(Poke)Ball is Life

by merryfortune

Summary

[Pokemon Coordinators AU, with a few universe alterations]

Hinata Shouyou has waited his entire life to become a Pokemon Trainer. His goal is to defeat Sinnoh's Champion. His rival is Kageyama Tobio, a standoffish boy that Hinata met at Trainer School but something is different about him now that they've met up again - this time as proper Trainers. It seems that Kageyama now has a new goal in life that isn't reflective of his title as "King of the Court" whatsoever.

[This fic is discontinued. Though 'complete', the final chapter merely explains how the plot would have progressed had I chosen to finish this fic.]
Shouyou had always thought he had been a blessed kid. He grew up in a cheery home and was constantly sounded by family: his dad, mum, sister Natsu and their parents’ clans of Pokémon they had journeyed with eons before.

Today was Shouyou’s fourteenth birthday. There had never been a lot of excess money in the Hinata household but the parents had found some money and pulled a few strings so both children could have an interesting combined birthday. The two were happy to share; especially since their present was so special and exciting.

The Hinata family ran a berry farm on the southern outskirts of Twinleaf Town and Shoyo and Natsu attended the combined primary to intermediate school in town but it didn’t cover Pokémon related courses. It was Shouyou’s dream to attend Jubilife’s Pokémon Trainers’ School but it hadn’t been feasible for multiple reasons. Shouyou was happy to attend Twinleaf but he still dreamed.

‘Now kids, be good to your teachers.’ Mother Hinata said as she straightened Shouyou’s collar and pecked Natsu’s forehead.

‘We will,’ they chorused.

‘It took a lot of convincing but the teacher at Jubilife was happy to take you in for the day so make the most of it.’ Father Hinata added.

‘We love you and are so proud.’ The parents were gushing like it was the children’s first time to ever attend high school.

‘We know.’ Shouyou blushed.

‘And take good care of Pelly.’ their father said as he gave his son a PokeBall.

Shouyou grasped the spherical object firmly. ‘And keep Natsu safe too. Air travel can be dangerous; even with trusted companions.’ their mother worried.

‘Understood.’ Shouyou said.

‘I’ll be fine. I’m brave.’ Natsu piped up.

Their parents took their children outside. They said their goodbyes and couldn’t be happier. It mightn’t be a permanent arrangement but it was going to be memorable and enriching. Today was going to be the rest of Shouyou and Natsu’s lives.

Shouyou turned away and let Pelly the Pelipper out of his Ball. In a crimson flash, the huge waterbird materialised with a whinnying cry. ‘Sorry if we’re heavy.’ Shouyou joked and Pelly cried again. Shouyou helped his sister onto the Pelipper’s back and then he got onto Pelly’s back as well.

‘Bring them home safe, Pelly.’ their father said and Pelly began to flap its wings powerfully. It took to the air and soared with long, strident strokes.

It was amazing, being up in the air. The wind lashed their faces; the kids couldn’t keep their eyes open. But when they could, the scenery was phenomenal. It was exquisite and beautiful; completely unparalleled. The blue swirled about cerulean swirls and pirouettes. Clouds swam
through the sky; parting only for Pelly and the Hinata siblings.

They flew over town and winding, sandy routes that were blooming with lush, evergreen trees. Soon, countryside thick with trees and foliage morphed into the sculpture of the city; grey but speckled with thrilling lights and signs.

Pelly swooped down and the kids’ stomachs plummeted. They grinned like it was a roller coaster and then landed. Pelly let them dismount and Natsu ruffled Pelly’s feathers affectionately. ‘Thanking you.’ she chirped.

‘Yeah, thanks.’ Shouyou agreed. He dug into his pocket and retrieved Pelly’s PokeBall. ‘But school’s going to start soon so we gotta go. C’mon.’ Pelly whinnied and returned to he scratched and faded PokeBall it called second home.

Shouyou turned to his little sister and took her hand protectively. ‘Ah, the Hinata siblings?’ a lilting voice asked from behind. The two kids turned around and were greeted by the escort their parents had organised: Jubilife’s one and only Nurse Joy.

She was a tall woman in a cutesy, white uniform. She spoke sweetly and came across as gentle with a compassionate and kind disposition. Natsu took to the nurse quickly. The little girl was star-struck as was Shoyo.

Nurse Joy strolled with the children and dropped them off at the school. She farewelled the children with tender sentiments.

‘Were we are, Natsu. Can you believe it?’ Shouyou asked.

‘Nup!’ Natsu yelped and the two went through the steely gates. The school was huge: three storeys high and the courtyard looked bigger than the entire perimeter of their house. Children swarmed in smart uniforms. They looked curiously towards the out of place newcomers.

Natsu was quickly accepted by the tribes of children around her age. Shouyou found it a bit harder. The teenagers his age were wary. They didn’t have any gaps in their cliques. It didn’t matter as the bell rang soon after they arrived. Shouyou hoped Natsu was in good company as they were separated by age group.

Shouyou was pulled aside by a teacher who assured him that his sister would be fine. She took him to a classroom with was filled with polished-looking middle schoolers. ‘Hello class.’ the teacher greeted them.’

‘Hello Misses Kagami.’ they chanted back.

Ah, so that’s her name, Shouyou thought to himself. He was standing in the doorframe. He peered inside. He bounced up and down. He breathed deeply. It smelt like clean like fresh chemicals. He couldn’t believe he was here. It felt empowering to be here. His heart pounded and he’d never worn a larger grin before.

Mrs Kagami stepped aside and gestured Shouyou. ‘Today class, we have a special student. He’s only here for the day and he’s here to experience specialised education. He’s from Twinleaf Town.’ Mrs Kagami said and Shouyou stepped into the limelight. He became sheepish. ‘Introduce yourself to the class.’ Mrs Kagami encouraged.

‘I’m Hinata Shouyou. I am fourteen. I like Pokémon and volleyball. My goal is to beat the Elite Four and Champion.’
‘A good goal to have,’ Mrs Kagami smiled.

She scanned the room for an empty seat. ‘Hinata, why do you got sit there?’ She pointed to an empty seat that was close to the door and slightly away from the middle of the classroom. It was one away from a black haired kid; he was bored with piercing eyes.

Shouyou took the empty seat gladly. ‘Good to meet you.’ Shouyou said to the boy who looked away. People snickered behind them but Shouyou ignored them. Though, it seemed to have riled up the boy who sat next to him.

He might be shy, Shouyou rationalised. He studiously took down the notes in a special note book he had bought specifically for today. It seemed like revision because it was basic stuff. It was detailing how to treat certain ailments like paralysis, burn, poison; among others. It was still exciting stuff though. Unfortunately, the flip side still remained though as Shoyo already had experience in the growth of cure ingredients.

Note taking took them to recess and Mrs Kagami dismissed the students except for Shoyo. He was embarrassed to be singled out. ‘So, how do you like it?’ She had a cheeky smile.

‘It’s great.’ Shouyou animatedly replied.

‘Sorry about Kageyama. He’s a little...intense. A great student, for the most part, but he can be quite standoffish.’

‘Oh, that’s fine.’ Shouyou wasn’t sure what to do with this information, although he did take it as “persistence will help break down barriers”. ‘Well, I shouldn’t keep you for much longer.’

‘Right.’ Shouyou rocketed off soon after.

He found a group of students who were fine with him sitting with them. Shouyou thought they all seemed a bit meek. They must breed them different in the city, he figured. They made light conversation and sports and suchlike. The city kids were pretty fascinated by Shouyou’s hometown. They found it awesome that he could see the stars from his homestead. Shouyou found it shocking that they didn’t get beautiful views from their ninth storey apartments.

At the moment, everyone seemed closed off by Shouyou remained certain that by the end of the day, he would have made a few long distance friends to keep in touch with.

Recess ended and they all trotted off back into class. Shoyo thought he was going to get swallowed by the rush. This school was a world away from the one he attended back home. He couldn’t begin to articulate the seemingly infinite number of differences.

This time they took notes of types and abilities. Shouyou never realised there were so many of them. It was overwhelming to think that all the best trainers knew them all off by heart. Shoyo tried to pay close attention and took notes furiously.

Mrs Kagami clasped her hands excitedly. It was getting on toward the end of the period before lunch. She was quickly covering up her PokeGear in her mess of a handbag. ‘I apologise for my inappropriate use of technology, I know, I know, but I needed it so I could get approval for an idea I proposed. This afternoon, after lunch, rather than the usual maintenance course we do, I thought Hinata would appreciate that, considering his disadvantaged background. And I just got a hold of a court we can use. Isn’t that great?’

The class whirred animatedly. It was an incredible idea. Shouyou hollered the most, unabashedly, over it and to the mocking of other students. Kageyama was silent and static. It was as though he
couldn’t care less.

Shouyou could hardly sit still through lunch. City middle schoolers were weird as none of them wanted to get up and play a game. Back home, everyone – regardless of their age – would band together and play a game. Sometimes it was volleyball, at Shoyo’s request and other time it was skipping at Natsu’s preference. Other times they played rugby or tag. It really depended on that day’s activity leader. It rotated around the school’s twenty-two students.

Then the bell rang again to signal that class was to begin. To Shouyou, the ringing chimes were a godsend. Mrs Kagami organised everyone into two groups that she called “Team North” and “Team South”. Shouyou was part of Team North, as were the trio of boys he had befriended. Shouyou saw that Kageyama was sorted into Team South.

‘I realise this may be a tad unfair but I think Hinata should represent Team North first.’ Mrs Kagami said. She was met with some mumbled agreement.

‘This’ll be my first battle ever!’ Shouyou shouted. He was absolutely hyperactive, again to the disdain of his fellow students.

‘We’ll pick Pokémon and sparring partners by luck. I have a random number generator app on my phone we can use.’ Mrs Kagami said.

She gave out a number to everyone. Shouyou also got a number, he was ten. ‘Okay, it will be Hinata Shouyou versus…’ She paused and tapped on her PokeGear’s screen. ‘South Nine. Would you please come forward?’

Team South murmured and snickered. Shoyo couldn’t quite make out what they were saying. It was Kageyama who came forward. ‘The hick’s screwed. He’s got to face the “King of the Court”.’ Shouyou heard that one loud and clear. He was offended by being called “hick” but he was more honoured by the fact that he was going to have a battle with someone with such a prestigious nickname. It was going to be a tough battle and Shouyou couldn’t be more excited.

‘Aoshima! We do not use that sort of language around here. Please respect the learning of others and keep foul language to yourself. If you do not, you will face the consequences of a detention tomorrow lunch time.’ Mrs Kagami reprimanded. ‘Back to the battle though.’ She took a deep breath and the boys took to their ends of the court.

Kageyama stood regally and Shouyou was genuinely nervous. He was almost worried he would upset his stomach over it. He tried to visualise he was somewhere else, upon a mountain and the victory was the summit. He wondered what the view would be.

A teacher’s aide appeared and carried a tray of pristine PokeBalls. Kageyama selected his partner Pokémon first. Shouyou then chose his. He would feel more comfortable with Pelly but using his father’s Pokémon in a practice battle would be unfair, even if his opponent had the privilege of being known as the “King of the Court”.

Shouyou liked how the PokeBall felt in his hand. He smiled to himself. ‘I am going to decide who gets to go first. If the number is high, it will go to Team North but if it is low, it will go to Team South.’ Mrs Kagami announced; not just to the battlers but to the whole class.

The number was drawn and Kageyama was allowed to go first. He tossed his PokeBall and a Bidoof popped out. A few of Kageyama’s classmates snickered. Shouyou supposed it was an unbecoming Pokémon for a king. The buck-toothed creature chuffed and raked its paws against the stiff, ruddy dirt underfoot.
Shouyou tossed his PokeBall out. He didn’t know what to expect. From an intangible, scarlet light, Duskull burst through with a haunting whine. Shouyou had never seen a Duskull in real life before. It looked eerie and made him feel unsettled.

‘Let the match begin.’ Mrs Kagami announced.

‘Bidoof, use Water Gun.’ Kageyama barked. He became fierce looking. His eyes were calculative. Bidoof plodded forward and out of its slack-jawed snout, a weak water spurt sprung forward. Duskull was doused by it and shivered uncomfortably.

Shouyou hesitated. He glanced around. It was then he realised that all day he had been judged and frowned upon for his inexperience and background. There couldn’t have been a worse time for a revelation like that. But he couldn’t focus on that. He had to remain in control so that he could savour every moment of this match.

Finally, Shouyou made a decision. ‘Will-O-Wisp!’ he shouted and Duskull sent forward bluish flames but they dissipated before they could make contact with Bidoof. Shoyo cringed. Why didn’t that work?

‘Moves with low accuracy are always a risk to use.’ Mrs Kagami annotated. Kageyama shot her a dirty glare.

‘Bidoof, use Defence Curl.’ Kageyama instructed. The Bidoof curled into a ball and when it unfurled itself, it appeared more willing to take direct contact.

Shoyo hesitated again. ‘Night Shade!’ he yelled and this time, not a single thing happened.

‘Normal type Pokémon are immune to Ghost Type moves. Inversely, Ghost types are not affected by Normal type moves.’ Mrs Kagami explained. Shoyo felt like a huge idiot for not knowing that.

‘Rollout!’ Kageyama yelled and for a plump and cumbersome-looking Pokémon, Bidoof was fast and agile. It rolled up into a ball and quickly hit Duskull with a bounce then a jump. Bidoof unfurled itself and Duskull cried like a creaky door battered by gales. It floated to the ground with a dried leaf’s flutter. Bidoof proudly chuffed.

Shoyo felt awful. ‘Come back, Duskull.’ he cried out, shattered. Duskull was recalled and the match was decided. ‘Kageyama wins.’ Mrs Kagami declared; as though it wasn’t obvious. The boys returned their PokeBalls. They walked off the court. Shouyou was heartbroken but his fingertips tingled. He had just participated in his first, proper Pokémon battle. It was unreal. He glanced at Kageyama; he was stony and indifferent.

Shouyou watched as everyone else got their turn to battle. He didn’t mind that he lost and he liked watching the other battles. Some of these other guys were fantastic. He just didn’t like the pity party that his friends were throwing him. Shouyou was tough. He didn’t need to be consoled. But he appreciated what his friends meant. There was something blocking the view to the summit of victory now but he knew that with training and preparation, Shouyou would be able to see the other side in all its glory.

Just as the bell ran to signify the end of another school day, the final battle ended. ‘Have a good day. Good luck in club activities and cram school. Hope you had fun today. I did.’ Mrs Kagami chirped. ‘You’re all free to go.’

Shouyou frantically searched for Kageyama. He pounced on the King who glared him down. ‘I’ll beat you one day.’ Shouyou declared to the thunderstruck boy.
‘Never. I’ll be Champion one day and I’ll never let you win.’ Kageyama growled but Shoyo grinned. That sounded like a sparkling challenge.

‘I’ll surpass you and see the view from the summit.’ Shouyou promised; he clenched his fists.

Shouyou heard Natsu call his name. ‘We’ll meet again.’ he said before dashing off. Kageyama stared, confused and mocking.

‘Have fun today, big bro?’ Natsu asked.

‘Yeah. I even made a rival.’ Shouyou said.

‘Really? I made tons of friends. And when I grow up, I wanna be a heroic Pokémon doctor!’ Natsu declared.

‘That sounds great sis.’ Shouyou smiled.

He brought Pelly’s PokeBall out of his pocket. They flew home shortly after and soon landed on familiar soft, springy grass and were almost instantly greeted by their parents. Their dad was sweaty and caked with mud from a hard day of harvesting. Their mother was smattered with flour and smelt like freshly baked poffins. These were the smells and sights of home.

The kids recited their days to their patents loudly and like unrehearsed actors at their first audition. It had been money worth spent and a day well used. Their parents couldn’t have been happier for them.

‘I can’t wait for Orientation Day. I’ll be old enough for my licence next year.’ Shouyou chirped.

‘We can’t afford to donate to Professor Rowan...’ their mother said,

‘That’s fine.’ Shouyou said. He had been expecting that since he learned that economic trouble was a thing but that didn’t deceede any of his excitement for December thirty-first of next year. It was still a long way away but it was closer than it had ever been.
Fateful Reunion

On Shouyou’s fifteenth birthday, he organised his trainer’s licence straightaway, despite the fact it would be a useless hunk of plastic until December thirty-first. His birthday was June twenty-first and that made December a long time ago but nonetheless, Shouyou up and got his licence. He got his Trainer’s Card two weeks after and to him, it was simultaneously useless and useful. It was a little hunk of brittle plastic with some of his vital information.

He clutched onto it happily this morning as today as Sinnoh-wide event known as Orientation Day. He couldn’t believe it.

‘Let me get a photo!’ Shouyou’s mother cried happily as she fumbled with a camera. She took plenty of shots and couldn’t stop smiling; no one could. Today was the day Shouyou took his first steps towards his goal of defeating the Champion. It was unbelievable.

Shouyou was wearing brand new clothes that weren’t quite comfortable on him yet. He had older clothes stashed away at the bottom of the backpack he was on the cusp of living out of. His new clothes consisted of a cheery yellow shirt and denim shorts, but they were still paired with his favourite, faded volleys.

‘You’re so lucky, big bro.’ Natsu whined. She was too young to be applying for a veterinary scholarship.

‘Yeah, I am.’ Shouyou agreed.

He was getting antsy. He had no clue what Pokémon his parents had prepared for him. He desperately wanted to meet his new partner Pokémon. They were too broke to arrange one from the Professor...

Shouyou didn’t want to sound bratty but he wanted to know so badly. It was still early in the day but Shouyou wanted to be out of the house by mid-morning and be in Sandgem Town before dusk. He bounced up and down with lips curled back like he was trying to prevent himself from lying.

His parents saw him rock with hyper trepidation. They glanced knowingly at each other. It’s time to put him out of his misery, they decided without breath.

The parents took their children outside and led them to the barn where their Pokémon liked to retire to at the end of each day. Shouyou grinned and Natsu poked him in the belly. She was happy for him.

‘No fair. Is Sho gonna get one of your Pokémon?’ Natsu asked.

‘Kind of.’ their father said; his voice was airy like he was all-knowing.

Their mother entered the barn and didn’t come out for quite some time. Sounds of squawks and squabbles emerged from beyond the red painted barn. ‘That’s weird.’ Natsu mused. They waited a moment longer, soon their mother barged past with her back to the huge doors. ‘Troublesome blighter.’ she grumbled. She kept the Pokémon she was cradling out of view.

The possibilities were endless. Shouyou perked up with unadulterated excitement. ‘We took a lot of things into consideration when we were trying to work out what Pokémon to breed for you. But we thought this particular Pokémon would make the perfect match for you.’ Father Hinata said.
Their mother turned around and why was Shouyou not surprised? But he could definitely see where his parents were coming from. He had a lot in common with this Pokémon. Its species were fabled to have sensitive hearts that required its constant bounces to keep it alive.

‘So Piggy’s a mother now?’ Natsu exclaimed.

‘Only been one for a month or so. Took a lot of effort to hide it all from you two snoops.’ their father explained.

‘Don’t think we weaned Piggy and her son well enough.’ their mother mused. She had gone into that barn clean but she had come out dusty with straw in her orange hair.

Shouyou approached his mother. He was shy but his eyes sparkled. She offloaded the squirming Spoink into his arms. ‘Boisterous little bugger.’ she said. Shouyou was in awe of the fact that this was his Pokémon. Spoink felt like soft velvet in his arms. ‘So cute.’ he mumbled.

‘And he’s all yours.’ his mother said. He let Spoink down and it joyfully jumped around Shouyou, investigating his legs by putting its snout to him.

‘I can’t believe it.’ Shouyou said.

‘Believe it, hun.’ his mother said. She handed him a shiny, red PokeBall. ‘For Spoink.’

‘Of course, I’m not dumb.’

‘But I’ve got more for you in the house.’

‘Thanks Mum.’

It became a tearful, wet event from then on. Hinata Shouyou was a fully-fledged Pokémon Trainer. It was unbelievable. ‘We love you.’ his family reminded him and farewelled him. Their eyes blinked back tears and their voices carried best wishes. ‘I love you too.’ he called back. I’ll call soon. Promise?’ He waved exuberantly as he walked backwards. So he didn’t have to make their goodbye official too soon but after a few paces, it was time to turn to the front and face the future properly.

Shouyou had walked into town plenty of times. He had mastered the best way of getting their quickly and without hassle. But everything felt different now. He shook with anticipation. Everything was possible now.

Just like Shouyou thought, he got to town quickly. Those roaming the streets saw him, congratulated him. They offloaded common sense and advice; some yarnd to him about their youth and travels but tried not to keep him long. Everyone knew that Hinata Shouyou was the boy who didn’t want to wait.

The road to Sandgem Town was a vastly different place to the wiry track Shouyou was used to following in order to get to Twinleaf Town. The road here was clearly defined. Huge, evergreen trees guarded the road.

Shouyou happily trod along the road with a skip in his step. He let his Spoink, he nicknamed “Oink”, bounce alongside him. Oink was wary of its new surroundings and kept close to Shouyou who was a beacon of the familiar. To Oink, Shouyou smelt of home.

The two kept a quick and steady pace. It was Oink who wore out first: lack of stamina from inexperience. Shouyou couldn’t wait to get the chance to battle with Oink. Apparently, he had been
born knowing “Bounce” which was unusual to Spoink piglets his age. Shouyou knew there would be plenty of potential sparring partners in Sandgem because that’s where Professor Rowan lived.

Professor Rowan was the man who studied Pokémon evolution famously. He would donate rare Pokémon, “starters”, to rookie Trainers who generously compensated him; the profits of which would go into his studies. Shouyou would have loved to have donated to him but he asked for a five hundred PokeYen in order to be eligible for a starter.

Shouyou slowed down and surveyed his surroundings. Even from a normal-eye view, they were beautiful. His memories of last year’s trip to Jubilife Trainer’s School were still crisp and vivid in his mind. He couldn’t wait to meet up with Kageyama again. Shouyou was certain he was a rich kid so he almost definitely going to have a starter which would place him in Sandgem Town today.

The clean air brushed past Shouyou and the trees rattled. Shouyou couldn’t get over the fact that he was finally going on the adventure of a lifetime. His goal to beat the Sinnoh Champion loomed close. It was still unbelievable. The tremendous build-up of adventure and excitement would never leave Shouyou’s chest. He was certain. He didn’t want it to leave. That’d be depressing.

The sun shone over him and Shouyou was careful to not overly exert himself. His feet weren’t aching yet but he was thirsty. He took a moment’s rest under an apple tree’s shade. He plucked an apple from it and bit around its core. He wet his mouth with water from his drink bottle. He felt replenished and then continued on his way again. He was making good progress.

Shouyou’s expectations of arriving at Sandgem Town before dusk had been met. It was still early afternoon when he reached the laboratory. He could smell the salt spray of the sea from there. He looked around and saw a charming-looking town ahead of him. He glanced up the path to the famous Pokémon Laboratory. He couldn’t resist the impulse to drop by, so he did.

The door was open and he was ushered in by stressed lab assistants. They wouldn’t let him inform him that he wasn’t a benefactor Trainer. The main part of the lab was spacious and weirdly empty. There weren’t nearly as many Trainers as Shouyou had expected. The Professor stood before a plain-clothed, black haired boy with an easily noticeable navy messenger bag.

‘I’ve lived for 60 long years. Even now, I get a thrill when I’m with a Pokémon. Now, you should know that there are countless Pokémon in this world. That means there are just as many thrills waiting for you out there! Now go! Kageyama, your grand adventure begins right now.’ He recited his story with perfected poetry. It utterly moved Shouyou. He came closer. ‘Ah, good to see you too, lad.’ Shouyou was encouraged to stand next to the other boy.

Professor Rowan turned around and had a silver tray with maroon felt encasing three, pristine PokeBalls only differentiated by a small, elemental mark. ‘Turtwig, Chimchar, and Piplup: three Pokémon that are rife with potential and specially bred for beginning Trainers. So,’ Professor Rowan paused to prompt Shouyou.

‘Hinata Shouyou.’ Shouyou introduced himself stiffly. He was vaguely terrified by this old man.

‘So Hinata Shouyou and Kageyama Tobio, will you two select one of these Pokémon who will have the sublime pleasure of being your partner Pokémon?’

The two boys turned their heads to face each other. ‘I remember you.’ Kageyama groaned.

‘Good because you’re my rival.’ Shouyou beamed.

‘My goal’s changed so find someone else to bother.’ Kageyama icily retorted.
‘How remarkable, the two of you already know each other. Friendship is a good thing to have on a long, arduous trip.’ Professor Rowan said.

‘I didn’t pay.’ Shouyou blurted out. Kageyama rolled his eyes.

‘I’ve thought long and hard about who I’m going to choose. And I would like to choose Piplup.’ Kageyama said.

‘The water type, as a species, they can be stubborn at first but once they warm up to you they can be dependable partners.’ Professor Rowan informed.

‘I know.’ Kageyama said. He took the PokeBall marked with a water droplet.

Shouyou backed away shyly. ‘I’m sorry but I only dropped by to say “hello”.’ he explained hastily.

‘That is fine. I’ll give you both a PokeDex and extra PokeBalls though. Don’t tell the assistants that you did pay, Hinata. They’ll get mad at me for frivolous spending of precious funds.’ Professor Rowan said and he gave both boys a handful of tiny PokeBalls. They thanked him with varying levels of expression.

Professor Rowan also handed them a PokeDex each. He gave Kageyama a cobalt blue one and Shouyou a vermillion one. ‘Enjoy your trip boys. Savour each moment because it won’t last forever.’ Professor Rowan enthused.

‘Understood, sir.’ Kageyama nodded.

‘Y-Yes.’ Shouyou chirped. They bowed and dismissed themselves. Professor Rowan had a good feeling about those kids.

Shouyou walked alongside Kageyama who was intent to ignore him. ‘Can we have a battle? A rematch?’ Shouyou pestered.

‘No.’ Kageyama coldly replied.

‘Why not?’

‘What’d be the point?’

‘Revenge. You’re my rival.’

‘No I’m not. We have completely different goals.’

‘What changed? You’re the King of the Court. Why’d you wanna change that?’

Kageyama stopped in his tracks. He glared venomously at Shouyou who had also stopped walking. ‘Don’t ever call me that ever again.’ Kageyama barked.

‘Why? It’s such a cool nickname.’

‘It’s not. And it’s unrelated to my new goal – as are you.’

‘Why? What’s your new goal?’ Shouyou wasn’t even sure if he knew what Kageyama’s original goal was.

Kageyama was more than hesitant about answering that question. But he did anyway.
A King Dethroned

Kageyama stared Hinata down. He was hesitant. He was upset too. His cheeks were red and his eyes were completely focused on Hinata. His fists were clenched. All this waiting for the reason was making Hinata excited and bouncy but he tried hard not to show it.

‘Why do you think they called me the “King of the Court”?’ Kageyama asked.

‘Because you’re strong.’ Hinata answered without hitch.

‘Wrong they called me “King” because I’m selfish: tyrannical and cruel, even to the rental Pokémon, especially the rental Pokémon actually because I couldn’t get them to move as I wanted them to.’

‘Oh.’ Hinata deflated. He stopped bouncing.

Hinata was quiet and Kageyama continued to glare. ‘Happy now?’

Hinata was paused, thought about how Kageyama might react to what he said and then decided to say what he was thinking anyway. ‘That makes you just like Piplup.’

‘Shut up.’

‘Fight me.’

Hinata reached for the PokeBall latched on his belt. ‘What’s the point?’ Kageyama asked. ‘You’re a Gym Trainer I’m a...Coordinator.’

‘That’s cool. I watch Contests on TV sometimes. That’d take a lot of skill, wouldn’t it?’ Hinata chirped.

Kageyama was a tad surprised by Hinata’s reaction. Would nothing stop him in his quest to irritate him? ‘Yeah.’ Kageyama grunted. He’d only made the decision to be a Coordinator recently and he had tried to do as much study on it as possible.

‘You’ll need practice for the battle rounds after the thingy openers.’ Hinata said.

Kageyama wasn’t sure what Hinata meant but assuming “thingy openers” was code for “Performance Stage” then Hinata was right. ‘True.’ Kageyama dragged out the word.

‘So why don’t we battle? We can still be rivals.’ Hinata said.

Why did he have to be so insistent? Kageyama blamed his old teacher Mrs Kagami for this. If she hadn’t sat this shrimp next to him on that day last year, none of this would have happened.

‘I’m not going to battle you regardless.’ Kageyama growled. But that didn’t deter Hinata as he had an idea as to how he could get Kageyama to battle. Hinata turned on the heel of his foot. He swung around with his hands behind his head. His lips puckered and looked generally unimpressed. ‘I feel bad for Piplup; having a trainer like you.’ Hinata said; his voice was singsong. Kageyama tried to ignore him but that really stoked his anger. ‘I mean you’re so cowardly. Afraid to make mistakes. How will Piplup ever learn in conditions like that? Sometimes, ya just gotta get your hands dirty.’

Hinata hoped that if he provoked Kageyama enough, they could have a rematch. But Kageyama was determined to remain unmoving, despite Hinata’s taunts. ‘We have nothing connecting us.'
‘Why don’t you leave?’ Kageyama suggested.

‘Two reasons.’ Hinata said, he stood up properly and held up two fingers. ‘One: revenge. Two: this is the only road into town.’

Kageyama hated it but it seemed that this orange-haired idiot refused to stop bothering him until he got his way. ‘Fine.’ Kageyama growled. ‘We’ll battle again.’ Hinata perked up and smiled.

‘So you agree to me being your rival?’ Hinata asked.

‘No. Not unless you switch to Coordinating over Gym Challenges.’ Kageyama said. There was no way Hinata would agree to that.

Hinata paused and frowned in thought. ‘I’ll do both.’ he decided.

‘If you must.’ Kageyama shrugged. He grabbed his PokeBall from his bag’s strap. Hinata unhinged Oink’s Ball from his belt.

They belligerently stared at each other. They backed away and put some space between them so their Pokémon could battle. ‘Go, Oink!’

‘Piplup, set up.’ Kageyama instructed. Two PokeBalls flew into the air from their respective owners’ hands. From scarlet lights, burst a Spoink and a Piplup. Spoink frowned and squeaked. Piplup put its yellow beak to the sky and puffed out its chest. It made shrill noises.

With no teachers or officials present, there wasn’t any order to who was allowed to go first. Instead, it was based on who reacted first. ‘Piplup, use Pound.’

‘Psywave, Oink!’

Piplup moved first and got into Oink’s close quarters. It turned around, hard, and smacked Oink with its tail. Oink squeaked and then released pink and purple waves from the pearl atop its head. The waves washed over Piplup who pirouetted about with dizzy frenzy. ‘Oink, use Psywave again.’

‘Bubble.’

Piplup still spun around, confused, and was surrounded by Oink’s attack again. Oink squeaked happily and Kageyama glared. ‘Piplup, snap out of it...please.’

‘Please?’ Hinata repeated. Piplup obeyed and managed to stop stumbling around. It opened its beak and large, glistening bubbles were blown out of Piplup’s beak. The bubbles clung and popped over Oink who endured it.

‘Pound.’

‘Oink, uh, Psybeam.’

Oink turned around and stared at Hinata blankly. He didn’t recognise the name of Hinata’s command. Piplup quickly struck Oink down with its coat jacket-like tail. Oink was knocked out by the Pound. Once more, Kageyama had won. ‘I’m so sorry, Oink. Have a good rest, buddy.’ Hinata said as he recalled his Spoink. Hinata was truly proud of Oink’s performance. He just hoped that Oink knew that.

Piplup toddled up to Kageyama and was expectant of praise. Kageyama bent down. He tried to
smile warmly but grimaced instead. His mangled expression left Piplup offended and scared. ‘Good work.’ Kageyama praised brokenly. He went to pet the crown of Piplup’s head but Piplup rejected the affection and batted Kageyama’s hand away with its wing.

Hinata swallowed a snicker. “King of the Court” Kageyama was a supposedly tyrannical Trainer and yet he was trying to genuinely overcome his shortcomings and flaws but was rejected by a small, baby penguin. It was funny but Hinata respected the intentions that Kageyama was trying to convey.

‘I like you.’ Hinata blurted out.

‘Return.’ Kageyama said. Piplup disappeared but the crimson blush staining Kageyama’s face wouldn’t.

‘You seem like a good person. Let’s travel together. As friends, rivals. Contests can’t be that hard. I’ll do them on top of Gym Battles.’ Hinata said. He knew this was coming out of nowhere.

Kageyama composed himself. ‘Why are you so insistent?’ he asked. He averted Hinata’s eyes.

‘It’s one of my best traits.’ Hinata boasted.

‘It’s probably safer to travel together...’ Kageyama mused.

‘Let’s go then.’ Hinata beamed. He hopped up and then broke into a dash. Kageyama was surprised by how high Hinata could jump. He tried to remember back to last year, when Hinata introduced him to the class. What was the sport that he said he liked? Kageyama couldn’t remember but he felt like he should have.

Kageyama ran to catch up with Hinata. They both seemed as equally fast. ‘C’mon, we needa get our Pokémon to the PokeCentre.’ Hinata said. His voice was light and almost a chuckle. Kageyama was secretly glad that Hinata wasn’t the type to get crushed by a loss.

But behind Hinata’s smile, he hid the sting of loss. He didn’t feel bad for himself but for Oink. The newborn was probably upset that he had loss. He was beating himself up over his last command. If he hadn’t had called out “Psybeam”, they could have won. Why hadn’t he used “Bounce” instead?

The Trainers dashed into town. The two fostered the other’s competitive spirit. They sprinted into the gorgeous and unexpectedly large local PokeCentre. They went through the doors and were accosted by a refreshing blast of pasteurised cold air. It was nice as their sprint had worked them into a heated sweat.

Nobody was surprised by them though. Their noise blurred into the clamour that the PokeCentre was already embroiled in. There were probably hundreds of Trainers inside the PokeCentre, just chilling and chatting. Most were unfamiliar faces but between the two of them, Hinata and Kageyama recognised and acknowledged a third of the other Trainers.

Hinata and Kageyama patiently waited in line with others for consultation with Nurse Joy and other staff. The two stood silently. Hinata wanted to chat but he didn’t know what to talk about with Kageyama. He did eventually decide to start small. ‘Like any sports?’ Hinata inquired.

Kageyama replied almost immediately. ‘I love volleyball. I play setter.’

‘No way, I love volleyball too. I like playing middle blocker. Everyone always gets so surprised by my jumps because I’m so short. Who’s your favourite team?’ Hinata babbled.
‘Karasuno Precinct.’

‘No way, me too!’ The two quickly engaged in a riveting discussion about their mutual love of volleyball. Their volume riled up anyone who had the misfortune of having to line up around the pair.

It didn’t take too long for Hinata and Kageyama to reach the counter. They put out their PokeBalls and the Chansey serving them understood. It made notes and accepted their cards as a form of identification. When it put the cards through a small machine, it made whirring noises and Hinata noticed information come up on a computer screen. The Chansey aligned Hinata’s Spino with his Trainer’s Card.

Hinata admired the technology avidly. Kageyama treated it as normal. They were dismissed and Kageyama decided he was thirsty so they grabbed some drinks from a vending machine. They found a small spot to sit down at. ‘So how does that machine work?’ Hinata asked.

‘Not sure.’ Kageyama replied and he started playing on his PokeGear. Hinata pouted.

‘Are you texting someone?’

‘Yes.’

‘Who?’

‘My parents.’

Hinata nodded. He came straight to the realisation that he barely knew anything about Kageyama.

‘Are your parents Trainers?’

‘No.’

‘Mine are. It’s how they met. They both tried to challenge the same Gym Leader at the same time. Dad’s a bit older than Mum, and from Hoenn to boot. Mum was still a rookie...Talk about a meet cute.’ Hinata rambled despite Kageyama taking no interest whatsoever.

‘I didn’t ask for your life story.’

‘Just wanted to make conversation.’

Kageyama noticed how Hinata pouted whenever he was rude to him. ‘Usually, when you’re told something personal, you should follow up by empathising or sharing something similar.’ Kageyama said and he stared angrily at the ground. He harshly reminded himself that if he wanted to rid himself of his status as a tyrannical king, he had to start acting nicer to everyone; even annoying pests. ‘My parents took the same finance business course in university. That’s how they met.’

‘Cool.’ Hinata commented uselessly.

The two were called over an automated system before they had the opportunity to traverse deeper topics of conversation. They both, secretly, considered that a good thing as they had things about themselves that they weren’t ready to share with the other yet.

Hinata and Kageyama collected their Pokémon from the counter. They also arranged a hostel room for themselves since it was looking dark out. They were being served by Nurse Joy so they took the opportunity to do that. They organised a room with two beds. They felt vaguely like boarding
Kageyama took a key for the both of them whilst Hinata searched the second floor for their room. It was decent enough. It resembled a hotel room. It had cream walls with red trims. The floor was carpeted in maroon curls. The beds were skinny singles. One was close to the murky window and the other was close to the door. There was about four feet between the beds. The air in the room tasted stale but Kageyama didn’t notice. Hinata, however, did and opened the window. He simultaneously claimed the window-side bed. Kageyama didn’t mind.

The two sat on their respective bed. ‘My parents are surprised that I chose Piplup as my starter.’ Kageyama commented. He didn’t bring his eyes up from his PokeGear’s screen to say that.

‘Really? I think you and Piplup could be twins.’ Hinata joked.

‘They’re also surprised that I managed to find someone to travel with.’ Kageyama added then put his PokeGear away.

Hinata could agree with that statement. The decision to travel together had been quite impulsive. ‘I should ring my parents. Them and Natsu are probably worried.’

‘Who’s Natsu?’

‘My little sister.’

‘Ah... Use your own PokeGear to call them then if you think they’re so worried.’ Kageyama suggested.

‘I can’t. I don’t own one.’

Kageyama had never met someone his own age who didn’t own a PokeGear before. It was especially surprising since Hinata would be away from his home for extremely long periods of time.

‘Here, use mine.’ Kageyama offered.

‘Thanks.’ Hinata smiled. They exchanged the PokeGear.

‘Go ahead and save your family’s number. Just in case something happens to you and I have to contact them.’

‘Thanks Kageyama. You’re so thoughtful.’ Hinata said as he pecked the PokeGear’s screen before Kageyama realised that Hinata didn’t know how to use it.

Hinata gave the PokeGear back and Kageyama fidgeted with it. He saved Hinata’s home number in it for him. Kageyama handed it back. ‘Don’t break it.’ Kageyama warned, faithless.

‘Yep.’

Hinata rang his family and waited. Natsu quickly answered their home line. ‘Hello, Hinata residents. Natsu talking.’ she recited.

‘Natsu, it’s me, Shouyou.’

‘Really?’ Natsu chirped.

‘Yep, wanna get Mum and Dad and put it on speaker phone.’
‘Uh-huh.’

Kageyama cringed. ‘Don’t use up all my credit.’ he warned.

‘Gotcha.’ Hinata nodded.

‘Sho, who are you talking to? Whose number is this?’ Mother Hinata asked. Her voice was distorted and Hinata realised that he was on speaker.

‘Kageyama from Jubilife School and I met up. We decided to travel together. He’s letting me borrow his Gear.’ Hinata said. ‘He doesn’t want me using up all his credit so we should probably keep it short.’

Hinata heard a sigh. ‘What a dependable boy.’ Hinata’s mother praised.

‘Have you and Oink won any battles yet?’ Hinata’s father asked.

‘We came close but Kageyama’s Piplup is tougher than it looks.’

‘Where are you?’ Hinata’s father asked.

‘Sandgem PokeCentre.’

‘Gonna get your first badge in Oreburgh, right? Just like your old woman, right?’ Hinata’s mother asked.

‘Hopefully. But I wanna do Contests as well now, ‘cause that’s what Kageyama does.’

‘Good luck, big bro.’ Natsu piped up.

‘Well our dinner’s gonna burn if we chat for much longer. Eat well and stay safe, Sho. And have a good New Year. We love you.’

‘Love you too.’

Hinata ended the call after saying more goodbyes than what Kageyama found necessary. He handed back the PokeGear and Kageyama put it on its charger. He was twinged slightly by envy. He had never held a conversation that long with his own parents.

‘Are we gonna do anything for New Year?’ Hinata asked. He had almost completely forgotten about it. He had been too swept up by his own preoccupations with Pokémon and rivalries. Kageyama paused. ‘I’m not sure.’

‘This is gonna be my first New Year away from home.’ Hinata commented.

‘We’ll see what’s happening in the foyer, how about that?’ Kageyama suggested.

‘Sounds good.’ Hinata agreed.
Kageyama and Hinata remained confined to their room until they got hungry. Kageyama said he would shout Hinata something small. They went down into the foyer and wandered into the restaurant area. It was like a mall’s food court. They ordered some fast food. They are barely spent anything.

They couldn’t find a place to sit though. The PokeCentre was at maximum capacity with guests by this point. They were glad they weren’t the ones who had to camp in the foyer though but on a night like tonight, that probably wasn’t a bad thing.

Hinata stared up at a huge screen that hung down from the second level’s balcony. The news was on with captions. There was plenty of screen time devoted to talking about Orientation Day. They played stock footage of rookie Pokémon Trainers and some veteran Trainers shared their experiences. It was pretty standard stuff but this year, it was devoted to him and his generation of Trainers. That made it special.

‘Bored yet?’ Kageyama asked. He glanced up the television screen. He was.

‘There’s two hours to midnight.’ Hinata noted.

‘Yep.’ Kageyama said. ‘And?’

‘We should stay up and drink soda. Maybe there’ll be midnight matches against other Trainers.’ Hinata said.

‘Doubt it but the other stuff is doable.’ Kageyama said.

It was ten-thirty now and there was still an hour and a half until New Year. Slowly, a buzz built inside the PokeCentre. Everyone was thinking about the year to come: their first year as a Trainer. Hinata had been right about the midnight matches though. Some people went outside to battle because they were bored and hot-blooded. Nurse Joy put stadium lights on outside.

Hinata dragged Kageyama outside. There were five courts available and fifty trainers itching to battle. ‘You go have fun. I’m gonna start working on my Performance Round techniques with Piplup.’ Kageyama said to Hinata.

‘Sounds like a plan.’ Hinata said. He had no clue what that meant but it sounded fun.

Kageyama stood on the edge of the light, where it and shadow merged. He brought Piplup out of its PokeBall and the two started to brainstorm ideas. Hinata meanwhile found a few people willing to battle him.

Kageyama got out his PokeDex. He knew it had a scan function and he soon worked out how to use it once he got past all the automated tutorials it had. He had it scan his Piplup. ‘

Because it is very proud, it hates accepting food from people. Its thick down guards it from cold. It lives along shores in northern countries. A skilled swimmer, it dives for over 10 minutes to hunt.’ the PokeDex recited. Soon, text was paralleled with live footage of his Piplup.

Kageyama scrolled through the information. He learned some things about his Piplup; it was female for a start and it was on level eight. It’s learned moves are: Pound and Bubble. That wasn’t going to help Kageyama much in order to create a good set-up for a Performance Stage.
Kageyama decided he would do some target practice on a nearby tree. Piplup was happy to attack it. Their training and practice caught the attention of two Trainers.

‘Good evening.’ a cheery voice greeted Kageyama.

‘Stop.’ he instructed Piplup who ceased blowing bubbles. Kageyama turned around and sized up these trainers. Their clothes were new and orderly. They were rookies like him.

The blonde guy with glasses was taller than Kageyama. He was wearing a collarless, whitish shirt with a sleeveless, black jacket over it. He wore jeans and boots. Around his neck was a pompous pair of grey headphones. His blonde hair was very short and he smirked. He was pissing Kageyama off.

His freckly friend was shorter than the both of them but not by too much. He had a youthful face and messy hair. He wore a dark, button-up shirt with ruddy shorts. He had a hat of some kind stuffed into his pocket. He didn’t come across as arrogant.

‘Hello.’ Kageyama greeted them.

‘You’re Kageyama Tobio, aren’t you?’ the blonde guy asked.

‘Yes. Who’s asking?’ Kageyama affirmed.

‘I’m Yamaguchi Tadashi and this is my friend Tsukishima Kei. We’re from Oreburgh.’ the shorter guy said.

‘And we heard along the grape vine that your probably one of the hardest hitters here.’ Tsukishima said.

Kageyama glanced down at his Piplup. Kageyama supposed that his reputation preceded him. ‘I suppose. I did graduate top of my class.’ Kageyama said.

‘I graduated top of mine.’ Tsukishima said.

‘Second.’ Yamaguchi piped up.

‘Interesting.’ Kageyama commented.

‘I hear they used to call you the “King of the Court”. I’d be interested in seeing why that is so.’ Tsukishima said.

Kageyama flinched and clenched his fists. His reputation really did precede him. ‘No one calls me that anymore.’ Kageyama growled. His Piplup squeaked. She stepped out in front of him, a tad jittery.

‘Why’s that?’ Tsukishima asked.

‘I’ve given up battling. That’s why.’ Kageyama said, exempting what these two didn’t need to know.

Tsukishima nodded and made a knowing, clicking sound with his tongue. ‘We’re Coordinators.’ Yamaguchi added; trying to keep the interaction peaceful. He could tell that Tsukishima and Kageyama weren’t the type to get along with each other. ‘Same.’ Kageyama said.

‘Let’s have a practice Performance Stage. Tadashi can judge.’ Tsukishima suggested.
‘I promise to be unbiased.’ Yamaguchi added.

Piplup stared upwards at Kageyama. The little Pokémon was tuckered out from training already. ‘I don’t think my Piplup is up for the challenge.’ Kageyama said.

‘Aah, that’s a shame.’ Tsukishima whined. ‘My Chimchar was after a challenge.’

A red light scattered from Tsukishima’s waist. A hyperactive monkey appeared and danced about. It came close towards Piplup to investigate it. Piplup shyly hid behind Kageyama. ‘We’re not up for it.’ Kageyama stated again. He really wished that Piplup was though because he wanted to put that smug Tsukishima in his place.

Tsukishima whistled and Chimchar scampered back towards him. ‘The King’s lost his crown.’ Tsukishima whined.

‘Fine. If you insist.’ Kageyama said. There were too many annoying people. Kageyama picked up his Piplup and she squirmed.

Yamaguchi set up the rules. A small performance, basic stuff, and Tsukishima could go first so Piplup could rest a bit. Kageyama agreed to the terms.

Tsukishima stood back from Chimchar. ‘Just like we practiced earlier... Chimchar, use Ember.’ he instructed. Chimchar spat orangey spurs into the air. They glistened and held their position well before falling down around Chimchar who danced on the spot.

Kageyama didn’t like the performance. It was too plain and it made him think that Tsukishima was all talk. ‘Well done Chimchar.’ Yamaguchi praised and then he turned to Kageyama. He let Piplup out of his arms. She stared warily at Chimchar and then back to Kageyama. ‘It was decent.’ Kageyama said.

‘Then go ahead and do something better than.’ Tsukishima taunted.

Kageyama kept his confidence to himself. ‘Piplup, Bubble.’ he said and Piplup threw her head upwards and let four, huge bubbles escape her beak. They floated down and she carefully balanced them on the tip of her sharp beak: just like Kageyama had asked her previously. ‘Growl!’ Kageyama instructed and Piplup opened her beak again. She let out a horrid noise that kept the bubbles floating for a moment longer before popping around her like sprits of glitter.

Yamaguchi applauded Kageyama and Piplup. ‘That was good, huh, Tsuki?’ he said to Tsukishima.

‘I suppose.’ Tsukishima reluctantly agreed. The cute routine was slightly better than Chimchar’s dance. But only just.

‘I declare Piplup the winner of this Performance Stage.’ Yamaguchi congratulated.

‘We better be off. I think it’s getting close to the fireworks program.’ Tsukishima said and he walked off rudely. Chimchar galloped behind him before leaping up onto his broad shoulders.

‘Sorry about that. He can be quite arrogant at times. See you later?’ Yamaguchi apologised. He caught up with Tsukishima. Kageyama briefly wondered what kind of Pokémon Yamaguchi had but then he turned his attention to who really deserved it: Piplup. He bent down and grimaced; another mangled smile. Piplup was horrified by the expression. ‘You did really well. K-Keep up the good work.’ Kageyama said and he tried to tickle Piplup’s chin but she struggled too much and returned herself.
‘Oi! Kageyama!’

Kageyama turned around and he saw Hinata with his Spoink bouncing up and down beside him. ‘C’mere!’ Hinata called and Kageyama regrouped with him.

‘How did battling go?’ he asked conversationally. Kageyama noticed that “Oink” was very tired.

‘Oink won four battles in a row! Isn’t that right, mate?’ Hinata boasted and Spoink yawned.

Hinata got out his PokeBall and returned the Spoink. ‘Well we won four battles. Who’re those people you were with?’

‘Assholes.’ Kageyama bluntly replied. ‘Other Coordinators. I bested the blonde one in practice Performance.’ Hinata smiled and congratulated Kageyama. They soon heard excited yelling emerging from the PokeCentre. They could hardly believe how close to midnight it was.

They quickly got inside the PokeCentre. Music played in the background and everyone was counting down to midnight. ‘Five. Four. Three! Two! ONE!’ everyone screamed. On the television screen, plumes of red light burst. The fireworks dazzled Hinata and Kageyama wished he could be there live. He had been there live a few times before.

‘Happy New Year, Kageyama!’ Hinata said to Kageyama.

‘Yeah, happy New Year, Hinata.’ Kageyama replied. Hinata bounced up and down; almost in time with the bass in the music playing.

‘Let’s get some lemonade.’ Hinata suggested. ‘Maybe Nurse Joy has sparklers?’

They found Nurse Joy at the entrance of the PokeCentre. She was speaking angrily with Tsukishima and Yamaguchi. ‘Boys, where do you think you’re going?’ she growled.

‘To Lake Verity.’ Tsukishima said.

Hinata whispered to Kageyama: ‘Those’re the Coordinators you were with, right?’

‘Mm, Tsukishima and Yamaguchi.’

Tsukishima crossed his arms and rolled his eyes. Yamaguchi started waving his hands apologetically. ‘Sorry ma’am but we wanna go and catch some Pokémon.’ he explained.

‘Can’t it wait until morning? The Lake is extremely dangerous at night, not to mention extremely faraway!’ she yelled.

‘But Lunatone can only be found there at night, ma’am. Please. It’s not like we’re going swimming.’ Tsukishima argued.

Nurse Joy ground on her teeth. She crossed her arms and scowled. ‘Rookie Pokémon Trainers are so irresponsible...’ she muttered to herself.

‘Hey...’ Yamaguchi attempted to argue back.

‘Just stick together and make sure you have a torch and don’t go anywhere near the water.’ she warned. ‘And make sure you have potions and keep out of trouble.’

‘Thanks, ma’am.’ the boys said in unison and she dismissed them. They bowed before dashing out the doors.
Nurse Joy glanced away from them and prayed for their safety. She then caught sight of Hinata and Kageyama. ‘Don’t tell me, you want to go to Lake Verity too.’ she said.

‘No, I was just wondering if you had sparklers that we could have.’ Hinata said.

‘Oh, um, no, sorry. I’ve already run out.’ Nurse Joy apologised.

‘That’s okay, ma’am. I think I have an idea for a replacement.’ Kageyama said. He bowed and went out the door with Hinata trailing behind.

Nurse Joy huffed. ‘It’s cold out tonight. You boys ought to be in your room by two a.m.’ she said.

‘We will!’ Kageyama promised. He took Hinata out to the front lawn.

Hinata grinned. He bounced up and down. ‘So, what’s your idea?’ he asked.

‘I think it’d be pretty if Spoink and Piplup used Psywave and Bubble together. We’d get an interesting effect similar to a sparkler, right?’

‘Maybe.’ Hinata had no idea. He called back Oink who was in a much happier condition now. Piplup was still nervous about everything but seeing Oink made her feel a bit better.

‘Psywave!’

‘Bubble!’

Piplup blew bubbles and Oink made them float about on a pink and purple trail. The boys watched happily. This was exactly what Kageyama had pictured. ‘I’m so pumped for this year.’ Hinata said.

‘Mm.’ Kageyama agreed.

‘I hope we both get to fulfil our goals.’ Hinata said and he raised his can of lemonade.

He glanced at Kageyama; prompting him to raise his milk bottle. ‘To defeating the Champion.’ Hinata toasted.

‘To becoming a Top Coordinator.’ Kageyama toasted. They bumped their drinks together carefully.

They watched as the bubbles popped and the light faded. They retired to their room soon after. They collapsed onto their respective bed. Today had been the longest day of their lives and it was great. They let their Pokémon cuddle up with them.
A Quiet Start

Kageyama and Hinata got up early in the morning and they weren’t the only ones with the idea of leaving early. The food court was quite busy. A few people were passed out on the given seating; partied out from hours before.

Streamers were strewn about with popped balloons. Hardworking Chansey were cleaning up with brooms and dust pans. Hinata felt bad for them since it shouldn’t have been their job to clean up so he helped. And Kageyama felt bad for Hinata so he helped too. They were rewarded with a free breakfast though.

They helped clean up a little bit and then ate their breakfast. They headed out at eight o’clock sharp though. Hinata was excited to get on their way. Kageyama was acting indifferent. Hinata guessed it was because the city at the end of Route 202 was Jubilife and probably a route that Kageyama knew well.

They took a quick detour to glimpse the beach though. Neither of the two had the opportunity to go often so they thought they would walk along the docks, just as a thing to do. They watched fishing boats set sail and surfers rode the early morning waves. They saw various fish Pokémon swim under the dock and out to sea. ‘Are you going to try and catch any?’ Kageyama asked.

‘I think I’ll be right.’ Hinata said. Kageyama checked the time on his PokeGear. Hinata peered over to see the time too. Kageyama was miffed by the lack of personal space between them.

Hinata stretched. ‘Let’s hit the road, huh?’ he suggested.

‘Yes.’ Kageyama agreed. They breathed in the salt spray one last time and decided to leave town. They walked through charming streets and grassy paddocks until they got to the city limits.

In front of them, a winding path stretched outwards into thick copse of trees. The land was rocky and rigid. There was a whistling zephyr zipping past them that carried faint traces of city smells and the scent of the ocean. They heard Starly caw in the distance and saw a few people make their way ahead of them.

‘So what Pokémon are you thinking of catching?’ Kageyama asked. They travelled on the road. It was uneven underfoot. He glanced around. He was on the lookout for Pokémon that he wanted to catch.

‘Hm...’ Hinata paused. He had thought about that question lots in the months before Orientation Day. ‘Bouncy Pokémon? Fast ones? Ones that go *fwaaf* or *gwaaf*!’

‘You haven’t a clue.’ Kageyama translated.

‘Oh, I know wanna catch a Murkrow, so I can have one like the Karasuno Volleyball Team.’ Hinata said.

‘Same.’ Kageyama agreed.

Hinata glanced at Kageyama. He hadn’t had his head facing forward for ages. Hinata considered that unusual. ‘What about you?’

‘I like flying types or Pokémon that can use technical moves best.’ Kageyama replied.
‘Are you gonna catch a Starly?’ Hinata asked.

‘I would like to.’ Kageyama said.

‘There’s a flock of them right there.’ Hinata said and pointed them out.

They were making a lot of noise and were pecking about. ‘I guess now would be as good as time as any.’ Kageyama said and he took Piplup’s PokeBall off of his bag’s strap. He enlarged the PokeBall and grabbed out an empty PokeBall from his bag. ‘Go get ‘em!’ Hinata encouraged as he watched Kageyama approach the flock.

Some stared blankly at him whilst others ignored him; far too happy eating. ‘Piplup,’ Kageyama said and he tossed out Piplup’s PokeBall. She burst out of crimson light. She seemed sleepy still and was put immediately on the alert when she heard the raucous birds. ‘Bubble!’ Kageyama said and Piplup opened her beak wide. A huge stream of bubbles floated out and popped about the flock of Starly.

Most fled, just like Kageyama had expected but one remained stationary. It was so still that Kageyama wondered if it was lame. It blinked and fluttered up. It stretched out its wings and zoomed in for Piplup. ‘Dodge!’ Kageyama yelped, not expecting the Starly to have attacked Piplup. Piplup scrambled away but the Starly flew around and kept batting past Piplup with its outstretched wings. Kageyama saw raw power in that Wing Attack. He had a good feeling about this Starly.

‘Bubble!’ he yelled and Piplup aimed a lofty stream of bubbles at the Starly. The popped over it and it huddled up, mid-air, and almost fell before flapping upwards again. ‘Pound!’ he yelled and Piplup obliged. She swung around and thwacked the Starly with her tail. Starly was knocked down to the ground. It struggled to get up. ‘Now’s the time!’ Hinata yelled.

‘I know, idiot!’ Kageyama snapped and he threw out his empty PokeBall.

It flew out and landed next to Starly. It opened and gaped. The red light spewed out of its digital centre and encased Starly. Starly was transported into the PokeBall and it began to rock. It swayed back and forth. The button on the centre of the PokeBall flashed between red and white before there was a satisfying click. ‘We did it...Piplup!’ Kageyama praised and he was swollen with elation. He picked up the PokeBall and it felt heavier now. ‘We did it.’ he said again and Hinata dashed over to him. He sprung up and smiled.

‘Well done!’ Hinata congratulated.

Kageyama put away Piplup and her PokeBall. He got out his PokeDex and let Starly out. It sat on the ground and stared up at them. ‘What a weird bird.’ Hinata commented. Kageyama had his PokeDex scan the Starly.

‘They flock in great numbers. Though small, they flap their wings with great power. Usually with a large flock, it is barely noticeable when alone. Its cries are very strident.’ the automated voice said.

The stock image of a Starly was replaced with live footage of Kageyama’s. It was still sitting down and staring blankly. Hinata looked onto Kageyama’s PokeDex and was impressed by his use of the PokeDex. ‘This Starly is close to evolving. It knows Quick Attack and Wing Attack and is male.’ Kageyama surmised the information. He put away his PokeDex and bent down to greet Starly.

It hopped up and fluttered onto Kageyama’s head. Hinata sniggered. ‘At least it likes you.’ he said.

‘Wanna keep on moving?’

‘Yeah.’

Despite Kageyama’s insistence, his Starly refused to stop squatting on his head. It seemed to like sitting there.
Eventually, Kageyama managed to remove his Starly from his head by returning it to his PokeBall. His Starly and Piplup couldn’t be more opposite. Starly seemed to love affection and was quite easy-going whilst Piplup jumped at the smallest of noises and tried to be hopelessly independent despite its wuss nature.

Hinata and Kageyama trekked through the grassy fields with ease. They spotted a few Pokémon, mostly Sentret and Zigzagoon, but nothing caught Hinata’s eye.

Kageyama checked the town map app on his PokeGear and it caused them to believe that they were half way through the Route already. That wasn’t surprising since it was early afternoon now.

Kageyama checked the news app and he tuned into the “Trainer’s NOW” report. He put it on speakerphone so that Hinata could listen in too. Kageyama didn’t listen to it too often as he found the host to be obnoxious.

‘Hey-hey-hey, it’s DJ Rocker-Beedrill and I say hello to all my hella cool rookies tuning in. Route 202 is the place to because my man Paulie is holding his annual Rookie Carnival. It don’t matter what your jam is because he’ll have something for you. So rookies, if you’re on Route 202, you should be finding yourself a circus-like tent or something and this dude named Paulie. He’ll help you hook up with other Trainers to help you practice. Oh and while all you rad lil dudes and dudettes are listening in, the Jubilife Contest Committee would like me to remind you that the Jubilife Rookie Prize is gonna be hip and hap’ning on January sixth.’

Kageyama turned off the news report. ‘I dislike that man something awful.’ he complained.

‘I like him. He’s so energetic.’ Hinata said.

‘Of course you do. Idiots like other idiots.’ Kageyama said. He put away his PokeGear. He could hear something sounding like a fair up ahead.

‘Do you think that’s Paulie?’ Hinata asked.

‘Maybe.’ Kageyama said. He and Hinata glanced at each other before breaking out in a merciless sprint.

Their stamina was to be admired as they dashed almost a mile just to get to the showground like on-goings in the middle of Route 202. Plenty of Trainers were hanging around and most of which seemed to have been at Sandgem PokeCentre. Needless to say, it was unsurprising when Kageyama and Hinata bumped into Tsukishima and Yamaguchi.

‘Yo.’ Tsukishima said when he saw them.

‘Who’s your friend? I’m Yamaguchi and this is Tsukishima.’ Yamaguchi said.

‘Hinata Shouyou.’ Hinata introduced himself. He already knew their names but now he had faces to put to them.

‘Are you a Coordinator too?’ Tsukishima asked. Hinata felt really short around everyone. He hated it and the condescending look Tsukishima had didn’t help.

‘Sorta. I collect both Ribbons and Badges.’ he replied.
Yamaguchi smiled. ‘Ah, that’d be hard, right?’

‘Maybe?’ Hinata said. He wasn’t certain himself.

‘Since we’re all here, we really ought to have a battle. A proper one. I wanna see how the King fairs under normal circumstances.’ Tsukishima said. Kageyama was riled up by being referred to as “King” but didn’t defend himself. So Hinata decided to step in.

‘Kageyama doesn’t like being called King!’ Hinata shouted.

‘Oh?’ Tsukishima said.

‘Looks like the King has a pawn he’d rather use to defend himself with.’ Tsukishima quipped.

Hinata scowled and shivered with anger. Kageyama stepped in this time. ‘Hinata is my rival. I can defend myself.’ he proclaimed. He tried to hide how embarrassed he was about saying that but Tsukishima and Yamaguchi glanced at each other. They sniggered shamelessly. ‘Battle us then and then we’ll see who needs a “lackey’s” protection.’ Kageyama taunted.

‘Fine but Tadashi is my friend.’ Tsukishima said. Yamaguchi smiled curtly.

The four of them quickly snavelled two courts off of Paulie who was in a mess trying to keep everything in order. It was Kageyama versus Tsukishima and Hinata versus Yamaguchi. People were content to watch as both parties were riled up something awful. The onlookers could only wonder about the relationships between the four. It looked too dangerous to be investigated. Two members of Paulie’s staff stepped up to referee both matches: a lady refereed for Tsukishima and Kageyama whilst a man oversaw Hinata and Yamaguchi.

‘Heads or tails?’ the lady asked.

‘Heads.’ Tsukishima yelled.

‘Tails.’ Kageyama shouted. The lady flipped a coin. She caught it and placed it on her wrist.

‘Heads.’ he called out.

Tsukishima got out his PokeBall and Kageyama followed suit. ‘This is a one Pokémon per Trainer match so choose carefully. Now, begin!’ the lady shouted.

‘Monferno!’ Tsukishima yelled and he tossed out his PokeBall. A large, primate Pokémon came out of the PokeBall and competitively whooped. Tsukishima readjusted his glasses smugly. He was quite certain that he was first person here at this Trainer’s camp to have evolved their beginning Pokémon.

Onlookers were impressed and wondered how Kageyama would react. He was impressed to that Tsukishima had managed to evolve his Chimchar already. Kageyama was originally going to use Starly but he knew that Piplup was stronger so he chose her PokeBall. ‘Piplup, set up!’ he yelled and he threw out her PokeBall.

She yipped and squawked and was terrified of her opponent. She stared bulgingly at Kageyama. Kageyama was thankful that he wasn’t a Gym Trainer or Piplup’s personality flaws would be hell to deal with.

‘Monferno, use Mach Punch.’ Tsukishima instructed and Monferno leapt forward with an extended fist.
‘Piplup, Bubble!’ Kageyama shouted. Piplup opened her beak and a spray of bubbles came out. They popped over to the Monferno who stopped to rub its eyes.

‘Monferno, stay focused, Scratch!’ Tsukishima said and his Pokémon began to swipe at Piplup.

She was knocked over and skidded past. ‘Bubble!’ Kageyama yelled again. Piplup got up and dusted herself off. She sprayed Monferno with bubbles again. This time, it didn’t rub its eyes afterwards.

‘Good, good, keep on task. Scratch!’ Tsukishima yelled. Monferno pounced on Piplup and swiped at her.

‘Bubble! Quick, stay in close quarters!’ Kageyama yelled.

Piplup quickly covered Monferno in bubbles again. They popped over it and it fell backwards. The continuance of constantly taking water moves was beginning to show. There was a slight sway when it stood. It scowled. ‘Mach Punch!’ Tsukishima yelled and Monferno lunged forward. Without having to be told, Piplup dodged and tried to get closer again. ‘Bubble!’ Kageyama said and that was final move that had to be dealt. The bubbles popped and Monferno sat down, exhausted, and almost toppled over.

The lady made her decision. ‘Monferno is unable to battle. Piplup is the winner.’ she announced. Kageyama grinned and welcomed Piplup towards him. This time, she didn’t cower at the sight of his ugly smile. She still didn’t let him pet her though. ‘Good work.’ Kageyama said. He returned Piplup to her PokeBall.

The man organising Yamaguchi and Hinata asked them for their preference on “Heads” or “Tails”. Hinata chose “heads” whilst Yamaguchi chose “tails”. Hinata was the one who won the right to go first based on the side the coin landed on. ‘This is a one Pokémon per Trainer match so choose carefully. Now, begin!’ the man announced.

Hinata smiled. His heart pounded and he grabbed Oink’s PokeBall. ‘Go! Oink!’ he yelped. He threw out his Oink’s PokeBall. The Spoink burst through the light and squeaked. It frowned and readied itself for its opponent.

Yamaguchi had two PokeBalls in his hand. He glanced at Oink and then stashed one of the PokeBalls. ‘Nae, I choose you!’ Hinata was excited to see what Pokémon Yamaguchi had chosen to battle with. The mysterious nickname gave seemingly nothing away. Out of the red light of the PokeBall, came Turtwig. It snapped its powerful jaws and growled.

‘Bounce!’ Hinata shouted and he heard laughter in the crowd. Oink snorted and sprung upwards higher than what should have been possible.

‘Oh dear...' Yamaguchi murmured. His eyes followed the Spoink’s extraordinary but then he refocused. ‘Turtwig, try you’re hardest to avoid it then it with an Absorb!’

Soon, Oink plummeted down to the ground but Turtwig was too slow to move out of the impact zone due to Oink’s velocity. Turtwig was taken into the ground, just a bit. A plume of dirt rose around them and people cheered Hinata on. The referee stared at the competitor’s Pokémon. He tried to assess whether or not Turtwig still had energy but he quickly decided.

He cleared his throat. ‘Turtwig is unable to battle. Spoink is the winner.’ he announced.

‘Yay! Go Oink!’ Hinata yelled and Oink happily jumped into his arms. The two bounced up and down happily. Yamaguchi smiled sympathetically at Turtwig who rose its head with a dour frown.
‘If I had known that that Spoink was capable of a flying type move, I wouldn’t have sent you out. But think of it this way, now we know our weakness and now we can do something about it.’ Yamaguchi consoled his Pokémon before returning it to its PokeBall.

Hinata and Kageyama regrouped after their swift matches. Some Trainers saw them as a power duo as it was apparent they were together. They exchanged their story and high fived, awkwardly as Kageyama hadn’t expected Hinata to prompt on. Their hands clasped with a soft sound.

‘That was fun.’ Yamaguchi said. He almost spooked Hinata. They turned around and the four of them were together again.

‘We’ll see you at the Jubilife Rookie Prize, right?’ Tsukishima asked.

‘Of course.’ Kageyama confidently replied.

‘We’ll get our revenge there, right, Tadashi?’ Tsukishima said,

‘Yep.’ Yamaguchi smiled.

They split off there.

‘We’ve met some interesting people, huh, Kageyama?’ Hinata said.

‘Yeah and we’ve got a long week ahead of us if we want to make sure we win against them.’ Kageyama said.

‘Yep.’ Hinata grinned.

‘We should start training.’ Kageyama suggested.

‘Okay then.’ Hinata agreed.
Kageyama and Hinata didn’t stick around the Training Carnival for much longer. They watched a few matches before toddling off. They watched those matches for the purpose of research. Kageyama also started to explain a few things about Contests to Hinata. His brash personality and lack of information would cause him to flunk in one so Kageyama adopted the job of tutoring Hinata.

It was pretty dark by the time they got to the PokeCentre. For the first time in his life, Hinata couldn’t see the stars. Whenever he looked up past the tall, metallic buildings of Jubilife city, he couldn’t see the twinkle of stars. Instead, all he saw a grey smog.

