bench in one of the children’s parks, watching the little ones play in the snow, make snowmen and snow-angels, toss snowballs and sled down a nearby slope, with their parents observing them, a sparkling memory surfaced from the mists of her mind…:
Mewtwo had never felt the snow before.

He has seen it in his dreams, clinging to the mountaintops of the Andes, and knew well what it was and what weather phenomenon birthed it. However, he had never experienced it for himself, and Cassandra, as his unofficial guide and friend now that their rivalry had died down, thought she should know it. Throwing on the layers of her winter clothes, she bundled her hands and face beneath a crème-colored scarf and equally milky gloves, and tossed the replica an oversized cloak to throw over his lithe frame. Although it would not do much to keep him warm, it would defang the bite of the freezing air outside. Of the pair, Cassandra was the first to wander into the iced gardens of the base, and glanced back at the uncertain clone, who seemed a tentative child as he regarded the world before him. As she watched, his pupils narrowed into slits at the blinding light reflected off the white snow and shining icicles, and he bared his teeth as he stepped upon salt crystals and into slush. Chiding him for being a coward, she urged him forward, and when he still hesitated, she gathered up a snowball and threw it at him.

As to be expected from someone with grenade training, her aim was flawless: the sphere burst as it struck him square between the eyes, and with a snarl, he attempted to repay her in kind. However, the snow crumbled in his grip, as his awkwardly shaped paws would not mold it as he desired. His agitation spiking, he resorted to using his telekinesis, shoveling up a full pile and hurling it towards her. She rolled beneath the barrage, much to his annoyance, and when she continued to bait him, he soon forfeited and strode into the light. There he watched as Cassandra, in a rare display of her true age, began to play in the snow dunes...for although her soul was as mature as most adults', she was still only sixteen, and at this time continued to possess a hint of innocence. Falling backwards into the snow, she waved her arms and legs back and forth, impressing an image into the white bank. When she requested it of him, he helped her up, and then peered at the image, trying to understand what she had created. Spying his confusion, she told him, "It's a snow angel, Mewtwo. The lower part made by the legs is the dress, while the upper parts made by the arms are the wings."

The clone's brow furrowed with puzzlement. "I don't understand...what is the point of it?" he asked. "Also, could you not simply extend your own wings in the snow to gain a superior visual effect?"

Cassandra, still holding his paw, merely sighed. "It...well, it doesn't really have a point, Mewtwo. It's just for fun. Making a snow angel is like making snowmen or snow forts or having snowball fights. There's no point to any of them except to just have fun."

"But aren't those activities for small children?" he inquired, certain that he was correct.

She sparred him an amused look. "Yes, but you're not even two, Mewtwo, and I'm not eighteen, so technically, technically, we both can still be considered children. Now come on - you should try it! Or do I have to chuck another snowball at you first? I can always put some ice in it, you know."

Although reluctant to do so, she managed to maneuver him into creating a snow angel. Shivering, he settled himself into the snow, lay back, and attempted to mimic her motions. However, his legs would not spread in the same manner as hers could, his arms soon became entangled in the cloak, and his tail and second neck made the process distinctly uncomfortable. After watching him thrash in the dune for about a minute, Cassandra laughed and helped him up, and together they regarded his work: his snow angel was very slender, with a train to her dress, and had crooked wings and a small head. The actual, warm-blooded angel smirked with mirth, while the demon glared down at the creation, contrasting it to the female's proper one. In comparison, his looked monstrous, while hers was full and graceful. His body trembled, and he cursed it for far more than being chilled beneath his pelt. It could not do so many tasks, including the seemingly simple creation of snowballs and snow angels. Again, it reminded him that although his person was humanoid, he was not a human as she was. Eventually, the female of his contemplations noted his distress, and turned to
stand before him, asking him what was wrong. He bared his teeth again and told her it was nothing...but Cassandra was an intuitive being, and in her training sessions with Mewtwo, she had learned how to read him empathically, at least when his guard was down, as it was now.

"You're such a liar. You know, your pupils narrow whenever you say things that aren't true. Are you upset over the snow angel? Because it's not like I was really expecting you to make a perfect one-.”

His eyes flashed sapphire at that. "So you expected me to fail, and encouraged me to attempt the task anyway so you might laugh at me, is that it?"

Her eyes widened, and then narrowed as she snapped. "No, that's not it! Chill out! I just wanted you to have some fun, that's all!"

His lips curled over his fangs in an angered sneer. "Yes, because it is lovely to be reminded of your shortcomings, or of how bizarre your body is."

For a moment, she stared at him, before murmuring "Oh," as the sting of his insinuation fading. With a sigh, she said, "It really bothers you, doesn't it? The thought that you're different from other people."

His gaze seemed slightly disheartened as he regarded her. "Does it not bother you? You, who by appearances are a mix of man and beast, just as I am?"

In response, she smiled a small, sad grin. "Sometimes, yeah. But then I remind myself I'm not that different from everyone else. I've got more in common with them than not."

His curiosity was perked at this and, unable to resist, he asked, "Such as...?"

Undoing the zipper of her jacket, she led his chilled paw between her breasts, pressing his palm flat against her sweater and the skin beneath. As his fingers warmed, he felt the steady beating of her heart through bone, flesh, and fabric, and when she took his other paw and placed it to his own chest, he felt his heart pounding at nearly the same pace. Shivering, perhaps from more than the cold air that now flowed into her coat, Cassandra murmured, "We both have a pair of eyes, ears, arms, legs, hands, and feet. We both have one nose and mouth. We both think, feel, and breathe... and we both have hearts that beat in the same rhythm. So really, what's so different between us? Is it the shape of our bodies, our abilities? In the end, those aren't so relevant. After all, I don't have the same coloring as Domino, and I don't have Giovanni's skills with politics and scheming, do I?"

Seeing the surprise registering on his face at her assertion, she chuckled and said, "Don't dwell on it so much, okay? You're not that different from us, Mewtwo."

Letting his paws fall, she stepped back, zipped her jacket back up, and winked, saying, "Now how about we go sledding? I'm sure even you can manage that! Just tuck your tail between your legs and kiss your warmth goodbye!"

And so he would...and after they exhausted themselves racing up and down the hills for hours, he admitted to her, albeit grudgingly, that perhaps winter was not such a terrible season after all...

Interrupting her reminiscence, a wave of nausea clenched her stomach, and as she began to heave, she ran to the nearest trash bin and vomited her breakfast into it. Several more heaves overwhelmed her, squeezing from her yellow bile, and when they began to subside, she sank to her knees on the ice-cold cement, gasping. Fluid ran from her nostrils and eyes, and her shoulders quivered with repressed sobs, which were as much of a response to her mounting frustration as to the unwelcome queasiness. Why was her body rejecting the few meals she managed to consume...? Didn't
it want the nourishment, and through that the energy necessary for her survival? Why was this happening, why...? Suppressing frustrated tears, the vagrant weakly rose to her feet and sluggishly staggered from the park, her torso aching from insult of regurgitation. As she wandered around the city, she eventually made her way back to the restaurant district where she had spent her morning. Surely here she could manage to find the sustenance to replace what her stomach had voided. Her eyes dull, she trekked to one of the diners, where a few brave souls were enjoying their brunch at one of the picnic tables outside. After a few more minutes they departed, leaving their trash behind for one of the diner workers to pick up, and picking through the Styrofoam containers, she found some deep-fried foods within.

Despite the fact that she would typically have never touched the greasy, sodium-rich meal ("Silver, you're going to have a heart attack before you're thirty!") she also knew that battered-covered fish and chips were loaded with calories, and so wasn't something she could afford to turn her nose up at. Yet just as she reached for the container, what she had been dreading would happen for weeks occurred: a pair of heavy hands suddenly grasped her shoulders, and when she stiffened and spun, she found an unfamiliar man standing behind her. Lashing out immediately at the potential threat, she uttered feral noises as she thrashed in his hold, thrusting her fists against him...and so for a moment did not hear the hushing, soothing sounds he was making in an attempt to calm her. Yet whether he was malignant or benign, her frail body was no match against his meaty bulk, and so against her wishes she was forced into the diner. Dread pooled in her stomach - what did this man want with her? What did he...?

"Vicki, could you fetch some soup for this poor girl?" he called into the kitchen while steering her to the stairs. As Cassandra peered at them, she noted that they likely led up to an apartment, where he must live....

"Is she the one we've seen taking the leftovers of our customers?"

Were they going to call the police on her over a few fries? That wasn't fair! Or something the police were supposed to deal with! Even so, conditioning from nearly a decade spent in the ranks of Team Rocket urged her to retreat. She'd be trapped here if she didn't move...!

"Yeah, she is, and she looks even worse for wear than the last time we spotted her."

With that, the man tugged her upstairs and gestured for her to sit on one of the couches in the living room. After draping several blankets over her shoulders, he offering her water, which she guzzled down wordlessly, trusting from his interaction with the woman that he meant well. He seemed relieved at her acceptance, and began to ask her what she considered the typical questions someone would pose to a runaway. What is your name? How old are you? Where are you staying? Do you have family we could call? Is there any way we can help you? He was too kind-hearted for his own good, Cassandra thought to herself, and by remaining silent, she declined answering his inquiries. It was far too dangerous for him to know anything about her identity or her previous life, and for his partner's and his safety, she mused that it would be for the best if she left immediately. However, when she attempted to rise for departure, the man set his hands on her shoulders and pushed her back into her seat. From the way he was speaking to her, he evidently believed her to be simple, traumatized, or simply too feral to treat as a normal human being. His words came slowly and were soothing in tone, and he continued to attempt to converse with her until his wife – for Cassandra had now noticed the wedding rings adorning their fingers – arrived and placed a steaming bowl of soup before her.

As starved as she was, Cassandra accepted this gift gratefully, and delighted in the filling, buttered bread that came with it. After she had savored all that had been presented to her, she stared at the grains of the wooden table before her, waiting for the waves of nausea to come that she felt were
inescapable. For the next ten minutes, she remained like that, oblivious to the inquiries of the couple, having gathered her knees to her chest and having wrapped her arms around them. Then just as she was beginning to hope that sickness would not overwhelm her this time, the surges came. She bolted up as the first wave hit, and asked in a raspy voice where the bathroom was, trying to suppress the urge to vomit as she opened her mouth. When the surprised woman pointed out the door, Cassandra ran and promptly regurgitated the semi-digested meal into the toilet bowl. Fingers again wrapped around her shoulders, and once the nausea faded, she was led back to the living room, where she curled up into a ball on the couch. She buried her face into one of the cushions, despairing anew at the emptiness within her stomach...

"...Girl? Girl, how long have you been getting sick like that?"

...Better yet, how long had she been running? What month was this, what day...? She peered around the house in wonder, suddenly noticing the Christmas tree tucked into the corner of this room, decorated with glass ornaments, strands of tinsel and colored lights. Wrapped presents were huddled beneath its lowest boughs, and near it was a ceramic set of the manger of the Baby Jesus Christ, complete with the boy's animal companions and human parents. Sprigs of holly and mistletoe were arranged on mantel of the hearth, scattered upon the tables, and hung from the ceiling, while seasonal cards were taped to a nearby wall. She could faintly smell the aromas of roasted chestnuts and gingerbread filtering in from the dining room, where cookies and sweets had been left out for the grown children who would likely be visiting soon. When she at last found a calendar, her brow wrinkled: the date was December twentieth. No wonder these people were being so hospitable; they must be drenched in the holiday spirit with less than a week to go until Christmas. Wearily she lowered her eyes...she had been running for a little over a month, but somehow, it felt so much shorter. Perhaps that was the effect depression had on her: it made time slip away because she could not be bothered to remember what happened within it, being too consumed in her personal grief to care about the external world. Hers was no longer a world of lights and colors as theirs was - it was the deep, cobalt grey of melancholy, only beautiful to the emotional masochists submerged in it....

From the distance, the question arose again. "...Miss, how long how you been sick like this?"

For the second time, she addressed them. "A couple weeks, not that its any of your business. Why?"

They seemed to ponder her response, and after a moment, the wife whispered for her husband to leave the room. Trusting his spouse, he nodded and did as instructed, and once he was beyond hearing range, his spouse knelt by the young woman and said, "And am I correct in guessing that up until fairly recently, you haven't been homeless?"

Cassandra blinked at her in confusion. "How the fuck could you possibly be able to tell-?"

The older woman, smelling of spiced bread, replied, "I was going to be a nurse before I decided to run this diner with my sweetheart. I still remember what I learned, which comes in handy when volunteering at the local shelter. Compared to the others I've worked with, you don't seem like you've been homeless for too long. Your clothes are too new, and your body, despite how sickly you are right now, is too clear of sores and rashes. So you probably haven't been like this for long, am I right?"

Cassandra glanced away from the woman and said, "It's been about a month, I think."

"And before that...?"

The vagrant's eyes narrowed at the thought of the past, and she hissed, "Again, that's really none of your business."
Leaning back, the older woman gazed at her with shrewd eyes, and then inquired, "Were you involved in something illegal? Beneath that grime, I can tell you're a pretty one, so…?"

Cassandra wanted to spit at the woman. Why was everyone under the impression that she was a whore? She'd only ever been with two guys in her life, and one of them hadn't had her as a willing partner. Hell, this married broad had probably been more promiscuous during her youth, and yet here she was, labeled her as a prostitute! Considering she exposed minimal skin, that she wasn't voluptuous or coy, she couldn't understand it! Gritting her teeth in rage, she ignored the woman's offensive inquiry, and unfortunately, the other female took her silence as confirmation. Pressing on, she asked, "When was the last time you had sex?"

Although Cassandra was sorely tempted to respond with something along the lines of, "What, are you offering?" she clamped her jaw shut and glowered at the inferences the would-be nurse was making. She supposed with the limited knowledge the woman had of her situation, the connections she was drawing were sensible: it had been about a month since she had left "home," she was throwing up her food from what was evidently not a virus when taking the lengthy timeframe into consideration, and she had been involved in illegal activities, quite possibly prostitution. As far as the woman was concerned, the vagrant was pregnant – perhaps the condition was even why Cassandra had fled in the first place. However, the wanderer knew that this theory was impossible: Mewtwo and she were of two different species, and so not compatible enough to conceive a child. Her voice gaining a hard edge, she snapped, "I'm not pregnant!"

The older woman raised an eyebrow, as much at the tone as the claim. "How would you know? Have you taken a test?"

Cassandra merely hissed, "Because it's not possible. I couldn't have kids with the last person I was with, and before him I was on a…a dry spell." That was one way of putting it...

"Prove it then. Afterwards, we'll take you to a real doctor to figure out what the problem is. How about that?"

Cassandra's lips curled with wry amusement as she looked the woman up and down; at her age, she must be post-menopausal. "Oh? And you just happen to have pregnancy test stashed away, do you?"

"I can send my husband on a quick errand. He won't take long."

An hour later, the couple gave Cassandra a paper box containing a pregnancy test and left her alone in their bathroom. After reviewing and following the instructions, she lay out a clump of toilet paper on the counter and set the test on top of it, and then sat down on the tiled floor, leaning her back against the sink as she waited for the five minutes to pass. From past experience in taking this test, she knew it was pointless; after all, Mewtwo and she had never used contraceptives when they'd been mates in their youth, and the continuation of her cycles during that time, although irregular, had proven that her body rejected his seed. Among the numerous gifts they'd been denied in their relationship, the loss of children was the one she'd most regretted, for Mewtwo had been a perfectly healthy male, and most likely quite capable of siring offspring in another pokémon if he'd wished. That, after all, would have been advantageous to the geneticists: having the clone's offspring, who'd fill the void made by the father's death, would allow them to continue their research indefinitely. Furthermore, such progeny could be just as easily turned over to Giovanni, to be shaped into an elite, private army of super-pokémon...

Not to mention that children were the ideal collateral to use to keep their parents in line. Even Mewtwo would have submitted rather than risk the lives of his kits. Somehow, she knew he would have been protective of his litter, had he he the chance to sire one...
However, because Mewtwo had decided to take a human as his mate, the prospect of him having a family was denied. As for herself, Cassandra had considered being a mother only three times in her life. The first time she discussed the possibility had been with her own mother; the second time had been with Amber when they had contemplated their futures; and the third time occurred when her period had been late during her short-lived romance with Mewtwo. This last incident had led her to take this test the first time – and it had made it quite evident that she could not be impregnated by the clone. Yet beyond that trio of times, Cassandra had never considered herself for the maternal role. With the occupation she had possessed, she had not expected to live long enough to bear children and watch them grow. Furthermore, her personality type was not conducive to motherhood; although she was too gentle-hearted for the role of an assassin, she had no inclination to or knowledge of how to manage children. No, she was far more suited to devote herself to a lover rather than a child. As soon as she checked the test, there would be the final proof of that. All that the test would amount to would be a free trip to the doctor to discover what was truly plaguing her, and nothing more.

That belief firmly in mind, Cassandra stiffly rose from her seat on the floor with a sigh, and turned around to face the test, the number of lines of which would reveal whether she was expecting or not. Her eyes fell upon it, fully anticipating the single dash she was certain it would show...but when she noted the result, she stared at it and her brow furrowed in confusion. Picking up the clean end of the stick, she reread the instructions on the box it had come from. However, the text she read only further bewildered her, and setting it aside, she peered at the test, not quite comprehending what it was attempting to convey to her. This couldn't be a valid result...yet she reminded herself that she was, theoretically, well past the stage where false positives were possible and, since she'd followed the instructions to a tee, there was no way she could have botched the test. It was almost 100 percent accurate, equivalent to what a doctor could confirm through blood tests.

And in that moment, the realization began to seep in. Her entire frame quivered, and leaning heavily against the sink, Cassandra shook her head in denial. It could not be right...no matter what it said, she couldn't be...there was no possible way she could be...! God, she couldn't even think the word! Yet even though her mind yearned to reject it, the result remained glaring at her, insisting that she surrender to reality. As truth began to overtake her, her legs buckled beneath her at its force, and another wave of nausea, this time born from her shock, swept through her. She leaned over the toilet and heaved up sour bile, and then withdrew from the ceramic, curling over her navel with her arms tightly wound around herself. Her shoulders trembled, and tears stung in her eyes as panic began to flood her. Her thoughts cascaded in her mind, all reflecting her fear: I...I can't be...I don't want to be...! I DON'T WANT THIS...!

Yet there was no denying what the test, having fallen to the floor beside her, declared...and in response, she asked a phantom one desperate question:

*Oh god, Mewtwo...what the hell did we do?*

For the result was two parallel lines: positive.

Cassandra was pregnant with Mewtwo's child.

Despite the protests of the couple, she left their home immediately after discovering her condition. Suddenly the buffeting cold of December seemed sharper and her surroundings turned crystalline – in the shock of learning of her pregnancy, awareness reclaimed her mind, having dispelled the grey mists around her like a howling wind. Numerous times as she drifted aimlessly in the streets, she jerked to a halt, frozen in fear and uncertainty as questions overtook her thoughts. What was she going to do? What was the reasonable thing to do in this situation? A voice, recognizable as her Merlo persona from her crisp, rational speech, posed a single word as a solution: abortion.
To a strictly logical mind, such a course made perfect sense. She did not want to have a child, nor had she any means with which to care for it. Difficult enough was it to keep herself fed and clothed, let alone provide such necessities to an infant, and given that she was sleeping in laundry mats or in the stairwells of apartment buildings, and had no access to the medical care that would ensure a successful pregnancy and delivery, going through with having this babe was foolhardy at best. Furthermore, taking its cross-species heritage into consideration, she could not insure that it would even survive a month after its birth. Hybrids, after all, often possessed genetic defects from their unlikely gene combinations, and fatal mutations or frailties were commonplace. In fact, the child could easily perish in the womb or before it had lived a single year, and if it did manage to cling to life for that long, it might be plagued with illness or anguish as its body turned against it...and no creature deserved to suffer through such misery, especially not an innocent infant...

And in the staggeringly unlikely chance that it was somehow born intact, keeping flawless balance between its human and pokémon sides, what then? Its mother was a fugitive, struggling to evade an organization whose members would enjoy riddling her body with bullets, and she could hardly counter their attacks while also cradling a newborn to her. Worse, if her enemies were successful in taking her life, the child would fall into Giovanni's grasp, and that monster would undoubtedly attempt to manipulate it and take pleasure from its pain. Gruesome experimentation, potential vivisection, and general abuse by his followers would likely be the child's punishment for being what it was: the "unnatural" offspring of two traitors. Or, perhaps even worse, that man might attempt to mold the child into what its parents had ultimately failed to become: a weapon with the power to cremate the world.

Even if she somehow found a haven where she could conceal and attempt to raise the child free of such evil, the outcome would still be hopeless. If the babe was born displaying traits that revealed its hybridized nature, it would be shunned by humans and pokémon alike. Or if it merely took after one of its parents, it would have to live with the uncertainty of the consequences of its genetic heritage: would it be no better than a mule, incapable of having children of its own, or, if it was fertile, ever fearful of how its genetics would affect its offspring? Would it someday sicken and perish from some underlying internal disease, or go mad as its body warred against itself? In all, the risk of forcing her son or daughter endure a life of hell was far too high for her to consider it a viable option; she could not condemn it to such a horrible fate. Far more merciful, far kinder would be to extinguish its life before it was aware of its existence, and so could fear losing it. Right now, at one month, it was merely a parasitic bundle of cells, incapable of consciousness or feeling pain. It would be for the best if she destroyed it now rather than wait.

Besides...how could she bring a child into a world where it would never know its father? The thought crushed her heart, just as the heavy truth that accompanied it did: for she did not even know if she could provide it with the motherly love that could temper the torment of its existence...

Thus resolving herself to the course she had chosen, she wandered through the streets, searching for a clinic. When she finally found one, she ducked into its bathroom and cleaned herself up the best she could, and then made her way to the front desk. She knew well that appointments were supposed to be scheduled in advance, and knew well that the cost of the impromptu service she needed would be high. However, she would not risk a self-inflicted abortion; such an operation could go wrong in countless nasty ways. Filling in a false profile in the paperwork the secretary handed her, she jotted down one of the Team Rocket bank account numbers that belonged to another of the Elite Children – her tab would cover the charge. Cassandra, aware that every minute would count after the finances of the agent were tapped, coiled with tension as she sat down in the waiting area. Her operation would take place in a couple of hours. With any luck, the organization would not notice the tap and track her down before she left....

As she waited, she glanced at the other people sitting on the benches and chairs around the room. A
businesswoman, her hair cropped short in an almost masculine style and her lithe frame adorned in a dark suit, was reading a marketing magazine, occasionally checking her watch impatiently. It was clear from her professional mannerism that she gave little more consideration to the creature growing within her than she would an aching tooth – perhaps less so, as a sore tooth would threaten to wreck her ability to smirk. More lively was the pair of teenagers, both younger than Cassandra, who were chatting about the upcoming events planned by their school. They, like the businesswoman, seemed to regard their appointment as a footnote in their lives, as a momentary annoyance they would be better off without. Finally, a wife and her husband sat towards the back, leaning against one another. The man bore a saddened, yet resigned look upon his face, and he murmured reassurances to the woman he was holding, who looked ill at the prospect ahead of them. From what she gathered from their whispers, the fetus was fatally ill, and continuing the pregnancy would only cause pain to both the child and its mother, as well as threaten the mother's health. Abortion was their alternative to this prospect, and unlike the girls and the cougar, they turned to it for mercy rather than convenience. Yet all of them had their reasons for being here: to spare someone from suffering, to move on with their lives unhindered, to not prematurely ruin a career worked so hard to build. Of them, she most understood the couple; though doing this, she would spare her child from a waking nightmare. This was for the best for all of them...

Right...?

She stared at her knees grimly. If this child had been conceived through rape, be it through her sensei’s or Zachariah’s advances, she wouldn't have given a thought to its extermination. She would have demanded it be removed from her womb immediately, because all it would have been to her was a reminder of how she had suffered, the memory of her violation made into flesh. Yet this fetus had not been conceived in such a way. After all, her late "husband" had never entered her body, nor had he peaked while attempting to force her into submission. Consequently, there was no chance that his seed could have been introduced into her body. With her lover, however, the opposite had been the case: they had spent a full night making love, not realizing that their passion and pleasure would result in the creation of new life. In retrospect, she regarded the memories from that twilight with wry humor; it proved strange for her to understand that, in the hours after they had fallen asleep, one of her gametes was being penetrated by one of his. Perhaps the fertilized egg had even implanted itself into the lining in her womb by the following morning. Perhaps even as Mewtwo had kissed her goodbye, his child had been growing within her....

And that last thought made her pause, for although she was aware of its parentage, she had never considered it in such terms: his child was growing steadily within her now, entirely dependent on her for its continued life. The notion made her stomach and her heart turn somewhat, in the way it does when a person unexpectedly trips down a stair. As she contemplated the thought, she brought her knees to her chest and rested her chin upon them: within her core was all that remained of Mewtwo in this world. If she remembered the passages in her biology texts correctly, by this point the infant's organs and its nervous system were beginning to form, and its limbs were merely tiny stubs jutting from the sides of its crescent-shaped body. Its heart, on the other hand, had already been pumping blood through its miniscule form for weeks. If given the chance to survive, it would soon begin to develop its sex organs, its bones, and its muscles…but she would not allow it the chance. A part of her felt saddened by that, even though she maintained that she did not want to have a child, for this would still be a loss to her. Never again would she be in this condition…and in that understanding, her curiosity began to stir. She wondered distantly what the infant's aural signature would feel like, and to find the answer, she extended her empathic senses not outwards, but inwards - for while the creature was not fully developed, it was alive. Would it be a blank light, she thought as she shut her eyes, without any of the characteristic hues of a unique soul? No matter if it was or not, she found herself craving to know that light, if only for a few moments....

Yet it was difficult to disentangle her own thoughts and emotions from what her empathy detected; to
be successful in searching herself for a being who was not her, she had to mentally thrash to direct her psychical skill into her core. Even then, her own life force threatened to drown out the smaller one within her, and for an indeterminate time she searched futilely, as if searching for a sapphire at the bottom of the sea. Eventually she found her way beneath the surging currents of her own aura, and sinking into the still waters, blessed, murky quiet encompassed her. Somewhere in this darkness was the other life force, and as she mentally traced the lining of her womb, her brow furrowed as she failed to encounter the faint thread which would lead to a tiny being. Then, quite abruptly, she "stumbled" upon it: a small light, a small warmth, an ember cradled in one's metaphorical palm. It curled within her core, possessing no thoughts, no emotions, nor recognition as her soul brushed its wisps of spiritual energy. Yet as she extended her senses into the ghostly, lavender glow, sensations arose from its budding mind: peace, comfort, security. Guilt stabbed at her at the knowledge that its instinctual trust was unfounded, for soon she would be welcoming its execution for the mere sin of existing, although it had not chosen to commit such a wrong. Reaching out, she "touched" it gently, repressing a whimper in her throat at she did so. Maybe if Mewtwo was still by her side, maybe if she was not being hunted, maybe then she could have kept it and cared for it as well as she was able. But she couldn’t…she couldn’t do this….

Then, nearly shocking her from her skin, she felt another fragile consciousness brush hers - it reached out, curious about the newcomer's presence.

In her surprise, her concentration broke, and she surfaced to the external world like a balloon whose weight is severed. Her heart pounded hard as the question began to form: was there…? Desperate to confirm that she was mistaken, she plunged back into her spiritual core, the route easier to navigate this time, and began to probe again. She found the lavender aura almost immediately and marked its place, and then began to peer around the black wildly, searching frantically for the potential glow of that other consciousness. Minutes passed in this manner, until there seemed no more places for the consciousness to "hide"...but then, just as before, she ended up stumbling upon what she was dreading would be there: another light, of a teal hue, floated before her, possessing neural tracks that were currently a tad more developed than its sibling’s were. Yet what was more important was that it was there, and as she regarded each in turn, her dread mounted inside her. There were two of them...not one, but two embryos were growing in her womb, each with minute differences between them, indicating that they were not identical. This meant that she was bearing fraternal twins, and in her horror at the notion, Cassandra severed the empathic connection and hunched herself further.

As she opened her eyes, she noted that the others in the waiting room were gone. Time had passed during her search as it would have in sleep, with hours slipping by in mere moments. From the next room, a pair of adults and a teenage girl emerged; the girl appeared wearied, as if she had fought in a long battle and had finally been defeated. Tears streamed down her face, which her parents ignored with averted eyes, and from their stiff mannerisms and clipped speech, Cassandra suspected they believed their daughter's abortion had been done for her own good. Perhaps they were even right...but the fact remained that the younger female did not agree with them, and as they swept by, the vagrant heard the teenager hiss that she hated them and would not forgive them for what they had done. Such declarations were all that remained of her willful spirit, of an angry ghost inhabiting an otherwise broken husk of a being.

When they left, a nurse called out Cassandra's alias, saying that the doctor was ready for her now.

...And quite suddenly, Cassandra couldn't do it. She couldn't enter that pale, sterile room. If she did so, the children...Mewtwo's and her children...would die. Their small, warm lights would fade, and she would be left all alone in the darkness once again. As terror flooded her at the thought, she bolted to her feet and began to walk away briskly, ignoring the calls for her to return. She quivered with the urge to run, and curbed it until she strode purposefully out the facility's front doors. When her boots
hit the pavement, her pace quickened, rising exponentially until she was sprinting down the sidewalk, shoving her way through the crowds as if hounds were on her heels. Soon fatigue began to overwhelm her legs, and as they trembled beneath her, she turned into an alleyway and sank down against a brick wall. Over her, a lamppost cast a muted, golden glow. It was evening, and once again, it was snowing. Yet still she curled up and stared into nothingness, feeling hot tears spill down her cheeks, feeling the chilly air trying to molest her through her clothes...

What are you doing? A voice within her roared. Are you really so selfish that you'll cling to them, even knowing you can't offer them anything?

No, she retorted to the cruel angel lurking in her mind, I can love them...I can try to protect them and make them happy.

You're going to fail. You can't embrace them and still hold a weapon to defend them with.

Her hands, empty, clenched into fists at her sides. But I can try, can't I?

And resolving herself to do just that, Cassandra breathed in deeply and rose to her feet. It was time to move forward.

Around her the snow fell, pure and bright, like shards of hope in the dark...

Three fortnums had passed since his goddaughter had departed with the abomination, and during that time, Giovanni had grappled with the chaos birthed by her betrayal. Only a handful of hours after she had fled, signs of how forcefully the organization had been shaken became apparent: riots erupted amongst the factions of Team Rocket, their ranks being undermined by confusion, suspicion, and uncertainty. Like a silent and deathly epidemic, a poisonous truth began to spread and weaken his soldiers with doubt: the heir, their tangible proof of the empire's longevity, was no longer living, and one of the highest agents in power had abdicated her thrown. While both figures were essentially detached from the collective gang, and so rarely encountered by the common thugs, they had represented the strength, the loyalty, and the privilege of the Team Rocket Elite. That one figure had been murdered, and the other was to be murdered for her indiscretions, cracked the otherwise solid structure of the gang. True, death and treachery were abundant in any criminal gathering...but this duo had been among their leaders, and if their leaders were being destroyed and corrupted, what unity could there possibly be among their subordinates, and what faith could they possibly give to their Signore, if he could not keep his affairs and his "children" in order...?

In an attempt to restore order and repair the damage she had made, Giovanni had given them a cause to pursue, and at least for now, it seemed to be working. The doubt that had threatened to shatter his ranks had turned into healing fury overnight; his soldiers would scour Kanto for the traitor and punish her for her wickedness. Within hours, the rumors of her wayward behavior before her desertion were known by all of the factions. With venomous words, they reduced the once feared Angel of Death into a lowly Judas, a filthy slut, and a murderess of her own kind. In return for her shedding their blood, they would shed hers, and they had begun to exact their revenge almost a week after her betrayal: they had exterminated the beast she had rode naked upon, ridding her of the unclean bliss she had traded her status to indulge in. Her monster had perished in a tsunami of white fire, erased entirely from the world...

Yet although Giovanni was gratified by the certainty of the clone's demise, he was also displeased that its destruction had resulted in the annihilation of its body. Had his agents followed his commands explicitly, the genetic blueprints from the carcass would have been available to him. However, as they had overlooked that necessity, they did not find reward upon their return to the base. Instead, Giovanni punished them severely for the infraction, leaving them barely capable of walking from his
office after they had reported to him. This maltreatment, however, had served to strengthen their fellow agents, for the abuse proved that the Signore had not softened, and that he still ruled his organization with an unyielding, steel fist. Clearly the whore had been fragile individual, and consequently weak in her resolve; surely that had caused her to abandon her superior and nothing more. All the same, as they sighted her and attempted to capture her, they firmly kept in mind that her body was not to be ruined. Giovanni, surely, would have some use for it...

Yet although they glimpsed the traitor and even engaged her in battle, so far they had failed to capture or severely wound her. Her training, far more advanced than their own, aided her in evading and deflecting their strikes. However, the crime lord knew her luck could only hold for so long; that she lingered in Cerulean City only degraded her chances of continuing to elude them. Already they had almost fully occupied the City of Water, and soon she would be surrounded with no avenue of escape left to her...and he wondered, vaguely, if she would even care when her death finally ensnared her. Surely, she would fight against them, but those who had survived their encounters with her had all reported the same thing: that her expression was deadened and her appearance unkempt, indicating that she had fallen far from grace. Losing one's beloved typically had the effect of breaking the spirit; such was a part of the reason why he had long forsaken love as a dangerous and misguided emotion. Contemplating the notion, he wondered to himself whether seeing her destroyed would invoke a similar pain in him. Perhaps not...but as she was akin to an incomplete painting being torn apart by its maker, its potential for glory shredded by the hands of the one who had created it, he admitted that her loss would be, at the very least, a disappointment to him.

However, when Domino strode into his office bearing a single disk, he learned that some of Cassandra's previous value could yet be salvaged. As the lights dimmed and the video contents of the hardcopy began to play, his second-in-command explained that the footage had been taken from a medical facility in Cerulean. The time stamp, showing the date and hour in the lower-hand corner, revealed that the recording was less than a two weeks old...but more important to him was the figure the recording displayed, who sat huddled in a chair near the registration counter. Upon occasion, well-dressed personnel and other patients passed in front of the young woman, who seemed seized in fitful sleep. Pausing the recording, Giovanni asked if the female's health was degrading. Would she linger near the building for medical assistance, and hence be easier from them to apprehend? His companion merely shook her head, and then stated in monotone, "She wasn't at a hospital. This footage was taken in an abortion clinic."

Giovanni's expression contorted in surprise, before he regained his composure and leaned forward, resting his mouth against intertwined fingers. If Cassandra had been willing to risk using one of Team Rocket financial accounts, knowing well that she would be traced to this facility in doing so, then she must have been completely certain of her condition – of her pregnancy. The notion that she was carrying a child was difficult for the crime lord to grasp, for Cassandra had been a strict abstinent for a majority of her life, and for a moment, he wondered wildly if Zachariah had managed to enjoy a successful wedding night before his bloody demise. Yet as he watched the remaining footage, it became clear to him that this was not the case: after observing a distraught teenager being escorted from the operating room, his goddaughter's face contorted with fear, and in what seemed to be a fit of maternal instinct, she fled from the scene, her hands drifting near her abdomen as she went. She had not gone through with the abortion...and although he could not hope to understand the core of Cassandra's soul, he realized well what this meant. Had the infant belonged to Zachariah or some random male, she would have allowed the unborn's execution. Yet the creature in her womb had evidently been conceived in an entirely different emotion than lust. It was a love child...and hence, it was undeniably Mewtwo's.

The laws of nature told him that was impossible; a human and a pokémon could not form new life. Yet his years of experience with the improbable told him to believe, and believe he did. Leaning
back into his office chair, he said, "Make certain everyone knows how important it is that she's brought back to Viridian unharmed. She's carrying the last bit of Mewtwo's genetic heritage, and until it's thrust into the world and into our hands, her pregnancy can't be threatened. Having this child, after all, will be better than nothing."

And perhaps it would even be better than the clone itself: because this monstrosity would be a mongrel, a mingled version of Cassandra and Mewtwo, possessing traits and abilities from each betrayer. Beyond the control he might be able to wield over such a specimen, the uses it could offer him were nearly infinite…!

And besides...if all else failed, would make the ideal proxy for its parents, enduring in full the anguish he had promised to inflict upon them.

Indeed, the saying was true: a child was truly the most valuable resource a man could reach out to take!

Now, weeks later, Cassandra spent the morning in a gloriously soft and warm bed. Despite how comfortable she was, though, Cassandra had a hard time sleeping. Recollections from the past three months and the choice facing her made dreaming fitful, and more than once she had lain awake, staring at the ceiling and wondering if she should leave the Center or not. In the end, she knew her decision was not a difficult one to make - only one option was actually viable. However, fear and dread pooled in her stomach at the thought of what remaining in this place could lead to. Beyond becoming an unmoving target, the dangers of remaining with lawful agents were potentially lethal, especially when she considered what could occur if her previous role in Team Rocket was exposed. Yet whenever her hand strayed to her firm abdomen, she was reminded of her foremost priority: protecting the children. Being what they were, the twins were likely quite fragile, and if she abandoned this chance to properly sustain them, she might lose them...and that thought terrified her more than any other. In the last two months since she had realized their existence, she had devoted herself entirely to keeping them safe, and increasingly had begun to yearn for them. She needed them as desperately as they currently needed her, and if they perished, she knew she would as well. As such, endangering them was unthinkable; they were all she had left, and if she could live long enough to give birth to them, hold them, and raise them, she would be content and ask for nothing more. For all of their sakes, she must stay with these people, no matter the risks...

An hour after sunrise, Cassandra rose wearily from the bed and strode into Aurora Joy's office. There she found the woman explaining to a young trainer not to let his pokémon battle for another two weeks, and after he nodded, left, and surrendered the doctor's attention, the once vagrant said, "I've decided to stay here for awhile."

Aurora's smile mingled relief with satisfaction. "I'm happy to hear that, and I'm sure Michael – he's the man who protected you last night – will be relieved. His superiors assigned him to be your guardian, so don't give him too much trouble, okay? Now why don't you sit down? You're probably overdue for some prenatal exams, and I want to check to see if everything's in order."

After a moment of surprise, and then uncertain hesitation, Cassandra did as instructed. The doctor assessed and noted the mother-to-be's weight ("Tsk, we're going to need to stuff you for awhile. You're far too skinny for my liking!"), height, blood pressure, heart rate, drew a vile of blood to test for disease and potential Rh conflicts, all the while asking the young woman questions concerning her medical history. On this count, Cassandra could not report much, as she did not know her if her family possessed a history of illnesses or genetic defects - yet in regards to her own health, she answered as informatively as she could.

Surprisingly, hearing of the violence in her past did not faze Aurora. Only after Cassandra told her
about the drug cocktail she had been taking, up until shortly before she had conceived, had Aurora appeared positively gob-smacked. She had muttered and cussed harshly that combining an anti-depressant with a painkiller was a sure way to court suicide, and that a doctor had prescribed it to her…unbelievable! Only when she had the nineteen-year-old lay down for a pelvic exam did her grumbling quiet: the scars across the female's genitalia were, to say the least, unsettling, and the doctor had to forcefully suppress the suspicion that the girl's "one other sexual partner" had carved them into her flesh with a razor. Still, as she examined the girl's vagina and cervix, checking for abnormalities and signs of infections - of which there were none - she noted how her patient's fingers clutched at the edges of the table. This young woman did not want a stranger examining her, even if she had a medical license, and as Aurora allowed Cassandra to redress, she stated that she would need a urine sample for the other tests, and asked, hoping to dispel the tension she had caused, if the teenager would like to hear her babies' heartbeats.

It was a wonder the doctor didn't hear cervical vertebrae crack, given how quickly the girl snapped her head upwards at the suggestion. As she nodded, Aurora smiled and told her to lie back down, and retrieved a handheld Doppler instrument from her supplies: it looked like a white walkie-talkie, but had a spiraling cord with a probe at its end, and a heartbeat monitor above the speaker of the device's main body. Flipping it on, she gently pressed the probe beneath the young woman's belly, where it was beginning to curve outwards…and then the sound of blood being pumped by a small heart, as fast as that of a tiny bird, rose from the speaker. Beneath this noise was an underlying echo; the twin's hearts beat in subtly different, but still frantic, times, as was to be expected now that they were over twelve weeks old. Aurora Joy grinned in satisfaction at the result on the fetal heart rate display: 142 beats per minute - they were both in the proper range. She glanced up to tell Cassandra that, but remained silent when she saw how her patient was peering at her own belly: awe, amazement, and warmth were plain on her face, and as she closed her eyes, she smiled softly as she listened to the sound...it was wonderful….

After awhile, Aurora flipped off the device, returned it to its drawer, and said, "That should be all for today. We'll have to run some more tests to make sure that none of you are sick, but besides being a little undernourished, I'm willing to bet that you three are okay. Would those additional screenings be alright with you?"

Cassandra seemed to still with uncertainty, but then slowly nodded her consent. Content at that, the redhead pulled a bottle of vitamins from a cabinet and handed them to the girl, and commented lightly, "Now why don't we head to breakfast and stuff you with some folic-enriched bread products? That sound good to you?"

Amusement flickered across the other woman's face, and rising, she walked to the cafeteria with the doctor. Around them repairs were being made to the damaged Center, and friends and family visited the wounded. Accompanying the daylight was a sense of good cheer among the residents, and as no one had perished in the night, declarations of victory and exaggerated "war stories" made even the most drugged patients smirk. The aromas of waffles, bacon, scrambled eggs, and diced fruits enticed everyone to breakfast, and as Cassandra and Aurora, still in their pajamas, sat down, Michael cast them a glance from the other side of the ruined lobby. Today's newspaper had been amended overnight to chronicle the attack on the Center, and thankfully, the girl had been kept out of it. No reporters would hound her and no children would question her; she would stay here in peace, as long as they were able to defend her. Stroking Alexius down the spine, he gave the dark puppy his bacon ('Rora would have scolded him, but that was alright), and mused that the upcoming months were probably going to be very interesting...

Halfway though their meal, Cassandra lifted her head and murmured to her companion, "Miss Joy…er, Aurora? Could you promise me something?"
Knowing that gaining the girl's trust was integral, the doctor stamped down her sneaking suspicions and agreed. The young woman bit her lip, and then said, "Whatever you find in your tests, could you promise to keep it between us...?"

"Of course – that's patient confidentiality," Aurora replied, relieved that this was all the mother-to-be wanted. Popping a slice of tangerine into her mouth, she savored the taste and, after gulping it down, asked in jest, "Why? Is there something I should know? Are your kids actually alien babies or something?" That could be interesting.

Cassandra gave a weak laugh, and shook her head, "No, they're not alien babies!" Close though. She just wasn't going to tell her that yet. Let her tests boggle her mind for awhile first.

Even so, she stared into her drink, unable to meet the woman's eyes, and thankfully Aurora was too engrossed in a sudden revelation to notice: she had just realized that she would no longer have to scrub any of those pink hearts from the windows anymore – they'd been burned to crisps! With a laugh, she bit into another slice of tangerine and watched her fellow citizens joke and work.

All seemed well.

Thank You: Kayasuri-n, Fan Boy 101, Mai-danishgirl, Red One1223, Leone the Infernal, Crescentmewtwo, Dark Magician Girl Aeris, sapphire espeon, The Bushman, and XHellXGeistX for reading and reviewing the previous chapter. I hope you and my other readers will do the same for this one!

Author's Note: I know that many of you will be skeptical about Cassandra's pregnancy, but it - and some of other oddities in this story - will be explained in the next few chapters, thanks to the addition of Aurora Joy to the cast. As always, thank you for reading!

Sincerely,

WiseAbsol
"The child must know that he is a miracle, that since the beginning of the world there hasn't been, and until the end of the world there will not be, another child like him."

- Pablo Casals.

"...Are you afraid, Cassie?"

She and her friend sat on a hillside, leaning back on their arms, with blades of grass pressing razor thin imprints into their palms. Above them, the firmament was stained with orange and honey, and the cirrus clouds gleamed like sun-illuminated gold, while beyond them, a plain of wildflowers and grasses extended, and paths of white dust interwove in the unending, undulating meadow. Only a few trees, ablaze with the bright hues of springtime, burst forth from the earth, and their youthful leaves rustled softly in the breeze, which smelled of sweet herbs. To Cassandra, who gazed towards the western horizon where the sun was setting, this place seemed a paradise, and a fitting land for the one beside her to dwell in – the one who, as she knew well, had been dead for nearly a decade.

Yet Amber Fuji seemed to have adjusted well to her status as a spirit, and if she possessed markers of her death, she did not reveal them. Her skin retained its vital, apricot hue; her long, teal hair remained siskin; and her pristine, white sundress and sandals were not smudged with grave dirt. In addition, perhaps in her desire to invoke Cassandra's full honesty and comfort, she had even aged herself to the same age as the mother-to-be: her body was long in limb, her waist and back were slender, her hips and breasts curved gently, and her face was maturely angled. Yet most notable were her eyes, for although they were still the pure indigo hue that Cassandra remembered, they no longer sparkled with innocence. Instead, they glemmed with comprehension into the matters of grief, pain, and most noticeably of all, acute dread. Perhaps she had watched her friends' lives from this world after her passing, and had borne witness to the suffering they had endured...or perhaps the truth of the nature of her multiple deaths had wizened her soul. Either way, Cassandra knew that the question the woman had voiced was carefully spoken, for the one who had uttered it knew it sliced through the shell of her friend's defenses and nipped at the flesh of her heart.

Was the angel afraid...? Could there be any doubt of that? "Of course I am. I'd be an idiot not to be scared."

How couldn't she be frightened? Although her consciousness lingered in this lovely place, she could feel the echo of her true self in the waking world, which ached with stiffness from laying upon a thin mat, and beneath it, unyielding cement. Despite that Doctor Aurora Joy had attempted to provide her patient with enough layers to keep her comfortable and warm, in the end, no amount of quilts and blankets could make a confinement cell cozy...yet Cassandra willed her thoughts away from that unwelcome reality, instead preferring to focus on the trio of pokémon in the meadows: a venusaur lay on his belly, his breath bending the wildflowers before him; a blastoise savored the clear, cool waters of the nearby stream; a charizard, his tail held aloft, gazed out across the rolling sea of grasses, as if searching for another arrival. Each of the three was strangely marked, and from these marks, Cassandra thought they might be the clones who had befriended her late lover in his childhood. Reminiscing so about her mate, she pressed a hand to her abdomen, which was now undeniably rounded from her pregnancy. Amber, seeing this, smiled...but that smile held more than
"But you're scared for them the most, right?"

Cassandra closed her eyes, trying not to allow the torment of her fear to overtake her mind...yet it would not be denied....

Unbidden the recollection of her misfortune materialized in the field: the cafeteria of the Saffron City Pokémon Center, its tables and chairs strewn about the dining hall, which bore the markers of battle, established itself first. Then the secondary characters, which lined the edges of the room, appeared like wraiths, the defenders and defiers of justice alike captivated by the duo they loosely ringed around: Cassandra, with one hand against her belly and the other aiming a glock, and the individual that weapon was aimed at, a Team Rocket agent who clutched at his bleeding shoulder and wickedly grinned at the distress his words were causing her.

"Filthy cunt," he taunted, "If they knew what you've done, they'd riddle your body with more iron than the cum that animal pumped into you-!

The degradation of her bond with her lover, and the hint at the exposure of her identity, caused a scream to rise in her throat. "Shut up! Shut up!"

"Or you'll do what? You'll shoot me in front of all of these people?" He laughed cruelly at the idea. "And here I thought you were trying to avoid falling back into old habits."

On the sidelines, eyes narrowed at these words, and Cassandra could feel their gazes, hot and probing, racing over her frame. Her finger tightened on the trigger of the gun, and panic began to overflow from her stomach in the form of sour acid in the back of her throat. She had to silence him; he couldn't tell them what her life had been...! Yet he was already speaking the words which tore away the little security she had only recently gained, "You know, that little one where you murdered dozens, possibly even hundreds in the name of our Signore. That you spent time your time parading around as Azra, our leader's assassin. Nah, you wouldn't want them to know about that, would you?"

No...! her thoughts cried out in horror. Yet the words spoken could not be unspoken. The people around her stilled, and the atmosphere of the room became frozen and airless. With a few sentences, he had ruined what safety she had gained for herself, and spying her distraught expression and knowing well how he had undermined her, his smile only widened. He was not finished with her just yet, either. "Hey, and while we're at it, let's tell them why you quit. Technically, I've already said it, but I don't think any of them really caught it."

And before she could silence him with a threat, with violence, he had cast his gaze at the audience around them and had called out, "What do you all think? Do you want to know why she betrayed us? Don't bother getting your hopes up, it wasn't a noble reason." Then, without waiting for their response, he glanced at the woman again and announced, "Nope, this woman right here just wanted to fuck...and she didn't even have to decency to want to fuck a man. No, she wanted to play with an overgrown cat instead, who postured as a human to take that jolly ride with her. That monstrosity growing inside her is the result, and we just can't wait to cut it out and see just how vile it-.

The blast of a bullet firing drowned out the end of his sentence. As the man fell backwards with a screech, cursing her now that she had fired a round into his other shoulder, he only quieted when she stomped her foot down onto his chest and lifted the barrel of the gun to point between his brows. Her motions were smooth, yet suddenly wearied...in fact, as he peered up at her he noted that her expression conveyed fatigue, and that her eyes were glazed over with the emotions his words had
triggered within her: horror, fury, and grief. She did not care that the people around them had just witnessed her shoot a man, could not even be bothered with the thought that now everyone would gaze upon her in revulsion. What mattered was what the worm beneath her heel had uttered, and in a low voice, inlaid with steel, she growled, "I think it's about time you shut your mouth. If you want to insult me and the person I loved, then fine, go right ahead. I'm really not petty enough to let that bug me."

Then her eyes blazed and she leaned forward, digging the barrel of the gun into his forehead. A click, from the pressure of her finger over the trigger, sounded in the room before she snarled, "But if you dare say another word about my children, I'll send you on your merry way. They're not what you think they are; they're not monstrosities or vile or…or…!" She attempted to swallow down the wrath that had been spawned for their sake. They weren't what he'd said they were…they were a purpose beyond misery and death and revenge, and she wanted to embrace them and be happy.

Yet the Team Rocket agent was not interested in the least with the firearm pointed in his face. Instead, her speech itself intrigued him, and with mingled disbelief and twisted delight, he echoed the key word from her snarls: "'Children'…?"

With a shriek of mingled horror and rage at her slip, Cassandra whipped the gun against the side of his face and leapt back from him, and, with eyes downcast, charged from the room into the hallways of the facility. Eventually, with tears blinding her as emotion overwhelmed her, she staggered into a table, which she grasped with one white-knuckled hand and leaned down upon. More than being exposed as the murderess she was, she was sickened at the knowledge of how her relationship with her late lover, and by extension their children, had been so perverted. Was there no chance at acceptance for any of them…? She could understand if she was branded as a monster, but her son and daughter, they….

"They're not monsters, damn it...they're not….

They were her miracles - they kept her clinging to life and made the world a place worth living in, even when everything around her sought to ruin her. As her tears became those of mourning for their sake, she jerked as someone began to tug at the firearm she carried and, as she relinquished it, grasped her shoulder and spun her around. There stood Detective Michael Lagorio, a man who had increasingly become a comforting presence in her life, not only for the protection that he offered, but also for possessing a good and noble nature which, in this chaotic, bloody world, was a blessing she could well appreciate. Yet gazing now into his face, she wondered if even this guardian would turn against her. The hard glint in his eyes, the scorching rage shining in it, gave her the answer. However, she found she could not move as he reached out towards her neck, and distantly she wondered if he would attempt to strangle her. For a moment the instinct to leap back, not only for her sake but also for the sake of her son and daughter, rose in her limbs, but she had frozen upon seeing a man of his caliber so degraded by his hate for what he regarded as evil.

Yet fortunately for the woman and her unborn children, the hand that reached for her did not close around her throat. Instead, it slid beneath her choker and yanked forcefully. The clasps of the piece, after years of mistreatment, snapped from the sudden duress, and as she felt the prickling and weight of her wings emerging into existence, she glanced away from him, unable to meet his eyes from the shame at what they identified her as. Yet now that she was exposed, she would not hide what she was, and so she lifted her feathered limbs and stretched the muscles and the tendons, extended the primary flight feathers and invited his abuse towards them. Surely he had every reason to strike her down…?

However, he did not succumb to a display of brutality. Instead, he merely gritted his teeth and then said listlessly, "So…you were Azra?"
She nodded and then lifted her face. The hand that did not clutch her, she noted, gripped hard at the gun, and it seemed a wonder to her that it did not fire. Yet after a few more seconds, that grip relaxed, and the man holstered the weapon. Afterwards he took her wrists with bruising strength, so unlike his ginger touch over the past month, and as he regarded her with open agitation, he mused aloud, "If you weren't pregnant, I'd kill you here. I'd lose my badge, maybe go to jail, but it would be worth it."

One corner of her lips tucked upwards at that. "Well, I suppose being knocked up has to have one little perk. You know, to make up for seeing my meals in reverse every morning."

…He couldn't bear to look at this woman. Turning his eyes away, he spat, "Don't talk. Really, don't: what you say can and will be used against you in a court of law-.

She almost laughed in surprise at the irony and the very banality of that opening phrase. "Am I being arrested?" she asked, with her voice light in her wry humor at the notion. Was this event honestly unfolding in her life…? Seriously…? First Mewtwo had gotten himself killed, leaving her with a responsibility she barely knew what to do with; then she'd been chased all the way here and nearly dragged back to Giovanni; and now she'd been outed and was being arrested. Could her life suck anymore than it already did? Wait…she shouldn't even think that. Life had taught her that things could always get worse.

She glanced around quickly for some wood. She needed to rap her knuckles on it fast.

Detective Lagorio just glared at her and, ducking under her wings as he did so, tugged her hands behind her back forcefully. So much for knocking on wood. "As a matter of fact, I am. You, Miss Cassandra Brennan, are under arrest for the murder of the Yew family and, I'm sure, countless others….

He recited her rights and placed her into one of the Center's confinement cells, for he dared not move her to the more proper police station. Yet there, able to do little more, she whittled away the time by contemplating her situation, and when that depressed her, resorted to reminiscing and dreaming. Having now resided in that cell for over two weeks, she was relieved to have found that her needs were cared for, and that she was not completely left in isolation. In fact, she received visitors a few times a day, including a concerned (yet wary) Doctor Joy; a pacing, visibly agitated Detective Lagorio; and a number of others whose names and faces she swiftly forgot. Her fate and the fate of her children, she understood, would be decided by these strangers…and that idea, she found, wearied her. Eventually she simply wrapped her wings around herself and took what comfort she could from their softness and warm - this was the first time in years they'd been exposed for an extended period of time, and she found they were growing stronger for it. However, as they gained strength, they also gained the itch to beat free of this cage and take her into the skies of early spring. Perhaps that was why, when she dreamed, the firmament always extended, wide and open, in all directions above her….

Within one such dream, Amber took one of the angel's hands in her own, and as Cassandra lay down in the grass, she felt slender fingers running through her hair. Both of her friend's actions provided solace to her, and with lowered eyelids, she murmured, "Damn it, Amber…of course I'm scared. I don't know what's going to happen to any of us next, especially these kids. They haven't done anything wrong, but that doesn't seem to matter to anyone but me. So what am I going to do? How can I protect them from all of these people who just don't get it?"

Above her, there was a sigh, and then a whisper, "Cassie, I don't think you can," Amber admitted. "Mewtwo and you will just have to reassure them that you love them, and maybe get them out of a scrape or two. Otherwise, I...I don't think it's plausible to change the world for the sake of two
people. I suppose Mewtwo might disagree with that, though..."

The stance her friend was taking, disregarding the fact that Mewtwo was no longer among the living, momentarily angered Cassandra. However, sorrow made the forming flame gutter out, and as she gazing out upon the land with mournful eyes, she whispered, "But Mewtwo's gone - the stupid jerk left me to deal with this alone."

"...Really? Are you sure about that?"

She looked up in confusion to find her friend regarding her solemnly, and, noting that she had captured the angel's attention, Amber nodded to the east. Sitting up, Cassandra peered in that direction and saw, in the distance, a tall, slender figure striding up one of the paths to the crest of another hill. Recognizing the silhouette, the mother-to-be bolted to her feet, her heart hammering and her breath quickening. As she stepped forward, the others vanished and the miles between the figure and her melted away. Barefoot she dashed up the path towards him, feeling the sand, of the texture of cremation ashes, beneath her toes. As the slope flattened, the breeze picked up, bending the grasses and causing her hair - as well as the thin, white nightgown she was wearing - to fly about. Yet when the gust died down, she lifted her gaze to find the clone standing before her. His back was turned towards her, and after a moment's hesitance, in which nervousness took root in her stomach, she approached him and wrapped her arms around him from behind. He was warm, solid, and smelled of mint - emotion flooded her, the most potent being her grief that this was only a dream. Yet as he turned in her embrace and lowered his face towards hers, she attempted to forget this fact as they kissed briefly....

When they parted, she noted that his brow was furrowed, and his expression ambiguous. He was silent as she took his paws gently and pressed them to her rounded navel. It was this, the act that would never take place, which she thought she probably yearned for the most: to share with him the life they had made together in their passion. As his fingers began to caress her belly curiously, the longing only became keener, and leaning against him, with her forearms flat to his chest, she whispered into his fur, "You bastard...why did you break your promise? Why didn't you come back to me like you said you would? I'm wedged in a rather tight corner right now, thanks to you, and I'm not sure if I'm going to be able to squirm my way out of it. We both know I'm not nearly as crafty as you were."

She trembled against him then, and for awhile, silence stretched on between them. But then, as something inside her broke, she said, "...Why didn't you listen to me? I...I need you here with me, ziv. I don't think I can do this alone."

His arms and tail slid around her in an embrace as she committed the rare act of breathing out her pet name for him...there was a brief pressure against her stomach as he did so...and then everything began to fade, but not before he whispered one phrase:

"You are not alone, Cassandra - don't you dare think that."

And as she slowly lifted her eyelids, her gaze focusing on the interwoven threads of the blanket bunched beneath her head, she felt the proof of his words: within her core arose the gentlest of sensations, like a feathered wing brushing the inner flesh of her womb. Surprise, then wonder suffused her, and for a moment as her hands slid to her rounded abdomen, her worries evaporated entirely. One of the babies was stirring...she could feel one of them moving...!

Mewtwo...that's one of our kids, she thought as she curled up around the sensation, closing her eyes with a sigh and burying her face into the fabric beneath her.

She wasn't alone.
The next day she was lying back on a medical table, with an icy slime smeared across her exposed abdomen and a probe digging into her firm flesh. This was more than a little uncomfortable, and only added to the discontentment spawned from having her wings smothered beneath her weight. That, and she thought that Aurora Joy might be treating her somewhat more roughly than she would with her other patients. She supposed that was understandable, given that the doctor had not been pleased to discover the true nature of the woman's children so late into the pregnancy. Yes, she had detected abnormalities before now, but it would have been nice to know that she was handling hybrids, given the careful approach that had to be taken in caring for them. By that same logic, Cassandra was willing to bet that Aurora was greatly displeased with the treatment her charge was undergoing… which, in fact, the older woman was.

While in theory the doctor grasped the idea that the girl before her had committed enormous atrocities, and so did not merit the comfort of freedom or a cozy room, Doctor Joy found she could not agree with the approach the justice system had taken in this case. Cassandra Brennan seemed too young, too soft, and far too loving when it came to her children to be a cold-blooded killer; and even if she was a monster, surely, if only for the sake of promoting the health of those twins, she should be treated more hospitably? Even Michael, who was among the most fiercely anti-Rocket members of the investigative force, was similarly disturbed by the situation, and he too was struggling to come to terms with the idea that Azra, the Elite Rocket he had once pursued so fiercely, was really a teenager. Neither of them knew what to think about this turn of events now that their shock and initial fury had waned, for both of them were still seeing Cassandra Brennan as a victim rather than a hunter…and the fact that she seemed remorseful about the crimes she had committed, and was, furthermore, growing more and more fragile as her pregnancy continued, made it difficult to affiliate her with the homicidal Azra.

Over the past few hours, Aurora had done a variety of tests and taken several samples from the angel and the twins, all to access the overall health of the trio. Now, while her computer programs mulled over the biological data she had submitted to them, she had determined she could no longer postpone one of the more important tests for the eighteenth week: the ultrasound. She had, from her own uncertainty, avoided it as long as she could, both curious and fearful of what she might find curled up in the woman's core. Her mind told her that this wariness was irrational, and that she should be thrilled to be the medic who had encountered this phenomenon: within her patient's womb were the first interordinal hybrids ever to be scientifically documented. Sure, she would never have the opportunity to share her findings with anyone in the medical community, as she knew the potentially disastrous consequences to the mother and her offspring if they were exposed to the world…but still, the chance to pioneer an unexplored field like this occurred only once in a lifetime…and to be so close to the subject of the case, professionally speaking, would offer her so more insight into the anomaly! So, with a silent sigh, Aurora braced herself, searched the monitor of the ultrasound machine for the twins…and then hummed at what she found. Interesting….

"You're scrunching up your eyebrows. Is something the matter?"

Despite the wry tone, there was an edge of nervousness to the voice. Blinking, Aurora turned to the angel and said, "Huh? Oh, no, everything appears to be fine, it's just…well, your kids are showing a pattern we see in pokémon litters, with one of them looking like the species of the father, and the other like the mother," Aurora announced, and turned the monitor to face the girl. With her index finger, she traced the outline of the child on the left-hand side of the screen. "This one seems to have taken after its human genetic inheritance, while the other one," she continued, outlining the creature on the right side, "is showing evidence of taking after its pokémon heritage. I can make out a tail, as well as the differences in the shapes of its hands and feet. Tell me, did its father have this tubular grown between the back of the skull and the spine?" Seeing her patient's nod, she said, "Well if that's the case, then I think I can conclude that there's no signs of defects or malformations. Just let me jot
down a few notes and measurements, and then we'll clean you up and…err-.

"Toss me back into that cell, I know. I'm just happy they're okay, despite me having to sleep on a cot and all," Cassandra said tiredly, and leaning back, she gazed at the monitor intently. The twins were now formed enough that they actually looked like children; as she watched, the kitten's tail swung lazily, and the child who took after her shape sucked at its thumb...and neither of them, she was pleased to discover, had any trace of her wings.

Yet the doctor noticed the girl's fatigue, and having already assessed the results from some of the tests she had done on the woman, she frowned and asked, "And how about you, Cassandra? How are you doing?"

At the sound of her name, the mother-to-be glanced briefly at the older woman and gave her a small smile, grateful for the personal address and her concern. "I'm alright - mind-numbingly bored sometimes, but otherwise I...," she saw the look the doctor was giving her, and shifted gears. "I'm a little tired, I suppose, and my stomach doesn't seem to want to settle, but I'm getting used to it. Same old annoyances, really. Although...."

Tension wound in Aurora's shoulders, and keeping her calm composure in place, she encouraged Cassandra to go on. "Is there something else?"

Cassandra looked at the monitor, her expression softening as she did so, and after a moment's hesitance, she murmured, "Yeah, um...I felt one of them moving around last night."

Aurora smiled, inwardly relieved, and as she took some screenshots from the feed and began to print them off for the expecting mother, she said, "Ah, so they've quickened, have they? Well, you're at eighteen weeks, so I suppose that's to be expected. Was this was the first time you've felt them?"

A nod answered her, yet as her charge cleaned herself up and adjusted her clothes, the doctor received the distinct impression that her response had disappointed the girl. Peering at her, Aurora noted that the smile adorning Cassandra's face had faded and her posture had slumped. She seemed disheartened, as if she had hoped for something more from the other female....

Yet after her patient had been returned to her cell, and after the doctor had gone over the results of all of the tests, she found she could not be concerned with the emotional status of the mother-to-be. Instead, the younger female's body became her foremost concern. Over the next three days, in which her studies were only interrupted by her physical needs and meetings held to determine the fate of the trio under her care, she poured over the data and began to arrive at conclusions that unsettled her. Eventually, Michael invaded her laboratory in a rescue attempt, and when he reached her in the depths of her marble cavern, he found her hunched over in her chair and rubbing at her temples.

Handing her a cup of coffee, mixed with a couple tablespoons of chocolate syrup as she liked it, he grinned as she groaned, "Oh, Michael, I bless you in the name of the Mocha, the Latte, the Americano, and the Machiatto. All Praise Frappa-Jesus!" and shaking her coffee-bean bracelet at him like a rosary, she took a long gulp of the steaming beverage, probably burning her tongue in the process.

As her pinched expression began to ease, he leaned onto the back of her chair and asked, "So, now that I'm in the favor of the Coffee God's high priestess, will you tell me why you look ready to throw something?"

With a grimace, she passed him a folder on her desk labeled with what he recognized as Cassandra's patient number: inside were numerous scans showing the girl's skeletal and musculature structures, including close-up shots of her wings and chest. Other documents included genome sequences, with
numerous links being filled in with an array of colors and circled in bold marker. Scrabbed in the margins of many of these pages were handwritten notes, and as he fingered through the folder, he found torn out notebook pages covered with Aurora's illegible cursive scrawl. Finally, there were numerous articles concerning pokémon and human anatomical and genetics studies and, more surprising, narratives from ancient tribes around the globe about otherworldly creatures. Since he could barely make out Aurora's miniscule notes and so put all of the puzzle pieces together, he asked her to translate what he was looking at. She first pulled out the records regarding the genome codes, and nodded to the data streaming on the screen before her.

"What I'm seeing here is a cluster of impossibilities, with the twins being especially...well, disconcerting. And I mean that from a strictly scientific perspective, not that social one you're all fixating on. The data I'm receiving has rather different implications."

The man pulled up a nearby chair and straddled it. Looking over the files she had given him, he vaguely recognized some of the genetic terms thanks to the course he had taken in forensic analysis, but much of it remained gibberish to him. Pinching his brow, he said, "Alright, what're you thinking, Aurora? Do you know how this," he asked, referring to the existence of the human-pokémon children, "happened? Got any explanations for me?"

Swiveling her chair to face him, she leaned forward and said, "I'm going to bypass giving you the sex ed. refresher course and get to the meat of it. How much do you know about naturally occurring hybrids?"

He grimaced at her. "Just the basics - that there are four things that make it hard to accomplish. You known, with the, uh, genitals not matching up, the fertility windows not being at the same times, their 'do me' cues not getting across, and the, ah, sperm and and eggs not fusing," he paraphrased, enough so that Aurora started shaking from silent laughter. Those were basically what the articles he'd been researching lately had said! He then continued, rather quickly. "Obviously the first three weren't an issue for them, so that leaves the fourth one, which is where I'm stuck in trying to figure it out. After all, bestiality is hardly anything new, but before now, I've never heard of offspring actually being produced."

The medic nodded and gestured to the files in his hands. "You're right - these kids shouldn't exist. Humans and pokémon are from two different orders of animals, and while there's been tales of crossbreeds in the past, those can usually be attributed to mutated children or ones born with supernatural abilities. As far as we know, though, nothing like this has ever occurred before...but I've come up with a theory, if you're interested in hearing it."

Seeing his nod, she fingered through the folder's contents and pulled out some articles concerning the ancient, and now presumably extinct, pokémon named "mew," as well as studies done by pokémon breeders on the compatibility between the monster races. "First, as we all learn in our Pocket Monster Research courses, many pokémon can breed outside of their own species. This can occur between the different evolutionary forms, or between different races in the same egg groups. Their ability to do this is extensive enough that even some of the most unlikely matches can come up - like one between a skitty and a wailord. ...Seriously, Michael, you haven't heard about that yet? It was this big gag in my graduate college - they called it "hot skitty on wailord action!" No, I'm not messing around! I'll show you the yearbook sometime. Anyhow, getting back on track, this whole thing has led most researchers to believe that all pokémon have a common chromosome count and gene markers. With both of these, the chances of having fertile offspring is close to ensured. Now we could chalk this up to some anomaly of nature in the pokémon order, and say it has nothing to do with what we're seeing with Cassandra's children. But I'm going to go out on a limb and say that, yeah, it's relevant to our situation."
Michael, by this point, was still trying to obliterate the cat-on-whale imagery, and so blinked at her and asked, "And you're going to drag me out on that limb with you, aren't you?"

"Yep!" She pointed to the article on "mew" and said, "According to many archeologists, that common ancestor is supposed to be these creatures here: the mew. My theory is that the mew were, as some researchers suggest, the first pokémon - anomalies, if you will, in the animal kingdom. Supposedly, they had powerful psychic abilities, which makes their mass extinction seem a little sketchy, since they should have had a very high survival rate. So I'm theorizing that their extinction can be explained by two factors: first, by being a budding species, their numbers would've been rather limited, and second, that they had a very, very special ability - one that, even now, only one other pokémon type is capable of: transform. The mew could shape-shift, and I think that was their undoing."

Michael leaned back and began to see where she might be heading with this. "And the only other pokémon with that ability are the ditto, which can be used as breeding machines. You're thinking the mew had similar capabilities?"

She nodded. "Yep – and that's not where the similarities end, either. Both species have nearly the same mass, height, and coloring. I think that the ditto may actually be a degraded form of mew, possibly the result of inbreeding late into the mew's existence. That we see massive defects in the later mew fossils, defects usually only seen in the offspring of incest, supports this idea. Furthermore, around the time when the mew went extinct, the first ditto also began appearing. Mind you, so did many other species of pokémon, so I suppose the correlation could be dismissed. But I have a theory on how those species came about as well. Would you like to hear it?"

"Naturally," he said, knowing that she would tell him anyway, but desiring to humor her nonetheless.

"I think that the mew, about mid-way through their existence, began experimenting with transform and changing into other sorts of animals. From there, I think they mated with those other species and had offspring, and that those were the forerunners of the pokémon races we know today. But that mixing was probably also dangerous for their species: their bloodline would've been diluted to the point where the original population was disappearing, since many of them would've also been lost in their transformations. Some might have died fighting for foreign mates, while others might have forgotten what they were - either way, they didn't go back to breed with their own kind. Eventually, their numbers began to decline, and they turned their focus inwards. Over time, this inbreeding would have led to low birth rates, with the offspring having increasingly frequent genetic defects and frailties. Eventually, they lost their shapes and their abilities completely, essentially devolving and becoming something else in order to survive."

The detective, contemplating this, eventually nodded and then said, "Sounds plausible enough, but you're never going to be able to prove it. And you know, I'm still waiting to hear what this has to do with the twins."

She stuck her tongue out at him and asked, "Do you know the name of the father of her twins?" When her friend shook his head, she told him, "His name was Mewtwo: mew-two. Apparently, he was a modified version of the original mew, created from some remarkably preserved remains dating back to early in the mew's existence. Meaning he was made from a purebred mew, still free of the poison of incest. Furthermore, he was shaped into the image of a man, and then empathically imprinted on the humans around him. That's probably why he chose a human as his mate, and why Cassandra was comfortable with accepting him," she explained.

Glancing at her handwritten notes, she then said, "Now from what she's told me, they were together
for a significant amount of time before conceiving, which I thought was a little strange. And then I
remembered that Cassandra had, up until recently, been taking a drug cocktail powerful enough to
to kill any fetuses that may have formed. She could have been pregnant multiple times and then
miscarried, but once she stopped taking the drug, her mate was able to sire offspring in her. While
different, she was simply another animal he was compatible with, albeit a highly evolved one.
And that leads me to why these children are so unsettling."

She turned to the screen behind her and pointed to the data stream rolling down the monitor. "From
the blood samples I took, I've been searching their genomes for the common genetic diseases or
defects found in other hybrids. After all, even with reproductively compatible parents, they're a mix
of two different orders of animals, so there should have been some genetic weaknesses and
mutations, or at least an abundance of 'junk DNA' - you know, those gene sequences that have no
identifiable purposes. But instead I found the opposite."

"Michael, these kids…I've checked the data over twice now, and the normal 'junk DNA' percentage
is well below normal. And I also haven't found a single significant mutation in either of them, so far,
which-!"

"You're not saying they're perfect, are you?" The detective's expression, now that he'd realized what
she was implying, contorted with disbelief.

"Genetically, they're definitely the closest I've ever seen to such a thing. In reality, I am sure they'll
have their weaknesses and faults just like everyone else, but physically, at least, they'll be ideal -
which, I suppose, does correlate to the facts. They're a mix of the two most influential and versatile
species this planet has ever known, so it makes sense that they'd gain some advantages from that.
Hell, they might just be the next jump in evolution for all I know! And what scares me is that if that's
true, then what if they're ever used to further someone else's agenda? If they fall into the wrong
hands, who knows the chaos they could wreck? - which I think Team Rocket probably figured that
out before I did. I think they're more interested in getting a hold of them than their mother…and
Michael, I can't stress this enough: we can't let that happen. In fact, I'm inclined to say we can't let
our own people to have them either. That also just seems to be asking for trouble."

Michael sat up straighter, having already realized that surrendering the children to Team Rocket was
unthinkable. However, what Aurora had said about their side…in theory, he could understand the
problems that might arise, but what she was implying…! "So what are you suggesting? That we let
their mother keep them? How the hell would that be any safer? Aurora, I know you've got doubts
that she's really who that Team Rocket agent said she was, but I've been checking her official files
and eyewitness accounts, and it all fits-!"

"I know it does! It fits with my own findings as well! But would you have seriously pegged her as a
cold-blooded killer before someone suggested it to you? I sure as hell wouldn't have…but in the end,
I'm not sure this line of argument matters. Yes, I'd say let her keep them, since she's probably the
only one who can look past what they are and love them for who they are. I'd say let
their mother raise them, provided she stops making stupid gambles with her life and-."

Alarm flashed through him at that. "Wait, say what?" Considering how important she was to his
investigation, that last bit was rather important for him to know!

In that moment, her gaze grew hollow as she contemplated the notion which she, as a person devoted
to preserving life, viewed as an atrocity. "It's just...there's a significant chance that she's going to have
complications in childbirth. If fact, because she plans to refuse a Cesarean Section due to some
sentimental, 'they must be born' nonsense, she's probably tipped the scale towards being injured or
killed in the process."
For a long moment, Michael Lagorio stared at the doctor, before asking, "And you came to that nasty conclusion how exactly?"

Wearily, Aurora took the folder from him and spread out the scans showing the angel's physical structure in comparison to another woman of her body type. "There are significant differences between the two. First, Cassandra's chest depth is greater than the norm, which supports the dense muscles required to support her in flight. These are anchored to a heavier, oversized breastbone and a collarbone, whose shape resembles a 'Y' in shape. Her shoulders are also a tad broad to secure this structure, and she also has a larger heart and lungs for increased oxygen and blood circulation. Her other organs, in contrast, are somewhat smaller than usual. Her arms and legs are disproportional, with her forearms being shorter and her fingers longer than the norm, while her legs are a tad longer. Her bones are thinner and considerably lighter, so I suspect they might have hollow cavities in them. Yet they also appear to be quite strong; when I scanned her, there were few signs of previous breaks or fractures."

"These adjustments all combine to give her more control over her direction in flight, and to make her frame strong and lightweight so her wings can support her in midair. As for those wings, they're the uppermost pair in a double-limbed mutation, with the lower pair being her arms. Yet though they're feathered, their internal structure is far more like a bat's than an actual bird's. The forearms are shortened, and their breadth is made up of the long, thin digits in the hands. Then there were the feathers themselves: the keratin they're composed of is α-keratin, the type found in mammal hair, rather than the β-keratin found in bird feathers. This makes the protein strands of her feathers nearly identical to those of her hair, which is why their pigment is of the same dark-.

Michael, seeing that she was beginning to ramble, interrupted her as politely as he could manage. "Keep on track, Aurora. What does this have to do with Cassandra possibly having complications?"

She gave him a sour look. "It has everything to do with it! With this body structure, she's not built for that kind of stress, not with that narrow pelvis and the strongest muscle mass being in her chest rather than her core. Plus, those essential core muscles are completely marred: the ultrasound showed that she has extensive internal scarring in her uterus. If duress is placed on the damaged tissue – which childbirth will inevitably do – it might tear and she'll start hemorrhaging. She's a high-risk pregnancy case because her genes were tinkered with and then someone else decided to beat the shit out of her! Multiple times! It's fucking infuriating…!"

Michael's brow furrowed, and placing his hands on her shoulders, he asked what he considered the most important question: "Wait, what was that part about her genes? I was cleared to read Cassandra's pediatric files by the court, and the records said she'd been born with that mutation. She's fully human, isn't she, or did you find something that suggested…?"

Aurora shook her head and said, "No, she's human. That was one of the first things I checked in her tests. I misspoke: while her genes weren't tampered with, someone else in her family did have a mutation manually triggered, which, unfortunately, manifested in her. I circled the gene sequence on that file there. That code is almost always inactive in humans, and usually acts as the source of supernatural abilities, or causes some very basic physical mutations. But those are only in the partially activated cases; in Cassandra, it's almost fully functional. Thanks to its influence, her entire framework has been altered, like nature was trying to make a bird out of a human. In part, it succeeded: she can get airborne, though I'm willing to bet she glides for the most part, since the laws of physics aren't on her side, but…," seeing his impatient look, she sighed, "...this isn't natural. How she and her children came about are, of course, but there are influences behind them that aren't normal. So I'm at a loss right now."

Laying the folder down onto the table by her now cold coffee, he asked, "Is that why there's myth on
"angels in this file?"

She nodded. "Yeah. I thought, 'hey, maybe there's some kernel of truth in those legends,' you know? Maybe this mutation has arisen before in humans; that could explain why almost every ancient culture has myths about winged people. Had there been pokémon with any similarities in shape, I might have dismissed it as that, like we have with all those tales of ancient monsters and demons. And yeah, the angel myths could just be spawned from the human fascination with flight, but considering what else nature has come up with, why couldn't evolution try out something new with humans? Why not give us wings on occasion...?"

Placing a hand on her shoulder, her friend sighed and murmured, "Aurora, dear, you know that you're rambling now, right? Please tell me you've slept recently, or I'm dragging you off to bed. Hell, it might even be mine - I can't even remember how long it's been since there's been a woman in it. Maybe it'll seem more inviting to me with you in it."

She laughed at that, and sticking her tongue out at him, she grabbed the folder from the counter and began putting the files away. She pressed "save" on the data analysis program on her computer, and then triggered the process of shutting the machine down. While she did so, Michael mused on the ideas she had proposed, and upon what his superiors had begun to suggest must be done about the girl. On one hand, many thought she should be tried and executed for her crimes after the children were born (since, while "unnatural," they were also blameless), while others thought her a valuable source of information into the inner workings and personnel of Team Rocket, and so was not expendable. Still others thought a combination of the two was in order, to force the girl to tell them everything she knew and then do away with the ex-assassin. To those individuals, Michael had to remind them bluntly that they were not the bad guys, and so would not treat this woman, who regretted her crimes and had turned against Team Rocket, as the organization would one of them. He had, when appropriate, taken the position of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend," even though he too was wary of the woman he had believed, and might still believe, he hated. Her fate ultimately depended on the nature of her soul, and whether what she offered to the cause of light was greater than the work she had done for evil.

For that, they needed an impartial judge insured to be able to delve into the most intimate depths of Cassandra Brennan's being to see what she was: a victim made into an unwilling soldier, and hence not evil or wayward to the core, or an evicted dog of Team Rocket's pseudo-military, as likely to snap at their hands as she was at those of her once handlers. For this they required a powerful, skilled, and most importantly of all, a trustworthy psychic who could gain what they needed to know about the angel without raping her mind in the process. Fortunately, Saffron City was the home of a woman who fit that description perfectly, a woman who had provided her assistance in the past on difficult cases such as this one. Of course, there would be protests against the selection of this candidate, namely from those among the force who were more than a little prejudiced towards people of her kind....

Reaching over his friend's head, he turned the lamp illuminating the station off, took her arm, and told her, "They've asked Sabrina Sheehy to question her tomorrow. If Cassandra passes her test, she'll be released and placed back under my protection. If not...well, it'll be safer for everyone to keep her locked up."

Aurora rolled her eyes in the dim. "Do your superiors really think she's a threat to anyone?"

"Well, it's not like they've ever met her before. For all they know, she could be an elaborate mole, though I doubt that's likely, not with her attitude. I'm more worried that they won't trust Sabrina’s judgment."
The medic gave him a puzzled looked, and asked, "But why wouldn't they-?" And then the realization dawned on her, and she groaned, "Are you serious? They'd doubt her just because of she's-?"

"It's not so much that she's gay, but that Cassandra falls into her type. She's got that dark skin, darker hair, and slender frame; she's perceptive, and she accepts alternative sexualities. They probably think the Gym Leader might go soft on her because of that," said Michael, rather more lightly than the situation warranted. However, he too knew this line of argument was absurd, and so in a more serious tone said, "But I'm certain she'll be more of a professional than that. Now, how about getting you to a bed, 'Rora? You're starting to look a little like a raccoon, you know."

She smacked him lightly, and with that, they walked out of her laboratory and ascended the stairway leading up into her home. Tomorrow, it seemed, would be a long day for all of them….

Stepping through the doors of the Pokémon Center around noon, the Witch of the Marshes greeted Doctor Joy and Detective Lagorio pleasantly before allowing them to direct her towards the confinement cell in the facility's basement, where the young woman she was to question currently dwelled. Vaguely, the psychic Gym Leader mused on why they were keeping the female in a chamber meant to hold rabid pokémon during their fits of disease, but surmised it was simply too much of a risk to move the woman beyond of the largely secured Center at this point in time. Perhaps, in the upcoming months, the location of this girl and her guards would vary to throw off Team Rocket's hounds, but for now law enforcement would much rather get a handle on the situation before daring to make plans on how to manage the addition of what was being termed a "volatile resource."

Snorting at the notion quietly, Sabrina reached out her senses to get a fix on the female in question, while simultaneously splitting her consciousness so she could listen to the detective's briefing. She could only do this for a short period of time, but she wanted to have some idea of what she was dealing with on a metaphysical level rather than simply gleaning skeletal facts from talking with the police officer. What she found matched what the man told her, although she discovered, to her interest, that the woman herself had some limited psychic abilities, while her children, a male and a female, were absolutely brimming with potential power. Perhaps this was a part of the reason why she had been involved in this: if nothing else, these children eventually had to be taught how to control their abilities, and as she headed the finest psychic academy on the continent, she was the one to call on for assistance. However, the births of these children would not occur for another few months, so for now, she must concern herself with their young mother.

Detective Lagorio opened the door to the room and, at her request, locked her in with the girl. Sabrina could sense that, for the most part, the woman was benign, and did not seem to have the will presently to cause her any trouble. If she did begin to fight, the Gym Leader was confident that she could defend herself and subdue the other female, but she hoped that this interview, as she wished to think of it as, would not come to that. She knew, of course, that this session was being monitored, but she doubted, now that she knew the girl was a psychic herself, that there would be a great deal of vocal discussion for anyone to record. This would be done in the depths of their minds, and thus far, those plains could not truly be measured by technology, only explored and known through metaphysical means.

Yet Sabrina's heart softened somewhat as she watched the woman stir from her mat, noting that a hand immediately went to cover her belly, as if fearful that this new visitor might pose some form of danger to the unborn twins. Perhaps the other interrogators had attempted to play the "bad cop" role and had used petty threats and insults to intimidate the expecting mother, and while Sabrina knew such methods would not work on this creature, she nonetheless found herself disapproving of them.
Yet neither could she admit to being fond of the honeyed path, for sweet words and promises could prove just as destructive as brutality in the end, if not more so because of their deceptive nature. Instead, the Witch of the Marshes preferred simple, calm, collected honesty. In more cases than not, it had led her to a fruitful session with the one she questioned.

It helped, of course, that her psychical abilities allowed her to sense truth and lies, and if she needed them to, allowed her to burrow into a soul by force to discover the golden roots of information she sought. However, she far preferred to have the consent of the subject; the process was less chaotic and abrasive that way. So, for a few minutes, she allowed Cassandra Brennan to assess her: long, black ivy hair; pale, unblemished skin; piercing, royal blue eyes; an official uniform of crimson and gold; all exuding her confidence in herself and a quiet, cool sort of power. Once, Cassandra had possessed similar attributes, but she found she did not mourn their loss, not when their absence meant she could display some warmth and humanity, both of which would be integral in providing her son and daughter with comfort.

Eventually, Cassandra broke the silence and said, "Oh, goodie. I'm about to get interrogated by another psychic, aren't I? Just don't punch me in the stomach, that's all I ask, Miss Sheehy."

Sabrina wasn't quite certain what the last part was in reference to. Nonetheless, she nodded. "So you know who I am. I suppose that means you weren't as hidden away from the world as these people think you were?"

"Oh, I was," Cassandra said, and then clarified, "But I was threatened with lectures if I didn't keep up with the news, and your coming out caught the attention of my godfather. Which is kind of funny, now that I think about it, because he usually likes blondes and redheads. Which makes Domino's relationship with him that much more entertaining in my brain right now, despite the squick factor there."

Again, Sabrina had no idea what the hell the woman was talking about, and she wasn't certain she should flattered or relieved at what she'd said. Regardless, she replied, "I see. Yet to answer your first question, I'm here to interrogate you, though I'm not fond of the connotations of that word. I won't make many verbal inquiries, since I find my methods of soul-searching more effective than toying with words. It will require me delving into your thoughts and memories, and my hope is that you'll make this process easier on both of us by cooperating and acting as my guide. However, your consent isn't necessary, merely preferable. I can overwhelm you if you attempt to fight me, and I'll be able to sense your deception if you attempt to lie."

"Now I understand that you may want to hide things from me," she continued, "and depending on their nature, I might not dredge them up. However, I'm here to act as your judge, so if I deem the matter relevant, I'll force it to the forefront of your thoughts whether you like it or not. In advance, I apologize for this, but it's the only sure way to prove whether you're benign or malignant to us. If you're the former, you'll be freed...if not, you'll stagnate here while your children are placed in a suitable home. As such, if you're really on our side as you'd like us to believe, I'd recommend against concealing things from me. That way, we can get through this quickly and with minimal discomfort."

What Sabrina Sheehy proposed was repellant to Cassandra, but as she folded her wings around herself in an open display of her uncertainty towards being so exposed, she understood that she had no choice. If she could prove to this woman that she was of no threat to the side of the light and the law, maybe her children and she had a hope of making it through this era of struggle intact. Maybe, if she could convince this woman of her remorse and her willingness to repent, she would have a chance to make a life with her son and daughter...

And so, with those hopes in mind, she accepted the Gym Leader's proposal with a nod, muttering
something about mental probes being the equivalent to anal ones. The other woman grinned, her smile (her dictation) quite like Mewtwo's when he'd been in a wicked mood, and leaning forward, she announced the beginning of the trial with three little words:

"Then let's begin."

Outside, above the earth, the sun had risen to the summit of the sky. Beneath its glare, there were no shadows.

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**Thank You:** Dark Magician Girl Aeris, Leone the Infernal, Yami no Silvar, Mewtwo1, Red One1223, blackwater2, Crescentmewtwo, RavenMewtwo, and Fan Boy 101 for reading and reviewing the previous chapter. I hope you and my other readers will do the same for this one!

**Author's Note:** Sabrina will not play a large role in this story, but I couldn't resist including her. Unlike in my other stories, she will have no interest in Mewtwo (aside from him being a psychic pokémon that she has never seen before), because I don't find love triangles very appealing as a subplot. As for Cassandra's body structure, that was taken from the winged characters in James Patterson's *When the Wind Blows*. Cassandra having one child who looks human and another who looks like a pokémon was based on the mixed clone children in *Mewtwo Returns*, in which some of the babies were the species of their father and others the species of their mother in appearance. Finally, the dream sequence is based on "The Song of Songs." Mewtwo's pet name, Ziv, means "gazelle," "radiant," and "the second month" in Hebrew. The first meaning complements Cassandra's pet name, the second is self-explanatory, and the third could potentially refer to Mewtwo's birth month (which is canonically in February, but it's September in this story). As always, I hope you enjoyed the chapter.

Sincerely,

WiseAbsol
"Run your fingers through my soul. For once, just once, feel exactly what I feel, believe what I believe, perceive as I perceive, look, experience, examine, and for once, just once, understand."

- Unknown.

"I'd advise you to lay down for this, Ms. Brennan," Sabrina Sheehy said as she levitated a chair over to the cot where Cassandra was sitting.