‘We best get to the PokeCentre, huh, Kageyama?’ Hinata said, sticking close as he wasn’t comfortable with his surroundings. There were too many buildings and people. Hinata followed after his friend blindly because he didn’t know his way around the city. ‘Why?’ Kageyama asked.

‘So we can sleep and eat?’

‘I just texted my Mother. She can pick us up from here, in about fifteen minutes.’ Kageyama explained.

He sat down on a bus seat bench and Hinata sat next to him awkwardly. Hinata watched as cars and buses and trams sped past. Kageyama was fooling around with his PokeGear again. It was more research into Contest techniques and stuff; he occasionally would explain something to Hinata.

Kageyama noted the time and put his PokeGear away. A second later, a compact white car pulled up. ‘Our ride.’ Kageyama said and got up. Hinata stumbled to his feet. Kageyama let him in and he chose to sit in the front. Hinata sat stiffly.

‘Hello, Mother.’ Kageyama greeted formally. The woman in the front looked a lot like him. She had straight black hair and piercing blue eyes: just like Kageyama. She was beautiful. She wore sophisticated clothes and glasses. She glanced at Hinata through her rear-view mirror. ‘That’s Hinata Shouyou. The boy I was telling you about.’

‘I realised.’ his mother snapped.

They drove off in silence. There was tension in the air and Hinata couldn’t stand it. Mrs Kageyama was a sharp driver who took hard turns but she got to where she wanted quickly. ‘How long are you going to let him stay with us?’ Mrs Kageyama asked as her son got out of the car.

‘I was thinking a week.’ Kageyama replied.

‘Just as long as he doesn’t disturb routine, Tobio.’ Mrs Kageyama said and Hinata got out of the car. She cringed when she noticed that there was mud in the backseat. She reached for a blue-tooth and placed it over her ear. She drove off as soon as Hinata shut the door behind him.

Hinata stared at Kageyama. They were out front an industrial-looking apartment complex which had a doorman and everything. ‘I’m sorry for my Mother. She can be intense.’ Kageyama apologised. Maybe he should have gone with Hinata’s idea of camping out at a PokeCentre all week, even though it would have been more expensive. ‘No, no, it’s fine. She’s probably stressed, right? Everyone gets like that when...they’re...stressed.’ Hinata made excuses. He didn’t like how she had treated him and Kageyama.
Kageyama took Hinata inside the building. It was clean and huge. No one greeted them though. Kageyama took Hinata into the elevator and pressed the button indicating the eighth floor. There were twenty floors in this apartment complex. The feel of the elevator going up made Hinata uncomfortable. It was exciting as this was one of the rare times in his life he had ever been in an elevator.

‘We’re door number nine.’ Kageyama said and Hinata got off the elevator. He had a bounce in his step; completely recovered from how he was inside the elevator. Kageyama found the door and got his key out. He unlocked the door with a chink and he reached inside the darkness and turned a light on.

He and Hinata stepped inside. Hinata had never seen a more orderly apartment. It was compressed, minimal and yet spacious. It made it look that everything had a purpose. There wasn’t a single indicator of clutter. The apartment looked too neat to look like someone lived inside it. The living area was spacious and had its back to a dining table which stood in front of a small, stainless steel kitchen. A corridor led down to a bathroom and two bedrooms.

Hinata was afraid to step inside because he mud all over his volleys and was generally unkempt. He felt like a sore thumb inside the apartment. Kageyama put aside his bag and took off his shoes. He replaced them with slippers; he lent a pair to Hinata as well.

‘So, this is my family’s apartment. Probably smaller than what you’re used to.’ Kageyama said. He tried to sound welcoming but he failed.

‘Nah, it’s almost the same size as the homestead.’ Hinata said.

‘I’ll whip us up something. I’m not great but what I lack in literacy, I make up in more practical skills.’ Kageyama tried to joke. He tried to break the ice but failed. He found it weird but he hated how uncomfortable Hinata was looking. ‘Sit down on the couch; put the TV on if you like.’

Hinata plonked himself down and turned the television on. He skipped through a few channels and settled on some cartoon. Kageyama busied himself in the kitchen. He made basic fried rice. Its aroma filled the room and it helped Hinata feel a bit more at peace with his surroundings.

Half an hour later, the two sat down at the table and enjoyed their meal. ‘Wow, this is really good Kageyama.’ Hinata praised.

‘Not really.’ Kageyama bashfully shut down the compliment.

After dinner, Hinata rang his parents from the Kageyama home-line. His parents were surprised to hear that Hinata was staying with Kageyama family. His father wanted to pass on thanks but somehow, Hinata doubted he would get the chance to. His mother was glad to hear about Hinata winning so many matches since they had last spoken. They wished each other best wishes and “Happy New Year” before hanging up. Kageyama listened into Hinata’s side of the conversation. He was plagued by envy again.

They went to bed early that night. Kageyama unfolded the lounge and opted to sleep there. He let Hinata sleep in his bed. They had an easy night of rest.

At first, Hinata was unable to sleep though. All he could smell was Kageyama. So he spent a good half an hour, trying to relax himself by inadvertently making his mind race. He absorbed his surroundings. Kageyama’s room had lots of blues and greys present. He had long curtains and a bookcase stocked thickly with Pokémon care and handling. His dresser was neat and orderly. There were a few framed photographs on top of it but other than that, the room was almost empty and
devoid of personalisation. It still looked straight out of an interior design catalogue despite belonging to a teenage boy. Eventually, Hinata did fall into a restful sleep.

In the morning, they discovered that Mr Kageyama had come in some time during the night but only to shortly leave again. The only evidence of someone new in the apartment was that the message on the refrigerator’s whiteboard had changed.

Hinata poured himself some cereal and Kageyama put toast on. The two moved around each other like familiar housemates; in a way, they were. The two created a game plan. There were four days before the Jubilife Rookie Prize and there was a lot to. They both needed to come with a crowd wowing Performance and to level up their Pokémon so they could stand tall, even among other rookies. The plan was relatively simple: hellish training for three days straight and one day of rest. Their practice field would be the free-to-use battle courts in the middle of the city.

So, every day for three days, Kageyama and Hinata made their way into the central business district and practiced. They practiced battling against each other and any other Trainer who wandered into the park with the same intention. The two found it suspicious that they didn’t see Tsukishima or Yamaguchi.

At the end of each day, they would make their way back to Kageyama’s apartment and rest. Their Pokémon were good little troopers and were steadily improving with each match or practice.

But were very glad on the fourth day when they were allowed to just hang around the apartment. Hinata found their Pokémon’s reactions to Kageyama’s apartment to be hilarious. Piplup raced around and messed things up because there were too many electronic sounds for it to handle. Oink watched the news like an old man. And the newly evolved Staravia was content to sit on the kitchen table and watch as the fan spin around. Kageyama also found it a bit funny but he did worry for Staravia: “What if he gets so dizzy that he gets sick, Hinata?”

Hinata and Kageyama changed the channel on Oink to a silly cartoon. Today was their day to relax and unwind. ‘So, what’re you thinking of wearing tomorrow?’ Kageyama asked. The cartoon was mindless drivel. He glanced at Oink who seemed to agree. Hinata screwed his face up. ‘What a girly question to ask. I’m just gonna wear this. I’ll put it through the washing machine first.’ Hinata replied and Kageyama realised that Hinata had ignored one of the most establishing elements of Sinnoh region Contests.

Kageyama stared. It was such an obvious thing and this idiot hadn’t noticed. His mind raced from there and one thing led to another which ended up with, Kageyama silently asking himself: *How is he still alive?*

Kageyama changed the channel again. Oink perked up and Hinata didn’t protest too much. Kageyama found a repeat of an old Contest from eons ago. ‘Hinata, look at the Trainer. Tell me what they’re wearing. Pretend I’m blind.’ Kageyama asked and Hinata playfully shoved him.

‘Something fancy. Like a blue dressy thing that kinda go *fuwa-fuwa* ‘causes it’s all swishy.’ Hinata attempted to explain.

Kageyama stared blankly at Hinata. That wasn’t even proper language. ‘Something fancy, exactly. This isn’t Hoen. We have class here in Sinnoh.’ Kageyama said and Hinata playfully shoved him.

‘I’m half Hoennien, remember?’ Hinata chuckled.
'Mother’s side, right?'

‘Dad’s.’

‘Right.’

Kageyama got up. ‘Get up.’ he instructed Hinata.

‘We’re not gonna go shopping, are we?’

‘No, that’d take effort. We’re having a lazy day remember?’ Kageyama said although he was itching to go outside now that they had mentioned it.

‘Then where are we going?’ Hinata asked.

‘My room. I should have some hand-me-downs you can borrow. Assuming my Mother hasn’t thrown them out.’ Kageyama said.

The two went into Kageyama’s room. Piplup followed them. The other two Pokémon were happy where they were.

Kageyama ploughed through his dresser. He messed it up badly. He dug to its deepest trenches. He pulled out a matching set of clothes. He sized them up against Hinata. ‘Will it bother you if we match?’ Kageyama asked.

‘N-No?’ Hinata said and he tried to hide his embarrassment. He wasn’t used to Kageyama coming into his personal space like this and prodding around, making sure things might fit.

‘Want to try it on?’ Kageyama asked.

‘Yeah.’ Hinata mumbled.

Kageyama turned around out of courtesy. Hinata took his shirt off and put on the one he had been given. He swapped his shorts. He liked this uniformed look. The fabric was so silky too. ‘You look good.’ Kageyama complimented.

‘And I’m number ten – just like Little Giant.’ Hinata beamed. ‘Can I keep these clothes?’

‘Go ahead. They’re too small for me. I would have outgrown them around the beginning of middle school.’ Kageyama said, offhandedly and without realising that made Hinata feel insecure about his height. ‘I have some things you can add as accessories.’ Kageyama said and Hinata nodded. He knew there was a reason why he felt there was more to this outfit.

‘So we’re going to be ready for tomorrow?’ Kageyama asked and Piplup chirped. She was excited for tomorrow. Kageyama was certain that would change when they got to the Contest Hall but he liked the excitement in the household. ‘Uh-huh.’ Hinata grinned as he was passed the accessories Kageyama was talking about.
From the moment Hinata and Kageyama woke up, they were in a chipper mood. They made themselves and their Pokémon the “breakfast of champions” which was just fruit salad, yogurt and cereal.

There was a new message on the fridge but it wasn’t important. All week, Hinata hadn’t seen both of Kageyama’s parents. They were like phantoms: flitting in and out of the apartment at their whimsy. They left messages which were succinct and emotionless. Hinata thought that today, there would be a cute message on the fridge since today was January sixth: day of the Jubilife Rookie Prize but there hadn’t been that message.

Hinata pitied Kageyama. Put simply and bluntly. He pitied Kageyama because Hinata, from a broke background swimming in debt, had more luxuries than Kageyama who was caged in this gorgeous, empty apartment.

‘How’re we going for time?’ Kageyama asked. He had offered to do the dishes by himself this morning. He insisted because “Hinata is the guest”. Hinata checked the time by displaying the program information on the television. ‘Nearly nine o’clock.’

‘We have to be there before ten to get our Ribbon Cases and to sign up.’ Kageyama said.

‘Why didn’t we do that yesterday?’ Hinata asked.

‘Because the Hall wouldn’t have been open yesterday and I think it’s a way of making sure thousands of Coordinators don’t turn up or the judges would be there for months.’ Kageyama said.

He put the dishes out to dry and the boys got their things ready. They double checked and then checked again. They couldn’t risk not having something and then they were on their way. The bus was, by some unknown miracle, on time and they got to the Contest Hall with plenty of time to spare. They crashed into the long line and waited their turn.

They were cutting it fine by the time they got to the front and were served by the receptionist. She gave them both a Ribbon Case each and registered them as known Coordinators. To do that, all she had to do was swipe their Trainer Cards through one of those cool little machines that were also in PokeCentre.

The two dashed into the men’s dressing room and quickly got into their matching uniforms: proudly and unabashedly. A few people snickered at how coordinated they looked to each other.

Kageyama and Hinata were wearing replica volleyball uniforms in their favourite team’s style. Their favourite team hailed from the Karasuno Precinct of Jubilife and were known for two things: their Murkrow mascot and the Little Giant, a short player who made a superb ace because of his astounding jumping skills. A little known fact about the Little Giant though was that he did have a history in dabbling with Pokémon Contests.
The two wore black uniforms were silky and shiny with “9” and “10” on their backs in blocky, white lettering. The volleyball uniform had orange highlights under their arms, on their collars and striped down their shorts. Around their knees and elbows they wore protective, black pads as “accessories”. They looked incredibly natural in those replica uniforms. The only thing separating these uniforms from the official ones was that they lacked a lot of the front-facing decorations and business advertisements.

Hinata and Kageyama were happy in their uniforms. They watched the introduction to the Contest. The media coverage was huge and there was even a cameraman floating about in the hallway between the dressing rooms and the entrance to the stage.

There were three judges on the panel: Nurse Joy, Ukai Keishin (he was subbing in for his grandfather who was a famous Pokémon breeder) and Ittetsu Takeda (a famed Pokémon Connoisseur with a respected opinion). The three sat and greeted the camera. Ukai was reluctant to. ‘Cheer up, Mr Ukai. It’s your first time judging a Contest. You may even have a good time.’ Takeda whispered to him. He forced a smile.

Hinata went pale. ‘Are you okay, Hinata?’ Kageyama whispered to him.

‘O-Oh yeah, I-I’ll be fine.’ Hinata said and he dashed off to the toilets. Another obvious thing that Kageyama should have asked Hinata about in the lead up to this event was if he got stage-fright. He was just so brash and carefree; Kageyama had just assumed that he was the type to actively seek excess attention.

Kageyama was lucky that he and Hinata were towards the end of the Performance Stage. He snuck off to the bathroom and found Hinata drowning himself under a tap. He looked pretty pale. ‘Are you okay?’ Kageyama was careful not to come too close. Hinata turned his head and closed his eyes. Water ran over his face.

‘I will be.’ he mumbled, water fell from his mouth.

Kageyama took his medical kit out of his bag. It looked very official and even had a red cross on it. He forcefully fed Hinata some stomach pain tablets; he was very much against swallowing them despite how tiny they were.

They kicked in fifteen minutes after Hinata swallowed them. He was up and happy again. They went back to the competitor’s pit and walked in just in time to watch Tsukishima make his appeal towards the judges.

He looked smug as ever behind those glasses off his. He wore unelaborate clothes but his clothes were elegant in their simplicity. He wore black dress pants with a matching black jacket over a white blouse.

He produced his PokeBall through sleight of hand. This impressed the crowd and stirred up anticipation. The PokeBall was coated in blue plastic. There was a pair of stickers on it: orange flames and orange stripes creating an “x” shape.

‘Monferno!’ Tsukishima said gracelessly and he tossed out his PokeBall. It went upwards and opened with a unique burst. Orange stripes went outward and flames glittered about as Monferno made its entrance.

The effects faded and Monferno hopped about happily, grinning. ‘Just like we practiced, Ember!’ Tsukishima said and his Monferno let out a burst of flaming flecks. The burst went upwards and quite high, they almost singed the ceiling of the Hall. ‘Now, Mach Punch!’ Tsukishima yelled and
Monferno swung its arms back and the embers began to fall from their maximum height. In perfect synch with the falling embers, Monferno slugged its arms forward and changed the direction of the embers’ fall with its punch.

The embers then splintered because of the pressure Monferno had exerted upon them. They turned to orange glitter right in front of the judges’ eyes.

Nurse Joy beamed. Ukai was visibly impressed and Takeda, who had feared for his life, was grinning as well. ‘Monferno is clearly, very well trained. I give you a...nine?’ Ukai said and his panel lit up with jewel red nine.

‘Mr Ukai took the words right out of my mouth. I give you a nine as well.’ Takeda agreed.

‘I’ll give you an eight because your risk assessment still needs some work. You must take into consideration location when appealing. But other than that, your Monferno’s skill and strength are incredibly remarkable.’ Nurse Joy said.

‘Your final score is twenty-six, Tsukishima!’ the master of ceremonies, Marian, announced.

Tsukishima recalled Monferno and left the Hall grinning and basking in the applause of the crowd. He was very pleased with himself.

‘Next up is Yamaguchi Tadashi!’ Marian sang into her microphone. Soon, Yamaguchi emerged from the corridor and into the view of the crowd. Yamaguchi was dressed smartly in a white shirt with a peter pan collar and a neat, if oversized, grey jumper and dress pants. He had thankfully removed his nerdy bucket hat from his appearance and had flattened down his unruly hair. He waved to the crowd as he approached the platform Trainers would call out their Pokémon from.

He produced his PokeBall and it was also coated in the bluish film that had covered Tsukishima’s. The stickers on this PokeBall were purple petals. ‘Nae! I choose you!’ Yamaguchi called and he gracefully tossed out his PokeBall. In a shower of purple petals, Turtwig emerged and snapped its jaws playfully.

‘Razor Leaf!’ Yamaguchi yelled and he thrust his hand out. His Turtwig yowled and released an array of sharp leaves into the air. They swirled around strange precision. They floated around the Trainer and Pokémon as individuals. They were like leafy halos. ‘Absorb!’ Yamaguchi instructed. His Turtwig yowled again and released a glowing, pastel green orb from its mouth and the leaves that had been floating around mysteriously quickly cut into the orb and split it into fine shards like glitter. It sprinkled down, loftily, and sank into the skin; replenishing it and leaving everyone feeling revived.

Nurse Joy grinned, Ukai looked vaguely impressed and Takeda nodded heartily; so much his glasses became askew. ‘I give this performance nine out of ten points. My skin looks so much healthier now. And the control and execution were quite unique and superb.’ Nurse Joy complimented.

‘I give it an six. Not my cup of tea.’ Ukai said.

‘That’s not how you’re supposed to critique performances, Ukai... but I give it an eight-point-five. The technical excellent was there and I believe it can be honed down even more in future.’ Takeda said.

Yamaguchi thanked the judges and Marian swooned. ‘Yamaguchi Tadashi is on twenty-four-point-five points, a close competition is brewing!’ Marian sang and then invited the next performer.
The competition really was tough. Even Hinata, an oblivious novice, could tell. ‘We now welcome Hinata Shouyou onto the stage.’ Marian declared joyfully.

‘You feeling alright still?’ Kageyama asked but Hinata had to get on stage. He was too busy dashing off to answer. Kageyama heard Tsukishima and Yamaguchi snicker in the corner. He also distinctly heard Tsukishima say: “He’s worried like a wife.”

Hinata stumbled out onto the platform. He looked worried and he couldn’t stop looking around the raised grandstands. There were so many excited faces. His heart wouldn’t stop pounding. He could smell something and he wasn’t quite sure what it was but liked its scent. He could almost place it but not quite.

Hinata pulled out his PokeBall. He smiled widely. ‘Jump out, Oink!’ Hinata yelled, just like he had rehearsed all week. His fingers trembled and all he could think about was the smoothness of Oink’s PokeBall and that smell in the air but he refocused himself.

Oink jumped out enthusiastically of the red light and hopped around Hinata joyfully before settling. ‘Psywave, Oink!’ Hinata yelled. His voice came out a little shaky. Waves of pink and purple were emitted from Oink’s big pearl but they were controlled; just like they had practised. They swam about close to Oink, highlighting him and making him the centre of attention. ‘Endure!’ Hinata yelled. His voice almost cracked.

Oink began to focus. His eyes narrowed. He was outlined with a white-red light that blended with the psychic waves. ‘Now, Bounce!’ Hinata instructed and Oink jumped up impressively. He summersaulted through the air and showed off the fading lights before coming back down to Hinata’s side.

Everyone was left impressed. ‘Fabulous use of colour.’ Takeda yammered. ‘I give you nine points.’

‘Yeah, something like that. Eight points.’ Ukai agreed.

‘I would give you nine points but risk assessment is clearly lacking in this manoeuvre. What if your poor Spoink hit the ceiling during that “Bounce”? I give you eight points.’ Nurse Joy tutted.

Hinata smiled as he tried to add up those numbers in his head but he didn’t have to because Marian’s voice rang out through the hall. ‘An impressive jump has gotten Hinata Shouyou twenty-five points.’ Marian declared and Hinata and Oink went back stage again. ‘We now welcome Kageyama Tobio to the stage.’

Hinata and Kageyama passed in the hallway. They gave each other a brief and poorly executed high five as they passed. ‘Aren’t Hinata and Kageyama adorable in their matching clothes?’ Marian pointed out. Kageyama stepped up onto the platform. He ignored anyone who wasn’t necessary: so that was everyone. He held Staravia’s PokeBall in his hand. He took a deep breath, closed his eyes and counted to three.

One, two, three... ‘Staravia, set up!’ he called out and he opened his eyes. He threw out his PokeBall. It spun open and Staravia fluttered upwards with avian grace. ‘Double Team!’ Kageyama yelled out and Staravia began to move with such speed and dexterity that after images occurred. ‘Quick Attack!’ Kageyama instructed. Staravia and his afterimages obliged. Staravia swooped and manoeuvred all over the place.
‘What is going on?’ Marian asked and camera angles changed. From a bird’s eye view, an incredible image from silver aftermath and doubles formed. The image was straight from the map app on any PokeGear.

Kageyama smirked to himself. Staravia fluttered down to his head and sat down. It stared upwards and this hadn’t been scripted but Kageyama couldn’t afford to scold Staravia now. He was getting too heavy to be doing this. Kageyama remained rigid.

Ukai whistled. ‘I’m giving you nine points based solely on the fact that you’ve got a fifteen kilo bird on your head and you’re not even struggling.’

‘Again, Mr Ukai that is not how you appraise Contest performances... I give you nine points for technical excellence and knowledge of geography.’ Takeda said.

‘I shall give you nine points also for the aforementioned points.’ Nurse Joy said.

‘We have Kageyama Tobio sitting pretty on twenty-seven points!’ Marian sang out and the crowd erupted in applause over the performance. Kageyama couldn’t believe his ears. His eyes were wide and he smiled, innocently, adorably. Staravia cooed from above him. Kageyama had almost forgotten completely about Staravia’s uncomfortable position on him.

Kageyama recalled his Pokémon and wandered off stage dreamily. He and Hinata sat happily together: completely proud of one another. By twelve o’clock, the Performance round ended. ‘We’ll have a short break and then we’ll begin the Battle Stage. But before we take our break, we’ll reveal the top twenty scoring Coordinators who are eligible to move on.’ Marian said.

Every Coordinator backstage stared anxiously at the screen that would decide their fate. One by one, a name and face would appear on the screen.

Kageyama and Tsukishima were early to secure positions in the top twenty. But soon, the final face was revealed and it didn’t belong to Hinata, or Yamaguchi.

Hinata was visibly crushed. Kageyama attempted to console him but his hand was batted away by Hinata. ‘I’m sorry. You practiced so hard. But if had been the top thirty Coordinators...’ Kageyama’s voice trailed off. He felt like every attempt he was making at being soothing was just stabbing more daggers into Hinata’s emotions. ‘Good luck in the next round. I’ll cheer you on.’ Hinata said. ‘I’m gonna go get changed.’
Tsukishima smiled at Yamaguchi. ‘You did really well. You were the only person in the whole thing to get ten points too, remember.’ Tsukishima complimented.

‘Thanks. Knock ‘em dead for me.’ Yamaguchi said and he let Tsukishima ruffle up his neat hair.

‘Kageyama won’t know what hit him.’ Tsukishima said.

‘Just be careful. You may be in strife if he uses Piplup over Staravia.’ Yamaguchi reminded.

‘I know, I know.’ Tsukishima smirked. ‘I have a plan.’

‘I know, I know.’ Yamaguchi mimicked.

Hinata got changed. He was accompanied by Kageyama. They bought sandwiches at the food court. Hinata barely ate his. ‘I’ll defeat everyone for you. How does that sound? I’ll battle for the both of us.’ Kageyama offered. He had earlier made the incorrect assumption that Hinata wasn’t fazed by losses. As it turns out, he was a mixed bag. Sometimes he was able to hide it but other times his crushed emotions poured out.

Hinata grunted. ‘I’ll win. Promise.’ Kageyama said. There was an announcement over the booming speakers. The competitors were to return backstage within the next five minutes. ‘Promise?’ Hinata looked up from his food. A pout crossed his face. He knew he shouldn’t be bitter when his friend was about to have his five minutes of fame. He tried to smile. ‘I’ll cheer you on.’ Hinata said.

‘Thanks.’ Kageyama said and he got up and left.

Hinata found a seat shortly after. It was close to the back of the Hall. He didn’t think he had a good view. It was almost bird’s eye.

Marian welcomed everyone back. The crowd stirred and automated cameras lurked about; as did cameramen and women. The first ten matches were organised. It was Kageyama versus some girl with a Bidoof. It was Tsukishima versus some guy with a Shinx.

The matches were glamourous and Hinata was captured by them. The Pokémon had so much grace and style. The Trainers gave out commands diligently and intelligently. Hinata wished he had that much game sense. He cheered hard when his preferred Trainer won or made a move but he shouted crazily whenever Kageyama appeared.

The quick matches came to conclusions easily, the counter on the television screen helped too. At first, Hinata hadn’t been sure what it measured but it seemed that the more graceful or stylish an opponent’s strike was, the more the defender’s bar would deteriorate. Soon, they were at the final match of the day. After such a long morning, it was hard to believe the second round was going to be over so quickly. The two Coordinators were present on the screen and Hinata didn’t find them surprising at all but Marian acted like it was the most shocking thing in the world. The Coordinators who had made it this far were Tsukishima Kei and Kageyama Tobio.

‘The Jubilife Rookie Prize Ribbon is up for grabs. It’s almost in between their fingertips but only one person can claim it. Will it be Tsukishima Kei hailing from Oreburgh City or will it be Kageyama Tobio from our very own Jubilife CBD?’ Marian asked. ‘Only time will tell?’ She hyped the crowd up.
Kageyama trembled with anticipation. He scowled and Tsukishima shot him a dirty glare back. ‘A passionate rivalry has been born – what will come of it?’ Marian asked and the crowd stirred again with great, boisterous waves.

‘Heads or tails?’ Marian asked. A large coin materialised on the television screen.

‘Heads.’ Tsukishima quickly called out.

‘Tails.’ Kageyama shouted.

‘Alrighty then.’ Marian said and the coin behind her flipped. She glanced behind her and declared: ‘Tails!’

PokeBalls were drawn and Kageyama blocked everyone out. He and Tsukishima were the only ones here. He chose Piplup’s PokeBall. ‘Set up, Piplup!’ Kageyama called and he tossed out his PokeBall.

‘Lunatone!’ Tsukishima yelled out and he tossed out his PokeBall.

Piplup strutted out of the red light and Lunatone hovered amid a mist of grey clouds. ‘This is sure to be an interesting and heart-throbbing match!’ Marian said and the counter began to tick.

Kageyama had the type advantage but he knew that Tsukishima had some sort of backup plan; a trump card. ‘Bubble!’ he yelled and he thrust out his hand competitively. Piplup chirruped and spun around on the tip of its yellowy talons. A swirl of bubbles spouted out of Piplup’s beak. The bubbles swirled gracefully around and swept around Lunatone who blinked harshly. It made crooning noises.

Tsukishima called out: ‘Moonblast!’ Mouths slackened. It was powerful move and beautiful move. Lunatone somersaulted through the air in a mystique of pastel pink. It’s rocky skin went from being bronze to a light silver. Its eyes reddened and it blasted off a beam of moonlight.

Piplup stared. Her eyes were wide and she was terrified. She allowed herself to be engulfed by the pink light. She toddled around, scared, and almost danced to the crooning wails that were emitted from the opponent Lunatone.

Kageyama didn’t even have to glance at the screen to know that he and Piplup had been one-shotted. Tsukishima grinned and his Lunatone hovered playfully around him. Piplup toppled over and Kageyama grimaced. After a sweep of immense silence, a grand roar took over the crowd. They cheered and thundered like a great storm.

Kageyama brought himself to look at the screen though. His and Piplup’s faces were blocked out by red crosses. Their once yellow bar was fully black and it was disheartening to see but across from their images were ones of Tsukishima and Lunatone. Their yellow health bar had a decent amount taken out of it from the one attack they had landed. Seeing that bit of the health bar blacked out made Kageyama feel a bit better. He returned Piplup and whispered praise towards her PokeBall.

‘Go, Kags!’ Hinata shouted from where he stood. He had decided that the match deserved a standing ovation. He was animated and into it. He saw Yamaguchi a few rows ahead and he was cheering for his Tsushima joyfully as well. ‘Go, Tsuki!’ he screamed and grinned.

Marian organised the boys and Tsukishima basked in the glory. The applause soon settled and people sat down again. Marian held up the coveted, small token of victory. It was a key to a grander fate yet all it looked like was a colourful ribbon. It had a gold plated breast over its knot.
and it was coloured cherry red with thin, moss green stripes highlighting the rich colour. ‘I present this Ribbon to Tsukishima Kei; this year’s winner of the annual Jubilife Rookie Prize!’ Marian said and she faced Tsukishima.

He stood stiff, red in the cheeks, and smiled earnestly. Marian pinned the Ribbon onto his jacket and smiled. ‘Give it up for Tsukishima Kei!’ she yelled and everyone erupted in a grand applause. Marian clapped with them and smiled sweetly. Tsukishima waved at the crowd and Lunatone swung itself around dramatically.

Marian settled the crowd soon after. ‘But remember, Tsukishima Kei isn’t the only winner here. Just like every year, we have our runner-ups and other potential stars. During the break, the judges and I made our guesses as to here will be ones to watch. These are our “Potential Tops”.’ Marian said and on the screen, fifteen faces appeared. Hinata was disappointed to see that Yamaguchi didn’t appear either. ‘All these Trainers will receive some personalised advice from our judge Ukai, as well as some congratulatory prize money.

A twinkle appeared in Marian’s ocean blue eyes. She smiled. ‘And here are our Highly Commended Coordinators!’ she said. Two of the first faces to appear on the screen belonged to Hinata and Kageyama. Hinata’s eyes widened. Perhaps he wasn’t a failure after all.

Kageyama’s eyes lit up when he saw himself on that screen. He and Hinata were two of eight Trainers to appear as Highly Commended Coordinators. A lot of self-faith had been restored in that moment. Another Highly Commended Coordinator was Yamaguchi.

Marian smiled widely. ‘These Trainers will receive some complimentary gifts and prize money. They will also have the opportunity to have a consultation with our other judge, Takeda! And if you were one of the few who didn’t make it, we do have a small entry prize for you to take and please remember that your all still rookies and your potential can’t be measured by two minutes of screen time!’ Marian said.

There wasn’t much more to the show after Marian’s little spiel. People soon went to collect their prizes and to talk amongst each other. Slowly, the hall was emptied out and the clean-up crew arrived.

Yamaguchi quickly caught up with Tsukishima as soon as Takeda dismissed him. The appraisals were taking place in the cleared out dressing room. Tsukishima was waiting in the Hall’s foyer. As winner of the Ribbon, Tsukishima was barred from getting advice.

‘You did it, Tsuki! I was cheering the whole time for you.’ Yamaguchi said and Tsukishima said.

‘Thanks, that means a lot. I feel like I drew the short straw. I got a Ribbon and you got,’ Tsukishima was handed the little gift bag Yamaguchi had earned. ‘And you got PokeBalls, some food, a potion or two. A bit of money as well.’

‘I guess they have to make it fair somehow.’ Yamaguchi said.

‘Have you seen Takeda yet? Remember the case study we did on him?’ Tsukishima asked.

Yamaguchi nodded. ‘He’s a lot different in person. The case study made him seem like this really serious person that you’ve gotta be really reverent around.’ Yamaguchi said.

‘So what’s he really like? But more importantly, what did he have to say?’ Tsukishima inquired.

‘He was nervous and Nae bit him.’
Tsukishima giggled. ‘Naughty thing.’ he commented.

‘I know, I still can’t believe it but that’s what makes Takeda think that Nae has a lot of raw power I’ll be able to channel into physical attacks and I should try and take advantage of that. So yeah, his advice was mostly work on techniques to take advantage of Nae’s raw power.’ Yamaguchi surmised.

‘What did he say about Sol?’ Tsukishima asked.

‘Again, it was mostly about raw power although he thinks Sol might have good defence and I should train it up.’ Yamaguchi said. Tsukishima nodded. That sounded fair.

Hinata sat down in front of Takeda. Hinata had no clue who he was or why he was respected so much but he still gave him respect. Takeda was a tiny man and wore formal clothes. Hinata felt underdressed in his casual clothes. Takeda had a shy smile. ‘Hinata Shouyou, correct?’ he asked.

‘C-Correct!’ Hinata almost shouted.

Takeda smiled. ‘I’m Ittetsu Takeda but everyone just calls me Takeda. You were the entrant with the Spoink with the impressive Bounce?’ Takeda asked.

‘Yes.’ Hinata said. ‘My parents couldn’t afford to donate to Professor Rowan so they bred me a Spoink. I call him Oink.’

‘That’s fine. I presume that’s why Oink knows Bounce.’ Takeda presumed. Hinata nodded.

Takeda looked over his notes. He liked to refresh himself on things. He had made notes during the Performance Stage. ‘Jump and speed are clearly Oink’s strong points. Oink’s species in general are very good at those things naturally but Oink as an individual seems to have better stats than other compared Spoink. I suggest to train Oink’s speed. If you hone it down, you’ll be able to use that jump better. I think you two will work well together. You seem quite free spirited whereas Oink is more serious. I think that’ll work well and aid your friendships.’

Hinata nodded. ‘Yes.’ he said.

‘Do you have any other Pokémon?’ Takeda asked.

‘No, sir.’ Hinata replied.

‘Well I can’t help you much more than besides what I know about Oink. Good luck in the future, have a good day.’ Takeda said.

‘Thank you, sir.’ Hinata said and he left.

Kageyama walked in next and handed Hinata his goodie-bag back. Hinata also took Kageyama’s goodie-bag. Kageyama sat down in front of Takeda nervously. The Pokémon Connoisseur also looked quite nervous.

Takeda smiled. ‘Kageyama Tobio, you entered with the impressive Quick Attack-Double Team combination to create a Sinnoh-like pattern. I remember that distinctly. Is it just you, Piplup and Staravia?’ Takeda asked.

‘Yes.’ Kageyama confirmed.

Takeda flipped through his notes. ‘Piplup and Staravia are both very speedy Pokémon. That
should be taken full advantage of. I think that Piplup’s special attack is also something that ought to be honed. Its control of moves such as Bubble already show advanced finesse despite not being overly trained. I believe that its perfectionist trait is inherent to its species though and not something credit to it as an individual, but I could be wrong but that is something to keep in mind. That perfectionism is a double edged sword. Kageyama, please keep the following in mind: only do onto others as you would do to yourself.’

Takeda paused. ‘Staravia on the other hand shows that it is still very untrained and disobedient. It wasn’t supposed to have sat on your head at the end, correct?’ Takeda asked.

‘Correct.’ Kageyama admitted.

‘Staravia belong to collectivist social communities so I find it unusual that it is rebellious, as well as quiet. Staravia and its evolutionary line are not known for being quiet.’

‘My Staravia is... weird to say the least.’ Kageyama said and he remembered its fascination with the fan.

Takeda giggled. ‘I expected as much. Your Staravia’s personality flaws will definitely hinder how you train it. Staravia is honestly a mixed bag but its species is credited to having good attack and speed. What you do with that will be up to you. I suggest that you use treats as a means of training it. It might be more obedient if it thinks it can receive an immediate personal gain.’ Takeda suggested.

‘I try to be as affectionate as possible with my Pokémon. Piplup tends to get scared by my smile though. Staravia just glares back...’

Takeda dismissed Kageyama shortly after. Hinata ambushed Kageyama in the hallway and they made plans for the rest of their day. They decided they would leave for Oreburgh tomorrow and spend the rest of the afternoon having a lazy day at Kageyama’s family apartment.

‘I’m really proud of us.’ Hinata grinned and he patted Kageyama on the shoulder.

‘I am too. We did well. One of us will get the Ribbon next.’ Kageyama agreed.

‘Definitely.’

Hinata began to dig through his goodie bag, just as a thing to do. He found some blue film and stickers. ‘What’re these? I forgot to ask you earlier but didn’t Tsukishima and Yamaguchi use these?’ he asked and Kageyama leaned over so he could look at what Hinata was referring to.

‘Those are Ball Capsules and Seals. They affect how your Pokémon leaves its Ball. You know how usually it’s a red light? It’s possible to alter how it happens now. It’s recommended that you use Seals in Contests, actually.’ Kageyama said.

‘Wow! That’s so cool. I’m gonna use all of them.’ Hinata said.

‘You can put eight on a PokeBall at the most and that’d be too much.’ Kageyama roused.
For the first time this week, Kageyama and both his parents were in the apartment at the same
time. The three of them and Hinata sat at the dinner table. Kageyama had made them curry.
Wonders didn’t seem to cease when Kageyama was in the kitchen, honestly. Hinata remembered
what Kageyama had told him about his ability to cook.

It was because he had grown up raising himself. They didn’t have traditional family meals so if
Kageyama didn’t want to go hungry; he only ever had two options: learn to cook or just survive off
of wheat-bricks and squeezy yogurt. Kageyama also thought he could cook well because he thrived
better with hands-on learning and that’s why he sucked at general schooling. Hinata could relate.
He was floating in that boat too. He had graduated with terrible grades.

Hinata pecked at the curry. It tasted good. He wouldn’t say it was better than the one his dad
made but it was still pretty good. Hinata tried hard to ignore the tense atmosphere at the table.

The family dinners that Hinata was used were completely different to this. Rice went all over the
place and everyone was boisterous. Everyone made up stories about how their day had been with
ridiculous and exaggerated details. They would laugh and joke and eat and had a good time but this
was completely different. No one spoke. They just ate in uncomfortable, suffocating silence.
Hinata didn’t like it. He hated the fact that Kageyama’s parents hadn’t once asked him about how
the Contest had gone.

Mrs Kageyama sat across from Hinata. Her avian eyes pecked apart Hinata. He knew that she
could sense his discomfort. She put down her knife and fork. She brushed her lips with a napkin.
There were scraps of curry sauce still on her plate and stray grains of rice. ‘I’m finished.’ she
announced. If Hinata said that and he still had stuff on that plate, even small stuff like that, he
would have been yelled at for wasting food and given a piece of bread to wipe up with.

Things really were different in the Kageyama household. Hinata wondered if all city-dwellers ate
like this. He wouldn’t be able tolerate if the answer was “yes”.

Mr Kageyama rejected his plate next and Hinata was appalled by the state it was in. Half of his
food was still on it. ‘Thank you, Tobio.’ he said.

‘You’re welcome.’

The adults left the table with their dishes. The leftovers were put in a container and left in the
fridge. ‘I’ve got to go.’ Mr Kageyama said to the room. He put on his formal jacket and took his
briefcase then out the door he went.

Mrs Kageyama stared at the message on the door. ‘Don’t stay up too late.’ she said and then she
left the room too. The boys heard the master bedroom door lock.

Kageyama glanced at Hinata curtly. He was embarrassed by his family. They were a disjointed
family. They were cold and distant towards one another. Their only communications really came through on the whiteboard on the door. ‘I wrote something on the fridge.’ Hinata said.

‘I know. Thank you.’ Kageyama said. ‘It was kind of you.’

‘I appreciated the generosity you and your family extended to me. I just had to let you guys know.’ Hinata explained himself.

Hinata was surprised by the affection Kageyama showed him. Kageyama ruffled the top Hinata’s head; he ran his fingers through wayward, orange hair. ‘Thanks.’ Kageyama mumbled. Kageyama’s cheeks reddened and as did Hinata’s. The two were ignorant to the other’s embarrassment over the act as they both just stared at the table.

They washed up together and set things to dry on the rack. ‘Do you want to watch anything or are you right to go to bed?’ Kageyama asked.

‘I’m right to go to bed.’ Hinata replied. ‘I’ve had a good day. I would never have known that Contests were so fun. And in your battle with Tsukishima, I couldn’t sit still. Piplup was like \textit{fwaa} and you were like \textit{gyaa}! It was exciting.’ Hinata beamed.

‘I was embarrassingly proud during your performance.’ Kageyama admitted and Hinata smiled.

Kageyama unfolded the bed and Hinata bid him goodnight. They made the decision to get up early the next morning so they could quietly sneak out of Jubilife but Kageyama had other plans.

He and Hinata got up before dawn. Hinata opened the fridge; his “thank you” message was still on the door. ‘Ah, someone ate the last of the strawberry yogurt. Guess I’ll have to settle for vanilla, huh?’ Hinata said and Kageyama closed the door on him. He was fully dressed and ready to go. He even had his bag slung across him.

‘I was thinking I’d treat you to a coffee shop breakfast.’ he said. He avoided looking at Hinata directly.

‘Oh, uh, okay then.’ Hinata said. ‘Lemme get ready.’

Hinata quickly got out of his pyjamas and made sure he had everything. His backpack bulged from everything he had packed into it. ‘Got everything because we’re not coming back if you have.’ Kageyama said.

‘Nah, I’ve got everything.’ Hinata confidently replied.

Kageyama locked the door behind and pocketed his house key. He led Hinata down busy, grey streets and into Stantler-Bucks. ‘I heard these places’re really good.’ Hinata said as he sat down. The coffee shop was elegant and smelt of coffee and vanilla. There were baked treats behind heated glasses and bored baristas took orders. They wore green aprons with the coffee shop’s logo on it.

The two Trainers ordered croissants and milky drinks. It was expensive but because of a combination of prize money and having had a week of saving, they didn’t particularly mind. They enjoyed their drinks and food but mostly the ambience of what was around. Despite belonging to a chain franchise, the Stantler-Bucks felt individual and unique. ‘I feel like a hipster.’ Kageyama said and he then got up to dispose their used paper cutlery. Hinata chuckled and agreed. This was his first time at a Stantler-Bucks coffee shop. He honestly thought they only existed in TV-land.

They left shortly after and caught a tram to the city limits. Hinata was glad to see the city roll
away into rocky, grass fields. They had been packed into this city all week like cards in a playing deck. Hinata was glad to see the fresh sights of nature again. ‘Ready to leave?’ Kageyama said and Hinata dashed ahead; into the wilderness.

Hinata dashed ahead and Kageyama caught up. In bursts of sprints, they competed against each other. They completely ignored the gorgeous scenery. They followed a tar road into a straightforward, open field. Huge trees reached out to each other over long grass and rocks. Steps had been hacked into the mountainside beginning to furl out before the boys under a streaky blue sky speckled with fluffy clouds.

They breathed in the clean air. It tasted refreshing and it was beautiful change to the polluted air they had grown used to in the confines of Jubilife City. It was hard to believe how close the city was to this untouched little piece of nature. It was also hard to believe how close it was to another city and a mountain. The rough terrain seemed to loom closer with every step though.

The boys hiked up hand carved steps in the ledges and passed a massive pond. It felt like they had been running and walking for a few hours so Kageyama checked the time when he felt his stomach rattle with ravenous roars. ‘Wow, it’s almost midday.’ he said and Hinata slowed.

‘Ah, no wonder I’m so hungry.’ he said.

‘Guess we should have lunch then.’ Kageyama said.

The boys sat down close to the river and listened to it simper. They sat in the shade of an oak tree that rustled with a quiet music. It was peaceful here. The route was eerie silent compared to the constant bark and howl of the city. Hinata was much more relaxed and comfortable here; Kageyama could see it in how loose he was.

Hinata spread out happily. ‘Oink,’ he sighed and his Spoink came out of its PokeBall. It hopped cautiously around. Kageyama followed suit and brought his Pokémon out of their PokeBalls. He rationed out Pokémon food between all of the Pokémon present. He and Hinata ate unhealthy snack foods though.

Like usual, Kageyama’s Staravia had found something to stare intently at. Nobody particularly worried about it. The avian always seemed to be in a world of his own. ‘When do you think we’ll be in Oreburgh by?’ Hinata wondered.

‘Depends on how much longer we stay here. But either way, I think we’ll end up at Oreburgh by tomorrow. Oreburgh Gate wouldn’t make a good camping spot and it’s probably unsafe going through it at night as well.’ Kageyama said and Hinata nodded.

‘I like it here. With you and Oink.’ Hinata grinned.

‘Mm.’ Kageyama agreed.

Tranquillity swamped them. It truly was a different change of pace after a week of battling, training and the general chaos of city life. ‘I’ll have to return the favour one day.’ Hinata said. Kageyama stared at him. The topic of conversation had changed so suddenly that he didn’t know what Hinata was musing about. ‘What?’ Kageyama prompted him.

‘I mean, you’ll have to stay at my place now. I think Natsu’d love you. You’d be like one of her television characters brought to life.’ Hinata joked and Kageyama’s face reddened.

It felt like there weren’t any secrets between them anymore. They didn’t feel like strangers, acquaintances or rivals anymore. They felt like best friends now.
‘Staravia!’ cawed the usually silent avian. Kageyama craned his head to stare at his Pokémon. His body felt heavy and he was suddenly irritable; like he lacked sleep. He glared at Staravia who blankly stared back in return. ‘What do you want? Are you hungry?’ he growled.

‘Jeez, Kageyama, don’t be so mean.’ Hinata said; his voice was singsong.

Staravia finally averted its stare and focused on something else. Kageyama followed its stare and saw what it was so fixed on. It was staring a little white Pokémon with a green horn and it was sitting idly on a tree stump, swinging its fluffy feet. ‘It’s a Ralts?’ Kageyama said.

‘Wow? Really?’ Hinata said. He got up and dived next to where Kageyama was lying.

The Ralts looked incredibly happy. It was licking its mouth and smiling. From under its hood, its green eyes glittered. Even from far away, its bliss was apparent. ‘I wonder what it’s doing.’ Hinata mused.

‘Maybe it’s just enjoying the weather.’ Kageyama suggested.

‘That makes sense.’ Hinata said.

Kageyama got up and brushed strands of grass off himself. ‘Why don’t we get moving again?’ he asked.

‘Okay.’ Hinata shrugged. Kageyama returned his Pokémon but Hinata was content with letting Oink travel alongside them.

They made sure they didn’t leave any rubbish behind and then began to walk away from the pond. The two made light conversation whilst listening to the serenity of their surroundings. But they detected, Kageyama mostly, the sound of a small creature crunching through long grass.

Hinata hazarded a glance behind them. It was just like he suspected. ‘I think we’ve made a new friend.’ he joked.

‘Maybe it’s feeding off us.’ Kageyama said and he pulled out his PokeDex. He imputed Ralts’ name and the automated voice prattled off probably useful information:

‘It uses the horns on its head to sense human emotions. It is said to appear in front of cheerful people. If its horns capture the warm feelings of people or Pokémon, its body warms up slightly.’

Kageyama glanced at Hinata. It seemed likelier that it was stalking him as Hinata was a cheerful person. ‘Gardevoir is a very popular Pokémon in Hoen; especially in Contests actually. That’s what Dad told me but he was never able to catch a Ralts. Wonder if he’d be jealous if I caught one when he couldn’t.’ Hinata mused.

Hinata turned around and psyched himself up. ‘I’m gonna catch it!’ he decided.

‘Alright then.’ Kageyama allowed it.

Oink snorted and bounced more aggressively. ‘Fight me, Ralts!’ Hinata announced. Ralts call echoed through. It sounded like it was ready to take the challenge. ‘Oink! Psywave!’ Oink narrowed its eyes and released pink and purple waves from the pearl atop its head. Ralts called again then disappeared right before their eyes in a blink. It reappeared behind Oink and started to release a psychic wave after psychic wave.

Oink stiffened and it grew dizzy. Ralts relentlessly attacked until Oink eventually cried out sadly
and wobbled around. ‘Oh dear...’ Hinata worried. ‘Come back, Oink!’ He thrust out his PokeBall. Oink disappeared in a crimson light.

Ralts spun around and looked happy. It teleported again and onto Kageyama’s shoulders. He grew irritated. Hinata’s mouth dropped. ‘I think it likes you.’ Hinata said and he stowed Oink’s PokeBall. They weren’t going to be battling for a while.

Ralts nuzzled up against Kageyama’s face. ‘Would you like to join my team?’ he asked it. Ralts placed its limbs around his neck and continued to rub its face against Kageyama.

‘I’d take that as a “yes”.’ Hinata mock translated.

Kageyama took out a PokeBall. He wondered if he would have to battle it. ‘Would you like to do the honours?’ he asked the Ralts. It leaped onto Kageyama’s hand. It was so small and he was so big. Ralts bopped on the button and was taken by the red light. It didn’t even take a second for the PokeBall to settle.

‘Lucky.’ whined Hinata, he pouted. He was really starting to want a second Pokémon now that Kageyama had three to choose between.

‘I suppose. I guess I’m not picky like you. I mean, what kind of Pokémon goes “fwaa”?’ Kageyama asked.

‘The coolest ones like Oink.’ Hinata retorted.

‘I’ve never once heard Oink go “fwaa”.’ Kageyama snapped.

‘Yeah but you don’t know Oink like I do.’ Hinata pouted.

Kageyama huffed and decided to let Ralts out of its Ball. ‘Are you gonna do the kyaa thing again?’ Hinata asked and Kageyama got out his PokeDex.

‘What does that even mean, idiot?’ Kageyama asked, rhetorically. He had his PokeDex scan his Ralts who happily twirled about.

The PokeDex came up with Ralts’ information quite quickly. ‘This Ralts is male and knows Teleport, Confusion and Growl. Roughly level nine. Oink is roughly level fourteen. But Ralts seems to fight dirty. He also has the Synchronise Ability which could be very useful.’ Kageyama said. He hoped that wouldn’t be a problem in the future.

‘Looks like my Dad’s gonna be jealous of you.’ Hinata mused. He didn’t particularly care for the stats figures behind Pokémon.

‘I think I would like to evolve my Ralts into a Gallade actually.’ Kageyama mused. ‘But where will I get a Dawn Stone?’
Ready to Rock and Roll

The Trainers strolled leisurely for the rest of the day. There wasn’t a need to rush as they had tomorrow and the rest of their lives. It was immense to think about how hard it would be to permanently screw up their amazing arrangement. After all, they wait fifteen years and then they’re able to be a Trainer until their deathbeds. Now that they had finally embarked on their life transformative journey, they understood that immensity.

They hiked up another set of steps and they stepped onto a platform. There would have been a mile between them and the opening to the Oreburgh Gate. There was a huge, carved cave and then it flattened out on top only to stretch into the larger mountain, Mount Coronet.

‘Guess we oughta find a spot to camp.’ Hinata said. He glanced around. The Gate entrance seemed to be a hotspot for rookie Trainers. All of which had the same idea as them.

‘Yeah.’ Kageyama agreed.

Hinata looked about for a private spot for them to share. There weren’t many of them around. Kageyama found them a spot though. He got his sleeping bag out of his bigger bag and unrolled it. Hinata followed suit.

It was beginning to get dark. Some people lit campfires and were happy to share it around. Hinata made friends with the guys that had marshmallows. He also brought Kageyama along with him.

A few girls sat around and sang songs. They sounded warby but didn’t care. Hinata sang along with them, even though he didn’t know the lyrics. Kageyama watched as Hinata embarrassed himself. Kageyama enjoyed himself though. It was the simple pleasures in life that meant most. This was the stuff of memory making. He looked up and watched stars twinkle. His mouth became ajar and his eyes widened. Stars were prettier in real life than they were on television. Hinata chuckled next to him. ‘You’re such a city hermit.’ he joked. Kageyama playfully shoved Hinata. He refused to stop cackling.

He and Hinata didn’t sleep until three in the morning. They kept talking and singing and listening to the radio, with the other Trainers. They made a few friends and took down a few names. Most of the Trainers going through had championship goals. Most of them weren’t interested in Contests but they were all happy to exchange information regardless. They had been Jubilife all week just to watch the Rookie Prize, mostly so they could brag to their grandchildren that they attended the first Contest of their generation.

In the distance, Kricketot crooned and the rhythm of the night was prevalent. The soothing sounds of nature made a beautiful lullaby after a long day of travel. In the morning, the fires were still tended by those silly enough to pull all-nighters. A few people even organised some hot breakfasts. Kageyama was one of those people.

‘Here you go, Hinata.’ Kageyama said as he served up some tofu he had cooked over a fire.

‘Thanks.’ Hinata yawned. He accepted the food. It almost burnt his fingers though. Kageyama then went onto serve others. He couldn’t believe that some of the other Trainers around had decided to bring extra food by the plenty for the exact scenario of meeting strangers in the wilderness.

Hinata ate quickly and wanted to leave quickly. But Kageyama refused to leave the makeshift camp until everyone was up and fed. Hinata decided he would see if anyone wanted to battle. He
found a few challengers who were also itching to have a battle and to train their Pokémon a bit more.

Hinata and Oink sparred in three battles. Hinata kept Takeda’s advice close to heart during the matches. He still didn’t know who Takeda was or why his opinion was respected so much but he seemed like a level-headed adult so Hinata valued it.

He and Oink won two of the matches but one Trainer had a Luxio which knew “Bite” so that had been the loss. But Hinata didn’t mind as Oink had put up a good fight against that wannabe Simba.

Hinata let Oink rest at his feet. He sat on his slinky, yellow sleeping bag. Hinata remembered Kageyama’s little PokeDex trick. He was curious to see if he could get his PokeDex to do the “kyaa” thing. He played through its tutorials and was eventually able to get the live feed of Oink to come up. It was surprisingly simple tool to use and felt more functional than a PokeGear. ‘Huh, so Oink, you know Bounce, Endure, Psywave, and now even Psybeam! That’s awesome. And you have the “Thick Fat” ability. I wonder what that means…’

Hinata continued to fiddle with the PokeDex so he could find out what the “Thick Fat” ability meant. Eventually, the automated voice informed him that Thick Fat ups a Pokémon’s resistance to ice and fire type moves. Hinata was impressed by that. That could be a very useful ability as there was an ice type Gym Leader in the north and Hinata was willing to guess that a lot of Coordinators would use fire types.

It was mid-morning when Kageyama had finished volunteering himself out as a chef. He and Hinata packed up their square of bedding. ‘I saw you battling. Oink’s really got the hang of battling. I bet if Oink and Ralts battled again, Oink would win.’ Kageyama said and Hinata smiled.

‘You really think so?’

‘Maybe. I mean my strategy could top your raw power any day.’ Kageyama said.

“We should test that theory later.” Hinata suggested.

‘Definitely. I need to get Ralts up to speed with the rest of the team. After all, he’s still a little rough around the edges. He got out of his PokeBall sometime during the night just to annoy me.’ Kageyama groaned.

The two chatted happily as they packed up. The two Trainers then decided it was time to begin their crawl through the dark, shadowy cave. Water dripped from above them. Stalactites and stalagmites sprang from where they stood. Echoic hoots were heard and Zubat fluttered about. Packs of Geodude hopped along. Hinata watched their movements carefully but still, nothing stood out to him. He sighed. He really wanted to catch a Pokémon but he really was too picky.

The path between Route 203 and Oreburgh was relatively straight but a road did diverge into a mound of crushed boulders. It seemed there had been an accident recently as it was fenced off by bright yellow ribbons and a few adults in coveralls hung about.

Soon, light began pull through the darkness and the sound of city buzzed. ‘We’re almost there.’ Hinata gleefully pointed out.

‘You’ll get that badge in no time at all.’ Kageyama said.

‘Hope so.’ Hinata said and without even so much as a glance, the two burst into a sudden sprint. The opportunity to compete was too strong within them.
The pair dashed out of the cave and into Oreburgh City. It was a dusty-looking place. Lots of buildings were coated in ruddy dust and plenty of workers were about. They were almost definitely miners judging from their bright orange jackets and general grubbiness.

Hinata saw the Gym. It had ornamental statues outside it and was a generally grand-looking place. He slowed down in front of it and was consumed by awe. The building had a brown roof and huge windows. Hinata grinned as he let its image sink into his brain and find a permanent home.

Kageyama grinned heinously. He could understand what Hinata was thinking. The other day when they had first arrived at the Contest Hall, he had been very much the same: almost too absorbed in the building than what was actually going on around him.

Hinata sighed and became depressed. ‘We better swing by the PokeCentre first. Oink’s probably really tired because of the battles we had this morning.’ Hinata said. He kicked up a bit of dust and trotted off. Kageyama followed along behind him. He offered to buy him some milk.

There wasn’t a line for Nurse Joy at all here. She quickly served him and told him he should have something to eat first before he tries and wins against Roark. She also worried that one Pokémon mightn’t be enough to best Roark but Hinata was very confident in Oink’s abilities so he shrugged off her advice. She laughed and said she got that a lot and then told him he ought to use a lot of items then.

Nurse Joy happily yarned to the two boys. They were the only ones at the PokeCentre currently. She said she enjoyed the annual burst of customers she got at the beginning of each year. She mentioned that so far, Roark had passed ten Trainers out of thirty. Soon, she returned Oink’s PokeBall to Hinata. He grinned and immediately became raring to go. She wished him good luck. In an instant, Hinata was out the door with Kageyama chasing after him.

Hinata didn’t waste any time in hightailing it to the Gym. He burst through the automatic door. He forced them open as they were too slow for him. Kageyama followed through after Hinata.

There was a fame foyer which was stainless steel with framed photographs of fossils on the silvery walls. There was a doorframe that led out of a larger room lined with shielded-off grandstands. The court was uneven and rocky. A few trainers lounged in the grandstands.

Hinata raced inside and these other Trainers barely batted an eye. ‘I am here to challenge Roark!’ Hinata howled. He then grabbed his stomach, his face wen green and he almost collapsed to his knees. ‘Not again.’ Kageyama fussed. He watched as his best friend wretched from stomach pains. ‘Where’s the closest toilet?’ Hinata asked.

Kageyama sighed. He rummaged through his bag and got out his Med Kit. This shouldn’t be his job yet it was. He forced some pain killers down Hinata’s throat. His eyes watered and he exaggerated the distaste he had the pills. ‘He’ll be alright. Give him some time.’ Kageyama said.

A man in a stylised miner’s uniform, glasses and a garish, orange helmet appeared. The Trainers in the grandstand began to stir. ‘More challengers, huh?’ he assumed.

‘Just me.’ Hinata jumped up. He was right as rain.

Good to go?” Kageyama asked and Hinata nodded. Kageyama threw back his thumb, over his shoulder, and pointed to the grandstands. ‘I’ll be cheering.’ Kageyama said.

‘Ossu.’ Hinata smiled.

Kageyama sat down in the grandstand. Roark took his place at the top of the court. A referee was
called out and he donned his official Gym jumper. ‘Challenger’s name and number of Pokémon?’ the referee barked.


‘One Pokémon?’ Roark asked.

‘I’m very proud of my Oink!’ Hinata yelled.

‘Alrighty then.’ Roark said.

The referee scowled. ‘The official rules for the match will be as follows. One Pokémon per Trainer, a ten minute time limit will be in place and after ten minutes, the win will automatically default to Gym Leader Roark’s win. Roark will also be the first to make a move.’ the referee barked.

Roark smiled and Hinata began to bounce. ‘Match... begin!’ the referee shouted. His voice echoed through the room with reverence. Roark plucked a PokeBall from his belt. ‘Go, Cranidos!’ he yelled and threw out his PokeBall. Hinata took Spoink’s PokeBall from his belt. ‘Jump out, Oink!’ Hinata yelled. He tossed out the PokeBall.

Cranidos broke the mould. The two Pokémon stared each other down. ‘Headbutt!’ Roark instructed. His Pokémon charged with its head lowered. ‘Psybeam!’ Hinata yelled. Oink released a mystical beam of layered circles from his pearl. Pink’s attack made contact first and barely worried Cranidos who soon butted Oink away with a furious power.

Oink was knocked back about quickly got up after hearing Hinata’s heartfelt enthusiasms and pride. ‘It’s okay, Oink! Let’s keep at it!’ Hinata encouraged.

‘Metal Claw!’ Roark yelled and Cranidos charged. It swiped out at Oink with hardened talons that were like steel. Spoink was knocked onto the ground again, Cranidos held Oink down. Oink squirmed and struggled with horrid squeals.

Hinata could recognise that he and Oink were in critical condition. They were in pure strife. ‘Endure!’ Hinata yelled out, frantic. Oink squeezed its eyes close and exuded a white light that coated him like a film. ‘Rock Smash.’ Roark instructed. Cranidos smashed its fist into Oink. There was no effect whatsoever. Oink struggled out of Cranidos’ clutches. Hinata snapped: ‘Endure!’

The white light over Oink cracked but still continued to protect Oink. Kageyama worried. This was a temporary solution to a fierce battle. It wasn’t going to be able to last for much longer. Kageyama hoped that Hinata had an idea.

‘Rock Smash.’ Roark growled. Cranidos smashed into Oink who took a little bit of damage. The effects of Oink’s “Endure” were still going strong despite it being use for a second round. ‘Potion!’ Hinata yelped. Oink bounced towards him and Hinata fumbled with a potion. He sprayed it over Oink’s body. His injuries healed. He became happier and healthier.

Roark crossed his arms. ‘Flamethrower!’ he yelled and his Cranidos opened its mouth. Its sharp teeth glinted and a burst of fire came out of its mouth. Oink too the attack head on and that depleted his health minimally. Hinata wondered if it was because of Oink’s Thick Fat ability.

Oink’s breathing was sparse. Hinata couldn’t help but worry for his partner. Kageyama worried for Hinata too. He had really thought that Oink and Hinata were able to handle this. ‘Psybeam!’ Hinata cried out. He knew he was going to lose and he didn’t know how to change that.
‘Crunch!’ Roark smirked.

Cranidos avoided Oink’s attack with a swift dodge. It got into Oink’s close quarters and bit hard onto Oink’s tail. Oink squealed and tumbled over into the dust. Oink twitched and tried to get up. He pawed at the dirt and grunted but it was useless. ‘I declare this match over. Spoink is unable to battle. Gym Leader Roark is the winner.’ the referee yelled. Hinata returned Oink with tears in his eyes. His stomach churned. He felt awful. Worse than awful. He felt like a downright terrible human being.

Roark returned Cranidos. He congratulated Hinata. ‘Your Spoink made for an interesting battle. I think you may have overestimated yourself. Gym Leaders aren’t to be taken lightly. We’re bred tough. I think some training in the mines or on Route 207 would help but keep up the good work, sport. I think you’ve got the potential. Don’t get disheartened.’ Roark said.

‘Uh-huh.’ Hinata nodded. He accepted the advice graciously.

Kageyama awkwardly patted Hinata’s shoulder. He didn’t reject the affection. ‘I’m sorry.’ he said.

‘Don’t be. It’s my fault for overestimating myself.’ Hinata said but Kageyama felt bad. For the past couple of days, he had been pumping Hinata’s head full of illusions about his strength. ‘Let’s go to the PokeCentre.’ Kageyama said and Hinata nodded. ‘And then, we’ll have a lazy day and then we’ll go out and train. We should probably find you a grass or water type.’

Hinata perked up. ‘You’re so smart, Kageyama.’ Hinata complimented. The two strolled out of the Gym and into the nearby PokeCentre.
This is easily the most anticipated chapter so far. I hope it lives up to your expectations.

Hinata gave his Spoink over to Nurse Joy as soon as they got to the PokeCentre. Kageyama meanwhile organised a room for them to hang out in and even bought them some lunch. Whilst waiting for Oink to heal, they made touristy plans. They made plans to visit the Fossil Museum and to take a spin on the Mine tour. One of Nurse Joy’s staff-member Chansey even supplied them a few pamphlets.

They rationed out their money and arranged plans. When Oink was returned to Hinata, they set off. They decided to go to the Museum first as they assumed the Mine tour would get them dirty.

The Museum was huge. It had gorgeous views of the sprawling hills and mountains that Oreburgh was buried into. It was cool inside the Museum and there were plenty of smartly dressed people hurrying around their daily lives. The public display of the Museum felt like an added extra, if anything a hindrance to the official stuff hiding behind the walls that the public weren’t allowed to see.

The exhibits themselves were fascinating and well preserved. Fossils were hung on the walls and with plaques of interesting information on what life had been like millions of years ago.

Hinata and Kageyama even arrived in time to find a demonstration of the fossil revival process. Hinata gawked and even Kageyama’s eyes widened as a spherical fossil became a Pokémon. ‘That’s soooo cool! It’s all like gyaa and fwaal!’ Hinata gawked.

‘I wonder how it’s done.’ Kageyama said. ‘Technology is so amazing.’

They strolled around the exhibition; reading and gawking at the signs and displays. It was good fun. By the time Hinata had grown bored, Kageyama had worked out that it was four o’clock in the afternoon and that they had missed the Mine tour. Neither of the boys were particularly crushed about that.

The boys returned to the PokeCentre. They hung out in the foyer, people watching and talking about volleyball. They had a heated discussion about which position was cooler: ace, libero or setter. Kageyama viciously defended his position of setter whilst Hinata was trying to communicate how ace and libero were cool. He liked ace since ace was essentially the heart and soul of team. He liked libero because it was a place where shorties like him could survive in a game of height like volleyball.

Time passed unusually fast during the afternoon but Hinata got antsy. He didn’t like staying cooped up for the sake of laziness but Kageyama insisted that they had all the time in the world. They ended up going for a run around the city just as a thing to.

With sweaty foreheads and dull-throbs in the soles of their shoes, Kageyama and Hinata returned
to the PokeCentre. They organised their bags and walked into the men’s shower rooms. They showered and got into their pyjamas. With drenched hair and daggy clothes, two pair hung around the food court. No one raised an eyebrow. They were self-sufficient teenagers; this wasn’t a thing to be concerned about.

The following morning, they got up early and went for a morning job. They raced around the block with unheard of enthusiasm. They ravenously ate through some food in the PokeCentre and then decided to get going.

Hinata stretched himself out and Kageyama helped. Oink squeaked at their feet. ‘C’mon, let’s go and train.’ Hinata said. The trio made their way through the gate. A few people sat around like it was a stop on a subway. A few people even greeted them but most people kept their eyes on their newspapers or PokeGear.

Mt Coronet was huge. It cast a huge shadow over entire route. Huge ridges with muddy slopes lined the side of the mountain and a few Trainers were battling. Long grass swayed and the stench of coal was heavy in the air. The constant bang of construction work drilled into everyone’s ears.

‘Wonder what’s going on up ahead?’ Hinata asked. He and Kageyama curiously wandered closer to the construction site. The area was sealed off by tall, wire fences and yellow sashes. A lollypop lady was keeping a careful eye on Trainers in the air. ‘Hello, lads!’ she greeted them heartily. ‘Come to say “hello”?’

‘Uh...yeah.’ Hinata said. They came closer. She sat down on a blue eski. She was rugged up in a fluorescent vest that was four sizes too big on her. It was too hot to be wearing a jacket.

She pushed up her sunglasses. ‘So, what’re you boys doin’ here?’

‘We’re training.’ Hinata said.

‘That’s good. Tried to take on Roark and lost, eh?’ she guessed.

‘He did that. I’m not interested in...Gym badges.’ Kageyama said.

‘Contests?’ she asked.

‘Yeah, the both of us actually.’ Kageyama said.

The lady kept checking the distance for something. Her eyes would constantly dart to the cycling lane. ‘Well, I’m just a volunteer. Mate of mine’s sick and I don’t have class today. So here I am. Who won the Jubilife Rookie Prize? You two’d know then? Keep missing all the reports on it. Funny, huh?’

‘Our friend Tsukishima Kei from Oreburgh City. I lost to him in the last round of the Battle Stage. I almost taken the Ribbon for myself but his Lunatone’s Moonblast was too much for my Piplup.’ Kageyama recited.

The lady’s eyes lit up. She smiled heartily. ‘Oh yes, I know Kei and his friend Tadashi. I taught them both. Two of my best students if I do say so myself. Natural talent from them of course but I helped.’ the lady mused. She glanced at the distance against.

‘Hey, lady, why’re you so distracted?’ Hinata blurted out and Kageyama felt embarrassed for him.

‘Oh, it’s not anything... Actually...’ There was a twinkle in those weary eyes. ‘It’s a problem you can help me with.’
The lady got up again and she scanned the horizon. ‘There was a landslide within Mt Coronet recently. It’s caused a lotta strife. There was a casualty in the landslide though. A herd of Ponyta and Rapidash had been passing through the area when it happened. It’d been a small herd, a few parents and a few foals. But one of the foals’ parents got caught underneath a rock, and uh, y’know, perished. But that foal Ponyta doesn’t believe it’s mum is dead. Keeps trying to come back and wreck things. Won’t take “no” for an answer.’