Cassandra would have preferred to conceal her wariness then, but at the telepath's approach, her feathers stood up, making an audible rustling sound against her shirt and the wall behind her. The Witch of the Marshes noticed this and peered at her with some amusement, before sitting in her chair and gesturing for Cassandra to lie down. With a grimace, Cassandra lowered herself onto her side and forced herself not to pull away as Sabrina pressed a cool hand to her forehead. Sabrina, to her credit, tried to put her at ease by making small talk, but her version of small talk was geared towards her personal interests, so its effects were limited. "You may not know this, but your aura has the luminosity of what we call a 'trace psychic.' Your abilities are no doubt slight, but they're enough to give you enhanced empathy and, to an even lesser extent, some premonitions."

"Premonitions…?"

That came as a surprise to Cassandra, and the telepath, seeing her grey eyes widen, smiled and said, "You didn't realize you were having visions, did you? They must not have manifested strongly then. You probably only glimpsed them during moments of acute stress, in fever dreams and the like. Most potential seers have that problem: they associate their visions with hallucinations and dismiss them, which makes having the ability next to useless." A hint of frustration or what might have been exasperation crept into her voice at that. Cassandra supposed that the Witch had had to deal with several "potentials" that couldn't tell the difference between truth and dreams, and had caused havoc with their mistaken "foreknowledge." Or maybe Sabrina had had firsthand experience with the problem, and had wound up with one too many headaches over it.

Cassandra wasn't sure which possibility was the case, and though the telepath's blue eyes gleamed with thought, she eventually shrugged, declining to elaborate. "Then again, not recognizing their visions can help people avoid self-fulfilling prophecies, and that has its own merit. If this assessment goes well, we can consider your options, if you wish. My more immediate concern, however, is your mental shields. I assume you've had some training in reinforcing them; being an empath, your ability to function in violent engagements would be compromised if you didn't. For this assessment, you'll need to keep them lowered, or at least permeable. Could you do that for me?"

Cassandra shot her a look that plainly said, "No, I'd rather make this harder on myself," and did as asked. The telepath, ignoring Cassandra's expression, nodded with satisfaction and said, "Thank you. Now this next step will probably be uncomfortable for you, but keep those defenses lowered if you can. I'd rather not hurt you if I can help it. So try to relax - meditate, if you know how."

Giving the woman another sour look, Cassandra closed her eyes and tried to immerse herself in a dark, quiet void. It took her awhile to shut down her senses: the cot beneath her was hard and uncomfortable, despite the blankets folded over it; the glow from the ceiling lights filtered through
her eyelids, leaving her in a dull red haze; the jasmine fragrance of Sabrina Sheehy's perfume was strong, almost to the point where she could taste it as she breathed; and even through the locked door, she could hear people talking, but couldn't quite make out what they were saying. Yet despite these distractions, she eventually found the shadowy reservoir she sought, and sank deeper into it with every exhalation. In a state of mind near sleep, her thoughts dissolved like threads of spun sugar in water, and she gazed into the murk, watching as a fiery light flickered in the distance. Like a friar's lantern, it weaved to and fro, making its way closer to her. Eventually it paused, hanging in the darkness, before it streaked towards her and flashed outwards. As the flare faded, Sabrina Sheehy - or rather, a version of her - manifested in her mind's eye: she was wearing a snug, crimson uniform with gold lining and buttons, as well as white gloves and matching boots. Her hair, rather than hanging loose, had been wound up into a tight bun, which had been run through with two bō shuriken. The narrow weapons gleamed in what little light there was...and given their high glossiness, Cassandra felt it safe to assume they were well-maintained, and that their points were definitely not blunt.

However, while that detail was notable, so was the fact the outfit seemed to be made from leather. Oh, and there was the whip hanging at the woman's waist. She shouldn't overlook that either.

As Cassandra arched an eyebrow at the ensemble, the Witch inclined her head and said, "You never know what you'll find in someone else's mind, Ms. Brennan. I designed this avatar to protect me from whatever hostilities I might face, and what the 'leather' and 'weaponry' lack in strength, they make up for in flexibility. And besides...this is much more stylish than full-body armor, wouldn't you agree?"

Sure it was. Just because Sabrina looked a little like a dominatrix didn't make her any less "fashionable," right? While Cassandra was musing on how spicy the woman's sex life must be, the Witch of the Marshes looked around and said, "So, is your mindscape usually this empty, and do you usually wear a nightgown in here? Or is this merely the default setting? If so, I suppose that will make the assessment easier for us, but I admit I'm a bit underwhelmed. One would think an ex-assassin would have a much more...engaging...imagination than this."

Cassandra scowled at that. Her imagination worked just fine, but she'd been asked to meditate, not to create an interesting mental landscape for the woman to explore. As for the nightgown, she'd only recently begun wearing it in her dreams; before her final mission, she'd usually found herself in her Team Rocket uniform, which - while it had showed skin - nonetheless hadn't left her feeling quite as naked and vulnerable as the white gown. She wasn't certain what had caused the change: maybe it was her disassociation from the gang; maybe it was being an expectant mother; or maybe it was something else entirely, something with obscure psychological roots. Whichever was the case, her perception of herself had changed, and wrapping her arms over her chest, she said as much to the Gym Leader.

Pursing her cherry red lips at being sassed, the telepath placed a hand on her hip - rather near the whip - and said, "Could you at least add some gravity and a floor, perhaps? It would make the shifts between this zone and your memories much less jarring."

With a reluctance born from annoyance, Cassandra did so, and soon they were standing on a dirt-packed floor, which had a dusty blue hue in the low light. The dirt felt soft beneath Cassandra's feet, and tracing a few lines into it with her big toe, she swept them away as the Gym Leader stepped towards her. Looking up, she noted how Sabrina's eyes seemed to glow in the gloom, shining with a hint of psychic energy. Having seen Mewtwo's eyes do the same numerous times, she didn't find the sight intimidating like many would; instead, the show of power made her paradoxically feel more at ease. Perhaps that was even Sabrina's intention, for when the glow faded, she said, "Let's begin with something simple - something comforting from your childhood. Is there a memory that stands out to
There were several, actually, and while the one she chose was tinged with the sadness of retrospect, Cassandra nonetheless allowed it to flood her thoughts. As the scents of pine and holiday spices filled her nose; as the space around them lightened, with smeared colors coagulating into distinct shapes; and as Christmas carols, muted but recognizable, began to play, Cassandra felt the telepath at work. She felt Sabrina keying into how she dredged up her memory, and after the Witch had memorized the unique set of triggers and learned the navigation technique, she gently, but firmly, took control of the process. Though no longer willing it herself, Cassandra nonetheless continued sinking into the memory, with the Gym Leader looking over her shoulder to watch. Years spun backwards, her knowledge of things to come growing fuzzy and inaccessible, her body shrinking and rounding as she became a child once more. Her mind was no longer her own, but her awareness of even that soon faded, leaving her with the vague sense that something was off - that she was being watched, but she couldn't imagine how or by whom.

Yet as the memory wrapped itself around her, sinking the nails of what had been into her shoulders and hurrying her along, even that much was forgotten….

At the young age of four, Cassandra opened her eyes to gaze up at the ceiling, the edges of which were illuminated by strung up Christmas lights. For a long moment, she wasn’t sure why she’d woken up, until she heard the muffled sound of sobs coming through her bedroom door: Mama was crying again. Sitting up, she carefully slid herself over the edge of her bed, soon stepping into her white kitty slippers. Padding over to the door, she reached up to the knob and turned it, and made sure to pull the door open wide enough - sometimes her wings hit the doorframe when she wasn’t careful, and that always hurt. But she was getting better about that, and walking down the hall, she squinted and blinked rapidly at all the light. The lamps in the living room were on, and there, sitting on the sofa beside the Christmas tree - which twinkled with blinking lights, colored bulbs, tinsel and turtledoves, a variety of other ornaments (many of which were clustered on the lower sprigs), and an angel crowning its apex - was her mother. She was wearing her lilac pajamas, which complemented her creamy skin and light brown hair, the latter of which flowed in curls over her shoulders. Her eyes, which were the same grey color as her daughter's, were moist with tears as she peered down at a photo album in her lap.

The woman had placed a hand over her mouth to quiet her sobs, but Cassandra was used to being woken by these noises of distress, and her mother's crying automatically drew her to the room. For a moment, though, she stood in the hallway, feeling uncertain, before she folded her wings around her shoulders and walked into the room. "Mama?" she called quietly.

Her mother stiffened and, swiping her tears away, shut the album and set it on the coffee table. She then turned and smiled, and beckoned for her daughter to come to her. Cassandra hastened her steps and climbed onto the couch, curling up to her parent and hugging her as long arms enveloped her. Her mother smelled good, like the warm milk and honey they drank before bedtime. The scent - and the embrace - soothed her, easing the girl's worry for the woman. She didn't like it when Mama cried. The world always seemed sadder when she did.

She felt fingers preening through her feathers, and as she closed her eyes, Mama whispered, "Hey there, my angel. Did I wake you up? I'm sorry - I was trying to be quiet. I was just…well, waiting up for Santa. I made sure he got his milk and cookies, just like you asked." Indeed, the glass on the table was empty, the plate held only crumbs, the stockings were quite a bit fatter than they'd been that evening, and the pile under the Christmas tree had grown. Through her grogginess, Cassandra felt a surge of excitement. Santa had been here! Christmas had arrived! She smiled and, though a bit distracted, heard her mother add, "I didn't want any delibirds to come in and take them, not after you..."
worked so hard on them."

Cassandra snuggled her face into her mother's belly. "S'okay...the delibirds can have some. They need cookies too."

Selena laughed at that, and ran her fingers through the girl's hair. "Well then, next year we'll leave some out for them too. I'm sure they'll appreciate them."

They were quiet after that, and as the minutes passed with Mama stroking her hair, Cassandra's felt her eyelids growing heavy again. With some effort, she managed to keep herself from drifting off - it helped that her mother's belly was rising and falling beneath her cheek, and that it was gurgling from late-night hunger. Both made it a less-than-ideal pillow, though if she stayed up any longer, it wouldn't matter much: she'd fall asleep anyway. In any case, the sound was familiar, since Mama's stomach was often growly; she ate much lighter than Uncle Giovanni, which Uncle Giovanni scolded her for whenever he came over for dinner. They always sniped at each other over the sticky rice and seasoned fish, especially when they had those drinks Cassandra couldn't have. She didn't like it when they did that, because they weren't like the couple across the hall, who bickered but never got angry. Her Mama and Uncle usually ended up angry, and if it got really bad, Mama either sent her to her room ("She's only four, Giovanni. She doesn't need to hear this!") or told Uncle Giovanni to leave, saying really bad words when she did so. Not that Uncle always made Mama angry - sometimes they smiled and laughed together ("So Silver got back at Zach how? Goodness, you should have him try out for the baseball team when he's older, if he has that kind of aim!"), though that wasn't quite as often. In any case, she was glad he wasn't here right now. He might upset Mama more, and Mama shouldn't be upset during Christmas.

Burrowing her face into her mother's side, she felt the woman twitch, whispering that that tickled. She retaliated by dancing her fingers beneath Cassandra's ribs, which made Cassandra jolt awake with a high-pitched squeal, laughter rising in her throat. "Mama, no! Don't tickle! Stop!" Yet Mama gave her no mercy, and with a wide grin, the woman continued with her playful torment, until finally Cassandra managed to squirm away and roll off the couch. As she hit the carpet, she heard her mother give a small gasp, which mingled lingering glee with worry with the realization that her child was probably fine (she hadn't hit the coffee table, thank goodness!). Sitting up, Cassandra wrinkled her nose and stuck her tongue out Mama, glad to escape being tickled. The woman, in response, bit her lip to keep herself from laughing.

Now within an arm's length of the Christmas presents, it took all of Cassandra's concentration to keep herself from reaching for one (especially the ones with the really sparkly wrapping paper Uncle liked to use), but somehow, she managed to avoid doing so...although she did glance over at them a few times, which she was sure Mama noticed. Still, as much as she wanted to figure out what was in them - there might be German chocolate eggs with toys in them! - she wanted to know something else a little bit more. "Mama, why were you crying?"

Her mother went very still, and for a moment didn't say anything. Then, with some hesitance, she told Cassandra, "I...I was just looking at some photos from previous Christmases, when your papa was here with us. The fact that he's not here now...it makes me sad, sweetheart."

While Cassandra, admittedly, didn't feel a strong connection with her father (how could she, when she barely remembered him?), she nonetheless felt some sadness of her own right then. She always felt his absence whenever he was mentioned, or whenever she was reminded that her Papa was gone. It was like a hole in her chest, in her life, and it ached whenever she saw other kids' fathers, both at the park and on the T.V. She didn't tell Mama, but she wanted one too; sometimes, she'd even thought of asking her mother to go find a new one for her. But she knew it would be better if she had her Papa back, because then they could pick up from where her fuzzy dreams left
off: with him humming or talking to her, or carrying her around way up high on his shoulders. And
the three of them would be a family again, and that sad look in Mama's eyes would go away,
replaced by lots of smiles. Sometimes Cassandra imagined that she would be the one who'd make it
all better, that - when she got bigger and stronger - she'd go find Papa and bring him home. And then
Mama would be truly happy again, and Cassandra wanted that even more than her Papa or presents,
because Mama meant more to her than anything else.

Fluttering her wings at the thought, she asked, "But Mama, if the pictures make you sad, why do you
look at them?"

Her Mama leaned back into the couch and, after twining her fingers together, said, "Because it's
good to remember, even if it makes you sad." And seeing Cassandra's confusion, she smiled, her
grey eyes warm as she looked at her daughter. "You remind me of him every day, you know. And
that comforts me."

"But where is Papa? When's he coming home?" After all, if he came back soon, then she wouldn't
have to go track him down.

Her Mama's mouth opened and closed, like one of Uncle Giovanni's big goldeen, and for a second,
she looked rather uncomfortable. Then she sighed and said, "Um…you see, 'Sandra, he…he went
overseas for work, but…he was supposed to be back awhile ago, so…."

"So he'll be back soon, right?" If he was supposed to be back already, then surely he wouldn't be
away much longer?

Her mother jerked, as if she'd run into the coffee table, and then brought a hand up over her mouth.
For a long while, long enough to make the girl start to feel uncomfortable, the woman stared at the
Christmas tree…and then, to Cassandra's horror, she saw her mother's eyes begin to glisten
with tears. She'd upset Mama, and that made her feel awful, like the time when she'd been sick and
accidentally threw up on Uncle Giovanni's coat, and he'd had to replace it with that orange thing
that made baby Silver cry. Ashamed and angry at herself, she barely heard her mother's breath catch as
she tried to say something, as if something were caught in her throat. Finally, Mama whispered in a
strange, raspy voice, "Yeah…yeah, he'll be back soon, sweetheart, don't you worry."

Yet Cassandra wasn't worried about her father anymore - she was more worried about her mother,
who was struggling to keep herself from crying. She watched Mama stand up and turn away from
her, watched her shoulders quake beneath her lilac sleeves, and watched that pale hand lift and brush
at her face. Cassandra got up, shuffled towards her, and wrapped her arms around the woman's legs
from behind. Pressing her cheek against Mama's thigh, she said, "Don't worry either, Mama. It's
Christmas, so smile! Please?"

Her mother looked down, and, seeing her daughter's pleading look, she sighed and petted the girl's
hair. "…Alright, 'Sandra. I'll try. And you're right, it's Christmas, and Christmas is supposed to be a
happy time. How about we have some milk and cookies, and then open a couple presents? It's late,
but we have all day to sleep in and open the rest, now don't we? Maybe we can even get out of
dinner at Uncle Giovanni's place if we're really, really lazy."

Cassandra grinned, her worries banished at the thought of milk and cookies and presents, of her
mother's smiles and not having to dress up for Uncle. To her, that sounded perfect…!

When the memory unwound and faded, leaving the flavors of sugar cookies and sweet milk in her
mouth, Cassandra gave herself a strong mental shake. Momentarily disoriented, it took her several
seconds to remember that that Christmas had long since passed; that she was no longer a child, that
her mother was fourteen years dead, and that her most recent Christmas had been spent alone on the streets. Disturbed by how she’d regressed, she glanced back at Sabrina, who was drawing away from her with a thoughtful look in her eyes. Cassandra hoped she’d given the woman something interesting to think about…and, had she asked, the telepath would have confirmed that she had. Whereas the four-year-old Cassandra hadn’t grasped the implications of her mother's words, the psychic certainly had, and found herself rather intrigued by the girl's "Uncle Giovanni," whom the mother and daughter both seemed to have wished to avoid.

"Giovanni," Sabrina mused to herself, was an Italian name, and possibly - perhaps even likely - belonged to one of the members of the immigrant families of the 1950's and 1960's. The Union of Japanese Isles - Kanto in particular - had, for the last two centuries, drawn numerous groups of immigrants to their shores. The diverse pokémon species on the islands (both from their isolation from the mainland, and from all the imported species), the rapid advancement of pokétech and other experimental technologies, and the world-renowned corporations which paid generously for fresh innovations, had proven irresistible to many groups. There had also, of course, been numerous social conflicts and natural disasters that had made foreigners seek out the gem of the East Sea; Sabrina herself was an offshoot, however distant, from one of those groups, though the percentage of Irish blood in her veins was nearly negligible. In particular, the fallout of the Second World War had resulted in considerable strife within Italy, particularly among the upper class. Infighting had occurred between those who'd supported and resisted Mussolini's policies, and within some families irreparable rifts had formed.

While the exact reasons behind those rifts had ultimately been forgotten, those divisions had remained. During the next twenty years, several powerful families had made the choice to sever all ties and migrate to the Japanese Isles. Notably, one of these families - which, some whispered, had been connected to the Italian mafia - had merged with the Makis of Viridian City. Although few in number, the Maki family had been, and was still, a wealthy and well-respected family. Their founding of the Viridian City Gym - as well as the work they'd done for the League - had done much to rid them of the "taint" of being burakumin (the descendants of those who'd dealt in unclean professions). That they often donated money to charities in Viridian, and funded numerous research projects, had only reinforced this "redeemed" image. Consequently, many had been quick to dismiss the rumors of the Maki heir (and eventual matriarch) being involved with the yakuza. It had, frankly, seemed an affront to suggest that the family was still involved with immoral activities. Yes, some of the heir's associates had been caught breaking the law. And yes, the heir herself had liked frequenting the dirty casinos of Celadon City. But the same could be said of other families, and none of them were involved with the gangs. Even so, the rumors had persisted, and from the two families' union had been born conspiracies. After with, with their pooled resources and connections, they'd become a powerful - and rather influential - force in Kanto.

That Team Rocket had appeared shortly afterwards certainly hadn't helped dissuade the conspiracy theorists.

And then, of course, there were the children. The Maki heir had given birth to two sons, the eldest of which had died around twenty years ago. The matriarch had met the same fate not long after, and had left everything to her younger son, who now ran the Viridian City Gym. Sabrina had met him once or twice at League conferences, and had come away from those meetings thinking that Giovanni Maki was a strong and charismatic man. Yet there was something about him that had made her distinctly wary; something in the way he smiled and looked at others that set her on edge. Though she'd tried to discover what that "something" was, and had discarded many hypotheses over the years, she'd never managed to get a satisfactory answer where Giovanni Maki was concerned. Even now, when Kanto was experiencing civil strife in Celadon and Cerulean, she couldn't gauge where he stood.
So it was of interest to Sabrina that an ex-Elite Agent of Team Rocket, who'd been born in Viridian City, and whose appearance belied her ties to the Italian families, had an "Uncle Giovanni."

Of course, Giovanni was a common Italian name, so it could simply be a coincidence. Objectively, she knew there could be many, many other explanations which didn't implicate a high-ranking League member into being involved with a gang. Yet why else was Sabrina sifting through this woman's memories, if not to uncover the truth - no matter how awful that "truth" might be?

Reaching out to take hold of Cassandra's shoulder, she asked, "This uncle of yours, 'Giovanni'…he's important, isn't he?"

Cassandra stared at her for a moment, her expression surprised and slightly mystified (for it seemed so, so strange for a person to not know), before she nodded. "Yeah, he's pretty damn important."

She said the words lightly enough, but even so, Sabrina could sense that there was more to the matter than that, and cautioned herself to be wary. "Show me," she said, gripping the girl's shoulder a little tighter.

And so Cassandra did, giving the Witch of the Marshes yet more to ponder.

A little older and a lot more scared, Cassandra stood near her bedroom door, listening to her mother and Uncle Giovanni arguing in the living room. Earlier that evening, after they'd had dinner and she'd played with Giovanni's persian, her uncle had given her an early birthday present: a shiny collar that made her wings disappear. While she'd enjoyed toying with it, with watching and feeling her wings vanish and then reappear, she wasn't sure how comfortable she was with it. She'd always had her wings; to suddenly not have them made her feel all squeamish, like she did whenever she and Mama stayed over at her uncle's place. But her mother and uncle both thought it would be better if she looked "normal," otherwise bad things might happen; people might try to hurt them, or take her away, and while she didn't understand why, she certainly didn't want that to happen! And now they were arguing over what else could be done to "keep her safe," and they seemed to have very different ideas on how to do that. Mama wanted everything to remain just as it had been, while Uncle Giovanni was pushing for change - change that Selena, and Cassandra too for that matter, didn't want.

"She's not going with you! I'm grateful for your help, Giovanni, but I won't let you drag her into your game. I already lost my husband to it - I won't lose my daughter too!"

"I'm not intending to 'drag her' into anything! I'm just asking for you both to come live with me. My home has plenty of room, and I can see to it that she has everything she needs, including the best possible education-.

"We're perfectly fine right here! And you can offer the same things to her from your mansion, you know." They both were breathing hard from anger, and as their shadows shifted, her Mama said every bad word and then continued, "God, it's bad enough that the boys are being raised there, among those sorts of people. Don't try to get my daughter over there too! And don't pretend you have our best interests in mind, especially not Cassandra's. You took one look at her wings when she was born and started plotting ways to use her-!"

Uncle Giovanni's shadow jolted forward, startling the persian at his side. "What are you-?"

"Caleb told me! He told me how you approached him, saying what a fine little agent she could be when she grew up. …Oh don't look so surprised. Of course he'd tell me that! You shouldn't have expected him to keep that between friends, not when it concerned our daughter! I thought it was bad
enough he had to stay by your side, despite you putting him through hell and back. But now you're trying to get to Cassandra too! Christ, where's your sense of loyalty? Where the fuck was it when you sent Caleb to Guyana - to Guyana! You knew the gangs there would kill your people on sight, but you still!"

Though her uncle's voice was quieter when he next spoke, there was also outrage in it, and hearing it, his persian began to growl. The sound made the hairs on the back of Cassandra's neck stand up. "You think I sent him to his death because he wouldn't...? He was my friend, Selena! And he was the only one I trusted to do the job properly! What happened was not my fault. I gave him plenty of agents and resources to use as he-"

"They were outnumbered five to one! And they didn't even have that many 'resources,' as you so put it! No matter how 'well-trained' and 'efficient' they were, they couldn't possibly have taken down hundreds of guerilla terrorists! Don't you dare try to spin this around and say he was incompetent. He didn't stand a chance, and he knew that going in! He said...," and her mother's voice broke then, before she went on with a hiss, "He said if he wasn't back in six months, then he wasn't coming home. He knew he was probably going to be killed over there, but he went anyway to make sure Cassandra and I didn't have to play for your 'team.' That was the deal, remember? He'd take on one last mission, and then we'd be out! He died - your best friend died attempting to do the impossible for you, and if you had any shred of decency in you, then you'd do the honorable thing and keep your promise! You'd stop trying to drag us into your world!"

She thought her mother might be crying, and her uncle, too angry to care, said, "I told you already: I'm not trying to drag you into anything. I simply want to make sure my best friend's wife and child are cared for properly. Is that so wrong of me to ask-?"

"Yes, because it's not Giovanni Maki asking! It's Signore Maki, and he's someone else entirely." Her uncle went very still at that, and when her mother spoke again, it was in a much quieter voice. "He's not the little boy Caleb was friends with, who just kept...kept trying to escape his bitch of a mother. He's not the one who made something of himself, regardless of what she thought. He's not the one who made his friends laugh, and...god, if he was asking me and Cassandra to move in, I'd say 'yes.' I'd say 'yes' in a heartbeat. But you're not that person anymore, and I guess I can't blame you for that. After what happened to you, Caleb, Nadia, and the others...it wasn't your fault, but it definitely changed you! And the only reason we stuck around, especially after Cassandra was born, was because Caleb refused to give up on you. He thought he could help you somehow...but he couldn't, and I'm not about to make the same mistake as he did. I'm not going to trust in some kernel of goodness that isn't there anymore. So just...just let it go, Giovanni. Let us go. If Caleb's memory matters to you at all, then do that much for him. And while you're at it, try to become a better father for the boys. Don't treat them the way that woman treated you - learn from what she put you through."

For a long, tense moment, there was silence...before, in a low and harsh voice, Giovanni said, "I have. I've learned more than enough from her." And as she watched, his shadow reached for its belt. There was a flash of red light as he returned his persian to its pokéball, and she watched his hand snake out, plucking his tangerine jacket from the coat rack. "And if you insist on rejecting my offer, then fine. I won't offer it again."

"Good. Because we don't want what you're offering." Her voice was also hushed, and the girl watched as her mother's shadow moved and passed her uncle's. There was the sound of the front door opening, and then Selena said, "Now please leave. We've probably been scaring my daughter, and I need to make sure she's okay."

Her uncle walked to the door, his footsteps falling heavily upon the carpet, and as he paused in the
hallway, she heard him say, "...Goodbye then, Selena."

"Good night, Giovanni." And the door was closed between them, followed by the sound of the locks being engaged.

It would be almost two years before Cassandra saw her godfather again.

When the deadbolt was thrown, the memory sealed itself away, leaving the two women back in the featureless gloom. Neither of them spoke when it did; instead, they both grew pensive, particularly Cassandra. It was possible, Sabrina thought, that the woman had never before fully processed what her mother and Giovanni had said. Actually, that seemed quite likely, given that most people - and especially children - didn't like to dwell on the things that distressed them, especially the things they didn't understand. People repressed what they could, and in Cassandra's case, overhearing her mother and godfather's arguing over her - and over her father - would have probably been something she'd tried to forget. She'd clearly failed in doing so, if the clarity of the memory was any indication; then again, it was also possible that she'd added the specifics at a later date, after she'd learned certain facts and details.

Yet even if it was half-remembered and half-imagined, it was still a moment in Cassandra's childhood that had frightened her, and some parts of it were no doubt very real. Of what had been said, there were certain bits that Sabrina turned over in her mind like precious gold nuggets - for that was what the information was to her. It seemed very likely to her now that Cassandra's "uncle" - or more accurately, her godfather - was who she thought he was...and that thought made laughter, and somewhat hysterical laughter at that, bubble up in her stomach. Had Giovanni Maki duped them all, even her, the telepath who was supposed to pick up on the clues no one else could see? The thought was insidious, half-acknowledged and half-thinkable, a suspicion so awful it just couldn't be true. Yet Sabrina suspected that it would be confirmed, and looking over at Cassandra, she felt her interest spike. This was something she had to know, regardless of the assessment at hand.

She also wanted to know what had happened to the girl's mother. There was a bittersweet tang to Cassandra's memories of her single parent, and Sabrina knew that whatever Selena Brennan's fate had been, it was essential to understanding the woman in front of her now. After all, wasn't there a saying out there somewhere, about the mother being the child's god? And if that god was lost, then where did that leave the child...?

"I never realized…"

As Cassandra spoke and then trailed off, Sabrina's gaze fixated on her. As she arched an eyebrow in inquiry, the other woman shrugged and said, "It's just...Nadia. Who was she? I lived with the man for eight years, and knew him even longer, but I have no idea who she was. I never gave it much thought before now." And for an instant, her pensive look returned, before she grimaced and said, "Great, now that's gonna bug me, and there's no chance I'll figure it out anytime soon. Wonderful."

Sabrina just gave her an amused smile and thought, Well, now you know how it feels to be wondering about Giovanni, don't you? But rather than say that, she said, "We should move onto something else. Would I be correct in assuming that your life stayed relatively peaceful until he showed up again?" Seeing Cassandra's nod, she added, "Then let's resume from there. What happened?"

And the telepath watched as Cassandra's demeanor suddenly changed: she shuffled her feet, and gave her a reproachful, reluctant look before drawing back. She didn't want to go to that place, to relive what had happened! Hadn't living through it once been enough...? Yet Sabrina, the reins of control in her hands, directed Cassandra's thoughts towards the event, pushed the woman to show her what she wanted to know. She'd warned Cassandra this would be the case; that she wouldn't
refrain from prying into what she believed to be essential knowledge, no matter how her charge felt about it. And so the mindscape around them brightened, the air growing warm and humid, the sky turning the amber color of an early summer afternoon. As slabs of pavement were laid out and grass sprouted beneath their feet, Cassandra gave the Gym Leader a scorching glare, before the two of them were enveloped by the memory….

Clutching the straps of her backpack as she jumped off the final step of the bus, Cassandra began to run as soon as her feet hit the pavement. Behind her, she heard the shrieks and laughter of some of the other children from her primary school. They were also heading to the apartment complex nearby, though at a more leisurely pace. When she heard one of the girls cry out that some "mean boy" had put gum in her hair, she paused and quickly checked her own, and was relieved to find no debris clinging to her head, sticky or otherwise. Good - she wanted to look nice for Mama today, and with a giddy grin, Cassandra charged forward, cutting through the lawns and skirting the edges of the parking lot. Around her cicadas chirped and buzzed, and clouds of gnats hung in swirling clouds above the sidewalks. On other afternoons like this one, when the sky was clear and golden-hued, she would have considered hunting the former and disbanding the latter group of insects, but she wouldn't tarry today. She'd received the results on her exams, and wanted to share them with Mama as soon as possible! She'd tried really, really hard to get those grades, and her mother would doubtlessly smile and be proud of her. Maybe they'd even go celebrate with ice cream! Ice cream would be nice. They could split a sundae with lots of caramel and nuts on top and oh, oh, she couldn't wait to show Mama the scores she'd earned, she couldn't wait! Her grin widened on her face until her cheeks started to hurt, but even then, she couldn't stop smiling.

Turning the corner around the nearest building, she stepped into the main yard, which was bordered with hollowed-out bushes, with spruces with blue poison-berries, and had a sandpit and jungle-gym in the middle. She paused, though, when she saw flashes of red light coming from the parking lot on the far side. She'd seen lights like those before, when the man down her hall had accidentally set his oven on fire. The smell of smoke hadn't cleared out for a week! She hoped he hadn't tried cooking again; the last time he'd made his arm as red as a krabby shell! Moving forward with more caution, she turned when she heard one of the grannies from Building C call her over. Shaking her head and shouting that she couldn't come play now, she darted toward her own building. The granny continued to call after her, and now feeling a bit unsettled, she thought, That's weird. And as she got closer, she saw blue lights intermixed with the red, and saw an ambulance parked out front. Cops and people who looked like doctors were talking to one another, and as one of them spotted her, he yelled something. Startled, she didn't listen to what he was saying and bolted for the door. She ducked under reaching arms and charged up the stairs, clutching her backpack tightly. What was going on? She didn't smell any smoke. So why were there so many people outside? Was someone hurt? Why were the cops here? Was the "dome-stick abuse" couple fighting again? That was always scary, and Mama always got mad when they shouted at each other.

Mama would know what was going on. She always seemed to know what was…what was…why were there more cops on her floor? Why were they up here? Why were they going into her home? What were those flashes of light? She could hear men and women talking. Were they talking to Mama? What had happened while she was in school? The cops in front of the door suddenly parted, and people in blue carried something out on a stretcher. It was person-shaped and covered in a white cloth, and then she saw a strand of light brown hair, the curl matted with red, escaping the sheet. As everything else went dark except that strand of hair, Cassandra felt herself go cold, her insides twisting sickeningly as a horrible smell (upon some instinctual knowledge - or perhaps from a memory from her infancy, of when her neighbor's' dog had died - her mind would later call it death, death, death) hit her nose. The smell alone was enough to invoke her confusion and terror, but the sight of the hair pushed her mind over the edge.
Mama?

And there was a shrill cry, and only vaguely was she aware of how her throat was hurting, how wet her face had become, and of hands grabbing her, arms hoisting her, of someone whispering words into her ears, the sentiment meant to be soothing, but the gesture proving meaningless.

Mama. Mama. MamaMamaMAMA-!

There was a pinching sensation on her arm, and then blackness overwhelmed her. When she awoke next, she found herself lying on a hard bed, the covers smelling like oranges and feather tips prickling out from the pillow. She pulled one free, and then another, then another, then another, her mind filling with the memory of what she'd seen, and that noise began again, with a shadow falling over her and someone making hushing sounds. The noise gradually died away, replaced with choked sobs, and the person pressed a ceramic cup to her lips, telling her it would make her feel better. A sweet smell, familiar, rose from the liquid inside. Her throat hurt, and when she drank to soothe it, her stomach turned over: it was hot chocolate. Her Mama always made her hot chocolate when she was upset, like after she had a nightmare or hurt herself or some mean kid had picked on her. Already distraught, that association made Cassandra's stomach heave. Brown mixed with sour acid drenched the sheet over her, and the adult cursed, and then began apologizing over and over again when she started to cry. The noise resumed, and Cassandra knew she was the one making it, the sound filled with terror and pain and grief.

MAMA…!

In the years to come, even the scent of chocolate would make her queasy.

By the time Cassandra calmed down enough to process what was going on, the investigation into her mother's death had been completed. The police, after discussing the matter with her godfather, informed her of their findings and asked her a few questions. They believed that Selena Brennan, the wife of the late Caleb Brennan, had succumbed to grief and her increasingly stressful financial situation. While her only child was away at school, she'd written and left a note on the kitchen counter, had locked herself in her room, and had then shot herself in the head. Hearing the gun go off, the neighbors had called the police, and after thoroughly assessing the scene and interviewing those nearby, that was the conclusion the investigators had come to. Yet there were still numerous questions to ask the girl: had her mother seemed "very sad" lately, or had any sudden changes in mood? Had she done any of the following activities: changed her appearance, given away her things, visited or called people she hadn't spoken to in years? Had she lost interest in some of her favorite pastimes, or talked about things that made her, Cassandra, feel uncomfortable? Yet more important than any of these rudimentary questions was one specific inquiry: "Have you ever seen this gun around the house before, Cassie?" The country's firearm laws were incredibly strict, and civilians weren't allowed to have them - which meant the purchase had probably been made illegally. At that point, Giovanni had stepped in, explaining that Caleb had been enlisted in a private army, and must have given his wife the gun for protection. Her questioners, momentarily forgetting Cassandra's presence, had turned to him: "Protection from what?"

Giovanni had merely said he didn't know.

Later, Cassandra was allowed to read the note they'd found. It had simply said, in a shaky scrawl unlike her mother's usual handwriting (they chalked it up to nerves), "I love you. I'm sorry." And that was all; there were no insightful reasons into why she'd killed herself, no sentimental death poetry, nothing that would've allowed Cassandra to make sense of the act. Instead, she'd been left with the knowledge that despite loving her, despite feeling bad about leaving her, her mother had left her behind - and that brought a trace of anger into her grief.
In the days that followed, the funeral preparations were completed, the items within the apartment were sifted through, some of which Cassandra kept, while the rest was stored or discarded. Selena's life insurance policy was used to pay off her debts, with the surplus funds being placed in a bank account for Cassandra's later life. Soon enough the girl was dressed in mourning clothes and brought to the funeral auditorium, where the priest said several prayers and incense offerings were made. Both she and Giovanni stayed during the vigil, which, as the funeral staff explained, was honorable of them to do. Not many people did such these days, and considering the nature of the deceased's death…well, it was very considerate of them. It would no doubt make Selena's soul very happy.

Cassandra dug her fingertips into her knees at that, and after the staff had left, after Giovanni's many failed attempts to start a conversation ("I heard you did well on your exams. Would you share your results with me?"), she got up and opened the viewing window on the casket. She looked down into Mama's face, which seemed peaceful in a way she'd rarely been in life. Seeing that, the trace of anger returned to Cassandra's heart, and she wanted to scream at her, to demand to know why. Why had her mother left her alone? Why…? She said she loved me, so why? Why didn't she say alive for me? Why wasn't I enough? And as her tears fell onto the glass of the viewing pane, she wondered, with a mix of a child's insecurity and uncertainty:

Did she really love me…?

Through her tears, she saw a hand reach over her shoulder and close the viewing pane, while another rested, hard and heavy, on her shoulder. "Don't worry, little raven," Giovanni whispered. "I'll take good care of you. I promise."

His words were meant to comfort her...but in that twisted night, she couldn't, wouldn't be consoled...

Somehow, even after fourteen years, Cassandra's grief over her mother's death still managed to hurt. As they drew away from the scene, Sabrina moved back, giving the woman a few minutes to calm herself - let it never be said that the Witch of the Marshes was unnecessarily cruel. Yet it was also for her own benefit that Sabrina gave them a small breather: for while Cassandra was feeling that upheaval of sadness, the pain of it rising from her chest and stinging in her eyes and throat, the telepath was also forced to endure it. Projecting her psyche into Cassandra's made that unavoidable; she was surrounded by it, intimately in tune with it, which was part of what made this process so insightful. She understood what the girl was feeling and why, having been carried along as her memories, thoughts, sensations, and emotions all unfolded. There was a danger to that, of course, of her empathizing too well with her charge. Yet Sabrina didn't know if she could help that, since she too was familiar with losing her parents at a young age. However, unlike in Cassandra's case, she knew that loss had been her fault. Her abuses of her psychic powers had harmed her mother and driven her father away, and it had taken close to ten years for her to recover from the trauma, for her family to mend. Even now, there was tension in the Sheehy home, but Sabrina believed that one day, they would overcome that. Working together to support a school full of psychic children had gone a long ways towards that end.

Especially when those children often came from even worse situations. Horrible as that was, it did help put things into perspective.

In any case, while she wasn't shocked by Cassandra's loss, she was somewhat disturbed by Giovanni's words and actions - for as innocuous and kindly as they'd seemed, there were still something there, something, perhaps, that Cassandra had added in retrospect. Perhaps, she thought, there was a tinge of irony to the whole affair. She wasn't entirely certain, and she wondered, vaguely, whether Cassandra's life had just gone to hell from that point on. After all, the end result was carrying two half-human bastards and being locked up in a cell - and that wasn't counting the charges
the court was considering raising against her. The homicide list alone would be long enough to reach down to her knees!

With a sigh, the Gym Leader turned to her charge and said, "I'm sorry for your loss. Should I expect things to go downhill from here?"

Cassandra didn't meet her gaze - she didn't seem to want to. Pursing her lips, she said, "Oh no. It got better for awhile. Then it got worse. Repeat that a few times, and then you'll have the basic picture."

Damn. Sabrina hated emotional rollercoaster rides. That was more Rose's department, but she supposed it couldn't be help. This was one of her jobs, after all: police consultation at its finest. She took some consolation in the fact that she knew now, with certainly, that Giovanni Maki was involved. She'd consider the full implications of that fact later, though. "Well then, we'd best get on with it."

And so, with mutual reluctance, they did just that.

During the years that followed, Cassandra was told she could have anything she wanted. Her godfather was, after all, a wealthy man, and his influence in the Viridian City was far-reaching. However, while she was given everything a child could desire - a comfortable room of her own, good food, clean water, and an abundance of books, toys, and clothes - even Giovanni could not give her what she wanted most: a friend. While she was assigned many different caretakers (all of them female), and some of Giovanni's girlfriends attempted to bond with her, she shied away from these women, unwilling to have another mother figure after her last one had left her. Similarly, she never grew attached to any of Giovanni's male associates, although this was more his fault than hers: being well aware of their sins, he'd refused to allow them near his goddaughter, lest she be influenced or injured by them. As for Giovanni himself, he was always busy managing the Viridian Gym and his organization, which limited his presence in her life. Not that he didn't try to be a good parent to Cassandra: they had dinner together every night, and when he could, he'd take her out to museums, theatres, art exhibits, stadiums, and even the zoo and the park on occasion. He went to every teacher-parent meeting, and spoiled her with gifts each birthday and Christmas, trying to make up for not being around more.

Yet for all his efforts, he wasn't an adult she felt she could have fun with or confide in. He couldn't be her best friend like her mother had been, and she was hard-pressed to find a child who could fill that void. Giovanni's own son was just a toddler, and acted like a brat more often than not. Zachariah, his nephew, was around, but he was older than she was, and preferred the company of boys to girls. As for the other so-called "Elite Children" who were selected during those years, most of their attempts to be her friend were insincere: they wanted the benefits of being friends with Giovanni's goddaughter, rather than being friends with her. Only one of them, Ricardo Verde, actually seemed to care about her as an individual, and while they talked often enough, they rarely had the chance to hang out. Being the oldest of the Children, he underwent his initiation into Team Rocket well before the others, and was soon too busy with his training and private lessons to keep the girl company. Her schoolmates were similarly problematic: some wanted to be her friends for their benefits; some envied and ostracized her for being Giovanni's goddaughter; some were too busy preparing for the next League competition; and some just considered the girl "weird" and "no fun" to be around.

Cassandra, for her part, tried to be friendly, but even she knew she wasn't the most cheerful of children. Her life was good, but it wasn't happy, and this affected how she behaved in school. She was quiet and withdrawn, and when she was having a particularly bad day, she'd sometimes be rather moody and snappish. Very rarely did she speak or smile, and her teachers, seeking to correct
this, often made the mistake of calling on her in class. Believing she was just painfully shy, rather than simply reserved, they tried to reassure her by saying she was a "smart kid," and no doubt knew the answer to the problem on the board. This praise, and the fact that she often did know the answer, only made the situation with her peers worse. Soon enough they considered her the teachers' pet, which made her nearly as unpopular as the class bullies. Whenever she tried to argue with them, they took it as evidence that she thought she was better than others. And so, tired and frustrated, she eventually began to avoid them completely. Why should she want to be friends with them when they were mean to her? They weren't worth it, were they? Maybe she'd just be better off alone - maybe she didn't really need friends!

And so her loneliness continued, until Amber Fuji came up to her one day and introduced herself. And just like that, Cassandra's life changed.

While other children had been cruel to her, Amber was kind and wise, and didn't possess the same pettiness as her peers. She was friendly to everyone, especially the misfits ("Mama says they need friends the most!"), and only fought with the ones who made the other kids cry. She soon became the 'big sister' to those who needed one, and was always willing to listen to their complaints and offer them her handkerchief - she certainly never seemed to need one, as optimistic and energetic as she was. For all these good qualities, though, she wasn't an angel. In the months to follow, Cassandra lost count of the number of times they played practical jokes on their teachers (she, at least, had the grace to whisper an apology beforehand), or how many times they were nearly killed, or worse, grounded due to some game of theirs gone horribly wrong (she'd forever bear the scars from the skating incident in the parking lot. On the other hand, the next time Giovanni took the boys and her to his summer home, she could cite some experience with the basics of jet-skiing).

Really, she should've realized how much trouble the rambunctious girl was when she first turned to her and, quoting her father, said, "Oh, Cassie, don't be such a worrywart! What doesn't cripple you makes you stronger, right?"

Uh-huh. Sure, Amber. That declaration just filled Cassandra with confidence that she wasn't going to die in some horrible way. Yet even while terrified out of her wits, Cassandra had to admit: going on wild adventures with Amber was fun. Heck, even a broken leg and tetanus shots were worth the memories, right? ("Note to self: the routes to Victory Road are restricted for a reason. Do not let Amber convince you it would be fun to go fishing over there! That is all.")

In any case, the two girls made a good match, as different as they were, and when they weren't being mischievous, they spent their hours in activities their parental figures approved of. They did homework together, practiced music together (Amber played the violin, and cited anime character Michiru Kaioh as one of her heroes), and frequently slept over at each other's homes - usually Amber's - playing video-games or reading manga well into the night. During this time, Jonathan and Makoto Fuji, who'd had Amber in their old age, got to know Giovanni Maki rather well. Cassandra could tell they were uncertain about her guardian, and that their wariness only grew when Amber blabbed about the "strange people" and the "private meetings" they'd been shooed away from. Yet if they figured out who Giovanni actually was, they said nothing; they merely told Cassandra she could come to them if she ever needed to talk to an adult. She never did take them up on that offer, and they didn't push - although more than once, she'd caught them looking at her in concern.

Yet most of her visits were pleasant, and during one fall day, when the air was nippy and Dr. Fuji was raking leaves in the front yard, the girls tried their hands at tree-climbing. The backyard of the Fujis home had one very tall and broad oak tree, which the family liked to picnic under on the weekend. The lowest boughs had been cut off (which should have been a hint to the girls), so after struggling and failing to cling to the tree's trunk, the girls dragged the porch table over. After getting
the mud from their shoes all over the plastic tabletop ("Your mama's gonna be mad, Amber." "You practice the puppy-dog face like I told you?" "Yeah, but-." "Then we'll be fine! She can't resist the face."). they hauled themselves up into the first branches, and began ascending from there, soon vanishing into the orange leaves. Within the next twenty minutes, they'd managed to find their way to the very top, and clung to the thinner branches, which were swaying in the autumn wind. They looked over Viridian City, gilded gold in the late afternoon, with leaves falling from the trees like flakes from a fire. Other children rode down the streets on bicycles, some of them with their starter pokémon tagging along. The neighbor's meowth was pouncing on something ("Probably a cricket," Amber said), while birds were swooping in erratic circles, drunk from a feast of overripe chokecherries. It was a peaceful moment, and one which the girls were reluctant to leave. Yet dinner would be ready soon, and so they began to climb down, intent on filling their grumbling bellies.

"We've got to get the table back before Mama sees," Amber said above Cassandra, who'd started climbing down first. Cassandra looked up, seeing her friend's little shoe prodding for the next branch. Finding one, Amber looked over her shoulder and asked, "You think we could sneak in and-.

Her foot slipped, and Cassandra watched with horror as her friend fell. As her body sailed past, she reached and grabbed her, and was yanked off her own perch by Amber's weight. They crashed through the branches, shrieking, hands clutching at one another, twigs lacerating their skin and leaves getting caught in their hair. As the ground swooped up to meet them, Cassandra, in a moment of clarity, remembered doing wing exercises under Giovanni's supervision. Fumbling at the choker around her neck, she turned the dial and felt her wings materialize, only for them to be battered by the branches as well. Gritting her teeth, she kept a firm grip on Amber and tilted her pinions, directing them into a short glide away from the tree. Now in the open air, she flapped up desperately, slowing their descent with each upward wing-beat. Yet the strain on Cassandra's frame was excruciating: her wings, after all, were meant to carry only her. On the verge of blacking out, she somehow managed to cling to consciousness, and lowered them both to the ground at non-lethal speeds...but both took very painful tumbles upon hitting the lawn. Laying in the grass and fallen leaves after impact, Cassandra heard a faint chattering sound, which - through an endorphin-induced haze - she dazedly thought must be a squirrel. In actuality, Amber was rambling non-sensibly, mostly in shock ("Cassie's a crow! You're a crow, Cassie!" Complete with hysterical laughter), and Cassandra thought she must have also muttered something - or maybe Amber was just that intuitive - because suddenly the other girl was fumbling with the choker, and then her wings were gone.

She stayed conscious long enough to hear Dr. and Mrs. Fuji shouting, and to see their feet coming towards them, before she sank into a dead faint.

When she woke up, bandaged and laying in Amber's bed, with her friend in the same state next to her, she remembered all the lectures Giovanni had drilled into her about secrecy. Yet when Amber began questioning her eagerly, she thought, *It was worth it,* and told her everything. She felt only relief, and even after the elder Fujis and her godfather scolded them fiercely, even after Giovanni discovered what had really happened months later ("She kept my secret this long - she can keep yours too! Please don't-." "I won't do anything to her. This is your mess - you're the one who has to clean it up!") she didn't regret risking everything to save her friend. Her only regret was not being able to save Amber the second time, during the close of winter on an icy road. The lively girl had committed no crime, no sin, no mistake that moral society would recognize; rather, by befriending an outcast and confiding in her parents, she would have been viewed as an honorable child. Yet for these admirable acts, her life met a violent end, her blood being spilled across cement and snow. Cassandra lost yet another person she loved, and couldn't even face Dr. and Mrs. Fuji, who she'd also grown to care for. Because it was her fault that their daughter was dead; it was her fault that their family had been broken. And so, in self-inflicted punishment, she watched the graveside ceremonies from afar, with the sight of Amber's parents, clutching each other and weeping, being seared into her memory.
And beneath her grief, a dark feeling began to rise, and for the first (but not the last) time in her life, Cassandra knew what it meant to hate someone…and for that someone to be herself. Why couldn't it have been me? she asked, looking up to the sky, looking up to God, perhaps, but both declined an answer. With Ricardo Verde's death also weighing upon her, the child Cassandra allowed her godfather do what he wished with her. He placed her under contract and scalpel, he handed her a uniform, and he sent her, along with others (faceless), on missions where more blood was spilled. Yet of all that blood, it was the blood of her fellow children she could never manage to wash away: the blood that she'd never touched, but was still drowning in. In the six years that followed, Cassandra waded through the darkness, learning and forgetting some essential truths, laughing at horrible things to keep from crying, and slowly but surely, withdrawing into herself. The phases of her life became acts in a gruesome play, and her world turned into a stage she'd toil in until the curtains closed…or at least, that was her belief.

But then Mewtwo came into her life…and just like before, everything changed.

As Cassandra's memories faded once again, the Witch of the Marshes tilted her head back, gazing into the blackness of the default mindscape. In its inky depths, she could barely make out flickers of images, bright and colorful like shards of tinted glass, stained with emotions and sensory details. Slowly but surely, she was plucking out some of the most relevant ones, placing them in a frame of information to get a clear picture of who the girl was. She would have to see more, no doubt, but she was beginning to understand what had gone into shaping Cassandra, the kindnesses and the cruelties alike. While it had lasted, the girl had been a cute, if meek little thing - like a puppy that'd been kicked at unexpected intervals, not frequently enough to make her feral, but certainly enough to make her skittish. Yet then her mounting losses had embittered her to the point of apathy, and Sabrina, having had a similarly privileged - yet still difficult - childhood, could naturally empathize with those feelings.

She too had been shunned by other children, though for different reasons, and had bonded closely with the one friend she'd had at the time. She too had succumbed to mounting losses, and had done what she'd deemed necessary to preserve herself - regardless of the psychological toll her actions had taken. Of course, Cassandra had been murdering people, rather than just terrorizing and transfiguring them - that was a very important difference, and one the telepath kept firmly in mind. Still, she knew how much the soul was damaged in that process, and wondered then what had lifted Cassandra out of the mire. In her case, it had essentially been the determination - and the pure heart - of a young boy, who, in the process of following his dreams, had destroyed the dreams she'd thought were hers. It had been years since then, yet even so, she couldn't help but be grateful to the stubborn hero, and somewhat amused by the rumors of his exploits.

Yet having heard the resonance in the name, Mewtwo, the Witch grew certain that Cassandra hadn't been swayed by a child's innocence. The simple word-number was saturated with so many contrasting emotions, positive and negative alike…yet at its core was passion-desire-love, so potent as to be almost heady. The young woman had been drunk on him numerous times, and from the perfection of the draught (laced not with shame or the anguish of unrequited feelings), Sabrina was certain he'd found his partner just as savory. She had to admit, the thought rather entertained her, because of course, of course it would have to be something as cliché as romantic love that had saved the girl! Yet she supposed that also made a certain amount of sense, because there was no other force (well, perhaps other than hate) more powerful and more influential than love, at least to the human soul. Hell, only the most cynical or corrupt of individuals would scorn it, and even then, they'd reluctantly admit that nine times out of ten, it added to a life, providing a light where there would otherwise be none. No matter what form it took, it was usually a good force…though, as with all things, there were exceptions.
Yet this Mewtwo seemed to be of the former sort, and was no doubt an important - and perhaps even pivotal - figure in Cassandra's life. As such, he was what the Witch was determined to analyze next.

Plus, Sabrina was rather curious about his name. *Mewtwo*. Mew-two. Mew the second? The second of Mew? Was he the child of the extinct legendary pokémon? One who'd become intimate with a human? She had to assume this was the case, considering what Aurora Joy had told her about the twins. Yet it seemed rather far-fetched; mind-boggling, really, but life was often stranger than fiction, wasn't it? She, as a psychic, was a living, breathing example of fate's twisted sense of humor.

And so, bracing herself for what was to come, she tapped Cassandra's shoulder and said, "Why don't you introduce me to him? Try to relate it to what we've already gone over, if you can."

Cassandra Brennan's eyes narrowed at that, and for a few moments, the space around them grew thick with both anger and rebelliousness - she didn't want Sabrina to have access to those memories. Hadn't she shared enough of her secrets already…? While she knew the evaluation was most definitely not complete, she felt as if the Gym Leader had already torn out most of her insides, exposing them to a light they weren't supposed to see. Why should her memories with Mewtwo be subjected to the same treatment…? Yet Sabrina, she saw, was adamant, and Cassandra comforted herself by noting that she didn't necessarily have to share something intimate. There were many moments she'd spent with the clone that weren't romantic or sensual; many moments they'd just shared as friends, doing normal, everyday things. Selecting one of those - and reaping the bonus points for finding a conversation that would interest the damned Witch - Cassandra shivered as the seasons shifted backwards, the area around them growing chilled as they slid backwards in time….

The autumn air was ruthlessly cold, enough that under the cover of night, it frosted the yellowed grass and drying leaves. As she sat and looked out across Viridian Forest, Cassandra saw that the treetops and meadows were glistening under the moonlight, and grimaced as she watched trainers and her fellow trainees lumbering around the routes. Many of the latter were exchanging drunken shouts and, worse, were singing with the most tone-deaf voices she'd ever heard. She vaguely wandered if "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds" had ever been quite so mangled before. In any case, their abominable cover of the classic Beatles tune only deepened her misery. First there was the temperature: despite the blanket laid out beneath her, Cassandra still felt as if she was sitting on a block of ice, which, just as if it really were melting into her jeans, also made the fabric feel damp and equally frigid. Moreover, it was after three in the freaking morning, and she wanted nothing more than to curl up in her bed and sleep. She'd already been waiting a goddamned hour for the *astrological event* to start, and if it didn't begin in the next five minutes, she swore she'd trek back to the base and do just that: sleep. Clutching a second blanket around herself tighter, she cursed and breathed into her hands, trying to ease the pain in her fingers; her toes, despite her woolen socks, were well on their way to going numb. Glancing over at her companion, she scowled at how comfortable he looked, bundled in his rather thin cloak. His fur was probably keeping him nice and cozy, the lucky bastard…not that she was keen on growing a similar layer of fuzz, but it definitely looked like it had its perks.

Shifting with discomfort, she snapped at him, "You know, we could have spent our free night in a shit-ton of other ways, but no, you just had to pick stargazing." She rubbed her hands up and down her arms, hoping the friction would warm them up. It didn't help all that much. "When is this thing going to start, anyway? If we stay out here much longer, my ass is going to freeze to the ground."

"Perhaps if you were wet and naked, and this cliff was covered in metal, that would be a risk. As you are, you should be fine. And the meteor shower should start within the next thirty minutes or so."

"You said that an hour ago, Mewtwo, and I haven't seen a single shooting star yet! Honestly, if you
had to get an astrology fix, couldn't we have just gone to the observatory? At least it's warm there!"

His violet eyes gleamed with amusement, despite her sour tone. Above him, the boughs of an apple tree bobbed and creaked, its remaining leaves ruffled in the night breeze. "It would have been crowded tonight, and besides, you said it was my turn to decide on our venue. This location is ideal for watching this rare event: here, we will not be disturbed, and our view will be unhindered by the city lights and the forest. Surely trading some comfort will be worth that."

"Says the pussycat with the comfy fur coat. I'd skin you for it if I thought it'd get me anywhere. Fucking cold as the Arctic out here, I swear."

His amusement only seemed to deepen at that. "I assure you, you would have died already if that were the case."

"Oh, well aren't you full of sunshine and daisies? Why don't you just poot out a rainbow while you're at it?" she snarled, and began to rock in place, hoping the movement would give her a bit more warmth. If it had any effect at all, she didn't feel it. Man, this blew - this blew harder than a crack-whore who hadn't had a fix in weeks, and wouldn't get any if she didn't give a lot-.

"Complaints will get you nowhere, Cassandra. If you would like, I could attempt to warm you up, but it you persist in-.

"And just how would you be warming me up, hmm? If it's anything randy, then I think I'd rather-.

He looked ready to roll his eyes at her. "I would merely be sharing that blanket with you, and my body heat - need I remind you - is several degrees higher than yours. I would not deprive you of what little defense you have against the cold, especially not for something like that."

Now a hint of amusement kindled within her, and she said, "Just so long as we're clear, kitty-cat."

He hesitated for a moment, and she thought he saw his eyes flash with something - probably annoyance at her feline-derived nicknames for him - before he crossed over the grass and settled down beside her. She partially unwrapped the blanket from around herself, throwing half of it over him, and they quickly folded the ends together, cocooning themselves in the thick cotton. Leaning her arm against his, she felt how cool his fur was, and repressed a smirk: so he hadn't been as toasty as he'd let on, either. Yet soon enough their combined body heat made the bundle a little more comfortable, and as her goosebumps smoothed, she found herself holding back a yawn, rather than curses. Her pinky finger hooked over one of his fingertips, his tail lay over their feet, and some of her hair clung to his shoulder - the dryness of the air was to blame for that. She needed a better conditioner; maybe something floral, this time, as a "Fuck you!" to the dying season.

In any case, they stayed that way for several minutes, in a complacent sort of quiet. Their breaths left them in puffs of mist, and their bodies shifted minutely, since the blanket beneath them barely made the hard and lumpy ground any more welcoming. In the forest below, the trainers and trainees had quit yelling, though the sounds of conversations and music - this time from a radio, which occasionally had meteorologically relevant updates - did manage to float up to them. At some point, she leaned her head on Mewtwo's shoulder, and felt him stiffen with surprise…before slowly relaxing. He didn't even turn to her to ask her why she'd done it, and for Cassandra, really, there was no reason for her doing so, other than her being tired, and him being available as a makeshift pillow. His shoulder wasn't really that comfortable, though; he was rather bony, so it felt like she was leaning her head against a bedpost covered in velvet. Still, it was better than nothing, and the fact that she was comfortable enough to do so, and he was comfortable enough to let her, reassured her that they'd worked through the animosity between them, despite their frequent bickering.
He kept very still then, likely not wishing to jar her, and after several long moments, said, "I have been meaning to ask you something...."

She closed her eyes, feeling the warm of his fur on one side of her face, the cold air on the other. She vaguely considered turning so she could warm up her other side, but also felt a little too lethargic to do so. "What might that be?" God, she wanted to sleep...but she'd managed to endure this long, so she'd be damned if she missed the meteor shower because she drifted off at the last minute.

She sensed, just barely, some discomfort and nervousness from him. That was strange...but once he spoke again, she understood why he was anxious. "The other day, when you were searching through your belongings" - actually, she'd been cleaning and reorganizing some of her stuff, something she tried to do every few weeks, before she was buried under the mess - "you looked through a box you kept under your bed. Among other things, there were photographs in there, one of which was a woman. Her eyes...", he trailed off as she shifted away from him, but then, after a second, continued, "Was she a relative of yours?"

Cassandra could feel his gaze on her, and while the question itself was innocuous, she felt something slither around in her stomach. Staring down at the expanse in front of her, watching the lights from several flashlights flicker over the paths and between the trees, she eventually answered him. "...Yeah. She was my mother."

It seemed to take him awhile to digest that, and when he spoke again, his voice seemed to be very carefully controlled. "...What was that like? To have a mother?"

Cassandra realized that, despite his tone, he was likely very interested in the subject; after all, he'd never had a mother of his own, or a father for that matter. Being a clone meant having no parents, so it was only natural that he'd be curious about such family ties. Yet he also seemed to understand that this was probably a sensitive subject for her, which, if she was honest with herself, was the case. Even after a decade had passed, that wound still smarted on occasion. Still, a part of her did genuinely want to answer him, and so, after struggling to kill the wriggling thing in her stomach, she said, "Well, it's not like I had one for long. She died when I was six. But while it lasted, it was...nice. Comforting. I felt safe with her, like nothing bad could touch me, and I never once thought that would change. She was my mother; she'd always been there for me, and I couldn't imagine a time when she wouldn't be." Such was a child's fallacy, she mused with some bitterness. "I mean, my father had gone and gotten himself killed, so how could my mother die too? I didn't think God or fate or whatever would be so cruel as to take her from me. But that's what happened, and I...it felt like a part of me had been ripped away. And that's not something that really heals, it just...goes numb, and you don't think about it if you can help it, because that would just make it hurt again."

She didn't know how to explain it to him any more than that, and glancing at him, she saw he didn't seem to know what to make of that. How could he, having never had a figure in his life that resembled a parent? She felt a great swell of pity for him then, and thought that - even though the loss of her mother had caused her great pain - the security and guidance her parent had given her had been invaluable. To have never had that...it was no wonder Mewtwo seemed so lost at times. Despite having the body and mind of an adult, he was still a child in many ways, stumbling to find his way in a great, wide world, which cared little for his plight. Seeking to offer him consolation (for a loss, she knew, he neither felt nor understood, but still had to endure), she moved her hand over his and squeezed his paw gently. He started, his expression flashing between confusion and surprise, before settling on a thoughtful look. Meeting his gaze, she realized suddenly that in all this time, in ten whole years, she'd never actually talked to someone about her mother before. It was a strange revelation to make, while catching hypothermia on a cliff and waiting for stars to fall....

"...How did she die?" Her fingers twitched over his at the question, her nails digging into his fur.
The pressure was too light to hurt him.

She wondered if he'd believe her. Given his faith in Giovanni, he'd probably be skeptical. Yet even so, this seemed to be one of those rare moments of unguarded honesty between two people, so she would tell him the ugly truth, and see where that led them. "...Well, see, if you piss off gang leaders or get in their way, they tend to get rather murderous. Giovanni's no exception to that."

She felt Mewtwo's arm tense against hers, and could sense his aggravation: he didn't want to hear this about his so-called "partner," and as his eyes narrowed with anger, he growled, "What are you implying?"

"I'm not implying anything. He killed her. I know he did." And despite the glare he leveled at her then, she decided to continue, not allowing either of them a reprieve from the facts.

She told him about how she had, on the eighth anniversary of her mother's death, slipped out of Giovanni's mansion and made her way to the local courthouse. In the previous year, she'd found the case number and set aside the money for the file copies she wanted, having learned how the procedure went. Handing over her identification and the number to the clerk, she'd put in her request, and wandered around town for the hour it took for the copies to be made. She'd made a few stops, making some small purchases and visiting places she hadn't been to in years (they'd added another apartment building, and someone had cut down the big oak tree), before returning to the old building, which smelled of yellowed papers and orange-scented soaps. Soon back in her bedroom at the mansion, she'd looked over the files, glancing at the scene of her mother's death and reading the reports. Nothing seemed to contradict what the police had told her all those years ago...but even so, she'd felt uneasy.

In the years that had passed, she'd become familiar with scenes of death, and those experiences made her question what she was seeing. Despite that the gun had been found in her mother's hand, and the gunpowder on her clothes, the entry wound had been more to the back of the skull than the side. Why would Selena have positioned her arm like that? That wouldn't have been comfortable. And why had Selena killed herself in their home, where her daughter, if no one else did, would surely find her? That wasn't very considerate! And why was the suicide note so shakily written? From what she knew about suicide victims - at least the ones who killed themselves after a long period of depression - they were usually calm, even content with their actions. Their moods shifted for the better, because it would finally be over. So why didn't the note reflect that change? Had Selena even been that depressed? While she'd always seemed a little sad, she'd certainly never been listless, and had always done her best to take care of them both. In fact, her mother had always seemed fiercely protective of her. So why would she have left her behind...?

And then there was the gun itself. Cassandra couldn't imagine her mother hiding it all that time; her "little angel" had been an inquisitive child, and understanding this, Selena had always explained which items around the house were dangerous. Don't touch the coils on the stove, or you'll get burned. Don't touch the kitchen knives or the scissors in the sewing kit, or you'll be cut. Don't try to climb onto the counters or the bookshelf to reach something - you might fall or have something fall on top of you. And definitely don't mix these cleaning products, or you'll die and kill everyone else on their floor. If Selena had owned a gun, why wouldn't she have taken it out and firmly told her daughter not to play with it? Cassandra had listened to the other warnings, and she would've listened to that one too! Yet her mother had never done that, and according to her godfather, Selena had always had it for "protection." Yet wouldn't keeping the doors and windows locked, and having the police on speed-dial have been enough? What would they have needed protecting from, excluding the occasional thief...?

It would have been another question without an answer, had Giovanni not called her to his office
then. When she'd taken a seat, he'd surprised her by asking, in a rather stern tone, why she'd gone to the courthouse and requested those files. She'd told him the truth: that it was the anniversary, and that she just wanted to understand her mother's death better. The next fifteen minutes consisted of him scolding her: he could have answered any of her questions, but she'd gone behind his back and done this and she'd best let him hold onto those files, and in the midst of his reprimand, she'd gazed at him in mute shock and wondered, Why is he so angry at me? Why is he angry?

And afterwards, after she'd reluctantly given him the files, she'd remembered other times she'd seen him angry, like when she'd supported Silver's decision to enter the Johto League; like when he'd found out how much Amber knew (about her, about him); like that time when she was four and he'd been yelling at her mother about…something…about what? She tried picking at the dredges of that indistinct memory, but it became evermore fuzzy and unclear the more she tried, until she was only left with the fact that they'd been arguing. It wasn't until later that she remembered that she'd gotten her choker around the same time, and remembered that their argument had been connected with her - or more specifically, how best to take care of her. He'd wanted them to live with him, but her mother hadn't wanted that. Yet that was how it had turned out for her daughter anyhow, Cassandra had thought wryly. She'd ended up in her godfather's custody and living under his roof, all because her mother had died. How very convenient that must have been for him…!

And as that last thought sank in, as suspicion morphed into realization, she'd felt her stomach lurch. No…oh god, no!

Yet her efforts over the following months, as she'd sifted through Giovanni's private files whenever he was away, confirmed her fears. She'd pieced the facts together with painstaking caution and excruciating slowness, though it became easier as time went on, since Giovanni started frequently leaving town to oversee another one of his projects. So while he busied himself with ventures and negotiations, she'd worked out how he'd gotten her. She knew he would have needed to do it himself; Selena wouldn't have let a stranger into her home, and it wasn't Giovanni's style to let someone else handle his personal affairs. She could just imagine how it had happened: how he'd intimidated or bribed the neighbors into compliance, making sure none of them ratted him out - in a building with thin walls, it was no secret that he and her mother had quarreled. She'd imagined how he'd gotten hold of something her mother had written, maybe a letter or just a list on the fridge, and had forged the note of apology, so short there were no lines to read between. She'd imagined that he'd come to their apartment, gun concealed, to "make amends," for he was skilled at deception, and there had been no signs of a break-in or a struggle. The door had been opened willingly, the furniture had all been in place, and no one had heard any shouting.

Hell, there had even been coffee mugs rinsed out in the sink. They'd probably talked over a hot drink, maybe said apologies, and she'd supposed the man had asked Selena to see something, something personal that she kept in her room. It had probably been something that had belonged to her father - they'd gone to college together, after all, and her mother had thrown nothing away. They'd then gone into her bedroom, and while her back had been turned, he'd shot her. He'd offered no warning, and as such, there had been neither fear nor pain for her. If there was any consolation to be had from the scenario, Cassandra had supposed it was that. Even now, she didn't want to think that she had it wrong somehow; that Giovanni had actually been much more ruthless, and Selena had died in tears. The very thought that she was serving the man who'd killed her mother made her sick enough. Adding that extra poison on top would have been too much for her to bear.

In any case, she couldn't have continued living with him, not after that - the idea had just been too asinine to her. And so, after he'd returned from his latest outing, smelling of brine and turpentine, she'd convinced him to let her move out. It had been a motion he'd reluctantly granted, and since then, she'd lived in her apartment, using a monthly stipend to support herself. It worked out well enough for her to get by, and her sanity remained (mostly) intact as a result. Well, it worked so long
as she didn't think about it, because her thoughts went to not-so-great places when she did, and that was always a rather pointless exercise in frustration when it happened.

Mewtwo, hearing all of this, gave her an incredulous look. "…Knowing this, why do you still serve him?" He didn't sound certain that he believed her, but knew she sincerely believed in what she'd said. She could easily imagine what he was thinking: if that man had truly committed such a crime against her, then why wasn't she seeking revenge? Why was she following his every order, and not lifting a hand against him?

Having had similar thoughts herself, she smiled a sad and bitter smile, the type one gives in the face of ignorance and naivety. "I really don't have much of a choice. I signed my life away when I was ten, and let him slip a nasty little leash on me for 'insurance' - his words, not mine. Here, I'll show you."

She unzipped her jacket, shivering as the cool air stroked her skin, and taking his paw, pressed it above her left breast. Through her shirt, he felt something round and unyielding, reminiscent of a bone, jutting out from her skin. His brows furrowed as he traced its sides, as he wondered what it was. Brushing his fingers away, she zipped up her jacket she said, "It's why I'm stuck as Giovanni's bitch. As long as it's there, there's no way I can tell him 'no,' not without risking my hide.

From what the surgeons told me, it's supposed to be similar to a pacemaker, but a lot less friendly: instead of making sure my heart keeps beating, it's designed to make it stop. All my godfather has to do is trigger it, and it'll send a paralytic through a tube straight to my heart. It wouldn't even matter where I was - he can just bounce the signal off a satellite if he really wants, and that'll be that. And it'll stay that way until I turn eighteen and he takes me off probation - then the surgeons will take it back out, and I can choose my own fights," and as that thought sobered her, she huddled deeper into their blanket and murmured, "Though by then…well, who knows if I'll have something I want to fight for, right?"

As she'd talked, the clone had gone very still, and she turned her head to look at him. As her eyes swept over his face, she noted that he no longer seemed irritated with her: his brows had smoothed, his muzzle was no longer wrinkled, and he wasn't glaring at her anymore. Instead, he was just staring at her, as if attempting to unravel some problem presented to him, his eyes glazing over he considered her words. Was he wondering about the implant? It was, she supposed, a rather unusual - and certainly excessive - method of insuring her obedience, but it wasn't as if she was the only one who carried the device within her breast. Excluding the high-profile hostages, it was a standard procedure for most of the Elite trainees who worked closely with Giovanni, since they were subject to periods of rage and rebelliousness. They were, after all, teenagers being forced to undergo numerous trials and pressures, so it was only natural that they'd lash out at some point. Having a lethal consequence hanging over them made them check their moods, and, more importantly, deterred them from having violent outbursts.

Had Mewtwo not been a powerful psychic, with his body producing and acting as a conduit for psycho-electrical energies, she suspected he'd have had the procedure done to him as well. However, the implant would've likely gone haywire within hours, and besides, the surgery would have had to be much, much more invasive, considering the bony plates that shielded his heart and lungs. And Giovanni, for all that he wanted to control the pokémon, didn't want to gamble with Mewtwo's life. So he let the clone go without a "leash," and instead tried to tame him with treats: with the promises of control and purpose.

Perhaps the latter was what was concerning him now. Between speaking with him and with her godfather, she knew that Mewtwo felt lost, and was looking to the man for guidance. She understood that, to an extent: for Giovanni was a powerful and charismatic man, and was quite capable of granting someone's wish, if he were so inclined. So long as the person could and would pay the
price, then all manner of material possessions, exotic goods and perfect fixes, servants and wealth
and paths to greatness, were all within reach. What Mewtwo asked for was not so easily given, but it
was definitely easy to exploit. He'd eventually gain control over his powers, but that would require
countless hours in battle, which Giovanni would be sure to make the most of. Yet to grant him a
purpose...a purpose he'd be satisfied with...well, Giovanni could drawn that out indefinitely. He
knew how to fan the darkest flames of a person's soul, the kind which consumed but offered little
warmth. He knew how to make people's vices their meanings in life, and how to keep
them needing what he offered them, with them usually being none the wiser. Mewtwo, if he wasn't
careful, could be similarly trapped - for he'd yet to realize that the power he had was already enough.
It was enough to ensure he'd never be beaten down, and enough to ensure that he could make his
own purpose, if that was his wasn't that how people were supposed to live their lives? Pursuing a
purpose they'd chosen for themselves, rather than one given to them by another...?

She snorted, which made him start somewhat. Who was she to talk? She was Giovanni's dog,
following whatever orders she was given, no matter how unsavory they were to her. Though, to be
fair, she could have a worse master. He was much more inclined to pat her head than use a rod.
Lifting her eyes to the night, she let her train of thought unravel - it was no use dwelling on it. After
all, it wasn't like Mewtwo would know what to do with the idea of making his own purpose; he was
expecting someone to hand it to him on a platter, and the thought of not having one - that maybe, just
maybe, it was okay to be purposeless sometimes - only seemed to offend him. She doubted he'd
listen to her...and really, who was she to tell him how to live his life? She wasn't even living her
own....

Still, she felt compelled to say something to him, to try to offer him some advice. "Mewtwo, just...do
me a favor, alright? Don't trust him. He'll just try to use you, and I don't think you can beat him at his
own game. He's too good at covering all his bases for that."

She heard him heave a sigh. "Perhaps...."

She wrapped her fingers around his. "I mean it, Mewtwo. Don't try it. He'll whip your furry ass, and
I don't want to watch a friend get hurt." She'd already lost enough of the people she cared about - she
didn't want to add him to that list.

He drew back from her somewhat, and as she cocked an eyebrow at him, he averted his gaze. "...A
friend? Is that what we are? Friends?"

She scoffed at him, but then forcefully reminded herself that his social skills sucked worse than hers,
which was saying something. Feeling another swell of pity for him - for she doubted anyone had
ever been his friend before - she grasped his paw tighter, even while she kept her voice light. "And
here I thought you were supposed to be the smart one. Mewtwo, I'm sitting on a cliff at three in the
fucking morning, freezing my ass off, just to spend time with you. You don't do that with someone
you don't like, at least not without getting paid - and I'm definitely not getting paid for this." And
shaking her head in bemusement, she said, "Look, just keep what I said in mind, would you? It's not
like I'm telling you to run away or anything; frankly, I'm enjoying your company too much for that."

His eyes gleamed then, and with an undertone of pleasure in his voice, he said, "Is that so?"

A smirk curled across her face. "Yep. I might even compose a song for you sometime. Though it'd
have to be something real melancholy, since you're such a brooding, 'woe-is-me' kind of guy. It must
be all that existential angst you like to drown yourself in." Speaking of drowning, she'd have to bring
him to the pool on their next day off. Mewtwo was one of those rare felines that liked water (it
probably had something to do with being grown in a vat), but he didn't have any idea how to swim.
So she was, slowly but surely, teaching him how...and laughing while he sputtered and flailed in the
meantime. He drew her from her thoughts by saying, in a rather offended tone, "I do not 'like to wallow' in angst! Given the circumstances behind my birth, my 'brooding,' as you call it, is perfectly justi-!"

"You say that, but all I'm hearing is your poor excuse for your bitch-bitch, moan-and-bitch routine. May I suggest happy pills? Or sex? I've heard they do wonders."

He snorted, his tail flicking over her feet. "I need neither to be content. I am certainly not 'wallowing' or 'brooding' now, am I?"

She stroked her thumb along the back of his paw, feeling the tendons. "I suppose not…"

Their conversation ended there, and for the next ten minutes it took for the first star to fall, they remained in a comfortable silence, growing groggy but somehow managing to hang in there. It was Mewtwo, his eyes ever on the night sky, who saw the first streak of light. Not wanting to miss the next one, she came to attention, straightening and searching the sky. Another meteor fell soon enough, and was followed every few seconds by another and another, many of them small and scarcely notable, while others tore across the black as if with purpose. Glancing at the clone out of the corner of her eye, she saw him watching the event with wonder, and admitted to herself that it was rather impressive, and worth the discomfort she'd been experiencing. His hand still beneath her own, she looked back up at the sky and told him to make a wish, for it was a harmless human tradition, and perhaps his desire might even come true, after a fashion. As his eyes grew glassy with thought, she closed her own, and made the same wish she'd been making for longer than she cared to admit: to spend more nights like this, in the company of someone who asked only to spend his time with her….

It was funny how things worked out sometimes. Almost a year later, she'd feel him press a kiss to the back of her neck, and would turn over in the sheets, giving him a languid smile. He'd whisper what his wish was into her mind, the words conveying a desire that, though not identical, melded neatly with her own. He'd wanted a purpose and found it in her, and while she didn't necessarily approve of that (shouldn't he have something of his own to live for?), she couldn't deny feeling rather touched. Meeting his eyes in the dim light, she'd slowly, suggestively wrapped a leg over his hip and drew him against her. The faintest smirk curled across his mouth, and as he grasped her chin, running a finger over her lower lip, he murmured something about her being insatiable. She just smiled back at him, and gave a pleased laughed when he grabbed and rolled her beneath him, his mouth finding the hollow of her throat-.

"That is private!"

To Sabrina's surprise and indignation, she felt herself being yanked out of the memory, the affectionate murmurs and kisses fading to black quicker than in a children's movie. Staggering slightly and blinking with disorientation (the warm and fuzzy feelings had evaporated in a flash), she twisted around and smacked Cassandra's hand away, half-grimacing, half-scowling. She wasn't used to being ejected from a memory; when she was fully in control, it never happened, but the scene they'd slid into had caught her a little off-guard…and Cassandra, being rather strong of will, had taken advantage of that. It was probably for the best that she had - it wasn't as if the Gym Leader wanted to see anything like that. She was interested in the interactions being the girl and the pokémon (they were both delightedly snarky, she noted), yes, but their sexual relationship wasn't something she wanted to witness. That had simply been where Cassandra's train of thought had wandered…so really, if anyone was to be scolded, it should be her, not the telepath who was just along for the ride!
Sabrina obliged the thought by saying, "I believe I told you I'd look into whatever memory of yours I please, if I consider it relevant to my search. Your sex life is no exception."

The look Cassandra gave her, and the tone in her voice, reminded the Witch of a petulant child - or maybe just a very pissed teenager. "Well, it damn well should be!"

Morally, Sabrina was inclined to agree... but she'd already set aside her usual set of morals, favoring the pursuit of knowledge - and the ends that knowledge could be used for - through the means at her disposal. No matter how invasive her technique was, it yielded results, and what was breaching one more boundary to arrive at some essential truths? After all, though it hadn't been her intention to witness that intimate moment, the little she'd seen had been...to excuse the pun...rather revealing, and actually to Cassandra's benefit. She'd clearly been very close to the pokémon, and, if it weren't for their different species, Sabrina would probably have thought them rather sweet. As it was, having experienced the girl's feelings second-hand, and being involved in a semi-controversial relationship herself, she was willing to tolerate the idea. It wasn't as if she hadn't previously encountered psychic trainers and their pokémon who were...suggestively close. Of course, it was one matter to suspect that something illicit was occurring, and quite another to know that it had. Having never quite been placed in this position before, Sabrina peered at the other woman long and hard, meeting that searing glare steadily.

There was no shame in Cassandra's eyes. There was only anger that the Witch of the Marshes thought it was okay to pry into that precious moment.

And Sabrina couldn't help but give her a small smile at that. She supposed she understood that rage. She wouldn't be pleased, either, if someone acted the voyeur and stared at her sensual moments with Rose. She'd be quite offended and vengeful, actually, and pity the poor bastard who angered her. And so, letting her smile shift into a wicked smirk, she said, "Perhaps you're right. I can scarcely imagine the type of sex life you led, for it to have culminated into that."

For a long moment, Cassandra just stared at her...before she scowled, her lips curling over her teeth and her voice growing reminiscent of a snarl. "What the hell is it with people thinking I'm some sort of depraved nympho? You're another in a long list of people who've been suggesting that, and it's starting to piss me off. Do I look like a whore to you people? Because I sure as hell don't put out or dress like one! So what the fuck are you basing this off of? Yes, I'm pregnant, but it only takes one unprotected fuck for that to happen! And yes, I was around - well, questionable people most of my life, and have broken more laws than I can list, but that doesn't mean I've slept around - and I sure as hell wasn't ever pimped out to anyone! Just because I'm not some passive, sweet, goody-two-shoe little virgin or, god forbid, some damsel, that doesn't automatically make me a whore. That kind of duality is such archaic bullshit! And you of all people shouldn't be buying into it, you psycholesbian bitch!" and spinning away, she followed up with an increasingly loud and vulgar flow of cuss words.

Sabrina, not fazed by the woman's rant, waited a few seconds before replying. It wouldn't do any good to interrupt, now would it? Besides, the girl had a point: the social tendency to see a woman as either pure or impure, as either light or dark, as either tender- or cold-hearted, with no available in-between...it was too restrictive and inaccurate to reality. Sabrina, given her own experience with that dilemma - they called her the "Witch of the Marshes," didn't they? - felt a twinge of shame for making a similar error. When she was confident that Cassandra had finished, however, she didn't apologize, but instead said, "Be that as it may, the fact remains that you slept with a pokémon. That is...unusual...and it seems doubtful to me that you'd jump right into bed with him, without first having experienced sex with another human being. However, that is what you seem to be suggesting...so I'll ask you once, and take your word on it. Was Mewtwo truly your only sexual partner?"
She'd asked the question in as casual and even a tone as she could manage…but her charge, she noticed, suddenly stiffened and averted her gaze. Under the telepath's persistent stare, she began to shift with discomfort, and when the Witch made it clear she wouldn't let the subject go, she admitted, "No, there was…one other. My first, technically…though really, he shouldn't count."

"Is that so?"

Noting the hint of skepticism and interest in Sabrina's voice, Cassandra's head snapped up. "No. Fuck no; you are not going to look at that! I won't relive that! I won't!"

Yet Cassandra Brennan's caginess was enticing to the Witch, because caginess meant secrets - secrets of importance, which were what she was there to uncover. While she might have heeded Cassandra's refusal - and indeed, the hint of dread in her eyes - she began to draw up the girl's memories of that other partner, intent on seeing what she was trying to hide. Predictably, Cassandra resisted. Struggling to gain control over the situation, her mental shields jerked as she tried to raise them, only for the telepath to force them back down, not allowing the woman to cut her off. Cassandra's protests, the fury behind them increasing with each refrain, swept over Sabrina, aggravating but not dissuading her - if anything, they made the Gym Leader more intrigued. She pressed onwards, noting with slight apprehension how the mindscape trembled and was engulfed in a red haze. Remembered words, muffled but grating to her ears, began to seep into the mental space, and Sabrina slowed, wondering if it was truly wise to continue….

Only to be plunged headfirst in the memory, with Cassandra's harsh and frustrated, "Fine! You want it so bad, then here you go!" resounding in her ears.

And what Sabrina witnessed next was enough to make her, by its end, flee back to the sanctuary of her own mind. When the telepath opened her eyes, phantom pains suffusing her flesh and her stomach twisting within her, she stumbled out of her seat and leaned against the nearest wall. It didn't take long for her to begin heaving, the tastes of orange juice and acid sour on her tongue as she retched up what little of a breakfast she'd had that morning. Through the ringing in her ears, she heard the cell door being flung open, and felt a hand grab her shoulder. Someone was asking her if she was alright, and with a soft curse, she brushed the man off, muttering that she'd be fine. She'd just need a few minutes to regain her bearings, that was all. As the man backed off, she blinked rapidly to clear her vision, and straightening with effort (her stomach twisting again), she turned back to Cassandra Brennan.

The eyes that looked back at her were knowing ones, but the satisfied, almost smug smirk she was wearing irritated Sabrina immensely. As another wave of nausea swept through her stomach, the Gym Leader hissed, "That was uncalled for!"

The smirk disappeared, replaced by a frown. "Yeah, I thought so too at the time."

Sabrina wasn't certain what to say to that, but as the smell of vomit stung in her nose, she glanced at the man standing off to their side. "If you could fetch a custodian to clean this up, I'd much appreciate it." And turning back to Cassandra, she said, "And as for you, I'll be back in a few minutes. Perhaps you should take this time to attend to your own needs."

Not staying a moment longer, the psychic swept out of the room, moving with all the grace and dignity she could muster up - which, sadly, wasn't much, considering several people had just watched her throw up. Even so, she didn't spare them a glance, and bluntly ignored Detective Lagario's questions, which faded away as she trekked upstairs. Finding the women's bathroom, she rinsed out her mouth and splashed her face, taking a few deep breaths to center herself. She reminded herself, forcefully, that what she'd seen hadn't been the worst incident she'd come across in her work - it had been nasty, yes, but nowhere near the worst. Even so, something would have to be done.
about the matter, and setting her purse on the counter, she reached inside and fished out her cell phone. Checking the time, she noted that her partner should be free, and pressed the first number on her speed-dial. The line rang once, twice, three times before Rose picked up. They talked for a couple of minutes, and after informing her of the situation, Sabrina asked the question:

"Would you be willing to take her on…? Yes?" And hearing the affirmation, Sabrina's brow smoothed. "Thank you. After I'm done with her, I'll give you another call."

The voice on the other line, laced with a faint Irish accent, said something else. With a slight smile, the psychic added, "I'll be fine. There's no need to worry." And as Rose said one last thing, Sabrina usually guarded gaze softened, and she whispered, "Yeah…I love you, too. I'll talk with you again later, alright?"

They disconnected the call, and, slipping her phone back into her purse, the psychic, calmer now, placed the strap over her shoulder and exited the bathroom. As she stepped down the stairs, the conversation below quieted, and she arched an eyebrow at all of them, daring them to say something. None of them, not even the desperately curious Detective Lagorio, did. The guard opened the door to the cell, and stepping through it, she noted there was still a faint whiff of vomit in the air, though the fragrance of lemons was doing a decent job of covering it up. Glancing over, Sabrina saw an empty tray sitting at one end of Cassandra's cot, and saw that the woman was drinking something - she presumed it was water - out of a paper cup. She'd apparently taken the time to eat something, which Sabrina supposed was wise; she had three to feed, after all. As Cassandra peered at her over the cup, the telepath sat down in the chair, waiting for the mother-to-be to finish up.

When Cassandra set the drink aside, she reached over to the tray and tossed something at the Witch. The telepath caught it with her telekinesis and looked it over. Frowning at the label, she glanced at Cassandra, who, smirking slightly, said, "If you're going to be leaning over me again, then the least you could do is take a breath mint."

Sabrina felt her patience beginning to fray, but she ate the sweet anyhow, the aluminum wrapped crinkling in her hand, the mint refreshingly cool against her tongue. Tucking the candy into her cheek, she said, "Stop being a smartass and lay back down. And I warn you, if you pull a stunt like that again, I'll find your most mortifying memory and make you relive it ad nauseum. Understood?"

Scowling at the threat, Cassandra did as instructed, circling her arm over her stomach as she did so. "It serves you right, you know, for prying into my brain like this."

"Yes, well, it's obviously not been a picnic for me, either," Sabrina said, pressing a palm to the woman's forehead. "Now if you want to sway me to your side, then you'll have to do better than that. Defend your position, Miss Brennan; show me something worthwhile - something, preferably, that won't make my stomach churn, if you will."

Cassandra, her eyes growing glassy at she considered what to reveal, eventually found a suitable memory…and, with a hint of redness staining her cheeks, she nodded and closed her eyes. Doing the same, Sabrina sank with her into the mindscape, which was already conforming to the remembered place. The space took on a deep amber ambiance, the air growing warm and fragrant with the scent of vanilla. Beneath Cassandra's body, which was younger and smaller in several ways, was a slightly rumpled comforter, which the teenager had the great desire to smooth out…yet she was unwilling to rise from her position on her belly. Instead, she clutched the blanket beneath her tightly, and struggled to keep her breathing even as shivers crawled up and down her spine. Pleasure mingled with anxiety, abandon mixed with nervousness, excitement blended with uncertainty….

And Sabrina, as she realized what was going on, couldn't help but lift an eyebrow in surprise and amusement. It might not be a memory of sex, she thought, but it's sensual enough.
It was no wonder, really, that Cassandra had blushed….

Her back was burning, and she wasn't certain if it was from the muscle soreness, or from Mewtwo's paws against her bare skin.

Through a fog of indistinct thoughts, she tried to recall how exactly she'd gotten into this situation, with him kneading into her back like a kitten would its favorite shirt. It had started with her going to Giovanni's private gym, as she did every Tuesday and Thursday morning, to work through an intensive exercise regimen. In earlier years, he'd assigned her a spotter, who'd made sure she was doing the forms correctly and wouldn't injure herself… but after awhile, she'd been dismissed, and she'd been left to her own devices. She'd done her usual round of weight-lifting and calisthenics, and had then moved onto the most rigorous part of her regime: her wing exercises. She jumped from a platform - at a non-lethal height, with a large landing mat spread out beneath her - and beat her wings repeatedly, trying to get as many in as she could before she hit the mat. Since she so rarely used her wings, and her body wasn't built for hovering, this practice - more than anything else - often had her soaked with sweat, panting for breath, and left her feeling rather lightheaded by the end.