Hinata was confused. He screwed his face up. ‘And what can we do about this?’ he asked.

‘Maybe you can catch it. Give it a new life. It’d probably like that.’ the lady said.

‘I was kinda lookin’ for a water or grass type.’ Hinata said.

‘Won’t find any of ‘em out here. You’d hafta take a rod out onto Route 206. But since you’re here, could you please do us a favour?’ the lady asked.

Hinata glanced at Kageyama. He bit his lip. ‘Okay, yeah, I’ll help.’

‘Good on ya, lad.’ the lady grinned. She had a rural, grandmotherly smile. Hinata didn’t feel like he was doing the right thing. Kageyama sensed Hinata’s unease.

In the distance, the harshness of diamond clanging against the rocky ground galloped towards them. The old lady’s smile changed as it became more knowing of what’s next. ‘Normally, I’d have my Raichu zap the little thing but now I have you two here.’ she said with a slight snicker.

Kageyama and Hinata turned around. Dashing towards them with the might of coursing river was a flaming horse with a determined glint in its eyes. It sprinted for them and then in a gigantic leap, it soared above them. It landed on a boulder that had fallen during the landslide. The construction workers began to panic.

Hinata’s eyes widened and became almost starry. His mouth slackened and became a neat little “o”. ‘I’ll catch it.’ he said. Hinata said and he jumped onto the fence and scaled it. He rushed through the construction workers and the lollypop lady began to explain that he had clearance from her.

‘Oink!’ Hinata yelled and he threw out Oink’s PokeBall. He jumped out of the red light and began to bounce up the rocks that had been placed up on each other precariously. ‘We’re gonna try and catch that Ponyta!’ Hinata yelled. ‘Psybeam!’

A peculiar beam of light was emitted from Oink’s pearl. It made contact with the Ponyta. It craned its head and raked the footing it had with its hoof. It whinnied with the valour of a war cry. A stream of embers was bulleted out of the Ponyta’s mouth. Oink bounced and dodged them. ‘Psywave!’ Hinata yelped and wiggly, pink and purple light was emitted from Oink’s pearl this time. Again, they made contact. The Ponyta wasn’t impressed by this.

It jumped down to where Oink had been targeting from. It slammed itself against Oink and pressed it against a rock. Hinata was absolutely falling in love with this Ponyta. It was spirited and could jump like nothing Hinata had ever seen before. ‘Bounce!’ Hinata yelled and Oink jumped as high as it could go.

Ponyta tried to jump just as high but failed. It scrambled on its legs and had taken damage from its failure. It tried to spit embers at Oink again but they failed to reach Oink who began to plummet downwards. Ponyta scrambled away and this time it was Oink who missed. Ponyta darted at Oink with viscously flames spiralling off of its body. It tumbled onto Oink. It navigated the uneven and
dangerous terrain skilfully.

Hinata grinned even wider. ‘Psybeam!’ Hinata yelled and Oink fired another light beam from its pearl. Ponyta’s eyes became less focused and its footing less precise. Kageyama shouted from beyond the fence as even he could tell what has happened. ‘Hinata, it’s confused! Now’s your chance!’

Hinata worriedly fumbled with his bag. He pulled out a PokeBall. It was shiny and new. It was small so he pressed the button. It became larger. He experimented with throwing it. He gained a feel for its weight. It was as light as a feather. He took aim at the Ponyta which stumbled dangerously over the rocks and loose crag. He threw the PokeBall.

It landed against Ponyta’s neck and then bounced off it. It opened wide and a red light sucked Ponyta into it. The PokeBall dropped to the ground and it became to rock. It rocked left and right. It teetered and teased what was about to happen. Hinata’s hands curled into a fist and prayed silently. He hoped desperately. ‘Please... Please... Please.’ he repeated. Kageyama also chucked in his best wishes too.

Then Hinata heard it. He heard the sound of a satisfying click and the brief change of colour in the PokeBall’s button. Hinata leaped up into the air and yelled nonsensically. ‘I did it! I did it!’ he chanted. Like a primate, he scaled the rocks and grabbed the PokeBall. It was heavier now. He leaped back down and Oink followed suit. ‘We did it Oink! We did it!’ he yelled.

The nearby construction workers clapped for him. Kageyama smiled, well tried to anyway and the old lady grinned. When Hinata climbed over the fence again and re-joined them, the old lady rubbed his back in a maternal fashion. ‘Good on ya lad.’ she said.

‘Thanks. I can’t believe it though.’ Hinata was star struck. He wouldn’t stop gazing excitedly at his PokeBall.

‘Let’s take Ponyta elsewhere and get it used to humans.’ Kageyama said.

‘Maybe get it some grief counselling too.’ the old lady suggested. She was supposed to come across as humorous but the boys took her seriously.

They went back inside the gate and into the city. They got back to the PokeCentre. Nurse Joy was cleaning down the counter. The place was empty aside from her and her staff. She was surprised to see Hinata and Kageyama. ‘Back already, boys?’ she asked, her voice pondering.

‘Please heal my Pokémon.’ Hinata begged. He placed two PokeBalls on the counter.


‘Won’t be a minute.’ she tittered.

She fiddled with knobs on her machine and placed the PokeBalls in their designated slots. Her machine lit up and made whirring noises. The boys watched with some interest. Nurse Joy turned off her machine when the lights and noises stopped. She took the PokeBalls from their slots and put them in front of Hinata again.

‘Thank you.’ he beamed.

‘You’re welcome.’ Nurse Joy replied.
‘But, uh, I was told that my Ponyta might need grief counselling.’ Hinata said, his smile dipped and became distorted by worry.

‘Oh.’ Nurse Joy said.

She grabbed a few things from her desk and came out from behind the counter. She instructed Hinata to let out his Ponyta. He did so. Nyta was quick to run as soon as she was let out of her PokeBall but Nurse Joy’s army of Chansey promptly stopped the Ponyta from escaping, as well as putting other precautions in place. ‘My, how bizarre.’ Nurse Joy commented.

‘Nyta thinks that it can still save its parents from the rockslide...’ Hinata said and he gave a corrupted version of what the lollypop lady had told him.

Nurse Joy hummed. She tapped the side of her face with a slender finger; a personal tic for thinking. The boys watched as Nyta ran amok within the PokeCentre. Nurse Joy gave little attention for the Ponyta’s lack of taste for the indoors: a trait common to all newly caught Pokémon that haven’t been wrangled in yet and taught manners.


She made a quick assessment. ‘This Ponyta has passed emotional maturity and should be able to cope without parents. However, based on grinding its teeth, it was actually born in captivity and was probably released without proper training. I think its father may have been a Primape based on unusual colouration and thickness on its legs. I think that it was trying to return home to find its parents. If any casualties took place due to that landslide, I think it was just a coincidence that it was a pair of mated Rapidash. To alleviate any of Ponyta’s emotional problems, I such emotional bonding. Show it you can be trusted. That means holding off on any battle training.’

Hinata nodded. Most of what she had said had gone over his head. But he got the most important bit which was the solution to the problem. ‘I think I already have an idea.’ Hinata said. His mother’s advice about Pokémon echoed in his head. She had never led him wrong before.

Nurse Joy nodded. ‘Well, I have some things that should help you. I’ll go get them.’ she said and she wandered off.

‘What’s your idea?’ Kageyama asked. Hinata smirked. He sat himself down at a table and began to go through his bag. He plonked a plastic box on the table. ‘You’ve been carting one of those around this entire time?’ Kageyama asked, shocked.

‘Lucky, huh?’ Hinata cheekily said as he took out a second box.

Chapter End Notes

A note about universe alteration I have included in this fic. Those Pokémon cross-breed things that were popular last year, are canon in this fic. Anecdotes about that are below (if anyone is interested in some minor nuances of this fic).

Nyta is one such example having Primeape lineage thus the unusual teeth and kankles. Another example is Oink who has a Pachirisu father. This means that Oink has
slightly off-colour cheeks as they are more peachy than dull pink. Most Pokémon in this fic are "pure bred" until stated otherwise. I do have a rule of thumb that I use. If Hinata caught it, you can bet that its cross-bred. There is like only one exception* to that rule. If Kageyama (one exception*), Tsukishima (no exceptions*), or Yamaguchi (no exceptions*) caught it, it is probably pure bred. I'll do similar notes for tagged characters introduced later.

* Foreseeable that is, this is an incomplete fic and that may change as I continue.
Hinata’s plastic boxes were brightly coloured and decorated with a floral motif. They were quite feminine objects. ‘Are you sure you can use them?’ Kageyama asked, suspiciously. Hinata scoffed.

‘My Mum makes the best poffins in the county. Of course I know how to use them.’ Hinata said.

‘So why didn’t you make any for me – I mean, us – before the Jubilife Prize?’ Kageyama inquired. He was sounding angrier than he meant.

Hinata rubbed the back of his head. He watched as Nyta tried to destroy anything that stood in its way. ‘Well, I didn’t have any berries. I wasn’t allowed to take any off the farm. But I got a few after I started hangin’ out with all those Trainers we met outside of Oreburgh.’ Hinata said. He was thankful that a lot of them were native to the area. He’d be embarrassed if they had to deal with how atrocious Nyta was.

Nurse Joy returned and she saw the poffin kit. ‘What a marvellous idea. Well, here’s a Soothe Bell and here are some reigns so you can keep Nyta to one spot.’ Nurse Joy said. ‘Here I’ll put them on Nyta.’ She showed Hinata what she had and he agreed. He didn’t really know what a Soothe Bell does was but he could see the immediate benefit of the reigns.

Nurse Joy led Nyta back to him. The Ponyta was more obedient whenever Nurse Joy handled it. ‘Remember be kind but firm.’ Nurse Joy said. She had tied the Soothe Bell around Nyta’s neck. It hung proudly. Nyta didn’t like its new accessories. ‘Take care.’ she added. Hinata took the reins on Nyta and tied them around the table.

Kageyama sat down. He reached out and let Nyta sniff his hand. It nudged him. ‘Nyta seems to be calming down.’ Kageyama noted.

‘Good.’ Hinata said. He opened his berry case and tested his poffin “easy bake” oven. It made buzzing noises that disturbed Kageyama and Nyta.

‘Should it be making that noise?’ Kageyama asked.

‘Uh? Yeah? Well, it’s a bit old but it’s always made that noise.’ Hinata replied.

‘How old is old?’ Kageyama asked and he stroked Nyta’s face.

‘Eleven years.’ Hinata replied.

Kageyama had grown up in a household where if an electric appliance lasted longer than three years, it was a miracle. He was genuinely concerned by the age of this “easy bake” oven. ‘I wonder what kind of poffins Nyta would like...’ Hinata wondered. He sorted out his berries. Hinata looked up at Kageyama. ‘I like dry poffins. What kind do you like?’ Hinata asked and he got out Oink’s PokeBall. ‘I wonder what kind of poffins Oink likes. Piggy likes bitter poffins.’ Hinata pondered aloud.

‘I’ve never had a poffin before.’ Kageyama admitted.

Hinata’s golden-brown eyes widened. ‘No way.’ he gasped.

‘Mother wouldn’t let me make them. She didn’t want to buy berries as she considers them Pokémon items.’ Kageyama explained.
‘Well, let’s make you one. I learned from the best. I’ll make the bestest poffins for you and Nyta and Piplup and Staravia and Ralts.’ Hinata blathered.

Kageyama called out his Pokémon. They all stood around the table and curiously watched was going on. Although, Piplup preferred to sit on Kageyama’s lap so she could cower safely. She hated the noise Hinata’s poffin “easy bake” oven made.

Hinata was careful using his berries as he didn’t have many. He thought he would go for a sweet tasting recipe as everyone loves sweets. He knew that Kageyama did. He placed a few pecha berries in the easy bake oven. He crushed the berries in his hand and Kageyama wondered if that was hygienic. Hinata added some basic ingredients such as sugar, spice and milk. He whipped it carefully and Kageyama watched as the batter swirled. The batter went from being a yellowy vanilla to bright pink.

Hinata changed the settings on his “easy bake” oven and capped it. He smiled. ‘Yummy poffins.’ he said.

‘Hopefully.’ Kageyama mumbled.

‘Don’t doubt me, Bakageyama.’ Hinata joked.

‘I really like when you cook though.’ Hinata said. ‘The food you make’s always so good.’

‘Thank you.’ Kageyama replied.

The “easy bake” oven began to scream horrendously. In turn, Piplup began to screech out of fear and the two Trainers began to panic. Hinata hit the poffin kit a few times and popped the lid on it. Kageyama soothed Piplup by cooing at it and trying to be generally soothing. His scary face wasn’t helping Piplup’s sensitive nerves. Hinata calmed the oven down and brought out piping hot poffins from the oven. He smiled and a sweet scent wafted around them. ‘Enjoy.’ Hinata said and he broke the biscuits into varying sizes. Again, Kageyama didn’t think this was a very sanitary process.

Hinata fed one to Nyta first. Nyta’s black like coal eyes lit up. It let out a pleasant whinny and began to beg for more by nuzzling closer to Hinata. Kageyama eased into a small smile. Hinata gave Kageyama a biscuit next. He was hesitant to try it as Hinata’s huge eyes bore into him. He bit into it. The poffin melted on his tongue like a piece of shortbread. It tasted very sweet but it wasn’t unbearable. ‘It’s good.’ Kageyama said and Hinata grinned.

‘That means a lot.’ he chirped.

He shared out more of his Poffins with the Pokémon present. Oink didn’t seem to particularly like or dislike the pink treat. Similarly, Piplup and Ralts didn’t mind the poffin’s sweet flavour. Staravia, however, hated it.

Hinata packed away the “easy bake” oven and crammed the leftover poffins into a container. Hinata got out his PokeDex. ‘I’m gonna do your trick.’ he said snippily to Kageyama who was returning his Pokémon to his PokeBalls.

‘It’s not really my trick.’ Kageyama commented. He didn’t realise that Hinata was trying to be playful.

Hinata scanned over Nyta with his vermillion PokeDex. ‘-' the little gadget informed in its metallic voice. Soon, a live feed of Nyta became part of the screen. Information on Nyta as an individual Ponyta took over the other half of the screen. Hinata read through the important bits
aloud. ‘Level nine-ish, probably close to the next level. Female, oh, uh, sorry Nyta. The “Run Away” Ability – perfect. Knows Ember, Flame Wheel, Tackle and... Low Kick?’

Kageyama perked up and Hinata’s eyes widened. ‘Low Kick’s a fighting type move.’ he remembered.

‘And rock types are useless against fighting types and with the insane speed Nyta has, you could have a winning combination.’ Kageyama said. The two boys were on the same wavelength. They, in synchronisation, got up and hastily shoved their stuff away. It was time to start training again. They had plenty of time left in the day and they weren’t going to spend it uselessly.
The One Where Piplup Evolves

Chapter Notes

I couldn't think of a better name for this chapter so I just chose something Friends-esque.

Oink and Nyta raced at Hinata and Kageyama’s sides. They sprinted through the streets and through the Oreburgh Gate, as quick as they could carry themselves. They slowed down when they reached the end of the shadowy, dank Oreburgh Gate and blinded themselves when they got through to the other side. In a brief moment of stupidity, it was like they had forgotten how bright and blue the middle of the day was. They were accosted by a sudden wave of hot sunshine.

Campers were still set up and some were maintaining a small pit fire. A few battles were taking place around the place. Wind scattered tents and hats. It was pleasant; almost dreamy. Hinata grinned and he scratched the side of Nyta’s face. Nyta whinnied and playfully batted her head against Hinata’s side. He laughed as she made him feel ticklish. ‘Let’s start.’ he said. Hinata turned back to Kageyama.

‘I can amuse myself. I might do some training of my own.’ Kageyama said.

‘Good. Good.’ Hinata said.

Kageyama held onto his bag strap, his fingertips brushed over his PokeBalls. ‘You were hoping for a battle, weren’t you?’

‘Yeah.’ Hinata said.

‘Alright then.’ Kageyama agreed.

They spaced themselves out from the Gate and from the other Trainers. A few curious souls who were resting their Pokémon decided to sit around and watched. The friendly, campground atmosphere had carried over and seemed to knit everyone together as friends or comrades. It was a peculiar but heart-warming phenomenon.

‘Nyta!’

‘Ralts!’

Nyta bounced onto the designated battle space. She neighed jollily. Ralts came out of Kageyama’s PokeBall and twirled around, dizzy and dreamy and completely unaware of Kageyama’s intent. ‘Ember!’ Hinata yelled.

‘Confusion!’ Kageyama instructed.

Ralts stumbled towards Nyta. Nyta opened her mouth wide and she sprayed a series of scorching hot embers towards Ralts. Ralts took the damage, dirtying itself. Ralts didn’t fall back though and emitted a yowl and shaky, purplish light from the horn on its head. The light hit Nyta but she shook it off but her footing suffered. She almost wandered out of the self-imposed limits. ‘Hang in there, Nyta. Tackle!’ shouted Hinata.
‘Confusion!’ Kageyama instructed.

Nyta crashed against Ralts ruthlessly. Ralts was knocked back and released shaky waves of confusing light again. Nyta was caught in their dazzle. She began to stumble again but she shook it off well. She tossed her nose to the sky and whinnied loudly. ‘C’mon, let’s keep going! Flame Wheel!’ Hinata yelled and the flames dancing along Nyta’s spine grew bigger and brighter. Nyta was engulfed by flames and she charged at Ralts.

‘Teleport!’ Kageyama said, almost panicked. Ralts disappeared and reappeared behind him. Ralts was sucked into his PokeBall. Kageyama threw out a different Pokémon. ‘Piplup!’ he yelled.

Hinata’s jaw dropped to the floor. ‘No fair.’ he whined.

‘It is too fair.’ Kageyama argued. Piplup strutted out of the red light and puffed out her chest.

‘Low Kick!’ Hinata yelled.

Nyta dashed straight for Piplup. Piplup widened her beak and let loose a jet of bubbles. Nyta dashed straight into the bubbles. They popped all over her and she cringed. Her pace slowed and the flames on her back began to dim. She still tackled Piplup with all her might. ‘We’re almost there, Piplup! Bubbles!’ Kageyama encouraged. He sounded a tad awkward.

Piplup chirped and opened her beak again. She released a jet of bubbles again. Nyta tried to scatter but she was too slow. She took another direct hit. She stumbled to her knees and whinnied dejectedly. ‘Oh no!’ Hinata worried. ‘Come back, girl!’ He thrust out his PokeBall and returned Nyta.

Kageyama smiled and called Piplup back to his side when Piplup began to pulse. A white, shimmery light began to encase Piplup who stared wide-eyed. Unsure of what was happening and whether or not she ought to welcome it. Kageyama’s levels of excitement rose. He knew what was happening. Everyone knew what was happening. He crouched down. ‘Go on.’ he gently encouraged, or as best as he could.

Piplup braced itself and allowed the light to take-over its genetic makeup. The light began to disfigure Piplup. Morphed her and stretched her into new heights, shapes and sizes but she was silent as though the process was painless. Soon, the light shattered over her and her new form was revealed. She was lankier now with longer wings and a golden crown had begun to form above its eyes. ‘Prinplup!’ she screeched. Her voice was deeper now. She waved her wings about and she seemed to slice through the air with strapping power.

Kageyama couldn’t be prouder of his partner Pokémon. He went to pick her up and swing her about like a father with his playful daughter but Prinplup wouldn’t let him. ‘Well done, Kageyama, Prinplup.’ Hinata smiled.

As soon as the newness of Prinplup’s new form softened, the boys got on with their training. They also made the decision to camp out around on Route 203 for a while longer. It seemed easier than commuting between here and Oreburgh PokeCentre.

Hinata decided for three days they would train as hard as steel for and then, he would go out for his badge again regardless of the time of day. Kageyama agreed. It sounded like a solid plan. Thus began another course of hellish training.
Hinata stared gleefully at his two Pokémon. They seemed stronger and there was a huge improvement in Nyta. She was slightly more obedient and she seemed to only be getting faster. He couldn’t be prouder of the two. They had also learned unusual ways to perform attacks and he was just proud and confident for the two.

Kageyama was proud as well; for Hinata, for himself and for their Pokémon. He was certain they were going to dominate in battles from here on out. The only thing really stopping them would be Tsukishima and Yamaguchi but they weren’t here now so it didn’t matter.

Kageyama and Hinata had become two of the strongest Trainers in the area. The sun was beginning to set and a brisk breeze was weaving and out of the ledges and ridges. ‘We better hurry.’ Hinata said to Kageyama whilst he returned his Pokémon.

‘Yeah.’ Kageyama agreed. Without hesitation or even a blink, the two erupted into a competitive sprint.

The two raced through Oreburgh Gate and roared at each other. They dashed as fast as they could into the Gym. Roark had just turned off a few lights. He was more than surprised to see the boys.

‘Back again, eh, Honokaa?’

‘Hinata.’ Hinata corrected.

‘Well, I’m gone for the day. So’s the Ref. Guess you’ll have to come back in the morning. Probably best, I’ve smelt miners better than you two.’ Roark joked.

Hinata embarrassedly checked himself. He smelt foul. ‘Alright then. See you tomorrow.’ he declared. Kageyama nodded and the two of them backed off. They strolled slowly towards the PokeCentre. It was a bustling place, filled with salt smells and even a bit of music. Nurse Joy quickly took their Pokémon. She mentioned that people weren’t coming in as much now. She said that tonight was usually when people left and celebrated their first win and the training they had done in the area.

Kageyama grabbed himself and Hinata some food and drink whilst Hinata collected their Pokémon after the recorded voice said to do so over the speaker system. Hinata also organised a place for the two for them to sleep.

They sucked down their food quickly. Hinata made salty comments about how Roark should have battled them and Kageyama made grunting noises as a way of avoiding agreement and disagreement. He considered it a tad selfish to expect a man to work past what he was comfortable with. Besides, he was an adult: he had responsibilities to take care of outside of his work as a Gym Leader, probably or so Kageyama mused. After they finished eating, they dumped their waste in a bin and sauntered into their rooms. They organised their toiletries and then put themselves through the showers. The hot water worked away the stress in their bodies. It just melted it away like all the dirt and grime that had burrowed into their skin.

The two Trainers were red-faced and refreshed when they wandered back to their shared room. This time, they had been given bunk-beds and a television. Hinata turned it on when they got back and they listened to the news. Kageyama also let him borrow his PokeGear so Hinata could call his parents. It had been a while since Hinata had been in contact with this folks. They were thrilled to hear him and his new stories. They were delighted for him when they learned of Nyta.
Hinata turned the television off at nine-thirty but he didn’t get to sleep until ten-thirty. He and Kageyama had made sleepy, dumb conversation until both of them were too exhausted of the other to speak. It was a marvellous feeling to be in bed after so many long nights spent in sleeping bags.

It was morning routine as per usual the following dawn. They got up and had a good jog around Oreburgh City. They ignored the sights and sounds of the dusty city at daybreak to focus on beating the other. They had begun keeping a tally that recorded who had beaten the other in that morning’s run. So far, it was at deuce but they had only been at it for two days.

Kageyama got to the PokeCentre first so he had taken the lead by one point. As looser, Hinata was given the duty to organise breakfast for the two of them. He got them some cheapo fast food. He plonked some vanilla malt milk and cereal in front of Kageyama and had a slice of toast and juice himself. The both of them were excited for the events that were about to follow breakfast.

Hinata couldn’t eat faster than he did. Kageyama’s stomach squirmed as he watched the orange-haired idiot scarf his food down. ‘Done.’ Hinata mumbled and he hastily wiped his wrist against his mouth. He began to get up but Kageyama glared. ‘You’re not going anywhere just yet.’ he growled. Hinata sat down and whimpered.

‘Why?’ He was timid to ask. Kageyama didn't immediately answer. He took some time to get his Med Kit out of his bag. He gave Hinata some pills. Hinata noticed that they weren't many left in its foil and plastic tray. ‘I don't want you nearly puking again.’ Kageyama explained.

Hinata accepted the medicine. ‘Thank you.’ Hinata said and then swallowed the horrible tasting pills dry. He almost gagged because of it but he tried to hide it. Hinata soon recovered from the foul tasting tablet and was soon on his way to the Gym with Kageyama hounding after him competitively. Hinata smashed through the Gym’s door and into its main hall.

Roark was sitting down and he smiled knowingly. ‘Good luck, dumbass.’ Kageyama said. He stiffly patted Hinata's shoulder before making his way to the grand stand. Hinata psyched himself up and tried to conceal his nigh boundless anticipation. Roark summoned his referee to the court. He wore his spiffy official uniform and recited his spiel from before. He made one alteration to it. This time around both Trainers were allowed to switch between a maximum of two Pokémon within a twenty minute time limit. Roark was interested to see who Hinata had added to his roster.

‘Onix!’ Roark yelled. He threw his shiny PokeBall out. A colossal Pokémon slithered out of the light.

‘Oink!’ Hinata yelped. ‘Jump out!’ Oink squeaked and bounced out of the scarlet light.

The two Pokémon stared each other down. Oink refused to give in despite the huge difference in height and perceived power. ‘Tackle!’ Roark yelled and the Onix lunged forward at Oink who deftly avoided it. Onix crashed into the ground and took recoil damage. ‘Psybeam!’ Hinata yelled. Oink squeaked and emitted a spiralling beam from his pearl. The beam sank into Onix as it slowly rose from its fall.

Roark immediately saw a difference in Hinata’s Spoink’s power. It was very evident that it had been training hard for these past, few days. But there was something fanciful about the way it moved, uselessly fanciful. It gave Roark a bad feeling and the unknown factor in this battle concerned him also. ‘Stealth Rock.’ he yelled. Onix roared and large pointed stones floated around Hinata’s end of the court.

Hinata glanced at them curiously. They weren’t doing anything so he wondered if it was a dumb mistake on Roark’s part. He hoped so. ‘Psybeam!’ Hinata yelled. Oink attacked gracefully.
Colourful swirls of mystique spun into the opposed Onix. Oink growled with a low voice upon taking damage. Its eyes became less focused and its noises slurred: the signs of confusion.

‘Rock Throw!’ Roark called out. His Onix roared and smacked itself with its tail. ‘Darn it.’ Roark muttered. Hinata grinned. Onix was on the ropes. There was no way it would survive another attack. ‘Psybeam!’ Hinata yelled. Oink jumped up and somersaulted. The Psybeam burst out from its tiny body and the light immersed Onix. It wailed and came crashing down. Roark returned his partner Pokémon quickly. ‘Onix is unable to battle. Two-one, the challenger’s way!’ the referee announced.

Kageyama cheered for Hinata. The Gym Trainers, apprentices of Roark, encouraged the Gym Leader. The pointed stones surrounding Hinata, the ones he had forgotten about, floated ominously.

Roark switched out his PokeBalls. ‘Cranidos!’ he yelled. Hinata grinned. He remembered how Oink had fared last time against Cranidos, it had been a one-sided slaughter so he fumbled with his PokeBalls. ‘Jump out, Oink!’ he yelled and returned the piglet Pokémon. ‘Jump in, Nyta!’ Hinata said and he tossed out the PokeBall containing his trump card. Roark wondered what kind of Pokémon “Nyta” was. He was expecting something with either water or grass typing.

Needless to say he was more than surprised when he saw a Ponyta dashed out of the PokeBall’s red light. ‘A fire type?’ he said.

‘Mm, Nyta’s special!’ Hinata yelled.

The rocks loomed and dug into Nyta who squealed. Hinata yelped with surprise. Kageyama wasn’t as surprised and the Gym Trainers were revelling delight. They were certain that this signalled Roark’s comeback.

Roark was sceptical of a fire type being “special” in a match against a rock type. ‘Okay then.’ Roark said. ‘Crunch!’ Cranidos sped towards Nyta with its jaws gnashing. Nyta quickly dodged it and whinnied successfully. Nyta had a youthful bounce in her dash. ‘Good on ya, Nyta!’ Hinata yelled. ‘Low Kick!’

Nyta stopped and pulled herself back before bolting a full pace. She then skidded and extended her leg. She tripped Cranidos who crashed down dramatically. ‘See? Special!’ Hinata boasted.

‘I might believe you now.’ Roark said. ‘Cranidos, Take Down!’

Cranidos got up and bolted for Nyta. It smashed into her and she took drastic damage. Cranidos roared victoriously. Nyta got up and whinnied. ‘Low Kick!’ Hinata yelled. Nyta obeyed and set herself up for the manoeuvre again. Once more, she tripped Cranidos whose movements were becoming slugged due to losing health so rapidly. Hinata could practically taste his triumph now. All he needed was one more attack to make it.

‘Super Potion.’ Roark said and he pulled out an orangey spray-bottle from his jacket. Cranidos waddled towards him and accepted the medicine.

‘Low Kick!’ Hinata yelped, angry. That was unfair! Nyta tripped Cranidos again but it didn’t have the same drama as the previous two. Maybe Hinata was the one about to lose but he refused to acknowledge the possibility. The match wasn’t over.

‘Low Kick!’ Hinata said and it was unprecedented but Nyta missed. She had been off of trajectory but a centimetre and Cranidos had pulled out of her laneway at the right second. Hinata’s
stomach dropped. ‘Bulldoze!’ Roark yelled and the ground began to shake. Nyta stumbled and dropped against the ground. She vibrated harshly. Her whinny was defeated. ‘Ponyta is unable to battle. One-one, deuce.’ the referee announced.

Hinata returned Nyta. He mumbled well wishes towards her PokeBall before grabbing Oink’s. ‘Jump out, Oink!’ Hinata yelled and Oink bounced out of the gaudy, red light. Oink hadn’t taken any damage in his fight against Onix but the floating stones dug into Oink and depleted some health. Hinata curled his fists. Stealth Rock was an unfair advantage!

‘Crunch!’ Roark yelled. He wasn’t in the mood to fool around anymore. Cranidos approached Oink rapidly and Oink tried to bounce out of its snapping jaws but Cranidos caught him by his curly tail. Oink squawked with pain. Its health depleted rapidly with the one, vicious bite. ‘Confuse Ray!’ panicked Hinata and a ghostly ray was emitted from Oink’s peachy pink pearl.

The ray floated like a haunting light around Cranidos who watched it. It snapped out at the light and ate it. ‘That’s one way to fix that problem...’ Roark mumbled and his apprentices chuckled. ‘Headbutt!’ he yelled. Cranidos leaped after Oink with a hulking and awkward heave. It smashed its head against Oink who took full damage. Oink landed against the ground and struggled to get up.

The referee watched pitifully. ‘I declare this match as being over. Spoink is unable to battle. Gym Leader Roark is the winner.’ the referee announced.

‘You did well, Oink.’ Hinata said, dejected as he called back Oink. He stowed Oink’s PokeBall and was overwhelmed by the second, crushing loss. It was beginning to feel like nothing would ever go his way.

Roark met Hinata on the side of the court. They shook hands. ‘Tell me something, Hinata. Who do you Train against?’ he asked.

‘Kageyama.’ Hinata answered and he nodded his head at Kageyama’s direction.

‘And he’s a Coordinator, right?’ Roark asked.

‘Yes.’ Hinata responded.

‘Are you a Coordinator, also?’ Roark asked.

‘Yes.’ Hinata replied.

Roark grinned. ‘That explains a lot then.’ he chimed.

‘Explains what?’ Hinata asked.

‘Your Pokémon have developed a very special finesse that is usually only seen in Coordinator’s Pokémon and it’s very hard to specialise in both as they require different modes. You want some advice, kid?’

‘Yes!’ Hinata perked up.

‘Focus purely on being a Coordinator. You’ll find you’ll have a lot more success. I reckon, if you battle like you were today in a Contest, you’d dominate.’ Roark said.

Hinata thanked Roark and took the advice on board. He and Kageyama left the Gym after bowing respectfully towards Roark. They began to walk towards the PokeCentre.
‘You okay?’ Kageyama asked.

‘No.’ Hinata replied, despondent.

‘I figured. Maybe Roark’s right. Maybe you should focus only on Contests. I think you’ve got a real hang on them.’ Kageyama said.

‘But I...’ Hinata couldn’t spit out the words he was thinking. ‘Can I call my parents?’ Kageyama replied by getting his PokeGear out of his bag. ‘Take as long as you need.’ he said.

‘Thanks.’ Hinata said.

He ducked off to the side of the path and Kageyama joined him. They let people stroll past. Hinata rang up his parents and it was his mum who answered. ‘Hey Mum.’ Hinata said.

‘Hi, Sho. How are you? Oh, you don’t sound well.’ she worried.

‘I just lost against Roark.’ Hinata said. ‘Again.’

‘He’s Byron’s son, isn’t he?’

‘Dunno.’

‘I think so. Is there something you want to talk about, honey?’

Hinata was hesitant to reply to his mother’s question. ‘Roark thinks I should only do Contests. What do you think?’

‘I think you should listen to your heart.’

‘But my heart only goes “ba-dump”.’ Hinata heard his mother laugh.

‘Honey, Sho, what do you think Oink and Nyta want?’

‘I think... I think they wanna be show-offs.’

‘And your bit of a show-off too.’

‘Am not!’

His mother laughed again. ‘Sho, it’s completely okay if you change your mind about things. I thought I wanted to be a Gym Leader once upon a time but now I’m a Pokémon breeder. I think you should keep your mind open.’

‘But what about Dad?’

‘What about him?’

‘He never got to go to the championships.’

‘Honey, live your own life. Don’t try and fulfil our dreams.’

Natsu’s voice entered the conversation. She was trying to get their mother’s attention. She wanted lunch from the sound of things. ‘Sho, I’ve gotta go. Your sister’s being a pain. Just listen to your heart, we love you regardless. Good luck.’ she said before hanging up.

Hinata wasn’t sure what to think. He was quiet. He thought about the things he liked about
Contests and what he liked about Gym battling. He cleared his mind and clarity came to him; and it seemed to smell like the piercing scent of air salonpas. ‘Before my eyes, it blocks my path. A high, high wall; what sort of scene is on the other side? What will I be able to see there? “The View from the Top”. A scenery that I will never see on my own; but, if I'm not alone, then..... I might be able to see it.’ Hinata said.

Kageyama was shocked to hear something to poetic coming from Hinata’s mouth. ‘Huh?’ he asked, too mystified to specify he was after clarification. ‘I need my Pokémon to help me if I want to see my goal.’ Hinata added. He let Oink and Nyta out of their PokeBalls. ‘What do you two want? Contests of Gym Battles?’ he asked. Their answer was clear.
When Kageyama and Hinata arrived at the PokeCentre, it was close to noon. Hinata had his Pokémon healed and Kageyama went searching for leaflets. Neither of the two were overly sure as to where they were going next. Hinata felt particularly lost even though his Pokémon had clearly voiced their opinions.

The two sat down and Kageyama flicked through Contests he had found. Hinata sat with his hands over his ears and a dejected look in his eyes. Kageyama hated the look in Hinata’s eyes. Usually his honey-brown eyes were gleeful and endearing but not today, not after that battle and that conversation with his mother. Why did adults have to be so painful and cryptic?

But it wasn’t his problem so Kageyama kept quiet. He read through the leaflets that he fund. Hinata played with their corners, curling them over and making shapes. Kageyama soon discovered, and voiced, that the next contest was in Hearthome. It was called the Heartfelt Charmaine. But due to the landslide, Mt Coronet was impossible to cross from both Oreburgh City and Eterna City. They couldn’t get to Eterna city quickly either as there had been a bike theft recently and all rentals had to be halted until the lawyers and insurance brokers said it was okay to continue business as normal.

Hinata wasn’t really listening to what Kageyama was saying. He was trying to block out all distractions so he could work out what his heart was trying to convey to him. He had spent his entire life living with one goal. That goal was to defeat the Champion. To defeat the Champion, a Trainer had to defeat all the Gym Leaders and the Elite Four. But Hinata couldn’t do that if he was pursuing Ribbons.

He liked Contests. He liked the thrill of performing and the smell of salonpas. He liked when Kageyama congratulated him for a good performance. He liked the way Marian came up with wits on the fly. He liked the attention.

He liked Gym battles as well. He liked the rawness of it all. He liked when his Pokémon cried out fiercely and it was the two of them on the line. He liked the challenge and how every move he made, it was matched evenly and expertly by Roark.

Hinata didn’t know which one he liked more. His Pokémon liked Contests more. But Hinata wanted to make his parents proud. He wanted to accomplish what his parents weren’t able to do before him. He wanted to avenge their dreams. But his mother told him it didn’t matter and that she wanted him to be his own person and to strive for his own goals. Hinata knew his own goals but suddenly, he wasn’t certain.

Maybe Hinata wants to be the next Top Coordinator. Maybe he wanted to feel how soft a Ribbon is in between his fingers. Maybe he wants to live off of the exhilaration performing gave him. Hinata had never felt so conflicted before.

‘What would you do, Kageyama?’ Hinata asked, breaking Kageyama’s concentration on the leaflets.

‘I think you mean why did I do it?’ Kageyama corrected.

‘Huh?’ Hinata stammered.

‘I was going to defeat the Champion once, remember? Collect all the Gym Badges and battle
competitively and seriously like before Contests became mainstream.’ Kageyama reminded.

Hinata felt like a dolt. How could he have forgotten? “King of the Court” Kageyama had shed his original goal so he could become a better person. And, it seemed to be working. He was awkward but empathetic now. He wasn’t this cold, distant figure anymore. Hinata was willing to bet if Kageyama’s old classmates were to see him now, they couldn’t recognise him anymore because of how far he had come as a person since then.

‘I already know why, Bakageyama.’ Hinata teased.

‘I guess. I wanted to be kinder. What kind of person do you want to be, Hinata?’ Kageyama asked.

‘Respected.’ Hinata replied.

‘For what qualities do you want to be respected for?’ Kageyama asked.

‘Courage and coolness.’ Hinata replied.

‘Courage?’ Kageyama mused.

He put down his pamphlet and gazed at Hinata like he was analysing him. ‘Does the idea of only doing Contest scare you?’ Kageyama asked.

‘No... It just feels like there’s a huge wall in front of me. One I can’t pass.’

‘Then it’d take courage to cross that wall and maybe taking the leap to only do Contests could be your way of getting respect. The Little Giant did that once.’ Kageyama said.

Hinata’s eyes widened. He straightened out his posture and was happier already. ‘What do you mean? “The Little Giant did that once”?’ Hinata poorly imitated Kageyama.

‘Dumbass, I don’t sound like that. Didn’t you know? Someone made fun of Contests once and the Little Giant called them out for it. Said they didn’t have the guts to try and impress thousands of strangers with their skill. The Little Giant then did... five Contests I think it was to prove that person wrong. He won all five Contests and entered that year’s Grand Festival on top. But he didn’t stand a chance against serious Coordinators though.’ Kageyama said.

Hinata’s mind was made. ‘I wanna be the Little Giant when I grow up.’ he breathed.

‘Dumbass, weren’t you listening? The Little Giant didn’t win the Grand Festival.’ Kageyama said.

‘I don’t care. I’m going to be him when I grow up.’ Hinata said.

‘We’re already grown up.’ Kageyama snapped.

‘Still don’t care.’ Hinata sounded so star struck that it was like he was from another galaxy. ‘I’m gonna be the bestest Coordinator ever and everyone’ll be like gwaa, he’s so cool!’

Kageyama couldn’t help but smile at Hinata’s sudden burst of motivation. ‘So, where’s the next Contest?’ he asked.

‘For God’s sake.’ Kageyama whined. ‘It’s called the Floaroma February Rendezvous. It’s next month, on the fourteenth.’

‘But that’s like...’ Hinata paused and began to count on his fingers. ‘Almost exactly a month from now.’
‘I literally just said that, dumbass.’ Kageyama growled.
Tsukishima and Yamaguchi were training the Floaroma Town area due to the fact that in one month’s time, Floaroma February Rendezvous, a Contest of famous proportions would be on. Floaroma Town’s February Rendezvous takes place on Valentine’s Day and would specialise in double battles and team entrants. The winners would take home a Ribbon each as well. It was a Contest undertaken mostly by couples but exceptions were prone. Tsukishima and Yamaguchi weren’t a couple but the two were planning on entering the Rendezvous together anyway.

The floral scented twilight was beginning to settle. The night was painting the sky. The two Trainers had just headed home for the night. They had a room to themselves at the local PokeCentre. They had to pay for it a bit because they were staying so long but they didn’t mind.

Tsukishima kicked off his muddy shoes at the door. Yamaguchi let him in to their room. It was a large room with beautiful, arte novae works on the walls. A king sized bed sat in the middle of the room and a television faced it. Their respective things separated the room. The two had to share a bed as it was cheaper to do than rent a room with two. They didn’t mind. The bed was big enough for three, to be perfectly honest though.

They had spent today chasing certain kinds of Pokémon. It was incredibly rare though but sometimes there were Pokémon spotted with Hidden Abilities. Abilities that weren’t normally found in that species and local legend had it that the Mareep and Electrike at the Valley Windworks. Tsukishima and Yamaguchi had taken it upon themselves to find out if that was true because respectively, those two Pokémon had the abilities Plus and Minus. Those were abilities thought only to be found in Plusle and Minum. They were also abilities that worked in amazingly in double battles.

The two wanted to be prepared for anything in the Floaroma February Rendezvous so they were trying to catch Hidden Ability Pokémon. They had, so far, spent two days in the endeavour and no luck yet. They weren’t giving up hope yet.

Yamaguchi attached his PokeGear to his speaker set. He didn’t look like the type but he loved golden oldie music or swing music. He liked brassy instruments best. Tsukishima didn’t complain about the music even though it wasn’t his thing. He preferred something heavy, like death metal, with growls and killer guitar riffs.

Yamaguchi sat on the bed and it jumped a little bit. He and Tsukishima had their backs to each other. Their hands were centimetres apart and Yamaguchi’s fingers were slowly coming up towards Tsukishima’s hand. ‘Do you wanna dance, Tsuki?’ Yamaguchi asked. Tsukishima looked away, he blushed. He felt as Yamaguchi caressed his hand. It was a very tempting offer.

Before Tsukishima knew it, he had been swept up onto his feet and the two were moving in time to music. Yamaguchi was leading. He smiled and his eyes twinkled. ‘My feet’re sore.’ Tsukishima complained. They had been running about madly like little children for most the day.
‘Same.’ Yamaguchi said and he let Tsukishima spin him around.

Yamaguchi came in closer. ‘I’m having fun.’ he mumbled.

‘Same.’ Tsukishima said and his cheeks were redder than beets.

The upbeat swing music wafted around them.
Hinata and Kageyama spent the rest of the day in Oreburgh. They did some more touristy stuff, just because they could. They even went on a Mine tour like the guides suggested. That was dull and dreary mistake so they abandoned that endeavour half way through. The two ended up going on a long, stamina pressuring jog around the city. But instead of sprinting and yelling at each other in a competitive haze, they turned on the radio app on Kageyama’s PokeGear and let it blast while they took in the sights.

The two had previously thought that Oreburgh was a dirty city with not much going for it. And they had been really wrong about that assumption. With their slow pace, the boys were able to see their mistaken assumption. Oreburgh was really a city of hidden beauty. Most of it was layered under dust but it was there. The scenic route was truly the best route.

Kageyama and Hinata spent two hours on their scenic route jog before heading back to the PokeCentre with growling stomachs. Nurse Joy greeted them and told them to go shower shortly after but they didn’t listen; they were too intent on getting some tucker into their bellies. After being ignored, Nurse Joy banned them from the food court until they took a shower. It was then, when they reluctantly listened.

They spent the rest of the day indoors, idling their time and not in a particular want to leave just yet. They had thirty-one days in order to prepare for the Floaroma February Rendezvous. Hinata spent most of the day making poffins and working out who liked what flavours. After some experimentation, he discovered that Kageyama and Ralts liked his spicy ones best, and Prinplup and Staravia liked his dry ones best. As it turned out, Nyta was the only one to enjoy sweet poffins best.

The following day, the boys had their usual cheapo fast food breakfast at the PokeCentre and then gave Nurse Joy their room key. She farewelled them and the two were headed for Jubilife again. The boys hoped the trip to Jubilife would only take them a daylight hours’ walk. They weren’t in the mood to camp on Route 203 again, not when Kageyama’s family apartment beckoned in the city.

Their hopes of getting into Jubilife by dusk were met. The two entered the rowdy bustle of Jubilife by fifteen past six. Kageyama hailed them a taxi and had the man drive them to the apartment complex. Hinata sat shyly in the back and watched as huge buildings towered over street corners. His stomach growled and he wondered what Kageyama will be able to whip up for them tonight. It was sure to be good eating.

Kageyama paid the cabbie and held the door out for Hinata. The taxi then sped off again because someone blue-toothed the driver. Hinata walked close to Kageyama. Even though Hinata knew the apartment complex relatively well from having spent a week there, he was still shy and cautious about. He had also gotten used to the elevator ride. It was fun and didn’t hurt his stomach.

Kageyama put his key into the door. The light was on, to his surprise. There were two sets of
shoes in the doorway. ‘Pardon the intrusion.’ Hinata mumbled to himself as he took his shoes off.

‘Hinata.’ Kageyama’s voice was low like a warning.

There was a scuffling sound down the hallway. Those shoes didn’t belong to Kageyama’s mother. They were too spiky and tall. But their friends, they definitely belonged to his father. Whose were they? Kageyama had a sinking feeling.

Hinata passed Kageyama who was trepid to enter the apartment. Hinata wandered into the kitchen. Kageyama approached the hallway that led to the bedrooms and bathroom. There was a “Do Not Disturb” sign on the door. It had flirty, pink handwriting and golden tassels hanging off of it.

‘Kageyama!’ Hinata called out from the kitchen but Kageyama ignored him. He was too fixed on the master bedroom door. Its handle wiggled. A naked man emerged from behind it. He was chubby with flat hair and glasses askew. His neck was pink and suckled with lipstick. ‘Tobio!’ Kageyama’s father growled. ‘What are you doing home?’ Kageyama was overcome by boiling rage. He couldn’t believe it. ‘Why are you having an affair?’ he roared.

‘God, you’re such a dumbass.’

‘Does Mother know?’

Up until that point, it was like the two had been having separate conversations. Hinata just wanted to disappear. This was a private matter. It didn’t involve him, He shouldn’t be here. And yet, he stood before the answer. “Does Mother know?” The question swam in circles inside of Hinata’s head. On the fridge door, the answer to the question was written down in pretty characters that were sleek and elegant despite the unruly ink of markers. It wasn’t a direct answer but it still had a clear purpose. On the fridge, Mrs Kageyama had written: “Divorce papers are on the kitchen table. Sign them.” It was pretty implied that she did though.

A lady appeared behind Mr Kageyama. She was wearing a bathrobe so see-through and erotic that it could be considered lingerie. ‘Kids are such a turn-off, honey. I’m leaving. I’ll take the correct money, don’t you worry.’ She disappeared again and Kageyama felt revolted.

‘She’s a call girl.’ Kageyama stated. The lady had slipped into a skin-tight, blood red dress that barely covered her ass. She sauntered out of the room; she took the “Do Not Disturb” sign and a wad full of cash. ‘Tamako knows.’ Kageyama’s father said simply.

He closed the door and made himself decent whilst his son roared at the door in fury. ‘All those damn business trips you go on? Are they really just trips to the brothel?’ Kageyama screeched. His father came out and barged past. Kageyama wouldn’t stop screaming. It soon got on his father’s nerves; he turned around and coldly spat: ‘You want to know why we’re divorcing? It’s because she regrets giving birth to such a retarded son.’

That’s when Hinata had grown sick of being the silent and invisible one in the apartment. Kageyama had gone quiet. Hot tears bled from his eyes. He scrunched up his face and he clamped his hand over his arm.

Hinata took a deep breath and glared at Mr Kageyama. ‘Jerk-face!’ he yelled. Hinata stomped off and took his friend. He put his shoes on and they left before even the prostitute did. Hinata marched the two of them down the hall and he left the house key behind them. He didn’t let go of Kageyama’s hand.
Not until they were outside. ‘Jerk-face.’ Hinata spat again. Kageyama came closer to Hinata. He took the smaller boy’s hand and placed his head onto his shoulder. Hinata felt tears on his shoulders. He heard Kageyama’s muffled pain. ‘It’ll be okay.’ Hinata said. He didn’t know if he was lying or soothing. He hoped the latter. ‘Let’s go to the PokeCentre.’ he offered. Kageyama took his head away from Hinata’s shoulder. He wiped his face with the palm of his hand.

Hinata couldn’t look at Kageyama directly. He looked too sad. His eyes were bloodshot and his cheeks were puffy. He had lost that air of control he had always had. This time, Hinata called a taxi and made all the big decisions whilst Kageyama followed behind, rarely speaking. Kageyama refused to let go of Hinata’s hand. He wanted something to comfort him. And Hinata became that comforting object.

The taxi let them off a few meters from the PokeCentre. Hinata paid him and he sauntered off. The two walked into the PokeCentre. ‘Two beds please.’ Hinata asked the Nurse Joy attending to matters at the counter. She was horrified when she saw the state that Kageyama was in.

‘Oh my! What’s wrong with your friend? Does he need emergency attention? I can call a doctor!’ she fussed.

Kageyama huffed. ‘I’ll be fine.’

‘Yeah, he’ll be fine.’ Hinata said and Nurse Joy gave them a key and pager.

‘Buzz me if you need anything during the night.’ she said seriously.

‘Of course.’ Hinata said. He put both items in his pocket. Kageyama finally let go of his hand.

Kageyama curled up on his bed with a blanket. He blocked out the outside world. Hinata said close to him. ‘Do you need to talk?’ Hinata offered.

‘You your father ever call you “retarded”?’ Kageyama mumbled.

‘No.’ Hinata replied with some thought.

‘Would he ever hire a prostitute and cheat on your mother?’ Kageyama asked.

‘No.’ Hinata stated.

‘Can I meet your parents?’ Kageyama said.

‘Sure. Let’s leave for Twinleaf tomorrow? Be at the homestead by four o’clock, maybe.’ Hinata said.

Kageyama smiled but then frowned. He snuggled into his blankets deeper. ‘Good night.’

‘Good night.’ Hinata replied. Hinata got up and crawled into his own bed. He wished he knew how to comfort Kageyama. That night, neither of the two could sleep easy.
Meeting the Hinata Family

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was unusual morning that followed. They didn’t even grunt at each other a well-intentioned “Good morning”. They also didn’t go on their usual jog. Kageyama was grumpy and tired, more than normal. Hinata didn’t know what to say. He came from a loving background. His parents wouldn’t divorce each other, even though their marriage did tend to be quite flawed at times. They certainly wouldn’t call him terrible things either so Hinata was having a hard time empathising with Kageyama. Hinata imagined though that the turmoil in Kageyama’s heart was torturous.

They ate in silence. They didn’t linger after breakfast. They kept close to each other and not a single word was spoken. Neither of the two made conversation and they both made careful not to touch the other. They made their way southward to Route 202.

They hurried through the streets as fast as they could. Kageyama wanted to be out of Jubilife City as fast as possible; Hinata sensed that from the way he walked. He had his shoulders pointed in and he rarely kept his eyes upward. Hinata got them to the edge of the city where urbanisation bled into the countryside. They stepped onto a poorly maintained road and set off. They embraced the fresh air and quickly hopped down ledges and ridges.

The two worked together to get down the bad terrain as fast as possible. They still didn’t feel the need to speak to each other, Part way through the Route, Kageyama decided to stop. He plonked himself down by a tree and began to fidget with his PokeGear. Hinata wondered what he was doing. He sat down by him. Kageyama moved slightly away. ‘You okay?’ Hinata asked. His throat felt raw from disuse.

‘No.’ growled Kageyama. ‘But I feel better now. I just blocked my parents’ numbers.’

Hinata disagreed with what Kageyama was doing. He didn’t think it was necessary to cut off all contact but if it relieved Kageyama even a little bit, he supposed that it was allowable.

Kageyama got up again and put away his PokeGear. The two walked in silence again. They arrived in Sandgem Town by eleven, a little earlier than they thought they would. They started speaking again when they realised they were hungry. They bought wraps from a beachside stand and they ate whilst walking along the waterside. Their shoes and socks were in their bags. The ocean was a deep blue and moved in subtle ripples. When its small waves reached their ankles, it brought refreshing coolness.

Hinata saw a bench up further, closer into town, he asked if he could sit down and Kageyama nodded. ‘I should probably call my parents, tell them to expect company.’ Hinata said. He couldn’t help but feel there were notes of foresight in what he had said. Kageyama passed along his PokeGear. ‘Feel free to use up my credit.’ Kageyama said.

‘Oh, I don’t think I’ll be that long.’ Hinata said.

Hinata opened up the phone app and tapped the name his family had been saved under. Hinata put the PokeGear to his ear and waited. After a few rings, he heard his father pick up and greet him. ‘Hinata family residence, Hinata Katsu speaking.’

‘Dad? It’s me, Shouyou.’
His father chuckled heartily. ‘Why’re you ringing so early?’

‘Kageyama and I decided that we’d swing by Twinleaf for a bit, for, uh, some reasons. Kageyama’s not feeling too good. Not the kinda thing a Nurse Joy can fix though. We think we might come home at four but it’s possible we’ll be earlier.’ Hinata replied.

‘I’ll go tell your mum to put something extra nice on. How long’re you thinking of coming home for?’

‘Dunno yet.’

‘Awright, see you when you haul ass back ‘ere.’

Hinata’s father hung up. He was a man of few words and speaking over a phone wasn’t something he was skilful at doing. Hinata gave the PokeGear back to Kageyama. He stood up, stretched out, then turned. Hinata remained seated. ‘Kageyama...’ Hinata said.

‘Mm?’

‘My family...’ Hinata trailed off. He was worried that he would come off sounding like a selfish brat.

‘Can’t be as bad as mine.’ Kageyama affirmed.

‘No, that’s not it. It’s just, we’re not rich. We’ve got more dollars in debt than we’ve got berries on the farm.’ Hinata said.

This was something Hinata had kept pent up for a long time but it didn’t feel good getting it off his chest. It made him feel bad. He felt like he was invalidating what Kageyama was feeling.

Kageyama sat down next to Hinata. ‘You sound like... you’ve been wanting to tell me this for a while now.’ he said.

‘I have.’ Hinata admitted.

‘Thanks for telling me. I feel like I understand you better now. No wonder you’re always so fussy about who pays for what and how much we spend.’ Kageyama said. Hinata got up. ‘Wanna leave yet?’ he asked, changing the conversation.

‘Yeah.’ Kageyama replied.

The two walked past the Pokémon Lab. They weren’t tempted to stop by and say hello to Professor Rowan but it was put on the agenda.

Kageyama let his Pokémon walk with him. He liked being surrounded by them. It helped make him feel a bit better. He had heard somewhere, a few places actually, that it was good to surround oneself with those who lift you. And Kageyama was now surrounded by those who made him stronger; not just his Pokémon but Hinata too.

Kageyama hadn’t ever been this south before. There was an unfamiliar crispness in the air. The pines trees stood proudly and the rural charm the area had was majorly appealing. He liked it here already. He wondered what Twinleaf was like. He knew it was going to be tiny. He recalled Hinata mentioning that his school only had twenty or so students in it. With every step they took towards Twinleaf, the lighter his heart got. The happier he became but he didn’t show it and Hinata didn’t realise it.
‘Tomorrow, we’ll go by the lake. I think that’d be nice. Go just before midday maybe. We should go swimming.’ Hinata tittered. ‘Don’t think Nyta’d like that but Prinplup would. Do you like swimming? I like swimming. Maybe we should bring Natsu with us.’ Kageyama wasn’t really listening though but swimming in a lake sounded interesting. He had only ever swum in chlorinated pools. He wondered what was safer though, a lake or the ocean.

Kageyama absorbed his surroundings. They were gorgeous and scenic. Their beauty was unparalleled. It was raw and charming simultaneously. He liked how it smelt and how the grass crunched underfoot. He liked that his Pokémon felt at home here too. Similarly, he also liked how at home Hinata was here. In the city, he always stepped about so cautiously and was so afraid of being lost but he was acting like he had a map sewn onto the back of his hand.

‘Welcome to Twinleaf.’ Hinata chirruped. Kageyama looked around. There was a main street with a variety of shops. A few elderly women toddled about with to-do lists. A few Pokémon scrabbled in the streets. The tar road was faded and the buildings had an antique look to them. They were crowned decoratively with out-of-era finesse. ‘And you live on a farm, right?’ Kageyama asked tentatively.

‘Yeah. We’re a bit more south.’ Hinata said.

Hinata showed Kageyama around. School had just been let out and a few children whizzed out of the school. Which was tiny, the size of a barn really and even that was generous. The children had plenty of room to play though.

They walked past a pond and a chubby, fisherman greeted Hinata. Hinata seemed to be greeting everyone though and would then introduce Kageyama. Kageyama had never been a situation like this before. He was certain that Hinata literally knew everyone in this town and their names off by heart. Kageyama barely remembered all the names of his classmates from school and he certainly didn’t know all the names of the people in his old apartment complex. It was genuinely shocking for him to see this change.

The farmstead that Hinata was from was called “Homely Victory” and the road towards it was the shaggiest looking thing Kageyama had ever seen. It was mostly dirt and it was thin. It didn’t look like anyone ever drove on it but there was a bit of evidence for people walking on it frequently. The fields that lined the road were full of yellow grass and thirsty-looking berry plants. Kageyama had seen five different species already and Hinata said that they weren’t even half way to the farmstead.

Eventually, the house came into view. It was small and single-storey. Adjacent to it though was a large, red barn that was taller than the actual house. They sat in a square of neat grass and within the boundaries of a rusted, barbed wire fence.

A little girl in denim overalls and orange pigtails swung on the rusted gate. She had a large, cheeky grin and waved heartily towards the boys. ‘That’s Natsu.’ Hinata said to Kageyama. They walked closer and they could hear her sing out now:

‘Beat you! Beat you! I got here first!’

‘Didn’t even know it was a competition.’ Hinata called out.

‘It’s always a competition.’ Natsu yelled back.

She scrambled over the fence and bolted straight for them. She was small and speedy. She crashed into Hinata with a hug and then looked up at Kageyama in awe. She was energetic and
loud. ‘You’re so tall!’ she swooned. Kageyama thought that Natsu was just like her brother. They looked alike and even acted alike. ‘Gimme a piggy-back!’ she cried.

‘Kageyama’s not here for your amusement.’ Hinata scolded.

‘I don’t mind.’ Kageyama admitted.

Natsu lifted her arms up and bounced. ‘C’mon!’ she prompted. Kageyama got down and she climbed onto his back. Kageyama carried her all the way into the house. She was so light that it didn’t feel like it mattered. ‘You’re spoiling her.’ Hinata whinged but Natsu just giggled. Kageyama imagined that this was what it was like to have siblings.

Hinata opened a wobbly door. It didn’t even have a lock on it. Inside, the house was just as shabby. There wasn’t any carpet and the rug in the room was holey. The furnishings were years out of date and there were senseless piles of clutter in every corner of the room and on every surface. But it felt so homely. It felt like there was a story behind every bit of bric-a-brac. It was a completely different place to where Kageyama had grown up.


‘Yes, Mum!’ Natsu cried back.

‘Gimme a minute.’ the voice called.

Natsu had been put down by this point. She had sat herself at the uneven and funky-looking dinner table that they had in the kitchen. ‘Feel free to sit.’ Hinata said awkwardly. The place was a mess. He was glad that Kageyama didn’t seem to mind. ‘I’ll get us some afternoon snacks.’

He poured out three cups of chilled water and sliced some cheese and put it on some crackers. Soon, a lady with messy, orange hair in a ponytail appeared in the kitchen. Her hair seemed wet and she wore faded pyjamas that had holes over the knees. ‘I am so sorry for the mess and for what I’m wearing. I was having a shower. I thought you’d arrive later than sooner. Oops, so uh, yes. Tobio, right?’

‘Yes.’ Kageyama said.

‘I’m Haruka, Sho’s mother. I’ve heard so much about you. You don’t look anything like what I thought. Then again, first time I heard about you Sho was talking about you the same way most people talk about the devil.’

Hinata blushed. ‘Muuum.’ he whined.

‘I’m only being silly. So, I was expecting you to be in shambles. Katsu, I mean Mr Hinata, said that you were feeling sick. Are you okay?’ Mrs Hinata approached Kageyama. She put her hand against his forehead. ‘You’re not warm... Then again, if it was just a cold, you woulda picked something up at a PokeCentre or pharmacy.’

Hinata glanced at Natsu. ‘Natsu, we need some time by ourselves. Could you go play with your dolls in your room?’ Hinata asked.

‘Oh, it’s that kind of problem.’ Mrs Hinata murmured. ‘Please Natsu.’

‘Can I take the rest of the biscuits?’ she asked.
‘No.’ her mother said firmly. Natsu pouted and left unwillingly anyway. She dragged the heels of her shoes and took an unnecessarily long time.

Mrs Hinata seemed to radiate an aura of maternity and Kageyama found that comforting. ‘So, what’s wrong, hun?’ she asked. She had a deep voice, for a woman. Kageyama explained what had happened and how he felt about it. He told her that he felt like hurt and like a bastard child. He came close to coming to tears. He also told her about how Hinata had been such a great help; an absolute comfort to be around.

She processed what she had been told. ‘Can I just say something to Sho for a second?’ she asked.

‘Sure.’ Kageyama said. Mrs Hinata faced her son. She looked cross.

‘What did I tell you about calling people “jerk-faces”?’ she asked.

‘That it’s rude and inappropriate.’ Hinata recited.

‘I’d ground you but due to the circumstance, I’ll let it slide but just this once.’ she said.

‘Okay.’ Hinata said.

Kageyama was choking up and so close to tears again that he felt like a dam about to overflow. ‘It’s okay, sweetie.’ Mrs Hinata said. She was cautious to hug him and only did so when he gave her permission. ‘You’re welcome here any time. Basically, I’m your mother now.’ Kageyama’s face changed immediately upon hearing that. He blushed terribly with embarrassment; as did Hinata.

‘That’s not necessary, ma’am.’ he said and she stopped hugging him.

‘Ahaha, I guess not. I was just getting carried away. But anyway, you’re welcome here any time.’ Mrs Hinata said.

She glanced at the retro clock on the wall. ‘I should probably get dinner started. What do you like, Tobi? Can I call you that?’ she asked.

‘It’s fine.’ Kageyama replied. ‘I’m happy with anything.’

‘Sho mentioned you like milky treats so I bought some strawberry yogurt for dessert.’ Mrs Hinata said.

‘Mum.’ Hinata whined embarrassedly again. Kageyama wondered what the cause for Hinata’s embarrassment was.

Chapter End Notes

Random musing for ya'll to talk about in the comments: would Daichi, Oikawa, and Kiyoko being in a three-way rivalry be an interesting dynamic to add to the story?
They had an early dinner. It was still light out when the vegetarian lasagne came out of the oven. Natsu and Hinata set the table under their mother’s guidance. Kageyama insisted on helping but he was told that: “As guest, it’s your job to be lazy.” by Mrs Hinata.

She began to serve up when she realised that her husband hadn’t come in yet. ‘Tobi, actually, go and fetch Katsu. He’s probably in the barn by this time of day, making sure everyone’s fed. Oh dear! Tobi, Sho, get your Pokémon out. They needa be fed too. I can’t believe I almost forgot about them. Hope they get along with mine and Katsu’s rascals.’ she fussied.

‘Yep.’ Hinata said and he showed Kageyama the way to the barn.

Kageyama knew the way to the barn. It was a pretty big building and nearby as well but he didn’t mind having Hinata tell him little things about the place on the way there. Homely Victory had been in the family for two generations now and Hinata’s grandparents had been the ones to have built it from the ground up.

Hinata opened the barn doors wide. It was the smell that hit Kageyama first. It was foul and then it was the sight. There was dander and feathers and straw and mud. Everything under the sun was in this barn and then he saw the Pokémon. They were eating from bowls and troughs. Kageyama saw plenty of Pokémon hailing from Hoenn as well as a mix of those native to Sinnoh. There was a mix of the common; he saw a Bibarel, and the rare, such as an Exploudred. He wasn’t sure how many he counted but there were at least thirty Pokémon all up.

And in the middle of all the mess, was a dark haired and dark skinned man. He was built like a brick house and it was clear to Kageyama that Hinata and Natsu took after their mother than their father. ‘Hey, Dad!’ Hinata called out and the man turned around. He looked musty and dirty. ‘We’re havin’ dinner and Mum told us that our Pokemon’re to eat here.’

The man grinned and put down the buckets of grain he had been handing out. He glared at a Pachirisu and it stayed put. ‘You must be Kageyama. Wow, you don’t look anythin’ like Sho reckons. Where’re yer horns and Zubat wings?’ he asked and he affectionately ruffled Kageyama’s hair. ‘So you’re Kageyama Tobio, good to have you here, son.’

‘Uh.’ Kageyama said and he pulled away. It was insight after insight for Kageyama. No wonder Hinata turned out the way he did with a family like this. And according to Mrs Hinata, he was part of that family too now. He hid honour and happiness rather than jealousy.

Mr Hinata shook Kageyama’s hand. He had a rough, calloused paw. ‘Hinata Katsu, Sho an’ Natsu’s dad. So, let’s see ‘em. What kinda Pokémon have the two of you caught?’ he asked.

‘Oink and Nyta!’ Hinata said and he let his Pokémon out of their Poke Balls. Mr Hinata was impressed by the two.

I really don't know why there is a connection between KageHina and Katy Perry (specifically her song California Gurls) but according to my fanfic muses, there is one.
‘Oink, you’ve grown so much in so little time. Atta boy. And you must be Nyta, well-bred thing. Look at those kankles. I reckon you’ve got Primeape in you.’ Mr Hinata appraised.

‘The Nurse Joy at Oreburgh reckons that too.’ Hinata said.

Hinata’s father ruffled his son’s bright orange hair and Hinata smiled. ‘C’mon, Kageyama. Don’t leave us waiting.’ Mr Hinata prompted.

‘Oh, uh, right.’ Kageyama said and he let out his three Pokémon. Two of his Pokémon cooed when they were let out.

‘Struth, these’re some good lookin’ blighters too. Prinplup, good, good. Haru went for Chimchar. Her Infernape’s round here somewhere. Bit of a loner, prefers to eat by itself. Staravia, nicely-nicely. Dependable, little buggers. Bit quiet, iddn’t he? And a Ralts! Aw, a Ralts. Wasn’t ever able to catch one of ‘em little ankle-biters. Tell me, Gardevoir or Gallade?’

‘Gallade, hopefully.’ Kageyama replied.

Mr Hinata beamed. ‘Got a Dawn Stone?’ he asked.

‘No.’ Kageyama replied.

‘Know what? You can have mine. Never caught anything which’d be able to use it.’ Mr Hinata offered.

‘I couldn’t...’ Kageyama politely declined.

‘I don’t need it, Haru doesn’t need it. Sho, do you need it?’ he asked.

‘Don’t think so.’ Hinata replied. ‘Don’t think Natsu would need it either.’

‘After dinner, I’ll give to you, eh?’ Mr Hinata said and Kageyama realised he couldn’t persuade the man out of giving him a gift.

They chatted as they returned to the homestead. ‘Hurry up, you lot. Dinner’s gettin’ cold.’ Mrs Hinata yelled out of the front door’s frame.

‘I know, I know.’ Mr Hinata called back.

The meal wasn’t restaurant quality but Kageyama loved it nonetheless. He couldn’t recall a time when his mother had spent time and cooked the family something. Usually it was ready-to-go meals in foils or he had to make something but here, it was a normal occurrence. Everyone had something to say and they laughed and joked. It was raucous and almost novel to Kageyama who was used to eating in silence.

‘Big Bro Tobi, what do you wanna be when you grow up?’ Natsu asked. ‘I wanna be a Pokémon doctor! I’ll get a degree an’ everythin’.’

‘Not if you don’t eat all your green capsicum.’ Mrs Hinata scolded and Natsu poked at the vegetable she didn’t like.

‘I haven’t really thought much further than becoming Top Coordinator.’ Kageyama said.

‘And have you decided what you want to do, Sho?’ Mrs Hinata asked.

‘Contests. I wanna be like Little Giant.’ Hinata replied.
‘Was Little Giant a Coordinator?’ Mr Hinata asked.

‘Yeah. And he’s so cool about it!’ Hinata replied. ‘And once I become cooler than Little Giant, I’ll take over the farm.’