Even so, it was necessary to stave off muscle atrophy in her extra limbs, and she went at it vigorously, making the ascension and descent multiple times. As she fell the fifth time, she'd heard - over the wing beats, over her labored breathing, over her pulse pounding in her ears - the gym door open and shut. Lifting her head, she'd found Mewtwo standing on the sidelines, watching her with interest. In her surprise she'd forgotten to beat her wings down, and had dropped the remaining meter, her legs giving out beneath her and her landing on her ass. Fortunately, the mat was thick and yielding, so she wouldn't even bruise. Mewtwo had then walked over to her, and as she'd stared at him, he'd summoned her water bottle and towel from the bench. She'd accepted them, and soon learned that he'd just wanted to see how she spent the days she didn't spend with him. She'd raised an eyebrow at that, only for him to avert his gaze. Her eyebrow had arched higher.

In any case, stopping to talk with him had only shown her just how tired she was, and after taking a quick shower, she'd locked up the gym and returned with him to her apartment. They'd chatted for awhile and played with Shadow, who - for all his intelligence - couldn't resist chasing after feathers, before he'd left for the arena. She'd settled down for a nap then…and had woken feeling stiff and horribly achy, with her back muscles clenched to the point of pain. As she'd stumbled into the bathroom for some aspirin, she'd remembered that she hadn't done her cool-down stretches, which was doubtlessly to blame for the soreness. It wasn't even the nice soreness either, and grimacing, she'd massaged her own shoulders and tried to find something to press into her back. Mewtwo had walked in about ten minutes after that point and found her in…well, a rather odd position, doing a rather odd thing…and she'd scrambled up, trying to explain herself. The clone had just kept peering at her with this look, but then, shaking his head, he'd sat down and described his opponents and their move-sets. Cassandra, having been raised in close proximity to pokémon battles, knew enough about type advantages and attacks to answer any questions he had. Or at least, she usually did. Today she was rather agitated, and she'd squirmed, trying to get comfortable and waiting for the aspirin to kick in. The mild painkiller didn't seem to be of much help, though, and after a while, Mewtwo had asked her if she needed something. An ice pack, maybe?

"No, but a masseuse would be great. Fuck, this is uncomfortable…"

He'd asked what exactly a masseuse was and did, and one thing had led to another, until, with his back turned, she'd taken off her shift, freed her wings, and had laid out on her belly. As his paws had touched her, she'd felt nervousness - so keen it almost made her feel nauseous - gather in her stomach, and she'd stayed very still and quiet, not relaxing in the least like she was supposed to. If anything, her response had only made her muscles coil further, and it had taken all her willpower to
force herself to unclench. Eventually she’d closed her eyes, turning her face slightly into her pillow to hide how she was blushing from embarrassment. She tried not to make any sounds of pleasure as he worked the pads of his fingers into her shoulders, around her spine and lumbar region, and most of all around her shoulder blades, where the worst of the knots were. Shivers swept over her skin as her muscles loosened and her blood circulated more freely, and she supposed if there was anything wrong with his actions, it was that he was being too tentative, too gentle. She stifled herself, though, unwilling to ask him to "do it a little harder." The very thought of making that request mortified her, and she didn’t want him to get the wrong idea. Though really, she supposed, how likely was it that he’d even think that way? He probably didn’t even find humans attractive….

For some reason, that thought sobered her, but soon that thought was swept away by another, more cautious touch. His fingers rubbed tiny circles into the bases of her wings, working up the muscles of the limbs, careful not to brush her feathers the wrong way. The nerves in her wings, sensitive enough to pick up on the slightest changes in the air, positively thrilled at his touch, and it took all her willpower not to moan. Her toes curled and her fingertips dug into the blanket, and she felt the pleasure of it race down her spine, the desire for more pooling, molten, in a rather private place of her body. It took a second for this reaction to actually register with her brain, and when it did, she buried her face into her pillow, her wide eyes staring into the cotton. Oh god! She was getting turned on by this! It wasn’t often she got aroused - it was usually during that time of the month, when her hormones were going haywire, and her jeans were just a bit too snug. It was never the result of what someone else was doing to her!

And yet Mewtwo’s hands felt sinfully good as they worked into her, and a small part of her mind - some perverse part, she thought at the time - made her wonder what a full frontal massage might feel like. The powerful temptation to tuck her wings against her back and turn over, to undress herself completely, just to see how he would react, just to see what would happen, rose forcefully in her mind. As she felt his breath, hot and moist, roll across her skin, as she heard him breathe in deeply, she felt her limbs coiling to make those moves, a part of her determined to say, "Fuck it," and go ahead with it. Yet she struggled with the desire and eventually quashed it down, the rational side of her mind (the not-fun, not-brave side, that perverse part of her brain sneered) winning out. She couldn’t do that, it was wrong! She shouldn’t even be letting him touch her like this, even though it felt incredible. But it was bad, and people would be beyond pissed if they found out. Giovanni would be pissed!

That did it. The thought of her godfather killed the growing desire ruthlessly. With a grimace, she lifted her head and told Mewtwo he’d done enough, that she felt better - which she did. The pain had gone, and even though she felt slightly ashamed at what had just happened (I shouldn't have let him do that), she didn’t regret asking him. There was a strange look in his eyes as she spoke to him, something intense and yet distant at the same time, but he turned around when she told him to. Banishing her wings and slipping her shirt back on, she asked him if he wanted to stay for dinner, only to look over and find him looking rather agitated, his tail twitching and his brow slightly furrowed. As she asked the question again, he seemed to be jolted out of his thoughts, and he told her that he had somewhere to go - something to do - and as he left, she watched him go with some confusion. Was he…was he embarrassed? Had he been embarrassed while giving her that massage? She found the thought to be a little depressing, and even as she heated up a ready-made meal, her thoughts skittered around in her head, making her feel restless. She continuously flashed back to what had happened, and found her face heating up every time. She tried to think of what they would talk about the next time they met up, and found the thought made her feel incredibly anxious. The nervousness returned to the point of causing stomach pain, and with a huff, she gulped down the rest of her meal and rinsed the dishes, deciding to clean them later. She needed to hash this over with someone, and Shadow certainly couldn’t suffice. She doubted he’d even know what to say, and besides, if someone
overheard her talking to an eevee, they'd probably think she'd gone crazy.

And so it was with reluctance and uncertainty that she found herself outside of the apartment of a fellow trainee. After hesitating for a full thirty seconds, she knocked on the door, not quite knowing if she wanted there to be an answer or not. Yet soon enough to door was unlocked and pulled open, and two purple eyes widened upon seeing her there. As far as the Elite Children went, Domino was the youngest, but certainly not the sweetest, and after she got over her initial shock at seeing the “favorite” at her door, she scowled and asked Cassandra what she wanted. After a moment, Cassandra just replied that she wanted to have some “girl talk” - something she hadn't had since she was ten. Domino looked skeptical, but eventually she rolled her eyes and waved her in.

Taking off her shoes, Cassandra went to sit in the armchair she was directed to, and glanced around the room: there were a lot of electronics scattered throughout the room, including a number of game systems and piles of cartridges and CDs, along with several bags of snack foods. There were posters of various anime hits and pop artists on the walls; in fact, the television was currently playing a music video of some sort, full of flashing lights and synthesized sounds that put a porygon's moves to shame. She also thought she spotted some stacks of manga and magic cards against one wall, and maybe, just maybe, some actual textbooks - but she supposed the latter might just be wishful thinking on her part. The one non-geeky thing in the apartment was the vase of purple tulips in the window, and glancing over at Domino, Cassandra found herself wondering how the girl managed to be so popular with their fellow trainees, considering she seemed to be such an otaku. She supposed she must hide it well, or was just so "sweet" that no one cared.

In any case, the teenager opened her fridge and turned to her. "What kind of soda do you want to drink?"

Cassandra blinked. "I…would rather not. I'd prefer tea, if you have-.

"Nope, I don't have any of that nasty crap, so be a good guest and pick a Cola product already."

"Domino-.

"My place, my rules. Pick a soda!" the blonde snapped.

Cassandra sighed. "Fine. Do you have a Vanilla Coke?"

"Unfortunately, yes." The teenager threw the can at her, and Cassandra caught it, cracking it open and taking a sip to appease the younger trainee.

It worked...well, slightly. After picking out a regular Coke and sitting down in the armchair across from her visitor, Domino continued to give her a look that basically asked, "What the hell do you want?" Cassandra, for her part, tried to make some small talk before diving into the subject ("Where'd you get those purple tulip-?" "The store. They were dyed that color, idiot."), but the other trainee quickly shut that down, demanding that she just spit out what she'd come to talk about. Cassandra just glared at the brat for a second, before taking a few gulps of her drink, feeling the carbonation burn down her throat. The pain making her a little bolder, she gathered her courage and got to the point.

"What does it mean exactly when you're nervous around a guy?"

Domino arched an eyebrow at that. "Are we talking Sensei-Biancardi-creeps-me-the-fuck-out nervous or self-conscious nervous?"

"Sensei Biancardi creeps you-?"
"Well, he's a creepy motherfucker! I'm thankful as hell that I'm not his type. You have that dubious honor, and I count my lucky stars every night for that," she said with a smirk.

_Bitch._ "No, it's not that kind of nervous," she clarified. "It's the second one."

"And you…don't know what that means? Seriously?" Now Domino was just giving her a look that distinctly said, "You're a dumbass."

Sometimes Cassandra really hated that girl. "I have a suspicion, but I just wanted to get your input."

"Mine? Really?"

"Trust me, if anyone else I knew was still on base, I'd have gone to them with this." But no, all the other female Children were out on missions, and she wasn't about to walk up to a stranger and start a conversation. Word would get around, and if she trusted Domino to do anything, it was to keep a secret. She was going to be an infiltration agent, after all, so that was kind of her specialty.

"Well thank whatever god there is for that small mercy! If you came over all the time to ask stupid questions like that one, I'd have to start keeping booze in my fridge."

If she beat the shit out of this girl, would Giovanni be terribly upset? Seriously, she was a spy, how much could a broken face damage her career? Giving the blonde a glare, she growled, "What, you don't already? I was so sure that was how you got others to like you! Get them so wasted they don't realize you're such a bit-.

"This coming from the frigid cunt who doesn't even have a social life." And seeing Cassandra bristle at that, she grinned and pressed on, "So you're self-conscious around this guy. Is he handsome? Charming? Do you imagine him doing scandalous things to you, or something really sappy that a ten-year-old could come up with?"

"What?" But then what Domino was insinuating sank in, and she crossed her arms. "Well, he's…he's not ugly, and I enjoy hanging out with him. And I don't know that the rest is any of your business."

"Fine, go ahead and be evasive. It's not like you came over to my place asking for help or anything," Domino said, and taking a sip of her soda, smiled wickedly over the can. "I'll bet you have though. I'll bet you've gotten all hot and bothered around this guy, or simpered at something he did. The fact that you don't know what to make of that is just sad."

"Your point, Domino?" This so wasn't worth it. She should have just found a computer and consulted the Internet. That would have been far less irritating!

"Alright, alright! It's obvious what your problem is: you've got the hots for whoever this guy is. There, you happy?"

_No_ - no she was not 'happy'! "And what am I supposed to do about that? He's a…," she stopped herself from saying 'pokémon.' "…He's a good friend."

"You have friends?"

Cassandra set her drink down, least she throw it at the girl. "Would you stop harping on my social life and help me?"

"Why should I stop? I need to get something out of this, don't I?"
"You're insufferable."

Domino just tilted her head, her curls bobbing slightly against her cheeks. "Like you should talk. In any case, if he's a friend, all the better. You know you'll have fun with him. Just accept that you want to bang him - oh fine, cuddle up with him - ask him out, and enjoy the ride. It's not that hard."

"It's not that simple, either," Cassandra replied. It would be one thing if Mewtwo was a human male, or even a human female. But he was a pokémon - a sentient one, but a pokémon nonetheless - and if Domino knew that, she doubted the other trainee would be encouraging her quite so much.

Ignoring the uncertain expression on her face, Domino shocked her with her next words. "'It's not that simple' are the words of cowards. If you let fear and 'what ifs' get in your way, then you really don't deserve to have anything worthwhile. And hell, who knows if you'll ever be into someone else again? This may be your chance to actually have something normal in your life, so I say suck it up, stop whining, and go for it."

The irony of someone calling her relationship with Mewtwo "normal" was not lost on Cassandra. Yet after that, there was nothing more for them to say, and reluctantly thanking Domino for her time, she made her way to the door…only for the blonde to call out to her one last time. "Would I know this guy? He must be something special, to catch your eye."

She glanced back at the other trainee. "I'd hope not." She didn't even want to think of Mewtwo having to deal with the girl's spectacular bitchiness! Then, pulling the door shut behind her, she admitted, "And yeah…he is special."

When she returned to her apartment, she found Mewtwo at her door, his cloak wrapped firmly around him. When she got closer to him, she noticed he was shivering, and pressed the back of her hand to his muzzle: it was damp and cool, as if he'd just gone swimming, but he didn't have the smell of chlorine on him. She arched an eyebrow, asking him if the water heater at his place wasn't working - she couldn't think of another reason for him to voluntarily take an icy shower. He didn't answer her, and after they were inside, he slumped down on her bed, looking rather distracted and, dare she say it, miserable. Though tempted to ask him what was wrong, Cassandra sensed he didn't want to talk at the moment, and with a sigh, she gathered up the blanket from her bed and wrapped it over his shoulders.

As he accepted it, she went into the kitchen and prepared some tea, soon enough pouring them both cups of the hot beverage. She brought his over and handed it to him, and after getting her own, she sat beside him, sipping her tea and letting the liquid roll over her tongue - for though it was bitter, it was warm, and that was enough to please her right now. In the quiet, she thought about what they'd done earlier that day, what Domino had said to her, and where they would go from here. In a few short weeks, she'd have her final evaluation with Biancardi, and if she managed to pass it, she'd be initiated as a full agent. Her godfather would doubtlessly want to celebrate, which meant there would be a party with drinks, mingling, and formal dances. She doubted she'd enjoy it very much - she wasn't the partying type like Domino. And yet…maybe it wouldn't be so bad if Mewtwo was there.

"'It's not that simple' are the words of cowards. If you let fear and 'what ifs' get in your way, then you really don't deserve to have anything worthwhile."

…She was right, wasn't she?

"This may be your chance…."

Cassandra turned to look at Mewtwo, who sat there, staring into the tea at his reflection. As if he felt her gaze, he turned his head and gazed back at her, his amethyst eyes meeting her grey ones. And
faint, so faint that it almost wasn't there...he smiled at her. She smiled back.

*I'll ask him. When the time comes, I'll ask him to come with me.*

She hoped he'd say yes.

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As they emerged from the memory, the bittersweetness of it leaving both their hearts heavy, Sabrina couldn't help but voice an observation. "At that time...you were falling in love with him, weren't you?" Perhaps she should have said "had fallen in love" instead, since the girl's feelings seemed to run deeper than infatuation...but somehow, this felt the safer thing to say.

Cassandra, blinking rapidly, seemed to understand. "Yeah...yeah, I was. He was my best friend. He meant everything to me."

The telepath nodded and, in a more gentle voice, said, "There's still more I'll need to see, Miss Brennan. If it's any comfort, we should be done in a couple hours, and then you can rest."

For Cassandra was growing weary, both from reliving so many experiences from her past, and from the demands of her pregnancy. Yet despite the fatigue threatening to make her mind leaden, Cassandra nodded and cooperated with Sabrina for the remainder of the session. And in that time, the telepath saw many more moments, ranging from back into Cassandra's childhood, through her turbulent adolescence, and into the months preceding her defection from Team Rocket. As she referred back to some and crosschecked others, she saw more of the woman's interactions with her mother, sweet and affectionate until riled; with the Fuji family, who freely gave wisdom and honey by the spoonful; with the Maki males, Giovanni, Silver, and Zachariah, each of them abrasive and charming in equal measures; with a number of other Team Rocket agents, the faces and names mixing into an almost unintelligible blur; and so many other memories with Shadow and Mewtwo, and those the latter was acquainted with. She saw holidays, anniversaries, and birthdays passing by in swift succession; saw lessons taught with books and blades and brutality; and saw glimpses of the deaths (of those known and those unknown) which Cassandra only wanted to forget. She saw moments of great happiness, bordering on quasi-religious rapture, which became less frequent, yet far more precious, as the years went on. And she saw Cassandra reach her lowest points, where her only thoughts had been, "Enough! I've had enough! No more!"...and yet, somehow, somehow the girl had gotten back up. Even as her mind had begun to be eaten away, even when she'd been placed in a room filled with maddening-blessed silence, she'd stumbled onwards, returned to awareness despite the ache.

At the time, Cassandra hadn't known why she'd done it. Why not just let go? Why keep on fighting like she was? What was the point...?

At one point, it had been friendship. But it had been broken.

At one point, it had been love. But it had left her.

At one point, it had been a dream. But it had faded.

Ultimately, it had been a question that had made her keep going. *There's something missing, she'd thought. What's missing?*

The answer, she'd sensed, was in the scent of wildflowers and the taste of mint tea. It was in the yellowed leaves and the sweetness of crème. It was in the color purple and full moon nights. It was in the warmth of Shadow's fur beneath her palm, and in the sound of his soft footfalls (which were not quite the same, but somehow, tantalizingly close). Always she tried and failed in arranging these
threads into a sensible pattern, failed to see the shape they intertwined to form. It was a blind spot in her mind, maddening her as she tried to peer into it, her senses keeping her ever aware of its existence. Yet even as she cursed the feeling, she clung to the pursuit of the answer...because, just for awhile, it was just enough to keep her from giving up.

And then she'd found the answer in him...and for a short while, she'd known what it meant to be more than just alive again.

It hadn't lasted long enough - but then, they could have had decades, and it wouldn't have been enough for her. Yet in the end, she'd managed to find something else to live for - something they'd made as they'd come together, gasping out curses and loving words alike, intertwined and moving in a rhythm all their own. Though he'd gone, that something remained, fragile yet growing stronger by the day, giving flesh to the promise that those brighter days would return.

And no matter the struggle it took to get there, no matter the blood and tears that might ensue...so long as they were alive, then there would be hope.

And for Cassandra, that would be enough.

It would be enough to live on....

Afterwards, content with the revelation she'd found, the Witch of the Marshes swept back through Cassandra's mind, searching for one final truth - a truth that would only be unveiled in dreams. She'd seen enough of the past, and now wished to look ahead. The young woman, for her part, exhaustedly tried to hinder her, grabbing at her clothes and asking her to stop, but Sabrina would not be swayed. She'd completed her assessment of the entity known as Cassandra Brennan, and only needed this last bit of information to confirm her findings. So she brushed Cassandra's avatar away, plunging into the depths of the woman's imagination, wandering through half-remembered places filled with half-forgotten things. She passed through a vineyard, the air of which was pungent with the smell of ripe fruit, and then into a rolling meadow, where pokémon with strange markings and another woman played. The one in the sundress (Amber) smiled and pointed the way, and with a nod, Sabrina began her ascent. The grassy hills faded, replaced with forest, and the psychic passed between the trees, trekking higher and higher along the growing bluff. Sunlight shined through the leaves, sending rays of golden-green light onto the forest floor, where tiny flowers and ferns grew. Above her a bird winged its way, and she thought she saw heard the call of a mourning dove. She continued on, sensing that she was close to her quarry, though what it would turn out to be escaped her. What could be in this forest that Cassandra desired with all her heart...?

Sabrina learned what it was soon enough. As she stepped out of the trees, she recognized the spot from Cassandra's memories: it was the rise that overlooked the Viridian Forest, the ground covered in grass and an apple tree perched at its center. She walked forward, closer to the edge, and saw that she wasn't alone...and, as she looked upon who was there, as she understood what it meant, she felt a great swell of compassion for the woman. Cassandra Brennan didn't dream of gaining power or riches or fame, nor sought to deceive anyone with her intentions. She wasn't planning to betray her potential allies, and had no desire to return to the organization she'd left months before. She wasn't a mole they needed to worry about, nor wanted to use her training to kill them all in their sleep. What she wished for instead was a simple thing, but something that was now out of her reach:

The Cassandra of the dream, sitting at the base of the tree, rested her head upon her lover's shoulder. He'd wrapped an arm around her waist, and was looking down at the babes in her arms, which were nursing and kneading their tiny hands into her breasts. Neither of them looked up at she approached, and gazing down, she saw that one of the infants took after its mother in its appearance, while the other seemed closer to a wildcat cub, if humanoid in anatomy. Which one was the boy and which the
girl she couldn't tell, but the contentment she felt from the small family - the sense of wholeness - made her heart ache. She knew it was the result of running her fingers through the woman's soul, of learning her experiences, her thoughts, and her rawest emotions; it was only natural that she would empathize and sympathize. Though far more invasive than most interrogation techniques, it was also gentler, with its only danger being in growing biased from what she learned. Yet Sabrina had seen numerous moments in the woman's youth that day, many more than the ones she'd dwelled on, and was certain the compassion she felt was merited. She'd explain as much those who'd requested her aid, and with a sigh, she began to turn away from the dream…and paused.

There was something around the trunk of the tree - a cord of some kind. Kneeling down, she reached out her senses and identified it as a psychic link, the type that was usually woven between…well, between bedmates. She had a similar one with her partner, but that one, at least, was intact. This one, the remains of which were still tied tightly into Cassandra's psyche, seemed to have been severed. Her brow furrowed as she looked at the end of the cord, which had presumably once led into Mewtwo's mind. It had been cut with precision, rather than blasted or burned away, which was usually the case in violent deaths. Yet this didn't seem to be natural damage - it was almost as if…as if it had been severed by a third party. Reaching for it, she touched the end and tried to sense any residual psychic signatures. She found a few bits of an aural code, but she supposed that what seemed to be foreign could just as easily be the natural code, damaged or mutated by trauma. Yet that wasn't all she found as she grasped it: there was a thread still there, thin and translucent yet strong as a fishing line, and as such difficult to spot or sense. But it was there, discolored with a faint red hue, and it led outwards into the void…and more importantly, it was taut. The other end was wrapped around something, and while she wanted to follow it and see where it led, she had no idea what would be at the other end. She had a suspicion - this remnant could be a blood tie or some sort - but she would have to leave it be. She hadn't the time, or likely the skill, to follow it to its end.

And so, tucking the information away in her brain, she stood and walked away from the scene. As it faded into darkness, she saw Cassandra's avatar appear in the gloom, and saw that the woman's back was turned towards her. She seemed to be rejecting the scene Sabrina had just left, and the Witch of the Marshes found that to be rather curious. It was a dream, made to be visited and made to find solace in. So why hadn't she done so…?

Yet Cassandra spoke before Sabrina could make the inquiry. "Are you happy now?"

Her tone was bitter, but Sabrina heard the undertone of sadness in it. The telepath stepped forward and faced her, preparing to ascend from the layers of the woman's psyche and return to reality, but she'd wait until this conversation was over before doing so. "I've learned all I need to know to make my assessment," she said. "But tell me, why didn't you come with me to the end? You were willing to relive the rest, no matter how painful it proved. So why wouldn't you go look at your deepest desire?"

Tan hands clenched into fists, and there was venom in Cassandra's voice as she said, shaking, "Why should I…? I know what it is, and I already know I'll never fucking have it, so what's the point in going over there to look?"

"You might learn something from it. Something you didn't realize before," Sabrina murmured, thinking about the thread.

But Cassandra just laughed, and it was a broken sound, filled with the sort of pain someone her age - of any age, really - shouldn't have to feel. "God, don't say that. Please don't. If I go into that dream, I won't want to wake up, and I…I have to wake up. I have to." Her children needed her to be a part of the real world, not lose her to the world that could have been, had fate been kinder.
Sabrina, though she had no children of her own and doubted she ever would, nonetheless thought that she understood. With a nod, she ascended from the woman's mind, and opened her eyes to find herself in the confinement cell. The colors and edges in the room were far crisper; the sensation of the hard chair beneath her was much more distinct; she could now hear people talking through the door; and the cell still smelled of lemons and the vomit from earlier. Taking in deep breath, she began formulating how to convey her findings to the others, and watched as Cassandra stirred awake. As she swayed from disorientation, Sabrina steadied her with her telekinesis; whether the ex-agent appreciated the gesture or not was unclear, and as she blinked her grey eyes at the Gym Leader, Sabrina wondered what she might say.

Pursing her lips, Cassandra said, "So…did I pass your nasty little test?"

Well, the test had hardly been little, could have been far worse, and had left them both drained, but Sabrina didn't bother to correct her. "I believe you did. If your caretakers heed me - which they should - I'm confident you'll be released sometime within the next twenty-four hours. Until then, you should have something to eat and get some rest."

"Yeah, because the smell of your puke is just so appetizing."

The Witches of the Marshes knew Cassandra was just trying to lash out, if in a rather passive-aggressive way, and let the comment roll off her. It was only natural for the woman to be snappish - having someone finger through your mind was never comfortable, and she was probably developing an awful headache. Knowing her continued presence would only further agitate the woman, Sabrina stood and made her way to the door. Yet as the guard unlocked the door and held it open for her, Sabrina remembered a small detail she'd picked up during the last few hours, and turned back to the ex-agent. It might not be appropriate to say this, but…well, she felt like she should. She doubted anyone else had said anything, after all.…. 

"By the way, Cassandra…I hope the rest of your birthday proves to be a little more pleasant."

Cassandra winced, and as the door was shut behind her visitor, she wrapped her arms around herself and blinked rapidly, banishing the tears gathering in her eyes. She wasn't sure if they were tears of anger, disgust, or sadness, but she supposed it didn't matter. After taking a moment to calm herself, she let out a breath and murmured, "Yeah, well, I won't get my hopes up. I already got the worst birthday present ever, thanks to you," and lowering herself onto the cot, she turned to face the wall, hoping she'd be able to spend the rest of her "special day" in some sort of peace.

Knowing her luck, though, she doubted that would happen.

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**Author's Note:** I'd never planned to write a scene in which Cassandra went to Domino for advice, but it ended up being my favorite part of this chapter. The next update will wrap up the "Examinations" chapters and then we'll be moving forward with the plot. Until next time!

Sincerely,

WiseAbsol
"There are things that we never want to let go of, people we never want to leave behind. But keep in mind that letting go isn't the end of the world; it's the beginning of a new life."

- Unknown.

"Alright, I understand. We'll be there shortly. Thanks."

Behind Aurora, Michael snapped his cell phone shut and walked over to her side, announcing that Sabrina had finished her assessment. Glancing over Cassandra's genetic files again, the doctor nodded, knowing they'd have to leave for the debriefing in a couple minutes. She supposed she could use a change of scenery: she wasn't making any progress right now, and her frustration was only giving her a headache. She'd been hoping to isolate which of Cassandra's parents had passed down that activated gene sequence, but the answer kept eluding her. Not, she thought, that it mattered overly much – but it was something to do where Cassandra's case was concerned. In the last two weeks she'd been allowed to visit her charge to make sure everything was in working order, that she was being treated with care – which, to their credit, she was, excluding having a nicer bed – but that was about it. She'd had other patients to attend to, of course, just like Michael had his other cases, so it wasn't as if she'd had the chance to grow bored or idle. Still, Cassandra Brennan's case was their primary concern, and now it seemed that a final decision was going to be made. As Michael grabbed his coat off the chair beside hers, she scooped up the files and locked them in her cabinet. Before they left, she reached down to scratch Alexius behind his ears; he was going to be their guard-puppy while they were gone, though she doubted he'd have more to do than nap. Yet as she shut the door behind them, she locked it all the same – just in case.

They said nothing in the time it took to walk to the conference room, mindful of the trainers wandering the halls.

When they arrived, she glanced around the room and saw that, besides Sabrina herself, some of Michael's superiors were seated around the table, as well as a colleague of his, Lieutenant Veronica Jenny. Among the ones she knew less well was a leading engineer of Silph Company (his name escaped her – something with a "B," she thought), and a dark-skinned woman – of African descent, if her facial features were any indication, though her green eyes suggested European genes – who she recognized to be Theresa "Rose" Gallagher, Sabrina's current and, Aurora suspected, final partner. Though they had never been formally introduced, Aurora knew a little bit about Ms. Gallagher: she had limited telepathic abilities, multiple degrees in psychology, and worked as a mental health counselor at the Saffron Academy for Extraordinary Students, S.A.F.E.S. Wondering if her occupation was why she'd been invited to this council, Aurora sat in the chair Michael pulled out for her, murmuring her thanks to him. She thought she saw the psychics give them an amused look as he sat down beside her, but she couldn't be sure. Ignoring that possibility, she took one of the cups of coffee being passed down (the powdered stuff, she noted with a grimace), and glanced up as the room's door was locked. They must have been the last to arrive. She was a little surprised by that, but in retrospect, she shouldn't have been. Of course they'd converge quickly. The others had been prowling through the halls, eager for the Gym Leader to complete her unusual interrogation. Now, after hours of waiting, they could get to business.
One of Michael's superiors spoke first. "Now that we're all accounted for, why don't you tell us what you found, Miss Sheehy? I trust you won't need a bucket for this?"

There was scattered laughter around the table, though Aurora saw Michael's jaw tense and Rose's hand cover Sabrina's. Sabrina narrowed her eyes at the man and snapped, "While I appreciate your attempt at lightening the mood, Chief Tachibana, I'll remind you that a telepathic interrogation is an intense experience. While assessing someone, I must experience their experiences vicariously; that is what gives me insight into their thoughts and motivations. My information - unless the subject's mind has been duped in some way – is almost always accurate, and my techniques are certainly gentler than…alternative methods. Its only downside is that I will, upon occasion, be adversely affected if the subject has gone through extensive trauma. Yet I am willing to endure those effects to aid you in your investigation, so I would appreciate it if you would refrain from mocking me."

The Chief's face went gray, and in a more reserved voice he replied, "I meant no offense, Miss Sheehy. It's merely unusual for you to react so strongly. Please continue."

"Thank you," and turning to the rest of them, Sabrina said, "I learned a great deal of information from Miss Brennan, some of which I will detail in my full report, and some of which I believe should remain undisclosed. We already knew from Detective Lagorio's findings that Cassandra Brennan, after her mother's death, was placed into the custody of Giovanni Maki, the Viridian City Gym Leader. There have been some who have suggested, in light of recent events," Aurora knew she was referring to the occupations of Viridian and Cerulean, "that Giovanni Maki might also the leader of Kanto's yakuza faction, which has taken on the moniker of Team Rocket. This is by no means a new theory: Giovanni is a known relative of the founding family, and his absences from his Gym, as well as some of his business enterprises, have corresponded with the campaigns of Team Rocket. But there has never been any concrete evidence of a connection - just the usual whispers and odd coincidences."

She gave a pointed look to Chief Tachibana and then dropped the proverbial bombshell. "That is no longer the case. My findings from Miss Brennan's assessment have made his position as their leader clear. You can now consider that suspicion confirmed, for all the good it does us."

The Chief leaned back in his seat, seeming to consider the implications of her words. Aurora, having spent long hours discussing politics with Michael, understood how bad this was. Giovanni Maki was one of the most powerful leaders in the League, which had members in almost every department of Kanto's government. Agriculture, economics, biological and technological research institutes, medical centers, education, law enforcement, protection agencies, social services – name a field, and the League was involved in it somehow. Even the military was not immune to its reach – in fact, they were intimately intertwined: during times of war and other national crises, League members were the first to be drafted, given their experience in battle and fighting the elements. If Giovanni Maki was the leader of Team Rocket, that meant there could be gang members in every level of Kanto's infrastructure…and if that information was released to the public, it would no doubt cause widespread panic and distrust. That would undoubtedly be something Giovanni could use to his advantage once he got a stable foothold - and Aurora had to wonder if he wasn't eying Saffron to play that role. They were under no delusions: their city was being targeted. Positioned between Viridian and Cerulean City, it was only a matter of time before they were hammered from both sides. Assistance from Vermillion and Johto might help in fending the organization off, but so far, neither had been called for aid. Things hadn't quite gotten to that point yet.

Her Center was being attacked, that was true – but that was because it was an easy target, on the outer rim of the city as it was, and because it held someone they wanted. The core of the capital had yet to be breached.
But it was only a matter of time.

"What about Cassandra Brennan herself? What role does she play in this?"

That was Veronica speaking, and giving her a nod, Sabrina said, "While Giovanni is certainly still interested her, she is no longer a willing participant in his schemes. She was an Elite agent until late last year, and possesses the skills and knowledge required to hold that position, despite her young age. She was, suffice to say, trained from the age of ten – the age most children join the League – and went on a number of missions, many of which resulted in assassinations. If you ask her as much, she won't deny her involvement. She is not the kind of person who would try to defend herself against your accusations, despite having cause to."

In her peripheral vision, she saw Michael lean forward in his chair. "What do you mean? What could she say in her defense?"

"Well, she could say that she had to do it, or else her godfather would murder her. In her case, the possibility was entirely feasible." She then told them about the implant that had held Cassandra in check, and Aurora couldn't help but stare across the table in mute horror. That poor girl…!

She could scarcely imagine how afraid the teenager must have been, knowing she was carrying her death within her breast. She didn't know if Giovanni Maki would have really done it – after all, the girl was his goddaughter – but it was telling that Cassandra had believed it possible.

Michael, however, didn't seem as satisfied with that line of reasoning. "And what about those she killed after that threat was removed? What was her reasoning then?"

The psychic peered at him for a moment, and then said in low and almost gentle voice, "Detective Lagorio, I realize this must be frustrating for you, but try to understand: while it is admirable of you to be willing to give your life for the innocent, you cannot expect others to make the same choice. You cannot expect a ten-year-old, a sixteen-year-old, or even a nineteen-year-old to die for someone they neither know nor love. There is a reason not many choose your profession." And as he opened his mouth to utter some retort, she pressed her point, "I am not denying her crimes. I am merely doing what you asked me to do: giving you the truth of the matter. And the truth does not always conform to what we wish to hear, does it?"

For a second Michael looked positively gobsmacked, and he blinked rapidly before regulating his expression. As he leaned back in his chair, Sabrina turned back to the others and said in a firmer voice, "Cassandra Brennan is a murderer; that much is undeniable. She has killed numerous men, women, and, in a few cases, children. Yet she never derived any pleasure from that bloodshed; instead, her crimes have caused her no end of remorse and self-loathing, to the point where the end of a gun, the edge of a knife, and the poisons she possessed all began to look terribly friendly. Like a 'good little soldier' she followed the orders given to her, first under the threat of death and then because there seemed to be no way out. She had done too much, seen too much, and knew too much to think she could walk away unscathed - especially without outside aid. But who could she have turned to for help? Giovanni effectively removed every person in her life who cared about her, cutting off the avenues of family and friends. Where else could she have gone? Would we have accepted her if she ran to us? Detective Lagorio is one of the most just men I know, and even he has his doubts about giving her sanctuary. So should it surprise us that she stayed within the organization? That she stayed until she found something else worth pursuing, regardless of the cost to herself?"

Several council members began to twitch, before someone coughed and asked, "You're referring to the, err…the father of those kids of hers?"

Some amusement – and a hint of sadness - entered the psychic's eyes at that. "What happened was
rather more complicated than that, but yes, he was the catalyst. If it helps, Mewtwo, as he was called, was a sentient being: his intelligence and capacity for emotion were on human levels. He would hold long discussions with her, and would bristle whenever she poked fun at him. Honestly, he was closer to a brooding young man in a cat-suit than a simple animal." She glanced around, seeing their faces contort as they struggled to assimilate this new information with their preconceived notions. "They were friends for quite some time before they became intimate, and while we might consider it... unusual... I will not label it as perverse. If you met him, I am certain you would come to the same conclusion. Which reminds me...."

She steepled her fingers then, her expression growing thoughtful. "I found something strange during her assessment." She began to explain something about a "remnant psychic thread" and "blood bond," and while much of what she said delved into advanced psychic theory, those who were familiar with Sabrina's work seemed to understand. Michael was nodding along, though he seemed distracted, his face slightly stony, his hands fist ed on the table, his cobalt blue eyes glazed over. Placing her hand on his thigh, Aurora watched his eyes flicker to hers, and they seemed to soften somewhat. He inclined his head ever-so-minutely – he was grateful for her concern – but now was not the time. He showed that by looking back at Sabrina, who was laying out her hypothesis. "...So I am not entirely convinced that he's dead. It seems equally possible that he's being hidden somewhere, and that she has been led to believe he's deceased. I don't recommend disclosing that to her, however. It would be cruel to give her hope, only to disappoint-.

"You say that as if she'll be interacting with us soon. Have you decided she's not a threat?" asked Chief Tachibana.

She blinked at him. "Did my earlier arguments not imply as such? Miss Brennan has never had much affection for Team Rocket or her godfather, and now that they have 'killed' her lover and threatened her children, she views them as her enemy – and that feeling appears to be mutual. Remember, she is familiar with their infrastructure, with the campaigns they've undertaken, and with most of the elite members. If she didn't have something they want, I am certain they would have long since bombed this Center to ensure her silence."

Shivering at the thought, Aurora distantly heard the Chief ask, "So what would you have us do? You believe she's not our enemy, and I'm willing to trust your judgment on this, Ms. Sheehy. But the girl is still dangerous, and I don't want to risk the lives of my men and women by making a misstep where she's concerned."

The Gym Leader released a long breath at that. "I have a few recommendations. First and foremost, you should allow her to have custody of her children. If you take them from her, she'll react by being anywhere between uncooperative to murderous. If you want to show her goodwill and make her inclined to give us information - which, need I remind you, would be invaluable to us right now – you should let her have her little family. The more you enable that desire, the more forthcoming she will be, so that rules out imprisoning her or subjecting her to the death penalty. I realize some of you may disagree with this, but my professional opinion is that by treating her as a criminal witness, rather than a mere criminal – by having mercy, rather than justice – you will be rewarded in the long run."

They all mulled over that for a moment, before the Chief nodded for Sabrina to continue. "Now if you take that route, you will have to see to it that they are all kept safe. Keeping them here won't accomplish that. They will have to be moved to a secure location; preferably somewhere they can leave their home without having to worry about being attacked or abducted. I would recommend one of the smaller towns for that end: what they lack in firepower, they make up for in isolation. Miss Brennan's name might also have to be changed, depending on where her children and she are placed. I would suggest assigning an agent to guard them at all times, perhaps a trusted associate of
Lieutenant Jenny-"

Michael, emerging from his contemplations, shook his head sharply. "No. I'll do it."

There was silence in the room as everyone turned to stare at him, with more than one person looking quite surprised by his offer. Aurora wasn't certain whether to share their reaction or not: her friend was a protector by nature, but there were people even he would hesitate to shield. Cassandra, she had thought, was one of them. Sabrina seemed similarly skeptical, and peering at him from across the table, she asked, "Are you certain that is wise, Detective, given your history with her?"

There suddenly seemed to be no air in the room. No one had dared comment on that particular white elephant before, but here was Sabrina, doing exactly that. Yet Michael seemed determined, and after glaring at the telepath for a moment, he said, "I may not like her, and I may have problems with what she's done. But I can set aside my personal feelings to do my job. Besides, the less people who know about this, the better chance we have in pulling it off."

After a long moment, in which Sabrina’s gaze grew intent and piercing – and the detective stared back, unflinching – she gave a slow nod. "It's up to your superiors to make the final decision, but you are correct: the less people who know, the better. That is why I also recommend that Doctor Joy-", Aurora started at her name being spoken, "-be transferred to wherever it is they're sent. As I understand it, she is acting as their doctor and has a grasp on their unusual physiologies. I think it would be best she remained in that position. She, unlike many of you, actually cares about what happens to them, don't you, Doctor Joy?"

Aurora was somewhat annoyed to be put on the spot like that, but she supposed what the woman said was true enough. "I do. I'm not sure when they could be moved, though. Cassandra's condition is rather delicate, and travelling for an extended period of time could harm her greatly."

"Meaning the move should be after she's given birth. That shouldn't be much of a problem: it'll take us that long to set everything up anyhow," Veronica mused aloud, and then, after a beat, added, "If we do this, that is."

Yet there could be no doubt that the group was reaching that decision. After giving Lieutenant Jenny an approving look, Sabrina schooled her expression and added, "As for my last recommendation, some of you might be wondering why I invited Rose Gallagher to this meeting. I'll allow her to explain."

Having never before had a conversation with Rose Gallagher, Aurora was surprised to note the faint Irish lilt in her voice as she spoke. "As some of you know, I work as a mental health counselor at S.A.F.E.S., and have had a fair amount of success in helping her students, who often come from abusive backgrounds." Her green eyes grew murky as she seemed to remember some of the sessions she'd conducted, but she went into no further detail than that. "From what Sabrina has told me, Miss Brennan is desperately in need of therapy, both to make her more…socially agreeable…and to deal with the extensive trauma she's been through. Honestly, it's astonishing that she hasn't gone insane already, and I'd like to keep it that way. I'm willing to do what I can to help her, if you'll allow it."

Chief Tachibana nodded. "That sounds reasonable. Is there anything else you'd like to add?" he asked, his gaze darting back to Sabrina.

The smirk the telepath gave him then was rather...unsettling. "Yes. I'm assigning a few of my people to guard them, whether you all like it or not. They will be nearby, ready to teleport Miss Brennan and her children to safety if they are ever in any danger." Some of the people around the table, including Michael, recoiled slightly at that, wondering if her words had been a veiled threat. Sabrina didn't indulge them with an answer, instead merely saying, with her grin widening as she spoke, "When the
time comes, I intend to teach those children how to control their powers. I might even give Miss Brennan some advice on her premonitions, not that it's my specialty, and not that she has them often. But I will be involved in this matter; they're psychics, so I have a right to that. Besides...I wish to see where that thread leads."

There was little more to say after that, or at least little new to add. The group hashed over what had been said, asking for clarification from Sabrina, Michael, and Aurora at certain points, adding in their own opinions and observations, at one point telephoning various guards to have their input. When all was said and done, they worked out that they would be taking Sabrina's suggestions, even though the vote was by no means unanimous. There had been a few of them who'd disagreed with the plan—some had thought it too lenient, or too apt for error, or that it would consume too many of their people and resources to pull off, especially when they had a cell handy.

Yet there was no knowing how long the Center would hold up to an outright invasion; waiting the remaining months for Cassandra to give birth seemed risky enough, and besides, a basement was no place to raise two children. That much they all agreed on! Yet for all the squabbles and all the derailments that followed, a rudimentary plan was laid out with the assistance of the consultants they'd brought on board, including the Silph Company engineer. In the upcoming months, they would make quiet inquiries, file and lose certain bits of paperwork, and would lay out the specific routes they would take. In the meantime, they had greater concerns: the police department was busy keeping Team Rocket at bay, as well as investigating the crimes the invading agents had and were committing. The Witch of the Marshes and her Rose had to secure their school, as well as intensify the training of their psychics to deal with the incoming onslaught. Then there were the others, those members of the unofficial jury of the unofficial trial of Cassandra Brennan, whose fate they had decided in a stuffy conference room. They had their businesses, their social groups, and their city as a whole to look after...and for Michael and Aurora, they had the equally heavy burden of tending to woman and her children, come what may. Doing so would include being uprooted from their homes, from their families, from their friends.

Yet at the same time, they took some solace in the fact that they'd be going forth together. They had that much, at least.

The members of the unofficial council then went their separate ways, promising to keep in touch. The Silph Company engineer came up to Aurora afterwards and pressed a package into her hand. "It's what I was hired for," was all he said, and then he left, disappearing down the hall. Returning to her office with Michael close behind, she took a packaging knife from her desk drawer and cut through the tape, opening the box and brushing away the bubble-wrap. Inside was an evidence bag holding the choker that Cassandra had, until rather recently, worn, looking rather worse than the last time the doctor had seen it. Handing that over to Michael, who muttered his thanks, she grabbed the black box at the bottom, undoing the cords around it. Opening it, she found a steel armlet, the band about a centimeter thick and four centimeters in height, the diameter of which had been measured to fit Cassandra's upper arm. The armlet itself was smooth and slightly cool, but too light to be solid—there were wires and silicon inside, she knew, along with other tiny technological marvels that made Silph Company one of the finest research institutes in the world. Their specialty, of course, lay in molecular disrupters, a key component to any pokéball—and they had the best designers in Kanto at their disposal to solve Cassandra's little feathery problem. At the very least, this version wasn't as abrasive as the other one, and probably easier to manage. It would be voice activated and deactivated, depending on what words Cassandra chose for the passwords (the researchers at Silph had already added in several voice samples, which Michael had provided from his interviews with her). The thin manual within the box would, Aurora presumed, explain how it worked. As it was, she had no idea how the armlet was going to hear a voice, let alone follow along with instructions.

Pokéballs somehow managed as much, though, and they had to be more versatile to commands, even
though their function was just as limited. They didn't have one-word passwords – they had to recognize certain phrases, which could be in any number of languages. In comparison, the armlet was a bit simpler, since it only had to recognize two words in one voice. The challenge had been to design it into this shape, to program it take a limited amount of mass inside of it, and to make it smaller and more pleasing to the wearer. The choker had no doubt been a boon to them, and while Aurora thought she should be more concerned about an information leak…well…she doubted they'd say anything. They would have done it for free for just the challenge of the thing. Indeed, they seemed to have taken pride in their success: beyond their company logo, which was engraved on the outside, she soon found the group's signatures etched into the inside of the armlet. The latter was no doubt unusual as far as their products went. The outside of the armlet also displayed a decorative touch, having swirling patterns of what looked like darker and lighter steel composites. They must have thought it looked cool, and she supposed they weren't wrong. It was prettier than plain steel, at any rate.

Well, no matter. She'd gotten a bargain for this pet project of theirs. All she'd had to do is promise to advertise their latest batch of special pokéballs at her Center, and they'd become very reasonable about the price. Pocketing it and the manual, she had a bit of a skip in her step as she went downstairs, dragging Michael along behind her.

It was time for them to free her strange and sometimes snarky patient.

"It's a happy coincidence that they got this to me in time for you birthday. I hope you like it. You're turning twenty today, right?"

Cassandra, giving Aurora a brief nod, turned over the armlet, her gaze tracing the initials etched into the inside of the band, her fingertips following the liquid pattern of the steel striations. It was a more simplistic piece than the choker she'd previously worn, but she found she appreciated it more for that reason. That it would also allow her to set aside the ornament that had shown her off as Giovanni's dog appealed to her just as much. Not that he'd meant the choker to signify that, for originally it too had been a gift. Yet that was what it had become, so she was fine with allowing the police department to have it. Slipping the armlet up her right arm, she opened the manual and read over the directions on how to program it. As she said the first code, with Aurora following along and watching with interest, the armlet buzzed and the tip of the logo on the outside – a disjointed 'S' with a single dot tucked into each cusp – began to glow blue. As she spoke the combination of letters, numbers, and phrases dictated in the manual, the 'S' slowly filled with blue light, reminiscent of a loading bar. As the armlet buzzed against her arm again, the vibration letting her know it was awaiting her chosen activation password, she considered which word to give. This would be the word which took away her wings, her ability to soar and feel the wind beneath her outstretched feathers….

When she thought of it that way, the word came to her easily. "November."

It was almost a relief when her wings dematerialized, vanishing from her back and leaving her looking like a normal human being. The weight of them, the care she had to take in her movements when they were out, was lifted from her, and for a moment she laid down on her back, her spine crackling as she did so. Yet as one of the dots glowed blue and the armlet buzzed against her arm again, she sat back up with a sigh. She had to select the deactivation word now, and as she followed back along the thread of her thoughts, she came to one that would suffice. Her tongue tensed against her teeth, forming the beginning of a hiss, a hiss which – beyond being necessary to speak the word – was one of equal parts fondness and sadness.

She smiled softly and whispered, "Ziv."
Her wings rematerialized, and in the following minutes, as her heart beat, leaden in her chest, she rattled off the remaining codes to confirm the entire process. Afterwards, she tested both passwords several times, and after confirming that both were functioning properly, she spoke the activation code and leaned back. Looking between the doctor and the detective, both of whom had become dominant figures in her life, her gaze settled on Aurora. "Thank you," she said, mostly for the armlet, but also, in part, for the care she'd been providing over the past few months – especially in the past two weeks. "This is the nicest gift I've gotten all day. The other one kind of sucked – it's a shame I can't return it."

Aurora looked both pleased and sympathetic. "You mean Sabrina's visit? I don't imagine that was pleasant, having someone rummaging around in your head. On the plus side, though, she convinced Michael's superiors to let you go. You'll still be in protective custody, of course, but you can leave this room – and the Center, too, come to think of it – whenever you like."

Even as relief washed over her, Cassandra knew she'd have to ask how that conversation had gone later. After all, there were probably many more conditions and precautions than the doctor was letting on. Yet for now, she would take her words at face value and savor the freedom she was going to be able to reclaim. She might still have her every move watched, and that was bound to get annoying after awhile, since she wasn't someone who enjoyed that kind of attention. But for now, she wasn't about to complain. It would be enough to see the sky again and enjoy a breath of fresh air; the cell, as clean as it was, was nonetheless stagnant and somewhat claustrophobic for her. She hadn't realized she didn't like enclosed spaces before now; it seemed she learned something new every day, as the saying went.

"Well, at least something good came out of it," she said, referring to Sabrina's "visit." "It'll be nice to get out of this boring-ass pit."

Aurora's smile widened at that. "It can't have been that bad. You've only been in here a couple weeks, and I'm willing to bet you slept through most of it."

That was true – for some reason, sitting around all day was rather exhausting. It no doubt had to do with her metabolism slowing down, and probably with her pregnancy. Resting a hand on the swell of her abdomen momentarily, she said, "Really? It feels like it's been at least a couple years."

Being surrounded by white walls, with no windows and the door only being opened once every few hours – for bathroom breaks, food, and the daily shower – was a very monotonous way to pass her days. The guards hadn't even been willing to talk with her, no matter which approaches she used, and her only real escape had been found in dreams. Aurora, kind as always, had given her a few books to pass the time, but she'd read through them quickly, and there was only so much reading a person could do without it becoming boring as well. It helped that the doctor's tastes were inclined towards science fiction and murder mystery novels, both of which were mentally engaging…but upon occasion, the scenes on the pages had reminded her of events in her own life a little too well, and she'd had to put them down.

Yet now that would all be at an end. She was going to get out of here, and despite how much the first part of her day had sucked, the second was definitely looking up.

The doctor gave her another smile then, though this time it was slightly more guarded. "In any case, I'd like to schedule you in for a check-up sometime this week. You all seem to be alright, but I want to make sure this...experience...hasn't had any ill effects. Not that it should have," she added rather quickly, seeing Cassandra's alarm, "But in your case, I would rather be safe than sorry. How does the day after tomorrow, around two, sound?"

"Well, between angry gangsters, scowling popos, and one sadistic psychic, I might be a little
busy...but I think I'll be able to squeeze you in."

The doctor gave a very unfeminine snort at that. "It's good you have a sense of humor about it. Now, should we get you something to eat, or maybe get you back to your room-?"

Michael, surprising them both, stepped into the room. "Actually, 'Rora, I was thinking of asking Miss Brennan to take a walk with me," he said. Giving Cassandra a sidelong look, he asked, "Would you be up for that?"

Cassandra wasn't entirely sure about that. For one thing, since he'd learned what role she'd played in Team Rocket, he'd been rather edgy around her, not certain what approach he was supposed to take in dealing with her. She suspected it was only his years of reigning in his emotions - a necessity of his occupation - that had kept him from raging at her to the point of violence. Not that she hadn't dealt with far more frightening people in the past; she had, so his anger was, at most, just uncomfortable and unnerving. Still, she was feeling rather tired right now, so she wasn't certain if she was "up to" dealing with him. Whether her fatigue was from a fortnight of self-inflicted lethargy, or from her pregnancy, or from the session with Sabrina Sheehy, she didn't know…but right then, she wanted to do absolutely nothing. She wanted to lie down and drift into dreamless sleep, wanted to put the "walk" with the detective off for another day…and yet, her muscles were also aching to move, and she almost felt that procrastinating where Michael was concerned would only make things worse. She'd end up fretting about it, and that would hardly give her the peace she wanted right then.

Still…it sounded exhausting. "I'm not sure. I'm feeling rather wiped out at the moment…," she trailed off lamely. She looked at Aurora, wondering what the woman thought.

Her brow was furrowed, her lips pressed into a thin line, her eyes somewhat distant. She seemed uncertain, torn even, and she glanced back and forth between them, obviously considering the tension in their relationship. Finally she asked, "Are you mentally or physically tired, Cassandra? If it's physical, then maybe you should leave this," she said, gesturing towards Michael, who seemed a bit taken aback, "for another time and rest. If you're mentally exhausted, though, a walk might do you some good. Clear your head, get your body moving – that'd be good for you, so long as you don't strain yourself."

Feeling the ache of disuse in her muscles, Cassandra sighed, realizing she'd have to go with the second option. At least this way, she could go outside for awhile, presuming Michael didn't intend to lead them around the Center in circles, where trainers could overhear their conversation. If he did, she'd probably drag him out the door – she wanted to feel a breeze on her face, to feel the earth beneath her shoes, to feel the sun against her skin - assuming, of course, that it hadn't set already. After all, it was still early in the year, so nightfall was in the afternoon rather than the evening. Yet even that wouldn't be too bad, she supposed; nippy, perhaps, but refreshing all the same. Glancing at the detective and giving him a slightly distrustful look – which he returned in kind – she said, "Alright then. A walk it is. My coat still in my room?"

It was, and when they walked out of the center, her in sweats, a cap and mittens, and boots a size too large, she clutched her jacket around herself firmly, shivering at the cold. The grounds outside the Pokémon Center were covered in a thick blanket of snow, which clung to the forest branches - particularly the conifers - like decadent swirls of frosting. Scanning the tree line, she saw no eyes peering out from the murk, and saw only a few people and their pokémon walking up the Routes, none of whom seemed to pay her any mind. As they turned, heading down the street into the city, she did see a few men and women nod to Michael, who she recognized as some of his colleagues in civilian clothes. Then there were others, all dressed in dark grey uniforms, who seemed to appear at random intervals, their eyes tracking them for a few seconds, before they disappeared into the background. Michael, in a somewhat terse voice, explained that they were the psychics Sabrina had
assigned to guard her and her unborn children.

Cassandra wasn't certain she liked that the telepath was taking an interest in her and especially in her children, but she supposed she should have expected it. The Gym Leader had already hinted she wanted to meet with her at some later date, and since Mewtwo had been quite a powerful psychic – doubtlessly more powerful than Sabrina – it begged to reason that his children would have the same potential. To someone who trained and taught psychics for a living, the allure would probably have proven irresistible.

Shaking her head at the thought and wondering when she'd have to face the woman again, she forced herself to stop looking for 'the Greys,' as she was tempted to call them. Their stares were certainly unsettling enough to come from aliens, and from the smile one of them gave her, she suspected they wouldn't mind the comparison 'the creeps'. She thanked whatever god there might be that not all psychics were like them. Or maybe it was just a human thing: pokémon psychics seemed to have a little more…well, color to them.

With a sigh, she turned to Michael and asked, "So, you planning to strike up a conversation sometime, or are you going to keep giving me the cold shoulder?"

He, to her annoyance, just said, "We'll talk in a little while. Just try to enjoy the scenery, would you?"

Fine, be all snarly, she thought, but did as suggested. She looked into the windows of the restaurants and bakeries, the smells pouring from them ever so enticing, and at the displays of the shops they passed by. There were mannequins dressed in the latest fashions, carefully laid out jewelry and antiques, seasonal decorations, bath and body works, and one filled with children's toys. She found herself pausing at the last, her eyes roving the display, where stuffed animals - many of which were shaped like pokémon species native to Kanto - were huddled in bunches. There were also toy cars and trains and airplanes, board games and card collections, and other odds and ends she hadn't really thought about since she'd been a child. Yet now she was expecting two of her own, and she wondered what she should get them someday. Not that she had any money – she'd have to get some kind of job, or beg money from someone – but her children should have something to play with, shouldn't they? She'd had a little stuffed cat many years ago, a persian that she'd, for some reason that now escaped her adult mind, named "Tiger." The last time she'd seen it had been after it'd lost an eye and been put in the laundry for washing. It was possible it was in storage somewhere in Viridian City, along with her mother's things; whatever the case might be, it was certainly lost to her now. Giving the display one last look, she sighed and moved on. She'd think on it more later.

Saffron City was, as many had noted, a lovely and prosperous city, as was befitting of the capital of a wealthy nation. When she stopped turning her eyes into the shops, she looked around the street, noting how clean the sidewalks were, how each of the manhole covers had flowery designs, how the signs were lit up with colored paints and lights. Some of the buildings had much more traditional Japanese architecture to them, as opposed to the increasingly common Western styles. There were a number of courtyards, seemingly just added in for public enjoyment, which were surrounded with hedges and shrubs that would likely flower come spring. Some had benches and picnic tables, utilitarian in design, while others had elaborate fountains or statues, some of which seemed to be very, very old. There were parts of this city that had been created centuries ago, and while most of the ruins were located beneath their feet, some still managed to emerge into the present day. And Saffron City reveled in being an amalgam of the times: keeping ancient monuments well-tended to, while building others that encompassed the current age. The subways beneath the streets – there were few in this area, which relied mostly on buses and rail-trains for public transport – were some of the most extensive and efficient in the world. Yet more noticeable on the horizon was the Silph Company headquarters, made almost entirely of glass, and the other tall skyscrapers of the city's
interior. Their sides gleamed an alabaster white, the dark glass of their windows reflecting the scarlet glow of the setting sun.

Near them, the Radio Tower blazed fiery orange, and she knew it would be lit up with spotlights after dark, unlike the other broadcasting towers, which simply had blinking red lights to distinguish them against the night sky. Yet it was an important structure, since it represented, in many ways, the voice and music of Kanto. Supposedly, government officials were thinking of tearing it down and moving operations to Lavender, turning the famed Pokémon Tower into their headquarters...but fortunately, public protest seemed to be preventing that change. Considering the move would likely ruin both monuments, she was inclined to agree with the public on that one. Besides, that move would take the national channel out of commission, and that didn't seem like it would serve anyone's purpose. She'd heard that travelling trainers often tuned in to listen to what was going on in the country: it kept them connected, even in the depths of the wilderness, and broke the quiet they were used to on the Routes. She wondered vaguely what it might have been like if she'd chosen their path, but training pokémon had never entirely appealed to her. The competition of it, the dangers of the road, the extended periods of isolation from other people; no, it hadn't been for her. She wasn't big on traveling – she did it when she had to, and enjoyed the sights while she was away from home, but doing it for a living didn't appeal to her. That, she suspected, was a good thing now, because soon she probably wouldn't be doing any moving to speak of. That was just something that seemed to come with raising children. One tended to stay put, if only for their sake.

Then again, maybe law enforcement would keep them on the move so they'd never be pinned down. That was also possible, she supposed.

She'd know soon enough. For now, she'd wander through the capital – or rather on the outskirts, since she didn't think they'd be going that far into the city – absorbing her surroundings and appreciating the fact that she could, once again, move around freely. Well, free to an extent, but it would be enough for now. As they turned several corners, leaving the shops behind and going into the suburban neighborhoods, she noted with some interest the prevalence of public parks: there were an array of designs to them, some with playgrounds, some which were more wooded, some which were more reminiscent of the marshes Saffron had been built on long ago, filled with tall, now wilted grasses and little frozen pools. In some of them she spotted small booths, selling hot beverages and sweets snacks, and she saw Michael staring at these, seeming to consider going over to buy something. They eventually stepped into one of these parks, where an ice-skating rink was the central attraction. She saw that despite the chill and the deepening afternoon, several families, couples, and their pokémon were enjoying the ice, with laughter, the thuds of people falling on their bums, and occasional curses floating on the air towards them. Cassandra averted her gaze, not entirely comfortable with the sight. The togetherness of it seemed a bit much for her to tolerate, and in some small, pathetic part of her, she couldn't help but be a little envious.

She hoped they knew how lucky they were.

Gazing to the edge of the park, she noticed a small Christian church towards the eastern end. There was a steeple constructed at the church's north side, a metal cross projecting from the tower's point, which gleamed in the rusty afternoon light. The main building was unadorned and built with red bricks, its main doors painted white, with the roof and trim around the windows a matching hue. The frosted windows, however, made up for the unremarkable architecture: each one held a large Gothic arch with intricate metal tracery, the scenes depicted in the stained glass bold and vibrant. From what she knew of Giovanni's chosen religion – which was enough to tell her that he was a very, very bad Christian – she knew that the main window was depicting the Crucifixion, the pivotal event in Christian lore, discussed and referred to in many of its scriptures. Above the figure of the crucified Christ were two angels, their wings spread wide over him, while to his sides were the criminals he'd been crucified with, one sorrowful, the other mocking. At his feet were Roman soldiers and grieving
women, notably his mother and Mary Magdalene, the latter of which was either a princess or whore, depending on who one consulted. In that moment, the contrasts of the audience struck Cassandra as passably interesting. Beyond this main window were smaller ones which captured other scenes, with other figures and symbols of importance that ranged back from the earliest Hebrew Scriptures onwards. With some humor, Cassandra figured most of the funding for the building’s construction had gone into this artistry. The church was understated; the windows were definitely not.

She was struck, rather suddenly, by the desire to go into that church. It would definitely be preferable to staying out here, where she'd have her head messed with by a reticent Michael and the happy families. Turning to him, she said, "Hey, Mr. Grumpy, I'm going over to the church. You need to follow me, or can I go on my own?"

Michael peered at her for a moment and then looked around the park. His eyes fixated on something, and looking over, she saw a Grey sitting at a booth, drinking from a steaming cup and looking over at them. She couldn't help but shiver at that. They were being such a group of stalkers. The least they could do is introduce themselves! Would it really kill them to give her their names, especially if they were going to be following her around who knew how long? She saw the man visibly smirk, and as she thought a slew of very vulgar curses his way, he began to laugh. Mewtwo, she mused, had been much more polite than this, and not nearly as creepy. Aggressive, even predatory sometimes, but not creepy.

"It doesn't look like there's any risk to you going over there," Michael said after a moment. Gesturing to the booth with the Grey, he added, "I'll be over there when you're done. We'll talk then."

Giving him a nod, she turned and widened the distance between herself and the two men, her boots crunching against the already well-packed snow. She was all too happy to get away from them, and though she knew she was being watched and tracked, this freedom from an escort almost made her feel a bit giddy. Sure, she'd wandered the halls of the Pokémon Center alone before the invasion (before the cat had leapt out of the proverbial bag), but this was different. For just a moment, she was just another woman walking through the park and acting on an innocent whim. It was kind of nice, she mused as she reached the church doors. The windows loomed over her then, and seeing how dark they were, she felt concern prickle through her. Had the church closed for the day? She reminded herself that despite the imminent darkness, the hour wasn't all that late. Reaching out, she turned the lever and pushed, and found herself smiling slightly as the door opened inwards. Warm air flowed out, the scents of incense and myrrh imbuing the outpour, and stepping into it, she let door close behind her.

Despite her godfather's choice of religion, one of the few heirlooms his father had given him, Cassandra herself had never actually set foot in a real Christian church. Beyond having no intention of joining the religion herself, there was also the fact that Christianity had never had a real foothold in the Japanese Isles. Of the Japanese citizens who practiced a religion, most practiced a mixture of Japanese Buddhism and Shinto, with the Abrahamic religions, Hinduism, Sikhism, the Ryukyuan religion, and the Bahá’í Faith all proving to be minorities. Yet Saffron City had a very diverse population, so she supposed it wouldn't be so unusual for there to be a Christian church here, or even multiple ones in the city. In any case, this one was well-tended, the white-painted walls still pristine, the rows of pews on both sides of the aisle kept polished, the organ at the far end of the room continuing to gleam a dull gold. The church altar was decorated with vases of dried flowers and ferns, with red candles that were currently unlit. There were chairs to either side of the altar, and a podium before it where the congregational leader would speak, all on a slightly raised dais. Yet the church was empty now, the hymn-books all tucked into the wooden sleeves built into the backs of the pews, the electrical lights above almost all turned off. Most of the light was filtering in through the stained glass windows, giving the chamber a multi-colored, low illumination. Yet Cassandra found she didn't mind this, and passing the basin of holy water - she wasn't sure if she could or
should touch it - and the tithe basket, since she had no money to donate, she stepped down the carpet, letting the quiet of the place, the sense of reverence there, wash over her.

*I'm in a church, she mused. I'm sure there's some sort of irony to that.*

She eventually sat down in one of the pews, sinking against the cool wood and pulling off her hat and mittens. As she unzipped her jacket and set it aside, her fingers brushed against the chain of her necklace, and she pulled it out from her shirt to peer at the metal cross. She tried to remember what was written in Braille on the back – Mewtwo had said it was referring to something from the Bible, and now that she was here, she couldn't help but be curious if she could find out what it was. She was a little frustrated, then, to discover that there weren't any extra Bibles among the hymn-books; it seemed there was a sort of bring-your-own policy. She wondered vaguely what visitors like her were supposed to do: share with the person sitting next to them, perhaps? Would that be alright, or would the devout frown at the newbie's lack of essential reading material? Maybe the podium had a Bible on it?

Just as she was about to get up and look, someone stepped out from her left, the sudden movement startling her.

As she jumped in her seat, the man in dark clothing – black shoes and pants, a clergy shirt, and a clerical collar with the bit of white at the center – chuckled at her reaction. His laughter was deep and warm, and his regarded her with amused eyes, which were, from this distance, the color of coal. His hair, tied back tightly and off-white in color, made a bold contrast against his russet skin, which was wrinkled around his eyes and mouth, likely from many years of smiling. He also had a short mustache and beard that encircled his lips and covered his chin, which seemed somewhat unusual to Cassandra, since many of the men she'd known had kept their faces clean-shaved. But the look seemed to suit this man, to make him look even more distinguished in his dress clothes, so while it might have appeared strange to her, it was not unpleasant.

He gave her a small smile then and said, "I'm sorry for startling you. I wasn't expecting anyone to be here when I came in."

"I'm not intruding, am I?" The church doors hadn't been locked, so Cassandra assumed that wasn't the case. She hoped she wasn't wrong about that.

"No, not at all. It's just not often that I see a new face." Gazing over the pews, as if imagining all the faces he was familiar with, he added, "As you might imagine, my congregation is a small but devoted one, so having someone here I don't recognize – and who's come alone at that – isn't something that happens every day. Is there anything I could do for you, child?"

For a moment, Cassandra had the absurd urge to tell him she was twenty now, and, as such, hardly a child. If he needed further proof, then all she had to do was smooth out her sweatshirt to make her point. Yet then she remembered that most visitors to a Christian church were considered "children," with the pastor or priest being viewed as the "parent" – her age, as such, had a rather small bearing on how he addressed her. Feeling the cross in her hand, she remembered what she wanted to find out, and said, "Err, yes actually. Would you happen to have a Bible somewhere around here? There's a verse I want to look up."

He gave her another amused - and a little bemused - look at that, as if she had said something rather funny. In retrospect, she supposed she had, considering she was in a church: of course there was a Bible somewhere around here! More than that, this was the internet age, so that she seemed to have come all the way here just to look up one verse must seem a bit odd to him. Yet he humored her with absolute politeness, not questioning her logic as he went over to the podium, picking up a thick tome and bringing it to her. Yet when he handed her the book, the cover and spine of worn black leather,
the wafer-thin pages yellowed between them, she didn't open it immediately. She resisted the impulse because the verse, whatever it might be, was tied into some private meaning Mewtwo had assigned to *them*...and she rather wanted to find out what that meaning was *alone*, not with this man, however nice, looking over her shoulder.

Deciding to put it off for the moment, she looked up at him and said, "Thank you, Father. That's what I'm supposed call you, isn't it?" She wasn't entirely familiar with how to address a congregational leader, since the exact title seemed to vary according to the division, and...well, she had no idea what division this was supposed to be.

He gave her another smile at that. "Father Shannon will do just fine. Do you mind if I sit?" he asked, gesturing to the spot next to her mittens, cap, and gloves.

"No, go ahead," she said, and found, when she gave it a thought, that she really didn't mind.

He sat down next to her, and gazing at the book in her hands asked, "So, what brings you here? Just a verse in the Book?"

Tracing her fingertips over the gold title, she said, "Well, no. Just thought I'd look it up while I was here. The windows...," she gestured to the series of them, "...I wanted a better look. Figured they must have been the most expensive thing in this place."

He arched an eyebrow at that. "Plunderers would certainly agree with you on that. I sincerely hope you're not a thief, child."

She found herself smiling at that. Out of all the criminal roles she'd played in the past, she'd never been a thief. Well, she'd stolen on occasion, but she was no cat burglar. "No, afraid not. My crimes weren't so clean."

Seeing the pastor's eyebrow hitch at that, she wondered if she should elaborate. She didn't particularly think he would respond well to learning she had been, among other things, a serial murderer. Yet even so, she felt somewhat compelled to tell him more, perhaps because he was a perfect stranger, and sometimes strangers were perfect to confess to. They would listen, they could even pass judgment, but they were never around long enough to burden her with their awkwardness or their resentment. Furthermore, this man was a priest; it was part of his job to listen to people's sins, to offer what advice he could, while leaving the final judgment in the hands of his God.

Of course, that thought quickly led into another, more sobering one, and gazing at the altar, she murmured, "I'm probably breaking some cosmic rule by being in here, you know. I've...well, done some awful things, things I'm pretty sure your God wouldn't forgive. I doubt He'd appreciate me dropping by His house like this."

Father Shannon's eyes softened then, his expression becoming one of concern. "Oh, I wouldn't say that. No matter what you've done, you are still His child, and there is nothing He won't forgive. That is, if you're repentant. Are you repentant, child?"

She met his gaze and felt strangely naked beneath it. "I am for most of those sins, yes. But there was one...well, one I committed multiple times that I don't regret at all," she said, pressing a hand against her sweatshirt, to the swell of her abdomen, the motion telling the priest all he needed to know about her condition.

"Oh, I see." His eyes gleamed as understanding dawned on him, but despite the faint frown he adopted (she wondered, with some annoyance, if he too was assuming she'd slept around in the past), his words remained warm enough. "I take it your child was conceived out of wedlock?"
She wasn't entirely certain why that was relevant in this day and age, but she humored him with an answer. "Yes. We couldn't…it's complicated, but I think…well, maybe if we'd have had the chance, we might have," she said, remembering the autumn day when a younger Mewtwo had presented her with a ring. "He proposed, after a fashion, and I accepted. I would have stayed with him for the rest of our lives, if he hadn't…."

"…Left you?" Father Shannon asked, rather gently.

She winced. Mewtwo had done that, actually, but he'd had every intention of coming back. But then... "He died."

"Oh." A few seconds passed while he considered that, before she felt a hand, strong and intending only to comfort, rest on her shoulder. "I'm sorry for your loss."

And it struck Cassandra then that no one had ever said that to her before, at least not where Mewtwo was concerned. Almost everyone, even the people who were more open towards her relationship with him, had been reproachful towards the subject, with others being outright scornful. They had been fixated on the bizarre novelty of it, had assumed there was some sort of perversion involved, and had been rather reluctant to acknowledge Mewtwo as a person. And as such, no one, no one had seen fit to offer a few words or a gesture of comfort like this. No one had, because to them she hadn't lost the man (albeit a man only in mind and soul) she'd loved. She'd just lost an animal, an illicit pet, and while she might grieve for "it," how could they offer her sympathy when that bond conflicted with what they viewed as moral? At most they might feel a twinge of sorrow, purely because she was a person in mourning, and most people felt at least a little moved by that. Yet that was all they'd offered her…but Father Shannon, in his ignorance of the messier details, gave her what he would have given any person mourning the death of a loved one. He gave her his condolences, and something inside her broke at that. Something she consciously knew, something she'd already internalized, hit her again with soul-crushing force. He was dead. Mewtwo was dead. The one she loved was dead. He wasn't coming back, and that dream, that scene she held another in the depths of her mind, the fantasy her soul was feeding on so desperately…it would never come to pass. She knew that already, she knew that, and that knowledge had always made her hurt so much—but now that pain became damn near unbearable. She felt the ache in her chest intensify to the point where she couldn't even scream. Instead she began to shake, her throat clenching until it became hard to breathe, her eyes burning as she clenched them shut.

She didn't want to cry. Not in front of this near stranger. Not in front of anyone. She didn't want to be vulnerable like this—people preyed on that, always had since her mother had died.

Except Mewtwo. He'd held her. He'd always held her when she'd cried.

But there was no one to hold her anymore.

And then she felt something unprecedented, something that made her stiffen in shock, before her breath hitched and she let out a sob. She felt Father Shannon's arms wrapping around her, his hand rubbing her back awkwardly, and she didn't know, she didn't know if this was appropriate from a priest, and yet she needed it then. She needed someone to hold her as she broke down, and for the next few minutes, she accepted the comfort given by someone who asked for nothing in return. She allowed herself to grieve in a way she hadn't since the Mt. Moon Range, hunched over and shaking hard, her tears falling in fat droplets onto the cover of the Bible in her lap. And Father Shannon just held her without a word, letting her know that someone cared.

Eventually the wave of grief began to ebb, leaving her feeling empty and exhausted in its wake. As she pulled away, brushing the back of her hand to her eyes, she gratefully accepted the handkerchief Father Shannon pulled from his breast pocket. It smelled faintly like sweat, but it was better than
using her sleeve to wipe up the waterworks. "Thanks…and sorry, actually. I'll bet I made you squirm, crying like this. Shouldn't be doing it anyway. Bad for the babies."

"No, no…there is nothing wrong with crying over the death of a loved one. It's a natural reaction, and far better than the alternative," he said and, with a faintly amused smile, added, "And I doubt crying is that bad for your child - or children, rather. Mood swings are inevitable during pregnancy, so tears are common enough. I wouldn't worry about it, if I were you."

"Maybe you're right..." And straightening, wiping away the teardrops on the leather cover, leaving only streaks of moisture behind, she said, "You don't think your God would hold it against them, do you? Being what they are?" She didn't add that they were half-breeds; she didn't want to leave behind the little bit of normalcy she'd gained. Maybe that was dishonest of her, but it wasn't something she wanted to share with him, not after the gift he'd just given her. It might be selfish, but she didn't want him to retract it, not now.

"God doesn't begrudge children for the sins of their parents. He is not as petty as some of His sons and daughters." He looked slightly bitter, slightly weary at that, before his lips curled into another smile. "Moreover, they were conceived in the emotion God holds most dear. For that, I daresay they have His blessing."

She felt touched by that, and she gave him another grateful smile. She might not believe in his God, or even in a god in general, but the idea of it…there was definitely something comforting to it. Too many people had accused her children of being monsters of some sort, so for this man to dismiss that idea…well, it was very refreshing. Of course, the opinion of a possibly imaginary being wouldn't have all that much effect on her children or her; the opinions of those on Earth, on the other hand, definitely would. Feeling a faint fluttering sensation within her – those were coming more frequently as her pregnancy progressed – she asked, "And what about you? Would you think less of them for being...?"

He blinked, surprised at that. "Me? No, not at all. I think their father not being present is unfortunate, but they've done nothing to warrant reproach."

"And me? Could you forgive me for the things I've done?" Thinking of Michael Lagorio, who was waiting for her at the booth, she wondered if it was indeed possible.

He hesitated at that, before saying, "I cannot absolve you, if that's what you're asking. That isn't my gift to give, despite what some might claim."

She shook her head at that. "I'm not asking you for absolution. I just wanted to know if I could be forgiven by other people, as well as your God."

He sighed. "We humans are imperfect, and forgiveness is much harder for us to grant one another. There are some people I doubt even I could forgive, and I'm someone who believes in the superiority of mercy to justice. I would like to think, in your case, that I would be strong enough to do so…but without knowing the nature of your deeds, I cannot be certain of that."

In the moment, Cassandra almost, almost considered confessing everything to the priest…but that knowledge might very well prove dangerous to him, and furthermore, she wasn't ready to talk about it. Not even to this near stranger, who'd embraced her as she'd mourned. "But there's a chance you'd be able to? That others could…?"

He hesitated then, clearly not comfortable with giving her an answer, not without first knowing what she'd done. Yet after a moment of internal debate, he gave her a nod, his expression somewhat sad as he said, "Yes. There's always a chance."
That was what she'd needed to hear. "That's fine then," she said, with some relief and thankfulness evident in her voice. "A chance is all I'm asking for."

Hearing that, Father Shannon looked as if he wanted to say something more…but at that moment, something that sounded like an 8-bit version of "Ode to Joy" rose between them. Giving Cassandra a slightly embarrassed smile, the priest pulled a cellphone from his pants pocket and flipped it open, checking the message on its screen. Pressing a button afterwards, he silenced the music, and turning back to Cassandra said, "Pardon me, but I'm afraid I'll have to be going. My evening class meets in ten minutes, and it wouldn't do to make my students wait. Is there anything else I can do for you, child?"

"No, I'm alright. Do you need me to leave?" She hoped not. She still had to look up that verse, and as much as she appreciated her conversation with him, it would be irking (and disappointing) to leave without learning it.

He gave her a reassuring smile and shook his head. "No, stay as long as you like. You still have some reading to do, I believe. Incidentally, which book in the Bible is your verse from?"

Tracing the Brail on the back of her cross, she said, "The Song of Songs, I think."

"Ah." He seemed surprised at that, before his grinned with open amusement. "That is a very erotic book."

She blinked at him, and then felt her face begin to heat up. "Erotic?" Oh no. Mewtwo, you didn't…!

The thought that she might be wearing some obscure reference to hot sex made her feel a little dirty and more than a little mortified.

Father Shannon laughed at whatever expression she had on her face. "Well, it contains the most romantic and sensual poetry in the Bible. Some scholars have suggested it was once part of an ancient Jewish wedding song, while others believe it's a metaphor for the relationship between Israel and God. Either way, the language is very suggestive. I admit I rather enjoyed it while in seminary school."

"Oh, did you now?" Hearing that made her feel slightly better, which had no doubt been his intention.

His grin only widened at that. "I wasn't born a pastor, child. I became one in time, and with many years of self-discipline." At that, the alarm on his phone began to play again, and clicking it off once more, he went over to the podium to grab some papers there. "And now I really must be going. Please place the Book back here once you've finished reading."

"I will," and as he began to head to the door, she called out, "Father Shannon, um…could I talk with you again sometime?" She didn't know if she'd have the opportunity to do so, but she wouldn't say "no" if the chance presented itself.

He also seemed open to the idea. "Of course. I look forward to seeing you again, child."

And though she was happy to hear it, it struck her then that she hadn't even given him her name. She could have kicked herself for the oversight. "It's Cassandra."

He seemed pleased, despite the fact that she hadn't added in her surname. Perhaps she would some other time, though. "Then I look forward to seeing you again, Cassandra," he said, and with that, he made his way out the door, papers tucked beneath one arm and "Ode to Joy" rising after him.
As the door closed behind him, Cassandra turned her gaze to the Bible in her lap. Her fingertips momentarily traced the wrinkles in the leather, before she flipped open the cover and scanned the table of contents. The *Song of Songs* was located towards the end of the Old Testament, and opening the book to around the halfway point, she began flipping through the gossamer thin, almost translucent pages, taking care not to rip any. The musty smell of old paper tickled in her nose while her fingers fumbled with the pages, and in the fading, iridescent light, she squinted at the tiny font of the page numbers and wondered vaguely how Father Shannon could read them at his age. She supposed he'd probably memorized where all the books in the Bible were by now, though; that doubtlessly would help. In any case, she found the song soon enough, and after deciphering the Brail on her cross again, she paged through to near the end of the short book. As she found verse 8:6, her heart pounded a little harder in her chest, and she quickly read the lines Mewtwo had assigned to them.

When she did, she felt her eyes begin to burn once more.

It wasn't an erotic verse like she'd feared. Not in the least.

"Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm; for love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave. It burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame."

Grief, that shadow that clung to her so persistently these days, stirred at the words…and yet much greater, much stronger than that grief, was the warmth of affection that filled her as she read. Of course he would have associated them with something like *this*. He'd always liked poetry, and after she'd gotten past that cool exterior of his, she'd learned firsthand just how sentimental he could be. No matter how high and mighty he'd sometimes acted, no matter how he tried to be the composed and uncaring stoic…all it had ever taken was a tender word or touch from her, and his iciness would melt away, leaving a creature of passion behind. He'd even been undeniably sweet at times, doing little things…little things like this…that had always made her want to drag him to bed and kiss him senseless (which, she supposed with some humor, had probably been why he'd done it).

Even as she began to tear up at the thought, she found herself grinning so widely that her cheeks hurt, and felt laughter bubbling up in her throat.

"Mewtwo…you were such a sap."

Using the past tense to describe him stung her slightly, but it didn't manage to sour the delight she was feeling. Giving a quiet laugh, she turned the pages back to the beginning of the song and, leaning back into the pew, read it from start to finish. The verses were straightforward enough, telling the story of the courtship and consummation between a woman and man, the Beloved and her Lover, from both of their perspectives and those of their friends. The language was, as Father Shannon had said, quite evocative; the lovers invoked naturalistic and often beautiful imagery when they described one another, with some of their words being thinly veiled references to sharing secret trysts and sexual acts. As she read, she remembered her own elation while loving Mewtwo, how anxious she'd been whenever they'd parted, and the sweetness of their reunions when they were younger. She flushed as she recalled some of their more intimate moments, the end result of which would, suffice to say, make her body no longer resemble "that of the palm [tree]" – a pear would probably better describe her torso, especially in a few months' time. Continuing to read, she blinked with surprise and then smiled as the Lover described his Beloved as being a dove – his dove. She thought to herself, *So...that's where you got that from, wasn't it?*, and read through until the final line, in which the woman beseeched her lover to come away with her.

Afterwards, she read each of the footnotes and found something else of interest. There were some Hebrew words and their translations within those sections, and one of them was a word she'd used
several times without ever knowing its exact meaning. It was a three-letter word with three distinct meanings: "the second month of the Jewish calendar"; "the radiance, brilliance, or the light of God"; and "deer" or "gazelle," the latter of which the Beloved had frequently described her Lover as.

That word was "Ziv," the pet name she'd given Mewtwo after he'd suggested it. She'd discussed a number of them with him, many joking, some half-serious, before he'd given her this slightly cocky grin, leaned over to lick a bit of jam at the corner of her mouth (she was not a morning person, so why he got her flustered then, of all times…!), and had asked her to call him that. She'd rolled the word over in her mouth at the time, and had asked him if it was something egotistical, if he was trying to get her to praise him in some other language – for all she'd known, it could be describing the size of "little Mewtwo." He'd given her a rather amused look and said that wasn't the case (though now that she knew it could also mean "brilliance" or, in a roundabout way, "stag," she had to wonder), and despite her questions, he'd only added that it went along with his pet name for her. She'd trusted him on that, and now, after reading the song he'd gotten them from, she knew he'd spoken true.

It only confirmed her earlier observation: he'd really been an incredible sap. That thought, however, only made her smile widen.

After all, that had been one of the things she'd loved about him.

Closing the Bible, she set it aside and heaved herself up, grimacing as she bent to grab her winter-wear. Tugging them all on, she took the book and crossed over to the podium, placing it back like Father Shannon had asked. Walking down the aisle, the stained light making her white cap and mittens shift between colors, she zipped up her coat and exited the church. The brisk air stung against her face and made her eyes water – the temperature had plummeted with the onset of dusk. She cast her gaze over the snow-covered ground, towards where the ice-skating rink had grown a little emptier, and saw that Michael and the Grey were sitting at one of the picnic tables, both of them with beverages in hand. They were talking about something, and as they looked over towards her, the psychic smiled at her and lifted a hand in greeting. Before she managed to get close enough to make out what they were saying, though, he leaned over to say one last thing to the detective, and then, straightening, winked at her before teleporting away. She stopped walking, feeling a prickle of annoyance at his behavior, but then closed the distance between her and Michael. The detective glanced over at her as she sat down next to him, but said nothing in the minute that followed. The sky above them grew a little duller, while the lights around the skating rink were turned on, illuminating the lines left behind by passing blades. Music played from several strategically-placed speakers, muted but having a distinct pop sound to it. She supposed it was probably the tamest genre the city crowd knew, which would be appreciated, given the family atmosphere. Despite the hour, there were still children and their parents on the ice, while others – namely teens and couples – were joining in on the fun.

Soon it would be spring, after all. There wasn't much time left to enjoy winter pastimes. As several more seconds crept by, they continued to sit there in silence, until Cassandra's patience finally broke. "So…are we going to talk anytime soon?"

"I suppose we should." But despite saying that, he sat quietly for several more seconds, on occasion drinking from his cup of steaming coffee. Staring down at it as he set it on the table, he finally said what was on his mind. "…You know, Aurora likes you. Sabrina trusts you. I respect both of them, but I'm not sure if I can be like them – not in those ways. I've seen firsthand what you've done, and not from your biased perspective." As he spoke, there was more than a trace of displeasure in his voice, but he seemed to set that aside as he added, "That being the case, I've volunteered to protect you and your children, and I'll do that job as best I can. Who knows, maybe my opinion of you will
change with time. But if this is arrangement is going to have a shot at working, there's something I need to know first." And, as if his coffee was actually Irish coffee (and perhaps it was), he took a long drink and then asked, "Why did you let her live? The Yew girl?"

In retrospect, she should have expected him to ask her that. He'd made it clear that out of all her crimes, it was the murder of that specific family that hit him the closest, or at least was the most abrasive to him. Yet after what had happened in the church, she felt rather reluctant to get into that subject, to discuss anything even remotely related to those murders, to that fire, or to what had happened afterwards. That experience had exhausted her in every way possible, and the thought of revisiting it now...it made her just want to curl up under a blanket and stay there for a few days. She'd had a long enough day already, hadn't she? Why did he have to ask her this now? Why ruin a perfectly fine outing with this? She could have hugged him (well, maybe) for making sure she could wander out of the Center in peace, and now this?

If it weren't for the somber tone in his voice, for that hint of desperation in his eyes, she would have stood up and walked away.

But this was clearly important to him, and it seemed to her that – for all he had done and would do - he deserved an answer. So, with a sigh, she said, "Because I wasn't supposed to. That's why I did it."

Seeing the confused look he sent her way, she turned her gaze to the ice-skating rink (there were children about her age slipping and sliding) and elaborated, "I could have snapped her neck or left her to die in the fire. I was supposed to - that was my job." She remembered then the feeling of her mask burning against her face; remembered her lungs constricting on the smoke; remembered how the firelight had danced over the infant's face, which had seemed deathly pale at the time. The child's lips had been tinged blue, and when she'd picked her up, the little girl hadn't even cried out. The babe she'd cared for, the child she'd supped with at the family's dinner table, had been weakened to the point of death...and Cassandra had known she alone was to blame for that.

The guilt she'd felt had driven her hideously close to the edge. If she'd finished the job (and it would have been easy, so easy), she would have gone over it. She knew that now, but at the time, she'd just stood there, heedless of the danger around her. Her thoughts, a flurry of conflicting desires, had frozen her in place. She'd wanted to flee; she'd wanted to do nothing; she'd wanted to obey protocols; she'd wanted to disobey them. Within a violent haze, she'd heard, hallucinated Giovanni's voice, growling at her that it must be done...

"But I...I couldn't bear to," she admitted, shivering from more than the cold. "She was just a baby, and while I was standing over her crib, I kept thinking to myself, 'I don't want to do this! I don't!' So, for once, I decided not to. I made sure that little girl lived, consequences be damned." And maybe, she thought, that didn't sound very compelling – but at the time, the conviction she'd felt had been a breakthrough of sorts. Almost too late she'd made that decision, had tucked the babe against herself and run. Yet once it was done, she had, for a brief and shining moment, felt impossibly liberated. And afterwards, after the breakdown that had followed right on its heels, she'd been left with a perverse sort of hope – a hope which she then proceeded to describe to Michael. "Later I thought that if, someday, she grew up and wanted to take revenge, then that was fine with me. She could tear Team Rocket apart, could track me down and kill me in cold blood, and that thought didn't bother me one bit. I honestly hoped she'd do just that, because they deserved it. I deserved it. But if she didn't do that, if she chose to live a peaceful life instead...well, that was fine too. Because then she'd be making the most of a life she wasn't supposed to have."

Hugging her arms over her chest, she rubbed her shoulders and turned back to him. "So that's why. Got any more questions?" If he did, she hoped they could be answered with short sentences and wouldn't require her to do any more soul-baring. She'd already had to do more than enough of that
today.

While he did look as if there were other things he'd like to ask, he reluctantly shook his head. "Not right now. I'll…take what you said into consideration."