While it wasn’t necessary, Kageyama helped with cleaning up. Haruka washed things and would hand them to Kageyama who would dry them and put them away. ‘Thanks for looking after Sho. I’m a worried mother, y’know? But you’re a good kid. I’m glad your friends with Sho.’ Mrs Hinata mentioned. ‘Oh, I hope you don’t mind but we don’t have a guest room or a fold-out, so is it fine if you and Sho share his room?’

‘It’s fine. It’s what we do anyway.’ Kageyama replied.

It was getting dark out and Natsu had been sent to her room. It was her bed time. Hinata and Kageyama were told they could call lights out whenever. They watched a little bit of television before deciding to roll out Kageyama’s sleeping bag on the floor of Hinata’s bedroom.

Hinata’s bedroom was completely different to Kageyama’s. It was messy and had too many personal items stacked up on bookshelves and dressing tables. It was evident that someone had made an effort, probably his mother, to clean and tidy. There wasn’t much space in the room though. Kageyama was so close to Hinata’s bed that he was certain that Hinata’s arm would dangle in front of his face some time during the night. But it was weirdly cosy.

Like normal, the following morning, Kageyama and Hinata woke up about the same time and had their morning run. They decided to run the length of the road from the house to the outer limits of the farm where it the road connected with the Twinleaf main road. They got back a while later and it was Hinata who had won this morning’s competition. The two ate breakfast with Hinata’s father. The girls were still sleeping.

‘Got plans for the day, boys?’ Mr Hinata asked.

‘We were thinking of swimming at Lake Verity.’ Hinata replied.

‘Good thinkin’ boys. Ask your mother, Sho, and see if she’ll let you take Natsu. And what Pokémon were you thinking of taking?’ he asked.

‘Oink?’ Hinata said.

‘Just Prinplup.’ Kageyama said.

‘I suggest, bring everyone but Nyta and reckon you two could take our lot?’

‘Don’t you need them for the crops?’ Hinata asked.

‘I’m only worried about the empty paddocks. I just need Camie, Aggie and Dot for that.’ Mr Hinata replied.

Hinata nodded and Kageyama stared at him. ‘Oh, uh, Camerupt, Aggron and Shiftry.’ Mr Hinata said.

‘I see now. That makes sense.’ Kageyama said.

‘What about Tat? Should she come?’ Hinata asked.

‘Does it rain? Of course Raticate’d wanna come.’ Mr Hinata replied.
‘Silly question.’ Hinata mumbled.

Mr Hinata put his dishes in the sink soon after. He then pulled on some protective gear and shoved off. Mrs Hinata woke up shortly after the front door banged and closed. ‘Just missed him.’ Hinata said.

‘And he didn’t even clean up after himself,’ Mrs Hinata grumbled after she saw the plate in the sink. ‘And I think I heard something about goin’ to the lake. Fill me in.’

Hinata prattled off their plans for the day. ‘That sounds like right good fun.’ his mother sighed. ‘After ten, we’ll head down and I’ll get stuff ready. You boys have swimsuits, right? I’ll get some more breakfast cooking. Reckon Natsu’ll be up soon with all this noise. We’ll have a good day out.’

As soon as Natsu found out about the plans to go to the lake, she immediately got changed into her pink and yellow one-piece. Mrs Hinata organised what they were bringing, such as towels and sunscreen. Hinata and Kageyama organised the Pokémon who were being brought as well. In a blink of an eye, everyone was ready and raring to go.

Natsu was perched on Bibarel’s back and Tat the Raticate was helping Mrs Hinata bring bags. Prinplup was happy socialising with the other water types that were brought along. They were Pelly the Pelipper, Dewgong and Floatzel. Hinata was holding Snaps the Sharpedo’s PokeBall. Kageyama was taking the chance to study Hinata’s parents’ Pokémon. It was very obvious that these were retired battlers. They had a dull fatigue in the way they walked and seemed old but they still seemed powerful.

When they started walking through town, Kageyama was sure the group would cause a fuss but no. Instead, people remarked on how well kept the Pokémon were and how strong they seemed to be. Some also remarked on how Natsu and Hinata were taller and others wanted to know who Kageyama is. There closeness everyone seemed to have with everyone else was something Kageyama found peculiar and excluded from. He wondered how apparent he was to the natives of Twinleaf as a city slicker. He imagined, considerably so.

They moved into lakefront area and passed through a gaggle of trees before finding the lake. It glittered like a sapphire jewel underneath the sun. Its waves batted the shoreline gently. There was a huge cavern in the middle of the lake. The water type Pokémon immediately dove into the water as soon as they could see it. Natsu joined them as quickly as she could too. Hinata threw out Snaps’ PokeBall and it happily materialised in the water.

‘Now, don’t stray too far.’ Mrs Hinata said as the boys began to take their shirts off.

‘Got it, Mum.’ Hinata replied. His mother nodded and began to set up a canvas and easel.

Natsu played with her brother and Kageyama happily in the water. It was cool and refreshing underneath the summery sun. They had potato salad and sandwiches for lunch and it was a relaxing change of pace. It felt more like a holiday than anything else. They headed home not long after midday. It was the Pokémon who wanted to stay behind longer than anyone else. And Tat, the Raticate, bringing her along for a swim had turned into a very bad decision as her fur stank from being wet.

Everyone was exhausted from walking and playing by the time they got home. Kageyama was beginning to wonder why they didn’t just take a car but he figured it would be discourteous to ask. Mrs Hinata led the Pokémon back into the barn and ordered the kids to go take showers. She said
she would start cooking up dinner afterwards. It had been a long but pleasure-filled day.

The artwork she completed during the day now hung on the wall next to the dining room table. It depicted Hinata, Natsu and Kageyama all playing with the Pokémon they brought on the lakeside excursion. It was a hyper realistic portrayal done in watercolour. Kageyama considered the artwork to be stunning. Mrs Hinata believed otherwise and said it was one of her more mediocre artworks and she felt like she hadn’t fulfilled her muse’s wishes in regards to her subject. Kageyama soon realised that all of the artworks in the house were signed ‘Haruka’.
Takeda’s naming theme is contemporary Japanese writers, to match up with the fact that’s what he teaches in canon. Mitsuyo is named after Mitsuyo Kakuta who wrote “Woman on the Other Shore” and “The Eighth Day.”

Takeda folded his sheets into his bed again and his Minccino named Mitsuyo helped. He glanced at his roommate, Ukai. He was still asleep. His blonde hair was in a mess and his bed was more so. ‘Ukai!’ he called from afar. ‘Ukai.’

‘Five more minutes, Mum.’ groaned Ukai.

‘I’m not your mother.’ Takeda replied.


Takeda picked up Mitsuyo who nuzzled up closer to him. ‘Mr Ukai, we have a big day ahead of us.’ Takeda paused. He smelt something foul in the air. ‘Are you hung-over?’

‘Maybe.’ Ukai slurred.

‘If you get up now, I’ll make you some breakfast. Really greasy stuff, if not, Mitsuyo will use Wake-Up Slap on you.’ Takeda offered.

Ukai tumbled out of bed. ‘Fine, I might’ve had a lil too much to drink last night.’ Ukai growled. ‘Wait, what do you mean we have a big day?’

‘Today’s January nineteenth, the reason why we’re in Hearthome.’ Takeda tried to prompt Ukai but he looked vague still.

‘I thought we were here to go clubbing with Fantina.’ Ukai said.

‘No. That’s just something you convinced yourself of.’ Takeda said.

Takeda sighed. He couldn’t believe this. ‘Your grandfather pulled out of being able to come to Hearthome for the Heartfelt Charmaine so now you have to sub in.’ Takeda tried to remind Ukai but he was still coming up blank.

‘Charmaine? Sounds like champagne... Is there going to be booze?’ Ukai asked.

‘No. We can’t serve alcohols at venues where minors will be present.’ Takeda said.

‘Then I don’t want to come. Why can’t the old man do it?’ Ukai asked.

‘He can’t make the journey. His back is still playing up.’ Takeda replied.

‘Bloody ridiculous.’ Ukai cussed.
He got up and looked through his things. He pulled on a shabby-looking suit and considered wrapping a crimson tie around his neck. ‘Argh, I hate this.’ Ukai muttered.

‘Just remember what I told you: courtesy and smiles. That’s all you need to succeed.’ Takeda said and he smiled wide.

‘I have a convenience shop in Veilstone that needs my attention. I’m a business owner first, breeder second and Contest judge last.’ Ukai growled.

He stumbled down the stairs outside their hotel room. Ukai trailed after him with his Minccino lying across his shoulders. It was a spoilt critter. They had breakfast and Ukai was barely awake.

‘You know what, Mr Ukai. Fantina will likely to be at the Contest. If you see her, why don’t you go and ask her if she wants to go clubbing. But I’ll only let you if are on your best behaviour at the Contest. We got a lot of complaints at the Rookie Prize because of how you acted.’ Takeda said, he was strict and firm in his tone of voice. Ukai perked up.

‘Deal.’ he decided.

They arrived at the Contest on time and they took the seats at the panel. Nurse Joy greeted them and soon the lights dimmed and a sole spotlight wildly. Marian walked onto the stage in her gaudy pink and yellow get-up. ‘Hello, hello, hello! I’m your host Marian and welcome to the first Hearthome Contest for the year and the third Contest for our newest generation of Coordinators? Isn’t it exciting? Like always, we have panel of judges: the esteemed Hearthome Nurse Joy!’

There was a round of applause for Nurse Joy who humbly accepted it. ‘We have the esteemed Pokémon Connoisseur, Takeda Ittetsu!’ There was a round of applause for Takeda who smiled earnestly because of it. ‘And finally, we have the grandson of the legendary Pokémon Breeder, Ukai Ikkei.’ The name “Ukai” was famous throughout Sinnoh. He was rumoured to be the man that Professor Rowan gets his “starter” Pokémon off of.

Marian calmed down the crowd and then whipped it into a frenzy through charisma alone. Soon, the first Coordinator was drawn out of the backstage pit. ‘Here’s a girl we all know and love. She was ranked fourth in last year’s Grand Festival. It’s Shimizu Kiyoko. It’ll be a tough day for all the rookies here today and rumour has it, she’s taken on an apprentice!’ Marian said.

Shimizu Kiyoko was a beautiful, bespectacled girl underneath a large, floppy sunhat with a navy blue sash tied around it. She wore a pastel blue dress with sleeves to the elbows that had lace underneath. She looked like a rich and graceful heiress. She stepped out onto the stage with elegance. She held a PokeBall in her hand that was inside a Ball Capsule. It was decorated with a white cloud seal on it. ‘Good luck.’ she whispered to the PokeBall and she gave it a peck.

‘Mismagius!’ she threw out her PokeBall.

It opened and billowing white spoke poured out of the PokeBall. There was no sign of Mismagius within it until yellow sparks began to part the smoke. Mismagius unfurled itself and twirled about. Its tendrils delicately swung about. Its screech wasn’t pleasant but already, its entrance had created high hopes for what followed.

‘Mismagius!’ Kiyoko prompted and her Pokémon wailed. Out of its jagged mouth came red and yellow bolts.

‘A mix of Uproar and Thunder Wave without cues?’ Marian cried out.

‘Indeed.’ Kiyoko confirmed. The red and yellow patterns swirled about and made patterns around
Mismagius who continued by releasing a Shadow Ball from its mouth next. It was a small Shadow Ball, well controlled but very compressed.

It shook and Mismagius showed some body language that there was a huge risk involved with this technique. ‘Continue Mismagius, I believe in you.’ Kiyoko pleaded. Mismagius wailed and the Shadow Ball shot up and was closely followed by a dark pulse that dyed the pre-existing light dark colours like orange and fuchsia, much more complementary of Mismagius’ gaseous body. The Shadow Ball exploded and small, glimmers of light poured around. The glimmers were swept up by the board of patterns that surrounded Mismagius. The glimmers floated above like tiny dancers before the patterns evaporated.

Mismagius floated towards Kiyoko who smiled graciously. ‘You were fantastic.’ Kiyoko praised and the crowd went wild. They loved it. It was like watching a micro-ballet. Those in the furthest rows especially loved it because, for this technique, they had the best seats in the splendid Contest Hall.

‘Judges?’ Marian prompted.

‘Ten. I can’t see a single way in which improvement could be made for this technique. The bond between you and your Mismagius is most beautiful of all. Truly compelling.’ Nurse Joy gushed.

‘As a certified Pokémon Connoisseur, I agree whole-heartedly. You and Mismagius couldn’t be more compatible for each other. For the technique over all, I give it a nine. My only word of concern though is that you should be more careful in estimating Mismagius’ skills. If something went wrong, well, that’d be horrible to think about.’ Takeda praised.

‘Understood.’ Kiyoko said.

‘Oh, uh, me?’ Ukai grunted and Takeda nodded. ‘What he said. Nine.’

Kiyoko and Mismagius bowed before moving off stage. The crowd applauded them one last time. ‘Shimizu Kiyoko has set the bar extremely high as she’s earned herself twenty-eight points. Who will dance for us next? Rumour has it that this girl is Shimizu’s apprentice! Let’s welcome Yachi Hitoka to the stage!’ Marian said and a shy girl came on stage. She was jittery and her knees knocked.

She had blonde hair in a side pony-tail. She wore a white blouse that had a huge, maroon ribbon tucked under its collar. She wore a pleated, maroon skirt and ballet flats. She had a PokeBall in hand that was also within a Ball Capsule. It had a few pink, bubble seals on it. She smiled. ‘Hello?’ she offered. ‘Well, um, I’m Yachi Hitoka and this is Smooch!’ She tossed out her PokeBall.

A myriad of pink bubbles floated out of the PokeBall alongside a Togetic. It made a noise similar to a “squee” and somersaulted through the air playfully. ‘Let’s do this Smooch! Magical Leaf!’ she shouted.

Smooch released a bout of leaves that glistened in all the colours of the rainbow. They flew towards the judges. ‘Uh, no! Quick, Smooch, Extrasensory!’ she stammered. Smooch began to bend the leaves into shapes through the use of weak psychic energy. ‘That’s better.’ Yachi said, her anxiety levels dipped. ‘Let’s make a heart shape!’ she shouted. Smooch nodded and the leaves were manipulated into a love-heart shape. The crowd crooned out of the cuteness of it. ‘Next up, a Ribbon.’ Yachi instructed and Smooch used to the leaves to create a bow. ‘Yep, and finish up with a PokeBall.’ The leaves construed again and became the likeness of Smooch’s PokeBall. ‘And let’s take a bow.’ Yachi giggled. She and Smooch took a bow.
The crowd applauded Yachi and Smooch. ‘Thank you!’ she cried out.

‘Isn’t she adorable and spirited? It’s easy to see why Shimizu Kiyoko took a liking to her.’ Marian said. ‘But my opinion doesn’t matter much, does it? Judges, tell us what you think.’

‘Adorable and full of potential. All you need, kid, is to learn to control your nerves and you’ll be good to go. Eight.’ Ukai said.

‘It was adorable overall but those nerves could have lost you everything. I suggest that you drink chamomile tea before a Contest but seeing how this has been your first, letting a bit of nervous energy control you is perfectly normal. I give you an eight.’

‘I think it is absolutely remarkable that you have a Togetic despite being so early into your years as a Trainers. I think that is incredibly impressive. And what’s more, the creativity and control you have is also quite striking. I give you a nine.’ Takeda said.

The crowd applauded again. ‘And that’s twenty-five points to Yachi Hitoka.’ Marian said and she made a quick pun before welcoming the next person onto the stage. They moved through the Coordinators as quickly as possible. When they got through all sixty-eight competitors, the judges set a benchmark of twenty-five points and chose twenty Coordinators from the forty-nine that passed.

The Battle Stage took place after midday and each battle was given a limit of two minutes. The Coordinators fought elegantly and quickly cut one another down until only two Coordinators remained. Unsurprisingly, these two Coordinators were Yachi Hitoka and Shimizu Kiyoko.

The two, young girls took an end of the court each. Their names and faces appeared on the screen. Marian counted them. Soon, they were told to take a side of a coin each. Kiyoko chose “heads” whilst Yachi took “tails”. A coin materialised on the screen and was flipped. In a few seconds, “tails” took the lead and allowed Yachi to make the first move. She smiled and threw out a PokeBall covered in confetti-like seals. ‘Go, Bliss!’ she yelled and in a burst of scattered pink and white confetti, a Chansey materialised.

‘Good luck, Weavile!’ Kiyoko said and she tossed out a PokeBall that had blue, star-shaped seals on it.

A Weavile jumped out from a burst of blue stars. It slashed its claws about competitively. It had a large crown of pink-red feathers atop its head. ‘Oh, this’ll be tough.’ Yachi worried before remembering the advice she had been given during the Performance Stage. ‘I mean, we can do this Bliss if we remain... vigilant!’ Yachi immediately regretted what she said. ‘Oh, um, just use Double Slap!’

Chansey charged for Weavile and slapped it five times. Weavile didn’t appear to have taken too much damage but Kiyoko was worried nonetheless. ‘Weavile, don’t worry about that.’ Kiyoko cooed. ‘Focus your energy on freeing yourself, Metal Claw!’ Weavile nodded and its claws sharpened and became like silver. It slashed out at Bliss.

On the screen, Weavile’s health bar had a small section taken out of it but Chansey was already missing a large part of its. ‘Don’t worry, be happy, Bliss!’ Yachi sang out. ‘Use Soft Boiled!’ Chansey began to recover a little bit of damage by eating one of the eggs that it carried within its pouch but the health bar on the television screen remained unaffected.

Kiyoko smiled curtly before composing herself. ‘I’m sorry, Hitoka but Poison Jab.’ Weavile’s claws became purple and glittered. It ran at Chansey with deft grace before jabbing Bliss’ stomach,
knocking it back and exhausting it of its hit points. The yellow health bar on the screen quickly emptied as Bliss couldn’t get up.

‘And Shimizu Kiyoko is the one who stands out on top after a daring battle against her precious and precocious apprentice, Yachi Hitoka!’ Marian sang out. Kiyoko’s likeness filled the screen whilst Yachi recalled Bliss. She sighed and stroked the PokeBall. *We did well, Bliss,* she thought.

Yachi was escorted off stage and Kiyoko was lavished with applause and praise. Marian held up the token of glory that the Heartfelt Charmaine amounted to. It was small, white ribbon with pale yellow polka dots but it was as coveted as platinum. It had a small, golden circle-shaped plate over the fabric’s knot. ‘I present this Ribbon to Shimizu Kiyoko; this year’s winner of the annual Heartfelt Charmaine.’ Marian said and she faced Kiyoko. ‘Give it up for Shimizu Kiyoko!’ she yelled. The crowd clapped and clapped for Kiyoko who stood shyly in front of them. Her Weavile clapped for its Trainer too.

Marian settled the crowd through hand gestures. ‘But remember, Shimizu Kiyoko isn’t the only winner here. Let’s give it up for our runner-ups and other stars-to-be. The twenty Coordinators from the Battle Stage will also be given some prizes.’ The faces of twenty Trainers who had battled appeared on the televised screen. ‘These Trainers will be given complimentary gifts and prize money. And for those of you who weren’t able to make the cut, just remember that your worth isn’t measured by two minutes of screen time and there will be plenty more opportunities throughout the year to prove that.’ Marian said. She handed Kiyoko the Heartfelt Charmaine Ribbon. She accepted it graciously. ‘Also special shout-out to Nametsu Mai who entered using a Loudred. We have no idea why Ukai gave you one of the harshest scores on record.’

This concluded the Heartfelt Charmaine. Trainers accepted their prizes and the clean-up crew arrived promptly and began to sweep up the messes caused by the morning’s events. And most importantly, Ukai found an opportunity to go and talk to Fantina.

She was a gorgeous woman who was in always in her fuchsia fineries. She had a daring sense of fashion. She was Kalosian and spoke with the accent of Kalos too. ‘Hello, young man.’ she said to Ukai. She towered over him, not just because of her high heeled stilettos but because of natural height too. ‘Hello Fantina, I am Ukai Keishin and I heard you like to dance.’ Ukai said. Fantina giggled with a raised hand.

‘You heard right, mon amour.’ she said.

‘How would you like to go clubbing with me and buddy of mine and a buddy of yours?’ Ukai asked.

Fantina chuckled. She had a brash voice and even harsher laugh. She walked away, still cackling. Takeda caught up with Ukai who had soon realised that Fantina wasn’t interested in the slightest. ‘She prefers classical dances and settings. If you said you were going to take her out to a ball, she would be more interested.’ Takeda said.

‘And you know this how?’ Ukai asked.

‘It’s how I read her.’ Takeda said. ‘But there’s something more. I don’t think she’s interested in the Eros love.’

‘Go die in a hole.’ Ukai mumbled.

The two judges left soon after Ukai’s rejection. They visited a cafe soon after and began to discuss the next Contest they had to appear at which was the Floaroma February Rendezvous. Ukai
tried to convince Takeda to find another judge but he was relentless with his begging. He was way too insistent about how Ukai was the one who had to be on the panel for this year.

Chapter End Notes

Idk if I made it obvious or not but I really headcannon Fantina as aromantic so yeah.
Ravaged Path

After already spending three days at Twisted Arrow, Kageyama and Hinata decided they wouldn’t spend any longer than a week at Hinata’s farm. They had to devote time to travelling to Floaroma Town which they believed would be a four day trip. They spent the week at Twisted Arrow working on the farm. Katsu appreciated the help. He got a lot down with his junior farmhands. He couldn’t afford to hire any for real but he wished he could.

When the water-operated calendar on the wall ticked over to Tuesday the twenty-sixth, the two boys readied themselves and prepared to leave again. Hinata had his backpack neatly stuffed and Kageyama had his messenger bag slung across his body. They were standing in the doorway. ‘Bye, Mum, by Natsu!’ Hinata called and his mother and sister came running.

Natsu frowned. ‘Are you leaving again, Big Bro?’ she asked.

‘Yeah, we have to get to Floaroma before the fourteenth, remember?’ Hinata reminded Natsu.

‘Muum, can I go with Big Bro Sho and Big Bro Tobi?’ Natsu asked.

‘Nope.’ her mother firmly replied. ‘Stay safe on the road, boys and good luck at Floaroma. When’s the Contest start? We’ll watch you guys perform.’

‘Ten o’clock, usually.’ Kageyama replied.

‘Gotcha.’ Mrs Hinata said and the boys stepped into the front yard.

Natsu and Mrs Hinata farewelled them but this time they’d didn’t cry. Mrs Hinata did hug them both before they left though. Hinata and Kageyama walked through the front yard and past the rusted gate. They walked past the fields and stopped by one to say goodbye to Mr Hinata. He wished them good luck and promised to watch them in their next Contest performance.

Kageyama felt wistful as he left. He felt like he had a home with the Hinata family. He felt weird, liking it so much. ‘Thanks for letting me stay, Hinata.’ Kageyama thanked.

‘No problem. My parents love you more than they love me.’ Hinata said. He was careful to make the joke but Kageyama didn’t seem to mind. He grabbed Hinata’s head though and squeezed it roughly. ‘Dumbass.’ he muttered.

They didn’t stop walking until they reached Sandgem where they had another beachside lunch bought from vendors. They sat on a bench together and watched the sea. They watched Wingull play on the waves and tease young children. It was okay, just observing the world around them but they didn’t linger for awfully long.

They hiked through the rugged terrain between Sandgem and Jubilife until dark. The Jubilife city skyline glowed in the distance and it seemed so close but the darkness that swept up the landscape persuaded Kageyama and Hinata that the wiser choice would be to stay put than to pursue the skyline further. The two selected part of the north-western terminus and unfurled their sleeping bags.

The sky was a mix of grey pollutants and immense stars. It depended on which direction your eyes fell upon. It was bizarre seeing the meld of the urban horrors and the glory of natural rouge. It smelt strange too. Some breezes carried the scattered scent of the sea or of flowers but other breezes brought the odour of urbanisation.
Kageyama and Hinata didn’t have a competitive jog that morning. They didn’t see the point. There wasn’t really a single path for them to follow aside from the one that strolled into Jubilife City. The pair of Trainers followed the road into Jubilife City. Although Hinata was hesitant to, Kageyama still hailed them a taxi. He refused to walk the entire length of Jubilife City just to save money. Hinata allowed it and paid for part of their fare as well.

Route 204 was waterside and overrun by lush grass and thick trees. A spindly path strayed into the mouth of a dreary cave. A few Trainers were spotted and they were battling. ‘We should find someone to battle.’ Hinata suggested upon seeing the others Trainers up ahead.

‘Good idea. We haven’t battled a lot recently. We don’t want our skills to dull because we’ve been lazy.’ Kageyama agreed.

Instead of immediately going through the Ravaged Path, the boys found sparring partners. They had quick battles against those who were in the area. Two of the Trainers in the area had badges from Oreburgh and while that made Hinata a little pissy, he was okay with it overall. He could see why but what irked him most was that he won his battles against the two. But Hinata congratulated himself though when he realised that Nyta learned “Stomp” though. He still couldn’t help but wonder though. If he, Oink and Nyta were to face Roark again, would he win?

Kageyama also battled successfully against the other Trainers in the area. They were skilled but ungraceful. It was very clear to him they were subpar rookies or straight from a Gym challenge. He was quite pleased when Ralts started to display the hints that it had learned a new move, which turned out to be Magical Leaf. He was sure it would be useful to have in the future.

After an afternoon’s hard work battling, the boys shoved off again. They explored Ravaged Path. It was a surprisingly open space but it was rocky underfoot. Plenty of fallen rocks had stacked up here and there. They wandered to their left and found a stream. It smelt fresh amongst the dust of the cave. They wandered back to the “main path” that would eventually lead into the rest of Route 204. To Kageyama and Hinata’s irritation, they found a cluster of small rocks that blocked the rest of the main path. ‘Nyta could probably fix this with a Low Kick.’ Hinata mused.

‘Probably.’ Kageyama mumbled.

They stood back and Hinata tossed out Nyta’s PokeBall. ‘Jump out, Nyta!’ he called and his flame horse Pokémon materialised. ‘Low Kick!’ he yelled. Nyta skidded into the pile of rocks with a hind-leg extended. The rocks burst and were reduced to rumble. Nyta neighed proudly and expected praise. She nudged at Hinata’s backpack. ‘No, no, no. You’re not getting a treat.’ Hinata scolded but that didn’t deter Nyta’s enthusiasm to try and get at the poffins in his bag. Hinata ended up calling Nyta back in order to stop her from bugging him.

It was a short path from where they were to the end of the Ravaged Path. When the two boys stepped out and into the sunlight, their eyes were dazzled. ‘I’m blind!’ Hinata wailed jokingly.

A refreshing, flowery scent filled the air as they wandered upwards. A plateau was above them and connected by man-made steps. They climbed up and saw thousands of flowers springing from the ground with elaborate and colourful petals. Hinata absentely batted at the ones that brushed his fingertips whilst they walked. Slowly, overhead, the blue sky was streaked with orange and navy. A few stars began to reveal themselves through the crystalline atmosphere. In the distance however, the two boys couldn’t see Floaroma Town yet.

‘What should we do?’ Hinata asked, halted.

‘I’ll go get some firewood. You can just do whatever it is you do when I’m not around.’ Kageyama
replied.

‘Which is wait for you to get back. I know! I’ll just set up the sleeping bags.’ Hinata offered.
Kageyama nodded and gave Hinata his sleeping bag.

Kageyama wandered off and Hinata chose a spot for them to sleep. He unfurled their sleeping bags and got their campground ready. Kageyama returned shortly and saw the sleeping bags were side-by-side and that Hinata had also organised a fire pit. Kageyama put down some firewood in the fire pit and lit it up with some matches he brought with him. He thought, vaguely, that it was a good thing they had Nyta with them. She was like matches times infinity.

The two ate warmed baked beans in tomato sauce for dinner and talked about random things. They got into their respective sleeping bags not long after they had eaten and fell into an easy sleep, lulled by the sound of wind and Kricketot song. It was peaceful and serene; not too hot or too cold. This was what paradise was like, surely.
Vs Honeymooners Daichi and Suga

It felt like there was all the time in the world to get to Floaroma Town so the boys slept in later than usual. It was too pleasant here. It was the sweet scents and general, paradisiacal aura that the thousands of flowers in the area gave to the already tranquil skies the feel of heaven.

Kageyama stirred first. He glanced around and saw that their things were still in place and their fire had long burned out. He got changed and rekindled the fire for cooking purposed. He wondered what the time was as there was a small but sharp pang of heat in the air. He was surprised to see that it was ten minutes past ten already. ‘Get up, dumbass.’ Kageyama barked. Hinata turned over and sprawled out. Kageyama picked up a stick and jabbed Hinata’s side. That got him moving. ‘I’m making breakfast.’ Kageyama said.

‘Ow, was that really necessary?’ Hinata complained.

Kageyama gave him some warmed up baked beans and a spoon. ‘Here.’ he said. The two ate and Kageyama listened to Hinata prattle about a dream he had last night. Hinata and Kageyama ate sloppily from their cans before wrapping them in plastic bags to dispose of them later. It was a pretty usual affair. The two began to tidy up and stashed away their camping gear. They made care to thoroughly check the area that it was clean and safe; exactly like they had found it.

‘Ready to go yet?’ Kageyama asked.

‘Yeah.’ Hinata replied. The two turned on their heels and faced Floaroma Town. The skyline of the romantic rural town didn't wisp the sky and felt ages away. It was mildly distressing since the boys had wasted time sleeping in.

It wasn't until they had walked a fair while, a mile and a half at least, when they began to encounter signs for Floaroma Town attractions. They walked further still and without complaint, until Hinata noticed something. ‘Kageyama, look.’ he piped up after half an hour of silence. Kageyama squinted and Hinata pointed out what he saw. There was a pair of figures walking towards them from the edges of Floaroma Town. ‘Trainers maybe?’ Kageyama suggested.

‘That's what I was thinking.’ Hinata agreed.

‘We’ll find out soon enough, dumbass.’ Kageyama said.

And he was right. The paths that were followed led to a spot where the walkers encountered each other. As the strangers came into view, defining characteristics could be seen. The strangers were both tall males. It was almost definite that they were older than Hinata and Kageyama, possibly by a few years but not overly so.

The man on the left was taller though and had strong features and short cut hair. He wore a black jacket over beige chinos. His companion had silvery hair that was messy, as well as striking eyebrows. He wore jeans with a stripy, collarless shirt.

They seemed friendly but Kageyama was wary. He glared at them as he thought the potential of them being hostiles was likelier than them being harmless. ‘They're probably nice.’ Hinata tittered but Kageyama wasn't having any of it.

It didn’t take much longer until they finally met. ‘Hello.’ greeted the silvery male.

‘Rookie Trainers, huh?’ the physically stronger of the two presumed.
‘Yeah!’ Hinata yelped. He jabbed Kageyama’s side. He refused to look up from the ground. He was focused very intently at something below normal gaze.

‘Sugawara Koushi. I’m a Coordinator from Johto.’ the silver-haired youth said.

‘Sawamura Daichi from Sandgem Town. Also a Coordinator.’

Hinata gawked. ‘Hinata Shouyou, rookie Coordinator from Twinleaf Town. This flying fish is Kageyama Tobio.’

‘Something the matter, Kageyama?’ Daichi asked.

‘I didn't mean to be rude.’ Kageyama mumbled, embarrassed.

‘It's okay. We get that a lot. Not a lot of people expect to see Top Coordinators like ourselves so openly gay, especially with the negative stereotypes surrounding male Coordinators.’ Sugawara said.

Hinata had no clue where that had come from. He gawked and gaped, and briefly wondered what the stereotypes male Coordinators had but that didn't matter. He glanced about for a non-verbal cue; the one he missed. Then he saw it. Daichi and Sugawara were holding hands. They were holding hands like it was no big deal. And it was kind of really cute. Cute enough for Hinata to feel the pangs of missing a relationship.

‘I’m sorry for our rudeness.’ Hinata panicked.

‘Are you the Sawamura Daichi that came third at last year's Grand Festival?’ Kageyama asked. Sugawara chuckled.

‘You’re so famous here.’ Sugawara chuckled.

‘Yes.’ Daichi replied.

‘Are you going to be at the Contest?’ Kageyama asked.

‘We thought about it but decided not to.” Daichi replied.

‘We couldn't come up with a routine, and there's the whole dating thing, that’d be a bit too controversial for our liking.’ Sugawara added.

This time it wasn't just Hinata who had missed a cue. They stared blankly for a moment before Daichi realized that they hadn't been informed. ‘You two know that the February Rendezvous requires partners, right? You can't get to the Battle Stage of it without entering with a partner.’ Daichi said.

‘We’re screwed.’ Hinata said.

‘You can say that but I have a suspicion that you two would work very well together in a double battle.’ Sugawara hummed. Daichi agreed. The younger Trainers exchanged a glance. They somehow seriously doubted that they could work together in a battle but Daichi and Sugawara roped them into a battle anyway.

The two sets of Trainers opposed each other in a makeshift zone of battle. ‘We'll let you go first.’ Sugawara said. Hinata and Kageyama frowned at each other.

‘Prinplup!’ Kageyama said.
‘Oink, jump out!’ Hinata yelped. A pair of PokeBalls flew from their hands.

‘Lairon!’ Daichi yelled.

‘Piloswine!’ shouted Sugawara. A second set of PokeBalls flew into the air. Two pairs of Pokémon stared each other down but Oink and Prinplup were uneasy about working together for a change.

Hinata didn’t know what to command Oink to do. He’s never participated in a battle like this before. He glanced at Kageyama and closed his eyes. Kageyama didn’t know why or how but he completely understood what the gesture signified. It was an act of trust with an otherworldly origin. It felt like it came from another life. ‘Pound!’

‘Bounce!’

Neither boy knew what to expect from their Pokémon. Oink bounced, a tiny hop, and Prinplup turned around. The two Pokémon coordinated perfectly and their combined manoeuvre wasn’t a Bounce or Pound. It was something else. Oink jumped on Prinplup’s tail as she swung around. Prinplup acted as a ledge for Oink. The combination of their separate momentums into one caused Oink to rocket into the furry, hulking mass that was Sugawara’s Piloswine. It was an unexpected spectacle that was awesome to watch that it was a true shame that Piloswine was unaffected by it due to its natural resistance to flying type moves due to its ice typing.

Daichi and Sugawara grinned out of awe. Hinata and Kageyama, meanwhile, were stunned. ‘When did they…?’ Kageyama murmured.

‘Learn to do that?’ Hinata finished.

‘Pokémon take after their Trainers.’ Sugawara mused.

‘Let’s show them our winning combination then, Suga.’ Daichi flirted.

‘Yep.’ Sugawara agreed. "Powder Snow!"

‘Metal Sound!’ Daichi commanded.

Lairon moved first. It opened its mouth wide and gave a horrid, metallic screech. Prinplup and Oink could barely tolerate it. They attempted to blot out the sound but it was too invasive. This left them wide open to Piloswine’s attack. The powdery snow that Piloswine summoned floated rushed towards Oink and Prinplup. The two took plenty of damage but they struggled through. It was a weak move but even it could be devastating because of the blow their stats took from Metal Sound.

What’s next?’ Kageyama and Hinata both wondered. They had never felt more clueless but simultaneously, they had never been more in synch. They didn’t realise the latter, however.

‘Confuse Ray?’ Hinata instructed.

‘Bubble!’ Kageyama said and again, something miraculous happened before them. Their Pokémon coordinated exactly as needed although not in what was predicted.

Prinplup blew a floaty stream of bubbles over the opposing team. The bubbles were huge and glistened. They also appeared as being pale blue. They made the perfect camouflage for Oink’s purplish Confuse Ray. It weaved in and out of the bubbles. It was actually quite beautiful as the bubbles became eerie orbs like talismans in a fortune teller’s den. Piloswine and Lairon were both affected by Confuse Ray but their Trainers didn’t realise it until the masking bubbles had all popped, taking health out of their Pokémon’s hit points.
Daichi and Sugawara watched as their Pokémon klutzily stumbled into each other. Lairon’s eyes spun and Piloswine’s movements were shaky. ‘Oh dear.’ Sugawara worried.

‘C’mon, Lairon, pull through!’ Daichi encouraged.

‘You can do it, Piloswine!’ Sugawara added. ‘Bulldoze!’

‘Rockslide!’

Kageyama huffed confidently. Those were complex moves and their Pokémon weren’t in the state of mind to be able to pull off such techniques. ‘Prinplup, attack Piloswine using Metal Claw!’ Kageyama instructed.

‘Oh, uh, Oink! Psybeam!’ Hinata yelped.

Prinplup lurched forward and with a powerful strike against the ground, it launched itself and soared into Piloswine with her wings extended. Her wings glistened hard like iron. She scratched into Piloswine and sent it stumbling back. Oink moved next and he released a spiralling, circular beam into the air and it was directed for Lairon who stumbled out of its way.

Then the counter began. The ground began to shake. Piloswine roared proudly, albeit facing towards the Floaroma Town skyline. Oink could barely bounce right and Prinplup was sent flying from loose footing. Lairon was also shaken but that woke it from its stupor. It growled and had the aura of an ingenious worker. It glowed white and nearby rocks began to float upwards, gently, before being commanded to crash against Oink and Prinplup. The two Pokémon were shaken and battered by rocks. Oink was the first to collapse but Prinplup endured.

Oink squeaked dreadfully. Hinata worried. ‘Oink!’ he cried out. He returned Oink. Hinata put away Oink’s PokeBall. ‘Knock ‘em dead, Kageyama.’ Hinata asked and an immense weight sank into Kageyama’s shoulders.

‘I’ll try.’ Kageyama said. His voice was wobbly as he was certain that he couldn’t but he didn’t want to let Hinata down. He calmed himself and moved forward. He would do it for Hinata and for Prinplup. ‘Bubble!’ Kageyama sputtered.

Sugawara smiled sympathetically. ‘I feel bad for them.’ he mumbled.

‘No mercy. Even to the young’uns. Especially the young’uns.’ Daichi replied.

‘Alright then. Piloswine – Take Down!’ Sugawara yelled.

‘Lairon, Take Down!’ Daichi shouted.

The two Pokémon charged with hulking, awkward pounces. Prinplup easily dodged them by swerving out of their way. The two Pokémon actually collided but only Piloswine took damage. Prinplup turned back and blew bubbles over the two Pokémon; they both took damage but not much.

‘Iron Head!’ Daichi shouted.

‘Ice Beam!’ Sugawara commanded.

‘Dodge!’ Kageyama pressured but he saw the wobble in Prinplup’s toes. He knew that Prinplup’s speed and stamina had been sapped by her lack of energy but still, Prinplup tried. She tried to dodge the oncoming beam of ice and succeeded by she had been blind-sided by the ice and had
completely forgotten about Lairon who charged at her ruthlessly. Prinplup was head-butted by Lairon. The steel plate across its head glowed as it knocked into Prinplup.

She was down for good. She couldn’t get off the ground. Flecks of damage and dirt covered Prinplup’s wings. ‘Return, Prinplup!’ begged Kageyama. He thrust out Prinplup’s PokeBall and she was sucked into the PokeBall.

Sugawara and Daichi approached Kageyama and Hinata. The winners were gracious, humble. ‘I’m sorry about your loss.’ Sugawara offered.

‘Just remember, we’ve got two years on you and we’ve been to Grand Festivals.’ Daichi added.

‘Of course.’ Kageyama said through gritted teeth.

‘It was fun. I didn’t know Oink and Prinplup could do that.’ Hinata said.

‘Are you still going to enter the February Rendezvous because I can guarantee some top Trainers will be there? My friend, Kiyoko Shimizu and her “apprentice”,’ Daichi paused and let Sugawara interrupt him:

‘According to the media circus. In reality, they’re just friends.’

‘Yachi Hitoka will be there. Yachi might be in your boat but if Kiyoko thinks there’s something special in her, then, well, good luck.’

Hinata and Kageyama paused. They turned to face each other, just slightly. So many words were caught in their throats and they found it hard to maintain eye contact. ‘I think... yes.’ Hinata blurted out.

‘I agree.’ Kageyama confirmed. Sugawara and Daichi smiled. There was something good about these kids, they had raw potential seeping out of them.

‘Here’s some advice, trust each other one hundred percent, you’ll have to bounce off of each other for ideas and decisions.’ Sugawara said.

‘And, you’ll never win if you believe you can’t.’ Daichi added.

The boys nodded. ‘We’ll watch you on television.’ Sugawara said. Daichi took Sugawara’s hand again and farewelled the rookie Coordinators. They walked off in opposite directions. ‘Best get our asses to the PokeCentre, huh?’ Hinata said.

‘Yeah.’ Kageyama agreed.
Floaroma Town was a feast for the sense from heaven. The air was perfumed with the delicate scents of flowers and berries. The town itself looked so cute and idyllic it was practically a movie set. The feel of flower petals was velvety on the legs as they passed the huge, untamed gardens that scattered the blocks of the town. Bakers were happy to give away samples of their pastries and breads to anyone who passed by their shopfronts. The pastries melted on the tongue and breads tasted robust.

‘I love it here.’ crooned Hinata who had a small custard tart in one hand and a few strawberries in the other. He had chocolate over his lips and Kageyama was fighting the compulsion to get a handkerchief and wipe Hinata’s face for him. ‘Glutton.’ Kageyama mumbled. Hinata feigned being offended before offering Kageyama the sweets he had.

They made it to the PokeCentre. It had huge planter boxes out front that were being tended by a cluster of Chansey in aprons. ‘Should we get a room?’ Hinata asked as the doors pulled back away and they stepped through a frosty blast of air.

‘Probably.’ Kageyama mused. They wandered to the counter where Nurse Joy sat on a ‘spinny’ chair/ She smiled amiably at them. ‘Hello boys, how can I help?’ she asked.

‘We’d like our Pokémon healed, please.’ Hinata said. He unlatched his PokeBalls from his belt. Kageyama also gave Nurse Joy his PokeBalls. She asked for their Trainer Cards and swiped them through her little machine. In the background, Hinata saw his Pokémon align with his Card and he wondered about why that was done and how it happened. ‘Twenty minutes to half an hour tops, sweetums. Anythin’ else?’ she asked. There was an upbeat twang in her voice.

‘A room please, two beds.’ Kageyama asked.

Nurse Joy nodded. She checked through her computer to see which rooms had occupants already. She soon found a room for them. ‘Everyone’s getting in early this year. Are you two here for the February Rendezvous?’ she asked.

‘Yeah.’ Hinata said.

‘We’re teaming up as rivals only.’ Kageyama quickly added. Nurse Joy chuckled.

‘I wasn’t assumin’ nothin’.’ she said.

She handed them a key. ‘I’ll put your names on the speaker system when your lil darlings are fully healed. I’ll give ‘em a check-up too. In a while, Sandile.’ she said. The boys shuffled off and found their room.

It was a good room. It had huge windows with silky curtains. The walls were pale blue and the carpet was navy. The beds looked soft and Hinata jumped on his excitedly. It bounced up and down without a creak. There was also a great deal of space in between the beds that were accompanied by oaky bedside tables with antique lamps on top. Kageyama opened the drawers of the bedside table that was “conjoined” to the bed Hinata had designated to him. Kageyama wasn’t
surprised by what he found: a Pokémon Trainer’s handbook in a ratty condition, condoms and hard boiled lollies in plastic wrapping. He closed the drawer promptly.

‘It’s hot. I’m putting on the fan.’ Kageyama mumbled but Hinata didn’t seem to particularly care. Kageyama turned on the fan. Hinata spread out on his bed and watched as a fan trundled overhead. ‘Kageyama...’ Hinata piped up. ‘What’re the negative stereotypes Sugawara mentioned?’

Kageyama hadn’t been expecting that question. He had assumed that Hinata was fully aware of them but then again, he was an idiot. Kageyama turned away from Hinata. He didn’t particularly want to answer that question. ‘Well, the big stereotype is that “all male Coordinators are effeminate and flamboyant gays” but that’s a mean generalisation.’ Kageyama replied.

Hinata nodded. ‘Oh.’ he said. ‘But that’s clearly wrong. Look at us, look at Tsukishima and Yamaguchi even.’ Hinata said.

‘Yeah.’

A loud, thrashing sound began to emerge from the room next door. Kageyama hated it. It was a loud “douf-douf” noise that grated on the ear drum. It was such a loud noise that it made the wall tremble. ‘What is that?’ growled Kageyama.

‘I kinda like it.’ Hinata admitted, a tad ashamed. ‘Everyone complains about my taste in music though.’

‘I can see why.’ Kageyama said and he got up.

He stormed out the door and towards the source of the raucous. He knocked on the door violently. ‘Excuse me!’ he shouted. His voice competed with the terrible music. There was a fumble behind the door before it swung open and Kageyama stepped back. He watched as his favourite tall glass of mayonnaise swung with the door. The two glared at each other.

‘Tsukishima.’ Kageyama stated.

‘Kageyama.’ Tsukishima murmured.

Kageyama didn’t mean to pry but there was a lot happening behind that door.

For a start, Tsukishima was wearing a flower crown made out of Gracidea flowers and Yamaguchi was also wearing a flower crown. Their Pokémon were also wearing flower crowns and enjoying the music. One of their Pokémon approached the door, a fluffy Mareep and it baaed adorably. Tsukishima and Yamaguchi were also wearing pyjamas. Tsukishima had tiny dinosaurs on his and Yamaguchi was in a tartan. They appeared to be enjoying some hot chocolates. Kageyama noticed was that there was only a one bed in the room. That left the most important thing happening: the music. This was all happening whilst set to death metal. The guttural singer was imparting the following onto the world: ‘SCREEEAAAMMMM LIKE A CORPSE BEEECAUUSE ONLY VILLAINS WIIIINNNN!’ Kageyama had no clue what that meant.

‘What are you doing here?’ Tsukishima asked.

‘I’m here for the February Rendezvous.’ Kageyama replied.

‘Does that make Hinata your queen?’ Tsukishima asked. His face twitched and it was obvious he was restraining himself from a bout of laughter. Kageyama was also practising superb self-control as he hadn’t grabbed onto Tsukishima’s throat and attempted to strangle him. Yamaguchi didn’t seem to have self-control as he was clutching onto his sides and laughing.
The Mareep baaed again. ‘Amp, go back to Yamaguchi.’ Tsukishima asked. Instead, it rubbed up against Tsukishima’s legs.

‘I suppose this means that you will be at next Sunday’s Contest?’ Kageyama asked.

‘Yamaguchi and I made special preparations.’ Tsukishima said.

‘I can see that.’ Kageyama said, terse.

‘I meant the Mareep and the Electrike.’ Tsukishima corrected.

‘Goodbye.’ Kageyama said.

The electronic speaker system booted up with chimes. ‘Will Kageyama Tobio and Hinata Shouyou report to the front desk? Nurse Joy would like to speak to you. I repeat: Kageyama Tobio and Hinata Shouyou to the front desk.’ the syrupy sweet automated voice said.

Kageyama shuffled off to collect his and Hinata’s Pokémon. He thought that context would make things worse and hoped to forget this encounter.

Chapter End Notes

This was supposed to be an angst chapter but...
Kageyama sat down on his bed and the two got down to business. Thankfully, Tsukishima and Yamaguchi’s racket had dropped. Hinata and Kageyama had ten days before the February Rendezvous. They had ten days to come up with a dual routine and perfect. Oh joy. Kageyama returned from Nurse Joy’s desk with his and Hinata’s PokeBalls. He gave back Oink and Nyta’s PokeBalls to Hinata.

It was midday, or around about. There was still plenty of time left in the day. Between Kageyama and Hinata, there was an unspoken agreement: they would go out and train. They didn’t have a whole lot of time and there was a lot expected of them for this next Contest as it was literally something they couldn’t do as soloists.

‘We need a plan first.’ Kageyama said, despite the obviousness of the statement. He and Hinata had returned to their room. ‘Mm, any ideas?’ Hinata asked.

‘I was thinking of you using Nyta first. We could use Oink and Prinplup in the Battle Stage because we already know they can work well together in a battle circumstance.’ Kageyama rambled.

‘Yeah, and you?’ Hinata prompted.

‘And that’s as far as I got.’ Kageyama replied.

The two boys stared at each other; they sat on their respective bed. ‘Maybe we should let Nyta decide?’ Hinata suggested.

‘Okay.’ Kageyama agreed. Soon, Nyta and Kageyama’s three Pokémon occupied the space between the beds. Unsurprisingly, the room now felt crowded.

‘Who do you want to work with, Nyta?’ Hinata asked.

Nyta glanced around before trying to leap up onto Hinata’s lap. Nyta attempted to nuzzle Hinata who tried to push her away. ‘Not me, Idiot-Nyta’ Hinata screamed jovially. Hinata got up and grabbed Nyta. ‘Who do you want to work with?’ Hinata asked and he tried to get Nyta to focus. ‘Who?’ he asked again. Nyta shook her Trainer’s hands away from her and sized up her rivals. She “glared” at Kageyama and became staunch and protective of Hinata. Kageyama wondered why Nyta’s body language had change so drastically: from fun-loving to knightly. He didn’t realise it was because he was leering at Hinata.

Hinata got off his bed and sat next to Nyta. He calmed Nyta down and she nuzzled against him in response to his affection. ‘So, who do you want to work with?’ Hinata asked for the umpteenth time. Nyta whinnied and stomped loudly. ‘This isn’t working.’ Kageyama said and he returned his Pokémon. ‘Let’s go outside and work out who Nyta can perform with. It’s more logical that way too.’

‘Oh, okay.’ Hinata said and he scrambled to his feet. He returned Nyta. He and Kageyama left their room and locked it behind them.

They decided to train in Floaroma Meadow. It was a favourite location for Coordinators to practice. There were a few other Coordinators rehearsing there at midday too. Hinata felt a tad intimidated by the other Trainers because they seemed to be perfecting their performances rather than constructing them.
He paused as he walked and Kageyama huffed. ‘Come on, over here.’ he said and Hinata scampered after his friend. The two chose their spot. It wasn’t quite secluded but it was nice. They were surrounded by vividly coloured flowers and honey-scented trees. Shadows danced around them and occasionally cooled them. It was a good spot.

‘Jump out, Nyta!’ shouted Hinata.

‘Everyone.’ Kageyama said. Four PokeBalls flew out and four Pokémon materialised.

‘Okay, Nyta. You’ve gotta be a good girl for us.’ Hinata pleaded with his fire horse who stared blankly, unpromisingly and unblinking. He didn’t like that smart-ass look of hers.

‘We all have to... get along.’ Kageyama spat out to his Pokémon. They seemed willing to cooperate. None of them seemed like they were ready to bring the worst out of themselves.

‘Let’s start.’ Hinata announced.

The two boys organised themselves and their Pokémon. Kageyama stood next to Hinata. Nyta stood next to Prinplup. Nyta seemed unruly and Prinplup seemed capable; much like their respective Trainers. ‘Okay, what if we tried to capture fire in bubbles. That’d look pretty, like lanterns, right?’ Kageyama suggested and Hinata grinned.

‘Sounds great! Ember!’ Hinata shouted.

‘Bubble!’ Kageyama instructed.

Nyta expelled a collection of fiery embers from her mouth and Prinplup blew bubbles. The bubbles knocked into the embers and popped. In turn, the embers dulled and fell gracelessly from the air. It was an ugly spectacle to watch. ‘I don’t know what I expected.’ Kageyama grumbled.

‘Let’s try again.’ Hinata encouraged, optimism sparkled in his honey brown eyes. Kageyama agreed.

They tried numerous times to get the embers inside the bubbles but each time, they failed more miserably than the last. They tried various methods but each one grew more impossible by the minute. The Pokémon were trying their hardest but it seemed it wasn’t possible.

‘Let’s switch Pokémon.’ Kageyama suggested. He recalled Prinplup and swapped her out for Staravia who fluttered onto Nyta’s back gracefully. Nyta bucked and nipped at the avian. Staravia spread his wings and flew up when he realised he wasn’t welcome to use Nyta as a roost.

Hinata faced Kageyama with half a giggle. He thought their Pokémon’s interactions were a little bit funny. ‘What do you want to try now?’ Hinata asked. ‘I trust you one hundred percent.’

‘Okay.’ Kageyama said. He felt a pressure on his shoulders. He felt like he was carrying Hinata’s weight. Since when did Hinata trust him “one hundred percent”? He didn’t want to betray that trust despite its gravity.

Kageyama composed himself and tried not to work out why Hinata had said such a peculiar thing. ‘What if we tried to simulate “Flame Wheel” on Staravia?’ Kageyama suggested.

‘Wooow! That’d be so cool.’ Hinata said and Kageyama explained to him what he would like to see happen. They explained the basics of what they wanted to their Pokémon who seemed to comprehend what was happening. Both Hinata and Kageyama had more faith in Staravia than Nyta.
‘Flame Wheel!’ Hinata said and Nyta began to concentrate. The flames along her back began to grow fierce and bright like the flames of a bonfire. The more energy she spent, the more they ignited. Staravía was hesitant to fly into the flames but he did so anyway. The flames licked over him but he couldn’t tolerate the heat much longer than two seconds before panicking and flying away. ‘No, we’re not doing this anymore.’ Kageyama barked and Hinata nodded. Everyone could smell barbeque and burnt feathers. It wasn’t pleasant.

It was back to the drawing board but they hadn’t utilised all the potential that Staravía brought forth. They let the bird heal and the Trainers discussed ideas. Hinata had an idea this time and he shared it with Kageyama. He explained it poorly but from what Kageyama scraped together between nonce onomatopoeias; Hinata’s idea was as follows: Staravía would initiate its move “Quick Attack” and then Nyta would follow up with “Ember” and “Flame Wheel” which would trail after Staravía making it look like Staravía had achieved Mach speeds. Kageyama liked the idea so once Staravía had stopped smelling singed and was moving as per normal, they began to practice it.

‘Quick Attack!’ Kageyama instructed and Staravía gave a quiet caw. It launched itself into the air and silver trailed from his tail feathers.

‘Flame Wheel!’ Hinata yelled. Nyta began to focus again and her flames grew. However, they didn’t achieve the desired effect. The flames only went upward, rather than following in Staravía’s wake.

They tried numerous times to try and remedy the problem but nothing seemed to work so eventually, they gave up. ‘You’re doin’ well, Nyta.’ Hinata said and he scratched behind her ear. She whinnied happily although she did look weary. Kageyama held out his arm and Staravía perched on it.

The two stared at each other. ‘You’re doing well too.’ Kageyama mumbled before his arm gave way underneath Staravía’s weight. He returned the avian and swapped Staravía’s PokeBall for Ralts’. ‘Let’s hope Ralts has the answer.’ Hinata smiled. He wasn’t giving up and Kageyama tried to smile back. He appreciated Hinata’s determination, it bled over to him. ‘Bakageyama, please stop glaring at me.’ Hinata deadpanned and Kageyama’s nerves puckered.

‘Ralts!’ he yelped.

Hinata giggled. Kageyama was hesitant to look at him but he did anyway. Ralts tugged on Kageyama’s pants. ‘I think he’s hungry.’ Hinata said. It was beginning to get dark and lunch felt like it had been eons ago.

‘He’s always hungry.’ Kageyama growled. He picked up Ralts without struggle and lifted him up in the air, like a father plays with his child. ‘I have no clue how Ralts and Nyta would work, honestly.’ Kageyama commented and that’s when Ralts struggled out of his grip.

Ralts then took to teleporting. ‘Where did he go?’ Kageyama panicked. He turned around and he saw Ralts on Nyta’s back. Nyta dug at the ground and tried to shake Ralts off of her back. Kageyama wondered if this would look more fairy tale-esque if Nyta and Ralts were both fully evolved. ‘I think Ralts has an idea.’ Hinata joked but it turned out he was right.

The two Trainers watched as their Pokémon played. At first, Nyta didn’t like that Ralts had taken control and she tried to convince Hinata to do something about the problem but he remained oblivious and allowed it. Ralts was eventually knocked off of Nyta and the two seemed ready to fight. But before the two Trainers could step in, the two began to fight like they would have in the wilderness. But the result wasn’t as expected. It gave both Trainers a flash of inspiration which was
likely to work based on what they witnessed.

‘Ralts is a genius.’ Kageyama breathed and his eyes were wide.

‘They say Pokémon take after their Trainers.’ Hinata joked and Kageyama blushed.

‘Dumbass, don’t say those kinds of things.’ Kageyama growled. He knew it was unintentional but Hinata reminded him of things said about him when he was still reigning as the tyrannical king. ‘Let’s go home and have something to eat, huh? Continue training tomorrow.’ Hinata suggested and Kageyama nodded.
Chapter 26

It was the day before the February Rendezvous and Takeda thought he was prepared for everything. He had been lecturing Ukai endlessly about the proper critiquing technique and he seemed to be listening. He also had practised his speeches for in case things went wrong with Coordinators and some stock things to say to people before and after the Contest. He was ready for the long slug of performers. The February Rendezvous was always huge and sometimes had a tendency to run over a few days rather than just one but it didn’t matter because Takeda was prepared.

But as it turns out, the unexpected can always worm its way into someone’s life at any given second. Takeda was getting ready, putting together his suitcase, when he got a call. He grabbed his PokeGear absent-mindedly. He was expecting Ukai on the other end of the line. He was expecting to hear Ukai growl about the “gift” he had sent. That shabby suit was not to see another Contest so Takeda had splashed out and bought Ukai one.

He didn’t expect to hear Nurse Joy on the other end of the line. ‘Hello?’ she said. ‘Nurse Joy from Floaroma Town speaking, I assume this is Takeda Ittetsu’s line?’

‘Ah, yes, I’m Takeda. It’s good to hear from you. Are you prepared for tomorrow? I’m looking forward to it.’ Takeda replied good-naturedly as he continued to pack.

‘Fantastic. Does that mean you and Mr Ukai junior are prepared?’ she asked.

‘Yep. I’m packing now. I think Ukai’s ready. It’s been a while since I’ve seen him in person. I can ring him later, if you like. He finds me very persuasive.’ Takeda said.

There was a pause and Takeda wondered if they had a bad connection. ‘Hello? Nurse Joy?’

‘I’m still here, um, do you and Ukai have a performance yet?’

‘What?’ Takeda said, uncouth before recovering and scattering apologies over the line.

‘A performance? Didn’t Marian tell you? She said she would like to see you and Ukai perform together, she thought it would be a good publicity stunt, a great way to remind the folks back home why you two are our judges. Apparently, some people from Hearthome complained about your lack of professionalism and began to wonder if you two are truly suited to Contest judging.

Takeda couldn’t believe it. He thought Ukai’s roughness was part of his charm, something that could be capitalised upon. He wondered about his own conduct and how it had been poor. It was bit of a low blow but he pulled through, continued a facade of control.

‘That’s awful that someone feels that way but I’m sure everything will be alright. So a performance done by myself and Ukai, that sounds like a good idea. I am going to call Ukai now, actually so we can organise it. I’m sure it’ll be fine.’ Takeda’s voice grew faint and he turned off his PokeGear rather than simply ending the call. He had never felt such pressure before and he had gone through university fuelled only by Red Tauros.

He could handle this, surely despite the impossibility of the time limit. He had twenty-four hours to create a high level performance that would secure his and Ukai’s position as the official Sinnoh Contest judges. Takeda didn’t like informal and obscene language but the only way he could sum up this situation was with a concise: Fan-fucking-tastic.
Takeda grabbed all his PokeBalls and his PokeGear. He turned it on and rang Ukai. ‘We’ve got an emergency!’ he yelled into the PokeGear. He heard Ukai grunt groggily. Things were just getting better by the moment because Ukai knew that sound. He had heard it many times before. He could distinguish it perfectly from any other guttural noise. That was Ukai’s “I-just-had-a-wild-night” grunt. ‘We have a HUGE problem!’ Takeda wailed. Tears were beginning to well up in his eyes and he blushing.

‘What kind of problem?’ Ukai asked after a breathy sigh.

He listened patiently and soon he was swept up in the panic. Takeda could hear everything that Ukai was doing. He got changed and he grabbed his PokeBalls and then there was a giant swoosh and Takeda found Ukai at his front door. His pants were on backwards, he was out of breath and his hair band wasn’t on straight. ‘They want us to do what?’ he asked and his Honchkrow squawked, upset it had been woken up so early as it was a nocturnal creature.

Takeda explained again before realising that Ukai’s question had been rhetorical. They two moved to the kitchen and pulled up a chair at the dining table. Takeda brought out a notebook and Ukai examined all of the PokeBalls they had on them.

‘Why don’t you evolve Panpour and Minccino?’ Ukai asked as he inspected the PokeBalls belonging to Takeda, who was furiously scribbling away at possible combinations.

‘I want them to stay small.’ Takeda said.

‘But they’ll get stronger if you evolve them.’ Ukai reminded. ‘I’ve got a Water Stone I don’t need, if you like.’

‘I know, it’s just I guess I consider my Pokémon pets more so than battlers or performers.’ Takeda admitted.

‘Okay then.’ Ukai said and Takeda put his pen down.

Takeda tilted his notepad upwards. ‘Fire and water types rarely work well together in a Performance Stage together so we should rule out any combination involving Pokémon that fit that description. Secondly, we should rule out flying types because they work best as soloists.’ Takeda announced and Ukai yawned.

‘Tell me something I don’t know. Every Coordinator knows that kind of stuff. It’s basic.’ Ukai said.

‘I know. I’m just procrastinating because I don’t have any ideas yet.’ Takeda said and he crossed out combinations involving flying, fire and water types.

‘Give it ‘ere.’ Ukai said and Takeda gave him the notepad.

Ukai flicked through it, even to irrelevant pages because idle curiosity begged him to look through it. Takeda didn’t stop him. ‘Hm, you’ve got a lot of rare Pokémon for this region so that already increases a chance of us droppin’ a show-stopper so even if we bomb, we can always rely on that.’ Ukai said.

‘But we’re not going to “bomb”. We’ll do well.’ Takeda said, hopeful.

‘Gramps taught me a routine once, usually used by any ghost type and any electric type; we’ll put a spin on it by using one of your unusual Pokémon. I suggest we use Natsuo, is that right?’ Ukai paused and Takeda nodded. ‘And we’ll use my Raichu.’
Ukai then went onto explain the routine and Takeda couldn’t stop grinning. It sounded simple, easy and best of all: engaging to watch. Takeda even found a video of someone doing a similar performance on PokeTube. And Takeda couldn’t have been more right in their assumptions. It didn’t take them long to work out the routine with their Pokémon. It turns out; Takeda really was ready for anything now that that surprise was old news. He and Ukai were ready for tomorrow’s February Rendezvous.
Valentine's Day

The week leading up to the February Rendezvous was hectic to say the least for Hinata and Kageyama. Nyta refused to compromise, Ralts was always hungry and there was little sanctuary to be found at the PokeCentre due to their annoying neighbours. Every single night, Tsukishima and Yamaguchi would turn up their music loud and dance to it. Well, it was unconfirmed whether or not they did dance to it but it seemed likely. They had appalling tastes in music and to make matters worse, sometimes Hinata would ask dumb questions.

Once the gruesome twosome was done for the night, it was usually lights out for Hinata and Kageyama. And just as Kageyama was drifting off to sleep, Hinata’s voice would light up the dark and ask: ‘Do you think they’re dating?’ or something along those lines. This was something that would happen every single night and Kageyama despised it.

He never thought February fourteenth would come but here it was. He, Hinata and literally every other Trainer in the PokeCentre were up bright early and scoffing their food down so they could all get to the Contest Hall on time. They all signed up for the February Rendezvous in the lead-up to the Contest rather than signing up the morning of it. The February Rendezvous was one of the few Contests which did that. It was because it always attracted huge swarms of Trainers and it was more convenient that way.

News reporters, journalists and cameramen swooped around and clamoured for live coverage of what was happening. The excitement in the Contest Hall was electric. The noise of everyone finding seats and talking, chatting and buzzing turned into a great racket like the crash of ocean waves.

Hinata and Kageyama had gotten changed in the bathrooms and Hinata was still feeling fine, which was unusual since normally he would become nauseous. Despite his insistence that he was going to be fine, Kageyama still had him take some stomach medicine. The two sat amongst all the other Trainers. There was little space between anyone.

Soon, the television back stage lit up and Marian’s face was televised. ‘Welcome to this year’s Floaroma Town February Rendezvous! It’s sure to be a great time, as per usual. This year we have one-hundred-and-sixty-four teams of hopeful Coordinators performing over the next three days. And they’re all hoping to be taking home one of these bad boys. Like every year, we’ll be handing out a Ribbon each to the winning Coordinators.’ Marian said and she showed off a Ribbon.

The Ribbon was fanciful. Its fabric was flowing and pastel pink, covered in red heart-shapes. It had a heart-shaped gold plate over it as well. It looked very much inspired by the other event taking place today which was St Valentine’s Day. Everyone stared at the screen intensely. Everyone was here to win and it was evident that there was going to be tough competition as there was a real mix of veterans and novices standing around/

The camera zoomed out and Marian began to speak again. ‘Yup, that’s our Rendezvous Ribbon and we’re here to have fun and live large! And due to recent on-goings, our fabulous judges Takeda Ittetsu and Ukai Keishin have volunteered to set the standard for this year’s February Rendezvous! Everyone give it up for Takeda and Ukai!’ Marian said and the Contest Hall burst into applause; little thought went into her mention of “recent on-goings”.

Takeda and Ukai were wearing similar suits and matching, pink bow-ties. They had their hair done nicely and they looked more than just spiffy. They bowed towards the audience like operatic conductors. Takeda grinned earnestly and Ukai just tried to smile. They stepped up onto the raise
platform overlooking the performance space. Lovey-dovey decor flitted about the room. ‘You ready? Ukai mumbled and Takeda nodded, slightly.

‘Natsuo, welcome to the performance!’ Takeda said and he tossed out a PokeBall covered in blue-coloured film.

Black smoke exuded from the PokeBall and a lithe creature strode through it. The smoke disappeared and a Liepard was revealed. It yowled loudly like a monster of the night.

‘Raichu!’ Ukai yelled and he tossed out a PokeBall of his own. It burst open and wild, electric bolts jumped out of the PokeBall with a yellow-brown rodent leaping out alongside them. Raichu’s cheek pouches flared. Raichu and Natsuo faced each other whilst the effects of the seals faded. They yowled and growled at each other with playful rivalry. ‘Dark Pulse!’ Takeda instructed before adding a second command, ‘Shadow Ball!’ Natsuo obliged and simultaneously performed the two commands. A huge wave of inky darkness swept over and in the epicentre of it, Natsuo raised her head and opened her jowls wide. A shadowy orb was being compiled in front of her canines. ‘Thunder Wave!’ Ukai yelled.

His Raichu expelled yellow light from its body. From above, the two Pokémon looked like titans in the midst of an undiscovered galaxy; a sun and a black-hole. ‘Electro Ball!’ Ukai yelled. Raichu’s tail straightened out and a huge orb of electrical energy materialised on its tip. ‘Go!’ Ukai yelled. Raichu growled and batted the Electro Ball out in front and Natsuo released the Shadow Ball that it had been expertly maintaining.

The Pokémon obeyed at the optimum moment of synchronicity and the energy balls they had been maintaining were both set for a course of collision. The audience held their breath and waited for the impact. And then it came with the impact of a dying star’s last wish. Glitter made from the debris of shadow and light. The galaxy faded as the beginning of a new star began.

Soon the performance came to a close as the “star” Raichu and Natsuo had created together faded. The applause from the audience was monstrous. They lapped it up and the Contest judges humbly accepted the compliments. They and their Pokémon bowed. ‘Takeda Ittetsu and Ukai Keishin, our beloved judges for the year.’ Marian said and they took their seats whilst Marian stirred the crowd and bent them to her will, pumping them up for the first performance.

Everyone watched intently and the judges had set the tone. About five performances in, Kageyama recognized some names. ‘Next up, our gal pals Shimizu Kiyoko, a veteran to the circuit who ranked third in last year’s Grand Festival – an impressive feat, and her apprentice Yachi Hitoka, this is her second Contest and let’s give them our most heartfelt of applause!’ Marian said.

‘Those’re the girls Daichi and Sugawara told us about.’ Kageyama hissed to Hinata.

‘I thought their names were familiar.’ Hinata mused.

Shimizu Kiyoko and Yachi Hitoka were a pair of dainty looking girls who wore dresses and skirts. They looked elegant. The black-haired girl, older and more mature-looking, was calm and in control. She was presumably Shimizu Kiyoko. The blonde girl, meanwhile, looked nervous. She was visibly shaking. ‘It’ll be okay.’ whispered the black-haired girl. They walked onto stage and swam amongst applause.

‘Hello.’ the black-haired girl greeted the audience.

‘Hello.’ the blonde-haired girl stammered.
‘Let’s get the show on the road girls, we’re all excited to see what you two have dreamt up. Take us to Wonderland.’ Marian said with a wink at the camera.

The blonde stood awkwardly next to her friend who comforted her with a single glance. ‘Pretend no one’s here. I’m with you, we’ll do fine.’ she said.

‘Uh-huh.’ the blonde said.

‘Masquerain, good luck!’ the black-haired girl said and she tossed out a PokeBall.

‘I’m Yachi Hitoka and this is Florrie!’ the blonde-haired girl said and she cautiously tossed out her own PokeBall. Her friend giggled at her tic.

Both PokeBalls opened simultaneously and were coated in blue film. They opened a dual burst of musical notes. They were a mix of pale blue and white, they flew out delicately with the accompaniment of dulcet tones. A Masquerain flitted about with majesty and beneath it a little Sunkern bounced happily and with the same tenure of a child worried they have been forgotten in conversation. ‘We believe in the both of you.’ Kiyoko sang out earnestly.

‘Y-Yep!’ Yachi stammered.

‘Silver Wind!’ Kiyoko instructed.

‘M-Mega Drin, I mean Drain!’ Yachi yelped.

Their Pokémon twirled about and jumped and spun like little children dancing. From that alone, garnered a collective “D’aww” from the audience. Soon, Masquerain began to flap its wings harder and silvery strands of powder began to exude from its mysterious-looking wings. Soon, a flurry of silver and white enveloped the court and slurred like fresh snow. But a burst of green began to pierce the air from Sunkern. Florrie released green energy that danced through the slurry. ‘Air Slash!’ Kiyoko yelled.

Masquerain howled and took a harsh turn. It released slices of desolate wind from its wings that split the slurry and shattered it into even smaller grains of powder. ‘Now’s your chance, Florrie!’ Yachi yelped, a tad tongue-tied. ’Leaf Whistle!’

The twin leaves on top of Florrie’s head twitched and it opened its mouth. It began to hum. It sounded like the twines of someone blowing against a leaf. It was quaint and rustic but pleasant to listen to although it was quiet. ‘Masquerain, assist Florrie!’ Kiyoko asked. Her Pokémon swooped down and let Sunkern jump up onto its back. The little grass type Pokémon was flown about the Contest Hall whilst it sang. It sang sweetly for a minute before running out of puff and it was returned to Yachi. She babied her little Sunkern. Kiyoko allowed Masquerain to perch on her head.

The two girls and their Pokémon beamed. ‘Thank you for watching us.’ they said in unison and curtseyed.

‘Their politeness is so adorable and refreshing. Judges, care to lend us your insights?’ Marian asked and the two girls held their breath.

‘It can be very hard working a flying type into a dual performance and you two have selected a very good partner for Masquerain. I think your two-part performance needs a little bit of enhancement, it felt very unconnected to first part despite how adorable it was to watch. I give you eight point five.’ Takeda said.

‘Eight, I’d love to score you girls higher but self-confidence is key. Yachi, you show promise and
you have a great teacher – from what I have seen and heard – all you need is a bit more confidence and your Pokémon’s performances’ll skyrocket but other than that, great job, keep on keepin’ on.’ Ukai said.

‘I agree, self-confidence will help you ripen your Pokémon’s capabilities. I have no complaints whatsoever but simply because the point has been brought up, the second act to your performance does feel disjointed. I give you and eight point five overall however. I hope you continue to do well into the future.’ Nurse Joy said.

The audience roared and the girls smiled. They returned their Pokémon and thanked the judges for their advice. ‘And that’s twenty-four point five points to our golden girls Shimizu Kiyoko and Yachi Hitoka.’ Marian said and the girls were ushered off stage.

‘Those girls worked really well together.’ Hinata whispered to Kageyama.

‘Mm, they’ll definitely be ones to beat.’ Kageyama said.

‘We can trump twenty four points. Cause we’re awesome and those judges don’t know what they’re talkin’ about. That whole Leaf Whistle-y *fwaa* thing was cool as.’ Hinata said.

A few performances later and a presumed couple entered with a Prinplup and Monferno combination and Kageyama and Hinata watched as their failures became that team’s winnings. They managed to get the flames inside the bubbles and wow the crowd with their finesse. It was achieved through a combination of Bubble Beam and Fire Blast. The judges gushed over them. Their names were Nametsu Mai and Sakunami Kosuke. The pair earned a score of twenty-seven with their complicated routine that even the judges said they wouldn’t have dared. They lost points because Mai had a habit of making inappropriate albeit hilarious comments under her breath. Kageyama had a feeling that they would become rivals.

More performances came through and eventually, Tsukishima and Yamaguchi were called to the stage. The boys had a feeling that they would be entering with their precious Electrike and darling Mareep.

Tsukishima and Yamaguchi greeted the crowd like manager pleasing celebrities, although Tsukishima played it more coyly than Yamaguchi. ‘Tsukishima and Yamaguchi, our golden boys from the Jubilife Rookie Prize. Let’s see if they can rock our world!’ Marian said and the boys took their position on the raised platform.

Yamaguchi and Tsukishima produced their PokeBalls. ‘I choose you, Sol!’ Yamaguchi said and he tossed out his PokeBall. His Solrock spun out of a burst of orangey flames.

‘Lunatone!’ Tsukishima said and his Pokémon surged out of a burst of yellowy stars with half a shimmy to show drama and flair.

The boys glanced at each other and with perfect unity, they both declared: ‘Moonblast!’ and ‘Fire Spin!’ simultaneously. Their Pokémon spun about with unbalanced levity. Lunatone released a huge ray of pink light from its rock body and fire scrambled from Solrock’s body. The fire and light danced and crashed together with chaos but that was soon changed when the boys declared with unified precision: ‘Psywave!’

That was a game changer. Their Pokémon emitted wobbly rays of pink-purple light that manipulated the flames and pink light with more control. It was like watching the inside of a psychic’s mystic, crystal ball. The Pokémon danced about the boys took a bow whilst the effect of their performance petered out.
The audience loved it. They roared and cheered and wondered how much time it would have taken to achieve such synchronicity between the Trainers and their Pokémon. ‘Calm down, we need the judges to speak.’ Marian teased. ‘Judges?’

‘Fabulous, simply fabulous!’ Nurse Joy swooned. ‘I give you nine points! I would give you ten but the whole “less is more” philosophy can be overrated at times. This is one of these times. I want more!’

‘I give you eight points. I think the whole “in unison” thing is downright creepy but it was hella cool, I’ll give you that.’ Ukai said and Takeda groaned. His fellow “professional” had reverted back to his old ways after such brilliant progress. How irritating.

‘I give you nine point five points. I believe you’ve brought out your Pokémon’s potential expertly. But just remember, there’s always room to grow so don’t get big-headed, boys.’ Takeda said.

Marian whipped around theatrically. ‘Our golden boys are truly ones to watch. They’ll be singing all the way to the bank one day, mark my words. The boys’re sitting pretty on twenty seven point five points. Our highest score of the day but the combination of Nametsu Mai and Sakunami Kosuke are incredibly close behind. The day’s only started and we’ve got neck and neck competitors. This is definitely one of the best Contests I’ve ever hosted. We’ve got such a talented bunch this year. I can’t wait to see how things play out.’ Marian said.

Tsukishima and Yamaguchi nodded. They returned their Pokémon and wanted to leap into each other’s arms to celebrate their score. But they waited until they were away from the camera’s prying eyes as they didn’t want assumptions and mistakes about their relationship. They were just close friends, very affectionate between each other and most importantly, just friends.

‘Beat that.’ Tsukishima smugly said when he passed Hinata and Kageyama backstage.

‘Play nice, Tsuki.’ Yamaguchi snickered.

‘Hey! We’ll do more than just beat you! We’re gonna take home those Ribbons!’ Hinata raised his voice but his rivals continued to snigger.

‘Don’t pay attention to them. They’re assholes.’ Kageyama said.

After what felt like an eternity, Kageyama and Hinata heard the blessed words. ‘Next up are our silver-clad boys who are set to impress, we’ve got Hinata Shouyou and Kageyama Tobio! Let’s see if they can leave the competition in their tailwind!’ Marian said, a few people understood her pun but it went over a lot of heads. The two stood up and their hearts skipped a beat. Time slowed and they made their way to the stage. All eyes were on them and they were curious and prying, demanding to know what was going to happen next and were quick to become displeased.

Hinata and Kageyama stood on the raised platform overseeing the sea of Valentine’s Day decor and the court where the Pokémon were free to perform. Hinata grinned and Kageyama tried to remain composed. This was not a situation where he was allowed to glower. ‘Jump out, Nyta!’ Hinata yelled with bursting enthusiasm. Nyta leaped out of his PokeBall in a cavalcade of blue flames.

Nyta whinnied loudly and relished the attention. She batted at the ground and people wondered why Kageyama had been so slow to start. ‘Ralts, set up!’ Kageyama said and he tossed out his PokeBall. It almost missed Nyta’s head. Ralts materialised out of the basic red light. At first, it was peculiar that only one half of the team had used seals until the entrance was fully revealed. Ralts leaped out of the PokeBall and straight onto Ponyta’s back.
Nyta didn’t behave badly to the new weight on her back. In fact, she was supposed to act wildly but it almost didn’t appear that way to the onlookers. She tossed her head back and reared up. Ralts held on and the crowd was in awe. ‘Such majesty! I’ve never seen such an entrance before! It looks like something out of a story-book!’ Marian said and without doing much more than call out their Pokémon, the two rookie Coordinators already had the crowd and judges eating out of their hands.

‘Ralts, Magical Leaf!’ Kageyama instructed and Ralts jumped down from Nyta’s back and summoned a myriad of leaves coated in mystic light. It spun around slowly and rotated the leaves he wielded. ‘Nyta, Ember!’ Hinata yelled.

Nyta reared up onto her hind-legs again. She opened her mouth wide and expelled a burst of smoulderingly bright embers. Ralts dug the leaves straight into the embers. The light of the leaves overtook the embers and were enraptured by the mysticism. The leaves burnt and showered the two Pokémon in cindery glamour. ‘Flame Wheel!’ Hinata yelped and Nyta focused. Her flames were raised and had the intensity of a bonfire but she controlled them. She didn’t let them sprawl and she manipulated them until they were wrought into a spindly figure. ‘Confusion!’ Kageyama yelled and Ralts howled. It brought forth a second psychic wave that was weak but it shook the leaves about and they danced.

And the image was complete. The two Pokémon brought forth an image worthy of a haiku. They created a tree out of flames and psychic energy. The crowd applauded them. ‘Shaking leaves, fire renews the body, immortal flames.’ Marian sighed. No one noticed that she had made up a poem on the spot. ‘The boys have truly done it now but judges, what do you think?’

Nurse Joy grinned. ‘A ten, straightaway and simple as that. It was like a children’s fairy tale. It was beautiful but simple with creativity I’ve never seen in a Contest before and I can’t help but feel it draws on a lot of romance, perfect for a day like today. You two deserve ten points, no doubt about it.’ she gushed. Her hands over her cheeks and she danced in her seat.

‘Your performance was very unique ad well suited to today’s theme. It was admirable to see such originality and for that I must reward you with nine points. Please continue to entertain us with your unique talent and skills; the sum of your parts create a larger whole.’ said Takeda.

‘10 points, boys, for your impressive performance. I’ve never seen such creativity. My grandfather will be proud but a prick and deduct points for something stupid.’ Ukai said.

Kageyama and Hinata grinned. They couldn’t believe their luck. ‘Round of applause for the boys, they worked really hard! This isn’t the sort of performance you can create without hard work and trust. So that’s twenty-nine points altogether, catapulting you into the leading position!’ The two boys walk off stage grinning like mad men. They slinked past Tsukishima and Yamaguchi, with grins that read: “Eat shit” which understandably, infuriated their rivals. ‘Not over just yet, King!’ Tsukishima growled.

On the television, Marian continued to organise performers. The competition wasn’t anywhere close to its draw.
The final performance was called out and everyone watched as the pair performed. They were almost definitely lumped into the “mediocre” part of the spectrum as the average seemed to be between nineteen and twenty-three. There was a quick break for the judges so they could decide their cut-off. Highlights from today replayed on the television screen. Hinata saw snippets of his performance with Kageyama, as well as parts of Kiyoko and Yachi’s and Tsukishima and Yamaguchi’s.

Soon, the judges returned from their break and a message was passed onto Marian. She nodded and smiled wide. She readjusted her headset microphone and her sugary voice was relayed to every corner of the Contest Hall and all over Sinnoh.

‘Haven’t we got the cream of the crop here today? It’s been a day full of close calls and neck-and-neck competition. I’m so proud of everyone here and if it were up to me, I’d give all these Coordinators a Ribbon each but unfortunately, it doesn’t work that way. And out of the one hundred and sixty four teams here, we can only have a maximum of thirty teams go onto the next stage.’ Marian said.

The Coordinators backstage reverberated with fear, with a question: What’s the cut-off?

Marian twirled around and teased the Coordinators. She savoured their bated breath. ‘The judges came to the unanimous decision that teams who earned twenty-six points or more shall proceed onto the next stage. These are the Coordinators who passed the barrier.’ Marian said. Her voice was serious.

Names and faces flitted onto the screen. Kageyama and Hinata became swollen by proud when they saw themselves appear first. They had gotten the most points in today’s Contest. Why shouldn’t they be proud?

‘Anyone with twenty-six points unfortunately were pitted against each other and the judges selected their personal favourites out of the few of you in that position but just remember guys, there’s life after this Contest – and constellation prizes. I chose them myself this time.’ Marian said. ‘Seeing as how it is four o’clock, we’ll have to end the Contest here and pick it right up tomorrow, same time as usual. See all of you ten o’clock sharp. I sincerely wish every Coordinator here, the best of luck for future endeavours. Farewell!’

Marian waved goodbye into the cameras and journalists buzzed about, trying to get interviews from anyone who walked into their path.

‘We did it Kageyama, we did it!’ Hinata said. Joy lit up his eyes like nothing Kageyama had ever seen. He bounced happily and rocked about.

‘Yeah, we did do it.’ Kageyama said.

‘We should celebrate. Let’s get popsicles!’ Hinata suggested and Kageyama nodded.

They got changed and went in search of an ice cream parlour. There was bound to be one around and they were right. It wasn’t too far from the PokeCentre; it was bizarre that they hadn’t seen it on their trips to and from the PokeCentre. They bought themselves some soda flavoured ice blocks and some treats for Nyta and Ralts. They had all be fabulous today and deserved the luxuries.

Time just flew by and heading to bed earlier than usual helped. The boys wanted to be in the best
condition possible as there were a lot of battles to be had tomorrow and they were going to make it to the top. They were going to stand over all their rivals. They would stand over everyone else too. It was going to be great.

The following morning, there was as big as rush as only a minority of the Trainers in the PokeCentre had the motivation to want to be there on time. Kageyama and Hinata even turned up early. They got changed at the Contest Hall and watched the formal greetings and boring bits. Their desire to ever turn up early diminished after watching that as it bored them to death.

It was a beautiful thing when Marian engulfed the screen with her captivating smile. ‘Good morning, Sinnoh! It’s a lovely day to day and perfect for the second course of our Contest. It’s a shame that today is going to be our finale!’ she prattled on and the rival teams streamed into the backstage area.

Shortly after, the official formalities were over and Marian re-capped what was going to happen: two minute battles that were decided randomly via computer generation. From there, it would be simple elimination. There were no take-backsies. Anticipation caused the air to dry and people grinned. Soon, this year’s winning duo would be revealed.

The battles were short and sweet but riveting. They caused the crowd to yell, holler and roar. Everyone had their favourites and bets were almost definitely happening unofficially between close friends. The favourites were rocketing through their matches and they were all expected to duke it out. Everyone outside of these four teams was irrelevant. It was hard to believe but after what felt like little time, the deciding matches were about to take place. It was Nametsu Mai and Sakunami Kosuke versus Hinata Shouyou and Kageyama Tobio. On the flip side, it was Tsukishima Kei and Yamaguchi Tadashi versus Shimizu Kiyoko and Yachi Hitoka.

Marian beamed. ‘I can’t believe it but we’re just about to decide who will be fighting in the final match of the day. It’s been a riveting day and the performances from yesterday, I can’t get them out of my head. It’s insane! But all good things must end. And here we have the dynamic duo: Nametsu Mai and Sakunami Kosuke!’ Marian said. The audience, no spare seats, whipped into frenzy and welcomed the pair.

The two strutted onto stage. Mai looked gorgeous in her burgundy, key-hole dress with long, tousled sleeves. She was taller than her partner in her stunning, charcoal black heels. She had her hair up in a tight bun with a decorative, flower-like fascinator. She towered over Sakunami in sleek monkstrap slip-on dress shoes. He looked smart in his dress pants and grey suspenders. The two looked like they were dressed for an awards show. ‘Shall we?’ Mai whispered. She bent out her arm and smiled invitingly.

‘We shall.’ Sakunami agreed and he hooked his arm around hers. They skipped onto stage before taking their place on their end of the court.

Marian spun around again. ‘And here we’ve got our golden boys! Hinata Shouyou and Kageyama Tobio!’ she shouted. The boys walked onto the stage, serious and prepared in their matching volleyball uniform. Hinata wondered if they could get in trouble for wearing them since they were technically the Karasuno’s precinct but it was only a small, nagging wonder at the back of his mind. He figured that since they didn’t get in trouble last time so they won’t this time. He and Kageyama stood opposing Mai and Sakunami.

The court was long and bare between them. Behind them, a huge television screen stood amongst lovey-dovey decor. Their faces appeared on the screen and a yellow bar appeared alongside their
likenesses. ‘In this instance, we’ve decided that seniority overrules the usual “heads or tails” so Nametsu Mai and Sakunami Kosuke are the ones allowed to move first. Two minutes and a lot on the line: it’s sure to be a tight match... Begin!’ Marian said and the timer turned over with a blink.

‘Rotom!’ Sakunami yelled and he tossed out his PokeBall. In a burst of yellow bolts of electricity, an orange-coloured Pokémon with a cheeky smile appeared. The crowd was in awe of such a rare Pokémon. ‘Just like we planned, Bibarel!’ Mai yelled and she tossed out her own PokeBall. In a fit of blue confetti, her Bibarel appeared. It smacked its paws against its gut enthusiastically.

Hinata and Kageyama exchanged a curt nod. They were facing dual typings that were drastically different to each other but they could handle it. ‘Ralts!’ Kageyama yelled.

‘Oink!’ Hinata shouted. The two threw out their PokeBalls and their psychic-types came out in a flurry of white confetti.

‘Surf!’ Mai yelled and her Bibarel swung around and summoned a huge wave.

‘Ride it, Rotom! Shock Wave!’ Sakunami yelled and his Pokémon obliged. It levitated off of the ground and rode the wave whilst crackles of electricity spread over the water. The wave crashed over Ralts who couldn’t escape. Oink however was able to jump over the wave but he couldn’t remain in the air long enough for the surf to completely wash over the court. Both took damage but it was the yellow health bar that took more. Soon, the crash subsided and puddles remained.

Kageyama fretted but Hinata took control of the situation. He thought he saw an opportunity. ‘Psywave, Oink!’ Hinata said and he jabbed Kageyama’s side. He then gestured wildly, Oink glanced at him, confused and then understood. He let off sporadic, wobbly beams but only where there were puddles. The beam was reflected and the crowd gasped as it was a gorgeous effect. And that’s when Kageyama picked up on Hinata’s cue. ‘Confusion, Ralts!’ Kageyama instructed and Ralts mimicked what Oink had done except with smaller, straighter waves.

The mystic waves hit their opponents at funny spots so they didn’t take much damage but their health bar was a completely different story. The cleverness in taking advantage of the opponent’s attack had caused half of their “hit points” to deplete: that was double what they had done to Hinata and Kageyama’s.

Mai nudged Sakunami with a smile. ‘Looks like we better reflect on our own behaviour since we let them do that, huh?’ she punned.

‘A girl after my own heart.’ Marian said and there was mixture of chortling and groaning in the audience. The clock was getting close to the one minute mark.

‘Yawn!’ Mai yelled and her Bibarel opened its chubby jowls and yawned. Oink and Ralts mimicked.

Hinata fretted this time but Kageyama remained calm. ‘Will-O-Wisp!’ Sakunami yelled and Rotom twirled about and released tufts of fire that while looked pretty, missed their target. ‘Ralts, please just use Disarming Voice on Oink!’ Kageyama said and everyone was shocked by the order.

‘Endure!’ Hinata stammered as even he was taken by surprise by the instruction.

Oink exuded a white light that protected it from Ralts’ beguiling screech. ‘Such trust between the Pokémon must stem from their Trainers!’ Marian said and both teams lost a little bit of damage.
‘Two can play that game.’ Sakunami said, a tad teasing and Mai winked.

‘I’m sure.’ Mai said. ‘Use your combination attack, Biba!’

‘Will-O-Wisp!’ Sakunami and then, with a little less gusto, he added: ‘On Bibarel!’

Rotom stared, unwillingly and mouth curved downward. Bibarel tucked itself up and into a tight, defensive curl. It then began to rock and it eventually somersaulted forward. It lunged itself like a bowling ball at Ralts who took direct contact.

Marian feigned disappointment. ‘Rotom failed to obey Sakunami Kosuke.’ she cried out. A lot of points were deducted from his and Mai’s health bar.

‘Gosh, we do dumb things sometimes but we’ve still got this.’ Mai encouraged and she put out her fist. Sakunami smiled weakly and knocked his fist against her.

‘We can do this.’ he affirmed.

‘There’s thirty seconds left on the clock and if things don’t change, it looks like Hinata Shouyou and Kageyama Tobio will be the ones advancing to the finale round!’ Marian pointed out.

‘It’s not over until the buzzer goes.’ Hinata mumbled.

‘We’re wasting time.’ Kageyama said. ‘Ralts, Double Team.’ Ralts began to swish about and duplicated itself from its aftermath.

‘What? I mean,’ Hinata said and Kageyama leaned into his personal space and whispered his plan. ‘Gwaa! That’d be awesome! Oink, Confuse Ray!’

Ralts organised itself so that it created a line directly to Rotom and trapped it. It looked about but new something peculiar would happen if it tried to escape the duplicate Ralts. Oink released a Confuse Ray that leisurely floated around Rotom who refused to move from its spot.

The yellow health bar belonging to Mai and Sakunami depleted some more and then it grew completely black with four seconds left on the clock. They couldn’t believe it. Hinata and Kageyama couldn’t believe it. ‘And we have our winner! Hinata Shouyou and Kageyama Hinata.’ Marian sang out. The Coordinators basked in the applause they had earned. They returned their Pokémon after it dwindled. Marian instructed them to shake hands and congratulate each other for such a creative and exciting match.

‘Rivals?’ Hinata asked as he shook hands with Sakunami.

‘I guess so?’ he awkwardly replied.

‘Ah, if only our Pokémon were like yours.’ Mai sighed dramatically. ‘How’d you do it? How’d you know Ralts would trust you like that? I mean, it’s not every day you purposefully attack an ally.’

‘I didn’t.’ Kageyama replied truthfully.

‘I don’t believe you so I’m gonna keep my eye on you.’ Mai said and she hid her left eye.

The teams were amiable and walked off stage. Marian twirled about with a twinkle in her eyes.
A moment was taken to clean the court of the puddles and Mai apologised to the cleaner for making such a mess. He didn’t seem to mind, he was dreamily happy. The court was scrubbed until it was spotless and Marian took the opportunity to introduce the next teams competing. ‘Up next are the gals who’re pals, the golden girls themselves: Shimizu Kiyoko and Yachi Hitoka!’ Marian introduced and the girls graced the court. The audience loved them and gushed for them. The girls politely greeted the audience. Yachi didn’t seem to be as nervous as she usually was. It seemed that she was finally beginning to adjust to the feeling of being the centre of attention.

Marian swung around theatrically. ‘And now we’ve got our favourite rockabilly hit the metal boys from Oreburgh: Tsukishima Kei and Yamaguchi Tadashi!’ Marian shouted and the boys came out onto the stage with rock star swagger although it was slightly mocking as they didn’t really see that kind of thing in them. They took their position on the court. ‘Once more, we’ll let seniority overrule the game of “heads or tails” that we normally prepare so that means that Shimizu Kiyoko and Yachi Hitoka will be the ones to go first.’ Marian said.

She paused for just a moment before continuing speaking. ‘We’ve got two minutes to get the finale. Let’s see who dazzles us? Begin!’ Marian said.

‘Leafeon, good luck!’ Kiyoko said and she tossed out her PokeBall.

‘Smooch, darling!’ Yachi said and she tossed out her PokeBall. Their respective Pokémon jumped out in the midst of pink love-hearts and a mix of blue, red and white confetti.

Tsukishima and Yamaguchi glanced at each other. ‘Monferno!’ Tsukishima yelled.

‘Amp!’ shouted Yamaguchi. They tossed out their PokeBalls. Their Pokémon came burst out in red flames and yellow lightning bolts. The two Pokémon chuffed proudly. Amp wasn’t a miniscule Mareep anymore but rather a little Flaafy. The Pokémon on the court faced each other with anticipation.

‘I believe in the both of you.’ Kiyoko affirmed. ‘Leafeon, Swift!’

‘Smooch, Extrasensory!’ Yachi shouted. Leafeon whipped its head around and opened its jaws. Golden, flying stars shot out of its mouth and whilst they sped, they were coated in fuchsia-coloured light and Smooch was conducting the movements with waves of its tiny arms. The attack was inescapable and Amp and Monferno both took damage.

The yellow health bar belonging to Tsukishima and Yamaguchi depleted. Tsukishima gritted his teeth. ‘C’mon, Tsuki, we can do it. Amp, Float Serve Electro Ball!’ Yamaguchi shouted.

‘Monferno, Mach Punch!’ Tsukishima said. Amp swerved around and its tail lit up. A gorgeous orb of electricity was created and was thrown from its tail with a wobbly serve; a volleyball player’s trick shot. The Electro Ball was uneven and it struggled hard against gravity. Monferno pushed it along with a powerful punch so it flew along.

Smooch wasn’t able to avoid the quickness in the shot. The girls lost a fair few points for that. Yachi squirmed and worried but Kiyoko placed a soothing hand on her shoulder. That alone was enough to calm the blonde girl. ‘We can do this, have faith.’ Kiyoko murmured before raising her voice. ‘Leafeon, use Leaf Blade!’ Leafeon darted forward before leaping into the air, somersaulted, and then ploughed its glowing tail into Amp who resisted the attack well.
‘Smooch! Fairy Wind!’ she shouted. Smooch waggled her hand and spun around in the air, summoning a glitter specked wind.

Monferno and Amp were subjected the attack but again resisted well however their Trainers’ health bar still dwindled but not by much. It could be inferred they lost points due to type disadvantages and by not cooperating. ‘We can pull through, guys!’ Yamaguchi encouraged.

‘We’re down to a minute.’ Marian reminded and suddenly, the pressure was on. Sixty seconds and there was still a whole lot more damage to be done.

‘Flame Wheel!’ Tsukishima instructed.

‘Thunder Wave!’ Yamaguchi added. Their Pokémon obeyed. The two creatures were more or less in time as they moved. Monferno wheeled forward in a fiery blaze and was illuminated by the weak wave of electricity that Amp had created. The crackles highlighted the flames and Monferno pushed over Leafeon with its movements.

Leafeon attempted to skitter away, afraid of the fire, but failed. It managed to get up however but it had taken serious damage. The girls’ health bar depleted horribly. There was barely a cut of yellow left on their now, seriously blackened health bar. Even Kiyoko was beginning to crack and lose her seemingly impervious calm. ‘We love you!’ Kiyoko encouraged. ‘Leafeon, pull through and “fly”!’ she shouted.

‘Y-Yeah! Smooch, you too!’ Yachi added.

It was a coded signal as the Pokémon glanced at each other and had an understanding connection. Togetic flew towards Leafeon and picked it up whilst its tail grew solid and iron-like. Smooch struggled to bring Leafeon upward whilst it continued to ready its “Iron Tail”. Smooch flew up as high as it could before ultimately dropped Leafeon down who plummeted fearlessly with its tail extended. Leafeon thwacked Amp who stumbled backwards, too mesmerised by the combination to move. The boys took a fair bit of damage from that and it was getting close.

But the two remained cool. ‘Electro Ball!’ Yamaguchi said but it wasn’t the “Float Serve” this time. The orb of electricity formed and didn’t seem to waver, it remained composed.

‘Ember!’ Tsukishima yelled and Monferno darted away from Amp but remained diagonal from the Flaafy. Amp released the energy it had been compiling and Monferno expelled embers from its mouth. They were absorbed by the Electro Ball. ‘Now, Mach Punch, Monferno!’ Tsukishima pleaded. Timing was crucial in this.

The Electro Ball imbued with fire dazzled as it flew towards Monferno who readied its glowing punch. With a swift, precise action Monferno was able to change its course and the Electro Ball was headed directly for Leafeon but Kiyoko wasn’t ready to accept loss. She gracelessly instructed her Pokémon: ‘Swift!’

Leafeon whipped its head around and expelled shining gold stars from its mouth. They sped towards the Electro Ball and attempted to cut through the Electro Ball but Yamaguchi stepped in so that Amp’s attack wouldn’t be for nothing. ‘Thundershock!’ he yelled and Amp let out a pulse of electricity that continued to push the Electro Ball onward. It managed to go through the field of razor-like stars although it had taken damage before finally making an impact against Leafeon.

Leafeon took direct damage and whilst it resisted the technique well, it wasn’t enough. The combined effort of Tsukishima, Yamaguchi, and their Pokémon was enough to trump the girls and their Pokémon. The final slither of yellow on Kiyoko and Yachi’s side of the screen disappeared.
The crowd roared and thanked them for such a thrilling battle. Marian twirled about with a
cildlike grin.

‘Wasn’t that amazing folks? Isn’t your heart pounding? Mine sure as anything is! The winners
are Tsukishima Kei and Yamaguchi Tadashi!’ Marian yelled. The crowd almost swallowed up her
charismatic voice. The screen elected the boys as the winner and displayed larger images of their
faces. Soon, they were ushered off stage and a hush fell over the crowd. It had finally arrived.

The main event was here. It was just a breath away. It was so close and victory was mere
moments from being captured. The two teams about to fight could practically taste the win and feel
the softness of the Ribbon between the fingertips. But first, they had to earn it.

Marian swung around and the room darkened. The spotlight wildly moved about the room. ‘It’s
time, my friends, that we said goodbye. But not quite, we’re done here just yet. I can’t believe it but
the finale event, the main event, the closing events are so close now. It’s been a thrilling and
romantic past two days and it’s all about to end. The pressure is mounting and it’s time that we
bring back our competitors.’ Marian said and the crowd shivered in anticipation for what was about
to follow. The spotlight illuminated the passageway to the backstage.
The backstage passageway was wooden and led out to where the Coordinators hung about, waiting for their turn. The competitors who hadn’t made the final cut stared enviously at the boys who had. The air felt dry and the atmosphere was electric, if tainted by ugly emotions.

‘Hinata Shouyou and Kageyama Tobio, will you please come forward.’ Marian said and the boys got up and dashed for the stage with immature fervour. The two were met with vigorous applause whilst they took the southern end of the stage, as per the courtesy. Marian hushed the crowd by putting her finger to her cherry red lips. She winked at the camera crew. ‘Now, will Tsukishima Kei and Yamaguchi Tadashi come forward.

The two entered more quietly compared to their rivals. They also basked in thunderous applause. They took their stance opposite Kageyama and Hinata on the court.

Marian swung around and acted giddily. ‘I can’t believe it folks but we’re here at the finale battle of this year’s Floaroma Town February Rendezvous. We’ve been blessed with excellent performances so far and this battle is likely to follow suit and maybe even surpass the glamour and glitz we’ve seen so far. Now, teams, take your pick: heads or tails?’ Marian asked and a huge coin materialised on the screen behind her.

‘Heads!’ Tsukishima cut in.

‘Tails.’ Kageyama barked back in retaliation.

The coin flipped and moved digitally. Marian turned around behind her. ‘And it’s tails. This means that Kageyama and Hinata will be the ones who have the first turn.’ Marian informed.

‘Begin!’ Her voice echoed from the microphone and the countdown began. There was a little under two minutes to win.

‘Prinplup!’ Kageyama yelled.

‘Jump out, Oink!’ Their PokeBalls flew through the air and their starter Pokémon burst out of them in a cloud of red and white confetti. Their Pokémon stood proudly and were ready to receive orders.

Tsukishima and Yamaguchi both smirked confidently. ‘I choose you, Amp!’ Yamaguchi yelled and he tossed out his Flaafy’s PokeBall.

‘Electrike!’ Tsukishima shouted and he tossed out his PokeBall. The pair of electric types burst out in the midst of yellow and orange lightning bolts. Electrike clawed at the ground and Amp baaed loudly.

‘Psywave!’ Hinata yelled.

‘Bubblebeam!’ Kageyama shouted. Oink emitted a wobbly ray of mystic coloured light from his pearl and Prinplup blew out a harsh stream of bubbles. The bubbles bounced and floated atop of the light. The waves were spread wide and couldn’t be dodged by the opposing Pokémon but they didn’t take much damage. The crowd was in awe of the beauty of Kageyama and Hinata’s combination. Tsukishima and Yamaguchi’s health bar reduced.

‘Electro Ball!’ Yamaguchi said and Amp swung around, its tail lit up and conjuring a lop-sided shaped orb of energy. After a second of concentration, the orb was released and aimed right at
Monferno. ‘Thunder Wave!’ Tsukishima instructed and his Electrike howled loudly and released a wave of weak electricity. But that little bit of extra energy was enough to pump up Amp’s attack and have it move on toward the opponent Pokemon.

‘Move!’ Kageyama and Hinata screeched. Prinplup scrambled away and Oink jumped into the route the electro Ball was taking. He took direct contact.

Both teams lost points. ‘The trust between Trainer and Pokémon will never cease to astonish me!’ Marian said.

‘Confuse Ray!’ Hinata instructed.

‘Bubble!’ Kageyama shouted.

Prinplup masked Oink’s Confuse Ray with its spray of floaty, gentle bubbles. Oink succeeded in confusing Amp. It stumbled around and swung its arms around violently. Tsukishima and Yamaguchi lost more points.

‘Thunder Fang!’ Tsukishima yelled.

‘You know what to do, Amphy!’ Yamaguchi yelped. Their Pokémon coordinated. Amp got down on all fours and Electrike dashed like a mongrel towards Amp and leapt onto its back. The pink and green on their fur began glow. Crackles of electricity dripped off of Electrike’s fangs. ‘Take Down!’ Yamaguchi yelled.

Amp bounded towards Prinplup with Electrike in tow. Amp crashed against Prinplup whilst Electrike bit onto Prinplup’s wing. Prinplup squawked. Hinata and Kageyama watched in horror, oblivious to how bad their point deduction was. ‘We can keep on going, right?’ Hinata shouted out, panic tainted his voice.

‘Of course.’ Kageyama said and Prinplup got up with a proud squawk. ‘Prinplup, use Metal Claw!’

‘Help out, Oink with Confusion!’ Hinata said and he smiled. He felt back in the groove now.

Prinplup lunged forward and Oink coated her wings with rings of confusion so that they looked like brightly coloured bangles. Prinplup slashed at Amp. Amp stumbled back. Tsukishima and Yamaguchi lost some of their points. Yamaguchi noticed that they were still ahead though and felt comfortable, safe even. ‘One minute to go!’ Marian sang out and pressure crashed onto everyone’s shoulders.

‘We can pull through!’ Hinata yelled.

‘And we’ll do our best to defend then.’ Tsukishima retorted.

‘Amp! Use Thundershock!’ Yamaguchi said.

Amp wandered about with blurry eyes. It hit itself out of confusion and Yamaguchi groaned. His and Tsukishima’s health bar went down a little bit. They were now about even with their rivals now which made Hinata and Kageyama perk up a little bit. Tsukishima gritted his teeth, I need to act quickly.

He thrust out his arm defensively and shouted: ‘Howl at Amp!’ Electrike understood with a rough nod. It opened its jaws and let out a terrible howl that woke Amp from its confused state
whilst simultaneously enhancing Electrike’s abilities that were already affected by Amp’s ability Plus. Both sides took the same reduction of points from their yellow health bars.

‘I think it’s time.’ Hinata said, breathless.

‘Definitely.’ Kageyama agreed. He glanced at the board, he was certain they could take the win home with this manoeuvre. There was less than twenty-five percent in those yellow health bars. He just hoped a knock-out would follow his command. ‘Prinplup, use Pound!’

‘Bounce!’

Oink jumped into the air and Prinplup readied itself. The two coordinated without so much as a glance. Oink had his eyes closed and fell down. Prinplup wacked into Oink with her tail and Oink was launched across the court like a rocket. the crowd was silent, in awe or in hate? It was unclear. Yamaguchi gawked and Tsukishima found himself wondered how they came up with such a plan. In terms of volleyball, it was like a freak god quick. It was made of pure luck.

Oink crashed against Amp who was knocked onto the ground. Amp laid back and eyes spun. The yellow health bar belonging to Tsukishima and Yamaguchi depleted but they still had a slice left. Kageyama felt crushed. He was so sure. He couldn’t look at Hinata. But Hinata was fine. He was proud.

‘Amp, are you okay?’ Yamaguchi asked and Amp didn’t respond, not even with a meek bleat.

‘Flaafy is unable to battle!’ Marian declared and Yamaguchi returned Amp. ‘Tsukishima Kei and Yamaguchi Tadashi are unable to complete the battle. This makes Hinata Shouyou and Kageyama Tobio the winners of the February Rendezvous Contest.’ Marian said.

The screen was lit up with Hinata and Kageyama’s faces. They were in awe and dreamlike. ‘We won?’ Hinata said and he turned to face Kageyama. ‘Our freak quick won?’

‘Yeah.’ Kageyama said.

Marian conducted the crowd. Everyone applauded, even Tsukishima and Yamaguchi. Although it was more out of the pretence of decent sportsmanship that anything else. ‘And let’s give it up for our runner-ups Tsukishima Kei and Yamaguchi Tadashi. They’ll receive second place prizes.’ Marian said. Hinata and Kageyama clapped for their rivals. Without them, such a riveting battle couldn’t have been possible. ‘We had fun!’ Hinata called out through the din of clapping.

Yamaguchi smiled, having heard him.

He and Tsukishima were ushered offstage. It was time for Hinata and Kageyama to hog the limelight. Marian joined them on the court and all eyes were on them. It made the two boys more than just a “tad nervous”. It made them feel downright stage fright. Marian had a Ribbon in each hand. She displayed them boastfully. They were identical to each other. They were pastel pink and covered in tiny, red love-hearts and a heart shaped, gold plate over the knot.

Marian smiled. She had a smile that could make flowers grow and pride swell. ‘I present these Ribbons to Hinata Shouyou and Kageyama Tobio: this year’s winners of the Floaroma Town February Rendezvous!’ she announced. She had a boy on either side of her. She pinned a Ribbon onto their shirts and smiled at her handiwork.

The boys stood stiff, swollen with pride: in themselves, in their Pokémon and in each other. They had dumb grins on their faces. ‘Give it up for our freak quick dup, Hinata Shouyou and Kageyama Tobio!’ Marian yelled and the audience was whipped into frenzy. They applauded loudly for the
pair of boys. They couldn’t think straight anymore. They were too enamoured with this sensation of victory and triumph. It was more than satisfying. It was addictive and glorious. ‘But remember, these boys here aren’t the only winners. Everyone who entered this Contest was brilliant and two minutes isn’t indicative of your strengths and talents. I hope every Coordinator here learns from their experience and shows up at the next Contest with newfound confidence and technique.’ Marian said.

Marian twirled around and grabbed both boys. She hugged them with aunt-like vivaciousness. ‘And like every year, Contest Spectacular Magazine will be having an interview with our winners. This year’s photo spread theme is Wonderland! Buy next week’s issue for the inside scoop on what these boys are like, outside the Contest Hall.’ Marian said and with unintentional venom, whispered into Hinata’s ear: ‘Hope you look good in a dress.’

The Contest soon ended after that with a few formalities and thanks. Hinata and Kageyama weren’t allowed to leave. Two enthusiastic reported bounded after them once everyone had left. They wielded notebooks and cameras like weaponry.

The lady in the pair was a young, twenty-something who looked straight out of university. She wore a red shirt and leather jacket on her torso and a small skirt from the waist down. She had a blonde bob and blunt fringe. She was quite freckly and had a good-natured smile. She gave off the vibe of being someone’s cool older sister.

The male in the pair had a brotherly vibe and friendly demeanour. He looked a tad younger than his companion and was the one holding the microphone. He had light blonde hair and brown eyes. He was slightly less fashionable than the lady but he was dressed decently in smart casual. He wore beige chinos with a slightly crumpled black jacket and powder blue button-up.

‘Are you friends with Kei?’ the guy asked.

‘You’re so straightforward.’ the female reporter said. She had a yowling voice. ‘Tanaka Saeko here, camerawoman. And this idiot’s Tsukishima Akiteru.

‘I’m the newest writer, I mean journalist, reporter, for Contest Spectacular. And interviewing you two is my,’

‘Our.’ Saeko interrupted.

‘Ah, yes, our biggest assignment yet. So, when’re you fine to head down to Floaroma Studios? We’ve got it hired out for the next few days.’

Hinata glanced at Kageyama and shuddered when he remembered what Marian had whispered to him. ‘Tomorrow should be fine, right Hinata?’ Kageyama asked.

‘Oh yeah, definitely.’ Hinata stammered.

‘Not gonna lie, we were expecting a het couple but don’t worry, we won’t make you cross dress.’ Saeko said.

‘True, unless you want to. ..?’ Akiteru added.

‘We’re not a couple!’ Kageyama barked awkwardly.

‘And we don't wear dresses either.’ Hinata yelped.

‘So sorry. We didn't mean to assume.’ Akiteru apologised.
‘Yeah so tomorrow at two. We’ll shout afternoon tea as well. How’s that?’ Saeko said.

‘Sounds good and we didn’t mean to snap.’ Kageyama agreed.

The rookie Coordinators were then allowed to leave. ‘Hey, Bakageyama, have you ever read a Contest Spectacular thingy?’ Hinata asked. Kageyama’s heart almost jumped out of his chest as he had expected a different question.

‘Think so but I’ve never read a February Rendezvous issue. I could probably find one on my PokeGear.’ Kageyama said.

He got out his PokeGear and toyed with it until he found what he was looking for. He found last year’s interviewees and their photo spread. It was sinful. A very much in love couple had done a summery, beach themed photo spread and answered a variety of romantic and explicit questions regarding their love life. How was this in a general demographic Contest magazine? Kageyama’s bad reaction to what he had found made Hinata very curious. ‘Well…’ Hinata mumbled, uncomfortable. ‘Saeko and Akiteru will change the questions right? I mean, we are minors and we aren’t dating.’

‘Hopefully.’ Kageyama agreed.

They began walking again and made their way to the PokeCentre.
Take Me to Wonderland

Chapter Notes

Not that this is a relevant comment or anything since it doesn't affect any of the characters introduced thus far but I'm adding it anyway: the introduction of the Alola region (and specifically Rowlet) has really shaken up some of my future plans for this fic.

Kageyama and Hinata managed to avoid Tsukishima and Yamaguchi at the PokeCentre. They had Nurse Joy heal their Pokémon and she congratulated them on their win. She was quick with their Pokémon so the boys didn't linger in the foyer. A few people congratulated them actually.

Hinata snatched Kageyama’s PokeGear often him as soon as he could and called his parents once they had reached the privacy of their room. His parents were ecstatic to hear from him. They had watched the Contest on television and couldn’t be prouder. They gushed over him with loving, familial words. Kageyama mused that he should stop feuding with his parents. He decided not to though, not yet.

Hinata laid back in the “Staryu” position on his bed whilst Kageyama sat with his back to the wall. ‘I'm so proud of us.’ Hinata said. Kageyama looked away slightly.

‘I'm glad we met.’ he admitted after a lengthy pause. Kageyama’s cheeks were a deep, rosy red.

‘And I'm glad we get along. But in the next Contest, I'm gonna come out on top.’ Hinata teased.

‘Yeah, right.’ Kageyama countered playfully.

The lead up to the interview was lazy. They ate and slept, that was essentially it but once they realised it was twelve o’clock was when they got into gear. They had their nicest travel clothes put through the wash and ironed. They scrubbed up themselves as well and ended with a half an hour to spare whilst smelling of lavender.

Kageyama used his GPS app on his PokeGear and worked out the shortest route to Floaroma Studios. He and Hinata left for the studio soon after. Kageyama predicted if they didn't designate time to waste, they would almost definitely arrive late.

Saeko and Akiteru greeted the two boys at the front of the studio. It was a huge, airy building that emanated a creative, artsy aura. The journalists toured them through the studio and made idle conversation. Eventually, the group stopped outside a door labelled “3A”. ‘Here we are, lads.’ Saeko declared and she kicked open the door with unnecessary roughness.

‘Careful Saeko, this isn't ours.’ Akiteru worried and Saeko ignored him with a nonchalant chuckle.

The door opened and revealed racks of interesting looking costumes in varying styles and sizes. They were all lined out in wire in front of a huge backdrop and props. The backdrop was designed to look like a curly and crazy forest of impossible colours. Giant, plastic roses stood in front of the backdrop with lacquered shine. It looked far from real or believable.

Saeko noticed that the boys didn't like what they saw. ‘Don't worry. We’ll spiffy it up in
Photoshop. That's why I'm here; I'm not just a pretty face.' Saeko said with gloating vigour.

'So, go ahead and pick a costume. Change rooms are over there. Go for your life. Pick whatever you're comfortable with. We’ll set everything up over here.' Akiteru said.

'Okay.' the boys said.

Saeko set up her camera and tripod in front of the backdrop. She also organised her laptop and some referential internet pages on Photoshop. Akiteru, meanwhile, checked over the questions he had written down and that his voice recorder was working. He had fresh batteries in his pocket just in case.

Hinata and Kageyama scoured the racks. 'What are you thinking?' Hinata asked.

'I like this hat.' Kageyama replied and he showed Hinata a wide brimmed top hat that was purple and green stripes and a white sash with a card reading ten out of six. ‘It’s the Mad Hatter’s hat.’ Hinata pointed out.

‘Yeah, it is.’ Kageyama replied.

‘You dress up as the Mad Hatter. I-I’ll be your Alice.’ Hinata said and turned his attention to another rack and pulled out light blue denim overalls. ‘I’ll wear this.’

‘It’s up to you.’ Kageyama said.

The two grabbed some more articles of clothing. They headed to the change rooms with as much as they could carry. They tried different combinations until they found the one they liked best.

Hinata left the change room first. He was wearing a blouse with puffy sleeves like profiteroles. The shirt had an argyle pattern alternating between white and sea blue. He had a black ribbon tied underneath his Chelsea collar. He wore the pale blue overalls he had picked out initially. Hinata didn't like how short they were on him. He did like the shiny, silver buttons on its front though. He left one strap undone. He wore frilly socks that were really soft. He wore his volleys though. They were rotten and damaged and even Hinata could see that they didn't match the rest of his costume but he refused to put anything else on his foot. Hinata waited a moment until Kageyama left his stall in the change room.

Kageyama came out in the hat he had picked first. It seemed a little too big on him as it refused to not engulf his face. He wore a long coat with split tails that was plum. He wore a white blouse splattered beige and a waistcoat that was a feral, emerald green. He wore black trousers that flared from the ankle down and billowed over his pair of buckled boots. Kageyama felt uncomfortable and ridiculous.

Hinata smiled. ‘We look so bad.’ Hinata chuckled and Kageyama half smiled.

‘Let's go and get this over with.’ Kageyama growled. The two toddled off and in front of Saeko and her shiny, professional camera. Saeko smiled and organised the boys. ‘Ever done this before, modelled I mean?’ Akiteru asked.

‘Nope.’ Hinata chirruped.


She grabbed some small items and decorated the boys with them. She put a black headband on
Hinata's head. It was studded with pastel blue diamonds but only on one side. She gave Hinata bangles and rings to Kageyama. Saeko piled on the useless bits of jewellery onto Kageyama's hands and wrists. She hitched a bronze fog watch onto Kageyama's coat. Kageyama couldn't move without jingling or jangling. Saeko still had plenty of bits and bobs in her arms though. ‘C’mon, get out yer Pokémon. They can participate in the shoot to, y’know.’ Saeko said.

Hinata and Kageyama let their Pokémon out of their capsules. Saeko put a silvery diadem over Oink’s pearl and tied a jolly red bow around Nyta’s neck. Nyta resisted Saeko and ended up having to be bribed with sweet poffins from Hinata in exchange for being less of a pain.

Kageyama's Pokémon were docile around Saeko and were very well behaved. Saeko put various bangles and necklaces on Ralts who very much enjoyed the glamour. She put a black and white bow tie onto Prinplup’s neck and a series of pendant laden necklaces on Staravia. ‘Your Staravia is so quiet and good. Nothin’ like mine, absolute ass she is.’ Saeko commented.

Akiteru smiled. ‘You all look mad. Fantastic. Let's get this show on the road.’ he said.

‘Yeah!’ Saeko chirped. The boys and their Pokémon walked around the props. A passing curiosity swept through all of them whilst they wandered through the designated space. Saeko huffed. ‘C’mon, more energy!’ Saeko yelped.

The boys were awkward at first but through insistent encouragement, they warmed up to the idea of modelling. Saeko snapped photos while they played around. It was like a great big game of dress-up. About seventy shots later, Saeko decided that she probably had enough good ones to pretty up in Photoshop and inject into next week's issue of Contest Spectacular. ‘That’s a wrap guys. Akiteru, you can take over.’ Saeko said. She unconnected the camera from the tripod and plugged it into her camera.

Akiteru got up and Kageyama took off his hat. ‘Can we get changed?’ Hinata asked.

‘Yeah, go ahead. I’ll set up some chairs. A table. Saeko, do you think you can get snacks?’ Akiteru asked.

‘I’m not yer gopher.’ she growled and crossed her arms. ‘What’d you in the mood for?’

Saeko left after taking orders, she didn’t promise anything. Kageyama and Hinata quickly got changed. It felt amazing to be dressed normally after their hour and half as amateur cos-players. They returned shortly and sat down with Akiteru. He had his recorder reading and seemed to know what he had written down in his notebook off by heart.

He smiled warmly. ‘You’re nothing like your brother.’ Hinata commented.

‘I know. He’s just awkward, that’s all but we’re not here to talk about Kei, we’re here to talk about you. So, tell me boys, did you always want to be Coordinators?’ Akiteru asked. The boys gave him a shortened version of the drama they had gone before deciding to be Coordinators.

Akiteru wrote notes on what they said. ‘My, that’s quite the story. So, tell me, how does it feel when you perform?’ he asked next.

‘Like gwaa and fwaa and all eyes are on me and I’m gonna be the next Little Giant!’ Hinata gushed.

‘Dumbass, the Little Giant never won the Grand Festival. And no one understands you when you talk like that.’ Kageyama berated.
‘Now, now.’ Akiteru said. ‘Each to their own. What about you?’

‘I feel in control, and tr-trusted.’ Kageyama said. His eyes darted towards Hinata when he said that.

Akiteru nodded and seemed genuinely interested in what the boys had to say. He asked numerous questions that covered a wide range of topics. They covered topics that they weren’t sensitive to and ones that hit a little close to home. When Akiteru noticed they were getting uncomfortable with the subject matter, crossed out what they said and similar questions. He smiled widely; completely different to how he had been previously.

Hinata and Kageyama knew this was going to be the last question and the one they’d hate most. They also knew that it was going to be the most important questions that Akiteru wanted them to answer. ‘Not many people enter the February Rendezvous as friends and it’s even rarer when a “just friends” team wins. And even though I explained to the Head Editor that you two aren’t involved, she still wanted a personal question about your relationship. And this is unavoidable; I wouldn’t be doing this if it were. Are you happy to answer it?’

The boys were hesitant and didn’t make eye contact. ‘I begged and pleaded with my editor and she let me alter the question so it’s more platonic.’ Akiteru added.

‘Shoulda mentioned that first.’ Saeko chimed in.

‘I guess?’ Hinata replied, uncertain.

‘Describe your relationship.’ Akiteru said.

‘That was a huge relief. ‘That could have been way worse.’ Hinata said. ‘We’re rivals. And I’ll beat him one day.’

‘He brings out the best in me. Reminds me why I don’t want to be that cold, cruel person I used to be.’ Kageyama admitted.

‘Really?’ Hinata said.

‘Yeah, because upsetting you is like kicking a Lillipup.’ Kageyama growled.

Akiteru chuckled. ‘Great response. Well, I think that’s everything we need, right, Saeko?’

‘Yep, I’m good.’ Saeko said and she spun her laptop towards the boys and her partner.

On the screen were two of the pictures she had taken. The photo on the left was one of Hinata surrounded by his Pokémon and cuddling with them. He looked incredibly happy in it. Special effects blurred the edges and made the background look more surreal. The photo on the left had both Kageyama and Hinata in it. It lacked their Pokémon. It had the two of them back to back. Hinata was smiling and Kageyama frowned. They looked good together and if it weren’t for the costumes, it would have looked badass.

Saeko grinned. ‘They look great.’ Hinata gushed.

‘Thank you, thank you. This big sis has many talents.’ she said and she opened some more folders and opened all of the ones she had played with. She showed them fake moustaches and body swaps. Some of them, such as Nyta’s head on Staravia’s body, were just disturbing but they did show off that Saeko was very good at editing photos.

The journalists locked up and put things away. The boys tried to help but the adults insisted they
would be right. Soon, after the journalists treated them to burgers and milkshakes in a homey diner with fragrant flowers on every table. They had an enjoyable meal accompanied by light conversation. The boys decided that this would be their dinner as the sky was getting very dark out.

Eventually, they finished up and the adults paid for everyone despite Kageyama’s insistence. Hinata tried to hide how happy he was that he wasn’t the one paying. ‘Well, catch ya on the flip side, boys. Might see you again.’ Saeko said and she waved goodbye.

‘Keep being friends with Kei, okay? He needs more friends than just Tadashi.’ Akiteru said.

‘No promises.’ Kageyama barked.

‘Maybe.’ Hinata said, very non-committal about it.

‘Well, bye. Remember to buy next week’s issue of Contest Spectacular.’ Saeko said. ‘Reckon you’ll be on every tween girl’s wall next week. You two’ll be more popular than my little bro.’

‘Bye.’ Hinata said and he waved back exuberantly. They split off from there. The journalists were headed for their hotel and the Trainers were headed for the PokeCentre.
Kageyama and Hinata hustled back for the night. Hinata plonked down on his bed. ‘I’ve had fun today.’ he smiled.

‘Same.’ Kageyama replied. ‘Are we going to leave early tomorrow?’ he asked.

‘Sounds good. Do you know when’s the next Contest?’ Hinata asked.

‘No, I don’t. We’ll work that out tomorrow.’ Kageyama.

‘Okay then. Good night.’ Hinata said and he scrambled underneath his sheets.

‘At least get into your pyjamas first, dumbass.’ Kageyama said.

Soon, lights were out and there was a noted lack of music in the air tonight. That must mean that Yamaguchi and Tsukishima signed out of the PokeCentre’s hostel system. The silence was glorious after so many nights of alternating between death metal and brassy swing. It made for perfect sleeping conditions so when the boys arose in the morning, they were actually refreshed for once without irritating ringing in their ears.

They had their morning run and then came back to the PokeCentre. Today, it was Kageyama’s win. He and Hinata grabbed their usual breakfasts and some pamphlets whilst once route. ‘Let’s see.’ Kageyama mused whilst he sucked on a squeezy yogurt. He flicked through a glossy Contest itinerary. ‘Nothing in Jubilife until March. Nothing in Eterna until March. Hearthome however has something this month. Fantina is celebrating her birthday so she’s hosting a Contest, says here even though it’s privately funded, it still counts towards a Grand Festival.’

‘Sounds good.’ Hinata replied

Hinata scooped some cereal into his mouth. ‘Hey, which way will we go?’ he asked.

‘The Contest is on the twenty-second. That’s eight days away. Probably doesn’t matter.’ Kageyama said.

‘Then let’s go to Eterna City. I bet we can catch some interesting Pokémon to use in Eterna City and Mt Coronet.’ Hinata suggested.

‘Okay then.’ Kageyama agreed.

The two finished up soon after and Kageyama decided that he would grab as many of these pamphlet things as he could so they had constant access to official Contests whenever. He also figured they may make good kindling. He and Hinata checked out with Nurse Joy before trotting off to Route 206.

Route 206 wasn’t a pretty route. It was harsh-looking and almost wintery. It was muddy too. Huge rocks and bigger trees punctured an already ridged and uneven valley. They walked into mountain-like terrain and crossed bridges over deep valleys and passed by coursing, blue rivers. It made for good endurance training though.

They passed by a few Trainers. They were a good mix, some were headed for the Gym in Eterna, a few breeders were socialising and others were mere adventurers and hoped to visit the festival in Eterna City. Around this time of year was Eterna’s month of honouring the dead and hosts a grand,
weeklong festival rife with interesting sights and sounds. It tantalised Hinata’s imagination and he insisted to a disbelieving Kageyama that he knew about this festival and it was the real reason he wanted to go to Eterna City.

Hinata and Kageyama crossed one last bridge and soon the land began to close into the mouth of an evergreen forest with a chilly aura. A house sat outside and Kageyama wondered what kind of person would choose to live around here. Hinata ignored the house, grabbed Kageyama’s wrist, and marched straight into the forest.

Immediately, as soon as they stepped into the forest, the air grew cold. But they didn’t mind. It was a nice kind of cold that was pleasant as it was summer. The sky darkened and trees obscured most of the blue but the sun still trickled through and it still became obvious whenever a cloud blotted out the sun. ‘This place is so spooky.’ Hinata said and he could hear the coos of a Hoothoot.

‘Yeah.’ Kageyama agreed.

Kageyama stayed close to Hinata. The forest looked like a natural labyrinth and every, beaten path looked the same. Seedot toddled past and avian Pokémon flew overhead. Kageyama noticed, he wondered if Hinata did. ‘What kind of Pokémon were you thinking of catching?’ he asked, trying to make conversation. The forest seemed to decided what sounds would be heard. It chose the eeriest sounds available and swallowed everything. Long strands of silence sank between short, dispersed caws and coos.

Hinata replied and kept walking. ‘The coolest kind, obviously.’ Kageyama hadn’t expected anything else, to be honest except for maybe one of Hinata’s favoured onomatopoeias. Hinata heard something, it had been soft and like the crunch of twigs underfoot. ‘Kageyama.’ he hissed. ‘What?’ Kageyama asked, his voice at its normal level.

‘I heard something.’

‘Of course you did. We’re not the only ones here.’

Hinata refused from the spot he was frozen at. Kageyama crossed his arms and rolled his eyes. Hinata heard the noise again but it was getting faster. He began to grin. He began to frantically search for its source. He had a good feeling about that noise. He rapidly looked left and right before he saw something.

He saw a Buneary. It was trying to reach something off a tree branch, a berry from the looks of it. ‘Bakageyama, see that.’ he said and he pointed out the small, brown creature.

‘Yeah?’ Kageyama replied.

Buneary was a good fifty yards away and from its demeanour, it was easy to tell that it was feeling frustrated. It had its paws on its hips and it was attacking the tree. The tree refused to give into its power regardless of how the Buneary struck it. The Buneary let out a loud noise that sounded like the wail of a murdered ghost. It sent shivers down Kageyama’s spine but ignited confidence in Hinata. He grinned. The Buneary leapt up and finally got to the branch of the tree which berries were growing from it. The branch was at least seven meters away from the ground.

‘I’m gonna catch it.’ Hinata said and he sprinted off. Kageyama let him. ‘Hey!’ Hinata shouted and he spooked the Buneary. It glared at him from where it sat. It stood up and the branch wobbled underneath its sudden movement. ‘Fight me!’ Hinata declared. ‘Jump out, Oink!’ Hinata tossed out
his PokeBall. Oink came out and began to bounce. ‘Confuse Ray!’

Oink emitted a curly, purplish light from its pearl that wrapped itself around Buneary. It began to teeter and it fell off of the branch. Hinata caught it but it struggled in his arms. He had to let it go but it didn’t flee the battle. It stumbled around and kissed Oink on the cheek. Oink’s eyes began to spin. Hinata noticed and he swapped Oink for Nyta.

Nyta was keening to battle. She fidgeted and refused to remain stationary. ‘Ember!’ Hinata instructed and Nyta spewed a few, orange-coloured embers at the Buneary. It took damage as it was unable to avoid the embers due to its confusion. It took more damage as it couldn’t differentiate itself from Nyta. ‘A little bit more, Nyta! Low Kick!’ Hinata yelled. Nyta spaced herself from the Buneary and then dashed at it. She extended a hind leg and tripped Buneary.

Buneary went down face first and didn’t get up. Hinata slung his backpack around and pulled out an empty PokeBall. He threw it at Buneary. The PokeBall bounced off of Buneary’s head and it opened. A red light came out of it and absorbed Buneary who was taken inside the digital world of a PokeBall. The button on the PokeBall’s front flickered red and it rocked and shook violently but the PokeBall failed. Buneary leapt out. It examined the PokeBall with disdain before kicking it back at Hinata. It hit Hinata in his face before he was able to catch it.

And it was completely fine. It had woken from its confusion. Its eyes narrowed and it attacked Nyta with frustration. ‘Chill.’ Hinata mumbled. ‘Nyta!’ He raised his voice. ‘Tackle!’ Nyta dashed at the Buneary and crashed against it. The Buneary skittered backwards and it was obvious that it was becoming worse for wear. Its movements were becoming less delicate and more sluggish. It still attacked Nyta with a Quick Attack though that was precise and strong.

Hinata gripped the empty PokeBall in his hand. ‘C’mon, Nyta, just a little bit more. Ember!’ he yelled and Nyta sprayed Buneary with an array of flaming hot cinders. Buneary defended by tucking its head in but was still left with a burn and some singed fur. Hinata threw his PokeBall and Buneary was sucked into it again.

The PokeBall’s button flickered red and white. It swayed from side to side with teasing motions. Hinata watched and soon, he heard it: the most satisfying noise in the world. The PokeBall emitted a ‘clicking’ noise and remained still. Hinata, overcome with joy, scrambled for it and picked it up. ‘We did it Nyta! We call Buneary. I’m gonna name it Bunny.’ Hinata decided. He turned around to Kageyama with wide eyes.

He approached Kageyama smugly. ‘Well... done.’ Kageyama said and he went to reach out, to grab Hinata’s head affectionately and give his hair a ruffle before deciding against it.

‘I knew this was a good idea.’ boasted Hinata.

‘I know, I got it. You told me so.’ Kageyama sighed, exasperated.

‘C’mon, let’s keep exploring. Are you going to catch anything?’ Hinata asked.

‘Maybe, who knows?’ Kageyama pondered. Nothing to the area came immediately to mind.
Newlyweds

It was hard to believe but Kageyama and Hinata had been walking for a few hours now and still no closer to the exit of Eterna forest. Kageyama also idly checked his phone and he couldn’t believe the time. It was eight o’clock.

He put away his PokeGear. ‘Hinata, we should probably set up camp.’ Kageyama said.

‘What’s the time?’ Hinata asked, slowing his pace.

‘Eight.’ Kageyama replied.

‘Wow, really? I’m not even hungry. Guess, we should set up camp, huh?’ Hinata mused.

Kageyama and Hinata chose a spot where the grass wasn’t all that long and away from a path that Pokémon would use. Hinata kept Nyta out of her PokeBall so that she could illuminate the inky darkness. They didn’t bother lighting a fire and they ate some packet of chips: dinner of champions.

Hinata returned Nyta and pure darkness surrounded them. ‘Good night, Kageyama.’ Hinata chimed, a tad tired sounding.

‘Night.’ Kageyama mumbled. The two curled up in their sleeping bags and kept their bags close. In a forest like this, it would be unsurprising if wild Pokémon liked to try and pilch off of unsuspecting Trainers.

Time blurred in the darkness of the night and forest. It was cold too. Colder than expected and Hinata’s skin was covered in goosebumps but he could feel a heat source very close by. Said heat source was incredibly annoying as it was jabbing into him. Hinata’s eyes fluttered but he kept them shut. ‘Kageyama...’ he groaned. There was no response but the jabbing sensation continued. ‘Kageyama.’ Hinata growled, a bit louder this time and the jabbing stopped. ‘Thank you.’ Hinata mumbled and he rolled over, bringing his bag with him.

There was a noise that seemed to jump over him but Hinata didn’t notice. Soon, a tugging began. ‘Stop that.’ Hinata growled.

‘You stop that.’ Kageyama growled back.

‘I’m not doin’ anythin’,’ Hinata mumbled.

‘Stop touching me.’ Kageyama groaned.

‘I’m not touching you. You’re touching me.’ Hinata countered.

Kageyama opened his eyes and couldn’t see a thing. There was blurry movement and hazy figures, small figures. ‘I know that’s you.’ Kageyama said but before Hinata could groan his response, there was a loud, harsh caw. It was sudden and shrill and woke the boys up thoroughly. Hinata let go of his bag and he could have sworn he saw it start moving. ‘What was that?’ Hinata asked and he got up.

‘I think your bag just got stolen.’ Kageyama said and he squinted through the darkness.

‘Damn it.’ Hinata whinged. Hinata got up with a wobble. He stretched out and moved off of his
His leg brushed against something soft and that thing made a terrible noise. ‘Crap, was that you, Kageyama?’ he worried and something shot up past him and fled.

‘No.’ Kageyama said. ‘Argh, what’s going on? I need some light.’

‘Nyta,’ Hinata said and his fire horse jumped out of her PokeBall. Her fiery mane illuminated the surrounding darkness and helped them see a little better.

‘Thanks.’ Kageyama mumbled.

‘What do you think was that?’ Hinata asked. ‘I wanna get my stuff back.’

‘I know, I know.’ Kageyama said.

He brought Staravia out and gave it instructions to look for Hinata’s smell that was further on. The Trainers waited with Nyta until Staravia returned. Staravia came back to them half an hour later and he then led the way to Hinata’s bag. Staravia led them into thick, prickly pine trees and into ignored, Pokémon paths. The boys complained and were becoming increasingly exhausted by the endeavour. It shouldn’t have been this hard but it was. And they had to accept that.

Staravia swooped around an unassuming tree. ‘Here?’ Hinata asked and he stood at its base. He looked up and through the clutter of branches and leaves, he saw what looked like a nest and a next to it was his bag with twigs poking out of it. ‘Bunny!’ Hinata said and for the first time, he let out his Buneary.

Buneary glared at Hinata, completely unimpressed and in better condition than when it had gone into the PokeBall. ‘See that bag,’ Hinata said and he pointed it out. Buneary nodded. ‘I want you to help me get it back.’ Hinata put his arms out and looked like he was about to volleyball pass. ‘Jump onto my hand and I’ll push you up.’ Hinata explained. His Buneary leapt onto his hand and he gave it enough momentum for a second jump. It easily got to the branch where it needed to be and seemed impressed. It seemed to accept that it could do better with a Trainer.

Buneary unhitched the bag from where it had been looped onto a twig and it went crashing down the tree. There was a squawk and then Buneary fell down along the tree too. Hinata dumped the sleeping bag he had been carrying and quickly caught Buneary before it could hurt itself. ‘Are you okay?’ he worried and his bag came down too.

A Pokémon swooped down from its nest and began attack Hinata. He screeched wildly and began to run around with a Pokémon hell-bent on pecking his head. ‘It’s a Murkrow.’ Kageyama noted.

‘Do something about it!’ Hinata screamed and he continued running. The Murkrow was absolutely relentless.

Staravia cawed. ‘Staravia, use Quick Attack.’ Kageyama murmured whilst he got an empty PokeBall out of his bag. Staravia zoomed towards the Murkrow and knocked into it. The Murkrow changed targets and Hinata sighed in relief. He put Buneary down and rubbed the back of his head.