She was willing to bet that it would take him awhile to process that; he'd probably mull over her words like his puppy would a milk-bone. For now though, he stood and went to the booth, ordering another beverage. She watched with some envy as the owner poured and topped the hot drink with whipped cream. The scents of coffee and apples suddenly made her all too aware of the cold emptiness in her stomach. After paying, Michael returned and sat back down, and for a long second, she was certain he was going to drink the sweet-smelling concoction in front of her. He seemed like he might just be spiteful enough, at least where she was concerned.

But then he set the cup in front of her, proving he wasn't that cruel. "Anyhow, have this. You deserve something for letting me drag you all the way out here." And as she took it, pulling off the plastic top to peer at the layer of whipped cream, he added, "I know you can't have coffee or tea, and he was all out of apple cider, so I hope you don't mind regular ol' hot chocolate. After you're done, we'll head back to the Center so you can get some rest. Aurora will have my head if I keep you out here much longer. She's probably already annoyed as it is."

With a certain amount of dread, Cassandra stared down at the beverage he'd given her, feeling the warmth of it seeping through the cardboard cup and her mittens. Michael couldn't have known that she had an aversion to chocolate – he couldn't have known the taste of it, the smell of it, was irrevocably intertwined with her mother's life and death. To him, giving her this was a peace offering of sorts, and he fully expected her to accept it. After all, it was chocolate, and who didn't like chocolate? If she were to reject it now…well, that would hardly be considerate of her, would it? It certainly wouldn't improve their relationship in the slightest, and if she was going to be shadowed by this man for who knew how long, then she needed try to make peace with him. It would make the arrangement easier on them in the long run. And yet…she honestly didn't know if she could stomach this drink. This was hot chocolate. She hated hot chocolate. It was a drink flavored with ugly associations, another reminder of what she'd lost, and she knew if she let it touch her lips, she'd start gagging as if it were a much fouler substance.

She looked up at the ice-skating rink then, stalling in the only way available to her. She watched the teenagers, the couples, the families, all moving across the ice, a few bumping into one another, a few stumbling and barely managing to catch themselves, a few slipping onto their asses or lurching forward to face-plant into the ice – the latter of which made several people wince. Yet there were others with far more grace and experience, and indeed, some were teaching their loved ones how to skate. There was one pair in particular that she began to watch: a man, who didn't seem to have hit thirty, was guiding a child by the hand, smiling and offering words of encouragement. The child – she thought it might be a boy, though the dark blue clothes and the shorter hair really weren't much of an indication these days – looked very nervous, but he was trying his best not to fall. They made a couple slow laps around the rink before making their way to the open gate. As they stepped onto dirty snow and earth, they made their way to the benches, where a woman was waiting for them. They talked in low voices, but their smiles were happy ones, and as they replaced their skates with winter boots, the man leaned over to the woman, saying something in her ear. She laughed, and their gazes dropped to their boy, who was determinedly trying to tie his bootlaces. But then their gazes shifted, settling onto what appeared to be the mother's lap…before the man reached over, pressing a hand to the woman's abdomen, with them again leaning towards and whispering.

Cassandra tore her eyes away forcefully, the ache in her returning. She was all too aware that unlike them, she didn't have anyone to be excited with about her own pregnancy. She didn't have anyone who would talk with her about it in a non-profession, non-medical manner, who would touch her
swelling stomach with that same mixture of awe and eagerness. When she'd first felt her children quickening, she hadn't been able to turn over in bed and wake their father, hadn't been able to hurriedly whisper to him what she'd felt. When the twins began to kick, she wouldn't be able to share that with him either, or hold his hand while she gave birth, and that hurt her deeply. True, it wouldn't have all been so pleasant; Mewtwo, she knew, would have added worry to the mix, and she wouldn't have been able to blame him for that. Aurora had mentioned more than once that this pregnancy was only going to get harder as it progressed, with a natural childbirth being outright risky. At the same time, she also knew that Mewtwo would have been pleased, even with his concern. As much as he'd tried to deny his loneliness, as much as he'd said he'd preferred to be left alone, she knew he ached for companionship. Having a lover had soothed him deeply, but to also have the promise of children, of a family all his own…that would have made him unspeakably happy. She knew the same could be said of her: after being so long without one of her own, or at least without members of a "family" who only sought to use each other, the thought of having one again thrilled her in a deep, perhaps even primal way.

But because of a twist of fate, because of wrong choices made, her little family wouldn't be complete. Mewtwo wasn't there, wouldn't be there, and so she'd have to go through it all alone. And for a moment, the thought crippled her and made her cruel, and she raged at the family she'd been watching, wondering why it couldn't have been them instead. Why did she have to lose the one she loved, when she'd already lost everything else? Why did she have to endure so much pain, while other people got more than their fair share of happiness? For a moment she hated those people, those strangers, for it seemed to her that they'd taken what she so desperately needed. Yet just as quickly, that anger and envy faded – it was irrational of her to feel that way, not to mention unfair. Sometimes shit just happened, and there was no rhyme or reason to it, no sense of balance to be found. Some people who didn't deserve to suffer did, and some people who deserved to suffer didn't. That was the cruel reality of the world, and the sooner she accepted it and moved on, the better.

Yes, she had lost much, and yes, she would never gain what she so desperately desired. The dream she harbored deep within her would never become a reality, and she would never know the same joy that those parents had. And yet…she'd already had a love she'd never expected to have. And from that love, she'd gained something she'd never expected to gain, which even now stirred within her, reminding her of that fact. For all that she might feel that the last twenty years had left her with nothing, she still had a reason – and a good reason at that – to move forward and not look back. The past, after all, was the past, and no matter how much she dwelled on it, no matter how much she agonized over it, it couldn't be changed. The future would also be hard – there could be no doubt about that. Her pregnancy wasn't going to get any easier, and she would have to raise her children without their father. She would have to cooperate with law enforcement, which would have, under other circumstances, probably seen her imprisoned or worse. By cooperating, she'd also risk incurring the wrath of Team Rocket - though she supposed they were already pissed enough at her as it was, so giving them one more reason to loathe her probably wouldn't hurt. And then, of course, there was the civil upheaval the gang was creating, with the threat of war growing stronger day by day.

Yet somehow, even as all of that painted a rather bleak picture, she felt as if the future still held some promise. Her pregnancy would be over within the year, and the joys of raising her children would balance out the sorrows. The higher-ups in Saffron City's law enforcement had chosen to protect her, and they weren't the type to go back on their word; they were supposed to be the good guys, after all. The organization, for its part, would stay vengeful, but even they could only move so quickly or freely, especially with the rest of the nation moving against them. And even if Kanto was consumed by a civil war, wars did not last forever; they all wound down to their exhausted ends, and peace resumed like it had before.

What had been, what could have been…she couldn't dwell on them anymore. If she did, then she'd
lose sight of the good that might still be, if only she took the steps to embrace them.

Turning her gaze down at her drink, which was still warm between her mittens, she lifted it and thought: *It's time to move on.*

Pressing the rim to her lips, she tilted the cup ever so slightly, letting a bit of the whipped crème and hot chocolate into her mouth. As the combination flowed over her tongue, as she tasted chocolate for the first time in fourteen years, her stomach gave an uncomfortable lurch...but it didn't heave. The whipped crème, she noted, added a milky flavor to the cocoa, while the chocolate itself wasn't terribly strong. Swallowing the first sip, she then drank a little more, feeling the heat of the drink passing down her throat and pooling in her stomach. And maybe it was the whipped crème, or maybe it the memory of how it'd tasted with an added teaspoon of bile, but its flavor was a little different from what she remembered. She doubted she'd ever drink it regularly – she really was more of a tea person - but she had to admit: it was pleasant.

She looked over and met Michael's expectant gaze...and nodded, with an unexpected smile tugging at her lips.

Maybe things could get better after all.

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**Thank You:** Indigo Shade and Larka for being my beta-readers for this chapter. I can't thank you all enough for your hard work! Also, thank you Black-Wolf-Demon-Girl, Yami no Silvar, nobodyreallyimportant, Leone the Infernal, Phantom SWH, Love Psycho, Shinymonkey8, m24ever, and Antauri's Shadow for reading and reviewing the previous chapter. I hope you and my other readers will do the same for this one!

**Author's Note:** While I try to stay as canon compliant as possible in this story, you may notice that I moved the Kanto Radio Tower to from Lavender Town to Saffron City. I did this for two reasons. The first is that the Kanto Radio Tower was based on Tokyo Tower, while Saffron City was based on Tokyo. As such, it seemed more fitting to me that these two things would go together. The second reason is that transforming the Pokemon Tower - a historical and spiritual site where hundreds of pokemon are buried - into a radio broadcasting station doesn't sit well with me. So as far as this story is concerned, it never happened.

Sincerely,

WiseAbsol
Later, they would realize the months that followed were the calm before the storm. As winter melted away, Team Rocket's grip on Viridian and Cerulean did not loosen, and Celadon was slowly infiltrated. By the time the cherry tree groves in the capital came into bloom, the City of Rainbows was no longer in the League's hands.

But though those cities had been taken, hope for the north was not lost – not yet. The citizens of Pewter, led by their gym's ruling family, were actively resisting the agents in black. It was said that not a week went by without some terrible rockslide entombing their foes. The Indigo Plateau, for its part, offered them aid when they could, while the Mt. Moon Range guarded their backs. To the east, the denizens of Cerulean - rallied by a redheaded spitfire - were taking advantage of the cave systems, riverlands, and frozen lakes of their region, teaching the invaders to beware the elements of water and ice. Finally, the flower maidens of Celadon were, suffice to say, not as gentle as they appeared. The Rockets soon learned that the most beautiful blooms were the ones with the deadliest poisons.

The Kantonians weren't winning all their battles, though. The Rockets were using firearms that few elemental shields could deflect, and trainers were beginning to discover that psychic attacks – usually devastatingly strong in a land where dark-types were exotic, and ghosts were jailed in the Tower of the Dead – weren't nearly as effective as they'd once been. This greatly concerned Sabrina Sheehy and her "Greys," but there were other worries that took precedence. Orre, for one, had shocked the Japanese Isles by launching an attack on Hoenn, determined to reap the resources they'd long been without. Johto, which now had conflicts on both sides, was attempting to aid Kanto and Hoenn, but defending its borders was its first priority.

In contrast, Sinnoh and several of the smaller regions were attempting to remain neutral. The southern isles, for their part, had troubles of their own to deal with. On some of the smaller islands, a mutated strain of rabies had broken out in the wild pokémon populations. They were struggling to subdue it with little success. In some cases, that meant leaving crops to ripen and rot, costing the islanders more than just their profit margins. Still, other islands – yet untouched by the disease - were giving Kanto their full support. They'd frequently been subjected to "Rocket Raids" in the past, and were more than willing to lend a hand against the agents.

These decisions wouldn't be without their price. Yet for the time being, the resistance measures were successful in their objective: they halted the spread of Giovanni's territory and power. For that, Saffron City was grateful. They'd been given the gift of time, and they used that time to plan and act. Radio broadcasts were made, instructing civilians on how to stay safe and, if they wished, on how to get to the countries that were accepting refugees. It spoke well of the Kantonians' bravery that most
scoffed at the thought of leaving; though some, to be sure, took the Magnet Train to Goldenrod, or boarded ships to the eastern lands or southern isles. Others strengthened their homes and their Pokémon, stocking up on food, water, and other resources while they were still available. This wasn't the first time Kanto had experienced civil strife, and the over-forty crowd remembered the procedures.

Yet even in this tense atmosphere, life went on, and not all of its pleasantries were lost. Michael and Aurora, though stressed from arranging their moves, nonetheless managed to enjoy themselves. Sometimes that enjoyment meant pitting Alexius' fire against Joey's brawn and Primrose's charm. Neither Michael nor Aurora might have the stuff of masters, but they could be formidable in their own ways. Other times they enjoyed simpler things: like delivering a bag of her favorite coffee beans, which bore the insignia of a grinning, green lizard; or handing him a doughnut "with sprinkles 'pon it, and frosting of white," because hearing her say that in a Shakespearean accent never stopped cracking him up (they loved the series that had come from. They'd listened to the audiobooks together in the car that one time, on that one weekend with the machoke, the crazy ditto, and the jello). It kept them from getting too ornery, in any case.

Sabrina and Rose, for their parts, had even more on their plates. They were responsible for the education and sanity of dozens of psychics, whose ages ranged from four to twenty-something. Their empaths were having the roughest go of it, with soothing teas and meditative sessions only just taking the edges off. Each woman had her own concerns as well. Sabrina was selecting which of the "Greys" would be traveling with Cassandra and her children, as well as meeting with the woman to discuss training options and "tracing back the thread." Cassandra still hadn't been told about that last part. Their meetings tended to vary between tense and hostile, but the mother-to-be was, at least, beginning to accept some tentative plans.

Rose was also meeting with Cassandra at least once a week, which Cassandra did not appreciate. So used to keeping secrets and reluctant to forfeit them, their first few sessions passed in silence. She was unwilling to open up. Yet as spring turned to summer, as the heat and green deepened, Cassandra began to talk. They weren't progressing as much as Rose would have liked – Cassandra tended to skirt around or only allude to the subjects they were meeting to deal with. But it was a start, and Rose was willing to be patient with her. It would just take time and effort, and Cassandra was willing to move forward. That was the important part.

True, there were some backslides in that tentative progress: Cassandra hadn't responded well to learning about Rose's relationship with Sabrina, and Rose had needed to be rather stern with her. "I assure you, nothing you say leaves this room. You have my word on that." When that hadn't appeased her, Rose had added, "Would it really matter if it did, Cassandra? She already knows all of your secrets. You know that. So what are you really upset about?" Cassandra had quickly learned that their confidences went one way, and that Rose was neither her friend nor her enemy. She was a neutral party, and she pried and it wasn't comfortable and she forced Cassandra to analyze herself. But that was precisely what would make it effective: speaking and sorting through it all and moving forward.

When the stress of that process – for it would undoubtedly be a long-term arrangement – and the pressures of daily life became too much for Rose, she…well, she indulged in certain joys with Sabrina (good wine, bitter chocolate, and summer berries made life much sweeter), and Sabrina, in turn, savoring the many uses of rose oil, which Rose was an expert in ("Sooth the body and the mind follows").

Without her partner, Cassandra couldn't share similar pleasures, but others were hers for the taking. While the cherry blossoms were falling in Saffron, she and Father Shannon walked beneath them. They talked about a number of things, while a pair of Greys followed them from a distance. One of
them was the man who'd talked with Michael on her birthday, who went by the name of Florian and might just be gay. Cassandra couldn't quite tell, and didn't know if it was polite or not to ask. The other was a woman named Anastasia, who was rather stern, but she seemed to have a soft spot for puppies. Cassandra wondered sometimes if she was the only cat person in the capital, but soon learned that Sabrina and Rose had two. *That was not comforting to her.*

Throughout all of this, the council planned for the move and Cassandra's body continued to swell. It was not merely her belly that did so, though it now looked like a white-streaked melon. Her chest was also aching and growing heavy with milk, and her feet were doing horrifying imitations of brown building bricks. The woman had never felt so hideous in her entire life. Well, maybe she had *emotionally*, but certainly not *physically*.

It was to the point where trying to get comfortable in any position, whether seated or lying down, was a losing battle. She was ungainly and her spine was constantly sore, and the muscles of her back were pinched and knotting. It made attempting to sleep difficult at best, and when she *did* manage to drift into dreams, what she *saw* terrified her. Nightmares were nothing new to her, but these…*these ones* made her afraid to go back to sleep.

The others took note of the dark circles under her eyes and gave her recommendations, though Aurora's simple remedy helped her the most: warm milk sweetened with mint or honey. Eventually, Rose managed to get her to talk about the dreams…though if Cassandra hadn't had a *perpetual headache* from sleep-deprivation, or felt the urge to cry *constantly*, she would've liked to think she wouldn't have cracked.

"They…in them, the same thing happens. I lose the babies. Sometimes some monster rips me open and tears them apart. Sometimes something heavy hits me, though I don't know what. Sometimes they're cut out of me and taken. Sometimes they…it's like that African wasp that lays its eggs in those caterpillars, but with more fire involved. But mostly there's just pain. I'm bleeding out, and afterwards I learn that all there was inside if me was a gallon of blood. They were never there, not really. I'm not sure which dream scares me the most." Her vision was hazy with tears and she was sniffling when she finished. Stupid hormones. It was *all their fault*.

They talked about those dreams for a time – psychics tended to believe that dreams had kernels of truth in them – and Rose surmised what Cassandra already knew about herself: that she had a hard time believing that things could go her way for once (when had they ever?), that things weren't out to get her (*well weren't they*?), that she was scared of something happening to her children ("It's a natural worry."). And that she didn't think the people around her would keep her safe (she'd just given Rose a *look* at that, and Rose had the grace to look abashed).

Then Rose threw her one of those curveballs she was coming to loathe, and asked her *who* had cut the children from her womb. Was it Aurora, who kept suggesting she have a cesarean section? Was it Michael, whose relationship with her was tense but mellowing as the months went by? Or was it someone else? Perhaps one of her enemies?

It was the last one. "Giovanni orders his people to. He says it's what a traitor deserves. I can't get away, and then there's just…pain."

That seemed to interest Rose. "And why do you think he says that to you? Is it possible you feel some guilt over deserting him? He did raise you, after all."

That seemed like a trap, so Cassandra didn't answer. Yet afterwards, she wondered: did she feel guilty? If she did, her guilt wasn't enough to make her regret her choice. It might still be enough to haunt her, though, like the many paths she hadn't taken in her life. Yes, she considered Giovanni a monster, and yes, she resented him for what he'd done to those she'd loved. But he'd been the closest
thing she'd had to a father, hadn't he? The ridiculousness and perversion of that feeling wasn't lost on her.

So the dreams persisted into the depths of summer, when the skies were clear and blue as a robin's egg, when the air was thick and sultry with the scents of honeysuckle and apples, and the cicadas screamed as they crawled among the leaves. The Festival of Stars, honoring Orihime and Vega, passed with fireworks and sweets, and students began preparing for school or returning to the Routes. On the evening of August the first, a couple weeks before her due date, a sweating and aching Cassandra twisted in the sheets of her bed, having kicked off the blankets earlier. As she felt one of her children kicking, she winced and pressed a hand to her belly, whispering for him or her to settle down. They'd be born soon enough (too soon, it seemed).

For a few minutes, she regarded herself in the closet mirror: she looked so misshapen. As she turned over, the muscles of her back contracted in a painful spasm. She cursed, squirmed against the pillows, and again tried to urge herself to sleep. She focused on the smell of cocoa butter and the chirps of the crickets, and began reciting the pokémon species of Kanto under her breath. Her last memory before she slept was to wonder, vaguely, if mew or Mewtwo should be considered number 150, and if mew should even be counted, considering it was supposed to be native to South America. She mumbled something, and then slid sideways into sleep….

There was a sense of déjà vu when she found herself in different room, with no memory of how she'd gotten there. She was lying in a hospital bed with a white sheet tucked over her shoulders. The ceiling and curtains around her were red, while the floor was made of porphyry marble tiles. The curtains shielded her from whatever was beyond, but she could hear indistinct voices and see silhouettes against the cloth. She tried to sit up, but found her arms and legs shackled to the railings of the bed. The stainless steel glinted as she shook them, but it wouldn't yield. As quiet as she tried to be, the noise she made was enough to draw the attention of the people beyond. The curtain was pushed inwards by a hand, and a tall, burly man followed it.

Giovanni was wearing a suit as black as his eyes, and when he stepped next to the bed, he frowned down at her.

Her blood ran cold. Some small part of her realized that this was a dream; that it had to be a dream, because she was sleeping safe and sound in the Saffron Center. But unlike those dreams where knowing the truth would allow her to control and unravel it, this one wouldn’t release her. She could order herself to wake up all she liked, but she couldn’t open her eyes until he was finished with her. And when he began to talk to her in that low, authoritative voice, she began to doubt. What if he’d taken her while she’d slept? What if this was real? The doubt bound her better than the shackles ever could. She looked up and met his dark eyes, and cringed as he brushed a strand of her hair from her face.

"I take what's mine, my dear. He was mine and you were mine. That makes them mine by right." He almost seemed concerned when he added, "If you yield them willingly, then perhaps-".

"No!" She struggled against her bonds harder, feeling sick and cold. "You won't get them! You won't...you can't...!" Her voice cracked as she sobbed. She couldn't let him take them. She couldn't bear the thought of them going through what she and Mewtwo had at this man's hands. There was no worse nightmare to her.

He wasn’t impressed. "You'll find that I can." He turned to the silhouettes and gave the order: "Doctors, bring them to me."

They came in, masked and rolling a table of surgical tools between them. She shook her shackles, the skin of her wrists and ankles tearing and slickening from blood. Her heart raced rabbit-fast, she
couldn't breathe properly, her body soaked in sweat and went cold with terror. As four of the faceless doctors held her down, a fifth pushed the sheet away and her nightgown up. It drew a line across her stomach with a marker and then reached for the scalpel on the table. Giovanni's face floated over hers, her tears making his features seem to melt like wax, his eyes caving in to empty pits. But his words were clear in her ears: "Let this be your punishment for betraying me."

Somehow, she knew the doctors wouldn't be drugging her or sewing her back up again. Her children would be taken and she would die on this table, unable to do anything to change their fates. As the scalpel slashed through skin, muscles, organs, she screamed and begged, but none of them listened. Let this be your punishment. The white sheet turned red, the hands plunged in, her body seized, and then, and then—.

She jerked awake. Her hair was plastered against her face and neck, her nightgown was soaked through, and she was trembling all over. The pain from the nightmare lingered, and as Cassandra tried to get up, she fell back into the bed with a strangled gasp. Her guts felt as if they were filled with white-hot knives, her abdominal muscles were tight to the point of spasms, and her thighs were slick. Cassandra glanced down the bed: the sheet between her legs was wet with something. For a confused second, she thought she'd pissed herself. But no, she thought, it couldn't be urine, the smell and color was wrong for that. Yet whatever it was, it had traces of blood in it. That's not good. As her abdominal muscles clenched and the pain followed, she finally realized.

Oh god, she thought. Oh god, it's happening. Oh god.

She hadn't realized her fear could reach new levels, but somehow it did.

For a moment, she laid there, frozen from it, but then she reached out to the nightstand. She fumbled for the phone, knocking it off its cradle as she grabbed at it, but eventually she drew it to her. She pressed the four-digit code for Aurora's room, and after a couple rings, she heard the line pick up. A groggy voice answered, "Hell…hello?"

"Aurora, it's…it's Cassandra. I'm in labor." Breathe, she told herself, keep breathing.

There was a pause, a shifting of bedcovers, a click. The doctor's voice was clearer when she asked, "Are you sure? You're still two weeks out. It could be false labor."

"Unless false labor includes my water breaking, I'm pretty sure it's the real-," another contraction tore through her, "-oh fuck on a fuck sandwich! Just get over here!" Christ, this was like the worst abdominal cramps she'd ever had times about a thousand.

In contrast, Aurora seemed quite calm as she said, "I do hope your explicative wasn't referring to that unfortunate fraternity game involving toast and-.

"Aurora! Faster on your part would be better." Now really wasn't the time for the doctor to dissect her curses. Now was the time for her to curse wildly and not be questioned about it!

"Relax, I'm getting dressed and alerting my assistants. I'll be there in two minutes. Do you think you can manage to walk to my office, or will you need a wheelchair?"

"Walking" sounded a lot like to "torture" to Cassandra right then. "A wheelchair. Bring me a fucking wheelchair."

"Right. Be there shortly."

They hung up, and Cassandra found that "two minutes" could last an eternity under certain circumstances. Eventually though, her door was unlocked and the doctor rolled the wheelchair to
her. As Aurora helped her into it, there was a lot of snarling, hissing, and spitting, but once it was done, they moved quickly enough. Aurora pushed her along at a brisk pace, doing her best not to jostle her as they swept down the halls. She instructed Cassandra to concentrate on breathing — two quick breaths in, one long breath out. Cassandra tried, clutching the armrests hard and squeezing her eyes shut. *Inhale, inhale, exhale. Inhale, inhale, exhale.* She didn't even notice when they arrived in the birthing room that Aurora had set up.

It wasn't until Joey tapped her shoulder, knelt, and offered to help her onto the birthing bed that Cassandra cracked an eye open. As the kangaskan lifted and laid her down in a smooth, practiced motion, the room seemed to spin, and when it settled, she saw the preparations the doctor had made. To her left was a table filled with birthing tools, including the one that was supposed to break open the amniotic sac (*one down, one to go*, she thought) and the scalpel for a cesarean section. She forced herself to look away from it. To her right were monitoring devices and, she saw with some unease, a stand with bags of her blood type, B+, hanging from it. *This pregnancy is going to be hard,* she remembered Aurora saying, *and the birth itself will be worse.* It seemed her doctor had prepared for the worst.

Aurora moved in her peripheral vision, catching her attention. "Alright, now try to relax. I need you to tell me how you're feeling. How bad would you say the pain is on a scale of one to ten, with one being mildly annoying and ten being 'I'm ready to faint'?"

"Um…somewhere around an eight?" Quantifying pain seemed rather absurd to her just then. It hurt and it hurt badly, so who cared what it was on the scale?

"Alright. Now does this hurt?" The redhead pressed a couple gloved fingers into her lower left side. When Cassandra yelped, Aurora took that as a "yes" and kept her expression carefully neutral. As she began unbuttoning and tugging off Cassandra's nightgown, Cassandra protested - mostly on the principle of the thing, really - but the doctor had seen her naked before, so it hardly mattered.

The chansey, Primrose, then sponged her clean with warm water (it smelled like oranges) and dried her with towels. Both of them helped her into a dry medical gown. "We don't want you catching a chill." Cassandra was grateful, but her thanks strangled itself on her lips as another contraction tore through her. Tears sprung to her eyes, but she blinked them away. *It's going to be okay,* she reassured herself. *They know what they're doing, so it's going to be okay.*

But she felt so scared…!

Minutes passed, then an hour, then two. As Aurora, Joey, and Primrose fretted over her, she sipped on ice chips and tried to keep her breathing steady. She was given an epidural to help with the pain, and the relief of it almost made her giddy. She could still feel how tight her muscles were and she supposed she'd be ready to *kill someone* when the meds wore off. Yet for now, waiting for her cervix to dilate those precious ten centimeters (*oh the body horror of this event!* didn't seem all that bad.

True, her feet and legs were numb, which might *not* be normal. And Aurora, who was making some phone calls, had said things were going "as well as they could," which didn't strike Cassandra as very reassuring. Still, she wasn't in pain and she didn't seem to be bleeding, so those were points in her favor. Finally, at thirty minutes to midnight, it seemed as if they could begin. "You're ready, so let's get started. The sooner this is over, the better." Well *that* had a distinct air of not-comfort to it. So much for Aurora's bedside manner.

As the next contraction hit, Aurora ordered her to *push*…and as she did, she felt fear sweep through her. She didn't feel ready for this. She may have been waiting for this for months, but suddenly she didn't feel ready. She wanted to *stop,* and she must have muttered something to that effect,
because Aurora tried to scold her and encourage her at the same time, which really didn't work too well. Yet though Cassandra wanted to run away, to find some nice dark place to hide in until it was over, she obeyed the doctor's orders like a rower on a longboat. Though the command she heard was always "again" instead of "row."

A delirious little giggle escaped her at the thought, but then she pushing again. As she strained, feeling pressure building in her uterus, mounting into steady pain (the epidural was wearing off, and it was too late to increase the dosage), she clutched the railings of the bed and bit her lip. She couldn't seem to breathe right, but even so, a moan of effort rose from her throat. She didn't scream or shriek, though passing something the size of a melon through such a tiny orifice would have invoked that reaction from most sane people. Instead, she whimpered as she pushed something round out of her with agonizing slowness (a head, she thought dazedly), and she found herself wishing desperately that someone, anyone, was there to hold her hand through this.

*Mewtwo…damn it, I want you here…!

Then the child's head was out, followed by its shoulders, its arms, with the rest of it slipping from her in a mess of amniotic fluid, blood, and bits of gore. It coughed, sucked in a huge breath, and then started wailing like some unholy banshee.

The beauty of the sound left her breathless. From the end of the bed, Aurora smiled and called over the noise, "Your son sounds quite healthy!"

*Her son! Her stomach jerked from some unnamable emotion, and her heart seemed to skip a beat. She watched intently as her baby boy was passed to Primrose, who took him to a nearby table, tied and cut his umbilical cord, and wiped him clean. She never noticed the grim look that flashed over Aurora's face. Cassandra might be in pain – the doctor could see that she was, despite the brave face she wore - but it wasn't enough pain to reveal the extent of the damage she was doing to herself.

There was blood, so much blood, too much blood, coating the table and dripping down onto the floor. Damn it, Aurora thought as Cassandra shuddered with another contraction, the red surging fresh. Damn it all, she's hemorrhaging! Not now, she can't do this now!

From down the hall, there was the chiming of a clock. As Primrose took the nameless boy from the room, Aurora took the amnihook from the table, deftly using it to break the other amniotic sac. Red-tinged water spilled over her gloved hands, and as Cassandra shuddered, Aurora ordered her to push. Cassandra barely heard the doctor over the ringing in her ears, but still, she obeyed. The pain intensified as she strained, making her feel feverish and lightheaded, making her breathing shallow out into pants. But she continued, clutching the railings until her knuckles went white, until she tasted blood on her lip, until her vision began to swim and dim. Then, finally, she felt the tips of the girl's ears, which were soft and strangely flexible as they pressed against the feline-shaped skull. It took several more pushes, but then the head and upper body were out.

The pelvis, wide with its tail, was harder for her to force out. She struggled for several minutes, gasping and wishing she could just stop – but then there was a tearing sound and the girl slid into Aurora's waiting hands, the umbilical cord trailing after her. Cassandra had the vague impression of her child being colored strangely; almost like Christmas, she mused, feeling a bit delirious. As hot and cold flashed over her, she listened to the girl's mewling and blinked at Aurora's concerned expression. She worried for a second that something might be wrong with her daughter…her daughter…but then realized Aurora was looking at her.

The pain was melting away, though. Cassandra gave the doctor a weak, exhausted smile and rasped, "I'm fine. Just tired. If it's all the same to you, I think I'll pass out for a while." Sleep sounded better than sex right now. Before she closed her eyes, she saw Aurora pass her child to Joey. Her eyes
were wide behind her glasses, and her mouth was moving, but Cassandra couldn’t hear what she was saying.

*It'll be okay,* she thought to the doctor. *It's going to be okay.* She would’ve liked to ask for a blanket, though. Suddenly she felt so cold.

She was still thinking about how strange that was when she passed out.

"Shit! Bring the...help me!"

The words floated down to her from the ceiling of the night. As she was carried on, Cassandra thought that she should be more concerned about what she was managing to hear. It certainly didn’t sound good, but...well, she just couldn’t bring herself to care. She knew Aurora would patch her up, so why be worried? She wouldn’t die here; she had too much she was looking forward to, and certainly had too much left to do. She refused to believe that childbirth would kill her when her foes had failed. As ironic as that death would be, it wouldn’t be hers. It just didn’t fit. She wished she could tell the doctor that, but her mouth wasn’t working and Aurora wasn’t a telepath. So that was a lost cause.

Not that it mattered, really. Cassandra felt like she’d earned a break from the chaos, so she was going to enjoy her nap. Let the others fret over her; for now, she was done with fighting. Instead she drifted through her mindscapes, traveling over seas of grasses and rolling hills, where the ghosts of children played. She wandered through vineyards and forests, avoiding the briars and tasting the fruits. They were sweet and bitter and ripe with memories. Finally, she climbed the cliffs that overlooked her lands on one side, while a crimson sea stretched on the other. On the horizon, its waters deepened into darkness...an encroaching darkness, she realized, staring at it. It's coming for me. Yet she wasn't afraid. No, as weary and sore as she was, as hollow as she felt, she was content to let it come. So she waited. For what, she wasn't sure.

As the darkness crept closer, she heard snatches of Aurora's voice, "...where...bleeding...where?" Her voice was cracking from frustration and, quite possibly, desperation. Cassandra still didn’t worry. Instead, she reclined on the edge of the cliff. The ground hard beneath her, but damp too, as if there had just been a summer rain. Her abdominal muscles also burned and ached, the way they did on the first day of her period. It had been months since she’d felt that, but she told herself the same thing she always did. The pain will pass. She just needed to outlast it....

When the darkness seeped into the shore below, she felt a warmth – a familiar warmth – settle himself down next to her. She turned onto her side to face him, and smiled as he wove an arm around her and breathed into her hair. Here in her dreams, he was so alive, so vital. When she met his eyes, his gaze was strangely clear and contemplative. He brushed her hair back from her sweaty face, and that felt nice, so nice. She cuddled against him, ignoring the protests of her now flatter stomach at the pressure.

Their children were no longer inside her, she remembered. With the help of Aurora and her assistants, she’d brought them into the world. But after nine months, it was a little surreal to have her body back – to not be sharing it with two other souls (or even one, she thought, looking at him), even though she’d spent nineteen years alone in her own skin. She frowned at the thought, and frowned deeper when she heard Aurora’s voice again: "...There! Michael, come...give me...!"

But she’d done it. Despite hurting herself in the process, she’d given birth to the twins, all natural (well, except for the epidural, but whatever, that shouldn’t count). Maybe it had been stupid to do it that way, but now no one could say to them, "You're unnatural. You were cut out of your mother's womb, not born!"
Truthfully, most people would probably overlook that distinction – women had cesarean sections all the time - but her children would already have enough to deal with. At least she could tell them that she’d carried them, given birth to them, and raised them. She could reassure them that there hadn’t been anything unusual about how they’d come into this world. They wouldn’t have to shoulder their father’s burden or his doubts…and to her, that made the pain she’d had to go through worthwhile. She may have beaten herself bloody, but she’d spared them that uncertainty. She was proud of herself for that.

"I did it, Mewtwo. I did it." She kissed him then, high on her success. She relished the feeling of his arms encircling her, of his tongue gliding over her lips. She opened her mouth and moaned as the kiss deepened, as his fingers felt her through the wet shift she was wearing, as his body pressed against hers and throbbed as he purred. She’d thought she was too tired to crave anything but sleep, but oh, this was good too, and she was in the mood to celebrate. She felt his hand tease between her thighs, against her clit, but then he dipped a finger inside and – oh, ow. Ow! She gasped at the pain, at the reminder that she was scorched and raw and weeping inside. She shoved his hand away and cursed, "Fuck…oh fuck, I can’t, I…"

He drew back from her, his brow knitting with confusion (she’d never learned to tell him no, but then, she’d never wanted to), but he kept his promise and didn’t force her. Instead he held her like she wanted, while she gave him what he wanted in a different way. She used her hands, her breasts, her mouth – they’d shared the sweetest of kisses before – and listened to him as he growled and groaned. She supposed that under the circumstances, this was a strange dream of her to have. But giving him pleasure and hearing him beg her for more (only she could make him beg)…well, illusion though it might be, it made her feel desirable again. She hadn’t felt that in quite some time, so she gave him what he wanted and savored the taste of it.

Afterwards, he trailed a paw over her arm and murmured, "Will you stay with me, my dove?"

She smiled. It was tempting thought, but..., "No. Not yet. Someday, but not yet. I have too much to go back to, Mewtwo."

"I see…." He nuzzled at her ear, nipping at the lobe. Then he asked, "Do you remember what I promised you?"

She found herself feeling more amused than sad at the thought of his promises. "Which promise? You made so many of them - I can hardly remember them all. That's like asking me to remember all the lectures Giovanni gave me." She kissed his muzzle, letting him know she was only teasing. "Though I have got to admit, your vows were always more interesting." Especially when they’d been a prelude to pillow talk. Damn her body for hurting so much!

He sighed, his breath hot against her cheek. "I will find you again, Cassandra. I will."

From the distance, Aurora's voice carried over the copper-scented breeze: "...closed…I need…point five liters…."

Cassandra thought of the crimson sea and the darkness beyond, which had halted at her shores. "I know you'll find me one day. Just not today."

"No. Not today," he agreed, his voice sounding sad…and regretful.

She twined her fingers with his and gave them a squeeze. "But someday."

Aurora's voice came again, clearer this time: "...stable. If...through the night...be okay."
Stars began to speckle the night above them, while the moon peeked out from behind thick clouds. For a moment she thought she glimpsed something across the sea, but it vanished as the dream began to grow pale and translucent. She felt a mattress beneath her instead of stone, and felt a blanket against her skin instead of fur. Very soon she'd be awake, it seemed.

"Looks like it's time to go back," she told him as she got up. He reached out as if to grab her arm, as if to ask her to stay...but then he nodded, reluctantly rising to his feet. When she stepped towards her lands, he turned away, taking the path down to the shore.

If he looked back at her, she didn't see it. She headed back the way she'd come, weaving through the forests and vineyards, crossing over the hills and plains. As she walked, the eastern sky grew lighter and pinker. When the dawn burst and the sunlight touched her, her wings unfolded from her back. She ran, jumped, flew towards the sun, mindless of its heat (her feathers weren't bound in wax). She soared higher and higher, soared until she was surrounded by rosy light, until the chirps of songbirds filled her ears....

She could almost still taste him when she opened her eyes.

There was sunshine pouring in through rose-colored curtains. The window had been thrown open to let the August warmth and the smells of summer in. Honeysuckle, wet leaves, grass cuttings – their scents all filled her nose. The breeze itself was moist; there must have been rain sometime in the night. The room she was in was smaller and cozier than the birthing room: the wallpaper was covered with roses, there was a water bottle on the bedside table, and she was resting in a featherbed. The blanket had been tucked up to her neck, but even so, she still felt cold.

Her mouth felt parched, too. She needed some of that water. Her body felt heavy and unresponsive, but if Cassandra knew nothing else, she knew how to force herself forward. Weak as she was, she braced herself and began to push herself up into seating position. The attempt didn't last long. Pain flared through her core like fire, like razor blades, and she sank back into the bed with a strangled curse.

"Careful there. Patching you up wasn't easy, and I don't want you re-tearing anything," Aurora said off to her left. Cassandra turned her head: the doctor was getting up from a chair and placing a book aside. The cover had a detective on it – though, weirdly, he was holding a wizard's staff. Must be one of those paranormal mysteries.

Her doctor, she saw, had dark circles under her eyes. Had she stayed up most of the night? She must have showered not long ago: her hair was wet and held back in a ponytail, and she was wearing a fresh set of clothes. As she crossed the room to her, her glasses glinted from the sunlight. She took the water bottle from the bedside table, twisted the cap off, and offered it to Cassandra.

Cassandra took it and sipped. The water was sweet and soothing to her throat. When her thirst was quenched, she handed the bottle back and asked, "Re-tearing'? What happened?"

Aurora scowled down at her. Her voice was crisper and wearier than usual when she said, "As I'd warned you might happen, the internal scars lining your uterus ruptured during childbirth. You began hemorrhaging after your son was born, with the damage only worsening when you were giving birth to your daughter. Her body wasn't suited for a human birth. I had to make an incision to widen your cervix to get her out."

She sighed. "You really should have consented to a cesarean section. If they hadn't been smaller than normal, you probably wouldn't have made it. As it was, we had to operate on you to save you. You lost over a liter of blood and might have done irreparable damage to your womb. It's going to take at least two months before you're fully healed - and even then, I wouldn't recommend having any more
Cassandra processed that information slowly, realizing, with some horror, what had happened and almost happened to her. She shivered and nodded. "You don't have to worry. The only one I'd be willing to have more children with is gone. The twins…they're enough for me."

The doctor looked skeptical. "You don't know what the future will bring. You might meet someone who will make you feel-.

"No. We both know I won't."

There was a note of finality in Cassandra's voice as she said that, and Aurora's retort died on her lips. It wasn't that Cassandra felt like she could never love again, or that she had some unspoken duty to remain loyal to Mewtwo's memory. There had been moments in the past few months when she had, largely at Rose's prompting, considered what it would be like for her children to grow up without their father – without a father figure, even. True, she'd never known her own father, and Giovanni's attempts to fill that role hadn't been very successful. She knew it wasn't essential for children to have both parents or even one. As long as they had someone to care for them and teach them, they could grow up happy and healthy; perhaps even happier than most, since parents could cause as much pain to children as strangers, but be harder to escape. Still, not having a family – and indeed, a whole family - could be damaging in its own way.

So, reluctantly and with a slightly sick feeling, Cassandra had considered the possibility of finding someone to fill the void Mewtwo had left. She'd considered finding someone to help her raise the twins and share her bed. After some examination, though, she'd realized that finding someone like that was improbable at best. There were just too many counts "against" them. Cassandra had done monstrous things for Team Rocket, and even her acts of love – such as accepting a beast's embrace – could be counted among her crimes.

Then there was the complication of having two children to raise - both of whom would assuredly have powerful psychic abilities, and one of whom didn't even look human. And say someone could overlook these things: then there were the facts that, A.) Team Rocket was still after them, B.) They were going to be guarded by a grouchy detective and a passel of psychics, and C.) There was a war stirring that could well kill them all. Who'd be willing to put up with all of that? Moreover, who could she trust to be gentle to her children and with her?

She knew only one person who would've been willing, who wouldn't have made some pitiful excuse and run away, shrieking about the madness that was her life. She only knew one person who might have smiled and said, "Yes." But he was gone, and they'd have to live with the reality that no one could take his place.

Cassandra could accept that. She hoped her children could too, even though their hearts were still soft and innocent, and it really didn't seem fair to have to put them through that pain. Yet there was nothing she could do about that, except hold them and whisper that it would be okay. She might not be able to raise the dead, but she would try her best to raise the living, because that was what…that was what mothers did, wasn't it?

Her heart trembled. Looking back up at Aurora, she whispered, "I…I want my children. Please, bring them to me. Please."

Suddenly she needed them, more than she'd ever needed anything in her life (save for those fleeting moments when she'd clung to their father, yearning to melt against and around him). She felt empty without them inside her, heavy, shifting. She ached to hold them in her arms. It was instinctual and emotional and almost frightening in its intensity, and Aurora - who simply said "Of course" with a
little smile – couldn't move fast enough to satisfy her.

Cassandra watched the door close behind the doctor and, ignoring the pain, carefully pushed herself up. For an instant she absurdly tried to smooth her hair and brush it back from her face, though she knew the twins would be practically blind at this early stage. Even if they could see her clearly, it wouldn't make any difference to them how she looked. Maybe she wanted to make sure her vision was clear, though. She wanted to see them. She shifted uncomfortably as she waited, but after a couple minutes, Aurora returned with two wrapped bundles in her arms. Cassandra's heart lurched and her arms reached out on their own accord. Slowly, carefully, and one-by-one, Aurora set the twins into their mother's waiting arms.

She balanced them against her knees, her arms at their sides, their faces mere centimeters away from hers. She couldn't help but stare. They were so very small and fragile-looking to her – to her, whose hands had killed men and women and even children. The thought unsettled her. For a moment she wondered if she should even be holding them like this. She wondered if someone like her had any place cradling such babes against herself. Yet they were her children, her baby boy and baby girl, and she knew she could never raise a hand against them. As awed as she was, it would be difficult to even raise her voice.

She spent what seemed like an eternity studying them: they were both wrapped in white baby blankets, with only their faces exposed. Her son had wisps of dark hair – her hair, she realized – and was ruddy-faced, which she'd read most light-skinned newborns had when they were born. He'd probably be several shades lighter than her, thanks to his father. She touched his head gently, unable to breath as she did. She'd never felt any skin more smooth and tender!

At her touch, he began to squirm and opened his eyes slightly. She saw a flash of blue and wondered whether his eyes would pale to match hers or would darken to match Mewtwo's. She hoped it would be the latter. Stroking his hair, she turned her eyes to her daughter and blinked in surprise. The girl had Mewtwo's shape, of course, though her paws were disproportionately large and she was pudgy with baby fat. Her face shimmered in the sunlight and she, too, had those baby blues. Her fur felt like velvet beneath Cassandra's fingers.

Yet that same fur…. "Oh no." She wasn't certain whether to laugh or cry!

Aurora gave her a reproving look. "Well that's a fine way to greet your daughter! You knew she took after her father, or did you think-?"

"That's not it!" As far as Cassandra was concerned, both the babes in her arms were perfect. It was just that her daughter's coloring was…well…. "It's just…there's two of them. It's going to be hard enough keeping track of them both without one of them blending into the shrubbery!"

Maybe it was the strange combination of genes that had gone into making her, or maybe it was that rare, one-in-roughly-eight-thousand chance. Either way, the girl didn't take after Mewtwo where her fur was concerned. Instead she was the color of white jade, with a midriff and tail being an emerald green (she checked to be sure). Cassandra's daughter, it seemed, was a shiny.

"Oh." Aurora looked slightly abashed. "Well, I wasn't certain what she was supposed to look like. What was her father's coloring, if I may ask?"

"Pale and dark purple. His eyes were the same color as amethysts."

Cassandra continued to stare. "Pain and dark purple. His eyes were the same color as amethysts." They'd laughed, joking that his eyes, not his type, had given him his resistance to poisons….

"I see. He must have stood out from a crowd, then. Your daughter should have better luck staying hidden." Seeing the sour look Cassandra gave her, the woman rolled her eyes and said, "If it worries
you so much, just put a big, sparkly bow on her! You could make it some obnoxious shade of green. Then she'll be easy to spot and even more adorable."

Cassandra bristled at that, even though she knew Aurora was only teasing. "She doesn't need a bow to look adorable. She already is. They both are."

"Hence why I said 'even more,'" Aurora replied dryly. She grabbed a clipboard from the table and sat down. "So, do you have any other comments to make before we fill out the paperwork?"

Right. There were birth certificates to fill out. She did have something more to say, though. "They're so tiny. Are they healthy?"

Aurora nodded. "They're perfectly fine. Clean bills of health for both of them, unlike you." She wasn't going to let that go, was she? "The only reason they're so small is because they had less room to grow. Don't worry; they'll be twice this size before you know it."

Cassandra wasn't sure how she felt about that. It was a relief to hear, but the idea of them growing so quickly was an uncomfortable one. She drew them closer and felt them move against in short, little jerks. As if sensing her unease, they began to fuss, and Cassandra found herself panicking slightly. She wasn't certain why they were crying and how to fix it. What should she do? Did they not like her holding them like this? Did they need a diaper change? Or were they-?

"Hungry, no doubt. I fed them some formula a few hours ago, but the real thing would do them good. How about it?" Aurora asked. There was a soft smile on her face, which reassured Cassandra somewhat. She still felt uncertain and definitely nervous at the prospect of feeding them...but she hadn't put up with tender breasts for months to not feed them properly. With some trepidation, she leaned them against her knees again and fumbled at the buttons of her gown. Aurora helped her and folded the fabric away, exposing her breasts. Cassandra shivered and, with a little more assistance from the doctor, she guided the newborns to her breasts. They continued to fuss, neither seeming to want her nipples, but then they each latched on and began to nurse greedily, their tiny hands kneading into her.

She made some sound then, some noise of surprise and pleasure, of relief and a bit of pain. She wondered at the strange sensation of the milk being suckled from her, which was so unlike anything she'd ever felt before. But those feelings were nothing, nothing at all compared to the contentment that filled her as they breastfed. *These are my children*, she thought. These were the creatures she'd felt moving in her womb, whose heartbeats she'd heard and who she'd dreamed of holding. They were in the world at last, safe and sound and warm. And while she found herself worrying – it would be harder to protect them now – she was also happy. For the first time in so long, too long, she believed that the world was beautiful. Now that they were here, the pain of the past appeared a dream.

A lot of what she was feeling was hormones, she knew. But knowing that didn't make her feelings any less true. With a light heart, she gazed down at them and thought, *The last person who mouthed me there was your father, when we were making you. I'm sure there's a joke in there, somewhere, but...god, I don't even care.*

It took a while, but when the twins satiated themselves and nestled against her chest, Aurora helped her button up. Then she took a pen from her clipboard and asked, "So what have you decided to name them?"

Cassandra lifted her eyes to the doctor. She'd gone through several baby name books over the last few months, but hadn't shared her ideas with anyone else. Now she would. She kissed her son's forehead and said, "This little guy's name will be Christopher Mewtwo Brennan."
Aurora's pen paused in the middle. "Mewtwo?"

"Yes, his father's name. Do you need me to spell it?" The question was crisp and rhetorical. Aurora knew how to spell Mewtwo's name, though the curve of her eyebrow suggested that she didn't think it was the kindest of middle names.

Well that was too damn bad. There wasn't any reason for her son to feel ashamed of it, and if he did...well, he'd just have to avoid giving her cause to shout his full name. To be honest, though, she hoped Christopher would take pride in it. His father had made plenty of mistakes, even hurtful ones - but even so, his memory deserved respect. He'd earned that much from them.

Next, of course, was her daughter. "And this little beauty," she murmured, kissing the crown of the girl's head, "will be Maya Amber Brennan." If Mewtwo had merited a namesake, then so did Amber. The girl had taught her how to smile again, and Cassandra liked to think that her friend would've smiled at this. She simply hoped that Maya wouldn't be quite as...adventurous as Amber had been.She'd probably have a panic attack if Maya decided "street-skiing" sounded like fun!

Aurora, for her part, had no objections to this name. She jotted it down without a word, which Cassandra was thankful for. Breathing in the smells of milk and baby powder, Cassandra whispered her children's names to them. "Christopher. Maya." Mewtwo's children. My children.

As they dozed, they would sometimes squirm against her and curl their hands into fists, or make what she could only describe as "little baby noises." Doing her best not to jostle them, Cassandra took the clipboard from Aurora and set it beside her, signing her name on both certificates. Her children had different birthdays, she saw: August 1st and August 2nd. She wasn't certain whether that would make celebrating their birthdays easier or harder, but...well, that was still awhile away, wasn't it?

After she handed the clipboard back to the doctor, though, Cassandra wondered what she'd give them. What were you supposed to give one-year-olds...? She'd already bought them a couple of stuffed animals; she hoped they'd like them. For a time she lost herself in her thoughts – there was so much to do, so much to plan for – but as her son gurgled and drooled against her gown, her thoughts boiled down into one. There was something she wanted to say to Christopher and Maya, and she wanted to be alone with them when she said it.

When she told Aurora that, the doctor gave her a thoughtful look, but then stood up and said, "Alright. I'll be back in fifteen minutes to check up on you three."

Then she left, shutting the door behind her.

Cassandra looked back down at her children, who occasionally blinked up at her with their blue, blue eyes. It took her a moment to gather herself, but when she did, she took in a deep, quavering breath and whispered, "Hi. Hi, Christopher. Hi, Maya. I'm...I'm your mother. I'm the one you've been growing in for the past nine months and...god, I've been waiting to meet you for just about that long. I hope you'll like me because I...I love you already."

Nervousness, ridiculous as it was, made her heart beat wildly in her chest, her palms sweat, her stomach churn. But she kept talking. "I love you so much, and that's the first thing you need to know. I love you and want you, and no matter what anyone else tells you someday, that's never going to change. I promise."

She took in another breath. Saying this was easier now that she'd started. "The second thing is that it's going to be just us. Your father...he isn't here anymore. And it's not because he didn't love me, and I know, I know he would've loved you. He would've loved being your father and...well, as
much as he would've hovered over you, and been stern with you sometimes, I'm betting you would've loved him too. So don't ever think he abandoned you. If anything, he's not here because he cared too much. He died fighting to keep me – to keep us safe, so that's why it'll only be us three."

"But if you…if you ever want to know anything about him, just ask. Since you can't meet him, it's only fair I tell you everything I know about him. It won't make up for him not being here, but I hope it'll be something, at least."

Her throat was starting to hurt, but she rasped through it. "And I…I loved him. I still do. You were made with so much love, sweethearts, and I carried you and gave birth to you, just like any other woman does. So there's nothing unnatural about you, and if…well, if someone says something differently, you just punch right them in the nose!" She gave each of them an Eskimo kiss to make her point. Maya squeaked rather cutely at that, which made her smile. "And don't you believe a word they say, because they sure as hell don't know what they're talking about. I do."

Then her smile faded. "As for the third thing - and this is really a mix of the other two - just…know that I'm going to do my best to take care of you. To make sure you're happy and healthy, and that you don't have to go through what your father or I went through. I'm going to do my best to raise you right, and sometimes…I'm sure at some point I'll mess up or end up making you cry, and you'll do the same for me. But know that I never, never mean to hurt either or you. You mean the world to me and…I'll die before I let anything bad happen to you! You're my children…my family…and I'll do everything I can to keep you safe."

She pressed her forehead against theirs, her eyes blinded by tears. She took their tiny hands in hers, gently, so gently, and whispered, "Us three - we're a family. We'll stick together and take care of each other and come out of this okay. We might not have your father, and it might be us against the world, but…we'll be okay. Everything will be okay, I promise. I promise…"

Her voice broke with a sob, and as if in response to her tears (which could very well be the case), Christopher and Maya also began to cry. For a few minutes she just cried along with them. She ached through her entire body, ached because Mewtwo wasn't here with them, ached from her fear for them, and ached because she didn't know if she could keep that promise. She knew how hard the world could be, and she had no delusions about the dangers they were facing. But all she could do was try her best not to fail them (she'd failed so many others) and pray that her best would be enough.

As she rocked and shushed them, slowly soothing them into sleep, it suddenly hit her just how difficult her new responsibility would be. For the next twenty years (and beyond, if she was honest with herself), she'd have to clean up all their messes. She'd have to care for them when they were sick or in perfect health. She'd have to endure every foul mood they had or mischief they might cause. She wouldn't be free or even able to do whatever she pleased. She couldn't afford to lose her temper or behave improperly or swear like she always did, at least not when they were around.

No, now she would have to put them first in all things, because she was no longer just "Cassandra" anymore. She was also "Mama." She was a mother, and for several long minutes, she sat stiff with terror at the thought. She wondered why she hadn't opted out of this (she'd had the chance!), she wondered when she'd fuck it all up, she wondered if she was even the right kind of person for this job. She could've gone a different way so many times, but she'd chosen this path. She'd chosen to become a mother. And it scared the shit out of her.

But she couldn't go back, not now, not after carrying them and birthing them and holding them in her arms! She couldn't go back, and despite how frightened she was, she knew she didn't really want to. As her heart-rate and panicked breathing began to slow, she wondered if her own mother had felt
this way. Had Selena wondered what she'd gotten herself into when she'd first laid eyes on her daughter, or…or when she'd seen the wings sprouting from her baby's back?

Cassandra wished she could ask her. She wished she had someone who knew what the hell they were doing to give her some signposts or guidelines or something. But Selena Brennan was dust and bones, and Cassandra knew she'd just have to make her own way and hope she got it right. Hugging Christopher and Maya closely (they kicked in their sleep), she whispered, "Shhh, sweethearts. I've got you…Mama's got you…." 

And as they drifted into deeper dreams, she thought, Welcome to the world, my dears. It's not the best world, but…we'll make the most of it.

She was ready to lean back and doze too, balancing the twins on her chest, when the door opened. That was good, it might be better if Aurora took them to where they'd…been…. The request died on her lips when she saw who was there.

It wasn't the doctor. It wasn't Michael either, or any of the faces she'd come to recognize over the last several months. In the doorway were two strangers dressed in monochrome gray uniforms, their eyes flat and their expressions as bland as their clothes. She instinctively clutched Christopher and Maya closer to her, dread frosting its way through her.

One of the two – the taller one with close-cropped, copper hair – stepped forward, fumbling at the badge on his belt and taking his wallet from his pocket. He glanced back at his partner, a dirty blonde with brown eyes, and nodded to him. Then he turned and looked at her. There was something cold in his gaze, and he seemed detached from what he was doing – but also determined. He showed her his badge and his identification, letting her read the words imprinted on them both: the Department of Child Welfare.

He then began what sounded like a well-rehearsed speech. "Miss Cassandra Brennan, by the order of the Child Welfare Department, we-.

The door opened again, the edge of it clipping the thus-far-silent stranger. As he stepped away with a grunt, rubbing his shoulder and glaring out the gap, Michael stepped in. His cobalt blue eyes darted around the room, sweeping over the men and settling on their badges.

Cocking an eyebrow, he said, "Huh. Now isn't that strange? I don't remember reading anything about Child Welfare getting involved in this case." He purposefully cut between them to stand at Cassandra's bedside, turning around to pin them with a level stare. "Well, I'm certain our superiors will get everything straightened out. For now, though, I'm afraid I'll have to ask you two to leave."

Near the door, the blond crossed his arms, his features once again smooth and unruffled. In contrast, the redhead's lip curled, and he opened his mouth as if to argue – but his words withered as a rumbling sound rose behind him. Cassandra watched the quiet man take a nervous step back as Michael's houndour, Alexius, prowled in. His soot-blackened fangs were bared, with threads of smoke escaping between them. The other one turned and grimaced, his fingers twitching and then plunging into his jacket. Michael moved in front of her, his hand reaching for the holster at his waist. His grip relaxed when the man drew out some papers and passed them to him. The detective scanned them quickly, his mouth thinning as he read.

He heaved a sigh. "How inconvenient. Alexius, come here, boy."

The devil-dog did. When he was sitting at his master's feet, Michael held out the papers to him and asked, "What do you think of these?"
Alexius snorted and spat an ember into the papers, which caught fire readily. Both the strangers made noises of protest, but as he tossed the burning papers into the waste bin, Michael silenced them with a glare. "Next time, make sure your orders have been signed off by everyone on board. I won't accept them otherwise." Scratching his partner behind the ears, he added, "Now for a second time, please leave. I won't ask a third time."

The blond stared at them for a moment, but then shrugged and headed out, giving his partner a backwards glance. The redhead seemed more reluctant to go, but go he did, brushing by a surprised Aurora as he went. Stepping through the door with a curious look on her face, she met Michael's eye and lifted an eyebrow. Gesturing for Alexius to stay, Michael crossed the distance between them, his hand coming to rest on her arm. He nodded to the retreating figures down the hall and murmured something to the doctor. Behind her glasses, Aurora's eyes widened, then narrowed. Their words grew more heated, but Cassandra only caught a few of them: "call," "check," "more," "alright," and a question, "when?" At times they glanced at her, at times down the hall, but in under a minute it was over. Aurora looked her way and said she'd be back in a few minutes, and then quickly walked from the room. Michael's eyes followed her, before he turned back to Cassandra and went to her bedside.

Looking down at them, he seemed to struggle with something for a moment, before he asked, "Do you understand what nearly just happened?"

Cassandra shivered; her fingers digging into the blankets that swaddled the twins. She nodded.

"In all probability, there will be more like them." He glanced at the ashes in the bin, his frown deepening. "I'll do what I can to keep you three safe. We all will. With any luck, we'll even be enough. But if not, you'll have to be ready. Can you do that?"

As if the nightmares she'd been through hadn't taught her anything. "Of course I can. What do you take me for? A civvy?"

That seemed to amuse him. "Technically, that's what you are now. And we're the good guys, making sure civvies like you stay safe and innocent."

She sunk back into the bed, suddenly feeling drained. "I'm hardly innocent, Mr. Po-po."

"True. You aren't." He leaned forward and touched the twins on the crowns of their heads. He didn't hesitate with Maya, though his eyes were thoughtful as he looked between her and her brother. "But they are."

Yes. Yes they are, she thought. A quiet moment passed between them, before Michael drew back and looked down at Alexius. "Stay here and keep them safe. I won't be long."

The dark hound gave a huff at that. A spark flared from his maw, but he didn't whine in protest. Instead, he reared up on his hind legs, placing his front paws on the mattress and shoving his muzzle at them. He sniffed at the twins, his nose wrinkling and his stubby tail jerking as if in agitation. He gave his master a look, but then jumped onto the bed and settled himself down at Cassandra's feet.

The dog's body felt like a giant heating pad through the blanket, and while Cassandra wasn't much of a dog fan, she didn't mind this at all. Looks like we'll be nice and toasty. After making sure Christopher and Maya wouldn't tumble off her, she turned her head to watch Michael leave.

Before he closed the door, though, she called out to him. "Michael?"

He paused, seeming surprised that she'd used his first name. He looked back at her. "Yeah?"

"...Thank you." For helping us, for helping me, for everything...well, everything except arresting
me that one time. That was kind of a dick move.

She was lucky he wasn't a telepath. But even if he'd heard her thoughts, he probably would have understood. He seemed like that kind of guy.

He stared at her for a second, and then said, "Of course, Cassandra."

She thought she saw him smile as he left. She grinned.

In the month that followed, Aurora ordered Cassandra to remain on bed rest. The doctor could tell Cassandra didn't like being confined for so long – not after her stint in the basement – but she wasn't as rebellious as she could have been. She hadn't tried to make a break for it with crutches or a wheelchair, at least. In truth, caring for her children and sleeping seemed to be keeping her busy. Now that she'd gotten some rest and plenty of iron, she didn't look like death warmed over. That was progress, however small. Even so, Aurora told everyone who asked that no, moving Cassandra was not a good idea. Not yet. The woman could get up and walk around a little – enough to shower and use the bathroom – but doing more than that wasn't wise. This had led to a great deal of sighing and muttering, before Sabrina had looked up from her tea, almost seeming bored, and had given them a solution.

"Why not simply teleport her and the children? The journey would be smooth, instantaneous, and nearly untraceable. There would be no drawbacks to it."

Aurora had wanted to disagree. Deconstructing people into molecules, flinging them through space, and then reconstructing them somewhere else – all in a second, too – didn't seem very safe to her! But few of the others seemed to share her opinion. Cassandra, for one, had no problem with it. She'd just shrugged, said she'd done it before, and laughed at the nauseated look on Aurora's face. The doctor didn't think it was very funny. What it - what if - the Grey Guards put them back together wrong? What if they ended up swapping parts? What if a part of them was left behind? If even one bit of their brains went missing, the effects could be catastrophic - and Aurora enjoyed her brain the way it was!

She would have taken any other kind of transport – really, she would have - but she was outvoted. Michael's superiors didn't want the psychics "spiriting" the family away ("Who knows where they'll end up!"), so they'd decided that Aurora would be taken along for the ride. Not that she could do much if, say, they teleported her and not her pokémon. She was a doctor, not a fighter! She was the white mage to Michael's knight! But the higher-ups seemed to have overlooked that little detail. Despite her protests (her many, many protests), it seemed she was going to have to experience teleportation.

On the day of the move, she tried to rationalize her fear away. As she sent the last of her boxes through the PC Transporter, she told herself that all of her (inanimate and not living) things had made it through intact. So had her cousin's stuff from out east. True, everything was a little cold coming out, but it was otherwise unchanged. Maybe if she just kept telling herself that, she wouldn't have a nervous breakdown….

She wasn't just nervous, though. Looking around her apartment, Aurora couldn't help but feel sad. She was capitol-born and raised, and had spent much of her adult life in these halls. Ten years ago she'd begun working here as an intern, taking the Center over when her mother retired. She knew the city, knew its people, knew its politics. She knew this place, and the thought of leaving it drained her. She wouldn't be here to enjoy the Frost Festival and Christmas celebrations. She wouldn't be here to admire the botanical gardens come spring. She wouldn't be here to have summer barbecues with the trainers, nor candied apples with them in the fall.
Those weren't traditions where they were going. There would be other wonders to replace the ones she loved. There would be spectacular mountain views, expansive fields of flowers, archaeological marvels, pilgrimage sights. There would be a school of Shinto priestesses, their practices unchanged from ancient times. There would be sweets made from purple honey – a rare treat, from what she'd read. And there would be quiet – which, really, she'd been craving for a long time.

It was a big change, though, and she wasn't keen on it. Oh, she trusted her cousin would run the Center well, and no one would even notice they'd traded places. People rarely did (except for that overly-zealous young man from Pewter City). But even so…even so, she'd miss it here. This place had been her home for so long, and even though her new home wouldn't look any different, it would feel different. And that was the main thing, really.

The strap of her overnight bag was also abrasive. She shifted it on her shoulder, trying to place it where it wouldn't rasp against her skin. As she did, she heard familiar footsteps behind her. "Is that everything, 'Rora?"

She turned around and gave Michael a nod. "I sent the last of my boxes over just now. She finished hours ago." She gestured to the boxes in the room around her, which were far fewer than the ones she'd sent. Of course, she'd also sent over a bunch of equipment from her lab, so she felt her amount of stuff was justified. It wasn't as if the lab over there would be up to date, after all.

She hoped her cousin appreciated the upgrade. "How about you? Are you ready to go?"

He tilted his head toward the duffel bag at the door, where Alexius was sitting and scratching his ear. "Pretty much. Everything's been sent on ahead, except my couch. Apparently Sabrina thought it 'clashed with the décor,' so it was put on the curb. Ronnie took it – said something about sentimental value…." He saw her arched brow and grimaced. "She slept on it a lot in our academy days. Just slept, I swear."

Somehow, that still rubbed her slightly the wrong way. Which was odd, because she knew Michael and Ronnie were close, so what did it matter if Ronnie crashed on his couch? They were partners, so what did she expect? Brushing those thoughts aside, she gave her place another glance around. It was naked and filled with another person's crap. It felt violated, and that filled her with regret. "I'm going to miss this place. I hope she appreciates it," she said, trying to keep her voice steady.

"I'm sure she will," Michael said, taking her pack from her and swinging it over his shoulder. "Shall we go?"

She nodded, reluctantly following him out the door, switching off the lights and locking it up. If she'd been told a year ago how quickly her life would change, all due to a teenager who'd stumbled out of the woods, she wouldn't have believed it. She wouldn't have wanted to believe it. She hoped this wouldn't turn out to be a big mistake.

Walking with Michael and Alexius to the garage, where the Center's monthly supplies were dropped off, she felt her stomach clench with unease and a bit of nausea. What if something went wrong…? She glanced at Michael and the duffel bag he was carrying.

"I don't like it," she admitted to him.

"Which part? The teleportation?" He shifted the bags to balance better on his shoulders.

"That and your part of the plan. I don't like it."

"Well, someone has to do it, 'Rora. And I'm the best one for it." He gave her his brightest and most
confident smile. "We'll be fine. Try not to worry so much."

*Easier said than done*, she thought. She pushed open the door to the room where the others were waiting. The crates had been pushed up against the walls, while an armored caravan squatted near the garage door. As they entered, the group standing next to it turned towards them: Sabrina and Rose, the Grey Guards Anastasia and Florian, the caravan team (the driver, the caravan guards, the young specialist) and their Pokémon, and, of course, Cassandra and the twins. The babes, she was pleased to see, appeared to be sleeping soundly in their mother's arms.

Their mother, on the other hand, kept glancing at her guards and squirming in her seat. Aurora supposed she could understand. She knew Florian was an outgoing man, flamboyant and full of laughter, while Anastasia was comparatively reserved and seemingly emotionless. That they worked so well together was a miracle, and she had to wonder why they'd been selected for this job. Did Sabrina think that the sometimes-overly-serious Cassandra would find a kindred soul in Anastasia, or find refuge in Florian's sense of humor? Were they selected on the basis of getting along well with Michael (not that that was *hard*), or because they were child-friendly? At her side, Alexius growled somewhat, but quieted as Michael set a hand on his head. There was little love between shadows and psychics, but they would work together if they must.

Of course, psychics couldn't teleport dark-types, and Michael wouldn't go anywhere without his faithful hound. That had, in part, been the reason behind their current plan, though there had been other arguments for it. Trying not to think about the possible dangers ahead of him, Aurora greeted the others and went to her charges. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Michael set down his pack and unzip it, taking out his Kevlar armor piece by piece. As Cassandra brushed off her questions with a quick, "Fine, we're just fine," the doctor turned her attention to her friend fully. As Michael suited up, he bantered with the caravan team and occasionally laughed at some quip they made. Alexius and the other Pokémon, meanwhile, sniffed at each other in greeting. After a few minutes, Sabrina cleaned her throat and spoke up.

"Now that everyone is here and properly attired, we should get started."

The others nodded, with the specialist coming forward and releasing three identical Pokémon from their pokéballs. The white light materialized into three pink, amorphous blobs: a trio of Ditto trained for decoy assignments. One by one, the specialist held the Ditto up to Cassandra and the twins, the former of which rather reluctantly let the pink tendrils touch them. Soon there was a second family in the room, complete with the clothes the originals were wearing.

Ditto genetics were, suffice to say, rather bewildering. Aurora figured the Dittos might have spun the cotton fibers like a spider did its silk. How they managed that was something a specialist like their trainer knew better than she. She watched the woman hand each of the replicas an everstone ring, which would help them maintain their transformations under duress. Cassandra, for her part, looked nauseated at the sight. Aurora wasn't quite sure why that was, but she supposed seeing mirror images of her children and herself wasn't very comfortable.

It wasn't a perfect illusion, though. Ditto could imitate human bodies and even a few words of human speech – but actual conversation was beyond them. If the caravan was captured, the ruse would be discovered and their cover story dismissed. Therein lay the danger for Michael and Alexius, who were going in order to add some truth to the lie. If they made it to the Vermillion docks intact, the Rockets might believe that the young family had fled to the Southern Islands – a reasonable story, given Michael's connections to them. From there some of their other contacts would teleport Michael to the actual site, the caravan team would be transferred to Fuchsia (their hometown), and Alexius would be moved via PC Transfer to join his master. It was rather more straightforward than it sounded, and safer than transporting the lot of them manually. It was dangerous for Alexius and
Michael, though, hence her concern.

As the caravan team withdrew their pokémon and boarded the vehicle, she felt Michael rest a hand on her shoulder. "You ready?"

Her stomach clenched. Right – she was going to be teleported east. A plague on all their freaking houses. "Not one bit. You?"

He laughed. "Ready as I can be."

He didn't seem to be nervous in the least. She admired his bravery. "I hope you're right."

He gave her a half smile and, to her surprise, kissed her on the forehead. "I'll see you on the other side, Aurora."

Please let him be right. "See you there." Don't get killed, Michael.

They turned away from each other. A moment later Aurora heard the truck start up and its doors slam shut. When the guards outside confirmed the area was clear, Florian walked up to her and playfully hooked her arm with his. Anastasia placed her hands on Cassandra's shoulders, and soon the four of them were bathed in blue light. The cold energy rushed through her, raising the little hairs on her arms and shining off her glasses. Yet through the glare, she could see Sabrina glowing even more brightly. After they were gone, the gym leader would release a burst of psychic energy – a harmless one, she assured them – which would drown out the trails their transfer left behind.

Just before the Guards teleported them away, though, she saw Rose – also luminous - give Sabrina a kiss on the mouth. She wondered why she'd felt as if she'd forgotten something.

Then the cool energy flushed through her veins like ice-water. There was a flash of azure light, and then they were gone, swept away into the east.

Through the glass, Michael watched the group disappear in a bright, blue flash, their images burning themselves into his retinas. As he blinked, they hovered in splotches of yellow-green-blue ahead of him. But as his eyes adjusted, he felt the knots in his stomach loosen. Unlike his superiors, he trusted Sabrina and her colleagues. As far as he was concerned, Aurora, Cassandra, and the children were now safe in their new homes, guarded by friends far more gifted than him. Leaning back in his seat as the garage door opened, he felt Alexius butt his head against his hand comfortingly. He rested his palm on the skull-like crest on the dog's forehead. He could feel the warmth of the fire-type through his glove, like sunbaked stone against his skin. It was a steadying sensation, a reassuring gesture…or maybe the pup just wanted attention. "I'll give you your treats later, Alexius," he promised. I might even give you the special one.

He hoped it wouldn't come to that, though. They were saving it for a rainy day. Well, a day when it was raining enemies, but knowing their luck…yeah, like hell if this would go nice and smoothly. Nothing ever seemed to when the Rockets were involved.

As the caravan rolled forward, a charge began building in the air, with the scent of ozone soon stinging in his nose. Here it comes, he thought, covering Alexius' glowing red eyes. Someone was calling out a countdown, ten, nine, eight, seven (the hairs on his arms and neck stood up), six, five, four, three (he ducked his head and covered his eyes), two, on-.

Sabrina unleashed the psycho-electrical pulse. The energy flooded the room in a tsunami of blue light, passing through them, through the caravan, through the walls of the Center and out into the night. Lights flickered and the radio spewed static, while car alarms started to wail along the streets.
He heard flocks of birds taking flight, a cat yowling, a couple screams and the sound of breaking glass. Despite putting his hand over his eyes, he was still momentarily blinded – he'd been able to glimpse the bones in his fingers – and he heard the driver cursing. Alexius, for his part, sneezed from the light, but otherwise didn't seem fazed. His stump of a tail continued to wiggle, thumping against the seat.

"Lucky pup."

"I thought you said it wouldn't damage anything!" Michael called out the window, thinking of the screams and the sounds of breaking glass. He blinked and tried to get his eyes to readjust to the dark. He should've worn a visor or something. Veronica liked welding things; she probably would have had something.

He heard a laugh, and then a voice blossomed in his head, the words buoyed by amusement, "I did not lie. If I startled a few into dropping their dinner plates, well…I cannot say it wasn't my fault, but nothing was harmed save a bit of china."

"Uh-huh. Sure." He'd see what the news report said tomorrow, just to be sure. For now they had to move. The pulse might have helped cover the others' trail, but it would doubtlessly draw the attention of the Rockets too. The faster they left the city, the safer the civilians would be. "Alright, Remy. Take us away!"

The driver gave him a dangerous grin, his teeth white and gleaming in the gloom. "Sure thing, Micky."

Everyone in the truck snickered at that – the specialist, the guards, even the freaking decoys. And nothing was creepier than babies smirking at you. It just didn't look right!

"Oh hell no. "You take that back, Remy! I will not be associated with the Disney mouse!" He leaned forward in his seat, taking the safety off his gun.

Remy turned onto the southward road, which was dirt-packed, lined with trees, and thankfully empty of trainers at this hour. He glanced in the mirror, saw what Michael was doing, and gave a bark of laughter. "Whoa, man, calm down. If you shoot me, how will you ever get your ass to port?"

"I could always drive the truck myself, you think of that? Or get Buster or A. J. to do it," the detective replied, referring to the Hulk and the auburn-haired, lady knight sitting across from him. "Hell, even Imite here could probably manage it just fine!" The ivy-haired woman rolled her eyes, but seemed amused nonetheless.

Then Remy opened his big, whisker-lined mouth. "Well, Buster needs to be ready to 'bust in' some faces, A. J. will be blasting Rockets off sky-high, and Imite…well, Imite can't see over the dashboard, so she doesn't count."

"Hey!"

Remy went on quickly. "Besides, can any of you pop a wheelie with a tank?" Oh, like hell he'd done that. Regardless of the picture on the dashboard. It was probably Photo-shopped, Michael thought. Everything from mountains to boobs were these days. "Is that a no?" Remy asked in a sing-song voice. He flashed another grin, twisting the wheel to turn into the border gates. As he got his identification out, he glanced back and said, "Yeah, that's what I thought…Micky."

"Keep this up and you'll be 'Baldy' for the next two hours." While they bickered, the gate guards glanced at their pass and stamped it. Remy gave them a bottle of lemonade for their trouble. As the bars lifted, he drove on through, taking them down the hill to the fields. On the stepped ridges on either side of them, flowers waved in the night breeze, their petals closed up for the night. He saw a
campfire near the exit of the Underground Tunnel, and heard trainers laughing as they roasted hot dogs and marshmallows. Everything seemed pretty peaceful. He hoped it would stay that way.

"I ain't bald," Remy said after he finished navigating them down onto the gravel road. The pebbles crunched beneath the wheels and dust billowed up behind them. "Don't you see all this hair I've got on my head?"

Michael scanned the trees. There were forests surrounding this whole route, sheltering the tall grasses and soupy ponds of the marsh. They should have plenty of warning before a foe was on them… unless of course there were foes hiding in the weeds and in the water. That was always a possibility. Beware the tall grass, his parents had once said.

But that had been before he’d gotten Alexius. The tall grass didn’t pose much of a threat anymore. "Having that bushy beard and mustache doesn't count, Remy."

"I don't see why not. It's above my neck, isn't it? So long as it's on my head, it should count." Remy turned onto the drier portion of the marsh, where the road weaved like an ekans. "Now you, you've got those big mouse ears and that pointy nose. So Micky fits you."

"What, she doesn't like you looking all scruffy? What a shame. That bad-boy look was all you had going for you." That was A. J., the bi – witch. He must not use gender-insensitive expletives, no matter how accurate they might be.

"Haha, very funny. How about keeping a lookout like a dutiful watchdog, A. J.?

The woman pressed a gloved hand to her chest, miming her hurt, but she donned her infrared goggles anyway. Buster, for his part, looked relieved as he turned to peer out the window. Knowing him, the banter had probably been driving him crazy. While his physique suggested he thrived on violence and loud noises, the man liked his peace and quiet - which was ironic, considering his career of choice.

Five minutes later, they'd settled into their positions. Remy navigated and minded the bellsprout crossings, A. J. and Buster watched their flanks and rear, and Imite and not-Cassandra made faces at each other (as disturbing as it was, he couldn't look away, because he'd never seen Cassandra make a ditzy face before). Michael kept his gun across his lap and a hand at Alexius' collar, which jingled when they hit a bump or pit in the road, thanks to the identification tags and the training stone.

The night deepened as they continued on: stars peeked out, clouds drifted across the moon, crickets chirped and owls hooted. The truck carried them through the marsh, to the east, to the west, the road winding ever southward. In the distance, the grasses opened up to a large lake, its waters black and shimmering in the moonlight. Ducks glided among the reeds, while fish surfaced to eat drowning insects. There were tents along the shore – fishermen, probably, hoping to catch something besides magikarp, which were all scales and bones. Of course, there was always a chance that the Rockets could be lying in wait in those tents… but as they passed them by, reaching the halfway point to Vermillion, no one stirred.

Leaving the lake behind, Michael began to wonder if they'd actually get away with it. Sure, they'd started some rumors about heading – well, just about anywhere but their real destinations - but he'd been certain someone would’ve seen through the lie. As he thought about it more, he felt dread coil in his gut. What if they'd seen through the lie completely? What if the Rockets were waiting in the mountains rather than on the coast? What if Aurora, Cassandra, and the twins had been captured, and
he was sitting here, useless to them?

But no. No, they had to be safe. If the Rockets had been lying in wait there, they would've received word by now. Moreover, Florian and Anastasia were highly trained defense specialists, and without dark-types on their side, the Rockets wouldn't be able to accomplish much. No, Aurora and his charges would be alright. He needed to focus on the team around him right now – and himself, for that matter. Just because the trip had been quiet so far didn't mean it would stay that way.

Beside him, Alexius began to growl low in his throat, his eyes glowing red as he glared out the west-facing window.

Ah, see. There I go, jinxing things.

"We've got movement in the trees to our right. Three figures, possibly more deeper in," A. J. said as she unclipped a pokéball from her belt. She rolled the window down, pressed the button to expand the containment sphere, and released a golbat into night. "Batty, why don't you go check out friends out? Stay out of range and get a headcount."

The golbat wheeled into the night, the chirps of its echolocation grating in Michael's ears. As the pokémon ducted into the trees, he saw a flicker of light as a Rocket released his or her pokémon. Most trainers wouldn't have bothered. For one thing, there would've been other places to catch the bat pokémon if they were collectors. For another, their teams should have been established at this point in their journeys. Besides, the golbat wasn't attacking the group. It was just looking, which made the thunderbolt they hurled its way completely unnecessary! Michael sighed as the golbat winged its way back to them, a little frazzled but otherwise unharmed. Electrical attacks were, luckily, not the most accurate ones in the book.

Of course, the fact that the Rockets had an electric-type pokémon was an ominous sign. The grunts, after all, tended to favor poison- and normal-types. That predictability made them easier to deal with, but to have a variation from the norm suggested they were A.) Higher in rank, B.) Stronger, and C.) Smarter.

Not smart enough to avoid giving themselves away, though, Michael thought ruefully as he removed Alexius' collar. The canine gave him a look, wagging his tail and huffing in pleasure, his breath growing hearth-hot in his arm. "Burn them, please, not me."

The dog snorted flame and, when A. J. opened the door, leapt out and was swallowed by the tall grass. Seconds later, A. J. and Buster released their own teams into the fields. Buster took inspiration from his idol, Bruno, favoring ground- and fighting-types. A. J., for her part, was a little more versatile, preferring a mix of flying-, water-, and grass-types. Between the two of them, most of the type advantages against everyday foes were covered, especially when the dual-types and unusual move-sets were taken into consideration. Having Alexius, a dark- and fire-type, on their side only rounded out their defense. Really, unless they had a dragon in their arsenal, Michael didn't think they'd pose too much of a challenge.

He made the mistake of saying that when their teams charged the trees, with Alexius taking point.

In that same moment, a giant, sinewy shape twisted out of the trees to meet them. It opened its maw and bellowed an earsplitting roar: "GYAAAAARRRRR!"

And then it unleashed indigo flames over the fields, setting the horizon on fire.

*Dragon Rage!*
"Shit!" Remy jerked the truck hard to the left, nearly rolling them over, but he managed to keep them upright. When the truck slammed back onto its wheels, Buster and A. J. were quick to act, opening the skylight and climbing to the "cage" up top. As their boots, heavy with magnetic soles, thunk-thunked onto the roof, Michael made sure Imite and the decoys were secure, and then clambered up as well. There wasn't a lot of room, and his feet certainly weren't as stable, but he tied himself to the railing like the others had and hoped it would be enough. Together they looked out onto the burning field, the lake to the north glistening red and gold, the smoke swallowing the stars and smothering the moon. They tucked their shirts over their mouths to help with the smoke, and searched for the thirteen who'd gone in.

Two shadows plunged down, swooping back up with comrades clutched in their claws: A. J.'s golbat rescued her tangela, who was looking a little singed on some of its vines, while her pidgeot caught her ivysaur in midair. The latter had propelled itself upwards with its vines, and for that quick thinking, its leaves were only a little curled around the edges. Her vaporeon and golduck, in distinct contrast, were whirling in place, sending spouts of water to extinguish the flames around them. Of Buster's teams, his hitmonlee, hitmonchan, and machamp were all dancing around patches of flames, none looking particularly pleased – but they were alive, which was the important thing. His rhyhorn and onix, both heavy-hitters, seemed more annoyed than anything else, while his sandslash had curled into a ball, defending itself with its pointed scales. All had survived the blaze, if a little worse for wear. But where was Alexius? Where was-?

With a great howl, the dog erupted from the ashes, leaping through the sparks and smoke at the gyarados. Golden energy surrounded him as he hurled himself at the leviathan, and when he was a meter from his foe, he let the attack surge forward. The energy burst from him, condensing into rings that encircled the gyarados…and then the rings constricted, slicing into its torso. They seared wherever they touched its scales, turning the gyarados' indigo flames back on it. For monsters as strong as the leviathan, the move Alexius had just used was a treacherous one…but what was that saying people were always quoting? "All is fair in love and war"? Well, Michael considered this a war, and he'd instructed the houndour to use **Foul Play** whenever he saw fit. After all, few expected such an advanced move out of a "puppy."

He supposed that was one of the advantages of having a Level 43 houndour: everyone thought they were a pair of pushovers.

And soon enough, everyone found out how very wrong they were.

*The bigger they are, the harder they fall. Or in this case, the stronger they are….*

As the false dragon collapsed, its wounds cauterized by the flames (it should consider itself lucky – it would be bleeding out if not for the fire), the houndour turned around and crossed the fiery field. As he came back to them, his eyes glowed with hellfire, sparks flew wherever he set his paws, and the air around him shimmered and burned. A light was gathering around him, turning from scarlet to gold to **white**. When he stepped forward, his torso and legs elongated, his sturdy bulk shifted into wiry strength. His claws became pronounced; the boney bands around his ankles doubled; he gained a third, white ridge on his back, and a collar with a skull-pendant around his neck. The crest on his forehead shifted up, forming two long, curling horns that melded with his ears. His tail lengthened into an arrowhead-tipped whip, and his snout grew long and pointed. When the light faded, the hound of the inferno stood before them.

Alexius the Houndoom threw back his head and howled.

When the long, undulating cry ended, Michael, grinning from ear to ear, thought to himself, **Well, it looks like that Rare Candy won't be necessary.**
I'm proud of you, buddy.

When he looked up, he saw seven Rockets emerging from the edge of the trees. One of them returned the fallen gyarados to its pokéball, replacing it with the other members of his team – among them a steelix, an electrode, a magneton, a tentacruel, and a seadra. His companions released their pokémon as well, the numbers setting the trees awash in red light. There were fearows and golbats, weezings and arboks, ratticates and persians, weepingbells and vileplumes. Michael glimpsed others through the smoke, including a pair of beedrill, a nidorina and nidorino, and quite possibly a golem. So if one of them had released five pokémon, and the rest had released six, that made the count… what, forty-one? And that was if they had the maximum legal amount on them, which wasn't always the case.

"So what have we got? Roughly 3-to-1 odds?" A. J. asked, leaning against the railing of the cage.

Beside her, Buster grunted an affirmative.

"Eh. That's going to be a pain in the ass. It'd be easier if we could just shoot the Rockets."

Remy leaned out the window. "You'd better not! I don't wanna be sticking any corpses in my trunk. Besides, their teams could get ass-ugly if we take out their trainers."

A.J. made a frustrated noise. "Fuck. This sucks. I fucking hate melees. Whatever happened to good-old-fashioned single combat?"

"Folks grew out of it," Remy said, and passed around lemonades. "Just divvy them up by type advantage and get on with it. None of us are getting any younger."

"Easy for you to say, Mr. I'm-A-Driver-Not-A-Fighter." A. J. opened the lemonade and dropped it down to her grass-types, who caught the bottle with their vines and made appreciative sounds as they drank.

Remy rolled his eyes. "Someone has to get us out of here fast if things go sour. Can't do that if I'm distracted by a battle."

"Yeah, yeah….."

The long grasses had finished burning, leaving cinders and charcoal in their place. The Rockets directed their hoard to cross the field, their pokémon calling out their challenges as they swooped, leapt, and slithered forward. Alexius ran out to meet them, his head lifted high, his teeth bared and his claws primed. The twelve others followed him. They were all that stood between their humans and their enemies, between the decoys and discovery. If they fell here, it would be a set-back for their side, but it wouldn't be a total failure. The Rockets wouldn't be any closer to figuring out the truth, and they would've wasted a nice portion of their strength in their attempt.

…But what was he thinking? He was making it sound as if their group was going to meet some overly dramatic and tragic end. Michael scoffed and reminded himself that this was what they'd been trained for, and Alexius had already shown his mettle by KO'ing a freaking gyarados. The others doubtlessly had their own aces up their sleeves.

"Have any of you ever wondered why cops usually work with fire-type dogs?" Michael asked suddenly.

The others looked at each other, obviously wondering why he was bringing this up now. It was Imite who answered him. "Well, aren't there a lot of reasons? Fire-types are rare, so people don't get to train against them very much. They're also good at working in burning buildings and firefights,
and...well, they're dogs. They're obedient, loyal, and easier to train than most animals."

"You're right. There is that." And then, surprising them all, Michael's mouth curled into a rather wicked smirk. "But there's also another reason. You see, someone, somewhere, once looked over a battlefield and thought, 'You know, I want to set those people over there on fire, but I'm just not close enough to do it.' Well, what move can all growlithe and houndour learn at some point in their training?"

In the center of the ashen field, Alexius opened his maw, tongues of fire licking at his fangs and snout.

And Michael answered the question as the devil-dog breathed out.

"Flamethrower."

The Center they appeared in didn't look much different from the one in Saffron. Sure, there'd been more space in the capitol Center and it had been better stocked. But like all League buildings, this one had the same barrel-vaulted roof and red-and-white coloration, the same "P" insignia popping up everywhere, and the same counters, computers, and visitors' dorms. The doctor's office and apartment, Aurora mentioned over tea and coffee, were smaller than her rooms had been, and the same could be said for the patient rooms. She seemed to think that was a little ridiculous, given the influx of trainers coming through the mountains and the area's tourist industry.

But it was what it was. Cassandra ultimately ended up tuning her out when she started talking about the town, because really, she'd heard all of it before in school, so she didn't really need the primer. She leaned into the wheelchair, her back still sore and her breasts aching as Maya and Christopher nursed. In a month, they seemed to have grown twice the size they'd been when they were born. So quickly, she thought. They're already growing so quickly.

After her children finished nursing, Florian and Anastasia – who'd teleported the Lavender nurse to Saffron earlier - offered to hold them so she could button up and give her arms a rest. Cassandra hesitated, not certain if she trusted them to not to take her children and vanish...but she quashed that worry ruthlessly, telling herself they'd already had numerous chances to do just that. So she let Florian take Maya and Anastasia take Chris (they squirmed and gurgled a little, but didn't start crying - score one for the Greys), watching them closely despite her drooping eyelids.