Kageyama readied himself and watched as the Murkrow slashed its wing against Staravia’s body. ‘Quick Attack!’ Kageyama yelled, his voice echoed through the forest. Staravia zoomed past Murkrow again and made contact. Murkrow fluttered backward with a flinch. It recovered and then flew at Staravia, a mysterious energy surrounded its beak as it pierced Staravia’s side. ‘Wing Attack!’ Kageyama yelled. Staravia obliged and chased Murkrow.
Murkrow led Staravia astray and moved out at the way at the last second. Staravia flew into a tree and Murkrow “giggled” with horrid caws. ‘Return, Staravia!’ Kageyama said. ‘Go, Prinplup!’ His two Pokémon were swapped out. ‘Bubblebeam!’ Prinplup let out a harsh stream of bubbles that popped all over Murkrow. Murkrow was beginning to slow so Kageyama took the opportunity.

He tossed out his empty PokeBall and it knocked against Murkrow. It struggled against the red light but the PokeBall closed on it. It dropped to the ground and began to rattle. It violently went one way and then another before click. It settled and Kageyama picked up his PokeBall with a little bit of pride showing on his face.

‘Well done, Kageyama. Just like the Karasuno precinct mascot.’ Hinata pointed out.

‘Yeah, I didn’t even think about that.’ Kageyama said.

‘I should have caught it, damn.’ Hinata said. Kageyama knew he didn’t mean to sound envious.

There was a rattle from above before a huge rush of wind. Kageyama took an injury to the head. There was a second Murkrow. Kageyama shrieked. He was certain he was bleeding and the Murkrow swooped away from him. ‘Whoa! What was that?’ Hinata hollered. Kageyama bit his lip and tried to stop himself from crying but holy hell did that hurt. What was that attack?

Hinata glanced at Buneary. ‘C’mon, let’s catch us a Murkrow!’ Hinata enthused and Murkrow swooped at him. He screamed and got out of its way. There wasn’t a lot of room to move in this part of Eterna Forest and that Murkrow clearly knew its surroundings very well. ‘Bunny! Use Frustration!’ Hinata said and his Buneary leaped at the Murkrow and bashed against it with a lot of fury. Hinata hoped that Frustration would one day grow weaker but for now, he was content with it dealing a lot of damage.

Murkrow jabbed its beak into Buneary but Buneary resisted. ‘Quick Attack!’ Hinata said and his Buneary leaped about with a blur in its tracks and tackled against Murkrow. Hinata went through his bag and got a PokeBall ready. Murkrow jabbed into Buneary again with a fierce Peck. Buneary fought about and kissed Murkrow’s cheek after bounding up to reach it. ‘I didn’t tell you to do that!’ Hinata wailed and his Buneary seemed to not care about that. Murkrow’s flight pattern became erratic and it bumped into a tree. ‘Quick Attack!’ Hinata yelled.

Buneary bounded up to Murkrow and tackled against it. Murkrow flapped its wings half-heartedly and began flying closer to the ground. Hinata saw his opportunity. He tossed his empty PokeBall at the Murkrow. It was swallowed by the classic design PokeBall and it began to rock. Hinata held his breath and Kageyama cheered him on inwardly. A small ‘click’ filled the air and the button on the PokeBall became solid white. ‘Yes! We did it, Bunny!’ Hinata said and he dived on his PokeBall.

‘Now, we match.’ Hinata said to Kageyama. The two showed each other their PokeBalls.

‘I wonder why they were sharing a nest.’ Kageyama mused.

‘Who knows.’ Hinata said and he faced Bunny. ‘Good, lil rabbit.’ Hinata scratched Bunny behind her extended ear and she pouted. He got out his PokeDex.

‘Good idea.’ Kageyama said and he did the same.

Soon, the new additions to their team were all lined-up. The boys scanned their PokeDex over them. ‘It is believed that seeing this Pokémon at night will bring about ominous occurrences. It appears near travellers to lure them into deep forests. It is said to carry misfortune.’ the PokeDex
voice said when analysing the two Murkrow nesters.

‘Let’s see, my Murkrow has the Insomnia ability and is on level fifteen. Female and knows the following moves: Peck, Astonish, Confuse Ray and Wing Attack.’ Kageyama said.

‘Karasuno,’ Hinata said and he glanced at Kageyama, who glared back, ‘is male, has the Super Luck ability and knows: Peck, Astonish, Wing Attack, and Sky Attack?’

Kageyama leaned over Hinata and stared at Hinata’s PokeDex in surprise. ‘No wonder my head hurts. It used Sky Attack on me.’ Kageyama said.

‘How are you feeling about that anyway?’ Hinata asked.

‘I’m not displaying any symptoms of a concussion so that’s good.’ Kageyama replied as he put his PokeDex away. The two Murkrow began to cuddle up again. Kageyama had a sneaking suspicion that these Murkrow he and Hinata had just caught weren’t siblings but rather nest-mates.

Hinata moved his PokeDex onto Bunny. ‘It slams foes by sharply uncoiling its rolled ears. It stings enough to make a grown-up cry in pain. When it senses danger, it perks up its ears. On cold nights, it sleeps with its head tucked into its fur.’ the automated PokeDex voice said.

‘Yeah, yeah, get on with it.’ Hinata said. Live footage of his Buneary was brought up and paralleled with some individualised information. ‘Female, level sixteen, Klutz – damn it, knows: Frustration, Quick Attack, Pound and Sweet Kiss.’ Hinata said.

‘That explains its obsession with kissing Pokémon.’ Kageyama said.

They returned their Pokémon to their PokeBalls and decided that they would simply sleep here for the remainder of night and continue on their way to Eterna City once it was light out.
The following day was relatively quiet and relaxed compared to the antics of earlier this morning and parts of yesterday. Kageyama and Hinata set off from where they had camped by nine and after a few hours of strolling through the forest, they had made it to the exit that sprawled into the rest of Route 206.

They were greeted by morning warmth and a mossy pond which had a wooden bridge that crawled along its surface. Fishermen were patiently hoisting their rods in the pond. Long grass swayed serenely in messy clumps next to the pond and the dirt was ochre red beneath them.

The bridge was surprisingly solid underfoot but the lack of railing concerned Kageyama. He wasn't feeling well this morning. Hinata glanced at Kageyama. He knew Kageyama was under the weather but he could sense things might be getting worse. Kageyama was pale and he walked oddly. ‘Kageyama are you okay?’ Hinata worried. Kageyama reacted slowly and with half a grunt. He was slowly going closer to the edge and Hinata grabbed him. ‘We better get you to Nurse Joy quick.’ Hinata yelped.

He had Kageyama lean on him for the remainder of their walk into Eterna City. Luckily the PokeCentre was very close to the Route 206; facing entrance so it didn't take Hinata long to haul Kageyama into Nurse Joy’s care.

‘Boys!’ she shouted when they stumbled through her automated doors. She rushed to their aid whilst barking orders at her staff. The Chansey she employed quickly brought a stretcher to her and Kageyama laid on it. He weakly tried to tell Nurse Joy that he was fine but she wasn't having any of it. She took him into her Trainer Wing and Hinata explained to her what had happened recently.

‘A Sky Attack to the head will do it alright. I can't believe it was delayed for so long. Kageyama is having a concussion. You should have brought him here sooner. You should have been a more responsible friend.’ Nurse Joy berated. Hinata swam in guilt. ‘I understand that you two were in the middle of nowhere at three am in the morning but you should have come sooner. But you're here now and Kageyama will be fine.’

Nurse Joy left Hinata outside an operating room. Hinata stood with dejected posture in front of the cream doors with a red cross on them. He felt useless. He wished he could see into the doors. Kageyama had said he was fine. Why did Hinata believe him? His lips curled downward and his eyes became wet.

Hinata glanced at Kageyama’s bag. It had and its contents had been left in his care, although it was unspoken. Hinata knew this was probably a bad decision but if it was him almost slipping into the coma, he’d want Kageyama to do it for him. Hinata rifflled through Kageyama’s bag and opened up his PokeGear. Hinata guessed Kageyama’s password, unsurprisingly it was “volleyball”, and opened up the messenger app.

Hinata had no idea if anyone was going to pick up. He listened intently to the rings. He hoped someone would.

‘Hello? Kageyama-Takashi residence.’ a womanly voice answered. ‘I don’t have much time, please make to quick.’
‘It’s Hinata Shouyou. Tobio’s friend.’

‘How is Tobio doing? ’

For the first time, Hinata heard genuine emotion coming from Kageyama’s mother’s voice. She had been so quiet and cold but now she sounded so concerned. ‘How’s he holding up? He shouldn’t have found out that way. We’ve been so worried. He blocked this number...’

‘He’s fine. He spent some time recuperating at my house. You know, working out stuff. But that was a while ago now. We’re in Eterna City. just arrived. He’s got a concussion. He took a Pokémon attack to the head and it’s made him go all... fw-funny. Nurse Joy says he’ll be fine but I thought you should know.’

Kageyama’s mother made a strangulated noise. ‘I’m going to kill Iwao and take the bastard for everything he’s got. If he wasn’t having his affair...’ she growled.

‘No, it’s my fault. I didn’t take him to the hospital straight away.’ Hinata stammered, wide-eyed.

‘No, sorry, that was to my assistant. She’s helping me divorce the prick. Sorry, I’ve got to go. Send my love. I’ll try and visit.’

Hinata put away Kageyama’s PokeGear. Mrs Kageyama – Mz Takashi, actually he supposed – was still as intense as he remembered but she seemed different. Hinata wondered if her marriage had been so stressful in morphed her into someone hateful and now that she was slowly untangling herself from it, she was becoming the woman she had been before her marrying Mr Kageyama. Hinata didn’t like that idea. It felt terrible.

He sat down and wasted time doing nothing. Soon, he heard the doors open and he perked up. Nurse Joy walked out of the room and scowled. ‘Concussions are incredibly serious injuries, Hinata. But, consider yourself lucky. He’ll be fine. I’ve done my best. But now it’s up to you. He needs some stimulation, ask plenty of questions and keep him awake. I’ll send in a Chansey to monitor soon and give him some fluids and pain killers. Just know for next time, treat every injury as though it is life-threatening. Honestly, rookie trainers can be so irresponsible at times.’ Nurse Joy lectured before strutting off to complete other duties in her hospital.

Hinata gingerly entered the room. Kageyama was in the centre of the room, it was a bit small but there were two other beds which were empty. The scent of the air was sterile. Everything was metallic and pale. Kageyama looked a bit woozy. ‘Hey, Kageyama.’ Hinata said.

‘Hey.’ he slurred.

‘Are you okay?’

‘Been better?’

Hinata was quiet. He fidgeted a bit and recalled what Nurse Joy had said. He was supposed to keep Kageyama thinking and awake. ‘How many fingers am I holding up?’ Hinata asked and he extended his fingers so they were in a V shape.

‘Two.’ Kageyama replied.

‘Yep!’ Hinata chirped.

He fell quiet again. ‘Why’re you acting so strange? I’m fine.’ Kageyama said.
‘No you’re not. You’re in hospital!’ Hinata came close to yelling. ‘Also, I rang your parents. Your mum reckons she’ll be here some time, soon maybe but she’s still working out things, about, you know divorcing your dad.’

Kageyama growled. ‘Why did you ring them?’

‘Because if I was the one with the concussion, I’d want you to ring my parents.’

‘God, you’re such an idiot.’

Tension erupted between the two boys. They stared at each other with intensity. Something was building up between them and it wasn’t going to be pleasant. They started with insults and then it went downhill from there. they boys were flat out arguing. Kageyama had risen from his bed and he has his hands out for Hinata’s neck. Hinata had moved back and was yelling about all the things Kageyama did to irritate him.

Communication between them was breaking down. It was littered with hateful words and small things that simply built up. A proverb says that enough dust makes a mountain and that was quite true as small things that the boys just did without thinking had caused the other to become annoyed, mildly and not enough to complain but the opportunity was here.

‘I’m done!’ Hinata roared and he turned his back on Kageyama. The two were red-faced and breathing heavily with fists clenched. ‘I’m not travelling with you anymore if that’s what you really think of me!’ Hinata stormed out.

‘Fine! You’re a shitty friend anyway!’ Kageyama spat back and he fell against his bed again. He heard the door slam shut but didn’t see it over the bed’s railings. He was huffy and angry. He didn’t even know the origin for most of what he said and it didn’t feel good to get it off his chest.

Chapter End Notes

This is supposed to mirror that early part of season 2 when Kags and Hinata had that bad fight. I'm worried this part of the fic is going to feel unnatural/not stay true to canon in that sense of parallels so feedback on that would be nice.
Twinke, Twinkle Little Star, Does Mother Really Know Best?

Hinata didn’t even know where he was going, he was just going. Eterna was an old city with hodgepodge bricks for roads rather than tar. All the buildings had an elderly feel with some modernisms rising towards the sky as office buildings. Huge maple trees sprawled over and gave shade. Feline Pokémon, feral probably or runaways from home, stalked the streets and skittered off when Hinata trudged past loudly and angrily.

He got to the edge of town and saw a huge valley in between Eterna City and Mt Coronet. It was breath taking and the air was cooler out here than closer towards the city and Hinata enjoyed that. He wasn’t particularly fond of city smells but it was a little better out here, if vaguely sooty.

Hinata wandered towards the valley was careful where he stepped as it was beginning to become steep the closer he walked to Mt Coronet. Long grass brushed past him as he walked towards the connecting bridge to an upper crust of Mt Coronet. Hinata was careful as he crossed the bridge. It would be a huge fall if should wander off it but luckily, the railings were sturdy and the bridge barely moved underneath him.

He got to the other side and waded through more long grass and entered the cave. He was immediately chilled by the temperature change. It felt good though, definitely what he needed to cool his head. His thoughts went between his immediate safety and Kageyama. It was horrible.

Hinata propped himself up against the rocky walls of Mt Coronet. He was close to the entrance and light spilled in, banishing the oncoming darkness. Hinata watched Zubat flit about and Geodude heave themselves about. It was peaceful and serene and Kageyama was wrong! He did not snore!

The Trainer was lulled by the quiet sounds surrounding him and the darkness, Hinata’s head lolled to the side and he considered having a nap. But something stopped him, namely a small Cleffa had wandered up to him and took much interest in him. The small, pink Pokémon liked to tug on his shirt and clamber all over him. Hinata was fine satisfying its curiosity and played with it. He dangled stuff in front of it and it batted happily. Hinata wondered why it was so used to humans.

‘Twinkle! Twinkle!’ a voice called out and Hinata turned his head towards it. He could almost place the feminine tones.

‘Twinkle!’ a second voice, a tad sterner, called out.

The Cleffa on Hinata’s lap balled up and tried to hide its ears. ‘Twinkle? Is that your name?’ Hinata asked and it unfurled itself and pouted. ‘Now I see. You ran off from your Trainer. Naughty.’ Hinata grabbed the Cleffa and got up. The creature was plush and tried to squirm but Hinata restrained it.

‘I found your Cleffa!’ Hinata called out and from across the bridge, he saw two girls scrabbling through grass. They quickly sorted themselves out when they heard Hinata yell. He then recognised their faces as belonging to Shimizu Kiyoko and Yachi Hitoka. The Trainers that Tsukishima and Yamaguchi had won against at the Contest a few days ago.

Yachi dashed across the bridge and looked so happy she was bleary-eyed. ‘Thank you for finding my Cleffa. Where was she?’ she rambled.
‘She found me actually.’ Hinata said and the blonde got a PokeBall out.

‘You’re Hinata Shouyou, you and your friend Kageyama Tobiuo won the February Rendezvous. Well done, I’m Yachi Hitoka. It’s good to meet you, properly. And thanks again for finding my Cleffa. I just caught so I haven’t had the opportunity to teach her any manners yet.’

Yachi returned the Cleffa from Hinata’s hands. ‘You’re welcome.’ Hinata said.

‘Where’s Kageyama? You two travel together, don’t you?’ Yachi asked and Kiyoko crossed the bridge.

‘Thanks for finding my friend Hitoka’s Cleffa.’ Kiyoko added.

‘You’re welcome.’ Hinata added again.

He couldn’t stop staring at the two girls. They were gorgeous. Kiyoko was an absolute, striking beauty from up close and Yachi was adorable. He hadn’t noticed before because he had only seen them from afar or as a collection of pixels on the already obscured television screens backstage. He counted himself lucky that they weren’t reprimanding him for staring so rudely.

‘Kageyama? Where is he?’ Yachi asked again.

‘Oh, uh, that idiot’s in hospital with a concussion.’ Hinata snarled.

‘Whoa! What happened?’ Yachi asked and worry saturated both girls.

‘A Sky Attack to the head.’ Hinata and then went on to explain how it had happened, how he caught the culprit and what had happened at Kageyama’s bedside.

The girls and Hinata sat down on a rocky outcrop. Hinata had been riled up by his story and the caring natures in the girls had been activated. ‘How awful. I can’t believe your best friend said such cruel things to your face.’ blubbered Yachi.

‘You and Tobio made such a good team. Are you sure you want to completely cut ties with him?’ Kiyoko asked and she played with Yachi’s hands, tracing circles on her palms and trying to calm her.

Hinata crossed his arms and pouted. His eyebrows came together and he looked away from Kiyoko, instead focusing on a jagged-looking rock with angry intent. ‘Yes.’ he said firmly but then he softened his stance, Kiyoko smiled warmly and prompted the truth: ‘No.’ Kiyoko looked to Hinata with a gentle gaze. ‘Shouyou, if you care about Tobio then effort must be put into the relationship. It is all about balancing hive and take and compromise. No one can maintain a healthy relationship without effort and communication but I suppose you have to be wary of putting too much effort in. And tell that to Tobio also.’

Hinata grunted. ‘I got it.’

‘Good. Now, are you going to go patch things up with Tobio? Because, trust me, adventures and traveling is more fun with a best friend to share the experience with. I can vouch for that personally.’ Kiyoko said and Yachi went bright red.

‘You think I’m your best friend?’ she stuttered.

‘Absolutely.’ Kiyoko whispered and then turned back to Hinata who had his answer ready.
He took a pause and looked Kiyoko in her eyes, even though she kind of intimidated him because of her beauty. ‘No.’ Hinata replied.

‘No?!’ both girls echoed; completely stunned by shock.

‘I have something I want to do first. I have something I wanna buy him first.’ Hinata explained and the shock faded.

‘Oh, well very well then.’ Kiyoko stammered.

‘You ought to hurry then because it’s getting late. The shops are probably starting to close.’ Yachi pointed out and Hinata leaped to his feet.

‘Your right!’ he shouted then dashed off.

Kageyama hadn't been allowed sleep and had been watched over by a Chansey. He heard something outside his door: the clack of pointy shoes against linoleum. The doors burst open and he got up to see who it was because it wasn't Hinata. His volleys would slap the floor dully, not like what he had heard.

Kageyama’s gaze was met by sharp eyes hiding behind glasses. ‘Hello Mother.’ he said.

‘God, Tobio, I was so worried when you blocked our numbers and when Shouyou rang. God, I had a heart attack.’ she said and raced towards the bedside.

Kageyama had never heard his mother speak like that. He wondered if she was more emotive now that she was splitting from his father. His hands clenched. He was scared to think that she had been like this before she had become pregnant with him and that he was the real reason that she had developed heartlessness.

His mother's lips quivered. Her perfect eyebrows upturned and her icy blue eyes became wet. ‘I'm sorry Tobio!’ she wailed and Kageyama's eyes grew wide and he felt terrible.

‘What? No. Don't be.’ he said.

‘I have so much regret. I just wanted to be a career woman with a good home life but I had the worst mother to model my parenting skills off of. I just didn't want to be my mother. I am worse than my mother!’

This was the first time Kageyama had ever heard about his maternal grandmother. She had died when his mother had been a teenager. ‘I'm sorry Tobio. I was a shitty mother to you. But I swear I'll make it up to you. I'll get a new job, move out to the country and we can start over. I’ll even get over my fear of Pokémon and I saw you on television. I’d been channel surfing. Well done on winning the thing. That February Runner-Up. And where’s Shotarou? I want to congratulate him and tell him “thank you”.’ his mother had sounded hysterical up until she started making promises to improve. She looked around the room frantically for a wild mop of orange hair on a short country bumpkin.

His mother sounded sincere in her promises. She had moved him enough to make him want to believe her and to make him regret that his first instinct had been to shut her out due to disbelief and contempt.
‘His name is Shouyou.’ Kageyama corrected.

‘Oh, well where is he?’ she asked.

‘We had a fight. He got mad and ran off. I don’t know where he went.’

His mother frowned with hands on the hips. ‘What did you fight about?’ she demanded to know.

‘Dumb things we do.’

‘Do you plan on apologising?’

‘No.’

‘Well you should and you should communicate face to face without being passive aggressive. No other way works. Shouyou is your first best friend that you’ve had since Oikawa and the drama he caused. I think you should apologise to Shouyou and come up with three things that you will do better so he doesn’t get as angry. Listen to him and respect him. From what I saw, you two have “solid” and that’s a lot better than “fire”.’

Kageyama found it hard to believe that his mother, with her failed marriage and various ex-boyfriends and no friends, was preaching to him about what makes a friendship work. He appreciated the sentiment though. His mother crosses her arms and glared. ‘I know what you’re thinking Tobio. Your thinking why am I preaching to you? Well, it’s because I’m your mother and mother knows best.’ she lectured.

‘Maybe I could call him “dumbass” less...’ Kageyama mumbled and he saw his mother smile. It was a rare sight but somehow, Kageyama knew it was going to become a whole lot more common. He really hoped so anyway.

Hinata had raced to the nearest department store and was relieved to find that most were going to be open for another two or three hours but he barely needed one. He darted about and had his wallet ready the whole time. He thought something like what he had in mind would be a frivolous purchase but it wasn’t just for him so it wasn’t. It was necessary. It would help mend things between him and Kageyama.

He grabbed the cheapest, smallest one there and took in straight to the cash registers. The smiling lady put it through and charged him. He put it on his debit card and didn’t bother having his boxed item bagged. He grabbed it, said goodbye to the lady then dashed off again. The lady didn’t consider him one of the weirdest customers she had had that day.

Hinata made it back to the PokeCentre as quickly as he could. His feet pounded as he ran and Nurse Joy yelled at him for running inside. He slowed down when he reached the wing for injured Trainers. He let out a few half-hearted, heavy breaths and sucked in a huge lungful of air. He stared down the red coloured cross on the white door. He nudged the doors open with his back as he still carried the thing he had bought.

Hinata turned around and he was certain he saw Kageyama’s eyes light up when he entered. Hinata grinned, he must be able to see the image on the box and he must like the signal it was sending. Hinata then saw Kageyama’s mother. ‘You were able to make it. Hello Kageyama-san.’ Hinata said, respectful.

‘Takashi-san, please.’
'Uh, of course.' Hinata said.

Takashi-san smiled pleasantly, or at least that’s what Hinata assumed she was trying to do as it looked more like a mangled scowl. ‘Excuse me. I have to go and powder my nose.’ she said and she excused herself but not without winking at her son first who then refused to meet her gaze. ‘Goodbye, Shouyou. I will be back soon.’ she said and left. The boys waited until the sound of her footsteps had completely faded before they started talking.

Kageyama stared at what Hinata carried. ‘What’s that?’ he asked.

‘Can’t read?’ Hinata retorted and then frowned.

‘No, I mean what’s it for?’ Kageyama elaborated.

‘Well you said you don’t like not being able to cook and how I never cook and how we never eat healthy and that makes us both gassy. Well, I thought this would help. It’s a gas cooker stove thing. Should last us if we treat it right.’ Hinata said.

‘You cheapskate. You bought the cheapest one then without even checking to see if it’s sturdy.’ Kageyama realised.

‘That shouldn’t make it any less of a peace offering.’ Hinata said.

Hinata sat the box down on the end of Kageyama’s bed. ‘I still want to travel with you. It’d be boring and lonely without you and its fun for me to train with you and my Pokémon would miss yours.’ Hinata said.

‘Same.’ Kageyama replied with some quaver in his voice.

‘And I ran into Kiyoko and Yachi. They both said that I should talk to you and apologise. I’m sorry for saying those things to you. You’re not dumb, or stupid.’ Hinata continued.

‘I’m sorry too. You’re not dumb either.’ Kageyama replied.

Hinata was surprised to hear Kageyama say that. It was kind of encouraging so the two continued to talk about a bit more. Neither of the boys raised their voice once during the conversation or interrupted the other. They waited for their turn and listened to what the other said. The conversation was riddled with long, awkward pauses but that was okay.

By the end of it, Kageyama promised he wouldn’t be so quick to call Hinata a “dumbass” and now that Hinata had said it, that he liked affectionate friends, he would even try to make the effort to be more hands-on but only about little things like hair ruffles and high-fives. Hinata promised that he would try and spend more so that Kageyama isn’t the one who has to burden the bill every time. He would also try to sit still a little more often so that Kageyama doesn’t become irritated by the constant bounce of his feet, this will be especially true when they’re having breakfast in a PokeCentre food court.

The boys accepted the terms and conditions and high-fived on it. Kageyama was awkward and Hinata was exuberant. It felt good to be friends again.
Kageyama’s mother wasn’t able to stay around much longer but she spent the evening at her son’s bedside. She tried her hardest to delay her departure but airplane flights had a domineering effect on her schedule.

She was livelier than Hinata remembered but also awkward. She was more open and Hinata wondered why. He liked this new persona of hers though and he thinks that Kageyama does too. She wasn’t good at making jokes though and she screeched when she saw Prinplup but by the end of the night, she became comfortable with Ralts. Ralts had taken to her quite well and she didn’t seem to mind patting Ralts’ head and letting him sit on her lap. She ate with them and tidied up for them.

It was sad when she had to leave after making so many good, new memories. ‘She’s a lot nicer now.’ Hinata said when she had left.

‘I’m sorry she kept stuffing up your name.’ Kageyama murmured.

‘No, it’s fine.’ Hinata smiled.

Why did Kageyama feel so weird seeing that smile?

His mother must have put strange thought in her head. She had mentioned Oikawa and the “drama” he had caused.

Time passed slowly in the hospital and it was driving Hinata insane. He spent a lot of his time sitting with Kageyama. Although, by midday Hinata sensed that Kageyama wanted some alone time, he would decide to spend some time outside on Route 206. Hinata suggested that he should go outside for a bit so Kageyama let him take his Pokémon as well so they could get a stretch as well. Hinata took care of their combined horde and tried to train them evenly for the rest of the day.

Soon, Nurse Joy gave them the thumbs-up and discharged Kageyama and set the two of them up with bunk beds on the second floor with the other hostel Trainers.

Kageyama was discharged right in time for the festival; and also right before the Contest in Hearthome. He had watched from the window for the past day as stalls and decorations went up. ‘Are you looking forward to tonight?’ Hinata asked. They were sitting down in their hostel room; it looked like the others they had stayed at although it didn’t feel quite as spacious.

‘Yeah.’ Kageyama replied.

‘But how are we going to get to Hearthome in time?’ Hinata asked.

‘Nurse Joy said that if we hire bikes first thing tomorrow at the Cycling Gate, we can get to Oreburgh in no time at all and we run like crazy through Mt Coronet and Route 207, then we’ll get
to Hearthome in no time at all. Only problem is neither of us will have a routine ready.’ Kageyama said.

Hinata’s ears perked up. He smiled and Kageyama glanced at the clock on the wall. ‘Lucky we’ve still got plenty of time before the parade. It is a festival of the night after all.’ Hinata said.

‘Then what are we waiting for?’ Kageyama asked. He and Hinata got to their feet.

He and Hinata spent the rest of the day training their Pokémon and coming up with routines. They didn’t devote much time into thinking about the fact that only one of them could continue their winning streak from here on out. Eventually, dusk dyed the sky into husky colours and the two felt a chilly wind on their backs so they headed back to the Pokémon Centre where Nurse Joy had decorated it accordingly. She was also running a stall where Trainers could hire out yutaka. The boys considered it but they were fine going in their casual clothes but that was after talking to Nurse Joy.

Eterna City’s Festival for the Dead was a formal occasion, the older you got and the more local you are to the area so passing trainers could be excused from wearing a kimono and yutaka.

The city was awash in moonlight and many, electrical lights had been turned off. The main source of light was coming from the paper lanterns that had been hung in the lead-up to tonight. They were elegant and like little wisps of colourful, decorative fire amid the maple trees. The stalls buzzed and many people made their way to the shrines and temples in the city’s east.

Kageyama and Hinata wandered the area and looked around. They nibbled on barbequed fruits and meats. They passed by young children playing games and elderly who prayed. ‘Do you have any deceased relatives, Hinata?’ Kageyama asked. It was a morbid question but seeing as this was a festival honouring the dead that they were attending, he figured he may as well ask. Hinata stared forward. ‘My grandfather is the reason it’s illegal in Twinleaf to drive a tractor anywhere near water.’

‘I didn’t ask that?’ Kageyama said. He paused and felt horrible. ‘Oh. I’m so sorry.’

‘And my great-great uncle died doing what he loved most.’ Hinata said.

‘And what as that?’ Kageyama inquired.

‘Screaming “Fuck Beedrill” in heavily forested areas.’ Hinata said.

Kageyama stared at his friend. He wasn’t certain as to what to do with this new information but he felt like he suddenly understood more about Hinata. He had insanity in his lineage. ‘What about you?’ Hinata asked and he sounded slightly more empathetic than when he was talking about his own losses.

‘My grandparents on Mum’s side died when she was a teenager. I never got to meet them but Mum doesn’t talk about them nicely...’ Kageyama murmured.

‘I’m sorry.’ Hinata said.

The two of them wandered into an area webbed with rope and little bits of blocks. It was dense with people as well and a man in white, red, and blue robes swept. ‘I think they’re luck charms,’ Hinata said and he reached for one that was dangling close to him. He plucked it down and noticed a price tag. ‘Five PokeYen. Wow, these’re really cheap. One per person.’ Hinata read off the tag. Kageyama reached for one too then.
The luck charm seemed to be encased inside of the wooden block like some sort of capsule machine toy. The boys broke them open and wooden blocks swung open as they had hinges. Hinata found a blue piece of string with a glassy, spherical charm attached within his as well as a slip of paper. Kageyama found an orange piece of string with a pair of yellow bells that tinkled faintly as it moved, as well as a piece of paper.

‘I’ll go first.’ Hinata said and he pocketed the charm and unfolded the paper. ‘Love: a companion nearby ought to be cherished.’ Hinata giggled. ‘I got a lame girly one. I wish I got something about the Hearthome Contest or volleyball. Yeah, that woulda been better.’

‘My turn.’ Kageyama said. ‘Life: give your partner patience and then success shall follow.’

‘Aah, no fair. Your probably gonna win the Hearthome Contest with a reading like that one.’ Hinata commented.

‘I don’t believe in fate. I believe hard work conquers all.’ Kageyama said and he put what he had in his pocket regardless.

‘Wise words.’ Hinata said.

The two went and paid the shrine-worker accepting the change for the luck charms. He bid the two Trainers good luck in their futures and went on with sweeping again.
Tsukishima hadn’t been particularly interested in going to Eterna City for the Festival of the Dead but Yamaguchi had convinced him. They had spent four days in Hearthome City, alternating between training and doing touristy things. They were confident that one of them would be victorious at the Fabulous Fantina Birthday Bash Contest.

It was a surprisingly short trip between Hearthome and Eterna City. They hired some clothes from Nurse Joy and dressed up in blue-grey yutaka robes with black sashes around their waists. They wandered the streets. They bought candied apples and played a few games. Tsukishima even won a small, stuffed Duskull for Yamaguchi and Yamaguchi named it Moony. Tsukishima blushed because he was certain that he was in the inspiration for its name.

They wandered to an area where trees were webbed with rope and little blocks hang off them with ‘luck charm’ written on them. Yamaguchi chose two and handed one to Tsukishima with a smile. ‘Well, let’s find out what our luck’s going to be like.’ Yamaguchi said and Tsukishima scowled.

‘you know I don’t believe in this sort of stuff.’ Tsukishima pointed out. Yamaguchi nudged him.

‘Come on, Tsuki, it could be funny.’ Yamaguchi said and Tsukishima finally took the block off him.

Yamaguchi opened his up first. He found a piece of white ribbon in his block with glassy charms that were dyed black. ‘This could be either really good or really bad.’ Yamaguchi said and he took out the slip of paper that accompanied the charm. Tsukishima helped him unfold it. ‘Okay, so: “Life: a wedding is only a party, a certificate is only a piece of paper, truth and ideal are intertwined as intangible forces”. Wow, that’s deep.’ Yamaguchi said. His eyes bobbed up from the piece of paper and Tsukishima had looked away.

Yamaguchi smiled and Tsukishima’s face reddened. ‘I don’t think we have to worry.’ Yamaguchi said; his voice was calming. Tsukishima’s intent stare dropped to the ground and he began to fumble with his block. ‘I’m only doing this because you find it amusing.’ Tsukishima said.

‘I know, Tsuki, I know.’ Yamaguchi sighed.

Tsukishima opened up his block and found a dark green piece of string with bells attached. He took out the slip of paper and opened it quickly. ‘Love: until death do us part.’ he announced. Yamaguchi came closer and went on tippy-toes so he could read what the slip really said but he gave Tsukishima the benefit of the doubt. Yamaguchi pecked Tsukishima’s jawline chastely and Tsukishima went bright red. ‘Let’s see what it really says, huh?’ Yamaguchi said. Yamaguchi reached over Tsukishima’s body with grabby hands and took the slip of piece of paper. ‘Let’s see: “Family: Life is all about connections, develop the bonds that will propel you further”. Oh, uh,
isn’t that weirdly accurate, huh?

‘Please don’t say that.’ Tsukishima said and Yamaguchi let go of him.

‘Hey, I saw some carnival games that way or should we go and pay our respects?’ Yamaguchi asked.

Tsukishima took Yamaguchi’s hand. ‘What kind of carnival games are we talking about?’ he asked.

Yachi and Kiyoko had plans to go to the festival as well. Yachi had been going since she was a young girl as she was local to the area, but not quite. She came from Celestic Town which was right on the other side of Mt Coronet’s Eterna entrance. She and Kiyoko had gotten ready in her small, rustic house. Kiyoko had also met Yachi’s mother and grandparents. They were nice people although Yachi’s mother could be abrasive at times.

Yachi got into her pastel blue yutaka and Kiyoko borrowed a grey and white yutaka that Yachi’s mother used to own as a teenager. The two girls made their way back to Eterna City after a quiet meal.

‘What would you like to do first?’ Kiyoko asked when they arrived at Eterna City. They had walked directly into the stalls and it appears that the parade procession had already gone through.

‘This is my first time with a friend and not with family.’ Yachi tittered. ‘But I always visit the shrine first and pay my respects to my father.’

‘Oh, I’m so sorry; may I ask how he died?’ Kiyoko asked, she was a bit flustered. She felt thick as she hadn’t noticed anything odd about the lack of Yachi’s father at her house. she had just blindly assumed he was doing some farm work somewhere.

Yachi smiled consolingly. ‘Oh, it’s okay Kiyoko. He died when I was little. I barely remember him; nothing more than a warm smile and he had a funny laugh that kind of went “Gwa-hah-hah”. I’m told he helped mellow my Mum out.’ Yachi said.

‘What an amusing laugh.’ Kiyoko replied. ‘I’m glad you only have happy memories of your father though.’

‘Yeah, only happy memories.’ Yachi said.

They arrived at the shrine. Yachi and Kiyoko stepped up onto the shrine’s steps. Yachi clapped her hands and smiled. She began to pray. Kiyoko copied and prayed. The girls didn’t spend too much time there as others wanted to pray formally as well.

‘Who did you pray to, if I may ask?’ Yachi asked.

‘Oh, I prayed to my ancestors. I don’t think about them enough. I don’t thank them for allowing me to be here. I apologised for not acknowledging them as much as I should. All my immediate relatives are still alive.’ Kiyoko replied.

‘That’s fine. Can we go and get our fortunes told now? Something a bit less depressing?’ Yachi asked and Kiyoko nodded.

The girls made their way to the side of the temple that was handling the fortune telling. Kiyoko
picked out a fortune for herself and Yachi chose a nearby one also. ‘I mustn’t seem like the type to fortune telling but it’s a guilty pleasure. Sometimes, it is comforting to think there is a force much larger than you that has good and bad things in store for you that will help you in one way or another.’ Kiyoko said and she opened hers.

‘I agree.’ Yachi chirped.

Kiyoko took out her luck charm. It was baby pink with white glass charms. ‘Here, allow me.’ she said and she tied it around Yachi’s wrist.

‘Kiyoko, that’s yours.’ Yachi pointed out.

‘I think pink would look much better on you.’ Kiyoko said.

‘Oh, alright then.’ Yachi said and her eyes lit up when she got a dark blue charm. ‘Here, you can wear this one.’

Kiyoko held out her wrist and held onto Yachi’s things so that Yachi could tie the charm onto her like it was a bracelet. ‘We match.’ Kiyoko said and Yachi blushed. Kiyoko didn’t notice as she had moved onto reading the fortune that had come with the pink charm. ‘Life: Beauty fades eventually so it is important to value what lies beneath the deceiving surface. I couldn’t agree more.’

‘Yeah.’ Yachi said. ‘Okay, here’s mine. Health: Do not set yourself on fire to keep others warm.’

‘Sound advice.’ Kiyoko stated.

Yachi nodded. ‘Indeed. I’d call it morbid but look at where we are.’

‘What would you like to do next?’ Kiyoko asked.

‘Food’s always good but we just ate. So let’s go and find some games to play but I’m not very good at many.’ Yachi admitted.

‘I’m good at fast paced games or ones that require strategy.’ Kiyoko said. The two began to walk to the sideshow alley within the festival.
Hinata and Kageyama left the festival early as they had to be up early the next morning. Their time, although brief at the festival, was well spent. They toddled back into the PokeCentre with stuffed stomachs and a few, small prizes.

The boys were quick to rise in the morning and got changed as fast as they could. They felt a lot of time-based pressure on their shoulders as neither knew exactly how long it would take for them to go all the way down to Oreburgh, then through Mt Coronet and finally out the other side and through Route 208. After all, they had until ten o’clock on Monday to get to the Contest Hall.

Kageyama and Hinata scarfed down their food as they realised they couldn’t have breakfast on the go. They binned their wrappers and Hinata stuffed the mini stove into his bag. He soon realised it wouldn’t fit. ‘We’ll strap it down.’ Kageyama suggested.

‘Oh, okay but what about in the future? We won’t have bikes to strap it down onto.’ Hinata pointed out. Kageyama glared at him and swallowed a growl.

‘We’ll work it out when we get there.’ Kageyama said.

Hinata hugged the stove awkwardly and hurried after Kageyama. They walked through the traditionalist streets of Eterna for a while until they saw the gate. It was huge and it masked a ridged, rocky area. The two hired some bikes and Kageyama helped Hinata tie down their stove onto his bike. When they decided it was secure enough, they kicked off and drove off from the bicycle bay.

Hinata was uneasy on his bike due to the oven but Kageyama was even worse. He was wobbly and slow. When Hinata got his balance, he began to nudge Kageyama’s bike along from behind.

‘Quit that.’ Kageyama murmured as he received another jostle from behind.

‘But then you’d fall off the edge. And then you’d die. And I wouldn’t like that. Nor would your mum.’ Hinata teased.

The cycling road was a long, clean bridge that stretched over a huge canyon. The drop was huge and they could see the ground beneath them due to the clear plastic they were cycling over. The valley beneath them was cruel looking, rugged and untamed.

It felt good to ride over the valley though. The wind brushed past their faces and the exercise got the boys’ hearts going. When they reached the other end of the cycling road, a surprisingly short trip, they were hesitant to give up their bikes. Hinata untied the stove and put it under his arm. Kageyama returned the bikes to the lady at the counter. She was miffed to see some peculiar dents on the back of what had been Kageyama’s bike. Naturally, he acted like he had nothing to do with it but his shoddy lying skills gave him away. The woman decided she would just give him an offhand remark about how he and his friend shouldn’t damage other people’s property. It was a slap on the wrist.

‘We really need to figure out a better way of carrying this around.’ Hinata whined to Kageyama whilst the left the cycling centre’s gate. They were greeted by the red dirt known to the area and the mountains they had grown used to whilst Hinata had been training to defeat Roark. Kageyama wondered if he ought to mention it.

The entrance to Mt Coronet wasn’t sealed anymore and there was no sign of there ever being
trouble here. ‘I wonder if Nyta would want to play here again...’ Hinata mused.

‘Who knows.’ Kageyama replied.

It appeared to the pair of Trainers that they were the only ones in the area. They couldn’t see anyone camping up above them, on precarious ridges and it seemed that no one else was having a stroll. The path narrowed and then led into Mt Coronet. The cave was shadowy and cool. Water dripped down from the rocky ceiling and a river coursed through with churning power. There was no silence in the echoic cave. Zubat flitted about overhead and Hinata gawked at them but uninterested in catching one for himself. Kageyama played with the idea of catching one also but decided against it.

They got to the other side of the cavern slowly, afraid of slipping over. Their eyes were dazzled when they left the cave. Their noses were hit with the fresh smell of berries but also the rank smell of pollution. The rushing crash of a waterfall assailed their ears and the boys ventured out. They were higher up than they expected. A bridge stretched out over the river and met a series of ridges and cliffs. Stairs leading down from them were built into the sides. What were possibly farm houses could be seen from here and further on, a tar road stretched into a city skyline.

Kageyama and Hinata were in awe of what could be seen and how much progress towards getting to Hearthome City they were making. They were going to be there with time to spare. The two crossed the bridge with little fear and then trekked downwards. Hinata was close to lost amongst the tall grass if not for his bright, orange hair. It made Kageyama chuckle a little bit, something Hinata pouted about. He also complained about how hard it was to move with the oven.

The waterfall was to their backs and Hearthome City faced them. Kageyama and Hinata marched through the grass and onto the main road. The main road was busy but no one paid attention to them. Kageyama wondered how many people here would reappear at the Contest Hall tomorrow though.

‘Halt, boys!’ an elderly voice yelled out. The boys cringed and turned around. An old man approached. He was wearing daggy clothes and had a PokeBall in each hand and a sly smile on his wrinkly, squarish face. ‘Hello.’ Hinata greeted. He and Kageyama bowed.

The man appraised them. The sun was beginning to set. ‘You two lads look strong. Why don’t you battle my Pokémon in a double battle? I have a pair of newly reared Pokémon, they need some exercise. Care to accept the challenge?’ the old man asked. Hinata smiled and Kageyama frowned.


‘If you insist.’

The opposing Trainers stood far away from the road or where they would bother someone. Kageyama was worried about the time but Hinata looked like he was itching for a battle. He eagerly held a PokeBall in his hand. Kageyama couldn’t tell who was inside and he didn’t like not knowing. He hoped it was someone complimentary to Ralts.

‘Ready?’ the old man clucked.

‘Born read.’ Hinata replied.

‘Age before beauty.’ the old man quipped.

‘Alrighty then.’ Hinata agreed.
The old man took a deep breath then threw out his PokeBalls. ‘Mankey! Poliwag! Do me proud, boys!’ he yelled and the two, small Pokémon leaped out of their PokeBalls.

‘Karasuno, jump out!’ Hinata yelled and Kageyama was unnerved.

‘Ralts!’ Kageyama shouted. Their PokeBalls spun out of their hands and their Pokémon landed in front of them.

The old man nodded knowingly. Hinata’s Murkrow preened itself and looked unimpressed by Ralts. It acted as though it wanted to be anywhere else but there. Ralts was dismayed by Murkrow’s behaviour but seemed to resolve to act better.

‘Poliwag, use Hypnosis on the Ralts. Mankey, Scratch Murkrow.’ the old man instructed. The Poliwag bounced up into Ralts’ close quarters and lulled it to sleep with a mysterious beam of mystically coloured light. Mankey lunged at Murkrow with claws extended. Murkrow dodged its attack by flying out of reach.

‘Sky Attack!’ Hinata yelled and Kageyama flinched. The old man whistled. Murkrow flew up into the sky. It dove on Mankey with vicious fervour. Mankey growled and pawed at where Murkrow had driven his beak into it, which was atop its head. ‘Wow, that’s a tough Mankey if it survived that.’ Hinata said, in awe.

‘I don’t breed fools.’ the old man replied.

Kageyama huffed. His eyebrows were upturned. ‘Come on, Ralts, wake up.’ he urged but the most movement Ralts displayed was a yawn.

‘Alrighty then, Mankey try using Scratch again and Poliwag, Hypnosis on the bird.’ the man instructed. Poliwag waddled towards Murkrow who flapped its wings and soared higher. The beam Poliwag exuded missed. Mankey was easily able to attack Ralts who seemed mostly unaffected.

‘Alrighty, Karasuno, use Peck!’ Hinata yelled. Karasuno dived on Mankey again with a glowing beak. Mankey couldn’t take the pressure and fainted. The old man recalled Mankey and told it that it had done well to fight such a powerful flying type for so long.

Kageyama stared at Ralts. ‘You can do it.’ he urged and Ralts rolled around for a bit before bringing itself up. It stretched out and seemed to be awake again. ‘Go on, Ralts!’ Hinata encouraged as well.

‘Use Magical Leaf!’ Kageyama instructed. Ralts twirled about and commanded sparkling leaves that ploughed into Poliwag who toughed it out with determined spirit.

‘It’s alright, Poliwag, use Surf!’ the old man soothed.

His Poliwag pounded its tail against the ground with enough force to heft itself into the air, briefly, whilst the battlefield was swamped in pristine, turquoise water. The water rampaged from underneath and leapt at Karasuno and near-drowned Ralts. The two were still going strong, probably due to being higher level to the Poliwag.

‘Your Pokémon’re so strong, I’m jealous.’ Hinata sang out.

‘Not as good as that Murkrow though.’ the old man said. ‘It’s got some good blood in it, I can tell. But very unrefined, needs some more reigning in, shrimpy.’

‘Shrimpy?’ Hinata echoed with a frown.
‘Come on now, Poliwag. One last ditch of effort. Use Ice Beam.’ the man said. The Poliwag fired a chilling beam of ice at Murkrow which brought it down from its domain; the sky.

Karasuno crashed against the ground. ‘Oh no.’ Hinata said. He returned Karasuno. ‘You did really well out there. A little more training and you’ll be all like gwaah! And it’ll be amazing.’ he said to the PokeBall.

‘Yeah, your Murkrow’s something else.’ Kageyama murmured and Hinata grinned at him.

Ralts yowled and reminded the two that there was another matter on hand. ‘Okay, Ralts, use Magical Leaf again!’ Kageyama instructed. Ralts twirled on the spot and commanded leaves of shimmering colours. They ploughed against Poliwag, pushing it back meanly. Poliwag landed on its rump and its eyes spun. It fell back and its Trainer returned it. ‘Well done, my lads. Well done.’ he said. ‘Riveting stuff, I expect I’ll see you at the Pokémon League.’

‘Uh no, actually.’ Hinata mumbled, embarrassed.

‘We’re Coordinators. We’re aiming for the Grand Festival.’ Kageyama explained.

The old man laughed heartily. ‘Guess that means you’d know my grandson then. A bastard by the name of Keishin, he’s been judging Contests as of late.’

‘Your Ukai Senior?’ the boys exclaimed, eyes wide.

‘In the flesh. Have a good one, good luck tomorrow.’ the man said and he wandered off.

It was dark now but Hearthome City was lit up in a thousand lights, washing the streets in vibrant oranges and yellows. The boys hurried in and navigated the new streets until they fell into the embrace of the local Pokémon Centre. They booked a room and tried not to worry about the fact their routine for tomorrow was unpractised. Tomorrow was going to prove an interesting day due to bad choices. They shouldn’t have dawdled in Eterna City like they did but that had been something out of their reach due to Kageyama getting injured in Eterna Forest and if that hadn’t of happened, then they would both be without their remarkable pair of Murkrows.
Anyone else enjoying Pokémon Go? I sure as hell am. Be sure to take a water bottle with you and wear a hat because you never know what you'll need protection from. For example, a real life Spearow aka a fucking magpie that doesn't realise its not swooping season.

There was no time in the morning for a job around the block. The boys were straight into their Contest gear and didn’t bother wasting time in the food court for breakfast. They had to get to the Contest Hall early if they wanted to participate in the Fabulous Fantina Birthday Bash. They ran through the streets determinedly and ripped through crowds. It looked like every Coordinator in the area was there.

The two barged past anyone dawdling and fought for their spot in the line. Hinata jumped into it first and knocked into someone far taller than him. ‘Oh, excuse me.’ he said and he hopped back a little bit. The person turned around and all eyes were on him. he was tall with messy, chocolaty brown hair. Every girl in the vicinity refused to take their eyes off him.

‘Hello, little shrimp. It’s alright. We all get a bit excitable.’ he said and Kageyama caught up with Hinata. His stomach dropped. He recognised the person that Hinata had knocked into. The line moved and the people at the front desk were doing their jobs quickly. The guy in front of them reached the receptionists. ‘Name?’ the lady asked.

‘Oikawa Tooru.’ the guy said but Kageyama already knew that.

It had been inevitable. Kageyama always knew this day would come. It had been one of the reasons he didn’t want to choose Coordinating as his preferred Trainer activity. It had also been a reason why he had to do it.

Oikawa was from Jubilife and he had been Kageyama’s best friend before he had graduated the Trainer Academy. Kageyama had learned everything about battling from watching Oikawa. Kageyama would also like to pin some of his personal flaws as something he absorbed from this troublesome egotist but he knew he shouldn’t do that. His tyrannical possessiveness for perfection was something he developed by himself. But still, he did learn some bad behaviours off of Oikawa. A small part of Kageyama wondered though, did one of the things he had learnt of Oikawa still count as “bad” due to the recent breakdown of his parents’ marriage?

Oikawa moved from the line and Hinata signed up for the Contest next. People Kageyama didn’t recognise, a guy about Oikawa’s age and a thirty-something year old lady, called Oikawa towards them.

Kageyama signed up next and Hinata waited for him at the side. He felt terrible and Hinata noticed. It was written all over his face in the manner of an unusual scowl. ‘You okay?’ Hinata asked. ‘Want me to grab you something from a vending machine?’

‘N-No.’ Kageyama stammered.
Kageyama had been thinking about it for a while. He knew he would have to talk about it with Hinata eventually. It wasn’t something he wanted to keep from his best friend – a real best friend who didn’t get him in compromising positions. Kageyama figured now would be a good time because the catalyst for a lot of Kageyama’s regrets was literally standing over there.

Kageyama snuck a glance at Oikawa. He was draped around a dark haired guy’s shoulders. The lady didn’t seem to mind. Somehow, Kageyama doubted that she and Oikawa’s new toy were related. She had a different type of connection to them. Kageyama glanced back at Hinata who was growing even more concerned.

‘Why’re you acting so strange?’ Hinata asked. Impatience pricked his tone of speech.

‘I, uh... I don’t want to talk about it... now. Later, after the Contest maybe?’ Kageyama stammered.

‘You look constipated.’ Hinata said. ‘Maybe you need the stomach pills.’

‘Shut up, dumbass.’ Kageyama snapped and Hinata dropped it.

A voice of the intercom asked the participating Coordinators to go backstage and for the audience to go to their seats in the Hall.

Marian swung onto the stage with vigour. ‘Hello and welcome to Fantina’s Fabulous Birthday Bash! A special Contest sponsored by the beloved Gym Leader and Coordinator of the lovely Hearthome City.’ Marian explained. ‘Let’s get this party started! Today’s Contest will have a panel of FIVE judges: our lovely Hearthome Nurse Joy, renowned Pokémon Connoisseur, legendary master breeder Ukai Ikkei, Ukai’s grandson Keishin and, of course, the birthday girl herself – Fantina!’

Marian brought on the first performers who did quite well. But then she brought the crowd to a hush and Kageyama was certain that Oikawa would be next, if not another big leaguer who was famous. ‘Here is ladies and gentleman, the man who took home the Grand Festival’s chalice last year – Oikawa Tooru!’ she said and everybody in the audience screamed “Good luck” for him.

Kageyama grabbed Hinata’s knee. Hinata was jarred by the sudden action. ‘Oikawa and I used to be friends.’ Kageyama said grimly.

‘What? No way! That’s sooooo cool. They just said he won the Grand Festival last year. That’s so cool! If you were the “King” and you were friends with him, does that make him the “Grand King” – especially if he won the Grand Festival? Wait... “used to be” as in not anymore?’ Hinata rambled. Kageyama roused on Hinata when he mentioned his past as “king” but he was overall fine with what Hinata said. Kageyama let go of Hinata.

Oikawa grinned and he winked at the camera. ‘I’m ready for my close-up.’ he teased. He threw out his PokeBall. ‘Adele, centre stage, my love!’ In a swarm of pink bubbles, a serpent-like Pokémon swam through them and basked in the shimmer when the bubbles popped. A gorgeous Milotic fanned its tail out and swayed. Something about it looked a bit off. Oikawa grinned cheekily. ‘Water Pulse!’ Oikawa instructed with huge hand gestures.

‘What a risk to send out a slightly injured Pokémon into a Performance Stage of a Contest! And judging by the audience’s awed reaction, it’s paid off!’ Marian fawned and Oikawa smirked.
‘Adele, darling, use Ice Beam at twenty percent power!’ Oikawa instructed.

Milotic cooed and produced a weak ice beam from its mouth. Flecks of ice were carried through the waves it was producing and the audience admired the beauty of the gold and pastel blue floating through the dark blue of the water pulse. ‘And now, scatter, Adele!’ Oikawa instructed.

Milotic writhed and construed the water accordingly. The water burst into small particles that showered over it gracefully. ‘Take a bow.’ Oikawa said and he bowed to the audience. Milotic dipped it’s had as well before being returned by Oikawa.

‘Judges?’ Marian prompted.

‘Mon Cherie, darling, it was gorgeous. Tasteful and elegant, yet risky. The perfect balance.’ Fantina said adoringly. ‘I bid you nine points.’

‘The risk was paid off and I see that you were careful not to damage Milotic too much. I give you eight points. I feel that Milotic and you are highly compatible.’ Takeda appraised.

‘I agree with my colleague Takeda. You and Milotic make a gorgeous combination and I look forward to how you will go in the future. Eight points.’ Nurse Joy said.

‘A completely refined Pokémon that has clearly endured precise training and can perform as calculate it. It is hard for me, even a veteran, to find fault in your performance but trust me, it is there. There is still much for you to improve, eight points.’ Ukai Senior said.

‘Bah, old man’s bein’ a hard-ass. Nine points, good work.’ Ukai Junior said.

Marian smiled. ‘That’s forty-two points for Oikawa Tooru.’ Marian said and Oikawa left the stage whilst she fawned about a few of his past achievements before bringing on the next Coordinator, Hinata.
Dramatic Performance

Hinata trotted onto the stage, proudly and desperately trying to hide the lack of confidence he had in his performance. He grinned. ‘Welcome to the stage, Hinata Shouyou!’ Marian said and Hinata stood on the raised platform provided for Trainers.

‘Happy birthday, Fantina!’ he smiled and she giggled. ‘Oink, jump out!’ He tossed out his PokeBall. Oink leapt out of a myriad of yellowy lightning bolts and bounced happily when he landed. ‘Psywave! Confuse Ray!’ Hinata yelled out, he tried not to seem panicked but he was.

Oink bounced up and down and released peculiar waves of psychic energy and eerie light. The different lights bounced off each other and Hinata grinned. That was exactly what he had been hoping for. He just hoped the performance would continue that way. ‘Now, Bounce!’ Oink bounded into the air with great height and came crashing down soon after. He pierced the psychic energy waves and they broke with great clamour.

Pink and purple glitter spun away with wild inertia. Oink squeaked and Hinata grinned; his eyes like stars. People looked around in awe of what had happened before the beauty faded from the air. Marian twirled around and riled up the audience. She smiled cattishly. ‘Judges?’ he prompted. Hinata held his breath and turned to the most important people sitting before him.

‘I’m not going to lie,’ Takeda began, ‘this didn’t feel like a very polished performance. It felt very rushed but it was beautiful nonetheless. I think you slide by purely on luck but I give you six points.’ Hinata thought that was reasonable.

‘Mon compagnon, how can you not give him points for risk? It is that risk that creates elegance, the payoff. I give him eight points.’ Fantina said. Hinata smiled. He couldn’t believe such a famous woman was sticking up for him.

The grandfather and grandson on the panel exchanged looks. ‘Takeda-sensei is right. Very unpolished performance, bit bland don’t ya think? I dunno... the whole glitter-sparkle thing is a bit dull by now. Six points.’ the grandson decided.

‘The “glitter-sparkle thing” to quote my dear grandson here, is a fine trick to master. He’s a moron, ignore him. But he and Takeda are both right, unpolished performances are never worth the pay-off and it’s always glaringly obvious when you go in unprepared. Seven points.’ the grandfather said. Again, Hinata found that reasonable.

Nurse Joy’s shoulders slumped. ‘I hate it when we have to take sides. I really, really do. I thought your performance was darling so i’m going to agree with Madame Fantina. I trust her eye and I agree, it’s always thrilling to see a risky performance end well and I believe wholly in this instance, that it has. I give you eight points.’ Nurse Joy reasoned.

‘And Hinata just flies past the half-way mark and lands at thirty-five points. A round of applause for Hinata. Now, let’s welcome his hinky bird to the stage – Kageyama Tobio!’ Marian said. People applauded Hinata’s efforts.

Hinata and Kageyama walked past each other. Kageyama’s hand brushed over Hinata’s shoulder. Hinata really liked his score. He thought it was good considering how little he and Oink had practiced.

Kageyama stood up on the pedestal and he took out his PokeBall. He scowled and the crowd
interpreted it as determination, which Kageyama was surprised by. His grimace was borne of a mixture of worry for what would follow in a few hours’ time; assuming that he and Hinata both make it into the Battle Stage.

Kageyama took a sharp breath and tossed out his PokeBall. ‘Prinplup! Set up!’ Kageyama yelled. Prinplup dove out of a plume of tiny, blue bubbles. Prinplup slid across the shiny floor and jumped up. The bubbles burst. ‘Bubblebeam!’ Kageyama instructed. Prinplup went onto its tiptoes and spun around with her wings extended. She blew out a huge array of bubbles which began to cocoon her.

She wasn’t supposed to do that. Kageyama’s eyes widened and shock stunned him. He didn’t know what his partner Pokémon was doing but he figured he ought to roll with it. It was the only option on this situation. It’s his fault for not practicing with her. Could he blame Hinata?

Kageyama didn’t know what Hinata had taught his Pokémon during their brief training session. No, Kageyama couldn’t blame Hinata for whatever was happening.

‘Peck and Metal Claw!’ Kageyama yelled. Silverly light penetrated the gaps in Prinplup’s bubble cocoon. Soon, a few slashes appeared and great slivers of light filled the room. More bubbles popped until Prinplup had broken free. Prinplup stood in the middle, proud. A few people clapped. Kageyama didn’t know what to do. He could sense confusion in the air.

Marian chuckled tersely. ‘I, for one, have been dazzled. Judges, may I beg you for your verdicts?’ she asked. It was always a bad sign if the hostess didn’t know what to say. Kageyama inwardly groaned.

Normally, the Judges would exchange glances and polite nods in order to create a civilised discussion but now, no one was racing to do that. Takeda sighed and decided he would go first in order to put Kageyama out of his misery. ‘It is very obvious from your reactions, Kageyama that this performance did no nearly go as planned. I apologise if that sounds blunt or cruel but it’s true. There was originality in your performance, that is for certain and if it were more polished then it would have been likelier to have succeeded. I believe it is shame that things haven’t been going your and Hinata’s way today. Six points.’ Takeda said.

Nurse Joy smiled pityingly. ‘I agree, it was blaringly obvious that you lost control of what Prinplup was doing and I think you should have trusted it a bit more because it seems that it has good instincts for performing. I award you seven points.’ Nurse Joy rambled.

‘Non, non, non, mes semblables,’ Fantina urged. ‘The boy is still learning. All growth begins with a mistake. I am a huge believer in that philosophy. I believe the boy ought to be given eight points for originality and being able to make mistakes. We’re being all too serious; we’re here for a joyous occasion. Eight points indeed.’

‘I don’t think that poor practise and mistakes ought to be excused.’ Ukai Senior said. ‘I believe that all Coordinators should operate with the utmost professionalism regardless of situation or happenstances. Whilst it is obvious there was thinking and originality in this performances, it was poorly executed and failed. Four points.’

‘Ooh, harsh.’ Marian cooed. ‘That’s the lowest score give out today so far.’

‘Now, just to the spite bastard I’ll give you seven points because I agree with what Fantina’s had to say.’ Ukai Junior said and he winked at Fantina. Takeda looked like he could claw his own eyes out.

Marian chuckled. ‘A panel of ups and downs, with a combined score of thirty-two. A round of
applause for Kageyama.’ Marian said. She then welcomed the next performers onto the stage.

Kageyama sat next to Hinata backstage. ‘I’m sorry.’ Hinata mumbled the moment Kageyama came into earshot.

‘Why?’ Kageyama asked.

‘I taught Prinplup to do that because I thought it’d look pretty. I forgot to tell you that.’ Hinata said and he waited for Kageyama to scold him. Instead, Kageyama was gentle with him. ‘It was pretty.’ Kageyama replied and awkwardly patted Hinata’s shoulder.

‘And now, we welcome the precious sweet pea that is Yachi Hitoka to the stage!’ Marian said and Hinata cheered on Yachi as she dashed towards the corridor leading out to the stage. Yachi smiled and her heart raced. She jumped up onto the pedestal and the crowd whispered eagerly. It seemed that the precious sweet pea was beginning to come out of her shell.

‘Hello I’m Yachi Hitoka!’ she squawked and then went many shades of red in her cheeks. She fumbled with her purse and brought out a PokeBall. ‘And this is Twinkle!’ Yachi said and she tossed out her PokeBall. It had a peculiar spin in it and when it opened, only a large, pink-coloured heart emerged. It floated through the air gracefully before losing loft and drifting to the ground. It burst with a peachy shimmer and revealed a tiny Cleffa.

Yachi smiled and then stopped as she realised that Cleffa was more interested in racing around and trying to get into mischief rather than staying still and behaving. ‘Come here, dear!’ Yachi cooed and she dropped some treats in front of her, by accident. Cleffa immediately came to her though. ‘Now, behave.’ Yachi said sternly and Cleffa gorged itself. A few people in the audience seemed to think this was part of the routine and found it suitably adorable.

‘Just like Kiyoko showed you now...’ Yachi murmured before taking a big breath so that she could confidently yell out: ‘Shadow Ball!’ Cleffa hopped up and down giddily. Orbs of eerie light and shadows manifested upon its paws like cheerleader pom-poms. ‘And again!’ Yachi said and she held out her hands.

Cleffa faced her and through the Shadow Balls it had manifested at its Trainer. Yachi, flinched, but caught them anyway. Another round of Shadow Balls manifested in Cleffa’s paws. ‘Now, Sing!’ Yachi yipped. The two of them did a little dance and sang together. Cleffa’s sweet voice masked Yachi less-than palatable singing voice. It was incredibly dorky but it was adorable nonetheless.

The audience loved it. Marian loved it. But most importantly, the judges loved it. Yachi was awarded a lovely score of thirty-nine points. She had never been happier. She couldn’t stop smiling or babying Cleffa. Marian then proceeded to bring on the next Coordinator.

‘She is beauty, she is grace, she is Shimizu Kiyoko! What a perfect name for a young lady like her.’ Marian said. Kiyoko graced the stage with her gentle presence. She smiled pleasantly and procured her chosen PokeBall. She brought it close to her lips and whispered: ‘Good luck.’ She then began her performance. ‘Froslass!’ Kiyoko yelled and she tossed out her PokeBall.

Mystic, white smoke drifted out from the PokeBall and Kiyoko’s Froslass appeared. It shimmied itself theatrically with a whine that was like wintery tundra’s zephyr. ‘Now, Blizzard!’ Kiyoko yelled and Froslass’ eerie whine grew louder. Powdery snow began to materialise in vapid waves, controlled with a gentle ebb and flow by Froslass’ swirls, movements akin to that of an exotic dancer. ‘Now, Ominous Wind!’ Kiyoko said.
The purity of the snow decayed. Silverly beads of powder began to discolour the snow into metallic monochrome colours. ‘Confuse Ray!’ Kiyoko yelled and her Froslass added a confusing but gorgeous light into its orchestra. The snow was no longer monochrome. Instead, it had bursts of colour: pink, purple, and blue in varying tones of mystique. Froslass’ delicacy at weaving the web of colours and snow was to be commended. ‘And now...’ Kiyoko paused. Was it for dramatics or was it out of hesitance? ‘Light Screen!’

Froslass twirled around and huge screens of opaque turquoise materialised. Four screens appeared and they began to pack in the colours and snow. Froslass forced them down until the cube it had created could be fit between its tiny appendages. ‘Shadow Ball!’ Kiyoko commanded and Froslass destroyed the cube with shadowy orbs. The result was a spectacular of so many vibrant colours that washed the stage until they faded into nothingness; from whence they came.

Kiyoko called Froslass back to her side. They curtseyed. Marian was ecstatic. ‘Judges, what do you think?’ she yelped. The judges yammered happily to Kiyoko about her performance. They picked it apart and dissected it, telling her where she could improve and where she had nailed it. Kiyoko left the performance arena with a fantastic score of forty-one. That was, so far, the second highest score.

A little while later, Yamaguchi Tadashi was called to the stage by Marian. He giddily raced towards the arena with spring in his step. He looked confident in himself. ‘Always the bridesmaid and never the bride, that is a phrase that sums up Yamaguchi Tadashi’s Coordinating career thus far but look at that happy, freckly face. It feels like change is on the horizon.’ Marian said.

Yamaguchi chose his PokeBall and grinned. ‘I choose you, Bon!’ Yamaguchi yelled and he tossed out his PokeBall. In the midst of yellow confetti, a tiny Pokémon popped out with a giddy jig. It was a Bonsly. Bonsly looked around, a bit startled, and began to race around. ‘Ah, no, stop!’ Yamaguchi begged. ‘Rock Throw!’ he yelled.

Bonsly ceased its nonsense and jumped up. A rock materialised and was thrown high into the air. Yamaguchi watched as gravity pulled it back down and waited for the right moment... There it was! ‘Low Kick!’ Yamaguchi yelped and he prayed that this routine would work just like he had practised beforehand. Bonsly jumped up and thrust out its leg. Its foot dug into the rock but the rock bounced off of it. Bon proceeded to alternate between its legs so it could kick the rock like a soccer ball. Yamaguchi grinned. That’s exactly how he needed it to go.

‘Okay, now, one last Low Kick at full power!’ Yamaguchi yelled and Bon obliged. As the rock fell, Bon kicked into it so that it shattered. Bon grinned and Yamaguchi couldn’t be happier. The audience applauded him and Bon.

‘Very cute... What do you think, judges?’ Marian asked and Yamaguchi’s ears pricked up. He turned to face the judges. They talked for a bit and gave him a mediocre score of thirty-six.

Yamaguchi walked off stage, contented and confident. Marian brought Tsukishima onto the stage next. The two passed and exchanged a simultaneous high-five and ass-slap. Luckily, for them, it wasn’t caught on camera. ‘Good luck, Tsuki.’ Yamaguchi whispered.

‘Thanks.’

Tsukishima stood on the stage. ‘Electrike!’ he yelled and he tossed out his PokeBall. His Electrike leaped out whilst yellow bolts of electricity shook around. Electrike howled in anticipation. ‘Swift!’ Tsukishima instructed. Electrike threw its head around and a trail of huge, metallic-looking stars followed. ‘Thunder Fang!’ Tsukishima instructed next. Electrike’s teeth crackled with electricity. It leaped towards one of the stars and bit down on it. It brought that star
down. The other stars that had been generated her eliminated.

Electrike trotted proudly towards Tsukishima who took the star from Electrike, with some competition which was perceived as adorable to the audience. When Tsukishima finally won the star, he tossed it. ‘Chase it, boy!’ he shouted playfully. ‘Spark!’ Electrike’s fur stood on end and a huge bolt of electricity rose off it and electrocuted the star which burst into golden glitter over Electrike. To the observant, it could be noted that Electrike seemed heartbroken because it killed its toy before it could play with it some more.

Tsukishima and Electrike’s performance was evaluated by the judges. They picked apart its pros and cons. Nurse Joy made special mention about the heartbreak in Electrike’s eyes at the end of the performance. Naturally, he lost a lot of points there because of that. He still walked away with an amazing score of thirty-seven though.