Florian was a tall man, with limbs that seemed too long and hands that seemed too big. His hair, which she could only describe as "ash blond," complemented his blue-gray eyes. He was always smiling and joking too: he'd once bombarded Michael with water balloons full of green dye, just to "Give him a bit of color." Michael had taken it rather well. He'd just had Alexius set the man's pants on fire and called it even.

Anastasia, in contrast, was a complete stoic. Like Florian, she dressed all in grey, though she tended towards a darker shade of it. She had hair the color of dark chocolate, which she kept tied back in a single braid; her eyes, very close to the hue of her hair, were often flat, but occasionally they seemed to light up...around Alexius, oddly enough. Psychics may not be fond of dark-types, but Anastasia seemed to have a soft spot for dogs. She liked cats just as well, she'd mentioned once, but dogs were loyal, obedient, and lovable. Cats had minds of their own, and sometimes that could get them into trouble (she'd said that while glancing sideways at Florian). After all, there wasn't the saying, "Curiosity killed the dog," was there?

Aurora broke into her reverie, gathering the paper cups to stuff into the trash bin. "Well, Rose has probably prepared everything by now. How about we head over to see what your accommodations
As exhausted as Cassandra was, that sounded like a good plan to her. She clutched the arms of the wheelchair as Aurora guided her from the table and out the room. She twisted her head to watch the guards following along behind them – Florian with a little bounce in her step, and Anastasia with steps so smooth she appeared to be floating (Cassandra checked to make sure she wasn't). Soon enough they were out the front doors and walking into the night.

Lavender Town, she thought, reminded her a bit of the suburbs of Viridian, except there weren't as many trees. Instead there were misty fields of soybeans, cotton, and, of course, lavender and other purple flowers, which the town had been named for. There were also kudzu vines everywhere, crawling up the sides of buildings and light-poles. When in bloom, they would turn the entire town violet. As for the roads, they were vacant at this hour and dimly lit. The glass of the light-posts had a faintly purple sheen to them, which made the emptiness even more eerie.

As they went, they passed by clusters of small shops, most of them selling bath-and-body works, reams of books, and supernatural trinkets ("Silph Scopes, bargain-priced at ¥ 50,000.00!"). There were restaurants and confectionaries, many of which prided themselves for their desserts: "Made with REAL Lavender Honey!" There was a spa-and-hotel for particularly wealthy visitors to stay at, and, on the other end of that scale, a volunteer center which took care of orphaned pokémon. A cubone was part of the insignia. Well, they do wear their mothers' skulls, she thought.

There was also a school and a market, she knew, but they were at the southern end of the town, and their group was heading east. As they went, the shops gave way to neighborhoods of small houses, which were very near a park. This one, she saw, had a number of trees and flower plots. They went through it, listening to the chirps of crickets and watching huge moths flutter around the lamps. In the distance, she could see the famous Pokémon Tower – the Tower of the Dead - looming higher and higher. It seemed determined to touch the moon. There were orbs of light flickering by its windows, too. Whether they were will-o-wisps or candles, she couldn't say.

Finally, they turned out of the park and onto another street. There were only a few houses here, but the ones that were there were huge. Well, not quite mansion or manor huge, but still sizable. One of the porches was lit, and there, sitting in the swing, was Rose. She got up when she saw them, giving them a smile. "Dinner's ready!" she called out. "It's nothing fancy, I'm afraid, but it should be enough to fill our stomachs. Please, come in."

The gate - made of heavy iron and fashioned into lavender flowers - glowed blue as it swung open. Like the rest of the fence surrounding the property, it had kudzu vines crawling through its bars, if not quite as thickly. As they went through it onto the cobblestone pathway, they passed a black mailbox with a sign hanging beneath it, which read: "Haunt Hartell." It had apparently once been known as "Haunt Hargrave" – the Lavenderites were fond of their little puns – but from what she'd been told, Sabrina had changed it to reflect Cassandra and her children's "new" last name. "Hartell" meant "little tough, hardy one" or "little buck," and it punned – of course it punned - on "heart." Oh, she knew what Sabrina was referring to with that, and she wasn't sure whether she should be appreciative or annoyed by it. In the end, though, the surname was better than "Gutermuth," which had also been suggested ("What? You don't like it? It means 'optimistic.'" "It sounds like 'gutter-mouth,' you bitch." "Which makes it perfect for you." "No! I said no!").

So now they were Cassandra Hartell, Christopher Hartell, Maya Hartell…and Michael Hartell. The detective would be posing as her cousin, who'd generously offered to have her and her children move in with him after her "husband's" death. Of course, Saffron City was no place to raise children - not these days, anyway - so he'd been looking for a house in the nearby towns. A close friend of his, Sabrina Sheehy, just so happened to have some property in Lavender Town, including a
vacation home she was willing to part with.

In truth, the Sheehy clan had property all over Kanto, including two vacation homes in Lavender: one being Haunt Hartell, which was smaller and in town, and Haunt Haggard, which was near the Tower and surrounded by gardens. Cassandra had the sneaking suspicion she'd be living in the "home away from the summer home," since Sabrina had purchased it rather recently...but even so, it looked like a nice house.

It was a two-story home, built from bricks and painted lilac. Ivy crawled up its western wall and around the corners, being cut back where it encroached on the windows and porch. In each of the side yards were tall lilac bushes, three to each side. What was in the backyard was a mystery. The front, though, had flower plots that followed along the walkway: she recognized lavender and lupin, violets and verbenas, clematis and chrysanthemums, bee balms, pansies, and heliotropes. She wasn't sure which of those were children-friendly, so she made a mental note to keep the twins away from them until she knew. At that point they stopped at the front steps and Aurora helped her up. A pang went through her abdomen as she stood, but Cassandra gritted her teeth and made her way up the stairs. There were wind chimes hanging from the porch roof and music was coming from inside. There was also the smell of roasted meat. It was enough to make her stomach growl and her mouth water.

Before she went in, she glanced over her shoulder, making sure the others were there (Christopher, Maya). They were. With Aurora at her side, Cassandra made her way into the house, slipping off her shoes as she went. She glanced around quickly as the others did the same, the door shutting itself behind them. There was a banner stretched above the entryway, decorated with birds and flowers: "Welcome to Your New Home!" it said in florid letters. Florian had probably done that. He seemed the most affectionate of the bunch, and had mentioned he was a decent painter. Beyond it and to her left was the dining room, the table laden with a vegetable and a fruit salad, a platter of chicken and potatoes, a loaf of bread, and a pitcher of some sort of iced juice. It took her a moment to force her eyes away.

Behind the dining room was the kitchen, which had quite a bit more cupboards and counter-space than Cassandra was used to. Hopefully she wouldn't set them on fire at some point. To her right was a living room, furnished with a couch and a pair of armchairs – they looked sinfully cushy – and a flat-screen T.V. on the wall. Huh. There's something I'm not used to having. Doubtlessly Michael would use it the most. To the right of that was a staircase that led up to the second story, presumably to the bedrooms. She took a couple steps out of the entryway and looked down the hall. There might have been a bathroom down there and another room – maybe a study, a guest bedroom, or a closed-in porch. She'd have to check at some point.

So this is going to be our home, she thought.

And honestly, it was a nice enough to make her wonder why Sabrina was letting them use it. After all, there were going to be two kids living here. That was bound to make a mess of it – dents in the walls, carpet stains, maybe even gnawed furniture. Maybe Sabrina was just so rich that she could afford to have the place ruined. But Cassandra never got the sense that Sabrina was wasteful. No, this seemed to be an investment of some sort.

Oh, it was convenient in all sorts of ways for them: the government – and the tenants, for that matter – didn't have to pay for the place, and they hadn't needed to contact outsiders to make the arrangements. The place was fully furnished, had plenty of space, and was apparently "cozy and perfectly safe." Its windows and walls were deceptively thick, and if those failed, there were friends nearby to help. Aurora and Rose would be short drives away, Florian and Anastasia would take shifts guarding the house, and Michael and Alexius would scarcely leave their sides.
But Cassandra couldn't shake the feeling that there was a catch to this somewhere. Maybe some would call her paranoid, but she'd never been given something for nothing. Not even in love - not really. Sure, Sabrina had said they'd have to pay the bills and buy their own food, supplies, and so forth…but that didn't feel like the catch. Where the Witch was concerned, Cassandra was certain it would be something subtle yet significant. And it frustrated her that she couldn't see what it might be.

_Sabrina is going to want something in return for this. I know it. But what is it…?_

If she turned this down, she wouldn't have to find out. But that would be insane. Her _children_ needed this place, and she had to put their needs ahead of her doubts.

She sighed, hoping that if there _was_ a catch coming, Sabrina would be willing to wait awhile to reveal it. She was too tired to deal with it right now.

She turned back to the others. Aurora and Rose were discussing something, while Florian and Anastasia both stood with her children in their arms. Christopher and Maya were beginning to squirm and cry. They'd already eaten, and their diapers hadn't been changed all that long ago. That left sleep. "I need to put them down to bed," she said, going up to them and making soothing sounds. "Is there someplace in here where-?"

"There's a crib upstairs for them. I'll take them up and keep an eye on them." Anastasia balanced Christopher carefully and took Maya from Florian. "You should get something to eat, Ms. Hartell."

Cassandra was a bit nervous about that idea, but she had to admit, it was a good one. She did have to eat. "Alright. You…don't have to call me that, you know."

"The sooner you get used to it, the easier it will be for you to slip into. I'm sure you know that." Well, that was true. But it didn't mean Cassandra had to like it. She'd just reclaimed her real surname, and now she had to adopt this new one. It would take a while to get used to….

As Anastasia went to the stairs, Florian called out, "Do you want me to bring you something to eat?"

"A bowl of fruit salad would be fine, Florian. Make sure Ms. Hartell enjoys her homecoming."

Florian saluted his partner and gave her a winning grin. "Will do!"

_Oh, goodie._

Yet despite her apprehension, Cassandra ended up enjoying herself. The dinner was a nice one: the greens had been tossed in some sort of tangy oil; the fruit salad had fresh raspberries in it; the chicken and potatoes had been spiced with rosemary and lemon juice; and the punch was surprisingly good. Maybe that was just because it wasn't spiked, though. The punch at Rocket parties had always turned into rocket fuel before the night was over. And the company here was also better – much, _much_ better. She couldn't really associate with Rose on a casual level, but she could watch with amusement as Florian pulled roses out of the woman's ear ("You'd best not have taken those from Haunt Haggard, Florian."). He also made a bowl of fruit "disappear" at one point, but being able to feel the surge of psychic energy somewhat spoiled the trick.

Aurora, for her part, took out a pack of cards and suggested they play a few rounds of poker ("You psychics better not cheat"), using some Ghastly Grape candies as the chips. It didn't go so well. Florian won on account of everyone "thinking too loudly" - "I can't help but overhear you!" As the night went on, the games dwindled into quiet conversations, most of which Cassandra only listened to. She noticed that Aurora was becoming rather fidgety, checking her phone every few minutes and
sighing. *She must be worried about Michael...and Alexius, of course.*

But Cassandra hadn't missed that kiss the man had given Aurora before they'd parted ways. She wondered if that would go anywhere. On the one hand, she hated it when people paraded their affections publicly, but on the other hand, it might be good for them. Whether it went anywhere or not, though...well, it wasn't really her concern. Unless they brought it back here and scarred her children. Then there would be words and maybe some punching.

The lull was interrupted when Aurora's phone jingled with a text message. She checked it, paled, and quickly got up from her seat. "I'll be back later. Michael just arrived and...."

Where that "and" might have led they never learned. When Aurora grabbed her jacket and started out, Rose caught her wrist and stopped her. "It'll be quicker if we go my way, Aurora."

Distracted as she was, the doctor forgot her fear of teleportation and nodded. In a flicker of light, they were gone. Cassandra looked at Florian, who, for once, seemed less than jolly. "I certainly hope it's not serious. I've been growing rather fond of that man, his devil-dog included. It'd be a pity if something happened to them."

Cassandra had to agree. While Michael wasn't particularly fond of her, she had nothing against him, not really. He'd been doing his best to keep her children and her safe, and she hadn't forgotten how he'd defended them the morning after the twins had been born. He was also Aurora's best friend, and Cassandra wouldn't wish the loss of a best friend on anyone. She'd lost two herself, after all.

The two of them waited impatiently for the others to return, watching the pitcher as it wept and hearing the sound of singing from upstairs. That observation distracted her for a moment. Anastasia was *singing*? The idea clashed with Cassandra's expectations. Even though it was muffled, her voice seemed pretty enough, and soothing. Florian was also looking up, and he had a soft smile on his face as he listened. Somehow, it looked more genuine than the others she'd seen.

"Ana takes lessons from Madam Sheehy." Huh. So Sabrina taught voice lessons? Weird. "She's a low alto, which isn't really everyone's cup of tea, but...it's nice, isn't it?"

Cassandra nodded. She couldn't sing – humming was her limit – but she had a strong appreciation for music nonetheless. Suddenly she thought of her viola, which had disappeared during her month in America (along with so much else – along with *Shadow*). Suddenly her fingers ached to run a bow along its strings. Perhaps she could find a replacement and pick up playing again. Maya and Christopher would doubtlessly consume much of her time and energy, but there would be moments, surely, where she could indulge in music.

Perhaps she could even look into jobs around town. She'd read once that Lavender Town had festivals where participants played flutes of bone and shamisens. There might be a demand for people who could teach kids other instruments. After all, if you knew one string instrument well, the others would probably be easy to learn. They were just variations of each other, really. And this was a small town – someone with her experience could be an asset. Though a small town could also mean fewer job opportunities, she reminded herself.

But she had to find *something*. She couldn't expect the government and Michael to support her children and her. That was asking for too much. As it was, she already felt indebted to them. That wasn't a feeling she liked, and she didn't like where it tended to lead. No, she needed to be able to earn her own bread. And she needed to have something in her life that was her own, didn't she? There might not be anything available, but...well, if there was, working in music could be a nice change. She could enjoy that. It couldn't hurt to check, at least....
At some point, she heard footsteps on the porch and raised voices. Aurora and Michael were back, and Aurora didn't seem too happy. Well, at least the detective seemed healthy enough to walk – that was a good sign, even with Aurora's anger. The front door opened and their words became clearer: "I wouldn't be surprised if you have a concussion! You should have stayed in the Center overnight."

"And leave the house without its watchdogs? That's not my style, 'Rora."

"No, your style is apparently taking on an army with a baker's dozen." They came out of the entryway into the dining room. Michael sported a bandage around his head, a wrist brace, and was leaning heavily on a very peeved Aurora. His ankle seemed to have swollen three sizes. Alexius – now a houndoom, she saw with considerable surprise - was limping at his side, and wore a thick wrap of gauze around his left foreleg. That wasn't counting the numerous cuts and scrapes both seemed to have. Aurora led Michael over to the table, and when he was sitting with his foot propped up on another chair, she ordered him to "Eat, rest, and pass me that last chicken. Alexius is probably famished."

"I'm starving too, you know." But Michael passed the chicken anyway, dishing himself up some potatoes and salad.

"Yeah, well, you weren't poisoned by an arbok, were you?" Aurora gave the dog the chicken, bones and all. Alexius tore into it happily.

"I had a pecha berry on me. It worked better than a bezoar!"

"Alas, if only we had the goat a bezoar could be found in. Alexius deserves a feast for his valor." She scratched the houndoom behind his horns, which he seemed to like.

Michael pouted at her. "I feel so underappreciated sometimes."

Florian smirked at him, reaching out a hand to touch his arm, "Oh, good sir, you know I appreciate you!"

As Michael nearly choked on his potatoes, Cassandra cleared her throat and asked, "So you were attacked, then?"

Michael seemed grateful for the question, if a bit surprised that it was coming from her. "We were. Route 6 is toast, but we got out alright. A few close calls and some broken bones, but we won. Our friends in Fuchsia will be questioning the Rockets we managed to catch. The rest of them ran, of course."

Giovanni won't like that very much. She didn't say that, though. "So did Ms. Gallagher crash for the night?" she asked instead. She was wondering where her therapist had wandered off to.

"Something like that. Either she's with Sabrina or in Haunt Haggard – or maybe both, come to think of it."

Cassandra nodded. Perhaps she didn't really want to know. In any case, crashing sounded good to her. Her eyes were beginning to burn and her headache was coming back. Sleep would do her some good. She'd ask them to tell her more about what had happened tonight tomorrow. She got up out of her chair, grimacing at the ache in her guts. It was like a period that would never end, the cramps and bloody muck and all. She couldn't wait until it was over. "I'm going to head to bed then." She glanced at the banner, at the remains of the dinner, and at them. "Thanks for…all of this. It's more than I expected." Ever, really.

They nodded and gave her tired smiles. Florian offered to help her up the stairs. They made their
way slowly, going one step at a time, and then turned left down the hall. They passed by two doors on their right – "Michael's room is the first one. They'd have to go through him before getting to you three." Then there was the nursery – or what would become the nursery, since it suspiciously lacked a crib. There were also two doors on the left, which apparently led to a study and a bathroom. At the end of the hall was her room.

She was surprised to see that it was the master bedroom. The bed - draped in red lilac covers - and the nightstand were at the northern wall, with the closet built into the eastern one. A dresser stood next to a door to the bathroom; the small bag of her things had been placed on it. Christopher and Maya's crib was near the west-facing window, which Anastasia stood next to, her eyes darting between them and the babes. She gave Florian a nod, took the bowl from the floor, and began to walk away.

Cassandra stopped her on impulse. "Thank you for watching them for me," she said. Then, remembering the singing, she added, "You have a nice voice, by the way."

Anastasia, to her surprise, blushed but said nothing. She nodded again and left, with Florian following in her wake. As he shut the door behind them and wished her a restful night, she sighed and turned to the crib. She went over to it, trailing her hand along its side and looking in. Christopher and Maya were sleeping side-by-side, both of them clutching the gifts she'd managed to get them. They were a pair of stuffed animals which differed only in their color. Christopher, much to her amusement, had favored the pink mew, while Maya had preferred the blue one (maybe because it was shiny like her, she'd joked).

She reached inside, tucking their little blankets around them tighter, brushing her fingers over their hands and faces. Her son kicked once, while her daughter squeezed her mew harder. *My sweethearts*, she thought, "We're home now." It might not be a familiar place, and it might not be comfortable for a while, but it was home. And then, thinking of their protectors below, she added, "We're safe now." *As safe as we can be.*

Her children slept on, oblivious to the fact that there'd been any danger at all. All they knew was that they were warm and loved. She drank in the sight of them, their faces glowing in the moonlight, which didn't seem to bother them at all. Feeling her exhaustion deepening, she drew away from them, going to the window to close the curtains. She pressed her hand to the cool glass, just for a moment, and looked out at the lilac bushes, at the houses of their neighbors, at the sprawling fields and the mountains. *We'll be alright*, she thought. She prayed. Then she drew the curtains together, went to the bed, and slipped under the covers.

The moon hung high in the sky as she closed her eyes.

The moon hung high in the sky as he opened his eyes.

He'd dreamed of her again. She'd been sleeping in a bed with red-violet covers, her hair spilling across the pillows, her arms curled near her face. He wondered how he'd imagined that sight: maybe her pose had been from *that night*, her clothes from sometime when they'd been younger, though if so the blankets should have been darker, much darker. Yet even so, she'd seemed peaceful. In a bit of pain, he'd sensed, but peaceful. He supposed seeing her like that had made for a quiet, restful dream, unlike some of the others he'd had lately.

As Citlali whirled into the cave, a bundle of fruits, nuts, and berries in his arms, he turned over, feeling uncharacteristically self-conscious as the mew greeted him. Since that night a month before, when he'd dreamed of her *loving him* with all the parts of her body save the nook between her thighs, the mew had been giving him endless grief. When Mewtwo had drifted awake, hard and
aching with need, Citlali had glanced down at him, rolled his eyes, and mewed, "Either tuck little Mewtwo into bed, or go play with him somewhere until he's all tucked out. Either way, I'd prefer not to see him."

He'd never been so mortified and agitated before. It wasn't often he responded to such dreams so strongly. He was a creature of stern self-discipline (except when it came to her), so he usually avoided such embarrassing situations. There was a time and place for arousal, and being stuck in a cave with one's brother wasn't one of them. But for once, he'd scarcely been able to help it. He'd tried thinking of anything but her, of anything that would kill his libido, including—but-not-limited-to Citlali being strung up by his intestines. It didn't work. So he'd grimaced, walked out of the cave and into the bushes, and made as quick an end to it as he could. He didn't feel very gratified afterward. The need was gone, but it hadn't been as satisfying as being with her. He'd scowled at himself then and thought, *Perhaps you might have considered that before leaving her in the snow.*

She'd begged him. She'd begged him to *stay with her,* and what had he done? Among other things, nearly burned himself to ashes physically and psychically. Even now, months after his wounds had knitted into scars, using his psychic powers left him with crippling migraines. Citlali had assured him that he would regain his strength in time. The spring waters of Mt. Quena were already quickening the process considerably. Yet even so, it still might take months - or even *years* - before he could wield his powers as he saw fit.

And that was very frustrating, since he wanted nothing more than to teleport back to Kanto and *find his mate.*

When he'd returned to his brother that morning, burning with shame, Citlali had given him a sly grin and said, *"My, my, what was she doing to you to get you all riled up?"*

He'd bristled at that. *"That is none of your concern."*

*"Maybe you're right. But I've heard that humans have invented many variations to their love-play."* He'd floated above him, his tail curling into a heart. *"Was she on her knees this time? Begging?"*

That had hit too close to home – and to the mark, really – for Mewtwo to react with anything but fury. More on impulse than anything else, he'd gathered psychic energy into a paw and hurled it at the immortal kitten. The psycho-electricity had felt like shards of glass tearing through his veins, his muscle fibers, his very skin. He didn't see Citlali dodge, because in the next second, blinding pain had burst in his skull. He'd fallen to his knees, clenching his eyes shut and snarling, hissing, spitting. It had seemed like hours before the pain began to ebb, and when it did, he'd growled out, *"You will not speak of her again. Do you understand me? You will keep your mouth closed where she is concerned."

The mew had pressed a paw to his forehead, and the ache had melted away like ice next to a hearth-fire. *"Such pain...."* Mewtwo doubted he'd been talking about the headache. *"Fine then. I won't mention her again."

In the past month, he'd kept his word. He hadn't brought Cassandra up, and Mewtwo hadn't volunteered the subject. Instead they'd talked about when his powers might return (he practiced every day, forming blue sparks and moving bigger and bigger targets), about the state of Kanto, and sometimes about what Citlali did when he wasn't here with him. Of course, Citlali remained very closed-lipped about his comings and goings. He would drop a cryptic remark or generality like, *"I'm just checking up on my charges. I'm keeping an eye on more people than you, you know."* Mewtwo had been tempted to ask if Citlali was keeping an eye on his mate as well, but that would breach their silence on the matter.
Besides, she was a sore subject for both of them: Citlali, for all his teasing, wasn't fond of the thought that Mewtwo had been "boinking" a human, and Mewtwo was sick of being judged for it. He'd chosen Cassandra and she him, and if his brother and everyone else had a problem with it, they should simply deafen their ears and put out their eyes. If they'd just left them alone (he might be sleeping in that bed with her. He might be holding her, kissing her, beseeching her forgiveness as his stroked her between her thighs. She might smile and tell him it was all okay, that they were home now, safe now)....

But the world did not work that way. Mewtwo knew that well enough. And even if they'd left Cassandra and him alone, it wouldn't have stopped him from making that foolish, damnable mistake.

*I should never have left her there. Why did I leave her behind...? Sometimes he thought he'd been struck by a bout of insanity. Sometimes....

The mew interrupted his musings by plopping down in front of him, shoving an apple the size of a softball at his muzzle. "Get up, Sourpuss, and eat some breakfast! I had to forage all morning for this."

Somehow, the clone doubted that. Purity Canyon was a place of plenty, after all. Even so, he sat up and took the apple. As he bit into it and the juices leaked down his chin, he realized it was a Fuji Apple. Citlali must be mocking him.

"You feeling up for a little trip, Mewtwo?"

Was the pest asking that in jest? Mewtwo had been ready to leave this place since he'd arrived here, blinded and howling from the pain of his burns! Certainly, he couldn't move anything heavier than his scrappy arms could lift, and he could only sparkle his foes to death, but he was weary of the same caverns, day after day after day. "Quite." He would have to rely on the mew for protection – and how he loathed that fact – but he wanted to move. He wanted to feel as if he was doing something. He wanted to believe he was getting closer to wherever she was, if only he could take a few steps forward....

"Alrighty then. We're going to be heading north first. Well, northeast. But we still have some island-hopping to do."

Mewtwo, who'd stood and was making his way to the cave entrance, froze. He drew a mental map of the Union of Japanese Isles and realized where Citlali would be taking them. "Sinnoh? My mate-.." Ah, there he was, breaching the subject for the first time in a month. "Cassandra will not be in Sinnoh."

"You don't know that. She could very well be in Sinnoh. It's been ten months," the mew reminded him, as if Mewtwo needed reminding. "Do you really think she can't tell which way the wind is blowing? Do you think she hasn't realized that Kanto is going to war? She has no friends on either side of this fight, Mewtwo. If I were her, I'd run as far and fast as I could towards Sinnoh. They've declared themselves neutral, from what I've heard. And Hoenn and Orre are involved in their own squabble. Sinnoh would be the safest place for her."

Citlali's argument was logical enough. Cassandra couldn't outright leave the Union, not without a passport or funds, and trying to access either one would alert Giovanni to her plans. Theoretically, she could smuggle aboard a ship to the mainland, or find some powerful psychic to take her there. But then what would she do? She still wouldn't have any resources or friends to help her, and she wouldn't know the language on top of that. His mate was resourceful, yes, but finding her way to Sinnoh would be far easier and safer.
So why did Mewtwo feel as if his brother had been lying through his teeth when he'd said that…?

The clone had no choice but to trust him, though. Months ago he might have scoured Kanto and the rest of the Japanese nations, taking out any who dared stand in his way. Months ago he could have crushed mountains, boiled oceans, and blown away armies with a sweep of his arm. Now he could barely nudge a boulder, heat up tea, or knock one foe out, let alone thousands. But Citlali still had power and the incentive to help him. They were "brothers," after all, and while Citlali didn't like his choice in lover, Mewtwo didn't think he'd purposefully misdirect him. Not if Cassandra was in any danger, at least. He didn't think the mew's disapproval would run that deep. He wouldn't want to cause Mewtwo any pain, and if anything happened to Cassandra….

No. He'd dreamed of her sleeping soundly. He would know if something had happened to her. For now, she had to be alright.

He had to keep telling himself that, or else he'd go mad.

He took the cloak and walking stick near the mouth of the cave - gifts from his brother to replace the cloak he'd lost and to keep his feet steady. The cloak was burnt umber in color, while the branch had grooves in it from woodworms. It wasn't the same as having his powers at his fingertips, but the wood could crack a skull if swung just right, so it would have to do for now.

The dusk was hot when he stepped out of the cave, but he threw the cloak over himself anyway, knowing the northern isle would be far chillier than Johto. Above him the leaves of the trees were just turning golden, their boughs bending under the weight of acorns and pine-nuts. They cracked under his paws and got between his toes, but he hardly cared. The sky was clear and shining with stars, and somewhere, surely, Cassandra was looking up at the same bright moon.

*I will find you, my dove. Someday, I will find you.*

But that day wouldn't be today, or tomorrow, or even the next, he knew. But someday. Yes, someday.

"Are you ready?" Citlali asked, his white fur shining silver in the moonlight.

"Yes."

Citlali spun, his tail falling across Mewtwo's shoulders, his whole body glowing bright blue. The light spread until it encompassed the clone as well, raising the fur of his arms and neck, thrumming through his veins like cool water instead of splinters of ice. It was such a welcome sensation that he might have wept, save for the fact he didn't weep (except for once, for Amber). Then he heard his brother's voice blossoming in his thoughts, and he thought he heard a hint of smug triumph in his voice as he said, *"Good. Because we have a long way to go, and I have much to teach you."*

And then the world warped into shades of blue, and they were elsewhere, having left Mt. Quena behind to the birds, bees, and beasts, to its natural springs and arbors.

*Someday, I will find you.*

The moon hung high in the sky.

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my other readers will do the same for this one!

**Author's Note:** For those of you who are curious, Michael was quoting George Carlin on the subject of flamethrowers. There will also be a time skip between this chapter and the next.

Sincerely,

WiseAbsol
Cassandra woke up to the sound of the television being turned on.

Under her door, a band of light flickered. She glanced at her alarm clock: it was a little after one in the morning. She considered turning over and trying to go back to sleep – she had work in the morning – but then she remembered that tomorrow was her day off, so for once she could afford to be up late. And she was a light sleeper anyway (her training had encouraged it; motherhood had reinforced it), so she'd have a tough time staying asleep as long as the television was on.

Sighing, she got up, threw on her robe and slippers, and left her room. She went to the room next to hers, checking in on Christopher and Maya – they were both still sound asleep – and then went downstairs.

Michael was sitting on the couch, with Alexius lying at his feet. The dog's ears and his master's gaze flicked towards her, but that was as far as their acknowledgement went. Michael was leaning his elbows on his knees, his fingers twining together as he stared at the screen. She looked at it. It was on one of the late night news channels. The reporter stood in front of a mostly dark background, but Cassandra could see fires – maybe bonfires - burning behind him. As her eyes adjusted to the light, she realized that dark background was actually the sea, and that those fires must be coming from one or more islands.

She sat down next to Michael. "When did this start?"

A little muscle in his jaw jumped. "This afternoon. The quarantine wasn't working. There are confirmed cases on the mainland now, so they – they said something about burning off the worst of the islands. The Islanders agreed to do it. They figure everything will grow back quickly – it's the tropics, right? - and they're getting compensated, so…"

His shoulders twitched as he tried to shrug. "They evacuated this morning. But they're still watching their homes burn. Some of them are saying you won't be able to see the sky when you look south tomorrow because of all the smoke. There's just going to be this black wall and…hell."

She rested a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry. Have you heard anything from your family?"

He gave a hollow laugh. "It's been a week since their last call."

Cassandra wasn't sure how to respond to that. Her parents had died when she'd been quite young, so she'd never dealt with missing family members. But at least there was still a chance that his were alright. She tried to give him a reassuring smile. "If they're as stubborn as you, I'm sure they're fine. Just give them a couple days to get their asses to shore. I'm sure they'll call as soon as they can."

The smile he gave her was weak, but it was still a smile. "Thanks."

She squeezed his shoulder and, after a moment, said, "I'll go make us something with caffeine in it."
Tea or coffee?"

"We're out of filters," he reminded her. "So tea."

She nodded and went into the kitchen, putting the kettle on the stove. She rummaged through their tea-and-spice cabinet until she found the ginger orange blend. He'd said once that it was his favorite, since it reminded him of his family's orchards (the groves were probably ashes now). As the water boiled and she stewed the leaves, she went to their phone and called Aurora. The doctor wasn't pleased to be woken up so late, but after Cassandra explained the situation, she said she'd be right over.

By the time the tea was ready and she'd poured three cups, she heard keys rattling in the front door. Aurora came in, bundled in her red jacket and the checkered scarf Michael had gotten her last Christmas. She went to Michael immediately, sitting down next to him and taking his hand. Cassandra set their cups down on the coffee table and nodded when Aurora mouthed a silent "thank you" to her.

She retrieved her own cup from the kitchen and went up the stairs as inconspicuously as possible. Once she reached the top, she glanced back and – yes, they were hugging it out. Aurora's chin was resting on the top of Michael's head and she was running her fingers through his hair. Cassandra turned away quickly. Best to give them their privacy.

She went to her children's room and sat down in the chair between their beds, taking comfort in the sight of them sleeping so soundly. They were happy and healthy, and that thought warmed her as much as her tea did. When she'd drained her cup, she leaned over and kissed each of their foreheads.

"We'll be alright," she whispered to them.

She returned to her room and tried, for a long time, to fall back asleep.

Her alarm clock went off at the usual time the following morning.

Cassandra glared at it, reached out and pushed the button, and wondered if she shouldn't just try to sleep in. She was still tried, her head ached, and it was her day off anyway. She briefly fantasized about burying her head into the pillows again, but that fantasy was dashed aside when she heard the doorknob to her room turning and the door creaking open. Little footsteps padded up to her and her mattress shifted as a small body climbed onto it.

"Mama, wake up! Wake up, Mama! It's time for breakfast! Mama!"

She opened an eye and saw her daughter leaning over her, her grey eyes annoyingly bright at this hour. "Mama wants to sleep more, baby. And shouldn't you be bothering your uncle? He's the one who cooks around here." Admittedly, she was getting better at the whole cooking thing, but the few meals she'd managed to make others eat weren't ones she'd make others eat.

Maya reached out with one of her over-sized paws and prodded her shoulder. "Uncle Mickey's already up. He's making pancakes. Aunty 'Rora's helping. They told me to make sure you're up. They said you have to go see Aunty Rose today. Do you have to?"

Right. She had an appointment. And she supposed this meant that Aurora had stayed overnight. Of course she had.

Cassandra sighed and sat up. Chris was standing in the doorway, shifting his feet as he waited for her to get up. She kissed Maya on the crown of her head, got up and did the same to Chris, and said,
"Yeah, I have to. Chris, would you be a dear and take your sister downstairs? I'll be down soon."

He nodded and walked past her, grabbing Maya's hand and leading his twin out of the room. As they began thundering down the stairs, she called after them, "And be careful going down those stairs! For the thousandth time, walk, don't run!"

They giggled and she was pretty sure she heard them jumping down the last step. Cassandra rubbed her temples. She swore, one of these days they were going to fall down and break their necks and they'd have no one to blame but themselves. Sighing again, she gathered her clothes and hit the shower. By the time she finished, the house was filled with the enticing smell of banana pancakes.

She went down the stairs slowly, making a point *not* to run, and joined the others at the kitchen table. Maya's and Chris's plates were piled high with pancakes, and they were in the process of drowning those pancakes in maple syrup and other, fruity ones. She recognized Aurora's orange sauce and Sabrina and Rose's cherry jam.

She forcefully reminded herself that *she* wouldn't have to deal with the sugar highs her kids were going to have. No, that would be Michael and Florian's job today. Plus, if the twins got sick from all the sugar, that would teach them not to put on so much syrup in the future. Maybe. She hoped.

She plucked the pouring dishes from their sticky hands and said, "At this rate, your breakfast will be syrup with some pancakes, instead of the other way around. Go easy on the sweets, rascals."

Michael and Aurora, the enablers that they were, grinned and said nothing. Cassandra poured each of the twins a glass of milk and then dished up her own plate. She decided on the cherry jam – the orange was good, but for banana pancakes, it didn't seem the right match. She ate quickly but carefully, keeping an eye on the twins as they wolfed their breakfasts down. She also glanced at Michael and Aurora, noting the dark circles under their eyes. Had they not slept at all last night? Well, at least Michael didn't have that haunted look in his eyes anymore. There had clearly been a turn for the better sometime during the night, no doubt due to Aurora's influence. Well, that and maybe something else Aurora was willing to give him, though they usually spent the night at the Center for *that*….

As the others took their dishes to the sink, Cassandra took Maya and Chris by their sticky hands and led them to the downstairs bathroom. She lifted Chris up first, turning on the faucet and squeezing some soap into his palms, and watched as he scrubbed up to his elbows. She did the same for Maya, and then got a washcloth from the cabinet, wetting it and using it to wipe the syrup smears from their faces.

Afterwards, Cassandra ruffled his hair and her fur and said, "I'm going to be out most of the day, but Florian and your uncle will be around for you to pester. Try not to drive them too crazy, okay?"

Maya gave her a toothy grin and said, "*We* promise, Mama."

"We'll be good," Chris asserted firmly, giving his sister a sidelong glance and looking, for a moment, very much like his father when Mewtwo had been resigned or irritated.

On a whole, Chris tended to be a quiet and serious child. He could have patterned his personality after many of the adults in his life, she supposed, but Cassandra suspected he'd developed this way in response to how wild and mischievous his sister was. Though Maya seemed to annoy him sometimes, he was protective of her and tried to keep her from climbing up the walls – literally, in one or two cases. After all, Maya's claws were sharp and the walls of their home were soft. So even though it wasn't and *shouldn't be* his job, Cassandra appreciated him looking out for Maya like he did. Her daughter was a handful, even with two adults and a devil dog looking after her and her
brother most days.

She wondered sometimes if Mewtwo had once been as gentle and quiet as his son, back when he'd been a child and befriended Amber. She supposed she would never know. Though come to think of it, if Maya was channeling anyone's personality, it was Amber's. Cassandra doubted Mewtwo or she had ever been so energetic or reckless when they'd been younger….

As her daughter dashed back into the kitchen to ask Michael and Aurora something, Chris lingered, reaching out and tugging at her sleeve.

"Yes, darling?"

He looked up at her with his wide, violet eyes and asked, "When will you be back?"

She took his hand and squeezed it. "Around four, I think. Would you like me to pick anything up for you or Maya while I'm out?"

He seemed reluctant to say anything, but there was a flash of excitement in his eyes at the question. After some more encouragement from her, he said, "Could you get some pickles?" Pickles - specifically, dill pickles - were one of the strange morsels Sabrina has introduced the children to during their lessons. Maya thought they were gross – "They look all toady!" – but Chris loved them. It was something about all the salt, dill, and garlic that went into them. She would have to go to the grocery store to get a jar, but that wouldn't be expensive. She could easily go pick up something for dinner while she was at it. "Of course I can. Now go on. You don't want Maya to steal all the good crayons, do you?"

Fifteen minutes later, Maya and Chris were sitting at the coffee table with a bowl full of art supplies and a stack of paper in front of them. They were already hard at work on their newest masterpieces. Florian lounged on the couch, watching them and giving them suggestions like, "More purple. You can always have more purple!"

As she left the house and walked to the car, Anastasia flanked her, pulling out her keys and getting into the driver's side.

"I can drive us there, Ana," Cassandra reminded her.

"There's no need for that, Ms. Hartell."

As Cassandra slid into the passenger's seat, she said, "You can call me Cassandra, you know. We've only known each other four years."

"But Ms. Hartell, I couldn't possibly call you by your first name until we've known each other for at least ten years. I mustn't be improper."

"Your partner gave me a nickname," Cassandra reminded her with a grimace. "You can call me Cassandra. Please call me Cassandra already."

As Ana started the car and pulled out into the street, she glanced at Cassandra, smiled faintly, and said, "Of course, Ms. Hartell. After another six years."

Cassandra refrained from the urge to groan and muttered, "Fine, be that way. Just go already." She had an appointment to make, after all.

Ana's smile widened as she drove them towards the edge of town, then up the stony hill to Haunt Hargrave. The haunt was a sprawling, two-story manor, with purple rose gardens prickling over the
grounds in all directions. Soon the frost would finish off the flowers, but for now, they remained vibrant and filled the air with their sweet scent.

Ana stayed in the car as Cassandra walked up the pathway to the haunt. She pressed the doorbell and listened to the wind chimes as she waited. Then the glass door swung open and Rose Gallagher smiled at her. "Good morning, Cassandra. I heard you had a long night."

"Is there anything you don't hear about?" But Cassandra said that with some warmth as she stepped inside and placed her coat on the rack. She slipped off her shoes and accepted Rose's offer of some Earl Grey tea.

After the tea was ready, they made their way to the sitting room they'd been meeting in for four years now. It was a small room with two black armchairs, which had afghans folded over their backs and sat facing each other. A table lay between them, with coasters for the tea and a box of tissues. Behind this set-up was Rose's desk and a bookshelf filled with academic texts. The walls were decorated with photographs of the mountains, while the large window off to Cassandra's left overlooked the rose garden. Sunlight and the tinkling of wind chimes poured through the glass. Altogether, it was a comfortable room, and Cassandra had often been tempted to take a nap in her armchair, rather than talk for an hour or two.

Yet talk was exactly what they did. They started with catching up on her life, mostly about how her children were doing and how her job was going. Her children gave her plenty to talk about: there wasn't a day that they didn't do something cute or weird or frustrating. Talking about the rest of her life was, comparatively, much more mundane. She would get up in the mornings, go to the school for a few hours, take a few of the students to practice their strings, and then return home in the afternoons to be with her children – unless she had an appointment with Rose, of course.

On her days off, she tended to schedule those in earlier. She liked spending her afternoons with her children. And she often needed that time for their appointments, too. Aurora encouraged her to bring them in for check-ups every few weeks, and there were also Sabrina and Rose's weekly lessons. And even without those, Cassandra and the kids kept themselves busy. Sometimes they took walks in the rose gardens, watched movies, read books….

Somehow, Cassandra's life had become normal. And she was enjoying every minute of it.

She wondered sometimes if it was fair for her to be this happy. She'd done so many terrible things in her life, after all. But when she'd expressed that thought to Rose, her therapist had told her not to dwell on it. The information she was giving Michael was valuable (even if it was becoming increasingly outdated), so Cassandra was doing her part to make up for her past life. And hadn't that life cost Cassandra something as well? Since she was in therapy and her children were fatherless, Cassandra supposed she couldn't argue with Rose on that point.

She turned her thoughts elsewhere as their session went on, trying not to focus on her late lover. Yet the calendar on Rose's wall conspired against her, and she found her thoughts drifting to him anyway. But then, she'd taken the day off knowing that would happen, and Rose knew her well enough by now to tell what she was brooding about.

"Today's the anniversary, isn't it?"

Cassandra grimaced and looked out at the garden. "Yeah. November 15th. He died five years ago today."

Rose looked sympathetic as she asked, "And how are you holding up?"
Cassandra shrugged. "Better than last year. It's tough, but it's getting easier. I can look back on him now without falling apart. Though every once in a while, Chris or Maya will do something that reminds me of him and...it breaks my heart a little."

"Can you give me an example of something you can look back on and laugh at?" Rose asked.

Cassandra thought back. It was hard to figure something out when she was put on the spot like that. But as she sifted through her memories, one stood out, and she gave Rose a slightly embarrassed look as she began, "Well, there was one time when..."

They'd been in her bed, bodies twining, hands wandering, mouths pressing in hot, gasping kisses. She remembered fidgeting and fantasizing throughout the day, particularly through that boring luncheon she'd been forced to attend. The persistent itch of need had bothered her all the while, but meeting with him in the evening had remedied it. She'd been more sensitive to his touch than usual, much to his amusement and pleasure.

She'd groaned, clawed at him, nearly climbed him in her eagerness, but he'd toppled her back onto the bed and entered her. He'd thrust at just the right angle – she was over the edge after a few hard pumps – but she'd been quick to recover. He'd built her up again, slower this time, determined to make sure she enjoyed their lovemaking. She'd made it easy for him; she didn't think she'd ever been this turned on before. By the time he spent himself, she'd felt drenched and thoroughly satisfied. The smell of it had been more pungent than normal, but damn if she'd cared....

He'd gotten up to get a glass of water, giving her a quick lick on the shoulder and a smug look ("Satisfied?" "Very.") as he went. She'd lain there in the cooling covers, her fingers toying with her hair. The bathroom light had flicked on and she'd heard the faucet going. Then she'd heard the glass being set on the countertop and Mewtwo saying, "Er...Cassandra...."

She'd turned onto her side and looked at him. "What-?"

Then she'd seen it. There'd been blood staining the fur between his legs. Except neither of them had been hurt, which meant that...oh...oh!

She'd thrown back the covers, saw the redness between her thighs and the stain on the sheets. She'd gotten up quickly, bundling her bed covers and dragging them to the bathroom, her embarrassment making her face burn. "Oh fuck, I'm sorry. I didn't realize-"

He'd caught her arm. "Cassandra – Cassandra – calm down. It is fine – I do not mind."

She'd turned to him, halfway through stuffing her bedding into the washing machine. "You don't mind having my period smeared all over you? Because that sounds like bullshit to me, pussycat."

He'd stared and then looked slightly uncomfortable. "Well...I cannot deny...it is somewhat..."

"It's gross. You can say it's gross. I need a shower and a tampon as it is."

He'd made some hand gesture as if to wave that away, but had been too frazzled to complete it. "I would not say...that...oh, very well. Yes, it is unpleasant to have this in my fur."

"You see? Don't deny it. You're squicked out right now. I'm squicked. Just...ugh...I'm sorry, I didn't realize."

He'd sighed and taken the bedding from her hands. "It's fine. We will wash up and forget about it. Now give me the rest of the bedding."
She'd stared at him. "What? Why? Is this a cat thing? Because I so don't feel comfortable with you keeping these. They need to be washed, not...whatever you'd use them for."

He'd sputtered. "That – this is not – it is not a 'cat thing!' It is simply – Cassandra, you are in the middle of putting them in the drier. I do believe that would make the stains worse."

Oh. Oh, he was right. That was the...well shit. "...I'll just get the shower going."

He'd nodded and leaned forward, giving her a kiss on the forehead. "Relax. We will laugh about this someday...."

She hadn't believed him then, but nearly a decade later, she sat in Rose's office, smiling and blushing as she recounted that story. She still found the memory slightly embarrassing, but in retrospect, it was kind of funny. Especially the memory of him trying so hard not to look disgusted for her sake....

"If it's any consolation, Sabrina and I had a similar accident when we were visiting her parents. I believe she burned the sheets in embarrassment."

Hearing that made her squirm with discomfort, but the mental image of Sabrina freaking out was grin-worthy. "Well at least we didn't have that problem. No parents to explain where the sheets went to."

"Oh, don't even get me started on explaining. I'm not sure Sabrina is ever going to live the fire alarm down. But I digress."

Cassandra had to admit, the idea of a flustered Sabrina was rather entertaining. They talked more about other light moments, with the conversation eventually turning to Shadow. Cassandra still missed him and wondered, sometimes, what had become of him....

"You received him as an eevee from Mewtwo, if I remember right?" Rose asked. When Cassandra nodded, she continued, "I'm sure it must have been exciting for you when he evolved."

Rose said that so casually, as if assuming it had been a pleasant surprise. Cassandra knew that in theory, the evolution of one's starter pokémon was considered a magical moment by many, being something all trainers strove to experience. Yet her memory of when Shadow evolved only made her feel sick.

She looked away from Rose and picked at a loose thread on her sleeve. "I...wasn't expecting it. But it wasn't that exciting, either."

Rose sensed the evasion, of course – and Cassandra trying to evade the subject only made Rose pry more. Her therapist never pushed her too hard, of course; she knew when to back off. But she always tried first to get Cassandra to talk first. "Why don't you tell me about it?"

Cassandra felt herself clenching her jaw. She forced herself to relax. "I'd rather not." It wasn't a pleasant memory and today was hard enough as it was.

"I think you should," Rose said, pouring her another cup of tea. She always did that when she sensed they were delving into a hard subject.

"I think you should," Rose said, pouring her another cup of tea. She always did that when she sensed they were delving into a hard subject.

Cassandra grimaced. "Fine. But I'm not in that place anymore, okay? So don't go telling Michael to watch me like a hawk. Poor guy has enough to deal with right now." When Rose nodded, Cassandra reluctantly began to speak....

She managed to hold herself together while debriefing Giovanni on the Yew murders. She was still
smudged with soot and gunpowder, still oozing from her cuts and burn blisters, still aching from what she'd done. If her godfather had heard about how she’d saved the Yew girl, he didn't mention it. Instead he congratulated her on her "good work" and told her to get some rest.

She might have screamed or sobbed or laughed hysterically at that. How could he expect her to sleep after this? But she said nothing to him. She walked out of his office instead, intent on getting home. Some people stared at her as she went. She thought she heard someone whisper, "She doesn't look so good...."

Was there a tinge of concern in that voice? Perhaps there was. But she didn't pause to find out who'd said it. If she stopped now, she'd seize up, stumble, and shatter on the floor. No, she needed to get away: from her godfather, from this place, from these people. She needed to be alone. If she broke down here, they'd talk. Her godfather would hear and then – she didn't know what she thought he'd do, but how could it be good? He'd made her into a child killer. Amber, Ricardo, and now the Yew boy – all of them were dead because of her.

Oh god. Oh god, what had she done?

She suddenly wondered if Giovanni had ever agonized over killing her parents. Had he ever had any doubts? Did he ever have regrets? She found herself doubting it. After all, he kept making things worse. He kept ordering her to hurt people, even though she'd never wanted to and still didn't want to.

She...she didn't want to do this any of this anymore. Please, please no more...!

She suddenly found herself in her apartment. She was sitting on her bed with her gun in her hands. The cleaning kit was sitting open next to her. Right. She always cleaned her guns after using them; that kept them in good working order.

But...she'd killed a boy with this gun. She'd killed a boy because he'd seen her face. She stared down at the weapon, hating it and also, somehow, yearning for it. Because it would be so, so easy to end everything with this gun. It might even be poetic. Even Giovanni wouldn't miss the significance of her shooting herself with this gun – the gun he'd trained her to point at people who'd made the mistake of crossing him. No, he'd see why she'd done it. She wouldn't even have to leave a note. Actions spoke louder than words anyway.

You saved that baby girl, some small part of her whispered.

But I destroyed her life first, she retorted, checking to see if there were any bullets left.

There was just one, but one was always enough for one person. The thought made her stomach swoop in a happy way, maybe like it did for people sharing their first kiss. The gun, suddenly, seemed to become something beautiful – to become some sort of gift. It was so simple, wasn't it? She didn't have to stay here anymore. She could get out. All she had to do was follow her training. Just center in on the target and pull the trigger. Center in-

The barrel felt cold against her temple. Her fingers were damp and shaking. But she was still smiling. This is it, she thought. I'm going now. I've had enough; I'm done. Better this than....

She began to squeeze the trigger. One click, two-

There was a flash of light and a flare of pain. Her hand jerked as she pulled the trigger, but the bullet missed her and buried itself into a wall. Flecks of blood fell onto the carpet and, in the stunned and deafened haze left behind by the shot, she registered that there was a weight on her arm. It felt
weirdly soft, though the pain across her wrist was needle-sharp.

She looked down and blinked. There was a mass of black fur with yellow bands clinging to her arm. White fangs and claws gnawed at her. Red eyes glared up at her, glowing with anger and reproach.

Recognition came slowly.

Shadow?

She'd...she'd forgotten about Shadow. She'd forgotten about her friend.

The gun, empty and useless, slid from her hand. She drew Shadow – so different now – against her chest. Her face was wet and she was shaking, bleeding, and hurting, but he was warm and soft and there. As he licked at her cuts and her face, she choked out, "I'm s-sorry. I'm so sorry. That was stupid. I'm sorry, I'm sorry...."

One of her neighbors, alarmed by the gunshot, found them like that. He called Giovanni's secretary, who called Giovanni, who came and assessed the situation. And though Cassandra had, by this time, done her best to regain her composure, Giovanni wasn't blind. He noticed the redness of her eyes, the cuts on her wrist, the bullet hole in the wall, and the changed creature in her arms, who could only have evolved like that through an act of great friendship. He guessed what had nearly happened and acted on it.

For the next month, he'd given Cassandra a leave of absence. He'd sent her to his country home and ordered her to rest. She'd spent most of that month in a white bedroom, with supervisors checking in on her. She'd stared up at the ceiling, her ears ringing from the silence. Far from the routes – far from anything at all – she'd been left to her own mind and to Shadow's company.

She'd recovered slowly, and afterwards, they hadn't talked about it. Life resumed as it had before, with missions and murders and borderline madness. Yet one thing had changed: her targets were never children anymore. And that had helped a little.

Of course, it had taken more than that to break Cassandra out of her suicidal mindset....

"I see," Rose said after Cassandra finished. The therapist sounded like she'd suspected this and now, finally, had her confirmation. As Cassandra wiped her eyes, Rose continued, "I'm not surprised that happened, all facts considered. I would have been more surprised if the thought had never occurred to you. Fortunately, you've come a long way since then."

It warmed Cassandra to hear Rose say that. She liked to think that she was better than she had been – that four years of therapy and normalcy were healing her. She took a sip of her tea and, for a moment, savored its minty undertone.

"Yeah," Cassandra said, staring down at her tea. "I made it, thanks to Mewtwo. He gave me Chris and Maya, and they gave me a reason to keep going. And now-" She met Rose's eyes. "-Now I want to keep on living. I like the life I have here."

She had a family now. Friends too. Their days together were close to carefree, when they managed set their worries about the war, the epidemic, and Team Rocket aside. It was as close to perfect as she'd ever known, anyway.

As Cassandra finished her tea, she glanced at the clock. They'd gone ten minutes over their normal time. Rose, seeing her glance, stood up and said, "I'm pleased to hear that. Perhaps we'll go into that more next week?"
Cassandra nodded and grabbed her coat. "Sure. This time should work for me again."

Rose nodded and levitated their teacups onto the tray. "Do you have any plans for the rest of the day?"

"Well, there's the visit up the hill. So that'll be an hour or so." She zipped up and pulled her gloves on. "But then I'll be spending the rest of the day with the munchkins. Florian and Michael are watching them right now, so who knows what I'll go home to."

Rose gave her an amused smile. "I'm sure it will be fine."

"Probably," Cassandra said, her lips twitching.

A few minutes later, Cassandra walked into the hills outside of Lavender Town, with Ana following along behind her. Their breaths steamed out as they passed the perpetually cold Pokémon Tower. The smell of roses soon faded, replaced by the scents of lavender and snow. She knelt down, picked some of the wildflowers, and then carried on.

As she made her way over the crags, sidestepping the scattered grave markers around the path, she felt a stitch form in her side. Cassandra wondered, not for the first time, if she was getting out of shape. She worked out, of course, and went to Michael's shooting range whenever she could. But still, living a civilian's life was just not the same as living the life of a soldier. She was becoming soft, and while that wasn't necessarily a bad thing, it worried her sometimes. If she was placed in the line of fire again, how well would she fare…?

As she reached the top of the ridge, she brushed the thought aside. She focused on the grave in front of her instead. It was a simple stone marker, not unlike those near the Tower. Rose had encouraged her to get it, saying that giving Mewtwo a grave might help her get some closure over his death. Cassandra supposed she'd been right. It had helped, over the years. Somehow, there was something comforting about visiting it.

Setting the flowers in front of it, she sat down on the ground and said, "Hey, wildcat. It's been awhile."

Ana was further down the ridge, near enough to keep an eye on her and their surroundings, but far enough away that she couldn't hear Cassandra's words. Cassandra was grateful for that. For her, this was a private ritual.

With a sigh, she went on. "Things have been going good. Well, as good as they can, with all the crap that's been going on. Michael went through a bit of an ordeal last night. Aurora came over to help. Not sure what that extended to. They were making breakfast this morning, so she must have stayed over. Probably a good thing; he needed her to be there. I hope his family is okay, for his sake. He's a good guy. He doesn't deserve to lose his family. Losing his home is bad enough."

She noticed, with some interest, that there were kids playing in the fields below. Kites flew from their hands into the blue, clear sky; a vulpix, ghastly, and cubone danced in the wind.

"Chris and Maya are doing well, by the way. Chris reminds me of you a lot. Very reserved, very into books, very protective of his sister. I'm kind of glad, though. He keeps Maya from tearing the house apart half the time. Doesn't want them to get in trouble. Not sure where he got his shyness from, though. I guess I wasn't that outgoing as a kid. You probably weren't either. But it's kind of funny sometimes. He hides behind me whenever we go out in public. He likes Sarah, though. Didn't see that coming."
Having her son be friends with the Yew girl seemed to be breaking some sort of cosmic law. That or God thought that freakish contrivances were funny. She was glad, though. She worried about her children not having someone their own age to play with, and Sarah was a good start to getting them to socialize. Cassandra knew from experience how valuable having such a friend was.

And Sarah was pleasant, at least. She tried to get Chris to come out of his shell. That was about all that Cassandra knew, though. She tried to keep some distance from the girl, to assuage both her guilt and Michael's worries.

Her only complaint, really, was that sometimes the girl (for Sarah and her adopted parents were willing to keep Maya's secret) outvoted the more cautious Chris on their adventures. Being adventurous was well and good, but it made Cassandra fret something fierce.

"Maya – oh god, Maya. How we had her I'll never know. Just last week I found her on the roof. I don't even know how she got up there, but apparently she wanted to try cooking eggs on the shingles. It's November, so obviously that wasn't going to work. Honestly, I don't think it would even work in summer! But I guess I should count my blessings. At least she wasn't trying to fly like a pidgey or something. Their powers aren't strong enough to try that yet. They mostly just make sparks right now."

Well, that was true for the most part. Their lessons with Sabrina were going well. They could levitate small objects, make psycho-electrical static, and were possibly empathic. They were unnervingly perceptive to the moods of the adults around them, anyway. They'd never tried to manipulate people, at least not more than with their natural charm and cuteness could accomplish. Sabrina had been quite stern with them about such abuses of power.

There were hints of how powerful they'd be one day, though. Sometimes when they were really upset – or happy – their powers would flare out. The lights flickered, random objects quivered and floated, and there'd been one time when they'd set a curtain on fire. Fortunately, Michael had experience with putting fires out, so he'd taken care of it. It had worried her, though. It still did sometimes.

She remembered the fire then – and what had caused it. Some ghosts had gotten into the house. They'd twisted her children's dreams into nightmares. They'd woken up screaming and Cassandra had followed suit. She'd bolted into their room, heart pounding, and saw the ghosts swooping towards them. Her babies had blasted the intruders with blue, psychic energy, but that hadn't done much to dissuade the ghosts.

So Cassandra had run in, batting at the ghosts with her bare hands and ignoring the chemical burns she earned in the process. At some point in the chaotic din that followed, Alexius had charged in with a howl and snapped at the ghosts, driving them away. The curtain had been ablaze by then, but Michael had come in and beaten it until it was out.

She'd hugged her shaking children, murmuring reassurances as her skin blistered. Michael, noticing that, had tugged her away and made her run her hands and arms under cold water. Aurora had arrived not long after. She'd slathered Cassandra with ointments and bandaged her up. And afterwards, Cassandra had cuddled with her children in her bed, watching them make butterflies of blue light to use up the rest of their wound-up, psychic energies.

They'd installed wind chimes outside theirs windows after that, to prevent another attack. The ghosts hadn't troubled them afterwards, but sometimes, Maya still had terrible nightmares. It always wounded Cassandra to see her bright, energetic girl sobbing from her dreams. There were moments when she wondered if part of Maya's bubbly personality wasn't some sort of front, some way of hiding her worries and easing her mother's....
Sighing, she said, "Sometimes Maya has these dreams. Visions, actually. Chris usually comes to get me whenever they happen. She sees things like I used to, but clearer. Sometimes what she sees comes true and – Mewtwo, I don't know what to do about it. I've never been good with my visions, not even after practicing with Sabrina. But Maya – she can't tell which are dreams and which are visions. She puts on a brave face, but I can tell it scares her. I just – sometimes I feel so helpless."

She was also starting to go numb from the cold. She got up, grimacing as her joints popped, and touched the marker. She brushed her fingertips over his name. "If you were here, maybe it'd be easier," she murmured, thinking of the war and their children. "I miss you, you know. It's been five years and I still miss you. I see so much of you in them every day. And it hurts, but – it's getting better. I just wish…I wish things could have gone differently for us."

The wind blew sternly in her face, as though to chastise her. With a sigh, she said, "I guess that's it for now. See you later, Mewtwo."

She blinked back tears – damn the wind – and went back down the ridge. Ana, always prepared, handed her a tissue. Cassandra smiled gratefully and dabbed at her eyes as they walked to the car. On the drive back, Ana turned the radio on, and the news from last night filtered in with the warmth from the heaters:

"…islands were evacuated late last night. Refugees are currently being brought to Cinnabar, where their pokémon will be screened for the virus. As always, donations can be sent to..." The radio host listed several aid organizations. "-and now, please tune in for a few words from Professor Samuel Oak, who's working round the clock to find a cure. Professor, has there been any progress on...?"

Mentions of the epidemic, as they often did, made Cassandra feel ill. Ana, sensing that, changed the radio station. They reached the grocery store a few songs later. Right, she was going to pick up dinner. She'd almost forgotten. She remembered the pickles and some other things they were short on, and about ten minutes later, they were carrying the bags up to the house. A few flecks of snow whirled around them as she unlocked the door – winter came early and stayed late in the mountains – and then they were inside.

Her home smelled like freshly baked bread and rang with laughter. The sound warmed her, but also made her stomach knot up. They burned the islands, she tried to reassure herself. That will help stop the virus from spreading. She carried the bags into the kitchen, finding a loaf of bread on the table and another in the oven. Michael sat at the table, his dark brows dusted with flour, and nodded at her when he looked up from his book. The doctor had a thing for fire-wielding detectives.

"How's it going?" she asked him. Are you okay?

He shrugged. "Bread turned out fine. Added some nuts and cinnamon to it." Michael liked to unwind with baking. Cassandra found she rather appreciated the habit. "Florian and the kids are giggling over something. I didn't ask."

Ah. Well then she'd have to brave the dining room for him. The first thing she saw when she went in was Ana facepalming – which was never a good sign – and then she saw what Florian was doing. Her mouth opened, closed, and then opened again. A strangled noise escaped her throat. So – so much naked chest and why in God's name didn't Florian have a shirt on? And why was he sparkling?

He saw her staring and winked. "What do you think, Cassie? Am I rocking this scarf or what?"

The purple scarf he was wearing whirled around him as he spun in place. His skin shimmered in the
lamplight. Tearing her eyes away, she saw that Christopher, too, had sparkles on his face and arms. An overturned bottle of sparkles from their art kit was on the table. What – what were they? – *she didn't get it!*

"F-Florian, put your shirt back on! Now! That's not appropriate. God, you look like one of those vampires from those awful books." And she’d been trying *so hard* to block those out of her brain.

He pouted, but scooped up his shirt and pulled it on. "Aw, I was going for a fae. My features are delicate enough to pull it off! Just gotta add some points to my ears. Got any silly putty?"

Cassandra pinched the brow of her nose. "I – I don't even – you covered yourself with sparkles so you could look like a fairy? Am I getting this right?"

"A fae," he corrected her. "Much more awesome and handsome! But no, this started because Maya sparkled in the sunlight. Chris wanted to too. So I helped – a lot – and one thing led to another…. Gosh, we were just about to go steal some of Madam Sheehy's robes for the costuming, too!"

Cassandra felt a headache coming on. "Okay, sure, whatever. Ana, watch the house. Florian, go take a shower at your place. Sweethearts, it's bath time for you. Up you get."

Florian bowed. "As you wish, oh mighty madam!"

The kids giggled again. With a sigh, Cassandra took their sparkling hands and led them upstairs. A few minutes later, their bubble bath was ready. While Maya sat on the toilet seat, waiting for her turn, Cassandra helped Chris out of his clothes. He climbed into the water by himself and was soon covered up to his neck in suds. Cassandra took a soapy washcloth and began rubbing him down to remove the sparkles.

He closed his eyes as she wiped his face. "You're not mad, are you, Mama?" he asked.

She smiled and ruffled his wet hair. It stuck up in places. "No, I'm not. You guys are just so silly sometimes. Go on, duck your head under." When he came back up with a gasp, she began rubbing children's shampoo into his hair. She might have the cut it soon. "Out of all the mischief you *could* get into, covering yourself in sparkles isn't so bad. Kind of cute, actually. It's sweet you want to be like your sister."

Maya grinned next to her. "*But I don't need sparkles! I'm always shiny.*"

Cassandra smiled and poked her muzzle. Her daughter's paws flew up as she squeaked and pushed her finger away. "Yes, you are. No need to gloat about it, little lady. It's your turn next. Just because you're not covered in sparkles don't mean your aren't getting a bath."

Maya scowled. "*Don't want one. Don't need one. I'm not dirty!*"

"You're still getting a bath. Alright, Chris, stand up. Time to rinse off." She took the shower head off the stand and turned it on, testing the water to make sure it wasn't too hot, and washed the suds off of him. He sat on the edge of the tub afterwards so she could rinse his legs and feet as well. A minute later, he was out of the tub and wrapped in a towel as big as he was. Cassandra patted him dry and brushed his hair.

Then it was Maya's turn. Her daughter squeezed indignantly as Cassandra put her in the bath and began washing her. She rubbed Maya's special shampoo into her fur, taking care not to get too close to her eyes. Maya glowered at her all the while.

Cassandra tried not to laugh at her daughter. She'd always found it funny how much Maya disliked
bath time. Mewtwo, in contrast, had always liked bathing or going swimming. He'd never seemed to have a problem getting his fur wet. But Maya…oh Maya. Sometimes Cassandra wondered if she might be a bit vain about her fur. But she supposed it was better for her daughter to take pride in her appearance than not.

Naturally, it took a bit longer to rinse and dry Maya off. Cassandra got out the blow-dryer and set it on low. Nonetheless, the heat was enough to make Maya's fur poof up. When her girl dashed downstairs to join Ana and Michael, Cassandra took Chris to his room to get him dressed. She left his sparkling clothes in the hamper.

Ana and Michael had started dinner while they'd been upstairs. There were hot sandwiches stacked on a plate, along with bowls of cherry tomatoes and apple slices set out. Cassandra watched Maya and Chris carefully, making sure they didn't try to pull the lettuce out of their sandwiches or knock their tomatoes to the floor. Maybe realizing they shouldn't push it after the sparkles, the kids ate their vegetables obediently (if with grimaces). She did the same to set a good example. She also distantly wondered when they'd have fresh fruit and vegetables again, with so many of the islands burnt down to ashes….

They curled up on the couch and watched a movie after that – some Western animated film with cats and jazz in it. While the cats tried to find their way home, she hugged her children, thinking about the events in the south with dread. The epidemic hit all types of pokémon indiscriminately. If it spread farther into the mainland, what would happen to her family? Her babies were hybrids. If they were infected, they might – she couldn't even think it. It hurt too much.

But how could she afford not to? She had to think about the consequences. Because viruses mutated, and if they mutated in her children, they might pass the virus on to humans as well. And if that happened… She shuddered and tried to reassure herself that it wouldn't. The mainland cases had been contained. They were isolated from most of Kanto here anyway. They were high in the eastern mountains, where no one visited anymore. Everyone with any sense was running west to Johto. Even so, she hugged the twins closer, fear settling cold and uneasy in her gut. She couldn't lose her children. She couldn't….

When the credits rolled, Maya and Chris tried to hide their yawns. Pushing her bleak thoughts aside, Cassandra took their hands and said, "It's time for bed, sweethearts." They made quiet, half-hearted noises of protest at that, but followed her upstairs to their bedroom. She pulled Maya's nightgown over her fuzzy little body, and then helped Chris change into his pajamas. She tucked him in first and kissed his brow, and then turned to do the same for Maya – but Maya had darted behind her, crawled onto Chris's bed, and had burrowed herself into his covers. Chris looked indignant, but also resigned. Cassandra sighed. "Maya-

Maya poked her head out from under the covers. "Tell us a bedtime story first!"

Chris's eyes brightened and then he, too, was sitting up and saying, "Please, Mama?"

They looked up at her with those big, pleading eyes, and any resistance she had crumbled. She sat on the chair between their beds. "Okay. Which story do you want?" They had a couple books full of fairy tales, but sometimes they asked her to make up her own stories. Since she didn't consider herself a good storyteller, she rather hoped they'd pick something from the books.

No such luck. "Tell us about the princess and the magician!" Maya pleaded, with Chris nodding in agreement.

That was both their favorite story and the only one she really knew. It was also the one she could
never bring herself to finish. Maybe tonight would be the night. "Alright. Once upon a time, there was an-
"

"An evil king!" Maya interjected right away. Okay, so this story had a weird beginning. So sue her.

"Yes, there was an evil king. The king had two sons and one daughter, but both his sons ran away to have adventures. So there was just the king and the princess, and he decided he would train her to be a prince. He taught her how to use swords and knives, and arrows tipped in poison, and entered her into all sorts of competitions to prove she was as good as any man.

"For him to do this wasn't bad, but the king himself was still evil. He ruled his people with fear and cruelty. If any of them spoke against him, he'd rip out their tongues, or send them to the front lines in battle where they were sure to die. For the king, wanting more land and wealth, waged many wars. That was why he trained his daughter: because she could go where he couldn't, fight battles he couldn't, and meet people he couldn't.

"But as time passed, the princess's heart grew heavy. She tired of doing the king's work. So one day the king, hoping to cheer her up, brought-
"

"A magician. He brought a magician!"

She ruffled Chris's hair. "That's right. He brought a magician to court. But this was no ordinary magician. This was the best magician in all the kingdoms, since he could do things no one else could. He made mythical beasts appear, threw fire and lightning, and made parts of the feast disappear. The king was pleased with these feats, thinking that the magician might be useful in his next war. And if not, at least he could make the princess smile.

"But the king was wrong about that. The princess didn't like the magician. He seemed arrogant to her and a bit of a show off. And the magician, sensing this, didn't like her either. Surely she must have a cold heart, to ignore him like that?

"The king, of course, was displeased. So much so that he demanded they train together. After all, the princess had some magic in her and the magician needed to be trained with a sword. So from then on, the two of them worked together and had many adventures, and slowly but surely, they realized that their first impressions of each other were wrong. They became friends and eventually much more."

Maya giggled and Chris grimaced. Cassandra went on. "Now the evil king didn't know they'd fallen in love. They knew he wouldn't approve, so they didn't tell him. But then came the day when the older prince returned to the castle. He'd returned from his adventure and was now ready to marry. 'But who will he marry?' the court asked the king. 'Why the princess, of course,' the king declared. For the princess was not truly his daughter by blood, but a noble he'd raised as such.

"Of course the princess, who was in love with another, didn't want to marry the prince. She also didn't want to fight in the king's next war – the worst war he'd ever waged. So she and the magician made a plan. They decided to run away together – to find someplace where they could live their lives in peace."

Chris spoke up at this. "But what about the evil king? What about the war? If they just leave, who's gonna stop them?"

She brushed his bangs back from his forehead. "Some heroes and their army, maybe. I don't know. The princess and the magician weren't really thinking about other people at the time.
"Anyway, the king found out about their plan somehow. To try to stop them, he sent the magician into exile and hastened the marriage between the prince and the princess. Each day, the magician battled dark knights and monsters to return to his love. And each night, the princess considered what she would do if she was forced to marry. For the prince was like his father, overbearing and unkind. She decided to bring a knife to their wedding bed – because even though the magician had promised to return, she was determined to save herself if he failed.

"The morning of the wedding dawned and the magician wasn't there. The guests arrived and the feast was prepared, but still the magician wasn't there. The ceremony started and the priest began to speak… and then, finally, the magician appeared. He staggered into the church, and though wounded, he demanded to duel the prince for the princess's hand. The prince, seeing that the magician was weak, agreed to the duel. They were to only use swords – no magic – and for hours after the duel began, their swords clashed furiously. All the while, the magician bled, his strength waning but not his determination.

"Finally, the magician couldn't go on. He collapsed and the prince kicked the sword from his hand. He drove his sword at the magician's throat, but the magician, using the last of his strength, summoned his sword with magic. He turned the prince's blow aside and pierced the prince's heart."

"Wait!" Chris protested. "The magician shouldn't have used magic! He cheated!"

Cassandra nodded. "You're right. He did. But when you're fighting to survive or protect someone you love, you should do whatever it takes to do so. Even if that means cheating. Also, darling, I never said the princess or the magician were heroes. They're just less bad than the king."

Chris didn't seem pleased to hear that, but even so, he settled back down to listen to the rest of the story.

"Now after the prince died, the princess went to the magician and healed his wounds with magic. Meanwhile, the king, overwhelmed with rage, ordered his guards to seize them. But the magician, with what remained of his magic, escaped with the princess. They ran from the king and his army, hiding in the depths of the forest. More than once they fought the king's soldiers – but together, there was no foe they couldn't face.

"They slowly made their way to the neighboring kingdom – a kingdom ruled by a magical queen and her consort. When the queen heard their story, she offered to protect them. So for a short while they were able to live happily together. But then the king's army gathered on the borders of the queen's land, threatening to invade. He demanded the blood debt the magician owed him for the death of his son, who'd died in that dishonorable duel.

"The magician thought he couldn't refuse the king. So he promised, again, to return to the princess – for she couldn't fight beside him this time. There was more than her life at stake if she did. The queen, knowing this, made sure the princess was safe. She surrounded her with her personal guards, the best knight of her court, a medicine woman, and even a priest. Then she gathered her army and, with the magician at her side, went to battle the king.

"Their battle was the greatest the kingdoms had ever seen. As the armies fought, the princess listened to their clashing swords and wanted to fight as well. How could she have been left behind when she'd proven herself in the past? But she had been left behind, for better or for worse. And while she waited for the battle to end, the magician faced the king. They dueled for hours while the soldiers around them fell. And finally, when they were at the end of their strength, they charged at each other. The king's sword pierced the magician's shoulder, but the magician's sword struck true, stabbing the king through the chest."
Maya grinned and bounced on the bed. "See? He is too a hero! He finished off the king!"

"But the queen was there, too, and so were all her soldiers," Cassandra pointed out.

"They're good too," Maya said with a nod. "So everyone went home and lived happily ever after, right?"

Cassandra could have agreed. Maybe she should have agreed and given them the happy ending they wanted. But that just wasn't how the story went. So Cassandra, after a moment, decided to tell them the truth – or at least as close to the truth as this story went. She shook her head and said, "Almost, but not quite. A lot of soldiers died in the battle, after all. And the magician hadn't just been wounded. The king's blade had poisoned him, too. The magician, knowing he was dying, regretted that he wouldn't be able to keep his promise to the princess. But at least he'd managed to keep her safe. She would live and maybe, someday, have a happy life all her own. When he died, the queen gave him a funeral of high honor, burning his body with the sword of the king."

Her children looked really annoyed now. "Mama, that's awful," Maya complained.

"I'm not done yet," Cassandra said. "Now after they'd buried the dead, the queen and her consort returned to their country to deliver the news. The princess was devastated, and for many months, no one could make her smile. She remained in the house she and the magician had been given, mourning him.

"Then, towards the end of summer, she asked for the medicine woman. The magician, who'd saved her in many ways, had given her one last gift. With the medicine woman's help, the princess had two children. A little girl-" She reached out and ruffled the fur between Maya's ears. "-and a little boy," she said, tweaking Chris's nose. Both of them gave her offended looks, but the effect was diminished by their smiles. "And the three of them lived happily together with the queen and all the others. The princess missed the magician, of course – but she saw him in their children, and in the end, that was enough of a happy ending for her." One half a happy ending could be enough, compared to nothing at all.

Her children didn't seem to agree with her, though. "Why couldn't the magician live? That's not fair! They should have had a happy ending together!" Maya said, with Christopher nodding beside her.

Cassandra leaned forward and hugged them. "I…I'm sorry, sweethearts. Sometimes things don't turn out the way we'd like them to, not even in stories."

Maya continued scowling, but Chris, looking somewhat sad and contemplative, tugged on her sleeve and asked, "What was the magi…no, what was Papa like?"

Sometimes her children surprised her with how perceptive they could be. They knew this story was about their family, though simplified from the truth and embellished in the language of fairy tales. Perhaps that was why they liked it so much, despite its questionable contents.

It suddenly occurred to Cassandra that they might know more about the magician than their own father. The thought was an uncomfortable one. She couldn't let it stand. "Well," she started with a gulp. "Your father was a powerful psychic. He looked like Maya, but was taller than your uncle and had different-colored fur. You have his eyes, Chris. And he – well, I guess he was kind of moody. It was kind of annoying, actually. But he was very smart and protective of the people he cared about. Though you had to do something to earn that care and his trust. He didn't give either out freely. So a lot of people thought he was cold, but that wasn't true. He – well, he loved me very much. He would also have loved you two, I know it. I think he really wanted a family. I-"
She stopped, took a deep breath, and admitted, "I'm not sure what to tell you. He wasn't perfect. He made some stupid and just plain wrong choices. But I don't think he ever wanted to hurt me. He wouldn't have wanted to hurt you either." That wasn't exactly a ringing endorsement, but it was the truth. He'd never intended to hurt her, even though he had so many times. "He – he had a lot of love in his heart. It was just hard for most people to see, because he guarded his heart so much."

They stared at her for a moment and then Chris asked, "Can – can you tell us a story about him?"

Of course she could. It took her a minute to think up something suitable, but when she did, she told them about the time she'd taken Mewtwo sledding. They giggled when she described Mewtwo's unease around the snow and ice – they were so used to both, living here – and grew quiet when she described making snow angels with him. Their eyes danced, though, and she decided she would try to tell them other stories about their father whenever they asked. His shortcomings they could discuss more when they were older.

She glanced at the clock and made a tsking noise. "You imps. It's way past your bedtime. Come on, Maya, back to your bed."

"But Mama, I'm not tired!"

"I saw that yawn. Go to bed or I won't tell you a story tomorrow night," she warned. Maya grumbled at that, but crawled out of Chris's bed and up into her own. Cassandra tucked them both in and pressed kisses to their foreheads. "Good night, sweethearts."

They mumbled their own good nights back to her. Cassandra closed the door behind her and leaned on it with a sigh. After taking a moment to center herself, she went downstairs. She met Michael in the kitchen, who stared at her for a moment, but then he handed her a letter. "Came in this morning by Pidgey Post."

She took the letter, glanced over the names and addresses, and gave him a tired smile. "Thanks, Michael. See you in the morning."

"See you," he said, passing her and heading upstairs to wash up for bed.

As the faucet of the sink was turned on, she opened the letter from Father Shannon and read it. He'd refused to leave Saffron City, even after the occupation, but hadn't been bothered by Team Rocket thus far. Not that all was well, of course. He'd lost some of his flock to the routes and the relative safety of Johto. He'd had to dismantle his church's windows to keep the shockwaves from the pokémon battles from shattering them. Then there were the stories of those who, like him, had decided to stay in Saffron. Some of them were faring decidedly less well than he was....

He didn't go into too much detail about their stories, though. He soon asked after how she and her family were doing: "I hope this finds you and yours well, Miss Hartell."

He only ever referred to her as Miss Hartell in their letters. Cassandra, after all, was an unusual name in these parts, and they couldn't risk Team Rocket locating her through their correspondence. That was why they used the Pidgey Postal Service in the first place: it wasn't as monitored as digital mail and hadn't broken down like the national post service had. Of course, there was always a chance that a bird could get lost in a storm or caught and its letter snatched. They knew that and tried to be as careful as they could be because of it.

Though honestly, Cassandra doubted that Giovanni would guess that she was exchanging letters with a priest.
Father Shannon seemed to be holding up okay, in any case. That was a relief. She wrote a few pages in reply to him, using no names but instead referring to people by their titles: her children's uncle, their aunts, their doctor. She told him some day-to-day events and that it had, recently, been the anniversary of her lover's death. Somehow that led her to writing about the war and the epidemic. She couldn't help but add, "I don't know what we'll do if they reach us here. We'll do our best to stay safe, Father. Please try to do the same. Sincerely, Miss Hartell."

She sealed the letter, addressed it, and found the stamps for the Pidgey Post on the counter. She'd drop off the letter at the Center in the morning. Maybe she could schedule Maya and Chris's next appointment with Aurora while she was there.

By the time she went upstairs, Michael had finished with the bathroom. She went through her own ablutions and then to bed. It was a quiet night and the skies were clear. It was hard for her to imagine that the sea was smoldering in the south. It was hard to imagine, but it was true.

She didn't sleep easy that night.

Her daughter also had an uneasy night, though for different reasons.

She was more tired than she'd let on to her mother. Almost as soon as she snuggled into her pillows, she was dreaming….

She was playing tag with Chris in the lavender fields. The sun was bright above them and the wind smelled like snow. Mama and Uncle and Aunty 'Rora were having a picnic nearby. They were sharing sandwiches and apples, and as she watched, Uncle ate a slice of fruit from Aunty's fingers. She'd seen that this morning before they'd realized she was there. They were so silly sometimes.

Mama stood and walked towards them, calling for them to come back. Maya felt Chris grab her paw and she turned around – but then Chris wasn't there anymore. No one was there anymore. As she watched, the fields froze and everything went blue. Maya started to feel a little scared then. Where had everyone gone? What was going on?

When she saw movement out of the corner of her eyes, she turned to look at it. Something black was flying by the Tower. It must have seen her, because suddenly it veered and swooped towards her, getting bigger and bigger as it got closer. When it flew over her, she realized what it was: a giant blackbird. It landed on a grave and stared at her with eyes made of stone. And despite the fact that this bird was big enough to snap her up in one bite, Maya wasn't afraid of it. It didn't seem to want to eat her.

She looked into the bird's eyes and saw herself reflected in them. She also saw that a tree was growing behind her. She spun around and watched the branches, scarred and gnarled, reach up towards the sun. From between its leaves, a thousand pairs of red eyes looked down at her. But they didn't scare her either.

Finally, there was a pale flash off to their side. She turned and saw a white deer, its silver antlers filed into points, racing through the fields. It glanced at them as it passed, and when it found the bird, it reached its muzzle towards it. The bird, after a moment, leaned down and pressed its beak against its fur…. Suddenly, a red glare fell over them. They turned to face the source of the light. Maya did the same – and then, scrambling back, she wished she hadn't.

Fire roared over the fields. Smoke swallowed the sun. Monstrous rats with greasy black fur and
bloody eyes scurried towards them. The deer bellowed and charged at them, swinging its antlers and catching the rats on its tines. As she watched, their stomachs were ripped open and their guts flew around the deer's head. The deer stamped on them as well, but there were too many of them, and their claws and teeth tore into the deer as they scurried up its legs.

Maya shrieked and looked at the bird. "Help him!" she screamed. "Don't let them hurt him! Please help him!"

But then she saw that the fire had reached the bird. She watched with horror as its feathers caught on fire and as the bird erupted into flames. It opened its beak and screeched a long, mournful cry. The sound reminded Maya of the sounds her mother made when she was having nightmares.

The recognition made Maya choke. She couldn't seem to breathe from the sadness and the smoke....

Then, suddenly, the dream stilled again.

A man dressed in white walked through the flames and the rats. With a gesture of his hand, the smoke swirled around them, covering everything except for the two of them. They stood facing each other, standing in what now looked like an orb of murky glass. His eyes glowed in the gloom like a cat's and slowly he reached up, pressing a finger to his lips....

Then he sank back into the smoke. As he did, it paled until it looked like mist. The wind blew again, sweeping it away with the bird, the deer, the tree, and the rats. When she tried to follow it, she thought she saw her mama in the fog, walking with a different man. He looked similar to the other one, but younger somehow. Her mama seemed younger too: rounder and with brighter eyes. But maybe that was just because she looked so happy.

Papa? Maya wondered. But no, that couldn't be him. Mama had said Papa looked like her and that man didn't look anything like Maya. But then she noticed his purple eyes and wasn't sure what to think.

The mist thickened and hid them. Though she tried to chase after them, calling out for her mama, she couldn't find them. She ended up running out of the mist and when she stopped and looked around, she discovered she wasn't in the lavender fields anymore. She was standing in a field of tall grasses instead. It was drizzling now, but the moon peeked through the low-hanging clouds, making everything shine silver.

And there was someone standing in the middle of the field. He was dressed in a long cloak and had a sword in his hand. Is he the magician? she wondered.

But then he turned and she realized he wasn't the magician at all. He looked like her, but his features were sharper and he was much bigger than her. For a second, his glare made her retreat a few steps...but then awe took its place. She'd never seen anyone who looked like her before! When he took a step towards her, she didn't back away, even when she noticed that his sword was stained with something dark.

She held his gaze instead and asked, "Who are you?" There was an echo as she spoke – a resonance to her question – and she realized that he'd asked her the same thing at the same time. His eyes widened as he seemed to realize that too.

She stepped closer and was about to tell him her name, but then the dream went black. The figure, the field, and the rainy night sky all disappeared. Maya suddenly became aware of the blanket tucked in around her and of the sound of her brother's breathing. After a moment, she opened her eyes and turned over to look at him.
She gulped and telepathically prodded Chris's mind. "Chris? You awake?"

Her brother stirred under his blanket, mumbled groggily, and then opened his own telepathic link to her. "Yeah. What happened? You have another one of your dreams?" he asked, yawning and clutching his mew toy to his chest.

After a second, Maya did the same with hers. "Yeah. Wanna hear about it?"

"Course I do. Tell me," he insisted, rubbing his eyes and seeming to wake up a bit more.

She thought back on the dream and began, "We were playing tag in the fields and then…." She told him everything she could remember and he listened attentively.

It was a long time before they went back to sleep.

In a faraway field drenched in rain, Mewtwo opened his eyes. He felt unsettled by…something. There was something…no, someone…he couldn't remember. "I saw someone," he whispered. "Who…?"

Citlali, floating above him, said, "It was just a dream. Go back to sleep."

As weary as he was from the day's events, Mewtwo took his brother's suggestion. He didn't see the way the mew's eyes glowed as he drifted back to sleep. He slept with the sound of rustling leaves in his ears and the taste of dew in his mouth. When he woke up the next morning, he didn't remember waking up in the middle of the night…and he certainly didn't remember what he'd dreamed.

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Thank You: Silvar Sunstrider, Love Psycho, Kosaten no Koinatsuyosa, blackwater2, nobodyreallyimportant, Leone the Infernal, shugokage, Guest, CrossroadxOFxVesper, Phantom SWH, and HieiHeeroJiroRikuSesshySeto for reading and reviewing the previous chapter. I hope you and my other readers will do the same for this one!

Author's Note: Here's hoping you enjoy the bonus scene below, which will be my answer to the questions of: where do the new Mewtwo Mega Forms stand in this story? And will they or the new Mewtwo character be featured in Angelic Shadows? I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it. Until next time!

Sincerely,

WiseAbsol

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Bonus Scene: A Hopeful Start in House Hartell

Mewtwo still wasn't used to waking up this early in the morning. Not even the mug of tea Cassandra gave him helped. But it was warm, so he carried it into the living room and sat down in the armchair. As he sipped the steaming beverage, he gestured irritably at the blankets on the couch. They folded themselves up and tucked themselves underneath the coffee table, along with the pillows he'd used. After years of sleeping outside, the couch was an improvement, but he did sometimes think about the bed upstairs with longing. That his mate slept in it made the thought even more tantalizing….

He shoved the thought aside when he heard little feet coming down the stairs. He watched Cassandra's children (and his, he thought, his stomach lurching and his mouth going dry) hurry into the kitchen. The little boy – Christopher, his name was Christopher – stopped in the doorway
between the rooms. "Are you coming?" he asked, smiling shyly.

"In a minute. Go on ahead, your mother's waiting." Mewtwo managed to say.

Christopher nodded, went inside, and said something to Cassandra. After a moment, Mewtwo followed them. The man – Michael – had come in from taking his houndoom outside. His jaw clenched as he watched Cassandra brush snow off of Michael's jacket and smile at something he said. Mewtwo knew he was reacting foolishly, of course. There was nothing between the two of them for him to be jealous about. So he sat down at the table, forcefully suppressing his fantasy of going over there, wrapping his arms and tail around his mate, and hissing at the man for getting so close to her. He doubted Cassandra would take that well. In fact, he rather thought Cassandra would punch him for that if he tried.

So he buried the urge and looked over at the twins, who were sitting across from him. The girl, Maya, beamed at him over her juice. "Mama says you're gonna watch us again today!" she told him.

"Is that so?" he said, reaching into the fruit bowl and taking out an orange. He carefully peeled the rind back with his claws.

"Uh-huh. Isn't that right, Mama?"

"Isn't what right, sweetheart?" Cassandra asked, spreading peanut butter on slices of toast.

"Papa's watching us today." His stomach did another uncomfortable lurch at that word: Papa.

Cassandra looked at him closely and nodded. "Yes, he will. Ana's also going to be here if you need her."

"And where will you be going, Cassandra? Are you going to see that man again?" Mewtwo asked her, his claws piercing the flesh of the fruit.

Cassandra raised an eyebrow at him. "And what if I am?"

He knew he had to tread carefully with her. They'd talked about this. "I…I merely want to know, in case I need to contact you about the children."

Her eyes softened slightly at his answer. She sighed. "Yeah, that's where we're going. We'll be back in a few hours, tops. Just make sure they don't get into too much trouble, okay?"

"I will," he promised.

They ate breakfast after that, and when Cassandra and Michael walked out the door, he followed the children into the living room. They turned the television on to some cartoon about giant, transforming robots, which they seemed to be familiar with. He sat down on the couch and couldn't help but tense as the guardswoman, Anastasia, came in. He tried not to twitch as she took out a stack of paper and the children's art kit. Of course – how could he have forgotten to do that? He would have to be better at remembering next time….

He resisted the urge to move away as the guardswoman walked over and stood beside him. He wasn't used to people who weren't his brother or his mate getting this close to him. "How are you feeling?" she asked.

Mewtwo considered ignoring her, but that wouldn't accomplish anything worthwhile. "I am tired," he admitted. "I am not yet used to this schedule."
She sat down in the armchair. "If you need a nap, go ahead. I can watch them."

He stared at her appraisingly. "I am grateful for the offer, but Cassandra has tasked me with watching them. She will not be pleased if she discovers that I slept instead."

The guardswoman shrugged. "I can always wake you up before she gets back." After a moment, she added, "I know this can't be easy on you. Getting some more sleep might help."

"...You are very kind," he said slowly. He wasn't certain he deserved such kindness, after everything that had happened. "But I must try to stay awake for them."

He did try his best, but between the white noise from the television and the sunlight pouring in through the windows, he ended up dozing on the couch. He jerked awake sometime later when the art kit crashed to the floor. He reached for his powers and his sword – but no, it was no longer at his side – before he remembered where he was. He held his breath a moment, urging himself to calm down. His ingrained habits from the war weren't of any use here.

When his breathing and heart rate slowed to normal, and when some of the tension in him unwound, he sat up and looked at the children. They looked back at him curiously. They were both levitating spilled crayons back into their box. For a moment, he felt a stirring of pride as he watched them. For them to do something so delicate with their powers at this age...they would surely be very skilled and strong when they were older.

"Sorry," Christopher said after a second, looking embarrassed. "It fell."

"Do not worry about it. I should not have been sleeping." He looked at the armchair and saw that it was empty. "Where is the guardswoman?"

"Ana's making lunch right now," Christopher told him, putting the box back on the table. Maya had already returned to her drawing.

Mewtwo felt himself twitch again. He should be doing that. He was their father; he should be taking care of them, making sure they ate something, making sure they were safe and... He leaned forward and rubbed his brow, feeling his teeth grind and a headache coming on. He didn't want to admit that he didn't know what to do in this situation, but it was true. Of all the things he'd imagined finding when he was reunited with Cassandra, finding out that he'd gotten her pregnant and that she'd been raising the children on her own...no, that had never occurred to him. How could it? It shouldn't have been possible and yet here they were.

The girl, Maya, hopped up onto the couch with him. "We made you pictures!" she said brightly, not seeming to notice his mood.

Mewtwo, a bit uncertainly, took the pictures and looked at them. They were difficult to decipher, but he picked out a few trees and green blobs that he figured must be bushes. Maybe the picture was supposed to take place in the park? That could be it. After staring at it some more, he made out a crude representation of Cassandra, who was pointing up at something. There were shapes in the sky, which he knew from the colors couldn't be clouds. They appeared to be dark purple and red boxes. He remembered that the children had been watching a show about robots, so maybe that was what these were.

He decided to ask. "And what are these, exactly?"

"They're bug robots. They're trying to take over the park and get Mama. But you're gonna stop them," Maya said, pointing to the other, curvier blob in the sky, which was colored light purple.
Christopher's picture had one as well, though his seemed bulkier, as if Mewtwo had suddenly gained more muscle and additional layers of bony armor around his shoulders. Why those layers were colored dark purple like his tail, Mewtwo wasn't sure.

Of course, Christopher's depiction of him was normal compared to Maya's. "Why is my tail on my head?" Mewtwo asked after a moment. That didn't seem like it would be good for his balance or his neck. "And why do I have a handle above it?"

"Because then you can whip it back and forth like the shampoo girls," Maya stated, as if that were obvious. "And the handle's so Mama can drag you back home when you're done fighting."

Mewtwo's lips twitched. "I am certain she would enjoy that. So I am able to change into both of these forms, then?"

Maya nodded. "Yep. There's magic stones buried in the park, but you find them and transform into a Mega Mewtwo! You have super-speed in my picture," she said proudly.

"And you're super strong in mine," Christopher offered shyly.

"I see. So I am switching between these forms to battle these robots insects, then? There is not another Mewtwo who is fighting with me?" he asked, since that was what it looked like when he put the two pictures together.

"No, it's just you," Maya confirmed. "I could make you a girl in mine, though."

Mewtwo smiled slightly at that. "That is quite alright. I am quite content with my current gender," he said, carefully setting the pictures on the table. "Why robots insects, if I may ask?"

Chris looked a little embarrassed. "Aunty 'Rina said psychics can't fight good against bugs and steel types. So that's why you need Mega Forms – so you can beat them," he explained.

"And Mama doesn't like beetles," Maya added. "She said a lot of bad words when she found some in the kitchen."

Mewtwo's smile widened. He could easily imagine Cassandra cursing up a storm at that. "I see. Well, thank you for these. It was very thoughtful of you to make them for me."

They both smiled at him and said, "You're welcome." Then Christopher squirmed and asked, "We can make you more, if you want?"

"I would like that," Mewtwo said, warmed by the offer.

The children both grabbed new sheets of papers and handfuls of crayons, looking determined. They squabbled over who would get what color, though after a minute it became clear that they had a system of trading back and forth. A little while later, the guardswoman came in and announced that lunch was ready. The four of them ate soup and sandwiches, with the children telling them what had happened on their favorite cartoon. Anastasia volunteered to do the dishes afterwards, giving Mewtwo an encouraging nod to go back into the living room with the children. There he watched them draw, feeling strangely peaceful and hopeful. They had a long way to go before they'd be a real family. He knew that.

But it was a start. He could work with a start.

Mewtwo watched his children and allowed himself, for at least this little while, to feel happy again.
“If the living are haunted by the dead, then the dead are haunted by their own mistakes.”

- Chuck Palahniuk, *Damned.*

The White Death was coming for them.

The Rocket Executive knew it. Less than an hour ago, the night had been clear around them. Then the mist had crept up, thick enough to blind them and make it hard to breathe. The temperature had plummeted, too, leaving them shivering in damp clothes as they tried to escape the forest they’d been camped in.

They were supposed to be heading east – heading *home* – but the Executive suspected they were going in circles now. He also suspected there was nothing they could do about it. The stars had been choked out, their compasses weren’t working, and the pokémon scouts they’d sent out hadn't returned. They’d strained their ears, listening and *hoping* to hear a battle, but there had only been that dreadful silence.

It wasn't just their pokémon who disappeared, either. *Anyone* who ran ahead or fell behind vanished into the white.

Their radios weren't working. Static filled the channels, which – apart from the mist and the *silence* – was another one of the signs of the White Death. Truth be told, no one would have learned about it if it hadn't been for the radios. There had always been a patrol or two that didn't make it back to base. Blame it on the League's lackeys, blame it on deserters, blame it on some freak accident or just fucking getting lost – one group in twenty disappeared without a trace. It hadn't really bothered him. After all, this was a war, and even on the *winning side,* there would be causalities.

But that was before the White Death came. In the last month, *six* of their best units had been swallowed up by the mist. They were being targeted, but by what? The fourth group had given them the only clue they had. They’d been chatting over the lines with another group, about some rare pokémon they'd caught or some pretty rebel they'd fucked, when their radios had begun squealing and sputtering out. The group listening had heard a few things through the static: "*Fog – where did – what is that? WHAT IS-?*

There'd been a thud and then the line had died.

They’d rushed over to the site, arriving there as the last wisps of mist were fading away. It had left behind bodies with their entrails spilling out; bodies with missing heads and limbs and fingers; bodies with pits for eyes and toothless mouths. The group had thought it was the work of a monster. The Executive couldn't argue with that, but the work, for all its brutality, wasn't recognized the massacre for what it was: an act of psychological warfare. It was meant to demoralize them.

The evidence of torture also worried him. It meant that the thing doing this *wanted* something from them – and until it got what it wanted, it was going to hunt them down. He understood that, but his understanding didn't make being its prey any easier.
He'd never thought it would be them.

But now the White Death was here. The Executive couldn't blame the others for being afraid; try as he might to keep a brave face, he was cold with terror too. Fighting the League's army single-handedly would have felt better than facing this shapeless, bloodthirsty thing.

*If I die, I swear to God I'm going to fuck Him up the ass,* the Executive thought furiously.

They'd probably been doomed as soon as the fog had rolled in, but even so, he kept his gun in hand, released his starter to slither beside him, and made damn sure to keep the others moving. When one of them stumbled – or worse, hesitated from getting up – he snarled at them.

"Get to your fucking feet! I forbid you to give up and die!"

His words lashed out at them, galvanizing most of them into standing up and pressing on. A few, though, just stared back at him with hollow eyes. At first, he laid hands on them, dragging them to their feet. At first, he tried to get the others to carry them. But the mist was getting thicker and colder; frost was icing their clothes and they were running out of time. They couldn't slow down now. So when the next one fell and wouldn't get up, they left him behind.

The Executive didn't like it, but his priority was to get as many of them through this as possible. He wanted them to live – fuck, *he wanted to live,* but if they all had to die, it shouldn't be on their bellies in the dirt. No, he wanted to go down fighting. He wanted to go out with some *fucking dignity.* Not like those gutless piss-ants they'd left behind.

He scanned the mist. They were surrounded by the tall, hazy shadows of trees. Everything around them was still. Then, out of the corner of his eye, he thought he saw something move. He peered in that direction, but whipped his head around when he heard something hiss on his other side. He wasn't the only one who heard it. The others twisted around to look, raising their guns and shouting orders to their pokémon. A ratticate and a persian leapt forward, fangs and claws bared. They became murky shapes in the fog - and then, so faint that he almost missed it, there were two flickers of light.

A second passed. Then a drop of rain hit his face.

When he wiped it away, redness smeared his fingers.

He didn't have time to shout before the *thing* came at them. His men and their pokémon screamed. Some of them charged desperately, hoping their bullets or elemental attacks might land a hit. None did and none saved them. The figure, cloaked in grey, weaved through them and cut them down. The blade it wielded glowed and *burned* when sank through flesh and fur. The Executive watched, frozen, as one man was run through, as another lost an arm, and yet another lost his head.

Their pokémon fared no better. No matter where they tried to attack it from, no matter how hard they tried to protect their trainers, none of them succeeded. One moment the thing would be killing someone at one end of the clearing, then the next it would appear at the other end, cutting off anyone's hope of escaping. In less than two minutes, his unit was *gone.*

When the thing finally turned to him, he tried to fight it. He fired until his clip was empty and released the rest of his team to fence it off. He ordered them to stay out of its range, but the monster flew forward, its bright steel butchering them with ease. His starter, in one last, desperate attempt, hurled himself at the figure and wrapped it in his coils. The snake, his fangs dripping venom, tried to bite their attacker – but then there was another flash of steel and the snake fell away in *pieces.*
Shock crashed through the Executive and left him numb. His legs went out and he stared at the remains of his friend. That was his starter. He remembered getting the arbok as an egg when he’d been ten years old. He remembered when he’d hatched. He remembered when he’d shed his first skin and evolved. He remembered teaching him Venoshock with the TM he’d spent months saving up for.

And now his first pokémon, his friend, was gone. How was that possible? How had this happened? How?

The Executive didn't try to run. He crawled towards his friend and reached out to the arbok, trying to convince himself that this wasn't real. That maybe his snake had slithered away and was hiding in the brush. He didn't notice or care about the thing that walked towards him.

He felt the edge of the blade at his neck, though. It was sharp and hot and wet.

That's Apollo's blood, he thought. He wanted to weep.

A voice cut into his brain. "If you want a quick and painless death, you will tell me everything you know." It – no, he – said that as if he thought torture would be worse than this. As if any amount of physical pain could be worse than what he was currently feeling.

"No. I won't." In that moment of defiance, he tore his eyes away from Apollo and looked into the face of the White Death.

His eyes were glowing blue – and he was smiling.

Years earlier, Mewtwo and Citlali appeared on the crags of Sinnoh's Route 215. The route was known for its towering pine trees, its rickety wooden bridges, and its perpetually rainy weather. Mewtwo was soon scowling from the mud, the chilly downpour that soaked through his cloak and fur, and the realization that his brother – who was still warm and dry in his bubble shield – hadn't warned him about either discomfort.

The legendary, not seeming to notice his scowl, gestured for Mewtwo to follow him with a flick of his tail. Since he couldn't levitate, Mewtwo followed him on foot, grimacing as his paws sank into slimy mud and cold puddles, grimacing as the bridges swayed beneath him, and grimacing as pine needles pricked into the pads of his feet. As they made their way to the northern stretch of the route, Mewtwo unsuccessfully tried to kindle a psychic fire to warm himself. Since the result was searing pain, he quickly dropped the effort.

Shivering, he hunched his shoulders and steadied his steps with his walking stick. He hoped Citlali didn't intend to make them stay here for long. Though, knowing his brother, Mewtwo thought he might. The mew delighted in making him uncomfortable.

Citlali floated ahead of him. As the rain hit his pink bubble shield, it hissed and steamed. Every few seconds he would pause, wait for Mewtwo to catch up, and then press on, now leading him west. They passed over more bridges, hills, and fields. They jumped down slippery ridges and bent saplings out of their way. Eventually Mewtwo saw the first hint of their destination: a gleam of yellow amongst the washed out blues and greens. Ahead of them, alone amongst the evergreens, was a towering aspen tree with golden leaves.

But that couldn't be right. This tree's leaves were oval-shaped, not circular; its white bark was encased in amber; and even from this distance and through the rain, the sweet scent of honey was wafting from it. Aspens also thrived in sunlight, not shade. He supposed he would just have to call the oddity a honey tree until he figured out its true species.
As they approached it, Mewtwo saw there was someone sitting beneath it. The thin, almost atrophied creature sat cross-legged, with its palms upturned on its knees. As they walked beneath the honey tree's branches, the alakazam opened its eyes, gazed at both of them, and spoke in an old yet soothing voice. "So this is the child you want me to teach, Bright Star? You didn't mention the state he is in."

While Mewtwo found Citlali's title curious, he also bristled at the alakazam's implication. "I have healed enough. I am prepared to do whatever it takes to regain my power."

A dry laugh resounded in the clone's mind. "Physically, perhaps. But in spirit, you are little more than ash and shattered bones. It will take time – and obedience – before you can regain your strength, let alone be ready for what I would teach you. Yet you seem determined and that is a good place to start as any." The alakazam looked at Citlali. "Do I have your permission to humble him?"

"Please do." Citlali mewled and did a backwards flip, looking unconcerned as he discussed his brother's future. "I won't be going easy on him. He has to learn these skills if he's going to play his part in the war."

"Ah. So that is your goal." And if the alakazam said anything else, he said it privately to Citlali.

A few minutes passed. Rain dripped onto Mewtwo's head and trickled down his necks. Then the alakazam grabbed the spoons lying in the grass beside him and rose to his feet. Mewtwo could almost hear the fox's bones creaking and his joints popping. He noted the leathery look of the creature's skin; the dullness of the brown armor across his chest, shoulders, forearms, and knees; and the streaks of grey in his lengthy whiskers. He didn't look like such a powerful fighter. He certainly didn't look like someone who could teach Mewtwo what his brother couldn't. He looked like one smack of Mewtwo's tail would do him in.

But Citlali was proof enough that looks could be deceiving. Physical strength didn't necessarily equal power. Mewtwo may have defeated alakazams before, but the older an alakazam was, the more formidable it was said to be. From what he'd learned of them, their memories were infallible; neither time nor self-delusion affected them. The alakazams forgot nothing from the moment they drew their first breath to the moment they sighed their last. Each experience and lesson remained with them, ensuring that they never repeated their mistakes – especially in battle.

"Come, child," the alakazam called, stepping out from under the tree and into the rain. He didn't seem bothered by the storm. Perhaps he weathered it as he'd weathered life. Or perhaps he simply couldn't feel the rain through his thick hide.

Mewtwo followed. "My name is Mewtwo. I would prefer to be called that."

The alakazam led him into the field and then turned to face him. "If what Citlali has told me is true, then 'Mewtwo' is dead. He was killed by his enemies and his recklessness. For your sake, it would be best if he remain that way. If you are to move forward, you must let go of your past."

Mewtwo shook his head. He'd heard of ideas like this – of reshaping one's self through severing all one had been – and he wasn't willing to do that. He wanted no transformation; he simply wanted to reclaim what he'd once had. Holding onto his past was a part of that. His past had made him who he was. His past was what motivated him now. His past was also Cassandra, and if she couldn't be at his side, then he needed to keep her in his thoughts.

He was doing this to get back to her. He needed to get back to her.

_I made her a promise._
The alakazam seemed to read his thoughts. He shook his head, levitated upwards, and reached out a claw and touched Mewtwo's forehead.

"You misunderstand my meaning. I know you won't be swayed from your path. But you are full of anger, grief, regret, and even hatred. Those feelings, dark as they are, can fuel your psychic abilities – but they will also hinder you from learning what I wish to teach you. Determination is not enough. For these skills, you will need clarity of mind. You will need to empty your heart of its passions. And I have my doubts that you are capable of that.

"After all, you are here to become strong again, but for the sake of another. If you clothe yourself in thoughts of her, you will never be able to see the unseeable or touch the untouchable. She – or rather, your feelings for her – will stand in your way."

Mewtwo's paws clenched into fists. "I will not give her up."

"Again, you misunderstand me. I won't ask that of you. Giving up someone we love one is almost impossible for creatures like us." The fox retracted his claw. "But you must set your thoughts of her aside for the time being. The sooner you do so, the sooner you'll learn – and the sooner you learn, the sooner you can return to her. Do you understand?"

That wasn't something Mewtwo wanted to hear, but he nodded nonetheless.

"Good."

The alakazam then sat down, cross-legged with his paws upturned. Water pooled in his palms. "Now sit. Yes, it's wet, but the rain keeps ambient energies grounded. You may even find it soothing after a while."

Given that it was cold as well as wet, Mewtwo doubted that. Even so, he sat down and waited for further instructions.

"Are you familiar with the energy pathways in your body?" the fox asked.

Mewtwo grimaced as water trickled down his spine. "By energy, do you mean the force human have called chi or chakra – or more crudely, power points?"

"Correct. Are you familiar with those pathways?"

The clone had read about the pathways, had studied diagrams, and had felt how his psychic energies circulated throughout his body. "I am."

"And what do you make of your current psychic disability?"

The question seemed unrelated, but Mewtwo surmised that the thoughts must be connected somehow. "Citlali told me I burned myself out. I have done so once before, but the waters of Mt. Quena restored me, so I am not certain what the damage is now. Are you saying I have damaged these energy pathways?"

The alakazam nodded. "There are reservoirs within the body that hold this energy. The form that energy takes varies from person to person and pokémon to pokémon. Your reservoirs, which carry psychical energy, are larger than most creatures' and replenish more quickly. Due to this, I doubt you were aware of your limitations. How could you be when they accomplished all you wished them to? You shifted mountains, bent minds to your will, and summoned the world-eating storm. Am I wrong? No, I am right in this.

"You have known fatigue, to be sure, but you have rarely forced yourself beyond that point. This time, you forced all of your energy out all at once – and like too much water surging through a pipe,
"the pipe twisted and burst in response."

The fox peered at him with a dark look, but didn't sound like he was judging him. "You have mangled the energy pathways in your body. Your reservoirs are tapped dry. What little energy you have left is struggling to circulate through those pathways and gather in the reservoirs. Each time you use your power, you feel the effects. Your power comes because you call, but your body begs you to cease."

"If you are to regain your strength and if I am to teach you, then we must mend the damage. It will not be a pleasant experience, for I have no miracle water to give you. Nor do I think such an option would be wise – you must know how to correct this damage in the future, whether it is you who suffers from it or someone else. Are you prepared to do this?"

"I am…teacher." It seemed right to call the alakazam that, now that he'd diagnosed the problem that had been vexing him.

"Good. Then let us begin…"
But Mewtwo did grow impatient as the rain turned into snow and the snow melted into mud. He wondered if he would ever learn the techniques the alakazam had promised to teach him.

Of course, he wasn't being trained by only the old fox. Citlali was also teaching Mewtwo a special technique – a technique Mewtwo had long coveted. There were many potential uses for it, though Citlali seemed to be thinking of its immediate, short-term advantage: it would allow Mewtwo to hide in plain sight. In the long run, though, it could mean a much more comfortable life for him with Cassandra, so Mewtwo was keen on mastering it.

That being said, the technique was a slippery and uncooperative one. Dozens of sessions went by without a bit of progress. Mewtwo needed to be in the right mental space for it: aware of himself and all that he was, but also striving to let that awareness go. Then came putting those thoughts into motion, into using his powers to unravel himself and weave himself back together. It required perfect intent and perfect belief. It would work because he willed it to and didn't doubt his abilities for a moment.

In theory, that shouldn't have been so difficult. He'd spent his life working his will on the world around him. He knew what it felt like. But turning his abilities inwards…somehow, that was much harder for him to manage.

It didn't help that any mistakes he made could be lethal. So Mewtwo observed Citlali closely, straining his psychic senses to feel out and memorize each step of the technique. The kitten made it much harder by injecting the most inane comments and random observations into his lecture ("Doesn't that cloud look like a pidgey's butt-feathers, brother?").

There were days when his teachers left him so frustrated that he wanted to set the forest on fire. He never did, though. For one thing, that would draw too much attention to the route. For another, the fire wouldn't even burn that long or satisfactorily. The wet trees and the constant rain would make short work of it.

So Mewtwo meditated instead. He sat down and measured his breaths. He listened to the rain falling around him. He focused on the feeling of raindrops hitting his pelt and sliding down it. He kept his thoughts clear and tried to let his anger wash away.

Sometimes it worked. Sometimes it didn't. Sometimes he went to sleep with his mind at ease. Sometimes he tossed and turned and dreamed terrible things.

It was during one of those nights (he dreamed there was fire all around him, fire all around her, licking at their skin and making it bubble and blacken and peel away from their bones) that the visitor arrived.

The rainclouds parted at her approach. The crescent moon's light poured through them, making the route glitter silver. She descended in its rays, a swan with blue feathers across her back and sides and yellow feathers flowing down her throat and stomach. Glowing pink bands extended from her body, while two small magenta wings were clasped together over her chest. Her golden plume flowed around her head in the shape of golden crescents; her beak was short and straight like a songbird's; and her eyes and forehead were the same deep magenta color.

When she reached the clone, she trilled and extended one of her bands over his head. She filled his mind with sweeter thoughts: of the scents of mint and eucalyptus, of the tastes of cream and blackberries, of the sounds of wind chimes and his lover's laughter. Mewtwo's paws unclenched, his brow smoothed, and his labored breathing eased as he calmed down.

"You've been through so much pain," she whispered, "so rest easy now. Things will seem brighter
in the morning."

"Perhaps for a moment. Then he'll start fretting again, as always," Citlali said as he drifted towards her. "Thank you, though. He should at least have one night of peaceful dreams."

The legendary, Cresselia, gave the mew a hard look. "Yes, he should. Especially because he's not at fault for them. At least not entirely."

"...I did what had to be done."

She turned away from him. "What had to be done. What a heartless thing to say."

Citlali tilted his head. "I'd rather be called heartless than let his heart lead him astray. This might not be an easy path for him, but it's the right one. The pain he's feeling now is nothing compared to what he would have experienced if I hadn't intervened."

"Maybe not," she conceded. "But I think I will give him some gifts of my own to make his journey easier."

Citlali's expression became guarded. "And why would you do that?"

After a moment, she said, "Because I've long seen his troubled face looking up at me. I've seen him yearning for someone's help, but not knowing how to ask for it. So I'll help him in what little ways I can. Then she met his eyes and did not quail. "I won't ask for your permission, mew."

The mew stared back at her and then turned away. "Do as you'd like."

As she turned away from him as well, she added, "Oh, and before I forget, the Other Star wants you to come and tell him stories. I said I'd pass the message along."

Citlali went very still at that. Then he asked, "How much time do you need with Mewtwo?"

"Not long. A week or two at most."

His tail twitched. "I'll tell Yasu to leave Mewtwo in your care during that time. I'll see you all again in a fortnight."

An hour later, the mew surfaced from the rainstorm and flew southwest. As he left the shores of Sinnoh, he decided that he would visit his other charges while he was away. That would be the best use of his time. He could check up on the woman and her children, too. It wouldn't do to lose track of them….

Cresselia, watching over Mewtwo, brushed a band to his forehead. "We'll begin when you wake up," she whispered. "For now, allow yourself this night of rest." And Mewtwo did, sleeping well for the first time in ages.

Training with Cresselia was a reprieve.

As invested as Mewtwo was in mastering what Citlali and the alakazam were teaching him, struggling to learn for months now had been more stressful than he'd wanted to admit. The fact that they pushed him so hard and told him, more than once, that he – and those he cared about - wouldn't survive "the coming storm" if he didn't did not help.

Having a break from that – and a teacher who was willing to offer him encouragement – was a much-needed relief.
She wanted to teach him two skills, and compared to those of Citlali and the alakazam, they were welcomingly accessible. The first was the ability to conjure mist regardless of his surroundings. He already knew how to make fire and lightning, which were at the opposite ends of the elemental spectrum, so he already had a foundation in the basics.

"You must focus on the water and air around us," she told him in a patient voice. "Cool and still the air, but warm up the water. The mist will form from that and will hide you from prying eyes. You can use it as a means of escape or as preparation for an ambush."

Having summoned hurricanes in the past, fiddling with the temperatures of air and water came easily to him. The problem, for him, was doing so on such a small scale. Mewtwo was used to grandiose displays of his power, so fine uses of it was harder for him to manage. He simply had much more raw energy at his disposal than most pokémon.

He'd come into it abruptly, too. He'd never had the chance to start out small and learn from there. As such, in his first few attempts at making mist, instead of the rain easing and the fog forming, he strengthened the rainstorm above them into a typhoon. Cresselia calmed the howling winds and rain with a gesture of her wing and asked him to try again.

The clone did so, regulating his breathing and thinking about still and cool air. He then concentrated on the water around him – in the muddy pools, in the pine needles, in the drizzle falling between them – and willed the water particles to vibrate, to begin to split and steam. At that, bursts of fog erupted from the puddles all around them, engulfing the entire route.

Through that thick, white murk, Mewtwo could see Cresselia's eyes glowing. "Very good, Mewtwo. Now try to disperse it. After that, we will see if you can't...tone it down a bit. A fog like this, while useful, may hinder you instead of help you. Its arrival also wasn't as...subtle as we want it to be." After a moment, she cheerfully added, "You are making good progress, though."

Mewtwo nodded and tried to do what she'd asked. He focused on the water particles in the air around them, quickening them more and circulating them upwards. The fog dispersed, though the drizzle resumed shortly afterwards.

He spent the next several hours repeating the process and experimenting with different temperatures and moisture levels. Over the next two days, he learned how to slowly envelop the route in mist and dissipate it with a thought. He figured out how to enshroud tiny groves in mist or just himself. He experimented from there, shifting mist into rain, rain into sleet, and sleet into snow and ice.

Fire and lightning had always come easily to him. They'd seemed like natural extensions to his fierce will and temperament. The elements he was working with now required the opposite from him. They required a calm and cool mind. They required gracefulness and just a bit of sneakiness. Mewtwo found he didn't mind acquiring the latter. For years, he'd faced his battles head-on, crushing his enemies with his strength. Yet that same brute, psychical force had failed him last time, so perhaps this craftier style of fighting would suit him better in the coming war....

In any case, he mastered Mist within three days. Cresselia warned him, though, that other, drier environments would make conjuring it more difficult. This led them to leaving the route for an island off Sinnoh's western coast. After spending months in the perpetually damp Route 215, the dryness of the air – and of his pelt – was a jarring but welcome change, as was the clear, starry sky.

As they soared through the night, he thought of what it would be like to truly leave – to turn his path south to his homeland and to where he'd last seen her. Though Citlali had said Cassandra might be in Sinnoh, Mewtwo now found himself doubting that. She felt farther away than ever now. He reminded himself that the skills he was learning would help him find her someday. They had to or
the time he spent mastering them would be worthless….

Cresselia led him to an arid mountain of red-brown stone, banded with grey. Looking out over the
island, he saw that the mountainside had gashes and shelves cut into it, with well-tracked roads
weaving between them. These gashes and shelves spiraled down into an open shaft, and when he
looked closer, Mewtwo saw piles of rubble and mining equipment. There was a honeycomb of
tunnel entrances along the base of the mountain, though most, except for the largest one, had been
boarded over. He looked out to the shoreline and he saw the lights of a small town twinkling.

Pebbles tumbled into the void and he stepped closer the edge of the cliff. "This is Iron Island, is it
not?"

Cresselia nodded. "It is. Once, this island was covered in forest. Steel pokémon thrived here and
watched over the humans who settled on the shore. Those first humans mined the mountain with
care, taking what they needed to create swords for warlords on the mainland. In exchange for those
swords, the island was left in peace."

The corners of her eyes crinkled. There was a wry tone to her voice as she continued,
"Unfortunately, the demands of modern man have reduced the island to this. The people here
prospered from the mining, for a time, until the iron ran out. Now they mostly offer their lands as
training grounds to trainers, especially steel-type specialists. On occasion, when the price of iron
increases, they still try to mine the mountain, but they fail every time. Despite this, there is still a
sword-making industry here. The best sword-masters in the archipelago live in that little town."

She ruffled her wings. "Yet I digress. We aren't here to teach you any iron-type moves."

Mewtwo looked over at her and thought, *Yet you wanted me to know that information all the
same.* He didn't comment on that, though, but instead asked, "And what do you wish to teach me
here?"

"As I said before, this is a good place to practice conjuring mist, since the air is so dry up here.
More important to your training, though, is the clear sky. You know Recover, don't you? The move
I'm hoping to teach is a variation of that. It derives its healing power from an outside source, rather
than an internal one."

He could see the use in that. Not having to use his own energy would mean he could focus it on
other things – and he could never have too many healing techniques, either. So over the next few
nights, Cresselia showed him how to harness Moonlight. She taught him how to catch and convert it
into healing energy, like a plant absorbing and taking nourishment from the light of the sun.

The process itself would have been difficult for him to explain scientifically, because it was largely
based on faith. He had to believe that the silver sparkles falling on him could knit his cuts, fade his
bruises, and ease away the knots in his muscles. If he didn't believe it would work, the sparkles
would melt back into normal rays of moonlight and his wounds wouldn't be healed.

Cresselia, pleased with his progress, rewarded him by giving him the next few days off. This left
Mewtwo rather at a loss for what to do with himself. He knew what he wanted to do after his
training was completed, but that was still months away at best, so having downtime now was
confusing. After about an hour of pacing, he decided to venture down to town.

The smithies, which had been restored and were used as tourist attractions, still rang with the sound
of hammers striking anvils. Furnace heat poured out of the doors and windows he passed by. *Cresselia told me about their industry for a reason,* he thought, looking into one and watching a
sword maker folding steel. *Perhaps I should have a sword for myself. After all, I need a way to fight*
dark pokémon and a sword is quieter than any gun.

Cassandra had favored knives for that reason, he remembered. The more he thought about it, the more fitting he decided a sword would be. He didn't have claws, after all, so an artificial one would complement him well. *I will find the best sword maker here and see what I might learn*, he decided.

So Mewtwo, keeping his cloak draped around himself and staying in the shadows, began to scout out the smithies. He dismissed a few of the larger producers, which favored quantity over quality, almost immediately. While their businesses no doubt kept many of the islanders housed and fed, their swords wouldn't suit his needs. The smaller businesses, which had much more distinct styles (and much higher prices to match), attracted him more. Some specialized in long- or great-swords, but those would be too large and unwieldy for him. The pole-swords, while they were lighter and would give him a longer reach, would be vulnerable to fire attacks and were also dismissed. Still others were too short or better for fighting on horseback. That left the classic sword – the *katana* – which was what he settled on.

Of course, those were *very* popular, so there were many smithies to investigate. Eventually he narrowed them down to three shops, each of which had a different lamination method. From there he decided on one. The smithy he chose promoted itself as specializing in the *soshu kitae* or seven-layer method, which the famous smith Masamune had used. Considering how esteemed that sword-maker had been, Mewtwo figured he couldn't go wrong with his choice.

Had Mewtwo been in a rush, he might have stolen one of their swords. He certainly couldn't have afforded one. Since he had the time, though, he decided make his own instead. Of course, mastering the art of sword making wasn't something anyone could normally learn in a couple of days. That took years of dedicated practice and experience. Mewtwo didn't have that much time, though, so he...well, there was no other way to put it: he *cheated*.

He stayed near the smithy for the next few days and watched the master work. He tapped into the woman's mind as he did so, imprinting her knowledge of sword making into his own. He learned about the elemental composition of her blades, how they were forged, how they were given decorative touches, and how they were assembled and polished. He learned the same for their sheaths.

How she used her swords was also something he focused on. He paid particular attention to her muscle memory. While their bodies differed, knowing her fighting forms and routines would make it easier for him to develop his own. Thanks to her experience and his abilities, forging his own sword and wielding it should come faster and easier to him than it otherwise would have. At least that was his hope.

He spent his last day on Iron Island gathering the materials he would need for his endeavor: iron, carbon, cobalt, manganese, tungsten, molybdenum, titanium, silicon, and some other trace elements. He also procured silk ribbons for the hilt and a sword care kit, which contained cloths for wiping down the blade and containers of camellia oil and limestone powder. There was an instruction manual included, too, which he was determined to commit to memory.

Cresselia, when she saw what appeared to be a boulder's worth of material wrapped in tarp floating behind him, twittered and said, "*Let me help you with that.*"

They carried his project back to Route 215. Before dawn, they carved a cave into the nearest cliff and stashed his materials in it. Covering the entrance with rubble for now, they returned to the honey tree and joined the alakazam. He gave them a thoughtful and amused look when they arrived, and while Cresselia and the fox talked, Mewtwo curled up into a ball and dozed. His efforts to carry so much material over half of Sinnoh had drained him.
Sometime later, he woke to someone touching his shoulder. He opened his eyes and saw Cresselia hovering next to him. Her eyes were twinkling again. "Our time together appears to be at an end, but before I go, I want to give you one last gift. Hold this for me?"

She gave him a thin, silver chain like the one he'd once worn his ring on. She then dipped her head to her chest and tugged at her golden breast-feathers. He was about to say something when she pulled out one long, curling feather. A drop of blood stained its quill. She waved away his concern and took the chain back from him. She then twisted the molecules of silver to form a clasp, placed the quill in it, and pinched it close until it held the feather firm. That done, she settled the necklace around his necks. The feather tickled his chest.

"My duty, as a Legendary, is to banish people's nightmares. As long as you have this feather, you will never have another restless night," she explained. "I pray this will help lighten your burden, Mewtwo."

Surprised but grateful, he stood and bowed to her. "Thank you, Cresselia. I will cherish the gifts you have given me."

Her eyes twinkled at that. "You're welcome. If we meet again, I hope it will be under happier circumstances. Farewell."

As she flew away, vanishing into the light of the half-moon, he whispered back, "Farewell."

In the years to come, no matter what horrors he witnessed, his dreams were peaceful ones thanks to her.

In the months to come, Mewtwo learned what Citlali and the alakazam wanted him to. He also forged and learned how to wield his sword.

When he returned, Citlali pushed Mewtwo until his body and powers complied with his demands. Eventually, the mew's will won out and Mewtwo acclimated himself to the changes taking place inside and around himself. Every day at dawn, he would uncurl from under honey tree, go into meditative stance, and activate the skill Citlali had taught him. He let himself unravel, keeping only the thread of his essence intact, and rewove himself into his new form. It was the closest he would even come to experiencing evolution, he supposed.

From there, he'd walk to the cave where his sword making materials were stored, would move the rubble sealing it aside, and would enter his makeshift smithy. He had a furnace that he poured his hottest flames into, willing them to melt the metals together. There were two types of steel – the harder, high-carbon steel and the softer, low-carbon steel – which had to be folded and refolded together to work out the impurities. The metal, from there, had to be drawn out into the shape of a sword and then covered in clay slurry. The thinnest layer would be applied along the edge. Quenching the sword then gave it its curve: the cutting edge would harden the most, making the more malleable spine curl slightly. After that came the polishing process, working the sword with finer and finer grained polishing stones until the blade had a mirror finish.

Making the other parts of the sword, like the blade guard and the handle, required equally careful work. Though he made numerous attempts (he nearly burned himself several times and the blades cracked and shattered many times more), he rarely made it as far as designing the handle, and never got as far as designing the scabbard.

Eventually, though, Mewtwo made a sword that pleased him. He sank his signature into the hidden core of the blade, as well as two kanji into its base. On one side was the symbol for "claw"; on the
other was the symbol for "moon." He shaped the guard into a full circle, rather than an oval, and laced the handle with white ribbons of silk and a grey braided cord to improve the grip.

After that, he turned his attention to the scabbard. He decided to use wood from the honey tree for it. He found a branch broken off by one of the storms and worked it with care. He dried and cut it, steamed and shaped it into a matching curve, and applied lacquer to it. The wood, in sharp contrast to the tree's golden leaves, was silver in color. Finally, he tipped the end of the scabbard with a polished moonstone and acquired a white, durable weave to make the belt. When it was all finished, he had a product he was proud of.

He named the sword "Tsume no Tsuki" – "The Claw of the Moon."

Of course, a pretty sword with a pretty name was nothing if its owner didn't know how to use it – or didn't have the will to. Mewtwo didn't intend to let either one of those be the case.

From that day on, he spent hours practicing the fighting styles he'd memorized, working his way through more and more complex forms as summer blazed into autumn and autumn iced into winter. When he wasn't doing that, he was mastering the alakazam's ability to see beyond what his eyes could see, to rid his psychical eye of the obstructions and illusions in its way. It meant twisting his psychical energies into a new form – but then, he was making many changes these days. He was transforming, slowly but surely, and only time could tell what he'd become.

In midwinter, as snow fell in feathery puffs around them and their breaths steamed out, the alakazam took him out into the field. "Now that you have mastered the sight, I have one more thing to teach you. Shield yourself and watch closely."

As Mewtwo did so, the alakazam gathering orbs of psychic energy into his claws and concentrated them, changing them. The energy deepened from a soothing, light blue to dark and mottled blues and purples, its light seeming as dense as liquid. His teacher then spun and flung the orbs into a nearby tree. When they hit, they exploded into bursts of cerulean light! The tree flew apart, its flaming debris turning from blue to gold as the psychic energy in it dispersed.

"This move is known as Psyshock," his teacher told him. "It is one of the most devastating attacks a psychic can wield in battle, due to its incredible power and accuracy. Master this ability and you will be an opponent even I would hesitate to trifle with."

It went without saying that if he made a mistake wielding that kind of power, no amount of moonlight would fix him. So Mewtwo took a steadying breath, closed his eyes, and quieted his mind. He focused on the psychic energy circulating through his body and gathered it between his paws. He compressed that energy, changing it the way he believed the alakazam had changed it, and was pleased when the light dimmed.

During those moments, when he held that pure power in his paws, insidious thoughts slipped into his mind. If I master this quickly, I may start my search. If I master this quickly, I can obliterate all who stand in my way. If I can master this quickly, I will be free to find and protect her. If I master this quickly, I will not fail again.

Something of those thoughts must have bled into his energy and tainted it. He felt it become unstable, churning and hissing and spitting sparks. He sensed his teacher's surprise but he didn't let it distract him. Instead, he concentrated the energy until it began to pulse in protest, took aim with his mind's eye, and hurled it at a tree. He opened his eyes and to watch it hit.

The explosion rocked the ground beneath their feet. The tree vanished in a plume of fire and red psychical energy!
When the searing heat and light faded and cinders began falling around them, he looked at the alakazam. The alakazam lifted an eyebrow. "That...was not Psyshock," Mewtwo admitted, chagrined. He should have kept his thoughts clear. "I will try again."

His teacher threw back his head and laughed. At some point, he must have noticed Mewtwo's annoyance, because he waved a claw and said, "No, that was not Psyshock. It was something better than that: an attack far more powerful and in tune with your will. You've created something new, child. You did so accidentally, to be sure, but I think we should develop it. Keep in mind what you did as we go deeper into the route. I wouldn't want my tree to suffer from our experiment."

They relocated and tried again. Each time Mewtwo used his new attack, it took a chunk out of his energy reserves. He didn't think he'd be able to use it more than a few times per day. The sheer devastation it caused seemed well worth the expense, however.

When his teacher asked, Mewtwo described the process of creating the unstable energy. After hearing his explanation, the fox nodded. "It's tied to your emotions. It's tied to your desire to protect and destroy." He then gave Mewtwo suggestions for maximizing its power and range. "Instead of containing it, why not let it run wild? Open your energy pathways all at once. I will watch from above."

The alakazam floated up and wove protective shields around himself, his spoons gleaming in the dying firelight. Mewtwo wasn't certain if his teacher's suggestion was wise, but he also wanted to see what this power could do if unleashed. So he concentrated again, thinking of all of the time he'd spent here, thinking of everything he'd learned, and thinking of what awaited him yet. The energy built up inside of him, writhing in his veins and snarling for release.

He opened his eyes and saw that he was glowing with red light. The air around him shimmered as if with heat and the energy licked out at his palms. When holding it back became too much to bear, he loosened it onto his surroundings.

A dark red wave surged from him, the energy of it tumbling and spinning into orbs as it spread out in a perfect circle. When they hit the surrounding crags and the trees, psychic energy flared upwards with a hellish roar, vaporizing everything it touched and bathing the route in crimson light. The heat and shockwave it caused staggered Mewtwo; he barely managed to stay on his feet. Sparks and embers floated upwards, but then the snowstorm – with help of his teacher, no doubt – strengthened and suffocated the fires left behind.

When the alakazam floated down, he had a grave look on his face as he assessed the damage...but the look lasted until he met Mewtwo's eyes. Then his face broke into a grin of boyish delight. "Yes, I don't think I would want to trifle with you!"

The unguarded approval in his voice left the clone feeling proud and touched. He began to bow to his teacher, but out of the corner of his eye, he saw a flicker of sparkles and then a blue light streaking towards them.

When the light halted and faded, he saw a rather peeved-looking Citlali glaring at them. "What in the devil was THAT?" the kitten shrieked. "Just what are you teaching him, Yasu?"

Yasu? Was that his teacher's name? The alakazam in question chuckled. "Oh, we were just experimenting with the boy's power. Isn't it marvelous?" He sounded positively gleeful.

The fur along Citlali's spine stood up. "Oh yes, let's teach my brother yet another earth-shattering
attack. He doesn't have an arsenal of those or anything. Arceus' hooves, he might have destroyed the entire route just now!"

Yasu waved a claw at that. "I am certain you would have intervened had there been any risk of that." He began walking back the way they'd come, black mud sucking at his feet as he did so. The mud was still steaming. "In any case, you should be proud of your brother. He has invented a new psychic technique. Perhaps it is not as subtle as my Psyshock, but sheer power has its uses too, doesn't it?" The mew didn't respond, but Mewtwo could sense his grudging agreement. "Now I think it's time we celebrated his accomplishments. How about we go to the lake and wrangle ourselves a nice fish dinner? I have some herbs stashed away that we can season them with."

An hour later, the smell of roasting fish filled their noses. Their catches had been stuffed with thyme, oregano, marjoram, and bay leaves, which the alakazam had promised would flavor the meat nicely. "If only we had some lemons, too," the fox lamented. "But we are too far north for that. No matter; this will suffice."

As they ate, the teacher turned to Mewtwo and asked, "Have you given any thought to what you will call your new attack? If you are to use it to strike fear in the hearts of your enemies, it should have a name."

Mewtwo, in the middle of his third fish (he couldn't remember feeling quite this famished before), considered that. It was a psychic attack derived from Psyshock, so "psy" should make up the root of the name. His teacher's use of the work "strike" also resonated with him. For what else was that move, if not a striking display of power that would strike his foes down? He smirked, swallowed a bite of fish, and said, "I think 'Psystrike' would be a fitting name."

The fox nodded. "Undoubtedly." He ripped a hunk of meat from his fish. "And what will you do now? You have learned all we wished to teach you."

The answer came readily to Mewtwo. Though he'd devoted himself to learning his new skills at the expense of thinking of anything else, his reason for doing so had never changed. "It has been three years since I last saw my mate. After I leave here, I will find her again."

"I see. So your feelings for her haven't changed." He sounded faintly approving. "But how do you know the war hasn't taken her?"

"I would know if it had. I am certain of that." Mewtwo discarded the remains of a fish. "And even if I am wrong, I will not give up until I have proof of her death."

"Ah. Then let me put your mind at ease, child. Your dove is alive." Mewtwo stared at the fox, his heart pounding. It was one thing to have faith, but another to have it confirmed. "She never arrived where you sent her, though. You must know that. To find her, you must retrace your steps. She has made her nest in the mountains of Kanto-"

He broke off mid-sentence. He glanced at Citlali and then sighed and said, "My apologies. It will take time for you to find her, Mewtwo. But I am certain you will. You are nothing if not determined."

The fox picked up one of his spoons. "I will give you one last gift to aid you on your journey, I think."

The spoon the alakazam was holding glowed blue and twisted, its handle bending backwards until it touched the cusp. The metal fused where it touched, making a loop. The fox gave the bent spoon to Mewtwo, who took it and added it to his necklace. It hung side-by-side with Cresselia's now green feather, which had darkened after being exposed to the sun.
"That twisted spoon is infused with my power. It should enhance your own," he explained, giving Mewtwo a wry smile. "Not that you need more power, but every little bit helps when you're fighting a war."

Mewtwo bowed his head to his teacher. "Thank you. I will make good use of it."

"I am certain you will," the alakazam said, returning to his fish.

It was the next morning, after Mewtwo had donned his cloak, his sword, and had packed a sack of food, that the thought struck him. Yasu was a human name and the move Psyshock, which his teacher claimed to have developed, was among the newer technical machines. He turned to the fox, who was sitting crossed-legged underneath the honey tree, and said, "You belonged to a human once, didn't you?"

The alakazam's eyes shone with amusement. "You strike me as quite bright, child, but it still took you two years to make that connection. Sometimes the obvious escapes you, doesn't it?"

It sounded like there were layers to that question, but the clone didn't think he wanted to delve into them just now. "Who trained you?" he asked instead.

The fox peered out across the route. "I suppose it cannot hurt to tell you. After all, there is a strong chance you will meet her." He opened his palms to the sky. "I was born here many years ago. Since few trainers take this route, I never bothered to run when I saw them. Most didn't give me a second glance. They were not interested in adding a psychic to their teams.

"Eventually, though, a man took note of me. He captured me and trained me, and though he preferred books to battles, I nonetheless spent most of my youth fighting for him. When age began to weaken me, a woman from Kanto approached him. She wished to make a trade, though what creature she gave him to take my place, I do not know.

"The trade triggered my evolution. It took me some time to get used to my new body, but my mistress was patient with me. She never made me fight. Instead, she developed new psychic techniques with me and asked me to teach them to others. We spent years together like that, until she noticed the grey in my fur. She asked me if there was something I wanted in return for my years of service. I asked her for my freedom. I asked to return home. Most trainers would not have allowed it. She did."

The alakazam smiled fondly at the memory. "She was sad to see me go, but the next morning my pokéball was destroyed and she brought me back Sinnoh. I became the guardian of this place and, over time, met your brother and many other legendary pokémon."

"Have you seen her since?" Mewtwo asked.

His teacher nodded. "She visits me sometimes, and sometimes when I feel the urge to wander, I return to Kanto and visit her. But it may be many years before that happens again. War has a way of disrupting people's lives."

Mewtwo could almost hear him say, You're not the only one who's been parted from someone they love. You're not the only one who suffers now. But they had given him the tools he needed to destroy his enemies, to end this war and make things right. So the clone clutched the sword at his side and said, "I will do what I can."

"I am certain you will," the fox said, though he sounded slightly sad. "But take care of yourself too. You are dear to many people, Mewtwo. It would hurt them if you died."

It felt strange, hearing that, but the clone supposed it was true. Citlali, Psyche, Shadow, and
Cassandra – oh Cassandra – they all loved him. He must not fail them now.

"I will be alright," he promised. "Farewell, teacher." He secured the sack at his waist and bent his thoughts to home. His brother, he knew, would follow him.

"Farewell, child," his teacher said as blue light encompassed the clone.

The world blurred into shades of blue. When it reformed, he stood in a ranger's cabin. It hadn't changed much in the last three years. The door was creaking in its frame, the blankets were mussed and mildewed on the floor, and ashes had blown across the hearth. He breathed in the crisp scent of winter and imagined, for a moment, that no time had passed. That Cassandra was outside, calling for him.

He went outside and secured the door behind him. His paws sank into the snow. He turned them towards Cerulean City. He would start there. *She has made a nest in the mountains*, Yasu had said. There were many mountains around the City of Water.

*Cassandra. I made you a promise. I will keep it. I will find you.*

He began the long walk south.

He searched for two years – and in those years, the war smirked and swallowed him whole. Like a toy soldier in the hands of a child, he danced, he twisted, he broke.

"You will tell me everything you know."

And in a misty forest grove, a man with blood on his hands screamed.

The White Death, as Mewtwo had come to be known, listened with relish as the Rocket Executive finally gave him the answer he'd been searching for.

"She – she's in Lavender Town! I heard the boss mention it to his lieutenant! Please don't hurt me anymore! Please!"

No, the man had given him everything he'd asked for. Mewtwo wouldn't hurt him anymore. He couldn't let the man live, though. Part of the effectiveness of these ambushes was the mystery that surrounded them. He couldn't go spoiling that now by leaving a witness. Besides, the fewer Rockets there were, the fewer there would be to terrorize innocent people or fight the League's army. No, this man needed to die, but for the gift he'd given him, Mewtwo would make his death quick.

"Thank you for your cooperation." With that, he charged his sword and touched it to the man's chest. The Executive's body jerked as electricity rushed through his body. When it passed, he crumpled to the ground, lifeless.

Mewtwo walked back his camp, taking the mist with him. *She's in Lavender Town,* he thought. It made sense. That village was tucked away in the eastern mountains. It was far from Kanto's central lands, where most of the battles were being fought. As a resting place for the dead, it was also a sacred site. The Rockets and the League's army had fought in every other major city over the last four years, but neither side had been willing to invade Lavender. Even if it did have fewer people for her to hide among, it was the safest place Cassandra could have gone.

It disturbed him that Giovanni knew where she was, but from the sound of it, he hadn't attempted to take her back yet. Mewtwo suspected he was too preoccupied with holding western Kanto to do so
just yet. He might not even have the resources to send people to capture her, but as long as he knew where she was, the option was always there for later.

Well, whatever Giovanni's reasoning was, Mewtwo would beat him there. He'd head east as soon as he'd cleaned his sword and had something to eat. Sitting down by the cold campfire, he levitated wood into it and set it alight. He opened his pack – much larger now – and took out a canteen and a towel. He wiped the blood from the blade and oiled it, the smell of camellia stinging his nose. He inspected the sword and, certain that it was spotless, slid it back into its scabbard.

He drew out a bottle of peroxide next and wiped down his hands and arms. Then he took out a cooking pot. A walk to and from the stream later, he had a pot of rice cooking on the fire.

It wasn't long before his brother swooped into the clearing. "So how many squads does this make?" he asked.

Mewtwo scooped himself a bowl of rice and began to eat. "Eight."

"Do you think this carnage is really necessary?"

Mewtwo lifted an eyebrow at that. "You spent two years training me to fight this war. Now you're complaining because I am too effective at it? You might have considered that before taking me to Sinnoh."

"I'm concerned because you seem to be enjoying it. You didn't have to torture that man. You could have extracted the information from his mind if you'd wished. Instead you decided to lop off half his fingers before you were through with him."

"You forget," Mewtwo said, taking another bite of rice, "that I am trying to avoid using my powers. Our enemies believe that I am dead. It would do no good for me to refute that. This way, I remain anonymous and feed their fear. That aside, discovering Cassandra's whereabouts was well worth dirtying my hands for."

The mew's eyes narrowed. "So you believe him, then? He might have been misinformed."

"Lavender Town is a sensible choice. She would not be in western Kanto – Giovanni controlled too much of her life as it is. Central Kanto is a forested region with low hills, so that would contradict Yasu's information. I have already checked the south, so that leaves the east.

"Originally, I dismissed Lavender because I thought she would prefer cities. They would give her more places to hide. But Lavender could suit her just as well. It is remote if nothing else." He refilled his bowl. "I will head there as soon as I have erased this camp. You are welcome to join me – or not, if you wish."

Over the years, Citlali had suggested – with increasing boldness – that Mewtwo should abandon his search. The mew would have had him turn all of his attention to the war effort. Mewtwo understood the reason for that – with his training, he was more effective than half of the League's army was – but he refused to break his promise to Cassandra. He had to find her and make sure she was safe. Everything else was secondary to that.

The mew stared at him for a long moment and then said, "I'll meet you there. I have an errand to run first."

"Very well. I will go on ahead."

As the mew disappeared in a burst of sparkles, Mewtwo set down his half-finished bowl. His heart
was pounding and his stomach was tying itself in knots. Tomorrow he would find her. Tomorrow he might be standing in front of her. Tomorrow he might be holding her. Tomorrow he might see what she had become in the last five years – and she would see him. The thought excited and unsettled him in equal measures. He felt himself trembling. He let himself continue doing so for a moment.

Then he mastered himself and finished his meal. He packed up his supplies and buried the campfire. He lifted his face to the eastern mountains, where the moon hung low in the sky.

*I will be there soon, Cassandra. Wait for me.*

He began to walk east.

In the Safari Zone, an umbreon sat and watched the fires burn.

He wasn't sure how they'd started. Lightning from the storm, pokémon battles, or quarantine measures were all equally likely. The blaze raced across the plains, belching smoke and spitting cinders. He barely recognized his homeland anymore. It had been too long since he'd last been here. He couldn't even remember what his birth parents and siblings had looked like. When he tried, they were blurred brown shapes swimming in a sea of grass.

So much had changed since then – since Mewtwo had picked him up and offered him a new home. Since he'd brought him to Cassandra and they'd become a family. Shadow ached when he thought of them, but if what the man had told him was right, *both* of them were okay. No, more than okay in Cassandra's case. She had friends and children of her own now. Still, the umbreon missed her and wondered if she felt the same. He thought she might.

"Are you alright?" the man asked, shouldering a duffle bag and holding a viola case in his other hand. Even after all these years, he'd held onto her treasures.

Shadow flicked his tail and chirped an affirmative. He was fine. It was a shame that he'd returned to his birthplace only to find it like this, but he had no emotional ties to it. His home had been in the arms of a girl who'd needed him. Leaving her had hurt him far more than seeing this.

The man tried to think of something to say, but then decided against it. Perhaps there was nothing to be said. They'd been companions for long enough that he knew that Shadow, like him, had things he didn't want to talk about. They'd gotten to know each other quite well over the years. Together they'd gathered information about the Rockets – about their movements, their ranking members, their bases of operation, and their plans. They'd gathered more besides, and without the young fox's help, the man knew he would have been caught well before now. The man was skilled in his work, but having a pokémon partner – especially a partner who knew the Viridian Base so well – had been an invaluable help.

He knelt down to give the fox a pat on the back, but then there was a flash of light off to their side. He dropped his bag and the viola case and drew his gun. The newcomer lifted an eyebrow at it and, realizing who is was, the man returned the weapon to its holster.

"Citlali," he greeted their guardian.

Before him was a man dressed in white and blue robes. His skin and hair were almost as pale as his clothes. Though his hands and face had neither wrinkles nor sunspots, his blue eyes seemed old, their twinkle tempered by the centuries he'd witnessed. The man had always known his guardian was...*unusual*...just from that. He just wished he'd understood the creature's nature sooner.

"Any particular reason you're visiting us on this fine and toasty evening?" he asked, picking up his
"Your jokes could you some work."

Citlali said, stepping towards them so smoothly he seemed to be gliding across the ground. He could be, come to think of it.

The man grinned wryly. "Sorry. Can't say I've done much socializing lately. I've just had Shadow and you for company, and we all know what your sense of humor is like."

Citlali huffed. "I see you're livelier now that you don't have to skulk about. In any case," he went on, before the man could make a retort, "Mewtwo's learned where Cassandra is. He's planning to head there tonight. He's going on foot, so you could beat him there if you head north immediately."

"So he found her despite all of your meddling. I told you it wouldn't take long." The man knelt and offered Shadow his shoulder. The fox leapt up and made himself comfortable.

"It took him two years of searching," Citlali reminded him.

"Only two? Seems short enough to me. Then again, I haven't seen my loved ones in a very long time." The man was no longer smiling. He was glaring at the legendary in accusation.

"I've already apologized. It was necessary."

"I'm not so sure about that," he said, taking out a compass and turning east. They'd have to skirt along the southern coast before turning north and hitting the fishing routes. If they booked it, they could reach Lavender in two days, maybe three. It would take the clone at least a day to get there himself. The man doubted Mewtwo knew how to navigate the snowy mountain passes, so he might not even make it there that quickly.

Though really, why try to race him there? Why not take it at a nice, leisurely, cautious pace?

Something of his thoughts must have showed on his face, because Citlali's eyes flashed and he frowned with annoyance. "You're not even going to try to beat him there, are you?"

"Is there any reason why I should?" The man couldn't see one.

"Well, if your meeting with her goes poorly – which it probably will – my brother might try to gut you. With a sword that can taze people."

"He sounds like a cheery guy," the man snarked. Cassandra just had to have picked a moody kangaroo-cat-monster with a violent streak, hadn't she? He had to wonder if Citlali hadn't succeeded a little too well in turning his brother into a soldier. "Can't say I'm afraid of him, though. Besides, she'll need all the help she can get."

The guardian scowled. "I mean it. They might try to kill you."

"Oh, I don't think so. I have something they need." He gestured to Shadow and everything else he was carrying.

Citlali looked unconvinced, so with a sigh, the man set down his bag. He opened it and drew out a bundle the size of a tennis ball. He unwrapped to expose the plastic container within. More fabric was stuff inside of that, which he took out to expose a little glass vial filled with translucent liquid. The label on it listed a string of numbers and its distribution center, which wouldn't have been registered with any known medical center. The name of its contents – which were priceless as far as the man and Shadow were concerned – was printed underneath:
"Gainesboro Virus Vaccine, ages six months and older."

Thank You: Leone the Infernal, 0769Alpha1378, Kitty, Bluefoot, Meneldur, and Lights for reading and reviewing the previous chapter. I hope you and my other readers will do the same for this one!

Author's Note: The following bonus scene, while not essential to read, is nonetheless meant to expand on Citlali's characterization and address the existence of the mew in the eighth Pokémon movie, who exists in connection to the Tree of Beginning.

Sincerely,

WiseAbsol

Bonus Scene: Mew and the Tree of Beginning

North of the Mount Moon Range was the Tree of Beginning.

Despite appearances, it was not an actual tree. A monolith of crystal, it towered over the surrounding mountains. Its interior, which few were allowed to enter, was a labyrinth of caves. Springs and streams flowed in its deeper reaches, depositing minerals that made the green, blue, and purple crystals sprout and grow. These crystals reached upwards in spires and twined in smaller, flower-like formations. All of these were connected to each other, for all of them contained the aura, the life energy of every living creature. That energy was enough to make plants grow without sunlight, nourish the creatures that lived there, and make the crystals illuminate even the darkest of the caves.

Few pokémon or humans could wield the aura, however. As such, few had learned how to tap into the power of the crystals and even fewer had learned all of their secrets. Only one had discovered the purpose of the crystals and of the Tree itself – and that one was Citlali, known by some as the Bright Star. He was the heir of the mew, the prince of the Morning and the East, and unlike the other legendary pokémon, he knew the truth about this place. He knew why ancient pokémon, extinct in all other parts of the world, still lived here. He knew why the Regis forced out curious visitors, invoking the crystals' power to drive them out. And he knew why there was another mew here, which others had taken to calling his counterpart.

That mew, whose life was tied to that of the Tree, was called the Other Star by some. He was the prince of the Evening and the West, but also Citlali's elder, for he had been here ages before the younger mew's birth. His experience had made him powerful enough to adopt any form he wished and wander farther from the Tree than any of its other denizens. Yet despite his years, he remained eternally curious, eternally playful, and eternally innocent.

In retrospect, Citlali should have guessed the truth after their fifth meeting, rather than their fiftieth.

The Other Star wants you to come and tell him stories. I said I'd pass the message along. That was what Cresselia had said. She'd never suspected the truth – though how could she? She hadn't left Sinnoh in four or five centuries, give or take fifty years.

The mew gritted his teeth as he flew through the mist and weaved between crystal branches. He found one of the entrances into the Tree and soon found the grove where his counterpart played. The Other Star had been collecting human toys again. There was a pile of dolls and stuffed animals, game pieces and cards, tiny trains and planes and cars. Wooden blocks were scattered in the grass. Some of
them were sprouting green shoots.

Citlali clenched his jaw. He ducked his head into a hollowed-out tree truck and, sure enough, there his counterpart, bouncing on green bubbles made of aura.

He saw Citlali.

With a shriek of excitement, he flew up and tackled him, knocking him back into the grove. When they stopped tumbling, he looked at Citlali with twinkling eyes. "Brother! You came! Do you have any new stories? Oh please, tell me, tell me!"

The voice grated on Citlali like sandpaper. The Other Star calling him "brother" made his irritation spike. "You are not my brother," Citlali thought acridly. He disentangled himself from the other mew and made himself take a steadying breath. Calm down. This is his nature, Citlali reminded himself. He cannot help his nature.

The other mew didn't seem put off by Citlali shoving him away. He did a backflip in the air and gave him an expectant look instead. Citlali, grudgingly, sat down in the grass and said, "Sit down. I won't tell you anything if you don't behave."

The other mew did so, grabbing one of the blocks to fiddle with as he listened. Citlali told him about the war breaking out in Kanto, about Mewtwo's training, and about the work of his other wards. They were scouting out the underground Celadon Base – a risky venture, but a good way to work up to facing the increased security around the Viridian Base. It was also an essential venture, since rumor had it that the Rockets had conscripted some of Silph Company's leading researchers to work in their laboratories. If the man and the fox managed to free them, it would slow and maybe even cripple their experiments.

The other mew looked up from his block. There were now blue flowers blooming from it. "What about that girl Mewtwo was in love with? Didn't she have babies?"

"She did and he loves her still," Citlali said sourly. "She and the little half-breeds are fine. They've settled in the City of Ghosts. They should be safe there, for now."

"Why do you hate them so much?" the mew asked, hearing to the bitterness in his voice. "They're just babies."

"It's not them I hate so much as what they represent. If my brother had picked another pokémon as his mate, he could have continued the mew legacy. But he chose to spurt his seed into that – woman – instead." He grimaced. "I swear, if he could live his life as a human, he would. He practically is one, no matter how much he claims to hate them."

"I think you hate them more than he does," his counterpart murmured.

Citlali's lashed out his tail in anger. He barely avoided whipping the other mew with it. "We can't all forgive them for what they have done. Or forget it," he said with venom. We can't all be like you.

"But they make all of these fun things!" he said, holding out the block.

"And for every one thing they create, they destroy two more. I won't love them for it." He wouldn't make the same mistake as his ancestors. He wouldn't be destroyed by love.

He couldn't stop Mewtwo from following in their footsteps. He could take steps to minimize the damage, but that was all. Whom Mewtwo gave his heart, his body, and his future to was his choice in the end. Citlali could turn his brother's path only so far; he couldn't force him onto another one
entirely, no matter how much the mew would have preferred to.

He comforted himself with the thought that at least his meddling ensured a happier outcome for Mewtwo. If things worked out the way he’d planned, that is….

"Do you love anything?" his counterpart asked, tilting his head.

"I love my brother," Citlali said crisply. As much of a pain in the ass as Mewtwo could be, the mew considered him family.

The other mew, however, seemed to assume he was talking about him. He brightened up, his tail twitching and his eyes shining with excitement. "You love me?"

Citlali hissed at that. "Not you. Never you."

His counterpart drooped. "Why not?"

"Because you aren't even real."

The other mew stared at him, uncomprehending.

A long time ago, Citlali's brother had died. His death had left Citlali as the last of his kind. Before long, the mew had grown lonely – so desperately lonely that even the company of other pokémon had lost its comfort. Then one of the legendary pokémon had told him of a Tree of Beginning. The Tree was a holy place – a place where all things lost to the world could still be found. There were pokémon who lived there that had vanished everywhere else. There was even a mew there who helped guard the ancient tree.

With hope filling his heart to bursting, Citlali had flown there as fast as he could. He'd met the other mew there and believed that he wasn't alone anymore. He'd been young and naïve and had wanted so badly to have a brother again.

He'd been devastated when he'd found out the truth.

He hadn't wanted to believe it. He'd even rejected his suspicions for years, until they'd taken root in his brain and grown like ivy, twisting through his thoughts. Why was it, he'd wondered, that extinct pokémon still lived here? Why was it that the Regis defended this place so ardently? Why was it that the other mew was so connected to this place – so much so that its life force and his were bound together?

And why was it that no matter what happened, the Other Star never seemed to change? He always acted like a child, even when wars were waged at the foot of the Tree, even when pokémon and humans were killed in front of him, even when their blood splashed onto his face. He was always curious, always asking questions, always exploring, and always watching everything around him.

When Citlali had summoned up the courage, he'd peered into the essence of the creatures here. What he'd found was bodies built from crystal, with aura running in their veins. Though they looked and acted like the pokémon from eons past, they were not them. They were not real. They were golems that didn't bleed nor breed nor quarrel. They couldn't think for themselves, for they no minds of their own. They were echoes of the past – echoes given form by the Tree. They existed only because the Tree remembered them and wanted nothing in this world to be forgotten.

Before humans had thought of recording their history – before they had even left their trees – the Earth had had the Tree of Beginning as its archive.
And every archive needed an archivist.

The archivist was responsible for more than just overseeing the archive. Its duty was to add to it, to journey into the world and record everything it saw. But it could only go so far before its connection to the Tree – the source of its "life" – thinned and snapped. If that happened, then the power that held it together would be lost. The construct would unravel; the illusion would fall away; and the archivist would be revealed for what it really was: a blob of crystal.

Citlali had seen it happen for himself. When he could no longer deny his suspicions, he'd taken hold of the other mew and teleported him to their homeland. His "brother" had struggled before they'd blinked out of existence, and when they'd reappeared, he'd had gone silent and deathly still. It hadn't been long before his body had collapsed, his bones crumbling and his flesh melting under in the heat of the Amazonian sun.

When Citlali had returned to the Tree, he hadn't known what he would find. Perhaps the death of the archivist would have destroyed the Tree as well. Yet there it had stood, unchanged from the day before. As he'd stared at it in stunned silence, something had hit him from behind – and when he'd shaken off his attacker and had whirled around to face it-

"Brother! Brother, tell me stories!" the other mew had cried.

It wasn't alive, so therefore it couldn't die. It didn't think for itself, so therefore it wouldn't remember dying.

The Tree, upon sensing its probe's demise, had simply made another copy and embedded it with the same programming. The copy would do what it had been designed to do: gather information about the world around it. If it had to pretend to be a real person to get people to care for it and give it what it wanted, it would do so.

Citlali hated it for that.

He hated it for giving him hope. If the Tree of Beginning hadn't been so important, the mew would have shattered and melted every crystal in it to ease his pain. But the Tree and its work was important – maybe even essential. So instead of destroying it, Citlali had humored it instead. He'd come to this place and told his stories, because it was his duty as a legendary and the other mew's counterpart. He also did it because he knew that one day even an immortal like him might die. If he did, then he wanted some record of himself – the last of the mew – to remain behind. He did not want his race to be forgotten. To be forgotten was than death.

Mewtwo had said so himself, once.

Mewtwo. If the other mew had been the death of his hope, then Mewtwo had revived it.

He wouldn't have thought so years ago, but it was true. The mew had watched the humans when they'd searched his forest and his shrine. He'd known they were looking for the remains of one of his kind. They'd wanted to resurrect a child – or at least the scientist leading them had.

Citlali, sympathizing with him and sensing that their success was important, had allowed them to have what they'd sought. He'd let the take his brother's eyelash and hadn't given it a second thought. He'd been certain that he'd made the right choice – that his gift would be used to change the world for the better. If the fake mew looked after the past, then it was his duty to look after the future. He'd thought he'd done his work well that day.

It was only later, when he'd discovered what the humans had done with his gift, that Citlali had
thought he'd been wrong about that.

He'd allowed the humans to make a monster. He'd allowed them to make a corrupted mew, a copy little better than the mew of the Tree. He'd been furious, and when the opportunity had come for him to confront the abomination, he'd done so gladly. He would have gladly killed Mewtwo, except….

Except his mind had been changed on that island. It had changed when he'd seen Mewtwo's and the other copies' strength. While he still thought the originals were worthier than their counterparts were, the copies had earned their right to exist. And Mewtwo….

Mewtwo was a part of the mew's legacy. He breathed, bled, and fought for what he believed in. His heart was full of passion and he dreamed the mountain dreams. He never forgot Citlali or what they'd shared. He'd even clawed his way into becoming the mew's equal. Compared to the other mew, the clone was so alive – so blessedly alive – and the mew was proud to call him his brother.

But he would not give the fake the same honor.

"What do you mean? I'm just as real as you, silly!"

Citlali, snapping back into the present, glared at his counterpart. "No, you're not. You weren't born. You have no family. You don't even have the decency to stay dead when something kills you. You're just an extension of this Tree. You're nothing more than that."

The other mew floated back and looked at him reproachfully. Someone else, Citlali thought, would have looked at that sweet and heartbroken face and reconsidered. Someone else would have believed that this creature, despite its origins, was a self-aware being. Someone else would have been convinced it had a heart.

Citlali was not that someone. He knew better. He and the Tree had played this game too many times before. He wouldn't be taken in by its ploy now.

"You're so mean!" the other mew cried. "Take it back!"

"No."

"TAKE IT BACK!" it screeched, flinging itself at him.

Citlali teleported before the fake could reach him. As the other mew spun around, he smiled a rueful smile. He knew just what to say. "You're a fake," he murmured, "but even a fake has its uses. Would you like to hear a story?"

And that was all it took to reset its programming. The angry tears disappeared and its childish smile was back. "A story?" the Other Star said, a tear still shining on its cheek. "Tell me!"

So the Bright Star told him a story. He told him Yasu's past, letting it record the tale for time eternal. When that was done, Citlali searched the Tree for someone to play with the other mew. A pikachu took on the task, and with his counterpart distracted, Citlali made his escape. He ascended through the branches of the Tree and flew through the mists surrounding it. Before long, a clear blue sky expanded out before him.

There was a future ahead of him to look towards. He couldn't dwell on the past forever.

Citlali flew on and didn't look back.
Chapter Warning: There are sexual acts between a human and a pokémon in this chapter. If this content grosses you out, please skip over that scene, which begins with Cassandra saying that she doesn't want to talk anymore and ends with an exchange of I love you's.

CHAPTER 25: THEIR REUNION

"I close my eyes, thinking that there is nothing like an embrace after an absence, nothing like fitting my face into the curve of his shoulder and filling my lungs with the scent of him."

- Jodi Lynn Picoult, Keeping Faith.

A lavender sea spread out before him, splashing purple petals across the foothills of the mountains. Mewtwo knew the flowers wouldn't last much longer. The clouds were hanging low in the sky, the wind smelled of snow, and the crags he stepped down were as cold as ice. Soon, perhaps even tonight, the frost would wither the fields below him. Yet for now, they remained as they were, vibrantly purple and fragrant. On occasion, he saw flickers of blue light among their rows. Those were the ghost pokémon drifting from the Pokémon Tower, no doubt. He decided to steer clear of them, because while they weren't much of a threat, the journey through the mountains had drained him and he didn't need his remaining energies sapped by the ghouls.

The Tower thrust up from the eastern hills of the town. He'd heard it was always shrouded in mist, thanks to the spirits who dwelled there, and he was pleased to see that the tale was true enough this morning. As he descended into the valley, he sent mist ahead of him to conceal his approach. He cloaked his aura as well, just in case there were psychics nearby. Few of them had sided with Giovanni, but the war had made him cautious. He also felt more comfortable this way. He'd spent the last several years as a ghost, so returning to the realm of the living – however ironic it might be to do so here – filled him with apprehension.

It was time, though. Cassandra was in Lavender Town. He couldn't be sure what to expect when he found her again, because she'd spent the last five years thinking he'd abandoned her or, worse, was dead. As much as he'd imagined taking her into his arms again, she might not have imagined the same. She might be furious with him. She might have moved on. He might not like like thinking about those possibilities, but they were significant ones. If she'd really thought he was gone and wouldn't keep his promise to her, it would be selfish of him to expect her to pine for him forever. That didn't sound like her anyway.

But he was keeping his promise to her. He might have been delayed, but he'd still come back to her.

The thought that he'd be seeing her again seemed unreal to him, though. After so long, he was half-expecting to search the town, only for Citlali to appear and say, "Sorry, just got word, your mate is in another town!" It seemed like after searching for her for so long, this might be a trick and he would have to start all over again. He reminded himself that her being in Lavender Town made sense and the Rocket Executive had seemed certain of it…but even so, anxiousness knotted up his stomach. He was faint from hunger and the altitude, but he didn't think he'd be able to keep anything down if he tried. Plus, pausing to eat meant stopping when he was so close. He couldn't bring himself to do that.

So he pressed on, the mist creeping ahead of him. He skirted along the edges of the town, extending
his psychic senses to brush the minds of those who lived there. None were familiar to him. As a half
an hour passed and then an hour, he felt his stomach churn. What if his information turned out to be
wrong? Just because that agent had believed Cassandra was here didn't mean it was true. Giovanni
could have been fed a bad lead. Cassandra had been trained in how to leave false trails behind and
blend in with a crowd. Why would she even settle down at all? Even if Lavender hadn't been
touched by the war yet, that peace couldn't last. It would have made more sense for her to keep
moving. What compelling reason could there be for her not to?

He desperately stretched his psychic senses further. He just as quickly retracted them when they
brushed the manor outside of town. There were two human psychics there - and one of them was
startlingly strong. Despite the early hour, she reached her own senses towards him, seeming curious.
He wrapped his shields around himself tighter, willing himself to become invisible. Eventually, the
touch of her power abated and he was left alone again. He found himself shivering afterwards,
though, and knew it had nothing to do with the chill in the air.

It took him a few minutes before he tried searching again, and when he did, he avoided the manor.
As the sky grew brighter and the sun attempted to burn through the mist, he glared upwards and
waved a paw, compelling the clouds to thicken. An icy rain, sure to keep most people indoors and
reduce traffic on the streets, began coming down. No one with any sense would be going outside this
morning. No one should even have to. It was the weekend, so the school would be closed and most
people would be off from work. Some of the shops might be open, but the shopkeepers would stay
inside to mind their wares.

So no one should cross Mewtwo's path and hinder his search today. Between his shields and the
running water, which would wash away his scent, no one should even know he was here. He took
comfort in that as he circled along the perimeter of the town, clutching his cloak around himself. His
shield might keep the sleet at bay, but the cold still seeped through it and made his breath mist out in
front of him. He hoped he would find Cassandra soon. Wherever she was would undoubtedly be
warmer than out here.

It took him most of the day to work in a spiral to the center of town. While it was grating to not just
cover Lavender in his power and pick out Cassandra's aura from there – which would announce his
existence as surely as shining a spotlight on himself would – he nonetheless forced himself to work
slowly. The running water diffused some of the residual auras around him, blurring the psychic
fingerprints of each person so he had to stop at each building and examine them carefully. He knew
his mate's aura well enough that he could tell which one was hers, even if it was distorted. It was
disheartening to have to stop at each house, only to find unfamiliar auras inside...but as he pressed
on, he found something that made his heart race.

There were traces of Cassandra's aura here, as well as by the grocery store and the Pokémon Center
nearby. Mewtwo couldn't think of why Cassandra would visit the latter, unless perhaps if Shadow
had found her after all of this time. The clone rather hoped he had. He would like to see his friend
again. Yet in any case, Cassandra visiting the market suggested she had settled where she was, at
least for time being.

She really was here. She was alive and well enough to provide for herself. His relief was intense
enough to make his legs weak, but he forced himself to keep moving. The wisps of her aura grew
more substantial around the park, so Mewtwo followed them. They led him to one of the residential
districts of Lavender Town.

The houses in this area, most of them two stories tall, had spacious yards and gardens. Mewtwo was
surprised by that. Cassandra must have had her financial accounts frozen by her godfather, so her
being able to afford a place in this neighborhood seemed unlikely. He'd expected her to have a small
apartment – one with a short lease, low rent, and able to be abandoned at a moment's notice. For her to live here instead suggested that she'd made a real life for herself here, complete with a steady job that allowed her to pay for this. He wondered how she'd managed to pass a background check, but perhaps one of her aliases hadn't been burned when she'd left Team Rocket.

Or maybe Cassandra had fallen in with some genuinely good people. He didn't think either of them had ever been that lucky, but maybe Cassandra had finally gotten a break. It was a nice thought. She'd been through so much pain. She deserved some peace and happiness.

He wondered if he was doing the right thing by potentially disrupting that.

He'd made her a promise, though. He needed to at least *try* to keep it. They could decide on what to do afterwards.

As he pressed on, the wisps became a trail that he could follow. It wasn't long before he found the house. With his heart hammering, he looked across the street, studying it. It was another one of the two-story houses, though this one was surrounded by ivy-covered iron fences. Frost coated the stones leading up to the porch, where wind chimes jingled and clanged. There was a car parked in front of it, where a woman was sitting. She was looking around with narrowed eyes, as if she'd sensed Mewtwo's approach, even though the clone knew that was impossible. He flung himself up into the nearest tree all the same, hiding himself among the browning leaves. The woman stared at where he'd been for a long moment, but then picked up a book and started reading.

He hadn't been spotted. Good. Arranging himself so he was comfortably perched in the branches, he studied her. Why was she sitting in front of the house? Was she waiting for someone? No, the car wasn't running. Minutes passed and no one came out to speak with her, either. This must be normal, then. Was she guarding the house? That was the only explanation he could think of, but that didn't make any sense. Why would anyone be guarding Cassandra? She had been a member of Team Rocket, the organization that was now waging war on Kanto. Why would the League – presuming the psychic below (because Mewtwo could now sense that she was one) belonged to the League – be helping her?

Cassandra wouldn't have risked her life to help them. She hadn't liked what her godfather had been doing, but she'd been determined to survive the last time he'd seen her. It wouldn't have made any sense for her to throw in her lot with the League. Then again, it had been five years. That was enough time for her to change and risk her life to do what was right – to try to help the heroes instead of merely hiding from the villains. Mewtwo could understand that a little.

Still, why would she do it? Why stay here? Mewtwo stretched out his powers and willed the guard to *sleep*. It took a minute for her to drift off, but once she had, Mewtwo extended his senses into the house. There was another woman inside – not Cassandra, he realized, though there was something familiar about the style of her aura all the same. Cassandra, for her part, wasn't in the house right now. Her aura had sunk into and stained its walls, though, and….

Hers wasn't the only one that had. There were residual auras from a few others, including that of the woman in the car. Three of them were stronger than the rest, though, suggesting that their owners lived there too. One of them belonged to a man, while the other two….

Mewtwo's heart sank. The other two were *children*.

Suddenly, the mystery had a solution. He tried to reject the answer creeping into his brain, but the more he tried, the more convincing it became. He could tell himself that the man was another guard and that the children weren't Cassandra's. He could spin stories about how the man was protecting them because they had something Giovanni wanted. Yet he knew that was only what he wanted to
believe.

Maybe the simple truth was that Cassandra hadn't waited for him. Maybe she'd found someone new to love – so much so that she'd married him and had his children. The man could be a member of the League, maybe even one of high rank. That would explain the house and the guard and what must be the children's nanny inside. This would explain why Cassandra was allied with the League. She had a family with one of them, so she was doing everything she could to help them. Love had always brought out the best in her like that.

She must be happy with them. She probably didn't have any need or desire for Mewtwo to be in her life anymore. He might even ruin things for her by reappearing and reminding her of everything she'd escaped.

He could have cried. Instead he glared at the house and dug his fingertips into the bark of the tree. He wouldn't interfere with her life if that was the case. He would... he didn't know what he would do if he couldn't be with her, but he'd figure out some use for himself. He had to know for certain first, though. He would have to speak to her again to find out the truth.

He'd wait until she returned and he could speak to her alone. Then he would find out if he had any place here. Then he would find out if he still had somewhere he belonged.

As the targets rolled towards them, Cassandra took off her earmuffs and smirked at Michael. "I'm pretty sure I win this round."

He grimaced. "You know that little thing called humility? You should get some."

"Aw, sounds like someone is a sore loser." As she inspected her target, she grinned at the neat cluster she'd made in its chest.

He pouted. "You shouldn't be better at this than me. I'm a cop. Cops are supposed to beat the robbers."

"I wasn't a robber, you know. Well, maybe one time."

"Still not cool."

"Children, come on, you're both good at shooting things. Can't even tell the difference," Florian said, coming up to them and looking between the targets. "You sure Cassie didn't miss a few times? Because her hole is smaller."

"That's because she shot through the same spot," Michael grudgingly told him.

"Well you beat her last time, right? No need to get your undies in a twist." Then he smirked at the detective. "Course, if you did, I could help you with that."

Michael gave a choked laugh. "No thank you. Go try those lines on someone else."

"Aw, but your face turns funny colors when I try them on you. It's like watching a disco ball, except it's your face."

"A disco ball? Really?" Cassandra laughed.

"Okay, it's not a perfect analogy, but I couldn't come up with something better off the top of my head."
"What about stop lights?"

Florian snapped his fingers. "You're right. Should've used that one."

"Speaking of inappropriate things, I've had this question I've been meaning to ask you," Michael said to Cassandra as he began to clean his gun.

"Fire away," Cassandra said, taking apart her gun to do the same.

She still didn't like guns, but through these sessions at the range, she'd gotten used to them again. It helped that they were only shooting paper targets and that Michael had tapped into her competitive side by making it a contest between them. They were well-matched when it came to this, but Cassandra knew that if they ever got into a firefight, Michael would pull ahead of her. He didn't have an aversion to shooting people like she did after that boy….

The smell of oil brought her back to the present. Michael looked embarrassed as he started to ask his question. "Well, Aurora was giving Alexius this really thorough check-up the other day and she gave me this article to read – no idea where the hell she got it from – but um - did - did Mewtwo have a knot?"

She stopped wiping down her gun and stared at him. "A what?"

Michael looked like he wanted to die. "At the base of his…?" He made a gesture to his waist. Beside him, Florian was struggling not to laugh.

"Are you seriously asking me what the shape of Mewtwo's cock was? Really?"

"You know how you read a thing and you can't get it out of your head no matter how much you try? This is one of those things."

Cassandra felt her face burning. "Well, um - no - no, he didn't. He was more like a cat and I think knots are - uh - a dog thing?"

"So what about barbs? Did he have barbs?"

"Oh my god! No! That would have been a pretty big deterrent from fucking him if he had!"

"Well, you know, so was him being a giant cat, but that's just me."

"Christ, I don't even – look, he had a pretty normal cock, okay?" She shook her head. "I can't believe you asked me that. It's not like weird cocks are my kink."

Michael lifted an eyebrow at that. "So what is your kink?"

"I feel like you should be asking that to Aurora."

He blushed. "I don't have to. She's, um, very vocal about what she likes."

"She tops all of the time, doesn't she?"

"…More than half the time, yeah."

"I knew it."

"I bet you topped all the time," Michael said, a little pouty again.
"Not that much. It made his back hurt because his tail got in the way."

"Did he have a big tail?"

Cassandra felt her face burn hotter. "Shut the fuck up or I'll tell Aurora to get you a dildo with a knot in it for Christmas. Tell her you sounded so interested."

Michael held up his hands in surrender. "No, no, I give. I'll let you keep your kinky secrets to yourself."

"I could stand to hear a little more," Florian put in with a smirk.

Michael nudged him. "That's because your mind is always in the gutter. What do you think, should we get him that dildo instead?" he asked Cassandra.

"I don't know, he might like it too much," she said, laughing.

Florian pressed a hand to his chest. "You both wound me, offering me new and interesting toys and then dashing my dreams. And to think I slave away every day protecting your ungrateful butts."

"Sorry, Florian. You know we don't mean it. Our butts our very grateful," Cassandra said lightly.

"I don't know, my butt would be very grateful if he never slapped it again," Michael grumbled.

"That was one time! And we were all very drunk!" Florian protested.

"I'm kidding. It was funny. Not that I ever want you to do it again."

"I know, Micky. I'm a psychic," Florian said with a grin.

Michael threw up his hands. "Yes, I know. I'm surrounded by them. Aurora's the only sane one of the bunch."

"Which is why you love her," Cassandra said with a smile.

He smiled back. "One of the reasons, yeah."

"Are you going to pop the question to her soon?" Cassandra asked. Michael had mentioned thinking about it once or twice this last year.

"That's for me to know and you all to find out after she does," he said, putting his gun back together.

"Fair enough." Checking hers over to make sure everything was in order, she did the same. She glanced at the clock on the wall. "We should head back. It's almost time for dinner."

"Right. Did you get the sausages for the pasta?"

"And the cream for the sauce. We should have everything we need."

He nodded. "Great. Florian, you're joining us, right?"

"Of course. I love our Sunday dinners."

"Well, this is a new recipe, so don't get your hopes up too high. Cassandra might burn the sauce again."

"Oh come on. It's been ages since I've done that!"
"Try three weeks," Michael corrected her.

Cassandra flipped him off. "Never let me live things down, do you?"

"I practically had to smash our fire detector to make it shut up. So no, never."

They continued bickering until they reached the door and saw the weather outside. Cassandra grimaced. "Were we supposed to get freezing rain tonight?"

"More like snow. Damn. Gonna have to be extra careful on the drive back."

"I'll take snow over ice any day," Cassandra agreed, covering her head with her sweater and trying not to slip on the walk back to the car.

"I don't know. The ice always makes everything so pretty," Florian said.

"Yeah, well, if a tree falls on you, you can just deflect it with your spooky powers," Michael grouched, looking deeply unhappy at the state of his car.

"I'd make sure you didn't get crushed either. I'm nice like that." Florian waved a hand and melted the frost from the windows. "I'll try to keep some of this off us while you drive."

"Thanks," Michael said, unlocking the doors and getting into the driver's seat. Florian took the passenger's side and Cassandra got into the back. There was some cereal scattered over the seat, so she found a plastic bag and swept the puffs into it. She'd have to have a talk with the kids about not making a mess in here.

It took longer than usual to get home, but they made it back safely. Once they parked behind Anastasia's car, Florian got out and went over to tap on her window. After a moment, the glass rolled down. He peered inside and started laughing. "Were you sleeping? You never fall asleep on the job! But you've got drool and everything."

Surprised and alarmed, Cassandra went around to see if that was true. Ana looked embarrassed and irritated. "My apologies, Miss Hartell. I don't know what came over me. It won't happen again."

Seeing as nothing terrible had happened, Cassandra gave the bodyguard a concerned look. "You're not getting sick, are you? Because you should take a few days off if you are."

"No, I'm fine." Ana's brow furrowed and she shook her head. "Maybe it's the weather. It's rather gloomy out, isn't it?"

Cassandra looked up at the sky. The rain seemed to be abating. "Yeah, but it looks like it's clearing up. Anyway, I'm heading in. If you want to go home and sleep, feel free."

Ana shook her head again and got out of the car. "No. It's Sunday. I'll stay until after dinner."

Cassandra nodded and began walking towards the house…but then felt a shiver crawl up her spine. She felt as if someone was watching her. She turned around to look, scanning the windows of the nearby houses and looking both ways down the street. No one was there. Her psychic senses told her the same thing. Still, she could have sworn….
Feeling uneasy, she hurried into the house with the others. She passed Michael on her way up the stairs. He’d already changed into dry clothes and was rubbing a towel over his hair. She went and did the same. When she came back down, she saw that the twins were watching Florian and Ana with interest. The bodyguards didn't look like they'd been out in the rain at all anymore.

"What did you do, steam yourselves dry?" she asked.

Anastasia nodded. "With a little bit of pyrokinesis. We would have offered to use some on you and Michael, but...."

"Don't worry about it. If Michael needs a heater, he's got the pooch. And I'm fine with towels," Cassandra assured her. Then she smiled at Maya and Christopher and held her arms open for them. As they rushed over to give her a hug, she asked, "What about you guys? You didn't go out into that yucky weather, did you?"

"No! We played games with Aunty 'Rora all day!" Maya told her.

"Maya's really bad at Operation," Christopher chimed in.

Maya scowled at her brother. "I wouldn't be if you let me float the pieces."

"But that would be cheating!" Chris said cheerfully.

Maya stuck her tongue out at him. "Well you're bad at Monopoly!"

"You played Monopoly?" That was kind of an intense game for four-year-olds.

"Maya kept stealing all my money," Chris complained.

"It's not my fault you kept landing on my things!" Yet there was a gleam in Maya's eyes that suggested that it totally was.