‘We’ll take a fifteen minute break before revealing who has made it into the Battle Stage.’ Marian said into her microphone whilst directing facing the cameras. The hundreds of Coordinators back stage shivered in anticipation.
Beauty vs Grace

Chapter Notes

I am so sorry about all this stuff. I don’t exactly have a clean method of recording what has and hasn’t happened but from here on out, everything should be fine. Keep commenting if things don’t make sense but please bear with me. This sort of ordeal shouldn’t happen again because I have a chapter outline.

The fifteen minutes passed quickly. Marian strode back onto stage and brandished her microphone proudly. ‘After much discussion, the judges have decided that Coordinators with thirty-two points. The judges have decided that of these people, only thirty of them will be battling. These are the Coordinators selected. I apologise for those who are unable to progress forward in this Contest. We all have off days; we all have days when some’s a little bit better.’ Marian said.

The first person to appear on the screen was Oikawa. He was followed by Kiyoko, Yachi, Tsukishima and Yamaguchi. There were a lot of faces and names that Kageyama and Hinata didn’t recognise. They got to the last two slots on the television screen. Kageyama held Hinata’s hand. Hinata squeaked, surprised by Kageyama’s sudden display of affection. The slot filled with the cheerful face of an orange-haired boy. The final slot was taken by Kageyama’s sharp face.

‘Congratulations, Hinata.’ Kageyama murmured to Hinata who couldn’t stop grinning but desperately wished he could.

‘Thanks. And I’m super glad for you; just made it, huh?’ Hinata said. Kageyama awkwardly let go of Hinata’s hand, as though he didn’t want to.

‘Th-thanks, nif-nice...’ Kageyama said.

Hinata chuckled.

The Coordinators on the television screen faded. People cheered and booed in the background. Marian filled the television screen with her doll-like face. ‘The battles will proceed in the next five minutes. Remember, if you aren’t part of the thirty, you aren’t to be backstage. The battles will be timed and are not to exceed two minutes. I’m super excited. It’s sure to be a cracking good time.’

Kageyama got up. ‘Good luck, I’ll cheer you on from the sidelines.’

‘Thanks.’ Hinata said. Kageyama waved goodbye to Hinata. He backed off and disappeared into the masses of Coordinators who weren’t allowed backstage anymore. The room became quieter and lonelier. Hinata glanced around. Everyone in this room was his rival for the Ribbon. He could totally do this.

Silence filled the Contest Hall. It was revenant. Excitement buzzed and people held their breaths. This match was sure to stun. Marian smiled. Her coin materialised on the television screen. ‘Heads or tails?’ she asked.

‘Heads.’ they both said, at once.

‘Someone will have to pick tails.’ Marian tutted.
‘I shall.’ Oikawa said and he winked at the camera.

The coin was flipped. ‘Tails.’ Marian announced.

‘I’m ready for my close-up...’ Oikawa said and Kiyoko rolled her eyes. ‘Go, Vivien!’ He tossed out his PokeBall and in a smattering of blue and white confetti, his Seviper crawled through. It gnashed its fangs and hissed.

‘Weavile, good luck!’ She kissed the top of her PokeBall and then threw out her PokeBall. Her Weavile skated out of a plume of tiny, purple hearts.

The timer began. ‘Begin!’ announced Marian.

‘Vivien use Toxic!’ Oikawa instructed. Vivien opened its jaws wide and spat out a thick stream of purple liquid. Weavile was drenched and poisoned because of it. A little bit of Kiyoko’s health was removed from her bar.

‘Dark Pulse!’ Kiyoko yelled. Weavile commanded a dark, swirling energy with magnificence. It slashed into Seviper. Oikawa’s health bar took considerable damage.

Seviper hissed and Weavile yowled back. ‘Vivien, use Venoshock!’ Oikawa instructed. Vivien’s fangs glowed white and it spat out a globular stream of purple liquid. It doused Weavile who took massive damage. Kiyoko’s health bar suffered equally because of it. ‘Shadow Claw!’ she shouted.

Weavile limberly swung itself forward and raked against Seviper’s maw with shadowy, purplish-black claws. Seviper hissed and shrank away from Weavile whilst waiting upon Oikawa’s orders. Oikawa’s health bar shrank considerably because of the assault but Oikawa was calm nonetheless. His face was charming and he oozed confidence. Kiyoko despised it. Her Weavile shivered and took damage; the health bar representing Kiyoko decided to copy it and took marginal damage as well.

Oikawa flipped his hair and smirked. The girls in the audience swooned. ‘Vivien, use Venoshock!’ he instructed and he gestured grandly.

‘Is this it? Is this the end for Kiyoko?’ worried Marian.

‘I believe in you, Weavile!’ Kiyoko called out but her voice wavered.

‘Vivien the Seviper opened its mouth wide and its fangs glistened. A terrible smell filled the room and revolted most. Purple liquid dripped off of Seviper’s fangs in horrendous globs. A shot was fire from Seviper’s maw and Weavile narrowly avoided direct damage. Its black eyes like buttons were wide with terror as it watched the poison seep through the floorboards.

The audience gasped and cheered. Kiyoko swelled with pride. Oikawa clucked, pissy that his opponent’s Pokémon had evaded the attack. ‘Well done, Kiyoko, she’s still in the running, folks!’ Marian announced.

‘Fantastik, Weavile!’ Kiyoko shouted and she seemed to shimmer. Her hopes inflated.

Kiyoko’s hands clasped together and she smiled. Her smile was pure yet it masked so much hatred. She couldn’t let Oikawa get away with winning. Not anymore. He always won.

There was history between him and Kiyoko. History that would be better off buried beneath them or locked in an ossuary. Yet it seemed to claw its way to the surface and it made Kiyoko’s lips tremor and her hands tighten. It made her furious. It made her want to lose face and go wild; a
But now was not the time to think of such grievances. Anger made an amazing motivational speaker but it did poorly as a beautician. Kiyoko couldn’t allow any risk to her serene facade, it was made her attractive to people. It enhanced her natural borne beauty and gift with make-up. She took a breath and she watched Weavile glance at her, itching to progress forward with a grace assault.

Kiyoko smiled and she could smell the faint smell of salonpas. It was a medicinal smell unsuitable for a Contest Hall but she supposed it kept the grip on the floor. ‘Weavile, use Metal Claw!’ she commanded. Weavile skipped into Seviper’s close quarters and swung at the serpentine creature with claws that were edged with steel. Weavile swiftly spun away from Seviper. It gnashed its fangs towards it and delighted in the shiver that proceeded Weavile’s attack. Kiyoko’s health diminished by a tiny margin from the poison status condition that Weavile was still suffering from.

Weavile’s paw slashed past Seviper’s crown and seemed to rip scales away from its golden forehead. Weavile sniggered and seemed to increase in power from the attack; a side-effect from using “Metal Claw”.

Kiyoko was mutely pleased with herself. She always had a knack for being able to tell when a secondary effect may come into play. She glanced at the board and watched as Oikawa’s health bar dribble away from his face. More and more of his bar sank into blackness. She refused to smirk because that would be something Oikawa would do and she refused to sink to his level.

‘Vivien, use Venoshock!’ Oikawa stated and Vivien unleashed a forceful shot of purple goo that stank like rotten meat. Weavile was unable to evade the attack with the deft grace it had been displaying throughout the match. It was drenched in the foul-smelling sludge and suffered massive damage from it and its status condition.

Kiyoko’s health bar however suffered more than her Weavile. She didn’t even want to hazard a small look at her health bar because she knew it was going to be disheartening. She knew without looking that she was within an inch of her life, she was playing a game on a thin piece of string. She was surprised there was anything left and that she wasn’t being escorted off of the court.

‘One minute remaining.’ Marian’s voice boomed through the court rife with ominous meaning.

‘Weavile, I believe in you, we can still win this!’ pleaded Kiyoko. ‘Use Focus Punch!’

‘A risky move...’ Marian stirred.

Weavile erupted into a metaphysical, orange-coloured inferno. Its aura burned bright. It closed its eyes and brought its paws together into the stance of a cartoonish karate fighter. Oikawa harrumphed and he tousled his hair. ‘Vivien, make sure you hit with full power.’ he said, teasing and the crowd grew tense. ‘Use Flamethrower... go wild with it.’ Oikawa instructed his Pokémon.

His Seviper surged forward at Weavile who was completely defenceless and Kiyoko’s heart skipped a beat. She looked away. Her eyes clenched shut and her hands curled into fists as she tugged on the chiffon material of her dress.

Seviper’s jaws opened as wide as they could go. They were unhinged and a burst of fire shot through from the deepest pits of its innards like the blazes of hell. Kiyoko saw the flares rush past her and she inhaled sharply, afraid, and the smell of fire was shoved down her throat.

She slowly turned her head and the first thing she saw was Oikawa: wide-eyed and acting as
though this was the most delicious moment of his life. Kiyoko could snarl at him: “As if butter wouldn’t melt in your mouth” but instead, she looked past his contemptuous smirk and condescending eyes that were clearly relishing this moment.

The crowd was silent and bewilderment stunned even Kiyoko. A smile of surprise gently tweaked her lips into a smile. ‘Fantastic! I knew you could do it, Weavile!’ Kiyoko yelped, an automatic response from the welling up of absolute delight from the bottom of her sincere, little heart.

Her Weavile was unscathed. Seviper must have miscalculated the aim of its Flamethrower by the smallest possible margin. It and Oikawa lost points for that. Kiyoko glanced and she checked. There was still a huge difference between her and Oikawa’s points but luck was in play and luck was a lady that Kiyoko believed she could seduce any day.

Weavile’s eyes opened and vicious fervour lit up in its ruby eyes. ‘We can turn this around, Weavile!’ Kiyoko yelled.

‘Thirty seconds remaining!’ Marian reminded them with exuberance yet she sounded like a message of death. Kiyoko’s heart hammered in her chest and her Weavile clicked its claws easily. She licked her lips and yelled: ‘Beat Up!’

Weavile crouched down and readied its paws. It launched itself forward at Seviper with blistering speeds and a well place punch connected. The Seviper recoiled back. The impact seemed to devastate it as it flinched. Five more swift punches and Kiyoko could compare whose attack stat was being represented by her Weavile.

The second punch belonged to Froslass, doubtless, as the punch was delicate and without much power yet there was a strange grace to it. Seviper was able to tolerate it. Weavile’s speed with delivering the blows was admirable. The third punch was likely to belong to Porygon-Z as it was similar to Froslass’ in power but it lacked the grace from before. The fourth punch seemed to belong to Gardevoir because the punch seemed wavering and weak. The fifth punch, the final punch, was likely to be on Mismagius’ behalf and was the weakest of all the punches.

Weavile fled from Seviper’s close quarters. It hissed and spat; Weavile retorted with warlike yowls. It failed in masking the pain it felt from its status condition.

Marian grinned. ‘A beautifully executed display of friendship and teamwork.’ she gushed and Oikawa’s yellow health bar blackened until there was a slither left. Kiyoko’s heart was swollen with elation. ‘Ten seconds remaining.’ Marian said and suddenly Kiyoko’s joy became as fragile as glass. Oikawa still had a chance to win.

Smugness radiated from Oikawa’s smirk. He clicked his fingers. ‘Vivien, use Aqua Tail.’ Oikawa said and his Seviper surged forward. Crystalline-coloured water rose up from beneath it like it was a creature of the surf. With a whip-like movement, Seviper turned around and the scythe-like appendage atop its thick tail was brandished. Seviper struck Weavile and water violently washed over Weavile. Weavile was knocked down; it dragged its claws through the polished floorboards with a terrible screech.

‘Time’s up!’ Marian shouted and sirens accompanied. Kiyoko’s health bar was obliterated. ‘The winner is Oikawa Tooru.’ The audience erupted with a roar of cheer and applause. Oikawa basked it like a god whilst Kiyoko watched, perhaps embittered but it did not show. She lost gracefully even when she thirsts for vengeance.

She had her rivals and Oikawa was one, a major player, but right now her strengths were just
falling short of his. She was unsure of where to go next so she exited stage left graciously. Yachi greeted her with yipping praise that made her smile.

Yachi’s eyes were wide and her motor mouth rambled. ‘I thought Weavile did great. You tried your hardest. That’s all you can ever do.’

‘Thank you, darling for your kind words.’ Kiyoko mumbled and she leaned in. Yachi allowed her and blushed profusely anyway. Kiyoko pecked her cheek.

‘Good luck for later, Hitoka-chan.’ Kiyoko said and Yachi fidgeted. Her brain had melted from Kiyoko’s blasé affections.

‘Th-Thank you, I think I-I’m gonna need it.’ Yachi said. She had calmed down and now a dismal expression crossed her face.

‘But you are better. You are level headed and you have your Pokemon’s utmost trust. I believe in you. I’ve seen you improve so much in the past few weeks and I am certain that you and your Pokemon can handle whatever it is Hinata-kun throws at you. I have faith in you.’ Kiyoko said.

‘Thanks so much.’ Yachi said tearing up.

‘I better go.’ Kiyoko said.
Marian feigned a tortured expression. ‘What a cruel twist of fate... It’s been decided that the best friends and golden boy duo of Tsukishima Kei and Yamaguchi Tadashi are to battle against each other in this next round. Oh what sadism!’ Marian moaned. The two came out and actually seemed excited, to her miffed confusion.

They took a stance opposite each other at different ends of the arena. This was something that was inevitable and Yamaguchi thought it was kind of exciting. He thinks he’ll be happy in victory or defeat because the endgame was the same: kisses and another opportunity to win a Ribbon further down the road they were travelling together as official if secret boyfriends.

Tsukishima had a similar view. He didn’t mind the outcome either way as it ultimately amounted to only good things. However, that didn’t mean he didn’t want to win. Yamaguchi was more easy-going but Tsukishima was more compelled. He really wanted to win and go further, reach the end of this Contest, and stand victorious.

A huge coin materialised on the LCD screen hanging up. ‘Now, boys, choose “Heads” or “Tails” so we can decide who moves first.’ she said.

‘Heads.’ Tsukishima said with a smirk.

‘Tails.’ Yamaguchi said with a red face. They sincerely hoped that no one caught onto the innuendos present in the subtext of their decisions which seemed to have been mutually agreed upon before they reached the stage.

The coin flipped and Marian announced the outcome present: ‘Tails.’ Yamaguchi smiled. He chose his PokeBall.

‘I choose you, Amp!’ Yamaguchi said and his Flaafy was ejected from its PokeBall in a flickering of bright, yellow bolts of electricity.

‘Monferno!’ Tsukishima called out. He tossed out his PokeBall and his Pokémon bounded out of a burst of red-orange lines.

At Marian’s call, the timer started and the battle officially began. ‘Thunder Wave!’ Yamaguchi said and a pulse of weak, electric energy spread out from Amp’s body. The wave stuck to Monferno. Tsukishima’s yellow health bar took a little bit of damage. There had been grace in the way Amp commanded the electricity. ‘Flame Wheel!’ Tsukishima instructed. Huge, orangey flames were exuded from Monferno’s body and it hopped, playing with the flames, and then tumbled into a cartwheel. It rammed itself against Amp and knocked the Flaafy to the ground. A lot of points were taken from Yamaguchi’s health bar on the television screen.

‘Take Down!’ Yamaguchi instructed. Amp bolted for Monferno and tackled it to the floor. The sound echoed through the hall. Amp kept Monferno pinned to the ground for as long as possibly but Monferno squirmed free with dexterity. Both Pokémon got up and seemed a little woozy because of the full-strength attack. Yamaguchi and Tsukishima’s health bars both took considerable damage.

Tsukishima glanced at the television. He and Yamaguchi were neck and neck but it was Yamaguchi who was a little bit below. ‘Monferno, use Mach Punch!’ Tsukishima instructed. Monferno shook its head and it seemed to have overcome its bout of dizziness. It leaped towards
Amp and pulled back its arm. Its fist seemed to harden. It took a huge slug at Amp. The punch pushed Amp backwards with an unbalanced stumble. A sizeable chunk of yellow was taken from Yamaguchi’s health bar.

Yamaguchi fretted but tried his hardest to overcome it. He knew if he showed too much worry it would be off-putting for Amp’s performance. He smiled. ‘Thundershock, Amp!’ Yamaguchi cried out. Amp released a crackle of electricity and it plunged itself into Monferno’s chest. Monferno screeched because of it and Tsukishima gritted his teeth. Yamaguchi tried not to regret his decision. Pokémon were able to survive tremendous feats with little injury, fears that would leave humans grasping for life. Monferno would be fine.

A large chunk of yellow was deleted from Tsukishima’s health bar which left Yamaguchi in the lead. ‘Ember!’ Tsukishima called out. Monferno inhaled before freezing up. Paralysis refused to let go of Monferno. Tsukishima’s health bar suffered because of it. He was now a turn or two away from losing but there was still the possibility of turning things around. He certain there was.

Yamaguchi smiled. He was so close. He felt bad that his success would be at Tsukishima’s demise but it’s all fair in love and war. ‘Electro Ball!’ Yamaguchi said. Amp created a ball of energy between its paws and tossed it in the air. The signature “float serve” Electro Ball was back; to the audience’s glee. It was that little trick which made Yamaguchi a sweetheart to many members of the audience and the judges included. The Electro Ball wavered but due to Monferno’s paralysis, the target was static.

Everyone watched with bated breath. Would it miss or would it hit?

Eyes followed the Electro Ball as it floated through the air and dropped momentum at the best possible moment. The Electro Ball sank into Monferno. Monferno fell backwards and its body loosened; the paralysis was over. Tsukishima’s yellow health bar was completely gone now. The audience cheered loudly for Yamaguchi.

Marian smiled. ‘Congratulations Yamaguchi on your win.’ Marian fussed about and the boys were taken offstage. The next pair of battlers was brought on stage. ‘These next two have smiles that light up a room so it’s going to be heartbreaking to see one of them lose. Why can’t both these sweethearts move onto the next round? Here comes Yachi Hitoka and Hinata Shouyou!’ Marian said.

Yachi smiled earnestly. Did people really think that about her? Did she really have a smile “that lights up a room”? Was she seriously considered a sweetheart? This was too much for her little, shy heart to handle.

She and Hinata took their stance at opposite ends of the court. They went through the coin flipping ritual. Hinata took heads, Yachi took tails, and it was Hinata who was given the first turn. ‘Jump out, Karasuno!’ Hinata said and he tossed out his PokeBall. Black smoke poured out from the PokeBall and his Murkrow rose from it. The smoke dissipated not long after.

‘Smooch!’ Yachi yelped and she tossed out her PokeBall. Red, white, and blue confetti exploded and her Togetic flew through it.

Marian smiled. ‘The match begins!’ she said. The counter began to tick downwards.


‘Um, chase it and use Fairy Wind!’ Yachi said.
Smooch flew upwards, attempting to follow Murkrow to the ceiling. It sent pulses of glitter filled, pink-hued wind at Murkrow but none of them reached Murkrow. The attacks which missed bit into Yachi’s health bar. Murkrow swooped back and attacked Togetic. Togetic and driven to the floor from the ceiling because of it. Yachi’s health bar was close to obliterated. She made audible squeaks because of it. Hinata was in awe. With just “Sky Attack”, he had brought Yachi to her knees. It would be hard to recover from that kind of assault.

Yachi took a deep breath. ‘Metronome!’ she called out. She had no clue if she was making a bad decision or not. Smooch waggled its hands and flitted about. Then stopped and there was a glint in its eyes. It opened its mouth a huge tunnel of flames bequeathed the world. Karasuno was caught in its middle and took the damage face on. The Flame Thrower drained Hinata of most of his health bar but he still had more than Yachi. He grinned.

‘Great job, Yachi!’ he congratulated. Yachi smiled and Smooch swooned. ‘But, um, sorry about this: Wing Attack, Karasuno!’ Hinata yelled. Karasuno swooped at Smooch with its wings extended. Karasuno ploughed against Smooch and sent it flying. Yachi’s health bar was fully blackened.

She smiled wistfully as she recalled Smooch. Marian fussed about them and brought on the next battlers. ‘I had fun today.’ Yachi admitted to Hinata as they walked offstage.

‘I know right. Smooch was all like fwaa and Karasuno was like gwaah! You did great!’ Hinata said.
Hinata and Yachi grinned at one another from the opposite ends of the Contest Hall. There was a strong scent of salonpas in the air and they both felt quietly confident in themselves and in the other. They had a strong, mutual admiration for each other.

Marian took a deep breath. She glanced at the bright screen. ‘Heads or tails, you two?’ she asked.

‘Tails!’ Yachi yipped with bunched fists.

‘Heads!’ Hinata chuckled.

The coin was flipped and it moved with clunky animations. Marian watched; the whole Hall watched with anticipation. ‘It’s landed on heads!’ Marian yelled. ‘Which means that Hinata has the first move.’

‘Go! Bunny!’ Hinata yelled and he tossed out his PokeBall. His Buneary leaped out of a cluster of tiny, pink hearts. Bunny glanced around and she seemed unsure of her new surroundings but she took to the applause and liked the attention.

‘I’m Yachi Hitoka!’ she shouted. ‘And this is Bliss!’ Yachi threw out her own PokeBall and her Pokémon waded through a cloud of petals and pink hearts.

‘Chan-see.’ Bliss crooned whilst stroking the egg in her pouch.

‘Bun-Bun!’ Bunny retorted competitively.

Marian cooed and the audience thought the Pokémon interacting with each other like that was adorable. But there was a more serious issue at hand. ‘Begin!’ Marian announced just as the timer ticked over one second. ‘Sweet Kiss!’ Hinata yelled.

Bunny bounded up to Chansey and leaped into the air. She poised herself so that her face would meet Chansey’s. Bunny nipped the side of Chansey’s round face and Chansey blinked. There appeared to be no apparent affect so Bunny tried again and again but still the Sweet Kiss was ineffective. Hinata lost points for it but he didn’t mind.

‘Unlucky, unlucky!’ he called out to Bunny who chattered stubbornly towards him.

‘Good work, Bliss!’ Yachi piped up. ‘Use Thunder Punch!’ She refrained from adding “Just like Kiyoko-san taught you.”

Bliss waddled after Bunny who tried to evade the attack deftly. Bliss tired of chasing after Bunny quickly. Bliss’ breathing deepened and her whole body heaved with each breath. She was already tuckered out despite that the battle had already begun. Yachi lost a few points because Bliss had failed to land a hit but the damage to her health bar wasn’t serious; it was quite light.

‘Bunny! Quick Attack!’ Hinata shouted and Bunny raced towards Bliss at top speed. Silvery afterimages wobbled in Bunny’s wake as she tackled into Bliss’ rotund, pink sides. Bliss waddled backwards with a pained expression; but nowhere near as pained as Yachi’s. She whimpered a little too out of worry then panicked glanced at her health bar. It took a small hit as well but her brain was dramatizing it to the worst possible situation. Yachi still hadn’t learned to wrangle her nerves in pressured situations. It was simultaneously endearing and concerning.
Yachi took a deep breath and tried to retaliate. ‘Let’s dazzle everyone, Bliss!’ Yachi yelped and she struck a confident pose. Perhaps she had learned how to conduct herself in stress. ‘Use Water Pulse!’ Yachi yelled. Bliss twirled on its foot and let loose a gorgeous pulse of billowing, blue water. Bunny took a direct hit and was lost in the escolar waves but she resisted. She fought the waves and held her breath; tried to make the best of a bad situation as her innate tenacity instructed her, without Hinata’s intervention. Bunny twirled and jumped, in movement with the water. Hinata’s health bar may have suffered but thanks to Bunny’s instinct, Yachi’s took a little bit of damage as well.

Hinata grinned brightly. He whooped and hollered; promised Bunny a treat later. ‘C’mon Bunny, let’s keep on goin’: use Frustration!’ Hinata yelled. Hinata was aware that Frustration was the reverse to Return which was a move that grew in strength when the bond between Pokémon and Trainer was strong. Although Bunny was recently caught, she had spent a bit of time with Hinata and despite her attitude problems, seemed to be fond of him. He’d never had Bunny use this move before but he hoped that it would be strong enough to knock a fair bit of breath out of Yachi’s Chansey.

Bunny bounded forward with wild eyes. A temper tantrum ensued. Bunny stomped and kicked and fussed and head-butted Bliss repeatedly who took the attack head on.

‘Oh no!’ Marian squealed and she roughed up her fluffy, brown hair. ‘A move like Frustration may be powerful, at times, but it’s never a good move to pull out in a Contest. Hinata’s going to lose points for that. You’ve got to admire my Chansey’s fortitude though; the way it’s trying to calm down Buneary’s Frustration.’

Bliss picked up Bunny who squirmed and struggled. Bliss patted the top of Bunny’s head and the scene seemed almost maternal. It was like watching the perfect mother and the brattiest daughter interact. It was surreal. Yachi and Hinata were confused most but the audience cooed. They lapped it up.

Hinata groaned. A small chip of yellow was removed from Yachi’s health bar but a large section of his own health was lost. Hinata could imagine Kageyama calling him a “dumbass” for doing something like that in a Contest.

‘Brighten up, Hinata-kun!’ Yachi called out. She was too sweet; even towards her rivals.

‘Thanks, Yachi-chan.’ Hinata replied. He was also too sweet with his rivals.

‘But we don’t have much time for chitchat... Bliss use Drain Punch!’ she yelled.

Bliss lumbered towards the swift Bunny who appeared confident to be able to evading Bliss’ painfully slow attack. However, through some sort of fluke, Bliss was able to land a hit on Bunny. A green orb of strange energy connected with Bunny’s side and Bliss robbed Bunny of a large chunk of Bunny’s health points. Hinata’s health bar also suffered because of the hit.

Hinata worried; chewed his lip and his eyes bulged. Bunny’s movements became sluggish and breaths ragged. Bunny wouldn’t be able to take another hit regardless of how filled Hinata’s health bar was: there was still hope even though it had dropped to the last quarter. ‘C’mon, Bunny, we can do this. Let’s turn it around!’ Hinata encouraged.

‘Just under a minute remaining.’ Marian reminded the Contest Hall.

‘Use Quick Attack!’ he yelled.
Bunny charged at Bliss with blinding speed. The only trace of her was her aftereffect. She was dainty and swift but when she struck, there was a determined, unrelenting force powering her foreleg. Like a martial artist, Bunny kicked Bliss and caused the Chansey to ungracefully stumble backwards. Bunny recoiled and somersaulted away from her foe. Bunny landed flatly and Yachi’s points took a massive hit. Hinata grinned as she grimaced.

‘Is this the change of tides?’ Marian asked. It would be apt to say that Hinata and Yachi were on equal footing as far as points went. They were both one round away from a knock out. There was no way to say who might miraculously pull ahead but they were both going to try their hardest. ‘Bliss, we can do this. Drain Punch!’ Yachi said and she punched the air; determination filling her tiny body.

Bliss lumbered forth. She threw back her stubby arm and an orb of power manifested. She chased after Bunny and lunged. Bunny deftly evaded the attack by the length of her whiskers. The orb shattered on the ground and left a crack in the floor. Bunny rolled through the air delicately and stuck another perfect landing. Yachi’s health points took a small hit and now, she and Hinata were completely equal in how much of their yellow bar remained. Intensity strained the atmosphere and the audience lapped it up.

Hinata grew giddy. He bounced and rocked on his feet excitedly. ‘this is our chance, Bunny! Use Quick Attack!’ Hinata called out.

‘The repetition of attacks tends to bore the audience...’ Marian murmured. ‘Let’s hope though, that this is Hinata’s lucky strike.’

Bunny bounded up to Bliss and with athletic dexterity, lunged at the Chansey with precision and power. Bunny moved Bliss back half a pace. There wasn’t enough power behind Bunny’s attack to push any further; factors such as Bliss’ weight and Bunny’s exhaustion weren’t helpful either yet the grace of Bunny’s executed attacks was increasing steadily regardless of how tired she felt. The people who monitored the electronic health bars noted duly and rewarded accordingly.

With seven seconds left on the clock, Yachi’s health bar completely blackened. Yachi blinked out of disbelief yet she wasn’t was disappointed or mad. Hinata was completely ecstatic. They both felt the same thing regardless: the satisfaction of a blood pumping battle. they had been on edge for the entire two minute duration of the battle and there hadn’t been a dull moment.

Marian smiled. ‘Hinata Shouyou moves onto the next round. Looks like Yachi’s losing streak won’t be broken until next time. Wish these Coordinators good luck, folks: they’ll both need it!’ Marian said and the two returned their Pokemon and met on the sidelines like old friends. Hinata hugged Yachi from her side and she smiled.

‘That was a great battle, Hinata-kun.’ Yachi said.

‘I was just thinking the same thing: you were like “Uwaa!” and Bliss was like “Fuwa!” and Bunny and I were like “Gwah!”’. It was amazing!’ Hinata said and Yachi giggled.

‘Are they the cutest thing?’ Marian asked and the audience agreed wholeheartedly.

Hinata and Yachi exited the stage and Marian brought on the next pair of Coordinators to do battle. Bit by bit, Coordinators cleaved their numbers as they all tried their hardest to reach for the top of the hierarchy in what was the most vicious Contest of this year thus far. Oikawa and Kageyama were ruthless as they defeated their opponents with sneering and scowls. Pockets of hope popped up few and far between as “small fries” like Yamaguchi and Hinata appeared in the randomised rankings with their good natured smiles and sincere compliments. But soon, they
approached the top. The Contest was approaching its conclusion, the final four were known.

There was a hush over the audience. Marian was quiet, a tease for tension, as she brought on the next pair: ‘Let’s bring back Yamaguchi Tadashi and Hinata Shouyou.’ Marian announced. Bit by bit, the numbers were cleaved and everyone was fighting for the top few positions: the insurmountable few; the ones who were consistently appearing at the top.
Sorry for the late update; I’ve been away from home for a bit as well as some other stuff I’ll elaborate further down.

Yamaguchi and Hinata approached the stage. They were friendly with each other and seemed to enjoy one another’s company. ‘Let’s have a good battle, Hinata.’ Yamaguchi said.

‘Yep!’ Hinata agreed and they split off from one another. They took positions at either end of the stage and listened to the sound of the voracious audience pick their side; who they thought was going to win

Marian grinned. ‘Alrighty, boys, pick your poison.’ she said.

‘Heads!’ Hinata called out.

‘Tails then’ Yamaguchi added.

‘Let’s see what fate has in store for us then.’ Marian said as the giant coin materialised on the television screen. It was flipped and the announcement of its face followed: ‘Tails! Priority goes to Yamaguchi!’

Yamaguchi smiled. *I’m gonna make, Tsuki proud...* He thinks to himself as he picks out his PokeBall. ‘I choose you, Mil!’ he yelled out as he threw out his PokeBall. Through a spray of pale blue bubbles, a huge and majestic Pokemon slithered out of the effect. The Pokemon was a gorgeous Milotic that sparkled with noble beauty. The audience was entranced; Hinata included.

Yamaguchi giggled nervously. It had taken him hours upon hours of fishing and driving Tsukishima mad from boredom to find Mil as a Feebas but clearly, the effort was worth it in the instant Mil was revealed amid the azure bubbles.

Hinata’s plan changed. He thought he would storm in with Nyta but suddenly that didn’t seem like a wise decision so he chose someone else. ‘Jump in, Oink!’ Hinata said and his Spoink bounced out of his PokeBall and through a myriad of red and white confetti.

‘The battle begins now!’ Marian announced and the timer on the clock began to count.

‘Mil, use Water Pulse!’ Yamaguchi instructed.

Mil surged forward with serpentine delicacy. It released a powerful pulse of crystal clear water that Oink was mercilessly caught in. Oink was pushed back and knocked down. He hopped right back up, doused. Hinata lost a decent chunk of his health bar. This battle had taken an unexpected turn and it excited both of the Trainers.

‘Oink, use Psybeam!’ Hinata yelled. Oink bounced forward and released a mystic coloured beam from the pearl atop his head. The Psybeam travelled in eerie circles and encircled Mil who took damage from the attack. Yamaguchi’s health bar took a hit as well; a hit that was equal to what he had dealt towards Hinata.
‘Mil, use Twister!’ Yamaguchi said and Mil hurled a furious orb of wind that manifested across the fan of its tail. A tornado ripped through the orb and violently swept over the court. The tornado charged forward and it was utterly hopeless to escape it. Oink was sucked into the vicious vortex and thrown around. Oink’s cries of fright were drowned in the rapturous vacuum. Oink was thrown around in the twister before being finally spat back at Hinata’s feet. Hinata’s health bar took a huge hit because of the violent grace Mil exhibited.

Hinata crouched down and helped Oink up yet Oink rejected Hinata’s hands; stubbornly rising up by himself and leaping forward back into the action. ‘Oink! Use Psywave!’ Hinata shouted. Oink flipped forward and released strange, uneven waves of pink and purple that washed over Mil with the pitter-patter of ocean-like movement. Yamaguchi’s health bar took a minor hit.

‘Mil! Disarming Voice!’ Yamaguchi instructed and his Milotic surged forward. It released a beam of pink-purple hearts that encapsulated Oink and confounded him with a shrill yet sweet voice.

Hinata’s health bar took minor damage. He panicked glanced at the screen. There was still plenty of time and he still had plenty of health; he was just above half way. He should be fine if he reclaims this battle. ‘C’mon Oink, no more messin’ around: use Psybeam!’ Hinata yelled. Oink bounced forward and with a single, spectacular bound, flew over Mil and showered the Milotic in rings of beautiful, mystic colours.

Yamaguchi’s health bar took a hit that equalled things between him and Hinata. Yamaguchi had to admit, whenever Hinata begs for that extra effort, it's always received. It’s strangely inspiring not just for Hinata’s Pokemon but for his rivals as well because seeing Hinata ask for that extra effort made Yamaguchi want to match with equal enthusiasm. ‘C’mon, Mil, like we did in practice the other day: Aqua Ring and Water Gun!’ Yamaguchi said. He hadn’t planned on bringing out such a secret weapon but Hinata was a worthy person for the honour of being the opponent in the debut.

Mil roared, a sound like a raging and lawless sea, and surged forth. From the fan atop its tail, an orb of water began to manifest. The water spread over Mil’s body and protectively coated itself but the orb of the water, the origin, remained upon Mil’s tail. Mil then thrust its tail forward and the orb of water was sent flying. Mil followed up the movement with a burst of water: its Water Gun. The force kept the orb moving. The audience was impressed by the coordination of attacks.

‘O-Oink!’ Hinata yipped, his voice cracked. ‘Dodge it!’

Oink leaped out of the path of the water. Oink narrowly avoided the attack and the slammed against the slick floor with a noisy crash. Oink skidded along. ‘You okay, Oink?’ Hinata asked. Both Trainers’ health bars took damage from the attack.

‘It’s a real shame that missed.’ Marian tutted. ‘The boys have reached the critical point of their performance: it’s either win or lose now, one round has the potential to tip the scales of victory. Who will win?’ she asked.

Hinata’s heart pounded in his chest. He wished Kageyama and Prinplup were here then they would be able to counter Yamaguchi’s cool float serve-like attacks with his and Kageyama’s Freak Quicks. ‘C’mon, Oink!’ Hinata said. ‘Let’s do it! The Freak Quick!’ Oink threw itself around and glared at his Trainer, as if to say “You can’t be serious!” Hinata crouched down a little, with his legs apart, and holding his arms out. He looked ready to receive a volleyball.
The audience was stunned and Marian was speechless but she couldn’t leave the air dead in the midst of Hinata and Oink’s preparation. She licked her lips and tried to think of something witty but words escaped her; she spoke nonetheless. ‘A risky manoeuvre could be win or lose! The stakes have risen: Hinata refuses to back down from Yamaguchi’s declaration of war that had come in such an elegant form from Milotic.’ she commentated. The audience clung to her words. They were on the edge of their seats with a slight murmur of disbelief.

Oink hesitantly turned around and returned to Hinata’s side. ‘Use Pound and then shoot through and use Psybeam. Go through the rings and hit Mil: easy as pie... right?’ Hinata whispered to Oink. Oink nodded and took the instructions.

Oink coiled up then jumped, slamming himself against Hinata’s ready arms and lunging himself forward. Mid-air, Oink impressed the audience but creating strange spirals using Psybeam. The sheen distorted the colour of Oink’s velvety fur and seemed to cause an even stranger effect on the Spoink. It seemed to push Oink further without movement. Oink whipped around and pounded against Mil after “flying” a few meters. Oink slammed against Milotic who bent backwards.

The Trainers looked to Marian and then to the screen. The audience raged cheerfully and raucously with applause and shouting. That was the sort of thing they looked for in a performance: strange and unusual manoeuvres that no sane Coordinator would dare try outside of an Appeal Round.

Yamaguchi’s health bar had been completely blackened. His heart stopped, his eyes darkened, and his shoulders slumped forward. He was utterly crestfallen. ‘Return, Mil!’ Yamaguchi said and his Milotic disappeared in a red flash. Hinata meanwhile was the embodiment of sunny joy. He bounced and rocked on his feet with curled hands. He looked ecstatic: every inch of him was bristled with happiness.

Marian clapped alongside the audience. ‘The winner of this round if Hinata Shouyou.’ she said. ‘Give it up for Yamaguchi Tadashi too, folks, he battled brilliantly. The hairs on the back of my neck are standing up: I’ve got chills and goose-bumps. This has to have been one of the best battles of the day.’ Marian commentated.

Yamaguchi and Hinata went offstage whilst Marian orchestrated the audience, pumping them up for the second last battle of the day. Hinata tackled Yamaguchi as soon as they entered the shadowy, offstage corridor. ‘You were great! You had me on my toes. Mil was like “fuwa” and it was sooooo cool!’ Hinata said.

Yamaguchi blinked. ‘Really?’ he said.

‘Yeah! You were the coolest. I was certain that you were gonna win but I didn’t want to give up because I really wanna win but honestly, you really were the coolest.’ Hinata said. He buzzed.

Yamaguchi stared blankly at Hinata before cracking the biggest grin. The pinpricks of tears in the corners of his eyes dried. He had come so close so many times in Contests but he had never been able to overthrow his opponents at the last second. Winning to Hinata was surreal because it felt vaguely like a win.

His eyes crinkled and Hinata smiled back. ‘Uwah, I wonder who’s going to battle next. Just me, Kags, and the Grand King left.’

‘Kags?’ Yamaguchi repeated.

‘Sometimes I call him that. Don’t tell him ‘cause it kinda makes him mad.’ Hinata said.
'Next up: Kageyama Tobio versus Hinata Shouyou!' Marian announced and the boys stopped in their tracks.

‘Looks like you better head back.’ Yamaguchi chuckled. He smiled sympathetically. ‘I’ll cheer for you. No offence but Tsuki and I like you a bit more than we like Kageyama.’

‘It’s fine. Kageyama can be a bit rude but he’s a good guy. I swear... Catch up with you later?’

‘Sure.’ Yamaguchi said and Hinata ran off.

Chapter End Notes

So one of my “friends” read bits and pieces of this fic and said it was like it was written like a child but fuck her. I know this chapter isn’t the best but in order to keep my self-esteem up, I’m going to pretend this is the best chapter I’ve written yet so yeah, I apologise for a crappy chapter and an inflated sense of ego.
Hinata jittered. He rocked and bounced but not how he normally does. This time, his stomach was churning. He had gotten used to the attention from the audience and what the nervousness does to him as a result thus why he hasn’t had any issues in the bathroom recently but now, it was all coming back.

Kageyama scowled menacingly from across the court. From the animosity he was exuding, it was hard to believe the two Trainers were amiable offstage but then again, they were wearing matching volleyball uniforms. Furthermore, beneath it all, Kageyama didn’t really want to battle Hinata because they were friends and no matter how it ends, it’s going to be a put weird dynamic in the relationship although, Kageyama had noticed despite how many times Tsukishima and Yamaguchi had lost and won against each other, they were still going strong. That was genuinely weird actually and Kageyama didn’t willing dwell too much on that; especially since they often shared beds at the Pokemon Centre which is another thing he doesn’t like to mull over much.

‘Okeydokey, boys, heads or tails?’ Marian asked as a giant coin manifested onscreen.

‘Heads!’ Hinata yipped.

‘Tails.’ Kageyama’s voice was muffled.

‘Let’s see...’ Marian teased as the coin was flipped. She glanced over her shoulder then announced how the coin had landed. ‘Heads!’

‘Okay then!’ Hinata chirped as he chose his PokeBall. ‘Karasuno!’

‘Murkrow!’ Kageyama hastily followed up and tossed out his own PokeBall.

Their avian Pokemon fluttered out of multi-coloured confetti – orange and blue – and took to a battle pose. There was a hint of unease in the way the two Murkrow beat their wings; a glimmer of hesitation in their eyes. It would seem the boys had forgotten the most important thing about their two, amicable Murkrow: they were nest mates.

‘Battle... Begin!’ Marian announced and the clock immediately began to change.

‘Karasuno, use Sky Attack!’ Hinata said and Karasuno flew upwards; his wings shone.

‘Gr... Murkrow, use Confuse Ray!’ Kageyama growled and his Murkrow released tiny, ghostly beads of light that orbited hauntingly around it, trying to reach out to Karasuno who was too far into the air. The Confuse Ray dissipated into an eerie scatter. Kageyama’s health bar took a little bit of damage but Hinata’s was left untouched.

Karasuno plunged swiftly. He crashed tackled past Kageyama’s Murkrow and sent her into a flurry of panicked feathers. Murkrow was dazzled and almost crashed into the ground but Karasuno steadied her. The strange display of what appeared to be affection impressed the audience as there was a sudden and unusual cry of cuteness from those in the bleachers. Both Trainers took damage but it was Kageyama who was hit harder.

‘Wing Attack!’ Hinata instructed and Karasuno charged forward. Karasuno’s wings outspread and were coated with a silver-white sheen. He glided towards Murkrow and struck past her with a slap. The two Murkrow cawed. Kageyama’s health bar sustained a slight bit of damage; nothing serious as he was still within league with Hinata who thus far, was dominating this battle. ‘Use
Confuse Ray!’ Kageyama said.

Murmuro released another round of eerie, flame-like lights that floated ominously through the air. They spiralled hauntingly around Karasuno who absorbed them; resulting with Karasuno contracting the confused status condition. Hinata’s health bar was diminished a little bit.

Hinata’s lower lip wobbled. ‘C’mon Karasuno, use Sky Attack!’ he called out. Karasuno’s eyes moved in dizzy circles. Dazed twitches crept through Karasuno’s wings and his path of flight became uneven. Karasuno beat his wings and tried to fly forth but rather than upwards, he plunged downwards and violently crashed into the floor turning into a mess of upturned feathers and anger. ‘Karasuno!’ Hinata shouted but there was nothing further he could do besides encouragement and soothing coos. Hinata’s health bar had a chip of yellow removed.

Kageyama’s turn followed. ‘Wing Attack!’ Kageyama called out and Murkrow flew forward gracefully. She charged past Karasuno with her wings outspread, glowing white. She battered Karasuno as she passed.

‘Peck!’ Hinata shouted. Karasuno regained balance in the air with a decisive beat of his wings, moving past any confusion he was duelling with. He surged forward. His beak glowed white and he tackled beak-first into Murkrow’s right wing; sending her flying. Kageyama’s health bar was reduced a decent amount. Hinata smiled. ‘Let’s keep going, Karasuno!’ he encouraged.

Kageyama had to resist smiling at how happy-go-lucky Hinata could be. It had always been admirable from the sidelines, how he never stopped chirping and seemingly thinking happy thoughts towards his Pokemon but seeing as how this was supposed to be a serious rival battle, Kageyama had to stop himself.

He put his arm out commandingly. ‘Murkrow, use Peck!’ he called out. Murkrow cawed and fluttered her wings. She flew forward with her beak glowing white. She paid back the damage Karasuno had done to her, perhaps with even more elegance as extra insult. Hinata’s health bar took damage that had been equal to what he had given to Kageyama. They were both neck and neck with three quarters of their health bars, and their time, remaining.

‘Use Sky Attack!’ Hinata shouted. In a silvery cloak of blinding light, Karasuno zoomed up to the ceiling. There, he was invulnerable to attacks and revelled in that fact with boisterous flaps of wings and fearsome, almost arrogant noisemaking.

‘Astonish!’ Kageyama instructed.

His Murkrow’s face darkened and she stuck her tongue out. She cawed with an atrociously high voice and caused a fuss. A few of her inky, downy feathers wriggled free from her wings as she attempted to get Karasuno’s attention, only to fail. Hinata’s health bar remained untouched whilst Kageyama suffered a small chip of damage.

The following turn, Karasuno swooped down wordlessly enveloped in blinding light. Murkrow made a lucky escape from Karasuno’s oncoming attack. She managed to loop-de-loop and criss-cross past Karasuno’s flight path. Karasuno kept flying and crashed into the floor with a mighty thud. Karasuno rose from its feathery mess with temporarily swirling eyes. It seemed to have snapped out of confusion although it was dazed for a new reason now. Hinata’s health bar took massive damage for it. Kageyama’s Murkrow had exhibited deft grace after all; leaving Karasuno behind and looking foolish.

Murkrow cooed and fluttered her feathers like the flirtatious ladies of old with their fans that
prettily concealed lovelorn messages.

Hinata groaned. ‘It’s alright, Karasuno, unlucky.’ he prompted.

‘A minute remains.’ Marian piped up ominously.

‘Come on, Murkrow, let’s get serious now. Combine Astonish and Confuse Ray!’ Kageyama said.

The audience, and Hinata, gawked. Murkrow cawed understandingly then seemed to dance in the air. She produced ghostly orbs of sinister shadows from her body and drew them around her in ominous motions. She thrust forward with a sudden noise that was almost like a bang.

Karasuno yelped; another ugly noise and was violently startled. The floating, gaseous orbs twirled around Karasuno who was soon entranced by them and consequently regained the confused status condition.

Kageyama smiled proudly; a twisted smile that was somewhat menacing and appeared to fail to convey a more innocent sentiment.

‘Waaaah!’ Hinata cried out from across the court in utter awe. ‘I had no idea that Murkrow could do that!’

Kageyama’s cheeks flushed. ‘We’re in a serious battle right now, dumbass!’


His eyes glistened like amber in the sunlight. Something unusual was beginning to stir and it caught the imagination of not only the audience, but of the Grand King himself who was waiting backstage for the outcome of the battle. Not once in today’s Contest had anyone seen two people so enamoured with the match they were having.

Karasuno cawed with a cracked voice. He beat his wings with a lopsided twitch and his eyes spun. It was to no one’s surprise that the avian Pokemon was unable to fulfil his orders but rather crashed; hurting himself in confusion. Hinata screamed out empathetically for his partner; as did a few audience members.

Hinata and Kageyama glanced at the screen. A small chip had been removed from the bulk of Hinata’s health bar. It’s amazing how such a small thing can topple unto huger repercussions as it would appear that Hinata’s health bar may only last for another round. He might get lucky though but even then, it wouldn’t receive much of an extension. Furthermore, time was trickling into smaller numbers too but Marian didn’t feel the need to chime in about that – not yet anyway.

‘Murkrow, use Wing Attack!’ Kageyama instructed. Murkrow swooped down at the violently bewildered Karasuno who was chasing his own tail feathers with his snappish beak. Murkrow went to batter past him but Karasuno evaded the attack and pursued an attack on his own accord. He attacked with his beak but it wasn’t quite a Peck. It was more like a head-butt but it quickly transformed into a chomp onto her wing.

Murkrow squealed and flew into a tizzy. Karasuno refused to release her and followed her in her panicked flutter. The birds squawked raucously like microphone feedback in a festive crowd but worse. Their Trainers screeched back but to no avail. The boys appeared to have lost control of their Pokemon.

It wasn’t an unusual thing to happen during Contests. Sometimes, Pokemon aren’t thoroughly socialised enough to respond well in crowds or their orders are too complex. Even in situations
such as these where Pokemon that are familiar with each other react like this in a new context. The fact that Karasuno was confused wasn’t helpful to the situation either. Luckily, there were contingencies at play that worked in favour of everyone.

‘Thirty seconds remain.’ Marian reminded the Hall. ‘Also, if neither Trainer can reign in their Pokemon within the next ten seconds, the win will default to whoever has more points remaining.’

‘Oh! Okay...’ Hinata replied. He cooed towards Karasuno in a feeble attempt to calm him but it failed.

‘Nif...N-No...Nice birdie!’ Kageyama called out awkwardly rather than encouragingly.

Hinata sniggered.

Luckily, before Marian could forfeit the match, their birds settled down. They quietened and with gentle flaps of their wings. The two Pokemon settled in the middle of the court. Karasuno tucked himself underneath his wing and peacefully closed his eyes. Murkrow fluttered down next to him and spread her wings over him. Karasuno cuddled underneath her. Murkrow settled too and closed her eyes; serenely falling asleep.

If it weren’t so adorable, it would be irritating.

‘Immediate forfeit!’ Marian announced. She glanced at the screen even though it was apparent who the victor was. ‘Kageyama Tobio may proceed to the final round.’

‘Return!’ the two Trainers thrust out their PokeBalls and their respective Pokemon disappeared in a flash of red light. Meanwhile, Kageyama’s face had become the on-screen spectacle – to Hinata’s annoyance.

‘We’ll take a short break and then, we’ll get on with the finals: Kageyama Tobio versus Oikawa Tooru. It’s sure to be an exciting match!’ Marian announced.

The boys started walking offstage. Hinata pouted and Kageyama’s face gave no hints to his inner emotions. Marian quickly caught up with them and one of her stagehands gave her a water bottle.

‘Hold up!’ she called out to them. The boys turned around curiously. She huffed and ran up to them. She took a quick gulp and looked exasperated. ‘What happened out there?’ Marian asked. She instinctively put her free hand over Hinata’s head and started to scrunch up his hair playfully. Hinata didn’t seem to mind. If anything, it looked like it would be Kageyama who would scold her for her unannounced affection. Marian was surprised to find that Hinata’s hair was soft and fun to ruffle.

The boys growled and threw sideways glares at one another. ‘It’s your fault.’ they jabbed at each other.

‘Newly caught Pokemon?’ Marian asked.

‘Yep, sometime last week in Eterna Forest.’ Hinata replied.

‘Okay then. I guess that isn’t too long a time to teach your Pokemon some manners but its unusual that they would behave that way.’ Marian mused.

‘Ne, Kageyama, do you think it’s because it’s because we found Karasuno and Murkrow as nest mates that they behaved that way?’ Hinata asked. Kageyama shrugged.
Marian paused. ‘Nest mates?’ she asked, tentative.

‘Well, they were sharing a nest when we found them.’ Hinata replied.

‘Those stupid birds stole Hinata’s bag.’ Kageyama grumbled.

‘My, how... strange.’ Marian remarked. She sounded strained.

‘Are you okay, Marian-san?’ Hinata asked.

‘Murkrow aren’t known for staying in nests as hatchlings and generally tend to antagonise their siblings so, um, I think it would be safe to say that your Murkrow that you’ve captured are in love. They probably stole Hinata-san’s bag for nesting purposes. I would advise that to avoid situations like these in the future.’ Marian advised.

‘Aah, you’re so smart. Thank you.’ Kageyama replied.

‘Well, um, hurry up. The break’s over in a moment.’ Marian tittered.

The boys took off ahead. Marian was left with the impression that these boys probably weren’t all that bright. She couldn’t help but sincerely wish the best for the two – as well as pray they soon become a trio and gain a third, sensible-minded friend. They seemed like they could use an addition given that it was a very well-known fact that Murkrow hate having siblings. There’s even a well-known saying to describe sibling rivalry based off of that titbit.

Soon, Marian got a message through her Bluetooth and she had to return to the stage. She stood on her platform with a grin plastered across her face. the cameras zoomed around her, searching for the perfect angle to relay back to everyone at home.

‘I’ve received word from on high that these two – Oikawa Tooru and Kageyama Tobio – have history. According to my source, these two close during their time at Jubilife Trainer’s School. Also according to our source, Kageyama learned everything he knew about competitive battling from observing Oikawa on those fateful practice courts. Will this be a match of destiny? Will the student upsurp the master? Only time will tell...’ Marian’s voice trailed off.

The audience mumbled excitedly. It was this sort of rivalry that caused hearts to pound and for battles to become doubly exciting.

Kageyama’s heart started to beat faster. He felt his blood boil. He could already hear it. He didn’t want to hear it. He secretly didn’t want to get this far. he wasn’t mentally prepared for this match and what it would follow up to. He promised Hinata that he would share something very important after this match but suddenly, he was cowardly trying to skirt the issue. Two minutes wasn’t enough to delay anything.

But he would try. Kageyama started to walk back towards the stage. He saw Oikawa skip into his peripheral vision with that pompous, regal smile of his. Kageyama steeled his resolve. Even though it seemed like insurmountable odds – an iron wall – he would try. He was going to find a crack and push through even though his Pokemon were surely under-levelled compared to the years Oikawa’s have had to train by his side. Kageyama was going to leave this match triumphant.

‘The King of the Court returns to battle the Great King – it will be an intense match for all!’ Marian announced.

There it was. The phrase he didn’t want to ever hear again. Kageyama wished that title had never been coined. Hearing it makes his blood turn to magma. Hearing it makes him breathe tightly and
his fists clench. He couldn’t help but loathe it.

Oikawa cut him off and made his appearance on stage first. The audience lavished him with praise. Kageyama’s entrance was met with neutrality. Did his reputation precede him? He was unsure.
Kageyama’s focus becomes wholly saturated by the Trainer standing opposite to him. His sickly sweet smile hides a demonic snarl. His coiffed hair hides a brain perfect for finding the most successful strategy. His fancy clothes – dress pants, a blouse, and a vest – hide a body that is capable of going the extra mile in training. This is the “Grand King” Oikawa in his rawest: a commander readying for war.

‘Hello Tobio-chan, fancy meeting you here.’ Oikawa sings out from across the court.

Kageyama’s stomach clenches and his heart beats erratically. He can’t tell if its terror or excitement.

‘Okay your majesties,’ Marian butts in, ‘but time to pick: heads or tails?’

Kageyama realises that its neither. It’s hatred.

‘Heads!’ Oikawa yelled out, immediately snavelling up his favoured position.

‘Tails.’ Kageyama adds.

‘Okeydokey, let’s see what Lady Luck has in store for us...’ Marian commentated whilst the digital coin on the flat screen behind her was flipped. It took a few, fumbled moments but soon a winner was revealed. With a curt glance, Marian announced: ‘Heads! Oikawa may have the first turn.’

Oikawa gracefully selected his PokeBall without a hint of hesitation. He kissed the seal on it and then tossed out with his obnoxious cutesy catchphrase: ‘I’m ready for my close up... Darcy, centre stage, my love!’ He tossed out his PokeBall.

Kageyama readied himself. He hadn’t seen Oikawa in ages and it had only been a recent decision to convert to Contests so he had no clue what he would be up against. All he knew what was that Oikawa was fond of gifting his Pokemon obnoxious but pretty Kalosian names and it would appear, that “Darcy” would be no different.

Oikawa’s Pokemon appeared in hazy, black smoke. It unfurled itself from its preciously tight position and revealed itself within the thinning smoke. ‘Gen-gaar!’ Darcy announced with a vicious grin that matched Oikawa’s perfectly.

Kageyama is unsure of who to send out. Gengar was poison-ghost in typing. Murkrow was still recuperating from her match against Karasuno. Besides, she didn’t know any dark type moves and Astonish was too weak to surmount a Pokemon that could easily be twice her level. Ralts couldn’t help either. Poison was resistant to fairy but psychic types can fare well against ghost. It was still too much of a risk because of how under-levelled he was. Kageyama could only curse himself.

Staravia couldn’t even touch Gengar. Time was ticking – Kageyama was taking up too much time. His fists clenched and then he released himself. He only had one choice left.

‘Go! Prinplup!’ Kageyama yelled. He threw out his PokeBall. His Prinplup stood in the cluttered midst of soapy bubbles that popped idly.

‘Oh-ho-ho?’ Oikawa tittered inaudibly with a raised eyebrow. He couldn’t help but feel like he had some influence over the starter his junior had picked. After all, he had chosen a Piplup, Absalom, as well and Kageyama had known that previously.
'Match... Begin!' Marian announced.

Oikawa winked and lolled his hand about. ‘Mega Evolution activate! Toxic, Darcy!’ he instructed. He ran his hand through his hair and tucked a few stray curls behind his ear. Oikawa made movements that tried to enhance the fact he was wearing an earring. He was wearing a peculiar stud earring with a pendant hanging off it. His tugged on the glossy pendant that seemed to be cosmic in design and ran his fingers across its smooth surface. A slight confusion emanated around him and he relished in it. But the bewilderment thickened when bright, pink light started to break free from the pendant on his earring.

Kageyama glared. He’d never heard of anything like that before. He had never seen anything like this before. Was it a combination command or some kind of intimidation tactic? He glanced at Marian who was making undignified faces similar to that of a breathless Magikarp’s.

Then something downright impossible happened before Darcy could begin using Toxic. A brilliant light burst through Darcy’s shadowy body. The light cocooned around Darcy until it was trapped within what was like a thick, fuchsia coloured shell. A second later, Darcy broke through the shell with a completely new shape: completely unlike any Gengar that anyone in the Hall had ever seen before.

Darcy’s new form was bizarre. Its body shape had contorted and its lower portion of it had sunken into the ground as well as changed colour; to a murky crimson reminiscent of a crisp, autumnal sunset. Its crown had elongated as had its arms and in the centre of its forehead, a koban-like coin had manifested. Yet that coin was actually a third eye. Shadowy spikes protruded from it and that gave it was wilder and more menacing appearance.

Darcy put its hands together and sludge materialised between its shadowy claws. Darcy hurled the attack at Prinplup, terrified, took the attack directly.

‘I-It’s okay, Prinplup. Use Bubblebeam!’ Kageyama called out.

He faltered. Kageyama never falters. Intensity sparked inside the Hall. He was too assailed by what had just happened to Oikawa’s Pokemon to think straight. He was breathless. Hope dimmed and victory now seemed even further away that it had been beforehand. He glanced at his health bar. It was erratic as though the tech guys couldn’t decide whether or not this counted as a one hit knock out. It kept going in between full and empty like a glitch until, it stayed put with just a slither of yellow remaining on a blackened bar. There is some mercy in this competitive and deceptively beautiful world of Contests and Coordinators but it would be appear that it is very little and very bleak.

Prinplup blew bubbles out of her beak by the thousands. The bubbles swirled around in a typhoon that caught light and bent it and contorted it into tiny sparkles. Darcy was assailed by bubbles that popped around it. Darcy became sodden and soapy but quickly shook itself dry. Prinplup meanwhile took poison damage with a jerky shiver.

‘Destroy them, Darcy-chan.’ Oikawa said and he held up his thumb up only to violently flip it around into a thumb down gesture. ‘Use Venoshock.’

Darcy chuckled: a grating, eerie sound. Its eyes thinned and it grinned broadly. Darcy seemed to share much more than its smile with Oikawa. It would seem that they are similarly sadistic also. Darcy collected green coloured sludge to its hands. It was lumpy and revolting; it reeked. Darcy pushed the misshapen ball of waste towards Prinplup who was unable to evade the attack.

Prinplup took the attack straight-on; as though too terrified to even consider moving away from
Darcy’s line of attack. The sludge splattered over of Prinplup with grabby hands. It dripped down Prinplup’s front and slowly sank beneath her pale blue plumage. The Venoshock reacted with her Toxic status condition and Prinplup squawked wildly and stumbled backwards with klutzy steps and wildly flapping wings. Prinplup’s eyes began to spun as she twirled chaotically on her clawed toes until she fell down. She slid down the court on her belly until she ended up at Kageyama’s feet.

He crouched down and helped up Prinplup who had thoroughly fainted. Kageyama’s heart shook. Prinplup was soft to hold but she was floppy to hold upright. Tears began to well up in Kageyama’s eyes that were usually dry and cold.

‘Prinplup is unable to battle. Oikawa Tooru and his Gengar are the winner of this Contest.’ Marian announced. She poorly concealed her fury. ‘However,’ she added sharply with eyes blazing, ‘I will first review the rules to see whether or not Mega Evolution is legal in regular Contests.’

‘I think you’ll find its perfectly acceptable.’ Oikawa teased.

Kageyama disappeared from the court. The audience didn’t seem to care because Mega Evolution – was that is called? – was cool. They wanted more. They wanted an explanation. Oikawa was lavished with flamboyant applause and noise. He accepted graciously.

A moment later, Marian found out that Mega Evolution wasn’t even within the rules of Contests or at least within Sinnoan rules anyway. Hoenn Contests allowed it as did Kalos. Therefore, from now on, there was an amendment: Mega Evolution is within the boundaries of equity.

Oikawa met Fantina soon after and she was the one to pin his Ribbon onto his chest. It wasn’t fashioned like the normal Ribbons that were awarded at the end of Contest. This Ribbon was truly Fantina’s soul as it resembled her greatly – or perhaps it resembled her favourite Pokemon, Drifblim. The Ribbon had extra loops and an X-shaped, gold cross holding together the white speckled, pink-purple coloured fabric.

‘You are so fantastically strong... I haven’t seen anything like that since I left Kalos, mon cheri. You, your Pokémon, so strong! Your power is admirable! I shall honor it with this Ribbon.’ Fantina rambled as she pinned the Ribbon onto Oikawa’s chest.

‘Merci, Madame.’ Oikawa replied.

‘You must be a special boy if someone gave you a Key Stone. I look forward to your future appearances.’ Fantina said.

She kissed Oikawa once on each cheek before letting him bathe in the audience’s appreciation. He waved out to them and Darcy mimicked. Oikawa’s Gengar soon reverted back to its normal appearance and the crowd went wild. Mega Evolution had ensnared the audience’s heart and they wanted more of this magic on their stages.

It would be safe to say that this battle had changed the Sinnoh Contest circuit forever. Whether or not it would be a good thing was a question only time could answer within its slow, due course.
I headcannon Hinata and Kags as being demisexual but not realising that there’s a word for it.

As soon as Hinata saw Kageyama dash offstage in a tizzy, Hinata chased. He flew through the bleachers and knocked people over in his frenzy to find his friend. He was the only one in the audience who didn’t see Mega Evolution as a magical tactic for excitement. He thought it was unfair. It was bad enough Kageyama’s Prinplup had been under-levelled but that Mega Evolution brought too much power to Oikawa’s side. Hinata’s blood boiled.

He skirted around people and wormed his way backstage. He had been lucky that no one had tried to stop him. He dashed into the warren of waiting rooms that spawned from the main room that connected to the stage. Without Coordinators, the stage rooms were silent and wrought with kenopsia.

Then he heard it. Muffled sobs that came from around the corner – towards the bathroom.

‘Kageyama?’ Hinata asked. His voice was weak.

There was no reply but Hinata ventured on. There were still suffocated noises coming from beyond the male change rooms, not the bathrooms like he had first thought. ‘Kageyama?’ Hinata called out again.

‘Go away, dumbass.’ Kageyama snapped.

Hinata crept around the corner. He saw Kageyama. He was struggling with getting changed as well as with his tears. He was gnawing on his bottom lips with a menacing scowl. He steamed with frustration. He tugged on his shirt before giving up; remaining in his volleyball uniform.

Hinata sat down next to Kageyama. There was some space between them. Hinata wanted to reach out to Kageyama but he wasn’t sure if he should. Kageyama seemed volatile. His arms were strained and his eyes tightly shut. He looked like he would explode if Hinata touched him.

Kageyama took a deep breath and put his hands on his knees. ‘I’m sorry, Hinata.’ he said.

‘For what?’ Hinata asked.

‘I don’t know.’ Kageyama replied snappishly. He turned his head and looked Hinata in the eyes. ‘I do know.’

‘Is it about your loss to the Grand King because I’m pissed off about that! That-That thing with the light and fwaa and the gwaa was totally unfair!’ Hinata replied.

Kageyama’s expression softened. ‘Th-Thanks...’ he mumbled and he put his hand on top of Hinata’s head. He patted Hinata and mussed up his hair. Hinata scooted closer; their knees bumped together accidentally. It was strangely calming. It was helpful. Kageyama then retracted his reach and there was a faint glimmer of fear in his eyes – Hinata didn’t notice though. Kageyama’s blood
froze.

‘I told you earlier that I had something important to tell you. About Oikawa.’ Kageyama said; abruptly changing the topic.

‘Ah yeah! You did say that.’ Hinata chirped. ‘I almost forgot because you were so quiet about it.’

‘Well, it’s important and I think that you deserve to know. Especially since Oikawa and I had been friends once... A-And more.’ Kageyama was sheepish.

‘More?’ Hinata echoed like he didn’t understand the repercussions.

Kageyama’s heart hammered against his chest. He licked his lips. ‘I h-had a crush on him.’
Kageyama confessed. Hinata’s eyes widened. ‘I’m gay.’

‘Oh...’ Hinata mumbled.

‘I think.’ Kageyama added and his moved his hands frantically, embarrassedly.

‘You think?’ Hinata piped up.

‘I’ve only ever had one crush and it was on Oikawa.’ Kageyama explained.

‘Okay then. That’s cool.’ Hinata said.

‘Thanks.’ Kageyama replied. He really meant it even though he thought he sounded like he didn’t.

Yet Kageyama’s heart wouldn’t stop pounding so hard. He wasn’t finished either. He had to elaborate. There was more than this than those three simple words. ‘It was that crush that ruined my friendship with Oikawa; well, it was one of the reasons. I just don’t want that happening with you. I mean, I don’t like you – I wouldn’t ever like you. You’re a hyperactive dumbass... But I don’t want things to be... weird between us.’ Kageyama huffed and before Hinata could say anything, Kageyama started to tell a story and began filling in the rest of the blanks in his and Oikawa’s previous relationship.

Kageyama was thirteen when he met Oikawa who was two years his senior. They had met through the Trainer Academy. From the start, there had been animosity between them. Kageyama saw everything Oikawa did: he was an amazing competitor in every aspect of Kageyama’s life; Training and volleyball. Kageyama knew he wanted to surpass this person.

Yet somehow, despite seeming to be enmity between them, they had managed to get along. They also had become friends. It was towards the end of the year when things began to pile up.

Kageyama had been so wide-eyed and ignorant then. He didn’t really understand why he had the compulsion to touch Oikawa’s face and to kiss him. He just knew he had the urge. He also didn’t realise that these ideas were forbidden.

It was also around this time that his parents had started fighting more. They yelled at each other frequently and rarely paused to pay attention to him. It was just Kageyama’s luck that when his parents had decided that they would try and prioritise him over their work and their issues with trust, fidelity, and love that they would pick the worst time for it.

That little apartment in Jubilife City owned by the Kageyama family seemed to have the ability to draw out the worst in people. Because, it was in that apartment that caused a huge shift in Kageyama’s relationships: from okay to terrible. It always has and it, would seem, that it always
As it was nearing the end of the school year, it was starting to look like Oikawa was set to walk out of Kageyama’s life so they had a lot to discuss – privately. Since the Kageyama apartment was closer to the school and they were tired from a long day, they naturally ended up there.

Oikawa sat on Kageyama’s bed. He looked around at the airy space. This was their first time in Kageyama’s house alone. Oikawa seemed nonchalant and disinterested. ‘So...’ he murmured with wandering eyes, ‘what did you want to talk about?’

Kageyama stood awkwardly in his doorway. He closed the door.

‘Hm?’ Oikawa murmured. It was an unusual behaviour given that Kageyama’s parents wouldn’t be home for another two hours, perhaps. It was always hard to tell with their erratic work schedules.

Kageyama couldn’t muster his feelings into words so Oikawa took the lead.

‘Awkward as always I see.’ Oikawa mused. ‘I haven’t told anyone but Iwa-chan yet but I’m not planning on pursuing competitive battling.’

‘What?’ Kageyama protested.

‘It’s not my style anymore. I want to compete in Contests.’ Oikawa replied.

‘Why?’ Kageyama asked, his shoulders raised and he was outraged.

‘You don’t think it suits a guy like me?’ Oikawa asked.

Kageyama didn’t reply. He opened his mouth only to shut it. Oikawa chuckled. ‘Tobio-chan, you can be so adorable at times.’

‘I think it does.’ Kageyama replied.

‘But we didn’t come here to talk about me, did we?’ Oikawa asked.

His eyes zeroed in on Kageyama. His eyes darkened and his smirked.

‘I wanted to talk about...us.’ Kageyama tried to wrangle in his nerves but he needed it off his chest. They barely had any time left. It seemed unlikely that their paths would cross again for many, many years if at all because of their increasingly divergent paths.