The doorbell rang. Cassandra stood up. "That must be your Aunt Sabrina and Aunt Rose. Why don't you go say hello?" she suggested. She gave Anastasia and Florian a please go with them look. They nodded and followed the kids as they bolted to the door.

When she heard Sabrina's low timbre and Rose's light laugh, Cassandra went to the kitchen. The pasta and broccoli were already cooking on the stove. Michael was mixing up the sauce while Aurora looked on, asking questions about the cheeses he was going to be melting into it. Cassandra scrubbed her hands and pulled the sausages out of the fridge. Soon they were frying in a skillet, with her turning them every few minutes.

"So did the kids behave themselves today?" she asked Aurora.

The doctor nodded. "Yeah. Well, they both cheated at Monopoly, but since it's based on capitalism, it kind of fit."

"Did they actually understand the rules?"

"For the most part. They got tripped up when they were counting money, but they got the hang of it after awhile."

Cassandra smiled. "Maybe I should challenge them to a game."

"Fair warning: they'll send you to jail so many times," Aurora told her with a laugh. "I'm pretty sure Maya was nudging the dice psychically."
"I'd scold her, but that's pretty clever." Good for her for thinking outside of the box.

When the sausages were done, she took them to a cutting board and sliced them. As she did, Sabrina and Rose came in carrying creations of their own. Rose had made a salad to go with the pasta, while Sabrina had brought an apple tart for dessert. They set the dishes on the table and drifted over.

"Is there anything we can do to assist you?" Sabrina asked.

"Set the table, maybe?"

There was a trace of a smirk on Sabrina's face when she said, "Of course."

When the others joined them, the Gym Leader waved a hand and the cabinet doors swung open. Plates and glasses and silverware danced in the air and then settled down on the table in perfect place-settings. Cassandra was reminded of that one scene from Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*. All that was missing was the talking clock and candelabra.

The kids, watching the display, excitedly asked Sabrina if she could teach them how to do that. The psychic smiled and said, "Perhaps when you have more control," which made the kids give each other a determined look. Cassandra supposed that was one way to make them work even harder on their lessons.

Rose, giving her partner an amused look, went to the fridge. "What would everyone like to drink?" she asked. As they made their requests, she took the pitchers over to the table and poured them all what they wanted.

"Florian and I picked this out," Anastasia said, pulling out a bottle of white wine from the back of the fridge. "If anyone is interested?" When the adults all confirmed that they were, she wrestled with the cork until it came out with a "Pop!"

"*Can we have some, too?*" Maya asked.

"I doubt you'd like it, sweetheart," Cassandra said. Nonetheless, she poured them each a *very shallow* glass of it. If they wanted to try it, that was fine. She'd rather they do it while she was watching them, instead of sneaking god knew how much of it behind her back because she'd told them no.

She watched them both take a sip. Both of their faces contorted with matching expressions of disgust. Maya sneezed and Christopher handed her back his glass. "It tastes gross," he complained. He looked at the bottle with a very offended look.

"It takes some getting used to," Cassandra said with an amused smile. "You might like it when you're older." They both looked at her as if she was crazy, which was reassuring.

Before long, dinner was ready and everyone had taken their seats. Cassandra dished everyone a portion of the pasta, now combined with the sausages, while Michael handled the salad. There was some conversation as they all began to eat, mostly about the progress the kids were making, about the trainers that had come to the Center lately, and about Michael rescuing a few black cats from trees. It was one of the quiet, peaceful meals that Cassandra had come to love over the years. That she had this to look forward to every week really showed how much her life had changed for the better.

As the adults were sipping their wine and the plates were cleared away, Sabrina cut the tart and asked Michael, "Did you hear back from your family yet?"
He nodded. "They called me this morning. They're okay and heading to Johto. What about your folks?"

She dished pieces of tart onto the dessert plates Rose brought over. "They're well, as are my students. They've moved out to our country home east of Saffron. No one has bothered them there so far."

Michael nodded, but then shared a look with Cassandra. While Sabrina hadn't talked about it much, they knew her academy in Saffron had been attacked multiple times. That her parents and students had been forced to leave it behind didn't bode well. It probably hurt the psychic more than she was letting on, too. After all, she'd built that school herself. "Well, at least they're okay," Michael reassured her. "That's the important part."

Sabrina gave him a curt nod and handed the children their tarts. They wiggled in their seats, eager to devour the dessert, but they'd been taught to wait until everyone had been served. Cassandra gave them a proud smile and thanked Rose as she set a piece down in front of her. It smelled enticingly of apples and brown sugar and proved to be just as tasty as Sabrina's other sweets when they tried it. She really was good at baking.

By the time they finished, the twins were yawning and nodding off. As the others cleared the table and started on the dishes, Cassandra took her children upstairs. After making sure they brushed their teeth, she tucked them into their beds and kissed them. "Good night, sweethearts."

"Good night, Mama," Christopher said, bundled in his blankets.

"Love you," Maya murmured sleepily, curling up under her covers.

"I love you, too. Sweet dreams." With that, she went back out into the hallway, leaving their door open a few inches. Alexius slunk out of Michael's bedroom and flopped down in front of theirs. "Thanks, Alex," she said, rubbing him behind his ears.

He grumbled and huffed out a puff of smoke. Cassandra rejoined the others for another glass of wine. As they finished the bottle, Sabrina said, "There is something else I would like to discuss." She looked over at Anastasia and Florian. "Did either of you sense something…strange…today?"

After a moment, Florian shook his head. "No, ma'am, but I was at the range with Cassie and Micky most of the day. It's hard to sense anything down there."

She nodded. "What about you?" she asked his partner.

Anastasia's brow furrowed. "I think I might have earlier. It felt like there was another psychic around for just moment, but then it was gone, so I thought I was misreading things."

Sabrina then turned to Cassandra. "And you?"

Cassandra, remembering how she'd felt outside of the house, nodded. "I thought I felt someone watching me when we got home."

Sabrina gaze sharpened. "I see."

"Do you think someone's out there?" Aurora asked, clutching her glass tighter. Michael put an arm around her shoulders.

Sabrina nodded. "I sensed someone sneaking into town this morning. They are very skilled at cloaking themselves, though, so I lost track of them shortly after they arrived."
“Did they seem hostile?” Michael asked before Cassandra could.

Sabrina shook her head. "Not from what I could tell. It might be that they're a refugee or that they're curious about the other psychics here," she suggested. "Of course, they might have other motivations entirely. If they could conceal their presence from me, they could conceal their intentions as well. You should all be on your guard until we can determine why they're here."

At that, Michael stood up, squeezing Aurora's shoulder as he did so. "Alexius and I will go patrol the neighborhood - see if we spot anything. Not sure how much he's going to be able to smell with this rain, though."

"He's watching the kids right now," Cassandra told him.

"I'll go grab him. Florian, you want to come with me?"

"Sure. I'll see if I can sense anything," the psychic said, sounding much more serious than he usually did.

"I'll stay here and keep an eye on things," Anastasia said. She turned to Sabrina and Rose. "What about you?"

"Rose will be returning to the manor in case the psychic is seeking us out specifically. I will look through the rest of the town and see what I can find," Sabrina told her. She looked at the rest of them and added, "You can, of course, contact me by phone or telepathy if you find anything."

They all nodded. As Aurora cleared away their glasses, she said, "Let's plan to meet back here in an hour. If anyone's missing, the rest of us will go find them."

Everyone agreed that that was a good idea. As Aurora offered to stay with Cassandra and the children, Cassandra tried not to feel too disgruntled at being left behind. She wanted to join the search - she could take care of herself - but she knew better than to suggest it. Their priority was to keep her and the kids safe. Though really, when she thought about it, she couldn't imagine leaving Maya or Christopher alone, either - not if there was a psychic lurking out there, intending to do who knew what. It could be they didn't mean any harm, but since none of them knew that for sure, it was best to take the proper precautions.

So Cassandra stayed where she was. It didn't take long to deal with the dishes – twenty minutes, in fact, which left forty for Cassandra to fret through. She went around the house, checking to make sure all of the doors and windows were locked. She also turned on the lights in every room as she searched them, with the exception of her children's bedroom – and that one she searched in the dark, making sure they were the only ones in it. When she was certain the house was secure and that only she, the children, Aurora, and Anastasia (who was upstairs) were the only ones in it, she rejoined the doctor downstairs, turning off the lights as she went.

Aurora had made tea in the meantime. She handed Cassandra a steaming cup of it. "It'll be fine. There's seven of us and only one of them."

"I know, but we haven't had a creeper around since Saffron," Cassandra said.

"It might be that Sabrina's right. This person could just be looking for someplace safe to stay. That's why we came here," Aurora pointed out.

"Or they could be a scout for Giovanni," Cassandra argued.

"And if they are, we'll stop them. Sabrina's more than a match for any psychic out there," Aurora
said, sounding calmer and more confident now that she'd had some time to think the situation through.

Cassandra wasn't so certain. Then again, she'd never met a human psychic who could match Sabrina's strength. The only psychics she'd known who could were Mewtwo and his "brother" and they were both long gone by now. As long as there was the chance that Sabrina could be defeated, though, Cassandra didn't think she could rest easy. She retrieved her gun before too long, even though she knew it wouldn't be much use against a psychic. It made her feel less vulnerable while the others were gone, though.

"We didn't find anything," Michael told her when they returned. He was shivering from the cold and gratefully took the mug of tea Aurora handed to him. Alexius, looking disgruntled, glowed as he used his fire powers to dry himself. "Alexius caught a scent across the street, but we didn't get too far with it." He gave Cassandra an apologetic look.

She turned to Florian. "What about you?"

He shook his head. "Sorry, Cassie. I tried, but they're slippery, whoever they are. Kind of like trying to grab a really slimy frog."

Cassandra felt her shoulders sag. Damn it.

"What about you? Did you find anything?" she asked Sabrina.

Sabrina took a long sip from her cup of tea. "I'm afraid the psychic eluded me as well. However, his cloak slipped once or twice. He seems to be rather upset."

So it was a guy, then. Great. "Like 'I'm-going-to-murder-everyone-in-that-house' upset or 'I-hate-being-out-in-the-rain' upset?"

Sabrina gave her a thin smile. "Neither. He seems more sad than angry."

"So should I be worried about him or not?" Cassandra asked.

"I don't think he means us any harm at present. However, there is always a chance that that could change."

"So we should stay on alert," Michael said.

Sabrina nodded. "We should be cautious until we know more. Taking watches throughout the night would be prudent."

The others nodded. "I'll take the first watch," Florian offered.

Michael took the second shift, Anastasia the third, which left Cassandra with the final one. It was cute that they thought she'd be getting any sleep tonight. Sabrina volunteered to take Aurora back to the Center, though the doctor looked queasy when it became apparent that Sabrina didn't intend to walk that distance. As the two of them vanished in a flash of psychic energy, Florian sat down near the front door and cast out his own power, reinforcing the wards around the house. The uneasy feeling people would get when they neared the building would make most of them hurry away. If they persisted and breached the perimeter, though, Florian would know and sound the alarm. Sabrina had explained the supernatural security measure when Cassandra was first settling in. It had been installed to keep reporters or trainers away, but it worked just as well on burglars and other, meaner individuals. Sabrina had trained her Grey Guards on how to set up, monitor, and maintain a ward, with Anastasia and Florian being two of her best with it. Supposedly they'd taken their training
one step farther and learned how to imbed mental "traps" in their wards...but since Cassandra had always been welcome here, she'd never verified whether that was true or not. Perhaps the lurker would do so for her – not that she was curious enough to hope that he would.

As Anastasia went to the guest room and Michael and Alexius searched the house one last time, Cassandra checked on the children. They were still asleep and blissfully ignorant of the possible danger they were in. She watched them for a few minutes, heart aching with love and worry. What might happen to them if Sabrina was wrong and the stranger really did mean them harm...?

No. Nothing was going to hurt them. She and the others would make sure of that. Going back to her room, Cassandra firmly told herself to calm down. She should try to get some sleep before her watch, at least, even if she only ended up tossing and turning until then. She wouldn't be any use in a fight if she was jittery like this.

Maybe a bath would help her relax. Figuring it couldn't hurt, she went into the bathroom and started up the water. She took candles out of the cabinet, lit them, and inhaled the sweet scent of vanilla rising from them. When her bath was ready, she undressed and slid into it with a sigh, feeling warm for the first time all day. She leaned her head back against the edge of the tub and closed her eyes, letting the water, the fragrance, and the flickering lights of the candles put her at ease....

She wasn't sure how long she stayed in there, but the house was quiet and still when she emerged. Everyone else had gone to sleep except for Florian, it seemed, since the living room light was the only one on. Cassandra finally felt calm enough to try sleeping as well, but her room seemed shockingly cold after her bath. She hadn't thought it was this chilly before she'd gone in, but....

The hairs on the back of her neck prickled up. Something was off in here. Something was wrong. She peered around her bedroom, but the candlelight had ruined her night vision. She couldn't make out what, if anything, was in the shadowy corners of the room.

She did, however, notice the window. It was closed, but it was no longer locked. The latches were turned the wrong way.

Cassandra forced herself to move slowly towards the dresser, feeling someone watching her as she did. She opened the top drawer, pulled out a nightgown, and then reached deeper inside to grab one of the bullet magazines from the back. Then she grabbed the gun on the dresser and whirled around, keeping her back to the wall.

"Who the fuck are you and what are you doing in my house?" she snarled.

She shouldn't have hesitated from shooting. That just gave the intruder a chance to jerk the gun from her hand and levitate it to the other side of the room. He then moved towards her, stepping out of the shadows and revealing his face.

"And here I thought you hated guns," Mewtwo said. "A lot has changed, hasn't it, Cassandra?"

For a long moment, Cassandra stared at him. Shock swept through her, leaving her body numb and her mind blank. When her thoughts restarted, they staggered as if they were struggling through molasses or a sticky web. What was this? What was she seeing and hearing? It looked like him and sounded like him, but it couldn't be him. Mewtwo was dead. This couldn't be real.

Was she dreaming? No, her dreams of him never scared her like this. Was she sick and hallucinating? That seemed more likely, but the only other time her mind had played tricks like this on her was when she'd been going through withdrawal. She hadn't touched anything stronger than
aspirin in years, though, and she couldn't remember falling ill anyway. That left deception. This must be a trick. That psychic who was lurking around town must be doing this to her. He must be using his powers to cast illusions.

"What the hell are you doing to me? What is this?"

Mewtwo – though it wasn't Mewtwo, not really – gave her a confused and then an exasperated look. "I am who I appear to be. I am your Mewtwo. I came to honor my promise to you."

"Mewtwo's dead, dumbass. And if you think I won't shoot you because you look like him, you're going to be really fucking disappointed." With that, she threw the cartridge at his face. As he yelped and dodged, she dived for her gun.

Before she could grab it, the gun slid across the floor. The intruder wearing Mewtwo's face looked irritated now. "While it is reassuring to know that you have kept your sharp tongue, I would prefer not to be shot at. I realize I was gone long enough to give you the impression that I was dead, but as you never saw my corpse, I would have thought you would be more open to the possibility that I did not die."

She surged to her feet and swung at him. "Don't you taunt me, you sick fuck!" He veered to the side, but her knuckles grazed his cheek. The feeling of fur against them made something in her twist-

He grabbed her wrist and tugged her to him so he could grab her other hand. "I am not taunting you. I am who I say I am. If you would calm down for one min-"

She jerked her knee up into his stomach. As he released her with a grunt and clutched at his middle, she scrambled past him and grabbed her gun, swinging it around towards him. She'd started to pull the trigger when he turned and met her eyes.

She hesitated. It looked so much like him. That is what he wants you to think. She knew that and yet….

He huffed out a breath. "You have always been frustratingly stubborn. What do I have to do to convince you?"

A seed of doubt planted itself in her mind. He was right about one thing: she'd never actually seen Mewtwo's body. She'd had a vision of his death – a vision that she'd felt so sure was real – and his absence had only supported what she'd seen. The idea that he hadn't died was unthinkable. It was one of the core parts of her reality, like the fact that she'd been a member of Team Rocket and that she had two children….

Her heart raced at the thought of them. She swallowed hard and stared at the intruder. If this was an illusion, then wouldn't it have to be drawn from her memories? That would make the lie more convincing. Yet this Mewtwo looked different from the one she remembered. His face was thinner, almost gaunt, as if he hadn't been eating much. There were scars on his paws and collarbone that hadn't been there before. His fur was duller and he carried himself differently, too. He looked wary and ready to pounce, like a feral stray rather than the confident tomcat she'd joked he was.

His eyes were the same, though. As frustrated as he was, his eyes had the same softness to them when he looked at her.

The seed of doubt cracked and sent up shoots of hope. What if her vision had been wrong? What if he'd been alive all of this time...?

"Prove it. Show me your aura," she demanded. If he was an imposter, she'd be able to tell. She knew
Mewtwo's soul too well to be fooled by a fake.

He grimaced. "If that is your wish. However, revealing it may be wake the guard downstairs."

"Yeah, because that would be such a shame," she growled. Then the implications of what he'd said sank in. "Wait, did you do something to Florian?" He'd never fallen asleep on the job before - and until today, neither had Ana. She felt a chill go down her spine as the suspicion set in.

"Florian? An interesting name for a guard. But to answer your question: yes, I did. I wished to speak with you alone and his...barriers...were a hindrance to that. He and the others might also have intervened, so I thought it best to use my powers to put them to sleep for the time being."

She felt fury flash through her, searing away the numbness from the shock. "You fucked with their heads?" How dare he? How fucking dare he! "Maybe you really are Mewtwo," she snapped.

He jerked as if she'd hit him. "Excuse me?"

She felt no sympathy for him. Instead she glared and growled, "Just show me your aura already! If you're lying, I swear I'll shoot you."

"Then it is fortunate for me that I am telling you the truth."

With that, he dropped his cloaking technique. His aura flared, radiating his thoughts, his emotions, and the core elements of his soul. She sensed the raw and abundant power in him, as well as his certainty that he could use that power in whatever ways he pleased. She sensed the self-assuredness that came with that certainty, running deep to the point of arrogance. She sensed his thirst to prove himself and his hunger to find somewhere he belonged. Beneath all of that, she sensed his loneliness and longings and love - and his worry that she would turn him away. Perhaps he should even expect her to, because the choices he'd made had risked him losing everything, including her. That they were both alive now didn't mean he hadn't.

Cassandra, raising her mental shields against his aura, had to sit down. It felt like him. His soul matched the one she'd known, so it had to be him. This had to be real. She'd spent so many years believing he was gone, though, so her heart had trouble accepting the truth. How could he be here? How could this be happening?

She buried her face in her hands and tried to get her breathing under control. Her breaths were coming fast and shallow and she'd started shaking. She flinched as Mewtwo took a step towards her, which made him go very still. "Cassandra?"

"I don't understand," she managed to say. She felt cold and sick.

Then there was a flash of light as Florian appeared. He threw a psychic barrier between her and Mewtwo, shoving the clone back. When the glow faded and he saw who was there, though, he cast Cassandra a confused look. "So um, I can't say I was expecting him to look like that. I mean, it kind of raises a lot of questions, but now's probably not a good time to-" He cut himself off and refocused. "Do you want me to kick him out?"

Mewtwo snorted. "If you think you can force me to leave, you overestimate yourself."

"Hey, I'm talking to the lady. Don't be rude. Well, actually, you're already rude, since you put us all to sleep and snuck in here, but let's not take it up a level. Let's calm down, Kujo." When Cassandra started laughing hysterically at that, Florian turned and asked, "Um, you okay? Because-"

Before he could finish what he was saying, the door slammed open and Michael and Alexius
charged in. The devil dog lunged through Florian's shield and tried to sink his fangs into the clone. Mewtwo, looking unamused – and even more so when he saw Michael leveling a gun at him – dodged the attack and knocked the hound back with a sweep of his tail. Then he raised a paw, pushing the men back with a burst of telekinetic force. "Enough! I am here to speak with Cassandra! You will not interfere!"

"You don't get to decide that, Mister Kitty," Florian said with a grimace as he pushed back against Mewtwo's powers.

Michael tried kicking the barrier, which was obviously futile. "You okay, Cassandra?" he asked, not looking away from Mewtwo.

It took her a moment to find her voice. "I'm fine. I'm just going into shock, I think."

"Yeah, is there a reason this freak looks like Maya? I thought you said Mewtwo was the only one who did."

Mewtwo gave them both a bewildered look. She shrugged. "He kind of is." She took a deep breath. Maybe saying the words would make this easier to accept: "This is Mewtwo."

"...Oh. So he's not dead, then?" Michael asked.

"No. I guess I was wrong."

Michael considered that. He didn't lower his gun. "Has he hurt you?"

"Hurt her? I would never-"

"Yeah, you shouldn't talk right now, or I'll have Alexius burn you to a crisp. Breaking and entering, pal. I don't care who you are, I'm within my rights to fry you."

"You could try," Mewtwo snarled, baring his teeth.

"Maybe we should all calm down for a moment," Anastasia said as she drifted into the room. She looked around at each of them before her gaze settled on Mewtwo. "What do you intend to do here, sir?"

Mewtwo gritted his teeth with frustration. "I wish to speak to Cassandra in private. That is all."

"We have a front door. If you meant us no harm, you might have used it," Anastasia pointed out, her tone brimming with disapproval.

He looked chagrined. "I did not wish to make my presence known to anyone but her. I have spent too long concealing myself to do otherwise."

"Maybe so, but we're dedicated to her safety. Your intrusion has threatened that. If you're expecting us to stand down-"

"I'm expecting you to stand down," Cassandra interjected.

Anastasia blinked. "Miss Hartell?"

"Hartell?" Mewtwo repeated. He turned to glare at Michael.

This was getting completely out of hand. "If he just wants to talk, fine. He might have picked a shitty way to start up a conversation, but I'll hear him out. I don't think he means any harm, but he'll
probably smack you around if you pick a fight, so let's just spare us all the headache and bruises, okay?"

"You sure?" Michael asked.

"Yeah. You can go-

"Mama? Why is everyone yelling?" her son asked, standing in the doorway and rubbing the sand from his eyes.

Cassandra felt as if she'd been punched in the stomach. She quickly got up and stumbled over to him. "It's alright, baby. Everyone's fine. We're all just talking. Go back to bed."

"But-" He then noticed Mewtwo in the room and stared at him. "Mama, who is that?"

"That's…." What the hell was she supposed to tell him?

"Chris, no fair, you said you would wait!" Maya cried, coming up behind him. She then followed his gaze and her eyes widened. "Who's that? He looks like me."

Cassandra's mouth went dry. She wasn't ready for this, but she couldn't lie to them, either. They deserved to know the truth. "That's Mewtwo. He's…." She forced herself to breathe. "He's your dad."

"…What?"

She reluctantly turned and met his eyes. They were wide with shock. Whatever he'd expected, it hadn't been this. She guessed that made two of them. Swallowing the lump in her throat, she turned back to the kids. She took each of their little hands in hers. "Um, your dad and I - we have a lot we need to talk about. So while we do that, I want you to go with Michael and spend the night with your Aunt Aurora, okay?"

"But Mama-!" Chris protested, with Maya echoing him.

"You'll get to talk to him too. I just need to figure some things out with him first," she said firmly, not allowing them to argue. "Why don't you go back to your room and get your overnight bags?"

Both of them were clearly reluctant to do so, but after some more prodding from her, they went back to their bedroom. She looked at Florian, not quite able to face Mewtwo again just yet. "You'll go with them and keep them safe?"

Florian nodded, but his brow furrowed. "Of course, but what about you?"

"Anastasia will stay to make sure nothing happens. Which it won't," she assured him. "You just want to talk, right?" she asked Mewtwo. When he didn't respond, she called out his name to get his attention.

That seemed to startle him, because he jerked and quickly said, "Yes, that – that is correct."

"So it'll be fine," she reassured the others. They didn't look so certain, but they also didn't look like they were going to fight her on this. Good.

"I'm leaving Alexius here," Michael said, giving Mewtwo a pointed look. "I'll give Sabrina and Rose a call to let them know what's happened."

"Thanks," she said to him, meaning it. If anything went wrong, Sabrina and Rose were probably the
only ones strong enough to do what needed to be done.

"If you need anything, you let us know," Michael insisted, walking over to her and squeezing her shoulder. When Cassandra nodded, he said, "We'll be back in the morning, bright and early."

"Okay. I'll see you all then."

As they went out into the hall – with Alexius growling at the clone as he passed him by – she glanced back at Mewtwo. "So, um, can you give me five minutes?"

"Most definitely," he said, turning away from her to look out the window.

This was going to be a long night.

It took longer than five minutes before the men and the children left. Mewtwo struggled not to stare as Cassandra hugged the little boy and girl (the boy had his eyes and the girl had everything else), but found he couldn't help it. As much as he wanted to turn away from the sight – as much as he needed to so he could get a moment to think – he simply couldn't. What he was seeing shouldn't be possible. Even when he'd been younger and all limitations had seemed surmountable, he'd never dreamed of something like this.

Cassandra having children he could accept. It was hard, but he could accept it. Cassandra having his children, on the other hand, was something else entirely.

He had children. He had children.

How had that even happened?

He felt numb as he leaned against the windowsill and looked outside. His thoughts jittered like water-striders across a pond. He supposed this explained a few things. Cassandra presumably wasn't married to the man with the houndoom – or if she was (she had a new last name, after all. He'd never thought she'd change her name for any man, and yet…), she didn't have children by him. At the most, the man was helping her raise them; at the least, he was guarding them with the two psychics.

He sensed one of the psychics – Florian – teleporting away with the others. The other one went downstairs, while the hellhound went into a room down the hall. He grimaced. The dark dog didn't seem to like him much. At least the feeling was mutual.

A few minutes later, Cassandra returned with a couple mugs of tea. "I figured you could use something."

"Thank you," he said, accepting the mug gratefully. He forced himself to drink some of it. He was surprised by how much it warmed him.

"So where the hell do we even start?" she asked, standing a couple of steps away from him.

"Those children would be a good place to start," he suggested.

"Their names are Maya and Christopher," she told him.

"...Was the naming scheme intentional on your part?"

"Huh? Oh, you mean the Ms and the Cs? A little bit. Mostly I just liked the names."

He nodded. "I admit, I do not understand how they exist. I take it you did not liberate them from
"You kidding? Giovanni thought it was gross enough that we were fucking. Having someone mix our genes together like that would have made him violently ill."

"I suppose that is true." There went that possibility. He was slightly disappointed. Genetic engineering would have explained the situation in a way he could understand. "So that night in the cabin, when we...."

"Yeah, you knocked me up. With twins, too. Outdid yourself there."

"Technically, the credit for that goes to you." He drank more of his tea. He wished the mint and chamomile would soothe him more. "Though why did it happen? We had sex many times when we were younger and you never became pregnant."

"Aurora – you haven't met her yet, but she's my doctor friend – told me the drugs I was on weren't very good for babies. They weren't meant to be used as birth control, but they had the same effect."

"I see. That still does not explain how we conceived, though."

"Well, you know, yours went into mine, and then you moved it around a lot, and when you reached your peak-" She made the hand gesture for something exploding, which wasn't exactly fitting, but it was amusing.

He smiled slightly and then shook his head. "You know what I meant. We are of two different species. I did not think we were compatible enough to have children."

"Apparently you just have magic sperm."

It had been a mistake to sip more of his tea. He choked and coughed. "I – I beg your pardon? I have what?"

Cassandra smirked. "Well, she didn't say it like that. I think she said your genes have – how did she put it? – right, 'morphic properties,' whatever the hell that means. Basically, if you can fuck it, you can breed with it. So magic sperm."

He wasn't sure he'd ever felt quite this embarrassed before, apart from the time Citlali had walked in on him during a very private moment. He supposed with the mew's ability to transform – and the fact that they were the progenitors of all pokémon species – gave weight to this explanation. He wondered if Citlali had known this was a possibility, but he banished the thought before it could distract him. "I see. I imagine it was still quite a shock to you."

"Well yeah. I mean, we made the whole sex thing work, but kids? That wasn't on my radar. I wasn't even sure I wanted them." She looked down at her tea. "I was on the run...and nineteen...and I thought you were dead. All pretty compelling reasons to get rid of them."

"Yes, they were," he agreed, feeling a heaviness in his chest at the thought. "No one would have blamed you if you had." When she raised an eyebrow, he amended, "Perhaps some might have, but that would have been stupid of them. So why didn't you?"

She looked back up at him and held his gaze. "Because they were all I had left of you."

He felt an almost overwhelming swell of love and warmth for her in that moment. They might have been apart for five years, but it might have been five seconds for all that his feelings for her had changed. He set his mug aside and took a step towards her. He was relieved to see that she didn't
back away from him this time. He reached up and stroked her cheek. "I missed you," he whispered. She closed her eyes at his touch. When she opened them again, they glistened. "I missed you, too."

He wanted to kiss her so badly, but when she drew away, he gave her her space. After a moment, she swallowed and said, "We need to talk more before…." Hearing that made him ache, but even so, he nodded and said, "Yes, I suppose we do. So you decided to keep the children. What happened after that?"

"Well, Team Rocket was still chasing me. I ended up crashing at the Pokémon Center in Saffron and falling in with good people. Aurora and Michael-" He supposed that was the man with the houndoom. "-were the first ones I met. When they found out about my past, I had to go through this…I guess you could call it a psychological test, to see whether or not I was going to murder them all in their sleep." She grimaced at the memory. "I met Sabrina through that – she was the one in charge of the test - and after I passed, I met Rose, Florian, and Anastasia. We all ended up moving out here when things got hairy in Saffron."

"I see. So you are close to all of these people."

"Well, we're all pretty good friends at this point. Not that it started out that way. Michael was in charge of my case back in Saffron. Aurora was my doctor - still is, actually. She looks after the kids, too. Sabrina is kind of…a mentor, I guess, though more so for the kids. I don't have as much potential psychically," she said with a shrug. "As for Rose, she's Sabrina's partner and my…." She hesitated and then told him, "She's my therapist." She looked at him closely.

Was she expecting him to judge her for that? "Has that been helpful for you?" he asked.

"Yeah, it has." She looked relieved. "It's been nice to have someone to talk to about...everything."

"I imagine so," he agreed. He wondered if she would tell him more about that, but since the contents of those meetings were confidential, he knew better than to expect her to.

She didn't offer any more information about it, in fact. Instead she said, "Then there's Florian and Anastasia. Sabrina assigned them to guard the kids and me, since she didn't really think Michael was enough – that or she didn't want the League to have complete control of my case. They've been here since we moved in, anyway."

He nodded, pleased that she'd mapped out the roles these strangers played in her life. Having them around would take some getting used to - that is, if Cassandra allowed him back into her life. If she did, how would he fit in among these people? The thought disarmed him; he'd never imagined having to fight for a place at her side. He'd expected her to be alone all of these years and that, when he found her again, he would be her partner again. He would be the other half of the pair they made, completing her just as she completed him. Yet now her life had expanded to include a whole new set of people, of other pieces, and he might not match their assembly. It might not be so easy to find where he belonged here. Doing so might be even more difficult now, thanks to how he'd offended most of them.

As he was thinking this, Cassandra set a hand on his arm. "You okay?"

"...I am attempting to process all of this," he admitted. He took up his mug again and drained the rest of his tea. "You are not romantically involved with any of these people, are you?"

That question seemed to irritate her, because she drew her hand back and scowled at him. "No. They're either dating each other or we don't click that way. But if I had been, what would you have
"I would have struggled to accept it," he confessed, "but if you were happy, I would have respected that and left you to your new family."

"Yeah, that leaving thing. Are you going to be doing that again? Because now that the kids know you're alive and here, they're not going to take that well. Neither will I, for that matter," she told him. There was fire in her eyes.

"That is not my intention. If you think that I have a place here, then I would like to stay," he assured her.

She nodded and finished her tea. "We'll see what we can work out. Now what about you? Why were you gone so long? Where the hell were you?"

He managed not to wince at her tone. "I was badly wounded after my fight with Team Rocket. My brother rescued me, but it took nearly a year for me to heal and rehabilitate myself. The battle also left me psychically crippled, so we sought out a specialist who could help me regain my powers," he explained.

"When that was done, they spent another year teaching me their special abilities. They told me that without them, I would not be adequately prepared to fight in this war – and they were not wrong about that. Their training has kept me alive, but...my goal was always to find you again." And he had. Despite all of the obstacles in his way, he'd found her and....

...And where did they go from here?

She seemed to be thinking the same thing. "I guess it's better late than never," she said uncertainly. "It's just going to take some getting used to."

He nodded. "Yes. There is much I have missed in your life...and in theirs," he added, thinking of the little boy and girl.

He hadn't been there to help Cassandra through her pregnancy. He hadn't been there to hold her hand when she gave birth. He hadn't been there to help her through the early years of raising them. That knowledge weighed on him heavily. He'd thought it was bad enough that she'd been alone for five years, but discovering that she hadn't been, but had needed him all the same...that was worse. He'd failed her and these children.

"You can't take it back," Cassandra told him quietly.

Hearing that made him hurt all over. "I know. I am so sorry, dove." He meant it. God, how he meant it.

She crossed the distance between them and wrapped her arms around his necks. "Then make it us to us - to me."

"I will," he promised. She was so close that her breath mingled with his. The urge to kiss her rose again, and this time, he didn't resist it. He lowered his mouth to hers and was gratified when she closed the remaining distance between them. The kiss was tender and warm and everything he'd been yearning for for five years. He wrapped his arms around her waist and lost himself in it with her. For a moment, everything seemed right with the world.

He might have cried, but he resisted doing so as he always had. I found you, he thought. He'd almost forgotten how good this felt and how good she tasted and....
She made a low noise in her throat as he nipped at her lip. Her hand touched his face, then trailed down, slipping into his robes to stroke at his chest. His breath hitched and his heart pounded. The desire to do so much more than kiss her stirred in him, making his thoughts thick and cloying. He drew back, just a little, trying to clear his head. He didn't want to take things too fast, even though whenever he'd imagined their reunion, his fantasies had eventually gone to this. He wanted to get as close to her as he could again, but what about her? What did she want to do?

"Cassandra...as much as I would like to continue this...do you think it's a good idea?"

She laughed once. The sound of it was rough and throaty. "No, but fuck it. I'm tired of talking."

She kissed him harder this time, and even if their world and they had changed, this didn't seem so different. He drew her against him, noticing that there was more to her than there had been: more to her hips, her breasts, her stomach, and her rear. He kneaded the latter with a paw and listened to her gasp. He grinned at her response, but mostly he felt relieved, because regardless of where this change had come from – from her age or her pregnancy or the softer lifestyle she was now living – it was another sign that she was healthier than she'd been as a teenager. She hadn't been wasting away somewhere, but flourishing, and that reassured him almost as much as her fingers tugging at his cloak did.

Cassandra, for her part, was doing her best not to feel self-conscious of how her body had changed over the years. Focusing on getting his stupid cloak off helped with that. He seemed to have knotted the damned thing together, probably to keep out the cold, but if that knot didn't loosen up soon, she was going to take a scissors to it. Fortunately, after a few more tugs, it came apart and fell to the floor. Then she saw that he was wearing a belt with a sword on it and why the fuck did he have a sword?

"I...you have seen it plenty of times before, so I am not sure why you are acting offended now. Is this not part of the idea?"

She put a hand on her face. Oh Christ. "No, I mean, why do you have a sword?"

"Oh." He looked relieved. "That is for protection against dark pokémon."

"You seriously thought I was talking about your cock just now, didn't you?"

"I admit that when you looked down and looked bewildered, it was not the sword that leapt to mind."

"You idiot. Take this off, it's going to get in the way."

He did so and then grabbed the edges of her robe. "You are overdressed. Let me help you with that."

"Don't you dare rip it. This is a nice robe."

"I will be very careful," he promised, pulling at the sash of her robe to loosen it and peeling the fabric back. She shivered as the silk slid and hissed down her body, pooling at their feet and leaving the rest of her exposed.

When he saw her armlet, he lifted an eyebrow and tapped a finger against it. "And what is this?" he asked.

"It's like that collar I used to wear, but a hell of a lot more comfortable." She was a little relieved to
have something to distract her from her sudden nakedness.

"May I?" he asked, making a gesture that indicated that he wanted to take it off.

"Um, I'll do it." She muttered the deactivation word, which fortunately wasn't quite as embarrassing as the activation word would now be, since he was here and would know how ridiculously sentimental she'd been when she'd picked it. She was pretty sure she didn't like appearing mushy, even to him.

As her wings materialized, she grimaced at how sore they were. While the armlet had been updated to insure that her extra limbs would get the same care as the rest of her body – receiving nutrients and the like – they still ached from disuse. At least they're not atrophying, she thought as she stretched them out. Aurora had been very concerned about that when Cassandra had admitted to not sleeping with them out for a few nights in a row. Not that her muscles would undergo that process so rapidly, but even so, the doctor had worried....

Needlessly, it seemed. They were healthy enough now and felt even better when Mewtwo circled around her and touched them. He massaged her muscles and stroked through her feathers. "Beautiful," he murmured, tracing along the edge of one wing. He continued circling until he was facing her again. He smiled and settled his hands on her hips. "But then, I always thought so."

She shivered as his eyes darkened and his fingers slid up her sides and stroked her breasts. This was nice, she thought as he kissed her mouth and then trailed kisses down her throat. Really nice, she thought as his hands raked through her hair and swept down her spine.

She wanted to touch him too. She needed to. It had been far too long since she'd experienced this and most of her still needed to confirm that he was real and was really here with her. She grabbed his shoulders, noticing that he was leaner than she remembered, and pressed herself closer to him. She kissed his chest and listened to his breath catch as she nipped at his collarbone and her hands slid down his stomach.

"Cassandra, please," he gasped, his voice sounding strained.

She knew what he wanted and there was something exhilarating about knowing that. She knelt and wrapped a hand around him and started stroking him. When he made a choked and desperate noise at that, she kissed and licked him from root to tip. She was pleasantly surprised to find that he actually tasted clean. She'd been expecting some muskiness, but no, like her, he must have bathed recently.

She looked up at him and lifted an eyebrow. "Were you expecting things to go like this?"

"No, but I had certainly hoped...." He groaned and closed his eyes, tilting his head back. "I wanted to be clean when I came to you."

"Mm, and is this clean?" she said, gesturing to him. He was starting to ooze.

"No, but you can take care of that," he said, sounding smug.

"Pervert," she teased. Then she refocused on what she'd been doing.

Mewtwo moaned as she took him into her mouth. This wasn't something she'd done much to him when they'd been younger, but that didn't mean she wasn't good at it. It didn't take long until he was dangerously close to his peak.

It didn't help when she looked up at him with a devilish grin and murmured, "How many times did
you imagine me doing this to you over the years?"

He couldn't quite manage to answer her at first. When he did, he dug his fingers into her shoulders and groaned, "More times that I care to admit – and it did not feel nearly this good!"

She smirked. "You're not going to finish early on me, are you?"

"Give me some credit," he said, struggling to hold himself together. It was getting harder and harder to. "Though if you keep that up, I cannot promise anything."

"Wow, am I going to have to train you again?"

He gave her a fanged grin. "Hardly. I have no doubt I will outlast you."

"Oh, is that how you think this will go?"

"I know it will." He stepped back out of her reach (his cock wasn't pleased with that) and caught his breath. "Let me show you. Go lay down on the bed."

That sounded good to Cassandra. She went and sat down on the mattress, with Mewtwo following her and towering over her. Do your worst, she dared him. He grinned, grabbing her shoulders and pressing her down in the blankets. "Get comfortable, dove," he murmured, which took a little wiggling, since her wings were pressing up against her back. Then he gave her another one of those breathless kisses she'd missed so much over the years. When they parted, he moved down her, kissing at her breasts, her stomach, and lower and lower on her abdomen. He knelt at the edge of the bed and she shivered with excitement as his breath ghosted between her legs. Then he was tasting her, licking at her cunt and clit and she couldn't do anything but gasp obscenities and dig her fingernails into his scalp.

Good god, she'd missed this. She'd missed him.

She wasn't quite sure how long it was before she urged him to stop. She was so close to hitting her peak, so much so that she would have liked to slap herself for making him stop, but she wanted him in her more and damn was she ready for it. Admittedly, she did have the strangest feeling that she was off balance somehow, or maybe that she was forgetting something, but she really couldn't think straight through her current haze of lust and pleasure.

She'd figure it out later. Right now she needed him. "Damn it, come here you stupid-"

He kissed her hard. When they parted to catch their breath, he smirked and said, "Stupid, am I? And how many times did you imagine this stupid pokémon when you were pleasuring your-

"Every fucking time," she groaned. "Just fuck me already!"

"As you wish." He grabbed her and pulled her to the edge of the bed. He hooked her legs over his hips and rubbed against her for a few maddening moments. She snarled another curse at him for that, then gasped as he thrust in hard and fast. She clutched at her blankets, moaning at the pleasure and satisfaction of it (fucking finally), and watched him move over her. There was something deeply attractive about how his stomach muscles tensed as he thrust into her and that intensely focused look on his face. Listening to him groan with pleasure only deepened her own, and it wasn't long before she reached the peak she'd been so close to. She shuddered around him, her mind whiting out and her body tingling as her orgasm washed through her.

Mewtwo felt her clench around him and barely managed to keep himself from coming. He was horribly close, so much so that he wasn't sure how he'd lasted this long – not with how she'd been
touching him, or the sounds she'd made as he'd tasted her, or the delicious, firm heat of her around him. He'd been determined not to disappoint her, though. If he'd left her unsatisfied after so many years of apart, he didn't think he'd be able to live with the shame.

Once she seemed to come back to herself, though, she gave him a searing look and growled in a low and husky voice, "Come on, Mewtwo, come-"

He'd never liked obeying anyone's orders, but he couldn't resist it when the woman he loved said something like that. He managed a few more thrusts before he hit his peak, his thoughts going blank as pleasure surged through him. Afterwards, he sprawled in a heap over her and pressed his forehead against her shoulder, panting. When he felt her arms wrap around him and squeeze, he nuzzled at her skin. This was what he'd dreamed about in all those years they'd been apart. He'd sustained himself on that dream, but this was so much better than anything he'd imagined.

"I love you," he murmured.

After a moment, she sighed, "I love you, too. Even if you are kind of crushing me right now."

He laughed and got up off of her. She sat up and fluttered her wings, then laid back down on her side with them draped across her side of the bed. He sank down next to her and circled an arm around her waist. He wasn't willing to let her go just yet. She buried her face into a pillow and her chest heaved as she sighed.

She looked up again, though, when she felt his fingertips tracing the red and white streaks across her hips. She gave him an assessing look.

He stroked her stretch marks as he'd stroked her other scars in the past. "So you truly gave birth to them." He knew she had, but it sank in more when he felt the physical evidence.

She reached down and covered his hand with hers. "Yeah, I did. It was hard and I can't say the stuff that came before or after it was any easier. But it was worth it. They're worth it."

"...What are they like?" he asked hesitantly.

The smile she gave him was somehow brighter and warmer than any he'd ever seen before. "Well, I guess Maya's kind of an imp," she told him. "She likes to get into everything and go exploring, and she gets her and her brother into trouble half the time. She once dumped a bottle of sparkles all over him to make him shiny like her. It took forever to get them out of his hair. But she's not a bad girl. Whenever someone's upset, she always tries to cheer them up. She brings us things, too – little treasures she's found outside, like pine cones or pretty stones. She has a collection of them under her bed." Cassandra tucked her arm under her head. "Everything's an adventure for her."

"She sounds very outgoing."

"Yeah. I have no idea where she got that from. I don't think either of us were when we were younger."

"Perhaps being raised in this place made a difference. She is surrounded by many colorful characters too, it seems."

"That might be it," Cassandra agreed. "I worry about her sometimes."

"Because she causes mischief?"

"That and she has a lot of nightmares. I think they might have be related to her powers – that they're
visions, maybe."

"...I could help with that," he said, relieved to find that there was something he could do for the girl – for his daughter, who shared his shape but seemed more like his brother than him.

Cassandra's brow furrowed. "You can?"

"I have a necklace that is charmed to prevent nightmares. I will give it to her when I see her next," he said. He would no doubt have nightmares of his own afterwards, but he'd earned those in full. The child should have some peace.

"And it actually works?"

He nodded. "I have not had a nightmare since I began wearing it. It will help her."

Cassandra's gaze softened. "Thank you."

"Of course." He stroked her hair. It was shorter than it had been, more in the style she'd worn as a teenager. It made him feel nostalgic, even though he knew those days hadn't been as rosy as they seemed in his memory. After a moment, he asked, "And the boy?"

"Chris? He doesn't have any nightmares."

"I am pleased to hear that, but what is he like?"

"Oh. He's a sweetheart, honestly. He's always really sensitive to what other people are feeling and gives us hugs when we're feeling down. He's pretty quiet and shy, too, which I think he got from me."

Mewtwo lifted an eyebrow. "You were shy?"

"When I was five," Cassandra admitted with a blush. "Anyway, he hates getting into trouble, so he always tries to keep Maya from getting too crazy – and pouting when she ignores him and drags him along for the ride. I think he might enjoy it a little, though. He's usually grinning up until the point where we catch them. Then he kind of glares at Maya when they don't get dessert that night." She grinned at the mental image. "God, what else? Oh, he loves learning. Sabrina tells me he always pays really close attention in his lessons and that he loves to read. He's like you that way."

Mewtwo had to smile at that. "What can he do psychically?"

"Way more than me. They both can. They can do that energy manipulation thing and make things float around and they've started fires once or twice. They have a ton of empathy, too. I think Chris might also have a touch of your...persuasive...abilities. Not that I've ever seen him use it, but no one ever seems to remember seeing them go charging by, and they're not exactly stealthy. But I don't think Maya would care about being seen, so that leaves him."

"Do you worry he might be abusing this power?" Mewtwo asked, feeling uncomfortable. He was very aware of the fact that he'd done so in the past to Cassandra.

Cassandra seemed to follow his thoughts, because she frowned. "I don't think so. He would never hurt anyone and we've told them both not to do something like that. But he's...protective...so if he thinks that's what it would take to keep Maya and Sarah safe."

"Sarah?" Who was that?
"That's their friend. She lives a few houses down. Anyway, it's something we need to watch out for."

He nodded. "It sounds like they have quite a range of powers."

"Well, they've got a super-psychic dad and a slightly spooky mom. I can't say I'm surprised. Sabrina says they're going to grow up to be some of the strongest psychics she's ever seen, which is saying something, coming from her." Cassandra sounded both proud and worried about that.

"Why do you sound so concerned?"

"Just...what if someone takes advantage of them someday?"

"As we were?"

"Yeah."

He lifted himself onto one arm and reached over to caress her cheek. "Then you will help them, just as you always have. As will I."

"You better."

"I promise." He would keep this one just as he had the last. He leaned down and placed a soft kiss on her forehead.

She closed her eyes. "And you don't break your word, right?"

"Never."

She smiled and curled closer to him. As she touched the scars on his chest, she asked, "So I have a question for you, if you're game?"

"Ask away."

"Where was the logic in teleporting me to Cerulean City? I mean really. It was crawling with Giovanni's thugs. Not exactly a fun place to land."

He felt everything inside of himself freeze. "Excuse me?"

"I just want to know what was going through your head, since you could have dropped me off on a tropical island somewhere, but you sent me there instead."

"That is not-" How had she ended up there? He knew she'd landed off target, but- "I had intended to send you to New Island."

"Weren't you born there?"

"Yes. I once made a home there, actually. You would have been comfortable there. Your needs would have been met and you would have been safe. You should have been safe."

He couldn't keep the pain from his voice. He would have taken them there originally, but he'd worried that Giovanni would check there first. With all of the man's forces in the north, though, Mewtwo had been sure she would have been alright on New Island – and that she might even have found her ease there until he returned. Yet it seemed his teacher had been right: she'd never made it there to begin with.
Cassandra stroked his arm soothingly. "Well, I'm here, so it wasn't a total fuck up."

"I do not understand how you ended up in Cerulean. I would never have sent you there."

"I don't know what to tell you. It...felt rough, though, like I was being yanked through instead of carried. I got sick afterwards. And..." She looked uncomfortable.

"And?"

She heaved out a breath. "I had this vision of you being burned alive. I kind of figured that's why I dropped out of the teleport: that you'd gotten yourself killed, so your power broke."

That could have explained it, but the timing was wrong. He'd fought Giovanni's forces for much longer than it should have taken for Cassandra to be teleported to New Island. That should have taken a few seconds for her and he certainly hadn't fallen so quickly. Cassandra seemed to reach a similar conclusion, because she frowned and her brow furrowed.

"Do you think you can concentrate on that memory for me? I will read it and try to assess what went wrong."

She nodded and closed her eyes. He pressed his forehead against hers and focused. He felt her remembered fury and desperation as she'd waded through the snow after him, determined to fight alongside him. He felt her horror and pain when he'd sent her away – and then something sickening. There was the sensation of collision – of being jerked in another direction – which had left her breathless and disorientated as the world had re-materialized. Her surroundings had tilted and spun around her, making her stomach heave from nausea. Then the vision had come, its psychic energy burning into her mind and showing him dying at Giovanni's hands.

He actually had almost died from the attack she'd seen - but then his brother had pulled him away, and that fact made the rest of the puzzle pieces fall into place with brutal clarity.

The psychic energy that had torn Cassandra away from him – the psychic energy that had filled her vision and seared itself into her mind – was not his or hers. It was his brother's. Or rather, it belonged to the creature who dared call himself his brother – and the worst part was, Mewtwo had come to believe him over the years. He'd considered the mew his family and had trusted him.

He'd known Citlali hadn't approved of his relationship with Cassandra, but he hadn't thought he would tear them apart and keep them apart. For that was surely what he'd been doing all of this time – and worse, he'd been trying to make Mewtwo give up on her. After all, he'd already made her give up on him.

Mewtwo wondered if Citlali had known about the children.

He felt himself shaking. Only once before had he felt this betrayed and furious: when Giovanni had turned on him and revealed he'd only ever thought of Mewtwo as his plaything. Yet there was something worse about Citlali's treachery, because while Giovanni had hurt him, he'd never claimed to love him. His brother had. Yet he'd still done this – he'd still kept Mewtwo away from his family – and for what? What reason could he have possibly have had to justify this?

Mewtwo wanted more than anything to get up and find the mew and demand to know why. He'd even started to rise when Cassandra threw her arms around him and said, "Mewtwo - Mewtwo, stop! Calm down!"

"He betrayed me. Citlali betrayed me. I have to find him and-"
"And what? What are you going to do?"

Kill him, he thought, but the thought gave him pause. Even if he had the power to murder the mew – and Mewtwo, after being trained by him, was not convinced that he did – could he bring himself to? Could he bring himself to kill Citlali? He kept you from your mate and your children. He put them all in danger. He did this. That fact might have been enough to drive him to do it, but at the same time, doubt niggled at him. He wasn't sure.

When he confronted the mew, then he would know. For now, though...

There was a knock on the door. A woman's voice carried through it. "Is everything okay in there?"

Cassandra sat up and pressed him back down into the bed with one hand. "Everything's fine, Ana! Go back downstairs."

He could feel the woman's hesitance. "Are you sure, Miss Hartell?"

Cassandra rolled her eyes. "Yeah, he's not pissed at me. You don't have to worry."

Anastasia didn't sound convinced as she said, "If you say so," but despite that, she did as Cassandra had said.

By this point, Mewtwo had calmed down a little. "They really think I could hurt you?"

Cassandra looked exasperated. "Well what are they supposed to think when your aura gets all spiky and murdery?"

"...I do not know, but I dislike that assumption."

"Pretty sure no one likes people thinking they're going to wack someone."

"Wack?"

"It's a mobster term. It means killing someone."

"I am aware of what it means. I am merely surprised to hear you use it."

"Michael and I watch movies together. Some of them use fun words."

"I would think you would avoid being reminded of your life in organized crime."

"It's easier to laugh at it than be depressed by it," she said. "And anyways, the movies exaggerate."

"I imagine they do. Dramatizing is a part of the art."

"Yeah, well, that's beside the point. What the hell is the matter with you? Why are you freaking out?"

He sank deeper into the blankets. "Do you remember the mew who visited me?"

"The one who tried to hook you up with that gardevoir who wanted to suck you off? Yeah, that was kind of memorable."

He grimaced. "If you could kindly not remind me of her intentions towards me, I would appreciate it."
"I think you might be the only guy I've ever met who's turned down a free blowjob."

"It would have been a different matter entirely if I had loved her. I did not. We are straying from the point, though."

"Right. So you're pissed off at that mew?"

"Ciltali sent you to Cerulean and gave you that vision. I am certain of it."

Her brow furrowed. "Why would he do that?"

"I intend to find that out."

"Not tonight, you don't," she said firmly. "You're not disappearing on me again."

"I will have to find him soon." He wanted to do so now, but Cassandra's tone made it clear she wouldn't tolerate any arguments from him.

"But not tonight," she insisted, leaning down to kiss him. "Tonight you're staying with me."

He was starting to think about making love to her again, slower and sweeter this time, when Cassandra drew back from their kiss. "Shit. That's what I forgot." When he gave her a questioning look, she said, "Ana. And...another thing, but I'll talk to Aurora about it tomorrow."

"Should I be worried?"

She shook her head. "No, I'll take care of it." She shivered as he played with her feathers. "We should go to sleep. It's late and I have work in the morning."

"What do you do now?"

"I give music lessons." She sounded reluctant to discuss it right then.

"May I come with you tomorrow and see?"

She considered that. "Maybe. I'll call and ask."

He nodded and kissed her forehead. "Thank you. Go to sleep, dove."

She smiled. "You too, wildcat," she said. As she closed her eyes, he pulled the blankets over them and wrapped his arms around her. He fell asleep to the sound of her breathing and the smell of her hair in his nose. Even with his necklace chasing all of his nightmares away, he slept more soundly than he had in ages, thanks to her warmth at his side.

He was glad he'd never stopped searching.

Cassandra woke up disoriented. The first thing she noticed was that she wasn't alone in bed. The second thing she noticed was that the body pressed against hers was hauntingly familiar. There was fur against her naked skin and a musky smell with a note of mint in it. Soft breaths puffed against her hair and, as she shifted to get a better look, she felt arms and a tail coil around her tighter.
Tears stung in her eyes. So it hadn't been a dream. On the edge of waking, she'd thought it must have been. But no, Mewtwo was alive and well, it seemed. She wasn't sure what was going to happen to them next, but for now, his being here was enough of a comfort.

The peaceful moment broke when her alarm went off. Mewtwo jerked awake with a growl and clutched her closer, but his eyes were still glazed with sleep, so he didn't seem fully aware of his surroundings just yet. She wiggled to loosen his hold and murmured, "It's fine, it's just my alarm, I'll turn it off." After a few seconds that seemed to sink in, because he released her.

After making sure the device wouldn't shriek at them again, she looked back at him and felt something inside of her clench at seeing him stretched out like that, with his arms open for her and the blankets rumpled around him. It was terribly tempting to call in sick and lay back down with him and pass the morning away in bed. Yet the others would be back before too long, so she couldn't stay here wrapped up in him, no matter how alluring the thought was.

So instead, she flung her legs over the side of the mattress and said, "I'm going to go take a shower. You can join me if you want."

He looked disappointed, as if he'd also been hoping they'd stay in bed, but he sat up and said, "I would like that."

They both washed thoroughly, helping each other when they could. He rinsed the oil from her wings and she worked out the little mats in his fur. The experience was so nostalgic that she half-expected to step out of the shower and be in her apartment again. Yet there was plenty to remind her of the present, like the shape and color of the bathroom and the new scars she found underneath his fur. Eventually, she would have to ask him where they'd all came from or if he even remembered that at this point. She still couldn't remember where some of hers were from, after all.

There were moments when their touches could have turned into more intimate ones, but she backed off whenever that happened and he took the hint. Having sex with him last night had been exciting and had felt so good, and she wanted to do it again, but she needed to think this through. Maybe that mew had torn them apart back then, but he hadn't been the only thing that had. There were problems that they were going to have to confront, and soon, and if she just fell back into bed with him and didn't say anything about it, they might never actually do so.

So after she'd dried off and activated her armlet, she dressed quickly and tried not to let his confusion soften her. At the last moment, she reached for her jewelry box on her dresser and hesitated. Should she wear her necklace? Would he think he had a claim on her then? She couldn't imagine not wearing it, though. It would niggle at the back of her mind all day, irritating her like a loose tooth.

So she glanced at Mewtwo and said, "Why don't you go downstairs and grab something to eat? I'm going to make a call." She gestured to the phone on the nightstand.

He hesitated at her dismissal, but then nodded, picked up his pack, and left the room. When he was gone, she took out her necklace and put it on, tucking the chain and cross underneath her shirt. Feeling better, she called the school to see if they would be alright with her bringing Mewtwo along for the day. The principle, used to Florian or Anastasia accompanying her, gave his approval. She hung up, glad that he hadn't asked a lot of questions. Maybe the people in Lavender Town were polite that way. Maybe it had something to do with guarding the dead and their secrets.

When she went downstairs, she found Mewtwo and Alexius staring each other down in the living room. Alexius was glaring at Mewtwo as if he'd kicked him. Mewtwo was giving the dog a displeased look and had his paw on his sword. She cleared her throat and raised an eyebrow at them. Alexius grumbled, smoke wafting from his muzzle as he turned and trotted away. Mewtwo grimaced
and followed Cassandra into the kitchen, where Anastasia, looking extremely tired, had prepared coffee. She was halfway finished with a mug of it when they came in.

Cassandra wasn't sure what to say. Ana had been here while they'd been fucking upstairs. They hadn't exactly tried to be quiet about it or bothered to conceal their activities psychically. It just hadn't occurred to them in the heat of the moment. Fortunately, she was saved from having to say anything when the front door opened and the kids came charging in.

"Slow down, you monkeys!" Michael shouted after them.

They didn't listen. They both hurried in and skidded to a halt in front of Cassandra, Mewtwo, and Anastasia. Cassandra tried not to feel hurt when Christopher and Maya didn't so much as glance at her or Ana. They only had eyes for their dad. She supposed if her father rose from the dead and was standing in her home like this, she'd be similarly transfixed.

There was a lengthy silence before Michael coughed and said, "So, glad to see you're both still in one piece." He was looking at her and Anastasia as he said it.

That got Mewtwo's attention. His eyes narrowed. "Neither of them were ever in any danger. If you could dispense with the assumption that I am a murderous monster, I would appreciate it."

Cassandra glanced down at the children. Their expressions hadn't changed. Mewtwo must not have transmitted that thought to them. She went over and placed her hands on their shoulders. "So, kiddos, why don't we get you something to eat?"

"Aunty Rora gave us muffins," Maya told her. "I had a blueberry one."

"Well that was nice of her. Did you thank her?" They nodded. "Good. We haven't had anything yet, though, so how's a second breakfast sound?"

"Like the hobbits have?" Chris asked, his expression brightening. He loved those books.

"Like the hobbits have," Cassandra confirmed. She opened up the freezer and pulled out some hash browns and breakfast sausages. "Michael, you think you can make some French toast?"

"Sure." He was looking between Mewtwo and her. He then glanced at Anastasia, who nodded.

Great. Everyone was going to know she'd slept with Mewtwo before lunchtime. Fan-fucking-tastic! Muttering a curse under her breath, she took out a frying pan, put it on the stove, and added some butter to it. Once that melted, she threw in the sausages and watched them start to sizzle. At least they could all have a hearty breakfast together before things got too crazy.

"So where's Florian?" she asked Michael.

"He's gone to make his report to Sabrina. She and Rose will probably come over sometime today or tomorrow."

"What about Aurora? She wasn't curious about him?" she asked sourly.

"She's curious, but she figured you were overwhelmed enough as it is without more people dropping by. She says she'll be happy to take the kids for a while longer, if you need it."

Cassandra glanced at the table. Mewtwo had been coaxed into sitting down and the kids had taken the seats on either side of him. They were watching him peel an orange with fascination. Mewtwo looked rather uncomfortable with the attention.
She turned back to the sausages and rolled them so their other sides would cook. "Yeah, because it's going to be easy to tear them away."

Michael shrugged. "They're four. We can handle them."

"Don't say that, you'll jinx us."

He smiled and sprinkled a liberal amount of cinnamon and sugar on the toast. "So are you really okay?"

"I'm fine," she said crisply. Why did they all have to keep asking her that? "I'm bringing him to work today."

"To keep an eye on him?"

"Sort of. He wanted to come."

"And you're explaining a giant kangaroo cat thing how?"

"I said he was a new guard."

"...Does that mean you're planning to leave the old ones behind?"

"Just for today. I think Ana needs some time away from us and Florian is off with Sabrina, so..." She shrugged.

"You sure this is a good idea?"

"Not really, but I know I can handle him."

Michael gave her a funny look at that. "...Right."

"...Don't make that dirty."

"Just tell me I don't have to sanitize the shower."

She suppressed the urge to smack him. "No. We behaved ourselves!"

"Well that's something." He flipped over a couple pieces of toast. "Just be careful."

"I will be," she promised. She slid the sausages onto a plate and added the hash browns to the pan. They continued cooking breakfast in silence after that.

When they finished and carried the food over, she heard Christopher shyly asking Mewtwo, "Where did you get that sword?"

Mewtwo glanced between him and Cassandra and then replied, "I made it myself."

Christopher looked at him with awe. "Could you teach me how to use it?"

"I want to learn too!" Maya insisted, refusing to be left out of anything her brother was involved in.

Mewtwo looked uneasy. "Perhaps when you are older – and if your mother approves," he said.

"Good answer," Cassandra said. She portioned food onto their plates with Michael, while Anastasia got them their drinks. The psychic hesitated, but then gave Mewtwo a glass of milk. He blinked at her and Cassandra struggled not to smile. Milk for the kitty. As they started eating – or in the kids'
case, shoveling hash browns into their mouths – she met Mewtwo eyes and said, "My boss says it's okay for you to come along today. Pretty sure no one will try to catch you, but make sure you have a shield up just in case."

"Oh, that will not be a problem," he assured her.

She was glad that one of them was confident about that. The kids, however, looked disappointed by this news. "He's not staying?" Maya asked.

"He is, but he's coming with me today. You'll see us again tonight," Cassandra promised.

The twins didn't look happy about that. They glanced at each other and Cassandra got the sense that they were communicating with one another telepathically. Then they refocused on their breakfasts. "Okay," Chris said, sounding put out, but also determined. She really hoped they weren't going to do something that forced her to leave work early.

"We'll keep an eye on them," Michael promised her when she was shoving her boots on later. Mewtwo was getting ready in the bathroom. She wasn't sure what that consisted of.

"Thanks," she said with a sigh. The kids were in the living room with Anastasia, scouring through the cabinets for a movie to watch. That gave her hope that she wouldn't come home to a burnt down house.

At that moment, the bathroom door opened. "Finally," she said, "I was beginning to think you'd died in there."

"That would have been most unfortunate."

She laughed and looked up. "Yeah, it-" she began, but then she saw him and her train of thought was derailed completely.

What, what, what? Her brain couldn't seem to compute what she was seeing. She sensed that it was Mewtwo standing there, but it didn't look like him anymore. Instead, she saw a man who was taller than Michael, had a lighter build than him, and had shock white hair. It fell around his ears like a shaggy fur. He was also wearing dull-colored clothes, but that he was wearing clothes at all made them stand out to her as if they were made of multi-colored patches with Christmas lights laced between them.

When her brain started functioning again, she walked over to him. This had to be an illusion. She reached out and poked him-

Huh. Unless he was really messing with her head, which she'd punch him for, that actually did feel like a real shirt. "What the hell?"

"Language." He looked over at the children, who were staring at him with wide eyes. Anastasia and Michael were giving him similarly shocked looks. "This is one of the skills I learned while I was...away. To help me blend in," he explained.

"You're not messing with our heads, are you?" She glanced at Ana. The psychic shook her head.

Mewtwo did the same. "No. This form is genuine. My brother taught it to me."

"You have a brother?" Chris asked curiously.

Mewtwo grimaced. "Of a sort."
"Oh."

Maya went over to him, practically vibrating with excitement. Her eyes sparkled. "Can you teach me how to do that, Papa?"

Mewtwo jerked as if she'd struck him. His eyes were wide as he said, "I...I could attempt to. We will see."

"Could I learn too?" Chris asked hopefully.

"I do not know if it would work for you, but we can try," Mewtwo said, seeming to regain his composure. She sensed that he was still shaken, though.

The kids looked thrilled. Cassandra leaned down and gave them both hugs. "We'll be back later. Don't get into too much trouble."

The twins promised not to and waved at them as they left. The school was within walking distance, just on the other side of the park, so as they crossed the street, Cassandra asked, "Could you really teach them that?" If Maya, at least, could learn how to look human, she would never have to worry about trainers again.

"I could try. They have inherited my other abilities. It stands to reason that they might be able to learn this one too. It might even be easier for them to master, since they are hybrids to begin with."

She nodded. "We'll figure it out." She took his hand and gave it a squeeze. It felt different, but it was still his.

Mewtwo looked down at their clasped hands. "I...did not expect her to call me that," he said quietly.

"You're gonna have to get used to it," she told him gently. She didn't imagine Maya was ever going to stop calling him that now that she'd started.

"I suppose I will," he agreed, looking at the path in front of them with a furrowed brow.

She tried to think of something else to say. "So what should I call you when you're like this?"

He tilted his head as he considered that. "'Matthew' would be acceptable. It sounds similar enough to my name."

"Alright then. Come on, Matthew. I don't want to be late."

He nodded and followed her to the school. She didn't let go of his hand.

By the time she finished her shift, though, Cassandra was feeling rather less sympathetic towards him.

To be fair to Mewtwo, he wasn't disruptive in any way. He didn't hover too close to her, glower at any of her coworkers or students, or interrupt her when she was in the middle of a lesson. Instead, he followed her with a pensive expression - and the occasional frown - on his face. This was no more than Anastasia and Florian had done in the past, but Cassandra found she was much more conscious of him being there than she'd ever been with them. Once her irritation with that took root, it started reminding her of other, similarly aggravating things. By the time the final bell rang, she was nursing a headache and gritting her teeth from anger.

It had been stupid of her to let him come along. She might feel more comfortable having him close
by, but if she'd left him at home, she could have let her work distract her. Instead, all she'd had to do was glance up at him and remember what she'd forgotten over the years. The one kindness she'd found in thinking that he was dead was how it had allowed her to deal with his memory: the pain of the bad times had faded, the good times had taken on a rosy hue, and she'd been able to forgive his faults. She'd even been able to idealize him, in part, because in the end there hadn't been any chance of him hurting her again - at least not more than he already had.

Now that was no longer the case. Last night, she'd been too overwhelmed to think clearly. Seeing him again had made all of her feelings for him come rushing back: the love that had made her willing to betray her organization, the desire that had made her willing to cross the boundary of their species, and just the pure joy of having her friend back. That had been enough to make her put all of her misgivings aside and take him back into her arms again...but now she'd had time to think. Now she'd had time to remember. And now she was left wondering: how could she have forgotten how moody he was? How could she have forgotten how judgmental and condescending he could be? How could she have forgotten how many goddamn times he'd made decisions for her and pushed past her boundaries just because he could?

She glanced at him walking beside her in that human form he'd acquired. Something about it – maybe the lie of it – made her irritation spike. "When we get home, you're changing back to normal," she said firmly.

His brow furrowed at her tone. "If you wish, though I would have thought you'd appreciate the advantages this form gives us."

"No, I get how it's useful, but it's not you. I fell in love with a walking, talking, psychic cat, not a white-haired pretty boy. Everyone I care about knows that, so this is just - it's stupid and unnecessary. It's not like I'm ashamed of you, you know."

His eyes softened at that. At least they hadn't changed. "What I said earlier about using this form as camouflage is true, but...I mostly learned it to give us a chance at having a normal life together. If it distresses you, though, I will return to my true form when we've returned."

"Thank you." She crossed the street and headed into the park. "I'm not sure why you bothered, though. I'm an ex-assassin, winged mutant, wannabe psychic, and you're a two-necked, genetic experiment, werecat thing with horns for ears. And we have a pair of half-human, human-pokémon children. So it's not like we ever really had a shot at being a normal family, no matter what you make yourself look like."

"Maybe so, but I doubt your coworkers would have accepted me as well if I had looked like a 'werecat thing,'" he said. There was a sour note in his voice and...a touch of disapproval?

"Do you have a problem with my job?" she asked, fighting to restrain her anger. She actually really enjoyed what she did for a living these days. Teaching children music was something she felt like she could be proud of. What could he possibly have against it?

"No, though I do find it surprising. You are a self-proclaimed 'ex-assassin.' Teaching is a far cry from your previous profession."

"Yeah, well, Lavender has enough ghosts in it without my help. And honestly? I don't think you have the right to question what I do with my life. Maybe if you'd been here, you'd have a say, but you weren't, were you?"

His eyes narrowed and he stopped walking. "No, I was not. I made a mistake. I understand that and I am sorry for-"
"You saying you're sorry isn't enough!" she snapped. A long, tense moment passed between them after that, as he stared at her and she struggled for regain her composure. She couldn't go home to the kids this upset. Finally, when she could trust her voice not to shake, she said, "We shouldn't have slept together last night. I wish we hadn't."

His jaw clenched. "Where is this coming from? You seemed certain of it at the time."

"Of course I was. I hadn't gotten laid in years and I was happy to see you."

"...And now you are not?"

And there was the heart of it. "Not as much as I want to be."

There had been many times when she'd wished she wasn't an empath. This was one of those times. The pain radiating from him was enough to nearly choke her. "Why?" he asked, his voice unsteady and uncertain. "I only wanted to - I have only ever wanted to keep you safe and happy."

"But you never asked me what I wanted," she said, feeling tears, the treacherous little fuckers, start burning in her eyes. She swiped them away angrily. "I begged you. I begged you not to leave! But you didn't listen to me. Instead you did what you thought would be 'best' for me, as if I was some stupid kid and not your partner. You don't do that to someone you love!"

He gave her a reproachful look and reached out, as if he wanted to touch her, but then he seemed to think better of it. When his arm fell back to his side, he said, "I do love you - more than anything. And I know I hurt you badly, so I will not ask you to forgive me."

"Good, because I can't. I had to go through my pregnancy alone. I had to raise our children without you and wonder, every day, if Giovanni was going to find us and give them to his scientists to play with. Maybe if you'd have been there, it all wouldn't have been so fucking hard. At least I would have known you had my back." Her hands clenched into fists. "But you know what the worst part was? It was when I realized that I shouldn't have been surprised. You leaving was just another thing in a whole list of shitty things you've done to me."

He actually looked shocked to hear that. "What are you talking about?"

She stared at him. Did he really not know? He'd had five years to think about everything he'd done wrong in their relationship, but it seemed that he hadn't looked passed the mistake at the cabin. "Do you really want to do this here?" she asked. There was no one nearby right now, but that could change at any time.

His gaze glinted. She recognized the angry defiance in it. "Better here than in front of your family. Go ahead; tell me my list of sins."

"Fine." She knew this was necessary and that she couldn't put it off any longer, but the thought of going over it all with him made her feel exhausted and depressed. She couldn't stop now, though, could she? So she took a breath and began. "You lied to me. You held me captive. You struck me and molested me at least three times – and you did that knowing I'd been raped in the past. You also had your friend torture me for information you already had!"

There was a look of growing horror on his face, but she wasn't finished yet. "And before all of that, you fucked with my brain. You erased a year's worth of my memories because you thought it would be for the best. You didn't even ask me if I wanted to forget! You just went ahead and did it!"

She could feel him becoming defensive. She could hear it in his voice as he said, "I am not the only one who has committed wrongs in our relationship. If I recall correctly, you never consulted me"
when Giovanni was threatening my life. You did not trust me to-

He was trying to reject what she was saying. She couldn't let him. "Yeah, that was a bad move on my part. I was sixteen and stupid; I admit it. But that one bad move doesn't equal the same as the dozen of times you've screwed me over. It doesn't even come close!" Try to understand what I'm saying. Just try!

Mewtwo didn't respond for a few seconds. Then he asked, "What do you expect me to do about it? What do you expect me to say? I cannot erase the past-"

"Though you gave it your best shot." She knew being sarcastic right now wasn't going to help, but she couldn't stop herself from saying that. It was a big part of his problem, after all. He kept trying to run away from the painful parts of his past. He never confronted them when he could help it. He needed to now, though. If they were going to have a chance of making this work, he needed to realize how badly he'd fucked up and do the work to make it better. If he couldn't do that, then….

He gritted his teeth with frustration. "I never intended to hurt you."

"Neither did Giovanni."

Mewtwo looked disturbed by the comparison. "How can you compare me to the man who murdered your parents and forced you to kill so many people? A man who, even as we speak, wages war on everything you care about?"

"Because whether you want to admit it or not, you're not so different from him! You both took advantage of me. You both betrayed me after I'd gave you everything I had to give!And you did it while saying you loved me and – fuck! Fuck! I shouldn't have given you a second chance, let alone a third one!"

And that did it. That made it sink in. She watched him break; watched the anger drain out of him and regret and dread fill in its place. "Cassandra…dove…what do you want me to do? How am I supposed to make this right?" he asked, sounding lost.

If he was doing like that to manipulate her - to make her soften up to him again - she would kill him. She would not expose her family to someone like that. However, as far as her empathic senses could tell, he was being genuine right now. She hoped she wasn't being fooled.

She had to be firm about this. She couldn't let him off easy, no matter how much she didn't want to hurt him. She crossed her arms over her chest and said, "You can't do things like that anymore. You can't treat me that way. I'm your partner. I deserve your respect. So you'll be honest with me. You'll respect my boundaries. You won't touch me when I don't want you to. You won't try to make decisions for me. When we make choices that affect both of us, we'll make them together. Otherwise this isn't going to work out."

When he nodded, she laid down the ultimatum. "If you can't do that – if you hurt me or my friends or our children – then that's it. You're done. I'll make sure you never come near us again."

He was shaking now. She didn't know if she'd ever seen that before. "Why...why are you even giving me another chance, when it is clearly against your better judgment?"

She knew she shouldn't be. She should be telling him to get lost. She couldn't, though. Not yet; not before she knew for sure whether this could work out or not. "Because I'm kind of stupid when it comes to you," she admitted. "I've missed you so much and...and even though you fucked up, not all what we had was bad. When we worked, we were really happy together. I don't want to throw that
away if there's any chance we can get that back."

She tried to swallow the lump in her throat. "Besides, the kids would hate me if I just threw you out. They've always wanted to meet you. And they should. They deserve to have a father. It sucks not having one, so just…please do better this time, okay?"

Mewtwo gazed at her for a long time, but then he nodded. "Alright. I promise."

Finally, she let herself take his hand and squeeze it. "Nice words. You know you're going to have to back them up with hard work, right?"

"I know." They began walking again. He still looked shaken. This was clearly not an argument he'd been expecting to have.

She never wanted to have one like it again. As they left the park, she said, "Since you're on probation, you're going to be sleeping on the couch until I say otherwise."

"Not in the doghouse?" he asked. "It appears you have one now."

Cassandra's lips twitched. "Alexius would never forgive me if I stuffed you in there. He'd pee on my bed in revenge."

"I suppose we cannot have that. The couch it is, then." He managed to meet her eyes for a second. "A shame, though. It was nice to sleep with you again."

Cassandra felt herself blush and cursed herself for it. "Knock it off. You flirting with me isn't going to make me go easy on you. I can see right through you."

"I am not trying to manipulate you. I merely meant…I missed being with you."

"Yeah, well, don't say that in front of the kids. Michael and Aurora are bad enough sometimes."

Mewtwo stared fixedly ahead of them. "So I take it they are involved?"

Cassandra rolled her eyes. "Now they are. You can't seriously be worried about me banging Michael, are you?"

"The thought had crossed my mind. He lives with you and he is not an unattractive man…."

Oh, there were so many ways she could respond to that. Why, are you interested? Yes, we have orgies every Sunday, want to join us? Other possibilities flew through her head, but in a dry voice, she went with: "Don't be stupid. Aurora is much better in bed."

His head whipped around so fast she swore she heard his neck crack. "What?"

She laughed. "You're so easy sometimes. Don't get your tail in a twist. I haven't been with anyone since you. Not that you could hold it against me if I had, since I thought you were dead."

He nodded, but she noticed he also relaxed slightly. "If you had grown lonely, I would have understood…."

She lifted an eyebrow. "Why, were you banging gardevoirs? Should I be worried about you giving me poké-crabs?"

He looked affronted. "Absolutely not. You are my mate. I have been with no one but you."
She had to smile at that. "Alright then. We've both been pathetically celibate for five years. Go us. Now let's get back to the house. It's movie night. Maybe that will help you calm down."

He smiled very slightly at that and followed her. Things between them might not be okay right now, but maybe, with time and a lot of effort, they could be again.

Cassandra had to admit, finally saying all of that to Mewtwo had been satisfying, though the pain she'd put him through had made it slightly less so. At least they could work on the problems between them now, rather than continuing to sweep them under the rug. Their partnership couldn't be built on passion alone and she would like to think that they could give each other more than that. When they were younger, they might not have been mature enough to do so, but they were adults now. She wanted to believe that the added years had made them stronger, wiser, and more capable of building a healthy relationship. She would have to wait and see if she was right.

She led him back to the house and released his hand when she unlocked the door. This late in autumn – or this early in winter, she supposed, looking at the snow – it was already getting dark outside. She stepped inside, sighing at the warmth and light, and smiled as Maya and Christopher rushed over to them.

She knelt and gave them each a hug. "How was your day, sweethearts?"

"Good." Maya was wiggling with excitement as she looked up at Mewtwo. "We're going to watch a movie. Do you want to watch it with us?" she asked him.

He looked uncertain. "If your mother is alright with it."

Cassandra suppressed the urge to roll her eyes. It was good that he was being careful and checking in with her about this, but them watching a movie together was pretty much the most innocent thing she could think of. As both Maya and Christopher turned to her, with Maya looking expectant and Christopher giving her a look of cautious hope, she nodded and said, "Of course he can. What movie did you pick?"

"Finding Nemo," Chris told her, shyly glancing up at Mewtwo.

She wondered how long they'd spent picking that out. "That's a great choice. Why don't you go get it ready? Your dad will join you in a couple minutes." As they scampered off to the living room, she turned back to him. "Go change back. Now."

"Of course," he said, looking slightly shamefaced.

"Your um – your cloak should be clean now. I threw it in the wash before we left."

He nodded. His smile was strained. "It is getting threadbare at this point. I will have to acquire a new one soon."

"Well, Christmas is coming up. If you're still here, maybe you'll get another one," she suggested. She couldn't promise anything – not the gift or of him still being here, but she hoped he would be. She'd dreamed about that in years past.

His brow furrowed. "Maybe so. I will be back in a moment." He went into the bathroom. She could hear him rummaging around in the laundry from behind the closed door, and after a minute, he came back out looking like himself.

She felt some of the tension in her uncoil. She gestured to the living room. "I can hear the
commercials going. You might want to get in there before they're over."

He sounded nervous as he asked, "Will you be joining us?"

"No, I think you three should spend some time together." When he looked even more apprehensive, she gently added, "It'll be fine, Mewtwo. It's just a movie."

He didn't seem convinced, but he nodded and headed into the room nonetheless. As she watched, he gingerly sat down in the middle of the couch and the kids climbed up and sat on either side of him. A few minutes into the movie, they cuddled closer to him and he shot her a panicked look. You'll be fine, she mouthed. He stared at her for a moment, then sighed and turned back to the television, clearly tense but seeming to accept the situation he'd been thrown into.

Anastasia was there as well. She was sitting in one of the armchairs with a book propped open in her lap. She gave Cassandra a nod to indicate that she'd be there to monitor the situation. Cassandra nodded back and went into the kitchen, where Michael was sitting and drinking a cup of coffee.

"How were they today?" she asked.

"Eager for you two to get home," he told her.

"Of course they were."

"You worried?" he asked, looking towards the living room.

"I'd be stupid not to be, but I want to give him a chance."

He made a contemplative noise at that. "Well, we'll be here to make sure he doesn't blow it."

She smiled. "Thanks. So, what are we having for dinner?"

"I actually ordered a pizza."

"Thank fuck," Cassandra said as she went to pour herself a cup of coffee. When he lifted an eyebrow, she told him, "It's been a long day. I'd end up slicing my fingers off if I tried to make something."

"Yeah, that's what I figured."

"When's it going to get here?"

"Shouldn't be too much longer - maybe ten, fifteen minutes?"

"Good, I'm starving," she said as she sat down.

"...Work up an appetite, did you?"

She scowled. "Not like that. I worked all day with him hovering around."

"What, you didn't take a break in a janitor's closet?"

"I think you're confusing me with you."

"Yeah right. Aurora would shoot that idea down so fast. There are chemicals and spiders in there and why bother when there are perfectly good, clean hospital beds we could use?" he said in a high voice that she guessed was meant to mimic the doctor's.
"No sense of adventure to her at all, is there?"

"Well, I wouldn't say that," he said, his eyes glazing over and his face reddening. She grinned and stirred some sugar into her coffee. After a moment, he hesitantly asked, "Though, um…what are the sleeping arrangements going to be? He going to be staying with you?"

She shook her head. "He's on the couch for now."

"In that much trouble, is he?"

"There's that. But you know how the kids are. If they have bad dreams, they come to me and I…I don't want them walking in on something. I don't want them to feel uncomfortable."

"Makes sense," he agreed. "So it's all pretty complicated, then?"

"Yeah. I think it's going to stay that way for the time being."

"You know we're all here for you."

She smiled at that. Yeah, she knew they were and she would never take their support for granted. There had been a time in her life when she'd had no one to rely on – when she would have killed for friends like these – and now that she had them, she'd do everything she could to keep them and support them in return. "I know. Thanks, Michael."

He nodded and drank the rest of his coffee. She did the same, savoring the bittersweet taste of it and the caffeine soon humming through her. When she glanced at the newspaper he was reading, he pulled out the Arts and Entertainment section and handed it to her. Apparently, even during a war (or perhaps because of it), people needed a creative outlet. That the pieces featured in the articles had become darker over time came as no surprise to her. So, after studying a picture of what looked like a bird on fire, she read the blurb about the artist and what had inspired the painting.

Several minutes later, there was a knock on the front door. Michael got up to answer it and, as he did, Cassandra went to check on how Mewtwo and the kids were doing. She peered into the room and felt herself melt at what she saw. Mewtwo finally seemed to have relaxed: he was leaning back into the couch and was staring at the television with a thoughtful expression on his face. He didn't seem to mind that Christopher and Maya had tucked themselves against his sides. As the two made comments about the movie – something about how fish were definitely food, but they could still be friends, because Aunty 'Rora had an aquarium at her office and they liked to feed them – his gaze flickered down at them and there was a trace of a smile on his face.

Leaving them to a scene filled with sharks and explosions, Cassandra returned to the kitchen. She took a stack of plates out from the cupboard, but paused as she heard raised voices from the front door. What was that about? Concerned, she set the plates down on the table and peered down the hallway.

Michael was standing in the open doorway, but what instantly put her on guard was the fact that he had his gun in hand and that he looked pissed. Florian stood on the porch beside another man, looking lost and a little panicky. He met her eyes and glanced at the person next to him.

Cassandra looked at the stranger. This was definitely not the pizza man, unless pizzas now came in duffle bags. He was about Michael's height, but heftier, with broad shoulders that reminded Cassandra of the hikers that passed through the Rocky Tunnel. He was wearing clothes similar to the hikers', too. They were all made of dull-colored, but durable-looking fabrics. The pants and the jacket were worn around the knees, elbows, and cuffs, while his boots were encrusted with dust.
That being said, he didn’t seem to be prepared for an early winter in Lavender Town. While his skin tone was darker than the norm up here, his cheeks, ears, and nose were obviously red from the cold. He rubbed his chapped hands together as he glowered at Michael.

He sounded rather exasperated as he said, "If you'd just let me in, I'd be happy to explain--"

_Oh hell no!_ Who even was this man? Michael seemed to be thinking the same thing. "Not a chance. If you want someplace to stay, there's a Center just down the road."

"I already told this young man," the stranger said, gesturing to Florian, "that I'm not looking for a shelter. I'm here to see Cassandra. I have some things that belong to her and some things I need to tell her." He shoved his hands into his pockets. "Don't even try to pretend she isn't here, son. Shadow smelled her a mile away."

Cassandra felt a jolt go through her stomach. Her gaze fell to the man's feet, where a mass of black and gold fur was sitting. _Shadow?_ she thought, not quite able to believe it. How could he be here after all of this time? Then the umbreon, after glaring at Michael, looked past him at her. His eyes brightened and his tail twitched with pleasure. He got down on his haunches, preparing to spring forward, but Michael stuck his foot out and shooed him back. The dark fox puffed up with displeasure and gave him an indignant look. By this point, Cassandra was sure it was Shadow. How had he found her, though?

"Look, I don't know who you are, but you're not coming in," Michael said firmly. "For all I know, you're another Rocket and I'm not about to let--"

"If I was, your friend--" The man gestured to Florian. "-wouldn't have brought me here. He knows I'm telling you the truth. I don't mean anyone here any harm – especially not her." He ran a hand through his salt-and-pepper hair. "Just give me a few minutes to--"

"What part of 'no' are you not understanding?"

"The part where you're keeping me from the only family I have left." His eyes held Michael's and Cassandra realized, suddenly, that they were grey. They were a very familiar, pale grey. "Please. I've been waiting for this for over twenty years. Please let me speak to my daughter."

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**Thank You:** To Mysti Rose, Leone the Infernal, and Vinylshadow for reading and reviewing the previous chapter. I hope you and my other readers will do the same for this one!

**Author's Note:** The reveal about Cassandra's father was never intended to be a surprise, since I assumed everyone would guess who it was when he was first introduced. As for why Cassandra was so angry with Mewtwo in this chapter, I think she explained herself well, but I'll give my own reason for it. I started this story when I was thirteen, during a time when I had very warped ideas about what a healthy romantic relationship looked like. Over the years, I've come to realize how problematic Cassandra and Mewtwo's relationship was, but rewriting the story to fix it isn't an option now. However, having them confront the problems between them and working through them is. While in real life, I would tell Cassandra not to give him another chance - and that it would be dangerous for her to - I'll let it slide here for storytelling purposes. I'm not comfortable with it, but I'll try to redeem Mewtwo nonetheless, since that works better with the story established to this point. As for the bonus scene below, I wrote it purely for laughs. I hope you enjoy it!

Sincerely,

WiseAbsol
Alternative Scene: A Desperate Search

She wasn't quite sure how long it was before she urged him to stop. She was so close to hitting her peak, so much so that she would have liked to slap herself for making him stop, but she wanted him in her more and damn was she ready for it. Admittedly, she did have the strangest feeling that she was off balance somehow, or that maybe she was forgetting something...

Then it hit her. "Oh fuck."

He lifted his head from between her thighs and gave her an amused look. "You seem to be enjoying this quite a lot," he said with satisfaction.

"Of course I am, but that's not – shit, I'm sorry, could you hold that thought?" She sat up and moved her legs so he wasn't between them anymore. She didn't want to risk kicking him in the face when she stood up. She tried to do just that and felt her knees tremble and her clit throb. God fucking damn it, this sucked!

Mewtwo looked bewildered. "Did I do something wrong?"

"No – god no – but I just – I need to grab something, okay?"

He blinked. "Can I help you find whatever it is?"

"Er, no, just...stay here. And try to stay in the mood." She glanced down at him and cursed some more in her head.

"Um, very well. I will be here." He sat on the edge of her bed, looking confused and rather frustrated.

That made two of them. She grabbed her robe and threw it on, then staggered over to the bathroom, trying not to let her thighs rub together too much. It wasn't easy and she gasped more than once at the pleasure-pain the pressure caused. She could have just laid back and let him fuck her silly, but no, she had to remember that they needed protection now. Though would a condom even work on him? He was pretty close to the size and shape of a human guy, but pretty close was not exact. What if it slid off?

Well, maybe Aurora had stashed some female condoms in here somewhere. She opened the drawers and rummaged through them. She even managed to yank Michael's locked one open. There was some off-color magazines in there, but nothing useful to her. She slammed it shut, cursing, and decided his room was the next best bet. Aurora stayed over sometimes. They had to have something in there, right?

Alexius watched her as she looked in Michael's dresser, then under his bed, and then finally in his closet without success. "Seriously? Seriously? I bet you're on the pill, aren't you, Aurora? You'd think you'd want to be double-safe - I mean, you're a doctor and all. You know your shit. I swear, it's like you're trying to spite me, except we all thought my fuck-buddy was a corpse, so I know better. Ugh!"

She glanced at Alexius. She could have sworn he was raising an eyebrow at her. "Shut up. This is a problem for those of us who haven't had our balls chopped off."

He gave her a judging look and she grumbled and straightened out the room. She went back into the hallway and then saw the light on downstairs. For a moment, she wondered if she was that desperate. Could she live with herself if she asked Anastasia to teleport her to the Pokémon
Center so she could grab some condoms? Could she really do that?

...Nope. She’d never be able to live it down if any of the others found out. She’d spend the rest of her days living with the shame of the "desperate 2AM condom search" story until she died. No, she wouldn’t do that!

So, with a huff, she returned to her bedroom and closed the door behind her. Mewtwo was, absurdly, reading the book she’d had on her nightstand when she came in. It looked like he wasn’t very aroused anymore, either. Damn it, couldn't you have played with yourself until I got back? Well, that might have ended up being painful for him if he kept it up for too long, so she guessed she couldn’t blame him.

He looked up from the book when she came in. "Did you find what you were looking for?"

"No," she said sourly. "Not a single condom in the house."

"...You were looking for condoms?"

"Yes. The last time I fucked you bareback, I got pregnant. I'm not ready to go through that again." Plus she’d nearly died the last time and Aurora would skin her alive if she tempted fate again.

"Oh." He looked embarrassed. "My apologies. I should have thought to...but it was never necessary for us before..."

"We’ll just have to do this another way. Unless you’re not up for it?"

"I am. What do you have in mind?"

She showed him. It wasn't what either of them had been planning on, but it was pleasurable and gratifying nonetheless. Afterwards, as she laid tucked into his arms, he said, "I admit, that is not how I imagined this going."

"Are you complaining about a blowjob? Really?"

"I am not. I simply imagined having sex with you in another way." He lifted himself onto one arm and stroked her cheek. "I trust I returned the favor satisfactorily?"

She laughed. "Yeah, you did. Thanks for that."

"It was the least I could do," he said, sounding smug.

Cassandra smirked and smacked him on the chest. He made an "oof" sound and toppled back into bed, dragging her against him as he did. "Silly wildcat," she murmured.

"Your silly wildcat," he agreed.

She traced patterns into his fur. "Are you tired?"

"A little. If you would like to continue our conversation from before, though, I will gladly stay awake for it."

She glanced at the time and shook her head. Her desperate search had taken longer than she’d thought. "Nah, let's get some sleep. We'll talk more in the morning."

"As you wish," he said, kissing her forehead.
She buried her face against his shoulder and breathed in the smell of him. She felt him drag the blankets over them and wrap his arms around her. Then, for the first time in a long time, she slept easily, knowing with a certainty that he would still be there when she woke up.
"Real fatherhood means love and commitment and sacrifice and a willingness to share responsibility and not walking away from one's children."

—William John Bennett.

"Are you fucking kidding me?"

When Cassandra's brain restarted, that was the first thought that leaped into it, hissing like an alley cat. Or perhaps like a wildcat, because the anger that stalked after the thought was enormous. It filled her up, making her hot enough that she could feel the warmth pouring from her face. It made her wonder if she could set something on fire. If she'd had Mewtwo's powers or, better yet, a can of gasoline at her disposal, she probably would have. She'd been an arson once, after all. She wouldn't even have to use as much gas this time, because there would only be one body to burn.

Then Cassandra saw Florian paling next to the man she was considering turning into a whirling, screaming bonfire, and mentally slapped herself. No. This was not ten years ago. She was not that person anymore. Hell, she'd never even wanted to become that person in the first place. But she was angry, and the thought of falling back into her criminal ways for just an hour was tempting. She wasn't going to be the kind of mother who set people on fire, though. That wasn't a lesson to teach her children, no matter how much this asshole deserved it.

Her father? Really? He thought she was going to believe that? What a load of horse shit. Her father was dead—everyone knew that. She'd known that since she was five, for god's sake. Who did this man think he was? And what the hell did he want? If he was a Rocket infiltrator trying to get close to them and make them let their guard down, just so Giovanni would have an easier time picking them off, then he'd picked the wrong way to go about it. Sure, this man might look like her, but how hard would it have been for Giovanni to find someone who could be a dead ringer for her father. The Rocket Boss had never been subtle with his schemes. He'd always been more of the "smash people with a hammer" type than the "stabbing them in the back" type. The latter was more the kind of shit Domino pulled, and she was too smart for a plan like this. Cassandra might have detested her, but even she would admit that Domino hadn't been stupid. She wouldn't have risen so high in the Elite if she had been.

Whatever. The point was, there was no way in hell that she was this man's daughter. This had to be a trick, no matter what Florian thought. Before she realized what she was doing, she'd stalked forward, ripped Michael's gun from his hand, and had the barrel pressed against the man's chest. His eyes widened with surprise. He went still, scarcely seeming to breathe.

That suited her just fine. "You have five seconds to get off my porch."

"Er, Cassandra, I know you think he's lying, but I can tell when people—"
"Florian. Stop talking." She didn't want to hear that from him. She wanted this man out of her sight.

The man stared at her and slowly raised his hands. "Cassandra, I—I'm unarmed. I'm not going to hurt you or anyone else here. Have this officer search me if you don't—"

There was a click as she began pressing down the trigger. He stopped talking, then opened his mouth again to say something in a slow, would-be-soothing tone. "Okay. Okay, I'm sure you need some time to calm down. I'll go to the Center and we can talk when you're ready. Let me just—" He bent down, leaving his duffle bag in the door frame. "That's yours. I'm going to leave Shadow here, too. He—he's missed you." There was something deeper in his voice then—an undertone of sorrow that was probably calculated to make her doubt herself and hesitate.

But she wouldn't. Cassandra pressed the barrel of the gun to his neck. He straightened and stepped back, keeping his hands up, and kept walking backwards as she stepped forward, following him. He nearly stumbled as he went down the steps. He didn't seem willing to turn his back on her. Smart guy. It was only when they reached the gate that he did. He gave her one last look, then turned and walked quickly down the street to the Pokémon Center.

As he vanished around the corner, Cassandra realized that her breathing was coming in ragged gasps and that the gun in her hands was slick with sweat. With conscious effort, she forced her arms down and loosened her grip on it.

She heard someone moving behind her, and then felt a familiar hand on her shoulder. "It's alright. It's alright, Cassandra." Mewtwo's voice had the gentle tone of someone trying to calm down a scared and feral animal. "He is gone. You can let go of that." It was hard for her to do so, with her fingers so tense around the metal. When she did, he caught the gun with his powers and levitated it behind them. He wrapped his arms around her waist and drew her back against him. "You are alright."

She let him hold like that for a minute, until she managed to stop hyperventilating. Then she pulled away and headed back into the house. Florian couldn't seem to look at her, while Michael was looking at her warily.

"You should let Aurora know he's coming," Cassandra told him. He nodded and headed into the house to get the phone.

"Cassie, I—" Florian began to say.

"I don't want to talk about it," she cut him off. He flinched like a kicked pikachu, but nodded. She turned her eyes to the floor, taking in the duffle bag and—and Shadow. His shoulders were hunched and his tail was twitching in agitation. She knelt down to him and reached out hesitantly. "Shadow—"

He growled low in his throat when she touched him between the ears, but after a second, he huffed out a breath and leaned into her touch. When she gave him a weak smile, he jumped onto her wrist, crawled up her arm, and perched on her shoulder. When he nuzzled her cheek, her smile grew.

"You brat," she choked out. "Where the hell were you when I got back? I was worried about you." She reached up and stroked his back. "I missed you."

He licked her cheek and then jumped back down to paw at the duffle bag. She sighed. "For all I know, there's a bomb in there."

She thought she saw Shadow roll his eyes at her. He certainly seemed to be giving her an exasperated look. "Fine. If whatever's in there kills us, though, I'm blaming you," she told him,
reaching for the zipper.

The first thing she saw when she unzipped the bag was the hard, black plastic of an instrument case. There were scratches and buff marks on it that looked familiar to her, and when she checked, she saw her name embossed in gold lettering on its side. She forced herself to take a breath, then lifted the viola case out of the bag. She unlatched it and looked inside at the instrument. The viola and the bow were in better condition than she would have expected after five years on the road. The wood gleamed with oil and the knobs for the strings still had their pearly luster. The horse hair strip along the bow wasn't worn out or stringy. They looked the same as she remembered. She closed the case with trembling hands, then turned to look through the rest of the bag's contents.

There were clothes—some of which looked like they might be hers (the creep), but most of them belonged to the man. Bundled within them, though, were more delicate items. A folder filled with the pages of the songs she'd created. A photo album with pictures of her and her mother, looking more worn out than she remembered, as if it had been paged through often. The velvet box with her mother's engagement and wedding rings in it. Another, larger box with trinkets she remembered from her childhood. These were the treasures she'd clung to while growing up, to remind herself of happier times.

She'd thought she'd lost all of these things years ago. That man must have taken them before she'd returned from her last mission—and taken Shadow, too. She wasn't sure whether she should be furious at him for stealing them, or grateful to have them all back. After all, she would have been forced to leave them behind if he hadn't. Even Shadow, her dear Shadow, would not have been able to come with her or Mewtwo as he'd teleported them away. Not as a dark pokémon.

Unease twisted at the nerves in her stomach. Had he known something like that would happen? Was that why he'd done it? And why would Shadow, who'd trusted so few people, have gone with him? Had the man fooled him by saying that he was Caleb Brennan? Why would he have done that—and why would Shadow have believed him? What proof did the man have, besides those familiar gray eyes?

She felt Mewtwo come up behind her. "I see he returned your treasures to you."

"He took them first," she pointed out.

"True. But why?"

She shrugged. "Maybe to win me over. I don't know. I don't care."

He gave her an assessing look. "Yes you do. If you want me to, I could go and question him. You needn't ever see him again."

She shook her head. "No. We don't have to go that far. Not yet, anyway." She zipped the duffle bag back up and lifted it onto her shoulder.

"So what do you want to do about him?"

She shrugged again. "I don't know. Let me sleep on it." She walked down the hall and saw Maya and Christopher peeking out at her curiously. A jolt went through her stomach. How much had they seen?

Maya spoke first. "Mama, who was that?"

Cassandra sighed and reached down, stroking the fur on the top of her daughter's head. "I don't know, darling."
"Was he a bad man?" Christopher asked. "You were really angry…"

She rubbed her stinging eyes and then took his hand. "It doesn't matter. He's gone now." She opened her mouth to say something else, but then there was a knock on the door behind them. She froze. No. No, he couldn't be back. No one came back to the door of someone who'd just pointed a gun at you —

Michael brushed by her and answered the door, his hand on his holster. When he opened it, she saw another, much younger man carrying two boxes of pizza.

Her shoulders slumped with relief. "Why don't you two go wash your hands? Dinner's here," Cassandra didn't know if she would be able to eat anything, but they shouldn't go to bed hungry. The twins glanced at each other, then went to the bathroom. She heard the sink going and went to sit down in the living room. The movie was paused on the image of a pelipper hitting a glass window. She knew how it felt.

Anastasia gave her a concerned look and opened her mouth to ask something, but Cassandra waved a hand dismissively. "Could you make sure they don't start picking off the pepperonis and eating them, like they did last time?" she asked.

Ana lifted an eyebrow, but then nodded and went into the other room, leaving her alone. Cassandra heard her say something to Michael, their voices rising and falling, with Florian and the kids chiming in sometimes. But it was all fading into a dull noise, with none of the words standing out. She flinched as Shadow jumped and curled up in her lap, and when Alexius flopped down on her feet, but she welcomed their warmth. She sighed and leaned her elbow against her knees, hunching over to run her hands over her face.

How in the hell was she supposed to deal with any of this? Why did it all have to start happening at once? Wasn't there supposed to be a break between the punches?

She felt fabric sliding over her shoulders and looked up to see Mewtwo standing there, draping a blanket over her. "You were shivering," he said.

"I'm pretty sure everyone else got the hint that I wanted to be left alone for a few minutes."

"I have never been good at respecting boundaries."

"Wow, look at that bit of self-awareness. I'm so proud of you."

"I would like to think that all of my brooding has to led to some self-realizations," he said, sitting down next to her. He held out his paw to Shadow, who glared and shifted so that he was turned the other way. "Ah. He is angry with me too, it seems." Mewtwo sounded hurt by that.

"What were you expecting? For him to cuddle with you?"

"No. He has always been more affectionate with you than with me." He drew his hand back and met her eyes. "Is there anything I can do to help?" he asked. He looked as if he already knew what her answer would be, though.

"Go make sure neither of our kids start choking on their food."

"You need to eat too," he pointed out.

Food didn't sound all that appealing right now. "I'll be there in a minute," Cassandra said, making no promises.
Mewtwo hesitated, then leaned forward and kissed her forehead. "That is all I ask."

"Boundaries," she warned him. He sighed, nodded, and went into the kitchen.

It took her more than a minute to motivate herself to get up. She just wanted to go to bed, curl up under the covers, and hide for an hour or two. Or ten. But her stomach gave a low grumble and she forced herself to get up. The dark pokémon followed her into the kitchen, with Shadow looking at everyone—but especially at Maya and Christopher—with interest. Michael handed her a plate with two giant slices of pizza on it, which were lukewarm, but filling. No one spoke while she ate. They seemed to be trying not to look at her—or at least get caught looking at her—and the atmosphere was uncomfortably tense.

The kids broke the tension by reaching down to pet Shadow, who was sniffing at their greasy hands and flicking his tail in a happy way.

"That's Shadow," she told them. "He's...." How was she supposed to describe their relationship now? He hadn't been her pokémon for years. "He's a friend. Treat him nicely, okay?"

The kids agreed, with Christopher giggling as Shadow licked his fingers. Cassandra felt herself begin to relax at the sound. For now, the danger had passed. Her family was okay—and more whole now than it had been before, with Mewtwo and Shadow here. She wasn't sure how she was supposed to move forward yet, but maybe what she'd told Mewtwo was her best option: she needed to sleep on it. The night before hadn't been nearly as restful as it could have been, and it had been a long, emotional day. Things would be clearer to her in the morning, after she'd had some time to process things and wasn't as bone-tired.

As the others finished eating and started cleaning up, Cassandra took Maya's and Christopher's hands and led them to the bathroom to get them washed up. Christopher stared up at her with big, purple eyes and asked, "Can we finish watching Finding Nemo with Daddy?"

Cassandra glanced back at the oven clock. It was getting late. "How about you finish it with him in the morning?" she suggested.

Christopher looked disappointed, but seeing his sister's yawn, he nodded. "Okay."

She squeezed his hand and helped him reach the sink to wash his hands. Maya clambered onto the closed toilet seat and waved her legs and tail over the edge. "Could Daddy tuck us in tonight?" she asked.

Cassandra hesitated. "What, are you getting tired of me doing it?" she asked, trying to keep her tone light.

Maya jutted her lip out in a pout. "No, but he's never tucked us in before."

Cassandra sighed. Mewtwo was already struggling with the whole fatherhood thing. This might be too much too fast. "How about tomorrow night? Your dad still needs time to get used to the idea of being your dad." Answering honestly was probably the best thing she could do right now.

Maya gave a long-suffering sigh, which Cassandra struggled not to smile at. "I guess. But definitely tomorrow night!" she insisted.

"Okay, darling. Tomorrow night it is. Now come here, we need to get you cleaned up too," she said, scooping the girl up and holding her up to the sink. When there were no signs of pizza grease in her fur, Cassandra set her back down and handed them their toothbrushes. They seemed to find getting their mouths extra foamy entertaining, but as long as they got their teeth clean, Cassandra wasn't
going to comment on them being messy. At least they weren't dripping all over the floor, right?

When they were done, she led them upstairs and went through the motions of getting them changed into their nightclothes and getting them tucked into bed. As wound up as both of them had seemed earlier, their eyelids were drooping with sleepiness now. She hummed to them until they closed their eyes and their breathing evened out. Within five minutes they were both asleep.

She wasn't surprised. As exciting as having their dad around must be for them, they'd also been woken up in the middle of the night and had gotten up very early today. It had only been a matter of time before they'd both crashed. Kissing them both goodnight, she turned to the door and saw Shadow sitting there, the gold bands around his ears and tail glowing in the dim light. He tilted his head up at her inquiringly. She smiled and put an extra blanket on the table between the two beds. He jumped and curled up on it, seeming to go to sleep as well. His garnet eyes were still gleaming as she pulled the door mostly closed behind her, though.

She went back downstairs. Mewtwo was in the process of laying out blankets on the couch for himself. Ana was standing in the hallway closet and pulling pillows down from the top shelf. Cassandra mouthed a "thank you" to her as she passed them by, then headed into the kitchen. Michael and Alexius were still there. Michael was washing the dishes and Alexius had placed himself as close to his partner as possible, without sitting on the man's feet. But it was a near thing.

Michael looked up as she stepped inside and nodded to the phone. "Aurora wanted you to call her."

Cassandra nodded, going over to it and speed-dialing the Center's number. "It's me," she said as Aurora picked up.

"Hi Cassandra. How are you feeling?"

"Like I got hit by a truck, but what else is new?" She rubbed the bridge of her nose. "So did that guy find you? Are you okay?"

"Yes, he did, and yes, I'm fine. That was actually what I wanted to talk to you about. He asked me if we had the equipment to run a paternity test."

Wait, what? She heard her voice echoing the sentiment. "Do we?"

"We do, though it's more to check on pokémon pedigrees. But it will work for this too. I still have your records on file, so it wouldn't take long to run a scan and compare them to his, if you want me to."

On the one hand, that would definitively tell her whether the man was lying or not. On the other hand, she wouldn't be able to deny it if he was telling the truth. Could she handle that? "Did you take a lot of samples from him?" she asked. "Can't people fake those with like...patches full of blood or something?" Hadn't there been a science fiction movie they'd watched together a few years back where the protagonist had done just that?

"That would still require him to have met your father at some point, get samples from him, and keep them viable for years. The patches would also have to be good enough to fool me and...that's a lot of effort for a man who looks like he's been on the road for months." There was the sound of a mug being set on a counter. "Anyway, I took several samples from him just to be safe. Poked him more than was strictly necessary, too, if that helps."

Cassandra managed a weak smile. "So you're going to run them soon?"

"I've already started. And I'll be in the lab all night, so he won't be able to tamper with anything. I'll
let you know what the tests say in the morning."

"You're not going to try to get some sleep?" And Aurora always chided her whenever she was up even an hour later than usual.

"I have coffee and someone manning the front desk," Aurora said. "It's fine. Though I'd like you to come in tomorrow, regardless of the results."

"Um, what for? Did we miss an appointment?"

"No, but Michael tells me you had sex with your boyfriend, and since I know Michael doesn't leave protection laying around where the kids could find it, that means there's a pill here with your name on it."

Cassandra felt her face heat up. "Er, yeah, I was meaning to talk to you about that. Is it still going to work that long after…?"

"Well, I would have preferred it if you'd taken it today, but you should be fine taking it tomorrow. Just be more careful in the future."

"Well I don't think we're planning to—" There was a noise over the line. Cassandra blinked. "Did you just snort at me?"

"Maybe. But let's continue this conversation tomorrow. You should get some sleep."

Cassandra hated that she was right. "Alright. See you tomorrow."

"Good night, Cassandra," Aurora said before hanging up.

As Cassandra hung up, Michael glanced over. "So do you want to talk about it?" he asked.

"Not really. I kind of want to just go to sleep."

"Well, you feel free to do that. Ana and I have the house covered."

She nodded. "And Florian?"

"He's at the Center with Aurora."

She could see why Michael would be worried, considering. "She says she's going to pull an all-nighter."

He grimaced. "Of course she is. You mind if we swing by the bakery before we run over there tomorrow?"

"Sounds good to me. Need any help with that?" she asked, gesturing to the dishes.

He shook his head. "Almost finished. You go rest up."

She nodded and thanked him, then headed towards the stairs. Mewtwo was attempting to make himself comfortable on the couch, an arrangement made all the more difficult with his tail. She reached down and brushed her fingers over his forehead. "Night, wildcat."

He gave her a look filled with longing, but then drew the blanket farther up his shoulders. "Good night, dove."
At least he wasn't going to argue with her or act petulant about their sleeping arrangements. She appreciated that. When she reached her room, she slipped into more comfortable clothes and under her covers gratefully, trying to ignore the feeling that the bed seemed colder and bigger than it should be. Sleep came fitfully to her at first, as her mind continued to whirl with images from the past day—of Mewtwo staring down at her reverently, of her children tucked up against his sides, of a stranger's grey eyes boring into hers, of Shadow growling as she reached for him, and so many of her friends unable to meet her eyes after she'd threatened to shoot an unarmed man. But finally, after she thought she might start crying from weariness and the tightness around her skull, she passed into black and empty dreams.

She jerked awake at a shriek of laughter from downstairs, then heard a shushing sound right after it. For a minute, she laid there in the shaft of sunlight coming through her curtains, her head pounding and her stomach churning as if she'd slept too heavily. Her head spun as she rolled onto her side. She could feel her shirt and her hair sticking wetly to her skin. How long had she slept? What time was it? Had she been dreaming? Was everything that had happened over the last day just a dream…?

Then she heard the low rumble of Mewtwo's voice and knew that it wasn't. It took her a few minutes to stop crying after that (why the fuck was she crying now?) and to process what was going on. It was nine in the morning. She'd slept for seven hours. And yesterday hadn't been a dream. Mewtwo's arrival, her telling him off, meeting back up with Shadow, and the mysterious man claiming to be her father—all of that was real. Take it one small step at a time, she told herself as she dried her face. The first order of business would be take a shower. She could worry about the next step after that was done.

The credits were rolling by the time she went downstairs and found Mewtwo and the kids on the couch. Mewtwo looked like he'd had a rough night too, given how red his eyes were and how stiffly he was sitting. But the children were bright-eyed and practically bouncing on the cushions next to him. He lifted his eyes to meet hers and she felt something tug inside of herself. She didn't know if she'd ever get used to him being here, the way she'd dreamed about for years.

He nodded to the kitchen. "The officer made breakfast for everyone. He set aside a portion for you."

"How long have you all been up?" she asked.

"About two hours. It took them some time to wake me to continue the film."

"Do you want to watch another one?" Christopher asked him, looking less shy than he had been the day before.

Mewtwo looked at her and, seeing her nod, nodded as well. "I would not mind. Why don't you and your sister pick out something suitable?"

Christopher grinned and bounced up from the couch, with Maya following behind him. Mewtwo stood slowly and went over to her. "How are you feeling?" he asked, reaching up to touch her arm.

"I get the feeling that I'm going to get really tired of that question before the day is over. You think you can handle them?" she asked.

He looked over at them. "I think so. For the duration of whatever film they decide on, at least."

"Okay. If you need me, I'll be making some phone calls." With that, she left him to their children.

She went into the kitchen and ate the eggs and toast Michael had set out for her. The eggs were cold and the toast was soggy, but she didn't think she would have been able to keep anything else down
as she dialed Aurora’s number. Midway through it, she chickened out and called the school instead, only to listen to the receptionist tell her that they’d already brought in a substitute teacher. Michael, it seemed, had called them to tell them there was a family emergency going on. Which was a good name for it. She wasn’t sure what else they could call this, if not that. She asked the woman to convey her apologies to the principal and then hung up.

It took her longer than she would have liked to call Aurora’s number, though it turned out that she needn’t have been so worried. Aurora wasn’t going to tell her the test results over the phone. The fact that she wouldn’t make Cassandra uneasy all over again. After all, if the man wasn’t her father, wouldn’t Aurora just tell her that? She agreed to be at the Center in fifteen minutes with Michael, and then went to get her coat.

She peeked into the living room as she laced up her boots. They’d put on a movie, though which one it was, she couldn’t make out from this angle. But the kids were more interested in Shadow right now, since he was letting them pet the daylights out of him and play with his tail. She could almost hear the fox purring from here.

"You keep that up and you're going to make Alexius jealous," she told them with a smile.

Maya responded to that by going over to the hellhound and throwing her arms around his neck. "Nuh-uh. He's our favorite puppy."

"He's your only puppy," Michael pointed out, throwing his scarf around his neck.

"Are you coming back soon?" Christopher asked.

"Yeah, sweetheart. Really soon. We're just going to visit your Aunt 'Rora," Cassandra said. "You want anything from the bakery?" she asked, looking up at Ana. The woman shook her head and assured her that anything was fine. Christopher, his eyes bright, asked for a cinnamon bun, while Maya, predictably, asked for a "head of bread."

Mewtwo blinked and stared at the girl. "A what?"

"It's bread that looks like a skull! It's really cool! And sometimes they fill it with red jelly!"

"That sounds...gruesome," Mewtwo said.

Maya stared at him, not understanding what he meant. "Why? It's not like it's a real skull." Before Mewtwo could respond, she cocked her head and added, "Though they have a lot of those at the Tower. I guess they're kind of creepy. Especially when the ghosts hide in them and jump out at you."

Mewtwo slowly turned his head and looked at Cassandra. "...That does not seem normal," he said in private telepathy.

"I think we already had a conversation about how being normal wasn't going to happen for us," she said.

He shook his head and focused on the sight of Christopher trying to catch Shadow’s tail, which the fox was flicking back and forth. Hoping that he had things in hand—and that Ana would swoop in and get things under control if he didn’t—Cassandra headed to the bakery with Michael. It was still the morning rush, with some people ordering loaves and rolls, while others scooped up bags of cookies and boxes of pies. When Cassandra and Michael reached the counter, they pointed to the family favorites in the pastry cases: cherry and apples fritters, cinnamon buns and chocolate twists, cream-filled donuts and donuts in the shape of skulls. The fruit filling today was raspberry sauce. Maya would be thrilled.
Cassandra was making her way through a cream-filled donut when Michael, swallowing a bite of his fritter, asked, "So your dad is supposed to be dead, right?"

"Right. Giovanni wanted to carve out a territory in South America. He was hoping to send some people to finish his mom's work there, but before he could do that, he needed to clear out the gang in the area. So he sent my father with a team to do that. They were killed instead," Cassandra said, giving him the gist of the reports she'd read as a teenager.

"I really don't need the gory details, but did they uh…send back proof that they'd killed everyone he sent over?" Michael asked.

She shrugged. "Some crushed pokéballs with the right serial codes. A few fingers and heads. It sent a pretty clear message."

"So did one of those er…parts…belong to your dad?"

"Some of the pokéballs did. The body parts were harder to ID. Between the rainforest and the trip over, they'd gotten a little ripe. Giovanni was convinced, though."

And even if he'd been wrong about that, and her father had survived his confrontation with the other gang, how likely was it that he wouldn't have returned before now? It had been twenty years, after all, and the world wasn't that big anymore. It wouldn't have been hard for him to stow away on a boat or even, in the days before extensive security checks, a plane. And even if that hadn't worked for some reason, he could have paid someone to teleport him to Kanto. It might have been a hopscotch-style trip and left him as sick as a dog afterwards, but it could have been done. The only reason her father would have been delayed this long was if he'd wanted to be delayed—which made him less endearing to her than a bloated, gooey corpse, as far as she was concerned.

"Just keep an open mind, okay?" Michael said as they walked towards the Center, with snowflakes whirling around them.

She resisted the urge to shove his face into the rest of his fritter. "Yeah, sure." She stuffed the rest of her donut into her mouth as they approached the front doors, which slid open for them.

Aurora, with dark bags under her eyes, waved at them from the front desk. "Man the fort," she told her chansey and the assistant at one of the computers.

Aurora gestured for them to follow her through the door behind the desk, which led into the treatment rooms and the laboratory in back. She gratefully accepted the box of pastries and took two for herself, then gestured to the coffee pot she'd started—apparently only a few minutes ago, given the bubbling noise coming from it.

"Do I want to know how many pots you've had so far?" Michael asked.

"Ignorance is bliss, don't you think?" Aurora returned. As he grabbed a mug from the cabinet and poured himself a cup of coffee, she asked, "You think you could go up front for a few minutes? The trainers keep going out to play in the snow and never remember to knock their boots off before they come back in."

It was a pretty obvious attempt to get him out of the room, which seemed ominous to Cassandra. Michael took the hint and grabbed another fritter before stepping out. When Aurora gestured for her to take a seat, Cassandra did so. She felt herself tense up as Aurora rummaged through the cabinets. She didn't relax when Aurora handed her a pill and a cup of water to wash it down. She wasn't fond of pills, but Aurora had proven herself to be a good doctor over the years—not like the one
Cassandra had once had—so she took the medicine without making a fuss.

"So where do you want to start? With this or with the test results?"

Cassandra nearly choked mid-swallow. She knew it would be stalling to pick the conversation about safe sex, but if Aurora told her that the man was telling the truth, would she really be able to concentrate on anything else? Probably not. "With this."

Aurora looked relieved. "Well, obviously, that pill isn't ideal as a contraceptive. I have other options you could try, like female condoms, since I wasn't sure if the male version would work for him or not. There are also birth control pills and implants we could consider, though you'd have to wait a few weeks before—"

Cassandra held up a hand. "What do you think would be the easiest to remember? I don't want to forget about this and end up…." She had her children. She wasn't ready to have more. She wasn't even sure she wanted to have more. She'd never given it any serious thought. And with everything else that was happening, now didn't seem like the time to start.

"Probably the shot. You'd come in for it every three months. I'd call you to schedule the appointments," Aurora said. Her tone suggested that she didn't trust Cassandra with scheduling those appointments herself, even though Cassandra had done that for her and her kids' check-ups for years now.

Whatever. Cassandra wasn't going to waste her energy on being offended. It wasn't as if Aurora's suspicion was without merit, given that Cassandra had completely forgotten about protection until after she'd had sex. So she said, "Sure, that sounds fine," and rolled up her sleeve so Aurora could get at her arm. The alcohol wipe left her skin feeling cool and tingly, while the sting of the needle made her grit her teeth.

When it was over, Cassandra asked, "You sure I'm good for three months?"

"You're going to want to use another method for the first week, just to be safe," Aurora said, handing her a bag filled with things Cassandra hadn't seen since her sexual education class when she'd been thirteen. Cassandra almost missed the days when her body had been too toxic for a fetus to survive. Her sex life with Mewtwo had been much more spontaneous for it. But she accepted the bag without complaint, because she knew she needed to be more responsible than that, even if she didn't think she was going to be sleeping with her partner any time soon.

With that done, there was nothing left to keep them from talking about the test results. Aurora picked up a file and sat down across from her. She seemed to be waiting for Cassandra to give her the go ahead. Not a good sign.

"And what about the other thing?" Cassandra asked.

Aurora hesitated, then said, "I ran all of the samples and double-checked them. The results were the same." She opened the file and gestured to two pictures, side by side. "This one is your profile. This one is his. All of those highlights are where they match up."

Cassandra's stomach swooped. There were a lot of highlights. "So you're saying we're related," she said, trying to hold out hope that maybe he still wasn't her….

The look Aurora gave her was almost pitying. "I'm saying he's your father." She set the folder on the counter beside them and put a hand on her knee. "Cassandra, I'm sorry, but…." But whatever else Aurora said to her, Cassandra didn't hear it. The shock settled in again in a way
that was getting to be familiar and exhausting. She couldn't seem to hear anything, as if there was
cotton in her ears. She couldn't seem to feel any warmth, either, as though she'd been locked in a
freezer. It felt as if she couldn't move or find her voice; as if she'd been bound up and her breath
stolen away. For a brief moment, she imagined herself as an animal that had been butchered, that was
waiting to have its skin stuffed and mounted on someone's wall. She couldn't feel anything, but she
knew that something horrible had happened to her.

Again.

Suddenly she could hear someone laughing and jerked when she realized that that was her, that her
mouth was open and that she was making that sound. But then, what else could she do but laugh?
This woman was telling her that her father was alive. That he'd been alive all of her life and was just
down the hall. That he was here right now, even though it was years after her mother had been
murdered, years after her childhood had been stolen, years after her innocence had been taken from
her. He'd come back to her years after she'd been damned for loving the wrong person, years after
she'd been hunted by her allies, years after she'd nearly died bringing her children into the world.

He had come back, but he'd come back years too late for it to matter.

Maybe he'd FUCKED her mother, but that didn't make him her father. It took more than a spurt of seed
to be one. If Cassandra saw him again, she'd tell him that.

If she saw him again. Cassandra wasn't sure that she should. She might murder him on the spot if she
did. And it probably wasn't a good time to test that theory. Aurora wouldn't appreciate the mess, for
one thing.

Oh, right. Aurora was still in the room with her. She was actually right in front of her. Her mouth
was moving and her hands were on Cassandra's shoulders. When had that happened? The ringing in
her ears started to fade as she concentrated on trying to make out with Aurora was saying:
"...Cass...are you okay?"

"Get off of me," Cassandra managed, lifting her hands to push Aurora's arms away.

"Are you okay?" Aurora repeated, her brow furrowed with worry. "I know this has to be a shock to
you, but—"

"You don't know anything about it," Cassandra snapped.

Aurora looked at her as if she'd slapped her. Then her expression turned stony. "Don't use that tone
with me. I'm only trying to help."

Cassandra wanted to snap again, but she bit her tongue to stop herself from swearing. She took a few
harsh breaths, trying to get herself to calm down, to not take her anger out on her friend. "Sorry," she
bit out. "I didn't mean it. I just need some time to process this, okay?"

"It might be best if you go home for that," Aurora said coolly.

"Aurora, really, I didn't mean—"

"No, I'm serious. You should go home," Aurora said, closing her eyes and struggling to soften her
tone. "I know you didn't mean that. It's the shock talking. And the best thing for shock is to wrap
yourself up in a blanket and drink something warm. I can help you with one of those." The doctor
handed her a cup of coffee. "Go home. Go see your kids. We'll figure out what to do about him
when you've calmed down."
"Can't we just push him off a cliff? Or at least shoo him down the mountain?"

Aurora's lips twitched. "I wish we could, but he has some...collateral."

Cassandra's brow furrowed. "Did he threaten you—"

"No. We'll talk about it when you're ready. Now go so I can have my lab back. Michael's waiting."

She made a dismissive hand gesture.

Cassandra went. As she and Michael walked back to the house, Cassandra held the cup between her hands and took sips of the dark, bitter coffee every few steps. The brew was bracing, but it was also as warm as promised. By the time they reached the porch and were brushing snow off of themselves, she was feeling a little better. The hugs Maya and Christopher gave her when she got inside were even better, soothing an ache that she hadn't even realized was there.

"So it's true then," Mewtwo said, looking at her from the entrance to the living room. There were crayons scattered at his feet and a sticker on his arm, which seemed like something from one of her more whimsical dreams—but the sorrow in his eyes was all too familiar to her.

She nodded and let herself be led over to the couch. She saw a collection of half-finished drawings on the table, with erasers in the shapes of pokémon scattered between them, which meant that they hadn't spent the whole morning watching movies. Cassandra was pretty sure she wouldn't mind one, though—especially if it was light and fluffy and had no hint of a father in it. Surely that couldn't be too hard to find? She got her wish when the kids picked out a fantasy about two con artists finding a legendary city and befriending the natives there and getting up to all sorts of hijinks. The whole thing passed in a blur of bright colors and music and a merciful lack of parents.

It helped that Maya had clambered into her lap and a blanket had been thrown around them both. Christopher continued to color pictures at her feet, while Mewtwo sat on the other side of the couch, the tip of his tail pressing against her leg. The table also had cups of hot chocolate on it, the small ones for the kids, the bigger ones for everyone else. Michael and Anastasia, it seemed, weren't immune to the allure of a silly movie and sweet drinks. Alexius and Shadow, for their parts, lounged on the carpet.

Under different circumstances, this would have been perfect. As the credits rolled, though, Cassandra still didn't know what to do. Maybe there was nothing for it, except to let the next punch come, to endure the sting and then let it pass. Eventually, life would have to stop pummeling her. It had to, right? There had to be a limit to how much she could take in less than two days? Her lover coming back from the dead, her father doing the same...who was next? Her mother?

A feeling a deep disquiet flowed through her at the thought. She forcefully shoved it down. She had enough to think about without something like that chewing up her brain and spitting it out in bloody pieces. No, she would just have to get this thing with her father over with. Once it was done and behind her, she could try to be happy again. Waiting would only make her feel worse. Best to do it while she still felt bruised and battered—hadn't she learned that lesson when she'd been younger?

Squeezing her arms around Maya's waist ("I'll never let this happen to you, sweetheart, Cassandra thought), she carefully shifted the girl over so that she was sitting closer to Mewtwo. "I need to go make a call. I'll be back soon," she told them, then went into the kitchen to dial Aurora's number. It rang only once before Aurora picked up. "What was the collateral?" Cassandra asked her.

Aurora didn't hedge this time. "He has the vaccine. He says he'll give it to us, and more where it came from, but only if he gets to talk to you."
Son of a bitch. She leaned against the wall and rested her head on the cool plaster. "Are you sure it's real?"

"It looks real. I'll know for certain after I can run some tests. He's not going to let it go until he has what he wants, though. He said you wouldn't need him then."

"He's right. I wouldn't." But if the vaccine was real—and if he had more of it hidden away somewhere—it would be a miracle. She could inoculate her children and her mate. The League could start inoculating their pokémon teams. Without the risk of their forces contracting the disease, they could fight in earnest and shift the tide of this stupid, pointless war.


"Are you sure? No one would blame you if you waited a day or two. Hell, no one would blame you if you took a week."

"And what if an infected pokémon comes into town tomorrow? What happens then?" They both knew the answer to that. She ran a hand through her hair. "No. Let's just get this over with. I can handle it."

"You shouldn't have to 'handle' anything like this anymore," Aurora murmured.

"No. Life just sucks that way. I'll be there in an hour."

"Alright. I'll see you then."

Cassandra hung up and hoped that she'd make it through this.

"Let me come with you," Mewtwo said as he watched Cassandra pulling on her jacket an hour later. "Let me be there to help you deal with him."

Cassandra, looking distracted, shook her head. "No," she said, her rejection stinging him. "I need you to stay here. Help Ana take care of the kids while I'm gone. Maybe take them to the park. They'd like that."

Mewtwo felt his brow furrow. "M Maya's appearance does not draw any questions?"

Cassandra shrugged. "Not as much as you'd think. Everyone here assumes that she belongs to Christopher." She glanced over at him and must have noticed how he bristled at that, because she added, "Which I don't like either, but it's better than them trying to catch her and study her or something."

"You could simply keep them at home if you were worried about that."

"Yeah, well, I can't imagine that would be very good for them. That's why I need you to go with them—to make sure they stay safe." She turned to him and set a hand on his arm. "If you want to help me, do this for me."

His shoulders sagged. He did not want to say that she was being unfair, because she wasn't—but it still felt that way. She had always turned to him with her problems when she had been younger. It felt like he should be by her side when she confronted the man who'd sired her and then abandoned her. He wanted to be there for her, to give her someone to lean on, and to make sure that man didn't succeed in hurting her again.
But Cassandra didn't want that. She wanted him to stay behind—and despite how the idea chaffed, he knew it would only upset her more if he tried to argue with her about it. He could not risk alienating her like that—not when things were so fragile between them as it was.

So, reluctantly, he nodded. "If you change your mind and wish for me to be there, all you need to do is think my name loudly. I will come to you at once."

She gave him a small, strained smile. "Thanks. I'll let you know." Her hand dropped off of his arm. Then she walked into the other room, telling the children she'd be back later, and left with Michael, Alexius, and Shadow.

With a sigh, Mewtwo went into the other room and tried to quell the urge to panic when the children looked up at him with happy, expectant faces. "Would either of you be interested in going to the park? Your mother suggested it."

Maya beamed at that and nodded eagerly, her tail twitching behind her. "Yes! Can we go now?"

"That was my intention."

Christopher walked over to him and shyly reminded him, "We'll need our boots and jackets."

"Ah yes. And where would those be?"

"The closet. I'll show you." The boy took his hand and led him down the hall, while Maya ran ahead of them. Mewtwo opened the door and found the jackets, which had fake fur lining the hoods and sleeves. The kids reached for them eagerly as he held them out. He pulled down the hats and mittens and scarves from the shelf, mindful of how cold it would be out and how very small these children were. They only came up to his waist.

They looked so fragile, standing there and giving him those eager looks. Fragile, but with bright eyes, with none of the shadows in them that he knew he would find in his. He was reminded of Amber for a second, but he buried the memory of her before it could sit in his mind and ferment.

"Mama usually helps us with our coats," Christopher prompted, while Maya bounced on the heels of her paws.

Ah, so that was what they were waiting for. He nodded and knelt, carefully helping the boy and girl slide their coats on. His hands fumbled with the zipper and the large buttons. As he pulled their hats over their crowns of their heads, something inside of him ached at how soft Christopher's hair and Maya's fur were. I made you with the woman I love, he thought as he wrapped their scarves over their shoulders. He wondered how many times he would have to tell himself that before the truth of it would sink into him, as deep and persistent as his love for their mother.

As they pulled their gloves on, Anastasia appeared. She, too, was dressed for the cold weather. "Are you going out like that?" she asked him.

He blinked. "I will be changing into my human form, but I believe my usual clothes and cloak should be sufficient."

She pursed her lips and shook her head. "I don't think so. The weather can change in an instant up here. You'll need something warmer."

"If the weather changes, I can change it back—and I have endured the cold before. You needn't be concerned."
She lifted an eyebrow. "I'm serious. Cassandra will yell at me if she finds out that I let you go outside in that. Besides, you'd be setting a bad example for these two."

He looked down at Christopher and Maya and found that they were watching their exchange with interest. He sighed. "I do not own heavier clothing than this."

"Michael does. You could borrow some of his."

"I'm not certain it would be wise to steal the clothes of a man who owns a gun and has little fondness for me."

"If it's a problem, he can take it up with me." She drew out a long trench coat from the back of the closet, which looked like it had seen little use. "Here. He hates this one. He says it makes him look ridiculous."

"It will look doubly so on me," Mewtwo said, but he accepted her offering nonetheless. He went into the bathroom to shift his form and get dressed. He felt silly when he donned the trench coat. It had been years since he had worn one, and now it seemed pointless when had a much better disguise. He supposed he would have to pick up some winter clothes from a shop in town, since his own were apparently insufficient.

As he came back out, she gave him an approving nod. "Alright. Let's get going."

She opened the front door and ushered them out into the snowy neighborhood. The walkways were covered in patches of ice and handfuls of salt, which he knew from experience would burn against the pads of his feet if he was in his true form. Maya, who was wearing what he could only describe as booties with gripping pads on them, didn't seem to be bothered, though. He felt relieved at that.

Overall, the weather didn't seem to be too bad. It was cold, of course, and overcast, but there wasn't much wind, nor was there any snow falling. They could probably stay out here for a few hours without any issues. But what was he supposed to do with the children? While he had seen a playground when Cassandra and he had walked through the park yesterday, he wasn't sure if it was wise to let them play on it—not when it was coated in ice. That left activities he was only vaguely familiar with, like making snow men and snow angels and fighting with snowballs and….

The idea struck him suddenly. He felt himself smile. "Are there any hills in this park?"

"On the south side," Anastasia replied. She didn't sound concerned. Perhaps she already knew where this was going.

He turned to the children and took their hands tentatively. "Has your mother ever taken you two sledding?" he asked, suddenly feeling self-conscious. Perhaps they would not be interested in such a thing. Yet it was one of the things Cassandra had taught him about years ago, so it would be… fitting…if he could do the same for their children.

They shook their heads. "No," Christopher told him. "What's that?" he asked, looking intrigued.

Mewtwo felt his nervousness drain away and his smile grow. "Let me show you."

If Cassandra had a choice—a real choice—she would have preferred to spend her day with her family. She should be playing in the snow with them, before the hard winter set in and they were confined to the house. Instead, she was sitting across the table from the man she refused to think of as her father, no matter the blood that tied them together.
Florian, the traitor, was sitting across from her as well, looking uncomfortable, but determined to play his role here. He would be checking to make sure that Caleb was being truthful as this talk went on. He was also, she suspected, there to make sure she didn't deck Caleb in the face. Michael was doing something similar. He was here to make sure that no one got hurt. Alexius, who was sitting at his feet, was obviously in work mode. He was staring at Caleb fixedly, with embers glowing blue between his fangs. They hadn't caught fire yet, but it would only take half a second for them to, if his master or his ward were threatened.

Shadow had responded to this by going over and leaping into Caleb's lap, giving the dog a bored and contemptuous look. Cassandra, for her part, had struggled not to feel angry or hurt by the gesture—or at least not to show it. She didn't think she succeeded, because Florian kept glancing at her nervously.

Well, she'd been a lot of things in her life. Calm and collected weren't two of them. She would try to get through this without yelling at anyone, though. She didn't think that would get them anywhere.

She crossed her arms and said, "So you wanted to talk to me?"

Caleb nodded. "I take it the results of the test came in?"

"What makes you think that?"

"You agreed to meet with me. I assume that means—"

"I'm meeting with you because you have something we need—and you won't hand it over until I talk to you. So let's talk. Why are you prioritizing...whatever it is you want to tell me...over the safety of my children?" She almost called them his grandchildren, to twist the knife in. That would mean acknowledging that they were a part of his family, though, and he didn't deserve them.

He frowned. "That wasn't my intention. I was going to give it to you as a gift up front, but then you...well." He sighed. "Even if this ends with you yelling at me, I'll still give it to you. I never meant to suggest that I wouldn't."

She didn't let herself feel relieved at that. He could make his promises all he wanted, but they would mean nothing unless he kept them. She wouldn't allow herself to hope that he would keep his word. After all, he'd promised her mother that he would come back to her, and he never had. Why should she believe him now?

"You could just give it to me now and prove it."

He gave her a sad smile. "If I did, you would walk out of here and I'd never see you again."

"Oh, I get it. So instead of helping me and trusting me to come back, you're going to openly manipulate me instead. That's really nice. Really endearing."

"You wouldn't come back. You've made it clear that you want nothing to do with me. Don't pretend that you would."

She felt her mouth set into a thin line. "So what is it that you wanted to tell me so badly?"

"Well, I imagine you have some questions for me?"

"What? Like 'what do you want and where the fuck have you been all this time?' Because that's crossed my mind, but I'm not sure it matters. You weren't here. What more is there to say?"
"A lot more. A hell of a lot more," Caleb insisted, leaning forward in his seat and staring at her with desperate eyes. "Please let me explain."

She leaned back in her chair, away from him. "Well it's not like I have much choice, do I?"

He closed his eyes for a moment. "No, I guess you don't." He sighed and opened his eyes. "Alright. What do I want? I want to help you and maybe get to know you better. You're my daughter and…" He met her eyes. "…from what I can tell, you've turned into an amazing woman."

She almost laughed in his face. "Flattery will get you nowhere."

"You can't blame me for trying," he said. "But I mean it. I'd like to be a part of your life, if you'd let me."

She bit back the first several scathing comments that sprang to her tongue. Instead she said, "Maybe if you turn out to be less of an asshole than I think you are." She doubted it, though. He hadn't been there for her. She couldn't imagine herself wanting him to be there after this, no matter what his story ended up being. She didn't need him.

He grimaced, but nodded. "As for where I've been, that varies. Mostly I've been in Guyana."

"Where Giovanni sent you," she noted. "You couldn't just hitch a ride home? There are these things called airplanes. And pokémon that can carry people across long distances. I'm pretty sure Guyana has those."

"It does—and I did end up coming home thanks to a pokémon. I just wasn't able to leave before then."

"Why?"

"That's complicated."

"You mean you don't want to talk about it."

"No, I mean it's actually complicated. I don't think I could explain it to you without giving you a lot of context about how I got there first."

"Giovanni wanted to get rid of you. Because he's a psycho and does that shit to the people he supposedly cares about," she said.

Caleb looked uncomfortable. "He wasn't always like that."

"Well he is now. Maybe you should have brought me his head instead as a peace offering. That would have taken a load off of my mind."

"And I might have done that, but his security is too tight right now. There's only so much you can do when it's only you and a fox. No offense, Shadow," he said, stroking the pokémon behind his ears.

Cassandra felt herself bristle. "And what the hell is this? You stole my starter pokémon from me? Who does that?"

"We knew you'd be leaving in a hurry when you got back from your mission. Trying to take Shadow with you would have slowed you down. So I got him and some of your things out of your apartment for you. It was the least I could do."

"I hope you mean that literally, because that's literally true." That was pathetic if that was all he'd
done for her over the years. Giovanni had fucking done more than that for her! "So you knew I was going to leave Team Rocket?"

"I was told that it was a very strong possibility."

"By who?"

"To answer that, I really do need to explain the rest."

She sighed. "Is this going to be a long story?"

He looked like he was struggling with the response, but then he hesitantly said, "…Yes?"

She reached up and rubbed her temples. "Okay. Fine. Fuck it. But we need coffee and lunch and maybe some alcohol first." After a quick raid on the Center cafeteria, courtesy of Florian, who gave her several of the lemon muffins he knew she liked (he was clearly trying to butter her up, wasn't he?), she took a gulp of her coffee and said, "Alright, go."

Caleb picked at his own blueberry muffin. "The first thing you need to know is that Giovanni and I have known each other since we were children."

Cassandra set her coffee down. "Oh my god, are you really going to tell me your whole life story? This is going to take forever."

He scowled. "You know, we have two options here. I could explain things to you out of order, which is going to confuse you and take all day. Or I could tell it to you in order, which will save us some time. Since this might be the only chance I get to talk to you, I'm willing to stay here as long as it takes. But what about you? I know you're scared—"

She glared at him. "I am not scared of you."

"Yes you are. All of this sarcasm and anger is your version of a brave face. It's how you play defensive. I know, because you got that from me. Though you have your mother's temper," he added with rueful smile.

Cassandra really didn't like that. "So are you going to tell me this story or not?" she said, not wanting to linger on anything that made him smile like that. I am not yours, she thought fiercely. You don't get to look at me that way.

He hesitated and looked as if he wanted to say something else, but then nodded. "Okay. So Giovanni and I met when we were boys. Our families had been allies for years—mine was in service to his, actually—and both of them were…less than interested in obeying the law? They smuggled, they stole and trafficked pokémon, they ran gambling rings—anything that would make them money and not draw too much attention to themselves, like the drug and flesh markets were. Our families weren't as interested in gaining power back then—that came later. Back then, we weren't that important. I was the fourth son of my family and Gio—"

"Wait. Does that mean I have uncles?"

He nodded. "Two of them were married with kids by the time you were born. You also have an aunt on your mother's side, who was engaged last I checked. You might even still have both sets of grandparents—you did five years ago, but with the war going on, who knows?" He looked like he felt guilty over not knowing what had happened to them. "I couldn't risk meeting with them again. If word had gotten back to Giovanni…."
Cassandra didn't respond to that. After a moment, Caleb went on, "Anyway, back then, Giovanni was…well, there's no delicate way to put it. He was an *unwanted* son and his mother made sure that he knew it. I have this very clear memory of her calling him a 'brat' once, and being surprised because that was almost nice, coming from her. His father and my parents tried to help, but there was only so much they could do. So you have two boys, both of them overlooked, and one with a very tense relationship with one of his parents. And neither of us had been instilled with a respect for the law."

"This sounds like it's leading to nowhere good," Michael commented, making Cassandra nearly jump out of her skin. Jesus, he should at least clear his throat before he started talking out of nowhere!

Caleb gave them both a crooked smile. "As a matter of fact, it didn't. We might have misbehaved a little."

"And when you say you misbehaved…?" Michael prompted him.

"We might have hit a few Pokémon Centers and stolen a bunch of pokémon." He almost sounded proud about it.

Michael did not look pleased. "And you were never caught?"

"Oh, we were. But it took the cops five tries to do it."

"How did you manage that?" Cassandra asked. Sure, *she'd* never gotten captured by the cops, but she'd been trained on how to avoid them. It sounded like Caleb and Giovanni hadn't been.

Caleb's smiled, but his eyes were sad. "Well, we had a very good getaway driver."

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**Forty Years Ago:**

Legally speaking, none of them were old enough to drive a car. But if you were going to pull off a heist, you had to have a getaway car, so the law could go hang itself as far as they were concerned.

That had sounded reasonable to Caleb five minutes ago, but now he was about eighty percent sure they were going to die. When Nadia—screaming as she drove them into Viridian Forest to try to shake the cops—soared the car off of a ledge, he bumped their odds of dying up to ninety.

At some point in the wild ride, the sack of pokéballs they'd nicked had burst open. Now they were rolling on the floor and bouncing on the seats with each bump they went over. Caleb was pretty sure one of those was going to smack into a window and shatter it any minute now, and then they'd really be in trouble. Giovanni's older brother would murder them if they wrecked his car. So what if he had three others? This one was his favorite! That was why Giovanni had insisted on using it. *He* didn't seem worried, though. He was busy trying to suffocate himself with laughter in the passenger's seat.

Oh well. If they crashed and died, none of them would have to worry about Gio's big brother anyway.

As they went soaring over another ledge, Caleb made a desperate grab for one of the pokéballs sailing towards the front window. He caught it and stuffed it back into the sack. As another one hit the back of his head, he cursed and shouted at his friends, "Maybe we should pull over!"

Giovanni smirked. "And get caught? Nah. What's the first rule of being in Team Rocket?"
"Don't get caught!" Nadia shouted at the same time as Giovanni did, sharing a mischievous grin with him.

Oh someone kill him if this car ride didn't. "Guys, there's at least—" He glanced through the back window. "—at least four cars coming after us this time!"

"That's a new record," Nadia said gleefully.

"I'm serious! We should ditch the cargo!"

Giovanni scowled. "Then what was the point of knocking over the Center?"

"Why are you asking me?" Caleb shouted. "It was your idea!"

"Boys, stop arguing. You're distracting your getaway driver," Nadia said, twisting the wheel and sending them into a sharp turn. One of the pokéballs hit the front window and cracked it.

Then he saw where Nadia was taking them. "Is that the river?" Caleb shouted.

"Don't worry! There's a bridge!"

Caleb saw what she meant and felt his stomach plummet. "That's a wooden bridge! For people to walk over!"

At that sight, Giovanni sobered up. "Um, he might be right. I'm not sure that bridge can hold up a car!"

Nadia ignored them and drove them straight towards it. "Let's find out!"

Giovanni reached for the steering wheel, but then they hit the wooden logs of the bridge and he was tossed back into his seat. Caleb saw stars—or rather, the pokéballs that were flying around his head—as the car bounced over it. The noise of the tires rumbling over the logs—he could feel them swaying and buckling—was deafening, but he was pretty sure the others were screaming.

Then the car went over the last bump and was back on the dirt road of the route. Caleb, when he regained his senses and twisted back around, looked back and saw that the police cars had stopped before crossing the bridge.

"Oh look, we made it," Nadia said.

"You crazy bitch," Giovanni breathed, sounding awed.

The flickering lights and the wails of the sirens faded behind them as they turned down the road. After a mile passed and there was still no sign of the cops, Nadia slowed down to a reasonable speed and Giovanni helped Caleb collect all of the pokéballs and put them back into their sack.

"That was a close one," Giovanni said, inspecting the pokéballs and pocketing one.

Caleb wondered if he was planning to add that one to his fledgling team. He'd been talking about entering the next League competition when it started, and as the opening date drew closer, Caleb had to admit that he liked the idea. Maybe they could all go together. That sounded like it could be fun—and much safer than these heists.

"At least we got away," Caleb said.

He should have known better than to jinx them like that. There was a sudden jerk and a rattling
feeling from the tires. Nadia cursed as the car slowed to a halt, while Giovanni quickly hid the pokéball he'd pocketed into one of the car's hidden compartments. Caleb, for his part, was pretty sure he'd have rather gone over the bridge. They were going to be in so much trouble.

As the car jerked to a stop, the cops emerged from the forest. Some of them landed around them on pidgeots. The beams from their flashlights cut through their windows, making Caleb screw his eyes shut. Oh, his brothers were going to kill him. There was a banging on the doors and orders for them to open up. He opened his eyes and glanced at Giovanni, who was seething with rage in the front seat. He was bristling the way he did when he wanted to fight. But then Giovanni glanced at Nadia, who'd gone pale next to him, and then back at Caleb. His shoulders sagged and he nodded.

"I guess we couldn't get lucky every time. Let's get this over with." He was the first one to open the door and step out with his hands up.

They were all booked from there, but fortunately for them, none of them had been stupid enough to bring their real identification cards with them. The car would be harder to explain away, but all of them knew better than to say anything yet, so they sat together in silence until their emergency contact got there. Finally, after what seemed like a small eternity, Giovanni's father arrived.

He was not an old man, but something in how he held himself suggested that he was. There was white hair across his temples and deep furrows in his forehead. He sighed when he saw them, but bailed them out. He always did when any of them got into trouble. He paid the fines and paid off the chief to knock their punishment down to community service. It helped that all of the pokémon—except for one—had been returned to their owners.

The car would be impounded until Giovanni's brother picked it up. It would no doubt be searched before then, but the compartments had been designed to withstand police probing, and they probably wouldn't search it too closely anyway, given who Giovanni's mother was. Still, they were all sure to get an earful when they got back home.

When they reached the manor, the adults were already waiting for them. Nadia's mother, who was holding the hand of Nadia's sister (who was dressed and packed for school, but looked like she was nodding off) grabbed Nadia's arm and tugged her back outside to their car. Caleb's oldest brother, Aaron, sighed and wrapped an arm around his shoulders, telling him their parents were waiting for them. When Caleb gave him a desperate look and glanced worriedly at Giovanni, his brother relented and murmured, "Okay. Five more minutes."

Giovanni's parents led him into another room. Caleb followed them at a distance, careful to not be seen. Mrs. Maki was ranting under her breath, asking Giovanni sharp, rapid-fire questions. Giovanni was stony-faced and didn't respond—not even when the woman spun around and slapped him. When she raised her hand to do it a second time, Giovanni's father caught her wrist and said something, low and urgent. The woman gave them both a disgusted look and stormed out. Caleb, feeling safer now, crept closer and listened.

"...I'm disappointed in all of you, but especially in you, Giovanni. What if your friends had gotten hurt? What if you'd gone into the river? You all could have died."

"It's not like she'd care," Giovanni said sullenly.

His father's expression grew pained. "That's not true. I know she's...hard on you...but you can't let that drive you to take stupid risks. I know you can do better than this. You can be better than this."

Giovanni flinched. "What do you want from me?"
"I want you to do something meaningful with your life. Not waste it like this."

"Well what if I want to be a thief?" Giovanni said.

Giovanni's father shook his head. "Why settle on such a small dream?" Then he placed his hands on Giovanni's shoulders. "Son, whatever you decide to do, it doesn't have to be what she wants. You know that, right?"

Giovanni looked away from his father. There were tears gleaming in his eyes. "…What about you? What do you want me to do?"

And Giovanni's father hugged him. "I just want you to be happy."

Caleb, reassured that his friend was safe, slipped away to rejoin his brother. The lecture he received when he got home, though, didn't stick with him as well as the conversation he'd overheard. It must have left an impression on Giovanni, too, because a few weeks later, when they were mucking out the stalls at the Pokémon Daycare, Giovanni turned to him and Nadia and asked, "I've been thinking about signing up for the League when summer starts. What do you guys think?"

Nadia and Caleb glanced at each other and nodded. They'd already discussed it more than once. Where Giovanni went, so would they. "We're in," they said together.

He beamed at them. "In that case." He pulled out two pokéballs. One of them was the one he'd hidden in the car. That one went to Nadia. "I want you guys to start out with the best. Go on, let them out!"

Caleb accepted the pokéball with a jolt of excitement. He tossed it into the air and said the release command. The light shot down from the sphere and materialized into something winged—a zubat! It wasn't blue, though, but green, and it looked bigger than the normal kind, with longer, sturdier wings. It swooped down, out of the rays of sunlight streaming in through the barn door, and attached itself to his arm. As Caleb tucked it against his chest, he noticed how soft and warm its fur was. He smiled and hugged it gently, not wanting to hurt it.

When he looked up, Giovanni was looking at him nervously. "I know a lot of people think that zubats are lame, but I swear, this one is actually good. It knows Steel Wing, and since we don't really have steel types around here, I thought that it would be—"

"Shut up. I love it," Caleb said with a grin. He had his very first pokémon. Who cared what anyone else thought? It was his! "Is it a boy or a girl?"

"It's a girl," Giovanni said with relief.

"I'll give her an awesome name." Then he looked over to see what Giovanni had gotten Nadia.

It was a meowth. Its fur seemed snowier than usual and the coin on its head was pale gold in color. Nadia was hugging it happily and scratching it behind the ears. "It's, um, a designer breed," Giovanni explained. "They bred her for beauty and friendliness and…some other things too," he trailed off with a blush. Caleb struggled not to laugh.

Nadia beamed at him. "Thank you! She's so pretty!"

"I, um, thought she'd suit you," Giovanni said. Caleb resisted the urge to slap his palm against his face. Oh Gio….

Nadia didn't seem to mind. "Do you have one too?"
Giovanni nodded and shifted his feet. "Well, it's not a meowth or a zubat, but…yeah."

Caleb nudged him. "Well come on. Show us!"

Giovanni gave them a sheepish grin and pulled a pokéball from his belt and tossed it into the air. The pokémon that materialized was a charmander, which clung shyly to his leg. Giovanni gave it a warm look. "My dad gave him to me." When he looked up, he seemed…anxious, as if he was worried about how they would react.

What, because they didn't have the traditional starters? So what? Any pokémon could become something special when you gave it your time and devotion, while supposedly "special" pokémon could be ruined by bad trainers. Caleb was perfectly happy with the pokémon his friend had given him. A glance at Nadia confirmed that she felt the same way. There was nothing for either of them to feel jealous about.

"That's great," Caleb told Giovanni. "Does he know any special moves yet?"

Giovanni shook his head and set a hand on the lizard's head. "Not yet, but he will someday. We're going to work on making him braver first."

Nadia smiled. "I'm sure he'll become the bravest charmander ever with your help."

Giovanni smiled. "Thanks."

"So when do you think we'll leave?" she asked with a flick of her hair, the red strands streaked with gold from the sunlight.

"As soon as we can, if that's good with you guys?"

Caleb, remembering how Giovanni's mother had slapped him and his father's wish for him to be happy, nodded. "We're ready when you are," he said, with Nadia chiming in her agreement.

Giovanni, in response, said nothing—but his smile was bright and carefree, and happier than the other ones he'd let them see.

In the years to come, the memory of that smile would break Caleb's heart.

Now:

Mewtwo had known more than his share of heartache. He hadn't realized there was a good version of it before now, though.

The children were giggling and tugging on his arms so he would get up and trek back up the hill with them. He'd been content to watch them sliding down the hill towards him—he'd kept his powers primed to catch them, just in case—but by their third time down the hill, they'd urged him to join them. And he had. He'd gone up to the stall at the top of the hill, where hot cocoa and cider were being sold and skates and sleds were being rented out. The attendant had given him an amused and knowing look when he'd requested a bigger sled this time.

*Good luck keeping up with them,* had been the man's advice. Mewtwo, for all that he was descended from a legendary pokémon, nonetheless found that that was harder for him to do than he'd thought. The children had *so much energy.*

But it was worth it. He was glad he'd thought of this. He wished that Cassandra was here with them,
though. It seemed wrong that she wasn't. *Perhaps next time, she will be,* he thought, sitting up from where he was sprawled at the bottom of the hill. At Christopher's urging, he stood and began walking back up the hill, the sled trailing behind him.

Maya, having gotten bored of waiting, was already at the top of the hill, bouncing on her heels. "*You took* forever," she told him, but didn't actually seem upset.

"*My apologies. I will try to be faster next time,*" he said. It might help if he wasn't so cold. He missed his fur, but as tempting as it was to shift into his true form (and maybe stretch out the officer's coat in the process), he shook the snow out of his clothes instead. "*Shall we go again, since you waited so patiently?*"

They nodded and clambered onto the sled, with him sitting behind them. They were both still small enough that they could seat themselves between the lengths of his legs. Though it was slow going at first to push their combined weight forward, soon enough, they started to slide. Once the nose of the sled tipped down and the speed got going, it felt like they were flying. The children shrieked and their fingers dug into his legs as they soared down the slope, and Mewtwo couldn't help but think, *No, this is better than flying,* thanks to the excitement bursting out of them. It would have been contagious even if he hadn't been an empath. That he was one only made the smile on his mouth widen.

After a certain point, he lost count of how many times they had gone up and down the hill. He knew it must have been a lot, though, given the stiffness in his knees and the slant of the shadows. Hearing the growl from one of the twins' stomachs, he suggested, "*Why don't we have something to eat?*" The vendor at the stall was passing out bowls of soup, which mostly seemed to consist of noodles, so its nutritional value was questionable. The food would be hot, though, which was what they needed.

As they sat down at the same table as the bodyguard, she smiled. "Did you have fun?" Anastasia asked the children.

Christopher nodded and Maya responded with an enthusiastic "Yes!" Mewtwo knew he shouldn't feel smug about that, considering his lack of involvement in their lives until now, and considering the fact that he wouldn't have known about sledding if not for Cassandra. But surely he could feel satisfied that his idea had been a success?

"*I am glad you enjoyed it,*" he told them. "*Though I feel like your mother deserves some credit. She taught me how to sled in the first place.*"

"Really?" Christopher asked.

"*Yes. I had never experienced snow before—*" He was certain that was right. He had spent his first winter with her. "—*and I did not understand the appeal of it at first. Your mother enlightened me on the matter.*"

"How old were you two?" Anastasia asked, catching him off guard.

He thought back. "*I believe she was fifteen. I was... somewhat younger.*" A lot younger, actually. When he thought back on Cassandra's age now, it seemed impossibly young to him. He hadn't thought of her or himself as being children back then—they certainly hadn't been treated as such by Giovanni—but technically, that was what they'd been. The thought was disquieting.

Anastasia made a thoughtful noise. "Well, it sounds like you had fun, at least."
He wondered what her impression of him was. Did she also think of him as Cassandra's abusive partner? The thought made his guilt, which he'd managed to forget about for the past two hours, twist in his gut. *I never meant to hurt her. I merely did not know any better.* Which did not excuse it, of course. He could not let himself think that it did.

He felt something—a light pressure—slide across his mind. He nearly flinched at it and nearly threw his powers back against it, but then he realized that it meant him no harm. He reigned his reaction in and lifted an eyebrow at Anastasia. One side of her mouth quirked upwards, and then a thought, shaded with her voice, prodded against his mental barriers.

He let it in and heard: *"Would you like to talk about it later?"*

*"Talk about what?"* he asked, lowering his eyes from hers to watch the children eat. His own bowl of soup was cooling in front of him untouched.

*"The guilt you're feeling,"* she said, surprising him by not hedging.

*"That is a personal thing to discuss with a stranger,"* he snapped back.

*"Or it's exactly the thing you want to discuss with a stranger,"* she returned. She took a sip of her cider. *"You can't talk about it with Cassandra, can you?"*

No, he couldn't. But he didn't know this person. It seemed impossible to him that she would actually want to listen to him and help him. He wasn't sure if his certainty in that was the result of his paranoia, or his ingrained distrust of humans, or due to the fact that she must be on Cassandra's side by reason of association (which made him feel a fresh stab of guilt, because Cassandra was *in the right*. There was no other side to be argued, was there?), but he couldn't help but feel wary of the offer. What if she was just trying to see what he thought of Cassandra's verdict? What if he told her about what he was feeling and she used it against him? What if she told Cassandra he was irredeemable afterwards? Would her input be enough to sway Cassandra against him? She had been there for Cassandra when he hadn't been. It was possible.

Anastasia continued to give him that small smile, though, as if she thought he was being…well, either unintelligent or foolish. Perhaps both.

*"Why are you offering this?"* he asked.

She looked down at the children, who were slurping their soup. She hesitated, long enough for Mewtwo to start wondering if she was coming up with a lie, but then she said, *"Because I know how it feels. It makes me want to help you."*

*"You cannot fix this,"* he said, because that was the truth. Nothing she could say or do would magically right the wrong choices he'd made.

*"You're right,"* she said. *"But I might be able to help you avoid making it worse."*

He hadn't even considered that possibility. Under normal circumstances, he might had dismissed the idea, but the memory of Cassandra's anger and *pain* made him reconsider. *"Very well. How do you suppose we discuss it with the children around?"*

The twins needed their attention. Being distracted from that seemed like it would be tempting disaster, and Cassandra would never forgive him if he failed her in this. She'd asked him to do this one thing for her while she dealt with her father. He would do it. He *had to*.

*"Let's go back to the house. They can keep playing in the snow there if they want to,"* she suggested.
She watched Chris yawn and said, "Or they'll take a nap, one of the two. Looks like you ran them ragged."

"I feel as if that isn't a bad thing," he replied. He levitated their empty bowls without a thought into the nearby garbage can. One of the other diners jumped at the sight, but apparently it wasn't so unusual, given how his friend laughed and teased him afterwards. Mewtwo supposed that living among ghosts normalized such things.

"Not at all," Anastasia said, gathering their sleds and returning them to the vendor. She took Maya's hand and Mewtwo took Christopher's. They walked back to the house, with Maya chattering about going sledding and wanting to go again soon, while Chris seemed to be getting more and more tired with each step. Mewtwo considered hoisting the boy up into his arms, but then found himself shying away from the idea. It seemed like too much too soon—and he wasn't used to holding anyone in his arms besides Cassandra. Except perhaps Psyche, but it had been years since he had last seen her, and it would not have been the same anyway.

He wondered what his old friend would have thought of this. He wished it was her that he was going to be having this conversation with. Psyche had never shied away from telling him how she'd felt about his decisions, especially when she'd thought they were wrong or pigheaded. But she had also considered him her friend, so she had softened the blow of some of her words and had supported his choice to try to be with Cassandra again.

Even if Anastasia said she understood what he was feeling, it wouldn't be the same as talking to his friend. He hoped that, whenever Psyche was now, she had some inkling of how he missed her. At the same time, he was grateful that she wasn't anywhere near here. It was not safe in this country anymore, especially not for the people around him. And she had her own family to take care of now….

No doubt she was doing a better job with hers than he was with his.

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**Thirty-Five Years Ago:**

_We should have come home sooner_, Caleb thought when they stepped into the threshold of the Maki family manor. He was dressed in a black suit that he'd had to borrow from Aaron. They were the same height now, which had disconcerted Caleb when he'd realized it. His brothers had always been bigger than him. That was part of how the world had worked. He'd even starting laughing at it, much to Aaron's dismay, since he'd thought that Caleb was having a breakdown, right there in the closet. Which was ultimately what it had led to, since Caleb had started crying into his brother's shoulder right afterwards.

Because Mr. Maki wasn't supposed to have died. Not now. Not like this.

Not that anyone had found a body—and from what he and Nadia had pieced together while Giovanni was stuck in his family meetings, there were conflicting accounts about what had happened. Some Rocket grunts were saying that Mr. Maki had gone out to meet with someone—maybe someone from a rival gang, or an investigator from the League, or someone high up in the military. One of them had even suggested that Mr. Maki was going to meet with a lover (at which point, Nadia had laughed in the grunt's face, much to the woman's displeasure).

Caleb thought that any of those options, except for the last one, could be true. There had been some disputes over territory recently. There were investigators snooping around, now that Team Rocket was getting involved in "bigger business enterprises," as Aaron had put it. And there were men and women here in military uniforms. That, more than anything else, didn't bode well. People like that
didn't mix with people like them, unless there was something serious going on.

Caleb might have been a thief, but there were lines he wasn't willing to cross. He had his doubts that some of these other people, especially the reputable ones, were like that.

Nadia, dressed in what was, for her, a demure black dress, sidled up next to him. She laced her arm with his. "Have you heard anything new?" she asked. Her persian, Aina, kept close to her side, watching those around them intently.

He shook his head. "Have you?"

She guided them into an alcove, which Caleb recognized as the one he'd once seen Mrs. Maki slap Giovanni in. Nadia lowered her voice as she said, "I found some servants we knew back then." Back before they had left. "It took some digging. Turns out most of the staff is new." She didn't sound surprised.

"And what did our old friends say?" he asked.

"That Mr. and Mrs. Maki had been arguing." She saw the look on his face and rolled her eyes. "Yeah, shocker, right? But I guess it was pretty bad, even for them. From what they overheard, I guess he wasn't happy about the direction she was taking the team in."

"It's probably related to those business enterprises Aaron kept referring to," Caleb guessed. "Did you notice who's come for the occasion?"

"Yeah, all of the good little soldiers of Kanto? Hard to miss. Those medals nearly blinded me coming in." She made a face at one of them, who glazed back at her. "Also in really poor taste. Can they stop gloating for two seconds? It's a funeral, for fuck's sake."

"Well, he did serve with some of them," Caleb put in. "So some of them probably really are here to pay their respects. Dressing up in full uniform is a military thing, I think."

"Remind me to never sign up for that. I'd look hideous in one of those uniforms."

"You would. Cocktails dresses are more your thing," he said.

"They go better with the ring," she said. Then she glanced at her left hand and sighed. "Not that I get to wear it here."

"You don't want steal a dead man's thunder," Caleb said, nudging her in the side.

"He'd be happy for us, though," Nadia said. She looked into the main room, but Giovanni hadn't returned yet.

Caleb squeezed her arm. "He would have been. He always liked you. And you make Giovanni happy, so he would have approved, even if he'd thought you had the personality of a gyarados."

Nadia made a face. "Wow, thanks, Cal. You really know how to make a girl feel special."

"It's a gift," he said. A quiet moment stretched between them after that, and Caleb was tempted to let the conversation slide into safer topics—topics that had nothing to do with death. But the hushed voices around them and the shifting bodies, all dressed in black, made it hard to forget.

"I keep thinking," Nadia whispered. "It's stupid, but I keep thinking why now? If this had just waited a year...which is awful, because I wouldn't have wanted him to die then, but...."
"I get it," he said. "I mean, then he would have been there for your wedding. And he would have seen Giovanni take over the gym."

"He hasn't taken the offer yet," Nadia reminded him, though she was smiling. All three of them had done well in the last League circuit, but Giovanni had been a runner-up in the finals. It might not have given him the chance to take on the Elite Four, but it had drawn the interest of several League officials. The fact that he had chosen to specialize in ground types (with the exception of his starter), and that the Viridian Gym Leader was looking to retire, had fallen together neatly.

"But he's going to. He's probably already sketched out floor plans for it."

"He did have some ink of his nose last week, come to think of it…"

Caleb smiled at the image, but it faded as he heard someone start crying. He glanced over and saw that it was Nadia's sister, Natasha. He felt Nadia shift to go to her, but then someone else—their mother, it looked like—hugged her.

"Christ," Caleb swore, the atmosphere settling down on him again. They watched the others mill around. A few of them offered tissues to Natasha.

"Maybe we should just shoot Mrs. Maki," Nadia said. She sounded serious about it, too.

"We'd probably end up six feet under if we did," Caleb said.

"It might be worth it," she said.

He shook his head. "Just because they were arguing doesn't mean that she…"

It felt wrong to say it. It felt like it would make it real if he did. He knew that Giovanni's parents hadn't gotten along, and that Mrs. Maki was willing to cross lines that he wasn't. But that didn't mean that she was capable of murdering someone. Or at least not her own spouse.

"Maybe she didn't," Nadia said. "She kept telling everyone that he'd finally walked out."

"If that was true, he would have found us," Caleb said.

They both knew it. Mr. Maki had always taken them up on meeting with them during their journey, even when those meetings had conflicted with his business appointments. He'd spent the finals with them—the entire three weeks—and had introduced them all to whiskey during that time. They'd all been hungover during their matches the next day, but it had been worth it. If Mr. Maki had left his wife, they would have been the first people he'd have gone to afterwards.

Nadia squeezed his arm. "Yeah. I think even Antonio knew that. Hence—" She gestured to the room in front of them. "He knew he would have shown up sooner, if he wasn't—"

"To my brother's credit, he did send out a search party," Giovanni's voice came from behind them. They both jumped. When they turned around, they saw that he had a glass of wine in his hand. It didn't look like it had been his first or his third, either. "And he blubbered on my shoulder for a while, so it's not like he didn't care."

Caleb suspected that Giovanni had done some "blubbering" as well, given how red his eyes were, but he wasn't going to point that out. Nadia noticed too and went to her fiancé. "You okay?" she asked, hugging him.

"As okay as I can be," he said, sliding an arm around Nadia's waist. He glared at the main room. "As
soon as the ceremony is over, let's go. There's nothing else worth staying for."

A few minutes later, the priest announced that they were going to get started, and everyone filed into the room with the casket. The front rows were reserved for members of Mr. Maki's family, but Giovanni insisted that Caleb and Nadia accompany him. They took the seats on either side of him. Caleb saw Madame Maki glance at them and frown, but she didn't tell them off. Antonio was seated on her other side, and beside him was his wife. Like her husband, she looked like she'd been crying. One of her hands was clutching his tightly, while the other one rested on the swell of her stomach. Caleb was uncomfortably reminded of the fact that Giovanni and Nadia's future wasn't the only one Mr. Maki would be missing. He'd never even gotten to meet his first grandchild.

It wasn't fair. None of this was fair.

This was Caleb's first taste of what it meant to lose someone he loved. He sat there, hearing only half of what the priest and Mr. Maki's friends and family members said. None of this felt real to him. He kept waiting for someone to say that this was a joke, that it wasn't true, even though he knew that it was. Maybe it would have felt more real if he'd seen the corpse. Then he would know for sure that Mr. Maki was gone.

He jumped as Giovanni hissed something next to him. He looked at his friend and found him glaring down the row. It took Caleb a second to see what he was staring at.

Madame Maki hadn't gone back to her seat after her eulogy. She was standing at the end of the row, talking with one of the military men. Giovanni and Caleb were not the only ones watching her. Antonio was also glaring at his mother, while other mourners were staring and whispering. Before anyone could approach the pair, the last song of the ceremony began to play. As everyone rose from their seats, discussing who would go with whom to the cemetery, Caleb watched Madame Maki and the man break away and slip through the door to the hallway.

"Unbelievable," Giovanni seethed. "It's his funeral! That—" Nadia tried to hush him as he swore, but he shook his head and stood. Before either of them could stop him, he said, "I'll meet you both there," and went after his mother.

The casket was being lowered into the ground when Giovanni found them again. His hand clamped down on Caleb's wrist and he could tell by Nadia's curse that she was just as startled. They both turned and started to ask him what he was doing, but then shut their mouths when he tugged them back from the crowd insistently. His face was completely white and there was something that looked unnervingly like panic in his eyes.

"We need to go," he whispered to them.

"What? But the funeral's not over yet. We still have to—"

Giovanni tugged on their arms again, forcing them to take another step back. "I'm pretty sure my dad would understand. Come on!"

The desperate note in his voice was enough to stop Caleb from arguing. He and Nadia glanced at each, then nodded and followed their friend. When Giovanni saw that, some of the tension in his shoulders loosened. They walked as quickly as they could back to the edge of the cemetery, knowing they would draw attention to themselves if they ran. They made it back to their car without anyone stopping them. Caleb didn't know why he suddenly thought that somebody would. Maybe Giovanni's fear was rubbing off on him.

It was only after they'd gotten into their car and Giovanni started driving them away—towards the
eastern routes, instead of back to Viridian or the Maki Manor—that Nadia managed to ask her fiancé what was wrong.

He turned down the road into Viridian Forest. "The League is planning to—"

That was as far as he got before something smashed into them.

Now:

A snowball exploded on the beam next to Mewtwo, splattering his coat. He brushed the snow off and, with his telekinesis, sent a few snowballs flying back towards the children. They squealed as they dodged, then renewed their efforts. They had yet to get close to hitting Anastasia. The woman had formed a shield around herself and declared herself a neutral party. This did not stop Christopher or Maya from trying to draw her into their game, though. From the way her lips were tugging into a smile, Mewtwo thought they might succeed, regardless of her declaration of neutrality.

"So you had something you wanted to discuss with me?" Mewtwo said.

Anastasia nodded. Her brow furrowed and she frowned as she seemed to consider what words she wanted to say. Then she said, "What I'm about to tell you is something I haven't shared with Cassandra or the others. Can you promise not to mention it to them?"

"Is it that bad?" he asked.

"Yes. Though I think they would be sympathetic. But it's not something that I'm proud of or feel comfortable with sharing. And it hasn't been relevant until now," Anastasia said.

Mewtwo deflected another snowball, which hit the wind chime above them with a jangle. He stilled the chime with his powers and checked that it hadn't been broken. "And?"

Anastasia licked her chapped lips. "...I have a son. He's ten years old. But I haven't been allowed to be his mother for eight years."

Mewtwo stared at her. "Your wording implies that you did something wrong where he was concerned."

Anastasia scuffed the toe of her boot against the porch. "I did. Not intentionally, but I did." She sighed, her breath weaving around her scarf. "I was a late bloomer, psychically. I started getting the migraines when I was in college. I thought they were from stress and the lack of sleep I was getting. When things started to move on their own and the curtains of my apartment caught on fire, my husband and I came up with all sorts of explanations—that maybe we were haunted, or he'd hadn't put out his cigarettes properly. We had a cemetery on campus, so ghosts were a more reasonable explanation than psychic abilities. When we graduated and moved away, the strange things that were happening seemed to stop. So we thought that our theory was right. We even joked about it with our new neighbors."

"I imagine getting more sleep and not being as stressed contributed to your powers mellowing out, for a time," Mewtwo assessed.

Anastasia nodded. "It didn't last. The headaches started again within six months. Worse this time. I took medication, but of course that didn't fix the problem. We got referrals to multiple doctors about what the problem might be. As far as they could tell, nothing was wrong with me. And then we found out that I was pregnant. Suddenly the headaches didn't seem like a big concern anymore."
"But they were," Mewtwo guessed.

She nodded. "I was sick throughout most of my pregnancy. I lost weight instead of gaining it. My son was born underweight. And by the time he was born, my telepathy and empathy were both coming in. My mood swings were more severe than they should have been. I kept hearing voices. I started responding to them, thinking that my friends and family members were talking. So of course they took me to see more doctors, who misdiagnosed me. I was put on medication that only made me feel worse."

She took a deep breath. "I started lashing out, psychically and verbally. And my husband started to wonder if I was safe to be around."

She glanced over at Mewtwo's face and must have seen something in his expression, because she bit her lip and looked away. "He loved me. He wouldn't have stayed with me, trying to help me for two years, if he didn't. But I could feel his fear. I could hear him wondering if he should leave Brandon alone with me. And eventually, I convinced myself that he didn't really love me anymore. I convinced myself that he was going to take our son away."

Anastasia shook her head, the lines around her eyes looking deeper than they had a moment ago. "It made me desperate. I loved Brandon more than anything. I couldn't bear the thought of being separated from him. So I took him and the car and drove away."

She burrowed herself deeper into her hood. Mewtwo could feel the shame radiating off of her and nearly edged away from discomfort, but he held himself still in spite of it. "My husband figured out what I'd done shortly afterwards. He called the police. They came after us. We ended up in a car accident. And while we weren't hurt by it, the police who approached our car were. My powers forced them back. One of them broke his leg when he fell. Another one hit his head and didn't wake up for two days. The last one managed to get up and calm me down enough to sedate me."

"Did they realize what the true problem was at that point?" Mewtwo asked.

She nodded. "That police officer was from Saffron. He'd seen the damage Sabrina had done when she was coming into her powers. He contacted her while my family was deciding what to do with me," Anastasia said, with a touch of bitterness in her voice. "When Sabrina came, she offered to take me away and train me. My family jumped at the offer. I understand why they did, of course. Brandon hadn't been hurt, but he easily could have been. So I needed to be separated from him and taught how to control myself. But it still hurt. And it took me a long time to stop being angry with them for that. Sometimes, I still am," she admitted.

"And you haven't seen your son since?"

She shook her head. "They've let me visit. There have been times when I thought I was well enough to be more involved in his life. But you can't rush through psychic training. And you can't rush through fixing the damage you caused, either," she said, looking over to Mewtwo and meeting his eyes. "Even if you didn't mean it, you can't erase that pain."

Was that the point of her story? To tell him something he already knew? "Do you think I am confused about that fact?" he asked tersely.

"I think you're confused about how long the recovery process is going to take," she corrected. "I wasn't patient enough with myself, so I've backslid a few times over the years. I shattered a window when my son startled me. I argued with my husband until his jacket started smoking. I set our Christmas tree on fire when I got angry thinking about all of the Christmases I'd missed with them. And afterwards, I felt like a monster. I felt like I could never get better. I apologized so many times
that it felt like the words didn't mean anything anymore. And they didn't make any of us feel better.”

She looked across the yard, to where the twins were now building a snowman. "These past few years have been a probationary period for me. I'm proving that I'm safe to be around my son again. And I am doing better. I haven't lost control in years. But I couldn't have done that if I'd kept doing what I was doing. As long as I kept dwelling on the past and my mistakes—some of which weren't even my fault—I couldn't move forward."

"So you're saying that it's useless to feel guilt over what we've done?"

She shook her head. "No. In moderation, guilt is useful. It can help teach us what we did wrong and what we can't do again in the future. But if you dwell on it, it will make you hate yourself—and once that happens, you won't be able to think clearly anymore. You'll make even more mistakes and you'll feel even worse. It becomes a negative feedback loop." She reached up to tighten her scarf around her face. "And even if you get out of it alright, you'll look back on the years you wasted to guilt and regret it."

Mewtwo looked at where the children were now sitting in the snow, making a snow-dog at the feet of their stout snowman. What Anastasia was suggesting made logical sense, but it still ran counter to what he felt was the right thing to do. He had hurt his loved ones. He should feel guilty about that. As long as he felt guilty, he would never forget what he'd done or repeat his mistakes. He would remember to be careful. He would remember to keep himself in check. That didn't seem like punishing himself, as awful as his shame might feel when he dwelt on it. It felt like he was being responsible in reminding himself of what he'd done wrong. Letting the guilt go, especially so soon—that didn't seem right. That felt like denying what had happened instead. Cassandra would be furious if he did that. He didn't think he could face himself if he was so shameless now, after he'd been confronted with his sins.

Anastasia seemed to follow his line of thinking, because she said, "How you move forward is up to you. But I thought...well, I thought my story might help you. I never intended to hurt my loved ones. And I don't think you did either." She gave him a sympathetic smile. "We just...weren't taught how to control ourselves around others. But we can fix that, now that we know. We can become better people if that's who we want to be."

Mewtwo did want that—and it was admittedly comforting, to look at his past actions as mistakes, rather than proof that he was a monster. He was still uneasy, though. If he'd had his tail, it would have been flicking back and forth from his agitation. "And will we be forgiven then, if we prove ourselves?"

"Maybe. That's up to them, though."

"So we will be laboring without any assurance of reward," he noted.

"That's true. Though I'd like to think becoming a better person is its own reward," she replied. "Do you think you can do it? Work to be better, even if there's a chance that Cassandra will never forgive you for what you did?"

Thinking of Cassandra still hating him in the future made him want to throw himself into a stone wall, since battering his body seemed like it would hurt less. But at least he would have tried to make things right and would know that he had done all that he could. He could not give up now—not when there was a chance that Cassandra could forgive him. And maybe that wasn't a selfless motive—maybe that was missing the point that Anastasia was trying to make—but maybe his motive would become worthier in time.
"I have to try," he said, looking at Christopher and Maya, who were finished with their dog and were tromping back to the porch. He had to try for them and for Cassandra.

"That's all any of us can ask for," Anastasia said. Out loud, she asked, "Are you two ready to go inside?"

Chris nodded and yawned, while Maya sighed and said, "I guess. My coat's all wet."

"I can fix that," Mewtwo said, gently taking hold of the fabric and sending his power through it to warm and dry it. He did the same for Christopher's jacket afterwards.

Maya's eyes brightened. "Can you teach us that?"

"I can try to," he said, offering her his hand. "But first, you and your brother should take a nap."

"Awww," Maya whined, but she took his hand anyway.

Mewtwo offered his other hand to Christopher, who took it eagerly, and together they headed back into the house, with Anastasia following along behind them.

______________________________________________________

Author's Note: As you can tell from the "Part 1" in the chapter heading, this is not the whole chapter. At a certain point, though, "Sins of the Father" would have been too long to post in one sitting, so I decided to divide it up and post the first forty pages of it. I hope this was worth the wait. I also hope that you don't mind me exploring Giovanni's backstory in scene like this, even if it's very late in the story to do so (this is what happens when you stretch writing a story out for over ten years —your pacing goes awry).

So I am tentatively back, but progress from me will continue to be slow, since I'm in graduate school right now. However, the more responses I get for this chapter, the sooner I will start working on the next one. I'm willing to write this story out to its end, as long as I have a few dedicated readers who want it to be finished. Even if that takes me another ten years to accomplish (though let's hope that it doesn't). **Just let me know if you guys want to see more of this. That's all I need to keep going with it.**

As always, thank you for reading.

Sincerely,

WiseAbsol

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!