‘Us?’ Oikawa echoed; his curiosity was more than piqued. He straightened up and gave Kageyama his most serious attention.

Kageyama’s hands curled into fists. His cheeks flushed and his ears went red. He couldn’t maintain Oikawa’s gaze. His eyes went to his feet.

‘C’mon, I doubt your toes are as interesting as I.’ teased Oikawa.

‘No, they aren’t.’ Kageyama agreed.

‘So what is it about us that you want to talk about? You want to be pen pals? I don’t think I can manage much more than just Iwa-chan’s letters and texts; and he sucks at communication even more than you. It’d be a hassle. No offence.’ Oikawa mused.
Kageyama’s heart pounded in his chest. ‘I like you.’

‘In a friend way or a gay way?’ Oikawa asked.

‘I’m not sure. I’ve never had a crush on anyone before.’ Kageyama replied.

‘Unsurprising.’ Oikawa said.

‘You don’t hate me?’ Kageyama replied.

Oikawa chuckled; a charming sound that was like the twinkling toll of silvery bells. His eyelids fluttered and Kageyama’s stomach dropped. His throat went dry. Oikawa smiled gently and he patted the spot on Kageyama’s bed next to him. Kageyama shuffled across his room accordingly, a blushing mess unable to say anything. He sat next to Oikawa. His shoulders were stiff and square. He tightly gripped his navy blue bed sheets.

‘Why would I hate you?’ Oikawa asked.

‘Don’t most people?’ Kageyama replied, uncertain. He’d only ever seen this sort of thing drenched with layers of hatred. It wasn’t the sort of thing that was usually met with acceptance.

Oikawa stared into Kageyama’s eyes mirthfully. He caressed the side of Kageyama’s face. Kageyama’s skin tingled. Nervousness bubbled up through him but it was pleasant. This was what he wanted, right?

Kageyama had imagined this scenario a few times before. He just never thought Oikawa would play along with him because he always seemed so invested with girls. Girls flocked around him because he was all these miraculous things: good-looking, cheerful, flirty, and talented.

It was those sorts of things that had made Kageyama realise he was attracted to males; or just Oikawa in particular. This was his first crush. He hadn’t even had those stupid kiddy crushes that were “I like-like you because you have me a biscuit yesterday”. It had all been kind of sudden. Kageyama had just woken up one morning, hours before dawn, and realised he liked Oikawa romantically. He then went back to sleep and decided that was a problem for another day. But today was that day for him to deal with these congested and confusing emotions.

‘Do you want me to kiss you?’ Oikawa asked. He was tracing circles on Kageyama’s hands. His voice was husky.

‘Y-Yes.’ Kageyama replied.

Oikawa smiled. He lifted Kageyama’s chin and aligned their faces. ‘Don’t be so nervous, Tobio-chan.’ Oikawa murmured. Kageyama felt Oikawa’s warm breath on his lips and he shivered. Their lips brushed together and they closed their eyes. Soon their lips pressed together and it was everything Kageyama thought it would be like.

He thought it would be strange and awkward; and it was. Kageyama was consumed by Oikawa’s presence. Oikawa smelt pretty. There was a hint of musk beneath his bergamot aftershave. Oikawa’s lips were warm, soft, and felt like they had been rubbed over recently with some sort of flavourless lip balm. Oikawa ran his fingers through Kageyama’s hair and deepened the kiss. Kageyama let him press on: kiss with tongue and breath.

The kiss was also everything Kageyama feared it would be. He feared that it would make sense of his feelings and cement them for what they really were. He had been hoping that he was mistaken. It would seem that he really was attracted to Oikawa. And he really, really liked it. The
feeling of being kissed, the feeling of affection from the one he liked.

Oikawa built up a rhythm that was fervent and strong. Kageyama was swept up in and he grasped onto Oikawa’s shirt with equal tenacity; encouragement. It excited Oikawa and emboldened Kageyama. ‘Do you want to take it further, To-bi-o-chan?’ Oikawa asked in between messy kisses.

‘Mm, y-yes...’ Kageyama replied with disjointed words.

Oikawa took Kageyama’s hand and Kageyama let him lead. Things were moving much faster than Kageyama had anticipated. He thought a seven second rule movie kiss would be enough for him and Oikawa but it was nowhere near enough.

Kageyama was flat on his back on his bed with Oikawa over him. There was space between them and mushy expressions that Kageyama didn’t really understand. Was this foreplay? This strange staring that made Kageyama blush was definitely foreplay, right?

Oikawa leaned in. His hands were next to Kageyama’s head. His body was streamlined against Kageyama except at his knees. ‘We won’t go too far but I know how to make you feel good, Tobio-chan.’ Oikawa whispered. Kageyama stiffened, excited and nervous but unsure of how to convey his emotions. Kageyama smiled and he smiled without looking scary; an incredibly rare sight, rarer than encountering a shiny.

Oikawa continued to lean in until his eyelashes were close enough to Kageyama’s face to noticeably brush past. Their lips were almost touching and hands were in places they were not to be.

Then there was a slam from an outside source. The boys froze immediately and heard the angry, cluttered footsteps of a disorientated, scorned woman.

‘Fuck you, Iwao. I’m busy! I don’t have time to deal with your bullshit!’ Kageyama’s mother screamed for the entire apartment block to hear.

‘I told you. She’s just a friend.’ Kageyama’s father snapped back irritably.

The apartment tremored around them because of their rage. The two boys froze, paralysed by fear and were unable to rid themselves of their compromising position. Kageyama’s mother was the one who found them. She stomped towards their door; certain Kageyama was home and she forced the door open.

Then, she screamed and things were never the same after that. Kageyama’s parents had never fully understood him since he decided he wanted to be a Trainer but this was a whole different level. His parents considered themselves very conservative and so naturally, Kageyama’s homosexuality was not something they wanted to be burdened with.

Whether or not it contributed to the breakdown of his parents’ marriage, Kageyama would never know. He’d always thought that his being in general had contributed to their relationship which had started to dissolve as soon as they had said their vows but nowadays, he wasn’t so certain. He still felt trouble by it but after talking to his mother when he had been in the hospital had changed his views on all those years of verbal warfare between spouses.

Kageyama finished his story there. Hinata was quiet. He was quiet.

‘Is it weird?’ Kageyama asked then he answered his own question: ‘It is.’

‘No, not at all. Its fine.’ Hinata fussed.
‘Really?’ Kageyama asked, uncertain with an averted gaze.

‘Yep!’ Hinata affirmed.

‘Th-Thank you.’ he replied.

Kageyama got up. ‘Well, we still have the rest of the day, you know. We could go out and do something or we could travel to Solaceon Town; if we run, we’d get there before night. Probably.’ Kageyama said, awkwardly changing the topic of conversation but Hinata didn’t mind. He got up too with a smile.

‘It’s your call. Maybe we should get ice-cream? Oh! Oh! Or Poffins – Hearthome is the Hearthome of Poffins, you know.’ Hinata suggested excitedly.

‘That was a really dumb pun... Dumbass.’ Kageyama retorted.

Hinata grinned cheekily.

They exited the change rooms and snuck out the back door before looping around the front. They noisily discussed their plans for the rest of the day. Despite the trials and tribulations they had faced today, it would seem that things were looking up – that was, until, Hinata quite literally had to look up from where he was walking.

He had darted around a corner suddenly and walked into someone. He stumbled back, dazed, then looked up. His eyes widened. Perhaps, things weren’t going to lighten up from here on out. Brown eyes looked down on him, confused and then amused.

‘Hello, Chibi-chan.’ A venomous smile followed.

‘Hello.’ Hinata replied. He glanced over his shoulder and Kageyama caught up to him.

‘Hello, Tobio-chan.’

Kageyama’s heart plummeted. His stomach knotted. He didn’t have words to describe how sick he felt all of a sudden.

Life in Pieces

Oikawa was not alone. He was accompanied by a boy his own age and a lady with a beehive hair style; she looked twice their age. They all had the sophisticated aura of veteran Trainers which was something Hinata was vaguely envious of.

There was a pause in which no one knew what to say although introductions was likely a good place to start. Kageyama scowled; his hackles raised and he was on the defensive. Hinata was as relaxed as he could be except that he was irrationally jealous of how cool and mature these Trainers were.

‘Ah-hem.’ the woman said with a faux cough.

‘Oh, uh, yes. Tobio-chan, Chibi-chan, this is Professor Juniper and my boyfriend Iwa-chan.’ Oikawa said.

‘We’ve met before.’ Kageyama said to “Iwa-chan” with a slight bow.

‘I prefer Iwaizumi.’ he said.

Kageyama faced Professor Juniper. She had a very tanned face; she was tall and had chubby curves. She wasn’t a Sinnoan woman; not with a name like that or with looks like those.

‘I’m Hinata Shouyou!’ Hinata blurted out.

‘It’s good to meet you boys; I’ve heard a lot about you from Oikawa-san.’ Professor Juniper said. She spoke with a slight accent. ‘Do you know who I am?’

The boys turned sheepish. ‘No.’ they admitted.

She laughed good-naturedly; a somewhat cacophonic rasp. ‘I’m a colleague of Professor Rowan. I’m from the Unova Region and Iwaizumi-san is my assistant; I’m here doing some abroad study. Recent data suggests that Mega Evolution is beginning to take shape in Sinnoh and I decided to chase the case before Rowan can. Meanwhile, my associates Bianca and Cheren are fine keeping up to date in Unova.’

‘Mega Evolution?’ Hinata asked; that’s all that he had caught in her quick paced speech.

‘That’s what Darcy my Gengar can use.’ Oikawa interjected.

Hinata had initially been intrigued by the concept but now he was repulsed.

‘It’s a very unique type of evolution that can only occur during battles and is born from a bond between Trainer and partner Pokemon, fantastic isn’t it? Currently, there are forty-six Pokemon known to Mega Evolve and forty-eight known evolutions. Its speculated that the Alola Region might bring new information to the table that is unconfirmed; isn’t that interesting?’ Professor Juniper rambled.

Iwaizumi glanced at the younger Trainers. ‘They seem a little lost, ma’am.’ he said.

‘Oops.’ she chuckled. ‘Anyways, you two are good friends of Oikawa, correct?’

‘Uuhh..’ Kageyama hesitated.
‘Tobio-chan is my very good friend and any friend of Tobio-chan’s is a friend of mine.’ Oikawa piped up.

The way he spoke grated on Kageyama’s nerves.

‘Fantastic!’ Professor Juniper chirruped. She blinked then checked her PokeGear: a fanciful, black and pink device but it seemed to have excess screens for a PokeGear. No, it wasn’t PokeGear. It was a X-Transceiver, they were very popular in the Unova Region. Hinata had never seen one before. She grimaced at its screen. ‘Looks like Professor Rowan wants to meet me a little earlier than expected at the Pokemon Club. Iwaizumi-san, Oikawa-san, would you prefer to stay here and catch up with your good friends or would you like to meet Professor Rowan?’

Kageyama tried not to show it but he was sincerely hoping that Oikawa and Iwaizumi chose to go with her. So naturally, he had to piped up awkwardly: ‘Shouyou and I were planning to leave town after lunch. So, um...’ He didn’t know where he was going with that.

‘Oh! Then you two best stay here then so you can catch up. I’ll be back at the hotel by five and then we can go out for dinner. And I almost forgot, Kageyama-san and... friend?’

‘Hinata Shouyou.’ Hinata said; he realised that he hadn’t been formally introduced at all.

‘Hinata-san, would you two be interested in aiding my research into Mega Evolution?’ Professor Juniper asked.

Hinata glanced at Kageyama who returned his look equally confused. ‘I realise that’s a big ask but would you be willing? Meet me at the Hallowed Tower, its on the outskirts of Solaceon Town and Hearthome City, tomorrow by noon. You’ve got until then to decide. Iwaizumi-san, could you pass on my PokeGear number? I’ve really got to be going.’ Professor Juniper said and she farewelled her assistants and then hurried off. Her high heels clacked against the tiles.

A strange feeling of being preyed upon settled in Hinata as he stole glances at Oikawa and Iwaizumi. They were so tall and they were really quite scary looking: fake smiles and scowls respectively.

‘So, Chibi-chan, we haven’t been properly introduced. I’m Oikawa Toru and this is my boyfriend Iwaizumi Hajime. We’re old friends of Tobio-chan. It’s good to meet you.’ Oikawa said. He spoke with a poisonously sugared voice that unnerved Hinata.

‘It’s good to meet you too.’ Hinata replied.

Iwaizumi cast his eyes away from everyone; despite his scary look, it would seem that he was feeling awkward. ‘Anyone else hungry?’ he asked.

‘I’m starving.’ Hinata complained.

‘Then let’s all have a lunch date. We’ve got so much catching up to do.’ Oikawa said.

As a group, the four of them moved off and ordered fast food. They brought their various drinks and burgers back then sat in a booth together. Iwaizumi and Kageyama sat on one side of the booth and Oikawa and Hinata sat opposite to them. Oikawa insisted that he should hold Iwaizumi’s hand from across the table and he not-so-secretly played feeties with Iwaizumi underneath the table. It was adorably confrontational as he always made sure Kageyama was looking when he was doing something grossly boyfriend-like to Iwaizumi.

Or maybe it was Kageyama’s imagination. Maybe it was Hinata’s even.
It almost goes without saying but things in this group dynamic are awkward and cramped. Hinata picked at his fries and Kageyama slurped on his milkshake. ‘So, how did you two meet?’ Iwaizumi asked conversationally since he had realised he was the only person with a sense of maturity at this table.

Hinata and Kageyama weren’t delusional. Oikawa was teasing them. Iwaizumi could confirm.

‘Trainer school. We, uh, battled on the first day.’ Hinata replied.

‘Cool.’ Iwaizumi nodded as the conversation continued to go dry but thankfully, or perhaps unfortunately, Oikawa decided he had better things to do than massage Iwaizumi’s hands.

Oikawa sighed. ‘It feels like its been forever since I’ve seen you Tobio-chan. You’ve gotten so tall and seeing Iwa-chan must’ve been a double take since its been so long since Iwa-chan’s been in the country.’

‘You’re not Sinnoan?’ Hinata asked.

‘No, my parents are but I was actually born abroad in Unova. As a kid, I always spent the summer here and that’s how I met Oikawa and Kageyama. For a bit though, I was able to attend the Trainer School in Jubilife City but it became too hard on my ill grandmother for me to stay with her all year around so I had to go home to Unova.’ Iwaizumi said.

Oikawa grinned like the Glameow that got the cream. ‘Friends to pen pals to lovers. A love story for the ages, don’t you think?’ Oikawa asked.

‘Uh, yeah.’ Hinata said. ‘So, um, how did you end up becoming Professor Juniper-san’s assistant?’

Iwaizumi grinned a little proudly. ‘I’ve always loved science and history. Pokemon battling has also been another huge passion of mine. I was lucky enough to be in my hometown – Nuvema Town – a bit before December last year when Professor Juniper started looking for new, fresh faces for lab; she likes to keep interns on board for three or so years so I put in an application. She liked me best and I guess I got lucky, a little bit.’

Hinata’s face lit up animatedly. It was becoming obvious he was completely forgetting why there was such a tough atmosphere to converse in thanks to Iwaizumi’s level-headedness.

‘Whoa! That’s sooo cool.’ Hinata said.

‘I like to think so but the reality is lots of unpaid hours and hard work.’ Iwaizumi replied.

Oikawa propped his chin up underneath his hands. He looked utterly love-struck towards Iwaizumi. ‘I’m very proud of Iwa-chan.’ he said in an airy tone.

‘Yeah, I’ve achieved more than you in the same span of time, Trashykawa.’ Iwaizumi teased.

‘Mean! I won the Grand Festival last year and I intend to win this year too. I only need one more Ribbon to eligible.’ Oikawa pouted.

‘I refuse.’ Kageyama spoke up and he looked Oikawa in the eyes.

His cobalt eyes became as sharp as steel. His resolve was iron. ‘It’ll be me or Shouyou who wins.’ he said. ‘And if I lose, you can bet it’s because Shouyou won because he’s a Trainer ten thousand times better than you.’
Hinata turned his head to Kageyama. He was a little dumbfounded and awed that Kageyama thought so highly of him. His amber eyes widened slightly and he licked his lips. He swallowed and then he turned to Oikawa: a glare, the best one he could muster in spite of his round cheeks and baby face.

‘That’s right!’ Hinata yelped and he brought his hands to his face. He excitedly balled them up. His conviction in this statement was utterly convincing because it was true. He wanted the ultimate victory at the Grand Festival because that’s what all Coordinators wanted. Oikawa looked bemused. ‘Hm, what an interesting proposition. We’ll see Chibi-chan, Tobio-chan.’ he said.

Kageyama got up from his seat abruptly and grabbed Hinata’s. ‘C’mon, Shouyou, let’s go.’ he said and he scooted across and out of the booth. Hinata was awkwardly dragged from where he had been sitting but he didn’t protest. ‘We’re going.’ he said and he bowed to Oikawa and Iwaizumi.

‘Bye.’ Iwaizumi said and the two, younger Trainers marched off. ‘He’s changed.’

‘A little bit, yes. He’s no longer the tyrannous King I was telling you about but he’s still... Very, um, there’s no polite way to put it.’

‘Awkward and blunt. Probably.’ Iwaizumi filled in for Oikawa’s blanks.

‘It’s going to be interesting seeing them again tomorrow.’ Oikawa said.

‘You think they’ll show?’ Iwaizumi asked.

‘Well, they can’t be that dumb. Right?’ Oikawa replied nonchalantly.

Iwaizumi shrugged. Oikawa was probably right for once but he somehow suspected that combined, Hinata and Kageyama could be very foolish. He supposed that only time would tell. He wondered what Professor Juniper meant by help with research. It wasn’t like she could hand out more Mega Stones. She had only managed to acquire seven and two had been handed out to him and Oikawa.
Hello, I would like to inform all my lovely readers that a hiatus is impending. If I finish Chapter 50, I will elaborate further when I publish it next Saturday otherwise, details regarding this possible hiatus will be put in the summary of this fic. It's almost sad; this fic is roughly one year old and it's nowhere near complete and we've had almost 52 weeks of regular updating (including the two weeks it took to sort out that mishap we had). I love you all so much but unfortunately, a hiatus is a very real possibility.

Kageyama’s grip on Hinata’s wrist was tight but Hinata didn’t mind. Although, he did feel vaguely like he was a toy on a string. He liked it though. He liked that it showed that despite all his gruffness and attitude, Kageyama cared.

He’d even gone as far as calling him “Shouyou”. It made no sense but the happiness that bubbles up inside of Hinata when he heard Kageyama calling him by his given name was unlike anything he’d ever felt before. It felt better than winning a battle or catching a Pokemon. It was even better than spiking a volleyball.

Hinata isn’t sure how far away from the Contest Hall they were but as they got closer to the Pokemon Centre; Kageyama began loosening his hand around Hinata’s wrist. Slowly, his fingers brushed over Hinata’s wrist then fell away. Hinata took his hand back. Kageyama noticed.

‘S-Sorry, was I being rough?’ he asked sheepishly as they kept walking. Hinata finally caught up to him and they walked side by side. Kageyama began to avoid looking at Hinata though. Hinata brushed his fingers over his wrist. His skin felt warmer than usual.

‘Not at all.’ Hinata replied.

‘Good... Nif... Nice.’ Kageyama said.

They passed a corner and the PokeCentre swallowed their vision. It was enormous and they soon stepped inside. It was buzzing with people and Pokemon. It was warm inside and the smell of food soon hit them. The two chatted a little bit and came up with a plan so they could leave Hearthome City quickly. It was decided that Kageyama would take their Pokemon to Nurse Joy and Hinata would grab their things. Then, when Nurse Joy was done healing their Pokemon, she could check them out of the hostel. It was a great plan.

But even the best plans have a critical flaw when it comes to dealing with misfortune. Today was just getting better and better.

As Hinata bounded up the pretty, tiled stairs, he bumped into someone for the second time today. He cursed himself as he looked up hesitantly. He really needed to learn to look where he’s going.

Like before, this person was tall and had mean eyes.

‘H-Hello, Tsukishima.’ he said.
Tsukishima huffed and turned himself around. He held onto the hand railing and Hinata came closer so that they didn’t cause a blockage. It would seem that he wanted to talk.

He sighed. ‘Hinata, I saw Kageyama and Oikawa’s match.’ he said.

‘Y-Yeah, impressive, wasn’t it?’ Hinata lied. He thought it was completely and utterly unfair but given that Tsukishima doesn’t like him or Kageyama, it seemed unlikely he would agree.

‘I think its fuckin’ ridiculous.’ Tsukishima muttered. ‘That was bullshit, honestly.’

‘Wha-What? I mean, I agree but what’s brought this on?’ Hinata asked.

‘It doesn’t bother you?’ Tsukishima asked, growly.

Hinata straightened up; frightened by Tsukishima. ‘It does! It really does.’ he replied jerkily.

‘I can’t believe something like that’s allowed by the rules.’ Tsukishima said with gritted teeth and a harder than usual scowl. ‘Don’t get me wrong, I’m glad the King lost ‘cause he’s an ass but that was unfair. You actually like Kageyama, don’t you? I can’t imagine how pissed you must be.’

‘I’m angry for him but he doesn’t seem too bothered by it. To be fair, after the match, we talked with the Grand King and the lady who lets him do that thing – Mega Evolution.’ Hinata explained.

Tsukishima screwed up his face. ‘Who? The bullshit has a name?’

‘Y-Yup! Professor Juniper from the Unova Region. She seems very phwish! And it’s called Mega Evolution. Apparently it comes from the Kalos Region.’ Hinata replied.

‘I see.’ Tsukishima replied.

‘Mhm!’ Hinata chirped. ‘And she asked Kags and me to help her research it.’

Tsukishima’s expression changed again but his intentions were still quite guarded. He didn’t seem as hostile now. His eyes thinned.

‘Research Mega Evolution?’ he replied.

‘Yep.’ Hinata replied. ‘She wants me and Kags to meet her at the Hallowed Tower tomorrow at noon. But she didn’t mention, I don’t think – I hope I haven’t forgotten – she mentioned, how she wants us to help.’

‘I’m coming too. So will Tadashi.’ Tsukishima stated bluntly.

Hinata flapped his hands panicked. ‘I probably shouldn’t bring uninvited people! The way Iwaizumi – her assistant – spoke, it sounded like there would be limited positions.’

‘That’s all the more reason I should go then. Someone as stupid as you probably shouldn’t be helping a really famous researcher.’ Tsukishima said.

‘Oh... I get it. You want to be a scientist when you grow up, don’t you?’ Hinata asked.

Tsukishima crossed his arms with a scowl. ‘I do. What about it?’ he asked defensively.

‘That’s sooooo cool! What would you study?’ Hinata asked.

‘Fossil Pokemon. I want to understand how Fossil Pokemon came to be; I want to develop what we
know about the ancient world.’ Tsukishima replied.

He was softly spoken about it but there was glitter in his eyes. Hinata could tell this was a subject he was passionate about.

‘Waaah! That’s sooooo cool! You should definitely come along with us. I’ll explain to that Professor Lady you’re a better Trainer to help than me. She’s really cool; I’m sure she’ll like you. Until then, just try not to kill Kageyama.’ Hinata rambled.

Tsukishima was taken aback. ‘As long as the King doesn’t do anything stupid, there should be no need for me to insult him.’ he replied coolly.

‘Can you please stop calling him “King”, he really doesn’t like that.’ Hinata insisted.

‘It’s a good nickname for him though; don’t you think “Queen”?’ Tsukishima asked.

‘I really don’t get why you call me that.’ Hinata said and he screwed up his face. Mentally, he exhausted every possibility as to why Tsukishima would call him that. He couldn’t think of a single reason.

Tsukishima sighed. ‘Dumbasses. The both of you. You suit each other.’ He sounded exasperated.

‘Well, it was nice talking with you Tsukishima. I promised Kageyama I’d get our stuff so we could leave in twenty minutes time or something. Remember, Professor Juniper will be at the Hallowed Tower tomorrow at noon. I’m certain!’ Hinata said.

‘I don’t believe you. I’m sure Tadashi won’t mind if we travel together for a bit. We were planning to leave soon too. Let me guess, you’re on clean up duty too?’ Tsukishima asked.

He took the first step the stairs from where they had been talking. A few people had passed them on the opposite side of the stairs but no one needed to come up. In a way, that was fortunate. Hinata quickly followed after Tsukishima’s pointedly giant step.

‘I wouldn’t call it clean up. We were so tired yesterday when we got here, I don’t even remember checking in.’ Hinata said with a yawn and a stretch.

‘Yeah, Tadashi and I cut it fine getting here too. We were hassled by some old man who’d turn out to be Ukai Senior and we also attended that festival thing in Eterna City. It’s been intense getting here.’ Tsukishima said.

‘No way, same with us but since you and Yamaguchi are such good friends; there was probably a lot less fighting.’ Hinata said.

Hinata then proceeded to babble about how he and Kageyama had more or less “reset” their friendship. Tsukishima looked strangely concerned but he was happy to listen. Or at least appear to be listening. Hinata is ignorant to this but after two seconds of hearing Hinata growl about the King, he zoned out and started playing his death metal equivalent of elevator music.

Hinata, after a while, honestly started to sound like he was speaking a different language. He didn’t even shut up when Tsukishima left him and entered his room; it was further down the hall from where Hinata and Kageyama had bunked.

He prattled to himself as he got their bags and made sure there was nothing left in the room. It was pretty standard of the PokeCentre hostel rooms but it had greeny coloured carpet and extra shelving. Hinata snooped through and found nothing. He didn’t think he would find anything.
After all, he and Kageyama had just kind of collapsed the moment they arrived. They didn’t even change into their pyjamas.

With his and Kageyama’s bags slung over his shoulder, he toddled down the stairs and met Tsukishima at the bottom. Hinata continued to chat to him about nonsensical things. Tsukishima continued to concentrate on literally anything else.

They soon met up with Kageyama and Yamaguchi. They had ended up chatting in line as well and ended up at the same conclusion and Tsukishima and Hinata.

Once Nurse Joy returned their Pokemon, the four were set to leave. There was a slight animosity between Kageyama and Tsukishima but Hinata and Yamaguchi were happy enough. It was going to be a peculiar next few hours; it wouldn’t take more than a day to get to Solaceon Town and they were only going that far together.
Welcome to Schrödinger’s Hiatus. I don't want to go on hiatus but I don't know if I can maintain a pace where I write a chapter during the week then upload on Saturday. I might upload next week, I might not. Let’s see how this pans out.

To Hinata’s infuriation, the way in which he carried his and Kageyama’s gas cooker became something of a joke. It was very inconvenient to cart around but that was because it was quite large. It also didn’t help that unlike the giants who were making fun of him, he had short arms which also made it extremely hard to wrap around the gas cooker.

When the group finally trudged into Solaceon Town, it was an absolute blessing for Hinata because now he could put down the gas cooker and relax inside the warm PokeCentre which was just on the brink. His arms were really starting to ache. It was way after what they were aiming for; they had wanted to be here by seven but they had gotten here by ten-thirty instead but it didn’t matter.

Route 209 was a strangely eerie place to walk through; even with the goodhearted banter Hinata and Yamaguchi were exchanging; Kageyama and Tsukishima were grudgingly listening to them. The initial few kilometres of Route 209 hadn’t been; it was once they crossed the surging river that they began to feeling a haunting atmosphere that gas cooker jokes couldn’t cover up.

The initial path of Route 206 was friendly. It was buzzing with life: Trainers and Pokemon raced along the spindly paths that wound through verdant forests and over ridges and through the occasional meadow swathed with tall grass. It was gorgeous and welcoming; a beautiful vibrancy to be enjoyed beneath the afternoon sun which was warm and comforting. It felt like a new day. All the hassles from the Contest before were being melted off of them.

However, as soon as they crossed a solid looking, wooden bridge, Route 206 seemed to change for the worse. It was almost reflective of the up and down day everyone – especially Kageyama – had been having.

The sky grew cloudier and the skyline grew thicker with huge trees as old as time. The river beneath the sky was a deep azure; it surged and rushed with visciously vigour as it charged through the landscape with foamy fangs and claws. It was noisy; for a bit, it encapsulated the soundscape of Route 206 but as the group continued to venture forth. It also encapsulated an odd, natural landmark.

At the water’s edge, on a sandy shoreline, the group discovered the meeting point for tomorrow – the Hallowed Tower. It was unsurprising they felt so unnerved and on edge. The Keystone had a presence of unearthliness and death. The air felt cooler around it. It was a very hallowed mar on the land: it was somewhat ugly in design; messy and rugged and without purpose. It appeared broken.

The group resolved to remember the spot so they could easily come back to it tomorrow and as they strayed further on, they didn’t escape the eeriness of the Hallowed Tower. It felt like it had eyes though: fixed on the four Trainers and was waiting for them to return.
They later discovered a skyscraper-like building by sunset: the Lost Tower, according to Tsukishima who checked his Map Card app on his PokeGear for information on this seemingly out of place manmade landmark.

The Lost Tower was a clinical grey in colour; weathered by time and eaten at in the edges. Nondescript vines lingered on the building’s facade. It had huge, hallowed windows that were slightly cracked and tinted. From those dreary “eyes”, it seemed that no light penetrated it and thus, made it seem abandoned but given that the grass around it was neatly trimmed and the atmosphere of respect that it was captured within, it was likely to be brooding and current.

The boys passed slowly by it. Silently, they all offered a prayer when they were within its sanctified vicinity. It was a relief to enter the city limits of Solaceon Town thereafter. There was still a long walk between the Lost Tower and Solaceon Town but just beyond the Lost Tower, it became apparent that civilisation was encroaching.

The paths became wider with more rigid tracks. The trees became more spread apart and the grass became choppier with huge dins of dirt in between. Farmland began to rise in golden, crops beyond fences. Slanted roofs that caught the last few glints of sunlight could now be glimpsed in between trees. Solaceon Town was within achievable distance and that gave the boys, with exhausted feet and tired heads, the motivation to continue marching on.

Upon entering the Solaceon Town PokeCentre, in in their state of near blind exhaustion, the boys were able to notice this Pokemon Centre was distinctly different to the ones they had grown accustomed to. The colouring of all the furnishings was more rustic and the decor seemed folksy. It was a welcome change from the usual.

Yamaguchi checked them in as he was the only one with trusted social skills. Nurse Joy quickly organised him and his friends a room to share. Nurse Joy passed over a key and sent him outside. The PokeCentre was small and had lots more in common with conventional hotels than a hospital as there were semi-detached flats on the PokeCentre’s property for Trainers to borrow.

With heavy feet, the boys were eventually able to pull their clothes off, get into their pyjamas, and go to bed. Tsukishima and Yamaguchi were the top and bottom of a bunk; Hinata and Kageyama similarly. Their room was beautifully isolated and to Kageyama’s delight; neither Tsukishima nor Yamaguchi snored. Although, the same could not be said for Hinata but Kageyama was used to putting up with him and his strange, nightly noises.

In the morning, Tsukishima could not be more disgusted with Kageyama and Hinata. He was exhausted from yesterday’s hike despite having a perfectly dreamless sleep but he was woken up in the extreme early hours of the morning – before eight! – by Kageyama and Hinata who were in a clamour to get dressed to go for a run. Yamaguchi managed to sleep through their ruckus but Tsukishima had not been so lucky. It was ridiculous. they were fools.

It shouldn’t have been his responsibility but it ended up being that way because of those noisy idiots but by the time they came back from their stupidly early run, they were greeted with breakfast courtesy of Tsukishima. Even with the aroma of hot food in the room, Yamaguchi was still asleep.

He didn’t stir until at least ten in the morning. For Hinata and Kageyama, that was downright bizarre. How could anyone just sleep for that long? Eventually, they had to wake him up though.

‘Oi... Oi... Yamaguchi!’ Hinata jiggled Yamaguchi’s side and he rolled over.

‘Is he... dead?’ Kageyama asked even though he had just seen Yamaguchi move.
'He could sleep all day if he tried.' Tsukishima muttered. He loomed over Yamaguchi’s bunk; careful he didn’t hit his head. ‘Sleeping beauty, wake up or I’ll probably embarrass you in front of your friends.’

Hinata stiffened. ‘He wouldn’t...?’ he mumbled.

‘Do what?’ Kageyama asked, clueless.

Thankfully, Yamaguchi stirred after that. ‘Sleeping beauty...?’ he grumbled, confused. ‘I only slept like...’ He began to count on his fingers. ‘It’s not like I slept for a century.’ He gave up after failing to realise he had no clue when he felt asleep or what time it currently was.

Tsukishima huffed. ‘Get dressed, have something to eat, we need to leave soon or we’ll never get to the Hallowed Tower.’

‘Ah! I forgot! Sorry, Tsuki. I would have woken up earlier if I remembered. I know it’s really important to you that you get the opportunity to speak to Professor Juniper.’ Yamaguchi said, he sounded muddled and he began kicking up sheets and trying to get changed.

It took Yamaguchi a few tries to put his shirt on the right way and he mixed his pants legs up in his rush but eventually, he was good to go. In the meantime, Tsukishima had warmed up his share of breakfast and he was fine with eating as he walked.

The group left the PokeCentre and its attached hostel as quickly as they could. They tramped down wide, dirt roads that were edged with rusting, barbed fences that protected tall, golden crops. In the day time, Solaceon Town was a lot more welcoming that how it came across during night. It was a warm place beneath a comforting sun.

It was fun here, if a little small but not as small as Twinleaf Town. Solaceon Town was kind of place Hinata felt very much at home with and even his “city slicker” friends found themselves feeling at peace with the rustic and homey atmosphere that Solaceon Town had despite its connection to the Lost Tower and its solemn sounding name.

Walking past the Lost Tower, once the town was just out of sight, was peculiar though. Even in the bright, yellowy sheen of the sun, it seemed eerie. It seemed abandoned and sighing; waiting for someone to accompany it in its mourning. Again, as the boys passed it, they found themselves muttering prayers out of respect; or in Hinata’s case as he a slight fears of ghosts, terror.

On an unimportant side note – one that Hinata would indignantly retort towards Tsukishima – Ghastly are scary! And the one that was hovering around nearby was totally going to lick them and it was going to be super gross and terrifying.

Somehow, the four did eventually arrive on time at the Hallowed Tower. It was a jumbled pile of mossy, ancient rocks on the shoreline of a powerful, surging river that was so blue, it was practically oceanic. It was strange but the Hallowed Tower gave the impression of being incomplete. It was like it was missing its peak at it had rose up, like a pyramid, but it lacked an apex.

Already waiting at the Hallowed Tower was Professor Juniper, Iwaizumi, and Oikawa. Professor Juniper was playing with her Pokemon, a Minccino, whilst Iwaizumi and Oikawa amused each other with their PokeGear.

Tsukishima’s eyes lit up when he saw the famous professor. He held his breath. Yamaguchi glanced at him; nudged him.
‘Yep, she’s real.’ he chuckled.

‘Oh, shut up.’ Tsukishima retorted, a tad embarrassed as his face was flushed in pale pink hues.

Hinata noticed and couldn’t help but chuckle which earned him an insult.

It took half a second but Iwaizumi and Oikawa noticed, put their PokeGear away whilst Professor Juniper shot up and grinned. She clasped her hands together and couldn’t be more delighted by the Trainers’ appearance. Her Mincino’s nose twitches, it blinked, then it ventured closer to the unfamiliar Trainers.

‘Kageyama-kun, Hinata-kun, it is good to see you both again!’ she gushed and hugged both boys; mussed up their hair too then turned to the boys she didn’t recognise. ‘And who have you brought along?’

‘These are our friends: Tsukishima, the tall one, and Yamaguchi, the nice one. Tsukishima wants to help you with your research. I think he’d be more help than me; he’s super smart!’ Hinata babbled.

Professor Juniper smiled. ‘The more the merrier.’

Tsukishima’s eyes widened and Yamaguchi chuckled.

‘My, someone’s certainly star struck... and tall.’ Professor Juniper noted with a giggle. Tsukishima blushed.

‘Please; he’s barely taller than me.’ Oikawa sulked.

Professor Juniper ignored Oikawa. ‘So, Tsukishima-kun, Yamaguchi-kun, it’s good to meet you. So is it true what Hinata-kun said – would you like to participate in my research?’

‘It would be an honour; I’ve always admired Pokemon Professors!’ Tsukishima blurted out; he had completely lost his usual, icy facade of indifference.

‘Fantastic! I would muchly appreciate the assistance.’ Professor Juniper said, beaming. ‘So, does anyone want to guess the connection between the Hallowed Tower and Mega Evolution?’

Iwaizumi and Oikawa had smug looks; knowing looks. The younger Trainers thought about it deeply but were unable to construct a connection.

A minute passed and still, no one was able to come up with an answer. Professor Juniper glanced at her Mincino and it leapt onto her shoulder. It curled around her like an overly fluffy and affectionate scarf; nuzzling against her chin and jawline.

‘Still no idea?’ she asked; mildly disappointed or perhaps feigning it. She crossed her arms and slowly shook her head with a subtle sigh escaping her lips. She opened up and smiled.

‘Well, the answer my good, unpaid interns, is right in front of your nose. The Hallowed Tower has a long history of being a symbol of human-Pokemon bonds; perhaps not my exact area of expertise but as a veteran Trainer, one I understand intimately regardless. See, Mega Evolution is a temporary form brought on by the right ingredients: a Key Stone, a Mega Stone, and the personal bond between Trainer and Pokemon.

‘With these three conditions, a select range of Pokemon can induce this temporary form which has new appearance, new ability, and sometimes even a different type! Not much is known about
the history of Mega Evolution which is what I want to seek out. It’s been theorised through archaeological evidence that legendary Pokemon Rayquaza can Mega Evolve without any of these conditions and has been doing so since humanity’s dawn which is astounding as I had initially predicted it was relatively recent; for example, occurring as of two centuries ago – as of the commencement of the Tower of Mastery’s construction.

‘Now, with all this stuffy background information has been established, you must be wondering: “How am I to help?”’

‘Yep!’ Hinata piped up.

Professor Juniper chuckled; hand over her mouth. ‘And that’s a great question: I’m not asking you to scour this beautiful, snowy land of Sinnoh in search of scraps of information regarding science and history; fact and folklore – oh, no, that’s why I’ve got these two,’ Professor Juniper chucked her thumb over her shoulder to indicated Iwaizumi and Oikawa, ‘no, I want you four to aid me in my quest to thoroughly understand the connection between Trainer and Pokemon, Key Stone and Mega Stone, understand?’

‘Understood.’ the four boys chorused.

Hinata glanced at Tsukishima. He was absolutely enamoured by the good fortune that had come his way. He’d never looked happier. His eyes sparkled. Hinata grinned to himself. He’s glad that he was able to help Tsukishima come that step closer to his dream. It felt good: sparkly even.

‘Now, unfortunately, I’ve only found two Mega Stones: they were the Gengarite I gave to Toru-kun and the one I gave to Hajime-kun. So part of your research will be to see if you can find other stones; I believe they do exist somewhere within Sinnoh, I’m just not sure where...’ Professor Juniper rubbed her chin.

Iwaizumi came forward. ‘I think you’ve made your point.’

Professor Juniper brushed him off. Hinata noticed something about Professor Juniper: she loved the sound of her own voice; explaining things and rambling. it was somewhat endearing.

‘I better ask for questions: any questions? Any at all...’ she asked.

‘Will this be a good pathway to a career in other fields of Pokemon research?’ Tsukishima asked.

‘Absolutely. Intern to Professor Juniper would look stunning on a resume. Which reminds me: I better pass on my phone number so you can keep me up to date with your discoveries... Any other questions?’

‘Will Mega Evolution ever be banned in Pokemon Contests?’ Tsukishima asked.

Professor Juniper hesitated. ‘Coordinating isn’t my forte whatsoever but it is to my understanding that Mega Evolution is fair game in all sorts of official battling; at least overseas in places like Kalos and Hoenn for example.’ she replied.

‘I see.’ Tsukishima muttered.

‘Ooh! Ooh! I have a question!’ Hinata piped up excitedly.

‘Yes, Hinata-kun?’ Professor Juniper prompted.

‘Can Oink Mega Evolve? And how does it feel? Does it feel as good as flying?’ he asked.
Professor Juniper turned to her official assistants. ‘Boys?’

‘Mega Evolution is an absolute thrill.’ Oikawa replied with a trill in his voice.

Hinata’s eyes lit up. He beamed. ‘But what about Oink? My Spoink?’

‘If you can find a Grumpigite, then yes. But Grumpig is not known to be one of the forty-six species capable of Mega Evolution.’ Professor Juniper replied.

‘Oink’s gonna go fwaah one day, watch!’ Hinata challenged.

Oikawa chuckled. ‘I like this shrimp.’ he teased.

‘I’m not a shrimp!’ Hinata rebuked.

Professor Juniper stroked her Mincinno. ‘So, let’s get down to business. Iwaizumi, you hand out the Key Stones I have prepared and I’ll explain some more about local history – the importance of the Hallowed Tower and its connection to Mega Evolution.’

‘Alright then.’ Iwaizumi said.

Professor Juniper passed Iwaizumi her handbag then began to spiel. She talked about the Hallowed Tower’s significance as a place of sealing. Her Mincinno jumped off of her shoulder and began to tidy up the Hallowed Tower in the background. Iwaizumi handed out pieces of jewellery. Professor Juniper’s voice was the most important element of this though.

She talked about thousands of evil spirits and their connection to Spiritomb. She spoke of good and evil; of mortality and amorality. She spoke of history and science. It was honestly lost on Hinata and Kageyama but they got the gist of it. She spoke of auras and Aura Guardians. And that concluded her spiel – or perhaps led into the most important piece of information she was going to divulge.

‘Aura Guardians, I have reason to believe, were able to Mega Evolve their Pokemon because they could finely read their Pokemon and as such, were able to tap into that power. There is a definite connection between Aura energy and Mega Evolution energy. I won’t entrust you with that research as it’s far too grand for children who are out to play but I want you to keep that in the back of your heads, okay? Okay.’

The boys nodded then examined the jewellery they had been given. They all had been given sterling silver bits and pieces with a strange jewel encrusted into it: a multi-coloured gem that had a strange energy – an aura, perhaps – emanating from it. The gem was beautiful. It shone like a rainbow with a strange, distorted, black helix within it.

Hinata had been given a bangle. Kageyama had been given a bangle also. Tsukishima had been given a lapel pin. Yamaguchi had been given a barrette. They pinned the Key Stone to themselves appropriately. The piece of jewellery complimented them well. The boys smiled to themselves. The presence their Key Stones gave off was soothing like a caress.

‘They look great on you.’ Professor Juniper said. She whistled and her Minccino returned to her. It had dug something of a trench around the Hallowed Tower in the time Professor Juniper had spoken pompously about Mega Evolution.

‘Thank you so much!’ Hinata chirruped.

‘Y-Yeah, th-thanks...’ Kageyama stuttered.
‘I appreciate the opportunity greatly.’ Tsukishima said as he fingered the gem protruding from his lapel pin. It was very smooth and he couldn’t quite believe that he had gotten so lucky to help with such a prestigious project.

‘Thanks!’ Yamaguchi piped up.

‘Well, before you all leave me so you can find Mega Stones and bond with your Pokemon, perhaps you may want to take a squiz at what my Mincing and I discovered.’ Professor Juniper.

She turned around, knelt in front of the Hallowed Tower, and was soon joined by her assistants. The boys peered around her and she wiped away some more rocks and dirt. A symbol was then unearthed, etched into the Hallowed Tower forgotten.

The symbol was the same helix that was found on the Key Stones.

‘Irrefutable proof, don’t you think?’ she asked.

She got up, dusted off her skirt, then bade farewell to the boys soon after. She had kept them in her company for bit more than an hour. The four were honoured to have been given the Key Stones and their gratitude was more than voiced; for most of them, Kageyama couldn’t quite articulate himself perfectly but Oikawa was happy to translate.
Crazy Happy Fun Times at the Day Care

The four Trainers returned to Solaceon Town sometime during the early afternoon; a bit after two. Which was fine as it was just in time for a very late lunch. The boys figured it would be cheaper for all of them if they ate together and having already had some terrible junk food as a brunch, they were hankering for a proper meal which put them in search of a cafe or a restaurant or a diner.

However, Solaceon Town wasn’t exactly huge. The main street was bare. The parking lot for the supermarket was vacant; except for two cars presumably belonging to the employees. The main road was faded; beaten down to grey by the sun and by decades of traffic. It looked in dire need of a touch-up but it seemed doubtful such cosmetic upgrades would be gifted to it any time soon. The post lunch Sunday rush had thinned.

The boys wandered in search of a meal on the side of the road. They passed ancient brick buildings with tired displays behind vaguely grimy windows. It wasn’t until the main street petered out, leading into Route 210, that they found somewhere promising. Well, perhaps not promising towards their original appetite for meat buns.

Somewhere along the way, the boys’ hunger for a meal turned into the desire to simply explore Solaceon Town. There was a twinge of hunger at the bottom of their empty stomachs but that was excusable as their surroundings were a feast for their eyes. The boys had ended up in a strange farmland area which for unknown reasons was included as part of the town.

It seemed to be like a ranch but there was something off about it. There were huge paddocks filled with pastel pasture and huge play equipment and well-used toys. Towards it north, it would appear that it was attached to a relatively large cottage.

Curiosity drew the boys closer. They were intrigued by the cosy scent of wood smoke and the function of this public building; well, the signage in front of the house seemed to indicate that this was a property open to the public. A rotund man loitered in the well-kept front yard. He anxiously checked his Poketch every few seconds.

‘Hello, mister!’ Hinata shouted at him; a fair few feet away from the man. He waved welcoming at the man whilst his friends panicked over his rudeness.

The man looked up from his watch and adjusted his sunglasses. He didn’t seem to be put off by Hinata’s random friendliness. He gave half a smile and Hinata wandered closer even though his friends were telling him not to.

‘Heya, kiddo, what can I do for you?’ he asked.

‘What is this place?’ Hinata asked in reply.

‘It’s a day care...’ Yamaguchi said as he read the signs properly.

‘Exactly. Solaceon’s pride and joy day care.’ the man said. ‘I’m waiting for my Pokemon to level up since I’m too out of shape to be battlin’ these days so I just let ’em play here and bingo-bango, they level up and some times, an egg is found here.’ the man explained.

‘Aahh! That’s so cool.’ Hinata said and he marched off. He really had a mind of his own some days. His friends groaned.
‘Thank you, sir.’ Yamaguchi offered politely to the man before getting tugged along by Tsukishima.

The door to the day care opened with a jangle. A very beautiful, young girl stepped out with an exasperated look on her face. The girl was incredibly familiar and it didn’t take the boys long to place why they seemed to know her.

‘Goodness, Nijimura-san, we’ve told you time and time again. The day care service works better when your Pokemon can’t see you and want to play with you; and we both know that Princess gets separation anxiety from time to time.’ she huffed.

‘Haha, I know. Well, see ya later then. I just remembered I needed milk anyway so I think I’ll hop on down to the shops.’ Nijimura-san said and he sauntered off.

‘Hello, Kiyoko-san!’ Hinata said to her.

Kiyoko smiled coolly. She tucked some strands of hair behind her ear.

‘It’s good to see you, Hinata-kun and I’m glad to see you and Kageyama-kun have forgiven each other after that mess in Eterna City.’ she said.

‘Yep.’ Hinata nervously replied.

Kiyoko glanced to the other boys. Her eyes sparkled and she seemed to recognise them but as she ushered them into the day care, she was reintroduced to them regardless. Inside the day care, it was very warm and homey with rustic decor. At the til, Yachi was sitting, wide-eyed and friendly. She was very glad to see her friends Kageyama and Hinata. She had also encountered Tsukishima and Yamaguchi once or twice before and she looked forward to befriending them. Although, Tsukishima looked terrifying and that was not good for her nerves.

She grinned broadly and Kiyoko took over looking after the till so Yachi could sit down with her friends. There was old, chaise lounge provided for guests. It was something of a squish to fit everyone on it but Yamaguchi didn’t mind sitting on Tsukishima’s lap and Hinata was happy perched on the arm of the lounge.

‘So, what are you doing here?’ she asked.

‘We’re just passing through.’ Hinata replied.

‘We’re hungry as anything and we thought we could smell food. His idea, by the way.’ Kageyama teased and pointed out Hinata as the main reason they were here.

‘What about you, Yachi-san?’ Yamaguchi asked. Tsukishima rested his head against the back of Yamaguchi’s neck and embraced him. Yamaguchi idly started to play with Tsukishima’s fingers as his fists dug into Yamaguchi’s scrawny belly.

‘I can answer that one.’ Kiyoko piped up from behind the register.

‘I wanted to get some work experience.’ Yachi said.

‘And since we were in area, I thought my parents would be fine with her doing the till every so often today.’ Kiyoko added.

‘Oh, is this your hometown, Kiyoko-san?’ Hinata asked.
‘Yes.’ Kiyoko replied.

‘I would never have guessed it.’ Yamaguchi said. ‘You seem so sophisticated. I thought for sure you’d be from the city.’

‘Nope. Born and bred out here.’ Kiyoko joked.

‘So, since you boys are visiting the Solaceon Day Care, can we interest you in our service?’ Yachi asked. She sounded so professional.

‘I wanna give it a shot.’ Hinata said.

‘You can keep two Pokemon in the day care at once.’ Yachi said and Hinata got up. That’s when she noticed that only his toes had been touching the floor.

Kageyama also got up. ‘I’m interested too.’ he admitted.

‘Would you like to serve them, Hitoka-chan, or shall... I...?’ Kiyoko asked and before she could even finish her sentence, Yachi scrambled to her feet and headed behind the counter. Kiyoko giggled as she stepped aside.

Yachi took a deep breath and wore a smile that shimmered. ‘The starting fee is One Hundred PokeYen and for each level your Pokemon increases by, it will be another One Hundred PokeYen. How may I help you?’ Yachi asked.

‘I want you to look after, Oink.’ Hinata said and he got out Oink’s PokeBall.

‘And I want you to look after Prinplup.’ Kageyama said as he readied Prinplup’s ball.

‘I’m assuming you will be paying separately.’ Yachi said.

‘Uh, yeah.’ Hinata said. Wasn’t that obvious? He wondered to himself as Yachi rang up his and Kageyama’s fees individually. She accepted their PokeBalls, and their money, soon after.

‘Thank you for your business. Your Pokemon are in safe and capable hands.’ Yachi said and she handed the PokeBalls over to Kiyoko.

‘They’ll be playing out in the pen. And again, they’re more encouraged to play when they can’t see you so I’d come back in an hour; two hours tops.’ Kiyoko said then she left briefly.

‘So, Yachi-san, why do you want work experience?’ Yamaguchi asked.

‘Hahaha, that’s a... weird question.’ Yachi replied, hesitant. ‘I don’t know if I’ll be a Trainer for much longer but I don’t have any aspirations. I’m just... aimless so I thought I’d do a bit of personal training here and there; read some self-help books, learn how to use a register and a till and eftpos and whatnot. Y’know?’

‘Why don’t you think you’ll be a trainer for much longer?’ Hinata asked. His expression was gravely serious.

‘Well... I’m not good at battling and I’m not great at Coordination. I’m just... there.’ Yachi explained, rather poorly.

‘But you and Kiyoko did great at the Valentine’s Day Contest.’ Hinata pointed out cheerfully with a flap of his arms for emphasis.
‘Yeah but that was all Kiyoko-san’s grace and finesse.’ Yachi murmured. She propped herself up against the counter with her elbows jutting out and a pout.

‘Nonsense!’ Hinata disagreed; his voice very loud.

‘Thanks for your concern, Hinata-kun but some of us just aren’t cut out for Pokemon Training... just Pokemon babysitting.’ Yachi said.

‘...Okay.’ Hinata murmured, moody.

‘Well, you boys said you were hungry, earlier, right? Why don’t we see if we can go to a cafe for lunch or something? All the cafes around here – all three of them – make everything homemade and I bet you four have been living off stuff that comes in a can or Maji Burger packaging. Bet you all want a good old fashioned home cooked meal, right? Let’s go find one.’ Yachi said, excitedly.

Kiyoko returned with a smile. ‘That sounds splendid, Hitoka-chan.’

‘Eek!’ Yachi squealed; violently startled by Kiyoko’s reappearance.

‘I didn’t mean to frighten you, Hitoka-chan but like I said. Having a meal at my uncle’s cafe sounds wonderful.’ Kiyoko said.

‘Your uncle owns a cafe? That’s so cool.’ Hinata chirruped.

‘I suppose so, but it’s not the best cafe but I like supporting him.’ Kiyoko mused then went onto say the teenagers of Solaceon Town had a somewhat mean-hearted nickname for his cafe. Kiyoko admitted to using it once a blue moon.

Kiyoko’s parents, who were just as ethereal in appearance as her, took over the register and the let the teenagers scramble off to have fun. Kiyoko led the group through the rambling, somewhat decrepit alleys and back ways that she assured were only known by locals. None of the boys or Yachi would have thought to cut through them but thanks to them, they apparently rid themselves of five minutes walking. They ended up at a cafe shortly.

Kiyoko’s uncle’s cafe had a cutesy sandwich sign out front and faded curly text atop the door. It seemed very bleached nowadays as well as quite kitsch but it would have been quite bubbly and sweet nowadays. Although, in terms of blending in with its surrounding buildings, it was probably better this way as it now had common ground with the convenience store across the road and the fruit shop two doors down.

The cafe had very eclectic furnishings; none of the chairs seemed to match the tables and the wallpaper was very busy with prints of fruit preserves and stuffed dolls. Kiyoko assured the boys it was supposed to be this way; Tsukishima was sceptical. At least Yachi was wholly taken by it. She definitely seemed to be aesthetically enjoying herself here.

The six sat down at the largest table available. Kiyoko mouthed an apology to the other patron visiting; an elderly woman who was enjoying tea and biscuits here. Kiyoko knew vaguely the lady but couldn’t quite place her name. She was sure it would return tonight when she tries to go to sleep.

As to be expected of six teenagers in one establishment, the cafe soon began to mumble cheerfully to itself because of their loud conversations that jumped swiftly from one corner of the table to another. The six of them had a jolly afternoon together in the cafe. The food was mediocre but it was just what they were craving; the comforts of home such as slow cooked curry and piping hot soup neither were amiss in this slowly creeping colder weather.
It was becoming increasingly obvious to the Trainers, who had been experiencing a wonderfully mild summer, that autumn was coming and it was going to bring chilly winds and frigid mornings and the like. It was not an unwelcome change as it was inevitable. Sinnoh is a freezing region for three quarters of the year.

At some point during the afternoon, it began to rain but only lightly. The sun could still be seen through the thick sheen of clouds. It was around the same time that they all chipped in a bit of cash and paid for their meals. Everything had been reasonably priced and Kiyoko’s uncle even gave them a little friends and family sale price which was kind of him; and muchly appreciated.

Under the cover of jackets and an umbrella, some had come prepared like Yachi; the six Trainers scurried off through the main roads to get back to the Pokemon Day Care. The shortcut they had taken earlier would likely be hazardous now that it was raining and getting steadily heavier.

It was seven or eight minute semi-dash back to the Day Care. The teenagers brushed off rain as best as they could. Their clothes weren’t disastrously wet so that was nice.

Yachi looked out the window wistfully. ‘It’s getting worse.’ she noted.

‘Mother has probably gotten the client Pokemon out of the rain by now. Except for the water types, perhaps.’ Kiyoko said as she glanced at her father who was at the register. He was serenely enjoying the chaos the young company had brought to his foyer. Kiyoko continued. ‘Hitoka-chan, would you like to finish the transaction for Shouyou-kun and Tobio-kun – I’m assuming you boys are ready to have Piplup and Spoink returned to you?’

‘Uh yeah, that’d be good.’ Hinata piped up, suddenly coming back into focus after spacing out, watching the rain.

‘Y-Yeah, same.’ Tobio replied in a suspiciously similar manner.

‘I’m happy to ring them up.’ Yachi said with a smile.

‘Good, I’ll go find my parents and the Pokemon then.’ Kiyoko said.

She left and Yachi scrambled behind the counter. Kiyoko’s father stepped out of her way and reminded her of the touch screen functions the register had. Yachi was quiet, attentive, but she gave the impression that she had already memorised everything Kiyoko’s father had said.

Yachi tapped a few buttons then faced Hinata with a grin. ‘Congratulations, Hinata-kun, according to this data, your Spoink has been raised three levels so that will be Three Hundred PokeYen, thank you.’

‘Wow, that is good. D’you think Oink knows any new moves?’ Hinata asked, exuberant.

‘Haha, I’m not sure.’ Yachi replied.

Hinata finished with his wallet and produced his money. ‘Here ya go, Yacchan.’ he said as he handed it over. He then stepped aside so that Kageyama could take his place.

Yachi finished up Hinata’s sale then moved onto Kageyama with another bright, friendly smile on her face. It was a very good look for Yachi; especially since she could be so nervous and anxious all the time.

‘As for you, Kageyama, your Prinplup has gone up two levels; well, according to this data anyway. So that will be Two Hundred PokeYen.’ Yachi said.
‘Thank you for your hard work.’ Kageyama stated awkwardly as he thrust out his money.

Yachi giggled and accepted his money. As she did, Kiyoko emerged looking somewhat frazzled which was probably related to the fact that she was carrying two PokeBalls and three Eggs; all of which were carefully balanced against her chest and within her arms.

‘H-Hello, Hitoka-chan. We appear to have an issue.’ Kiyoko said. For once, her voice was without its usual cool and calm. She definitely sounded a tad stressed.

Again, Yachi turned around and squeaked but not because she was startled. It was because she was concerned for Kiyoko. Yachi helped Kiyoko put the Eggs on the counter. Kiyoko then returned the PokeBalls to their rightful owners.

‘So. Are we gonna mention the Donphan in the room?’ Tsukishima asked, vaguely interested in what’s happening.

Two of the Eggs were the same; or just about. They were both brown and beige in a zigzag pattern that wrapped around its middle. The remaining egg was pale blue with two white spots on its front and a navy blue cape-like decoration around its tip that extended down its back. Something about these Eggs made them seem freshly borne.

‘It would appear that some of our Pokemon got along very well today.’ Kiyoko said.

‘Very well put, Kiyoko-chan.’ her father chided.

‘Who’s are they?’ Yamaguchi asked.

‘According to my mother, the two brown Eggs – so, the Eevee Eggs – belong to my Leafeon and Hitoka-chan’s Espeon. The blue Egg – the Piplup Egg – would belong to Tobio-kun’s Prinplup and Shouyou-kun’s Spink.’ Kiyoko explained.

‘Wait? What!’ the two boys exclaimed, in near synchronisation.

‘Quiet down!’ Tsukishima roused.

‘Yes, it would appear so. According to my mother, the Prinplup and the Spink were very much fascinated by each other and loved playing together.’ Kiyoko spoke like a euphemism.

‘I didn’t even know that was possible.’ Hinata said.

Yamaguchi snickered in the background.

‘So, like, we’re like grandfathers now.’ Hinata said to Kageyama.

Kageyama’s face went red. Tsukishima and Yamaguchi laughed loudly and obnoxiously in the background.

‘Please don’t ever say that ever again, dumbass-Hinata.’ Kageyama scolded. He and Hinata’s conversation soon devolved into an exchange of insults that were of a limited vocabulary in nature.

‘If you don’t mind me saying,’ Kiyoko interrupted the nonsensical back-and-forth of insults, ‘would you like an Eevee Egg each? Hitoka-chan and I have no need for them; why don’t you take one each then? In exchange, Hitoka-chan and I will adopt your Piplup Egg.’

‘That sounds good.’ Hinata said.
Kiyoko leaned down and pecked the Eevee Eggs. ‘You are in capable hands, my darlings.’

‘Mm, bye-bye, you two.’ Yachi murmured with a sniffle. ‘I kind of feel like a grandmother, to be honest – I can understand where Hinata-kun is coming from.’

‘See. She gets it.’ Hinata mumbled, petulant with crossed arms. He approached the counter and patted the top of the Egg. ‘I still don’t know how Oink managed it but good on him.’

Kageyama stared at the Egg. He found it utterly inconceivable that his Prinplup and Hinata’s Spoink were able to produce an Egg.

‘Thank you.’ he grunted and he chose the Egg on the left. Hinata scooped up the Egg on the right. The Eggs were very warm and it was quite soothing.

‘Aw, darn, I just realised something. It’s gonna be hard carting this Egg around and that gas cooker.’ he complained.

‘Here, we have some equipment that might help.’ Kiyoko’s father said and he soon disappeared into the mysterious backroom of the Day Care.

‘Well, Tsuki and I are gonna go back to the Pokemon Centre. Are you two going to come or are you going to bond with your Eggs here?’ Yamaguchi asked.

Hinata twisted around. He saw the rain lash the windows harshly and he grimaced. ‘When do you think the rain will lighten up?’ he asked.

‘Tomorrow. I checked a news app.’ Tsukishima replied.

‘It might be better if you leave now then. How about you boys borrow some of our umbrellas?’ Kiyoko suggested.

‘Uh yep, we’ll come with Yamaguchi.’ Hinata said then addressed Kiyoko: ‘That’d be great, Kiyoko-san.’

‘Well, just take your pick from the basket near the door.’ Kiyoko offered.

From there, the four boys took their leave. They dawdled with farewells, not quite wanting to experience the rain just yet but the allure of hot chocolates in the Pokemon Centre was somehow stronger. Soon they darted through the rain, not caring much for road safety as the streets were empty. After a few minutes of stunted sprinting, the four made their way back to their lodgings. Hinata arrived first, Kageyama second whilst the other two arrived a little while later at the same time and out of breath; questioning where Hinata and Kageyama got their energy from.
Coffee is Bittersweet Like You

Jubilife City was a grand place to be. The sweeping buildings are tall and grandiose. It was clean with a frivolous energy about it; residing in every street corner and in every person. Sometimes, it’s hard to believe that when it comes down to it, that’s all just hocus pocus that attracts tourists. There are plenty of terrible, ugly things inside Jubilife City.

One of them, Sawamura Daichi is about to discover, is that it’s hard moving on. Two years ago, when he first became a Trainer, he had also been a boyfriend to a lovely girl named Michimiya Yui. She was wonderful and determined. They had grown up close friends in Sandgem Town; their home town.

However, it wasn’t to last. They had tried a few things first before the cracks ran too irreparably deep. They had tried living together but that ended up bringing the immaturity out. They had tried not going against each other in Contests but their thirst for competition was too strong.

It was hard trying to maintain a long distance relationship built on rivalry and competition. Then there were those strange feelings that simpered beneath the surface and festered worse than any other insecurity.

Long story short, Daichi supposes, is that people change.

But they made it to the one year point anyway. It wasn’t until after the Grand Festival that Daichi decided that perhaps he and Yui weren’t a couple. They should just be friends. Somehow, that fixed all their problems. Or maybe the distance did. In very early January, almost an hour after he and Yui broke up, he decided to catch the next ferry to Johto. Do some soul searching in a region that couldn’t possibly remind him of Yui – because honestly, he saw her everywhere in Sinnoh. He saw her in the snow, he saw her in the sky, he saw her in the flowers: every little thing reminded him of a childhood memory he shared with her or one of her adorable little quirks.

Johto made things better. A lot better.

But Johto also introduced Daichi to Sugawara. Sugawara made sense of things for Daichi: from the moment they met, they clicked. He was a fantastic travelling companion. Sure, they picked at each other’s habits but nothing ever piled up and exploded; not like travelling with Yui.

Yui was too proud to cry on Daichi’s shoulder. To be fair, Daichi would never ask her to let him sob with her.

Sugawara was the answer to many of Daichi’s unfortunate questions. He quelled the anxiety Daichi had swirling within him. The anxiety that made him question parts of his identity that he didn’t even want to contemplate.

It should have been obvious. When he kissed Yui, it didn’t feel romantic. It felt platonic. It felt
sibling-like. It felt too awkward and sometimes, strangely impersonal. It was by their third kiss, somewhere in the middle of April, after a Contest, that a barrier of some kind was broken. It had been pierced by a single question: “Is this... right?”

That one question began an onslaught.

“So, what are your plans for the day, Daichi?” Sugawara asked as he lazily flicked through a glossy magazine. He was trying to catch up with the Johtoan gossip but he believes that it’s already out of date by a month by the time it arrives in a Sinnoh gossip rag.

“Last night, remember when I got that call out of the blue from an old friend. Yeah, I was thinking I’d call her again today and see if we can meet up. I don’t think I’ve seen her since I got back from Johto.” Daichi replied.

“Then I’ll spend the day shopping then.” Sugawara sighed.

“Cool.” Daichi said and he pecked Sugawara’s cheek.

Sugawara chuckled then Daichi went onto the balcony attached to their PokeCentre flat. He rang up Yui and he felt a horrible wave of dread spiral out from the bottom of his stomach. She picked up immediately.

“Hello, hello!” she chirruped and for a moment, all those terrible feelings vanished.

Daichi and Yui went onto arrange a meet-up. Yui was in Sandgem Town, with her family at the moment, but she said she would be free for lunch so they arranged to meet at their favourite cafe. It had been the one they had gone to on their first official date as a couple. They had visited it once or twice before as “just friends” though.

Daichi gave Sugawara directions to this cafe; just in case. Sugawara thought he was being silly but he accepted them anyway. Soon after, Daichi left. They had arranged a twelve o’clock time but he knew Yui would be there half an hour early. She was that kind of person.

He was right. By the time he arrived, walk past the window inside, he could see Yui slide into a booth. Their booth.

The cafe was classical Sinnoan in design. It looked built to survive a blizzard and the wood it was built from still smelt like a dewy forest. The decorations seemed a lot like roasted chestnuts in design or like snow-capped mountains. It was great here. Daichi loved it but he didn’t think he’d ever be able to return to it with anyone but Yui.

Daichi bypassed the waiter when Yui called him over. Her round eyes lit up and Daichi realised he’d forgotten how beautiful she was when she smiled. She had a dimple in one of her cheeks. Her hair was longer than it usually was; sitting on her shoulders rather than around her ears in rowdy flicks.

She was wearing her Contest blouse – it was grey with burgundy trims and buttons – rather than a sporty tee like Daichi had been expecting. It had been a while since they last saw each other. It would seem that Yui had matured much more than Daichi had expected. He’d always thought she would be this happy-go-lucky fool forever but now, he was given the impression that she was still cheerful but she had also grown wiser. Older.

“It’s great to see you again, Daichi.” Yui said with a grin full of teeth.

Daichi sat down and made himself comfortable. He flattened the menus. ‘Yeah, it’s great to see
you too. How – How’re your Pokemon going?’ he asked. He wasn’t sure what to talk about. All the topics he had spent all morning preparing had disappeared.

‘Everyone’s getting super strong. We’re not gonna go down without a fight in this year’s Grand Festival.’ Yui replied.

Daichi laughed. Perhaps she hadn’t changed as much as he had thought.

‘There’ve been so many tough rookies coming through this year – on top of those sly Houndour Kuroo and Oikawa, I’m not sure if I can come as close as I did in our debut year.’ Yui said and she crossed her arms. ‘But the best thing we can do is train because the moment that the timer starts, none of those things are really going to matter. We’ll fight to the very end with all our might. And...let’s win!’

‘Very well said.’ Daichi replied. ‘Yeah, I’ve met a few of those rookies. Their names were Hinata and Kageyama. I was in a double battle with them and a friend. We won, experiences trumps guts apparently, but they came so close. Their Spoink and Prinplup were able to do some insane things in combination.’

‘A friend?’ Yui picked up, curiously.

‘A... A boyfriend actually.’ Daichi said. His palms started to sweat.

‘You like dudes?’ Yui asked.

‘I don’t mean to offend you but part way through our courting days, I realised I was gay.’ Daichi said. The conversation had been swell until this point but he couldn’t lie to Yui. Not anymore.

‘Wow, what a coincidence. I’ve recently come to the conclusion that I like girls... I’m pansexual.’ Yui replied; her voice was equally small.

‘Really? That’s great for you.’ Daichi replied.

The conversation quietened and a waitress came over. The pair orders drinks for themselves: mocha with cream and sugar for Yui and a chai latte with a shot of espresso for Daichi. Those were their orders regardless of where they went. Although the appearance of the cafe was very traditional; the menu did have some give. The waitress jotted down their orders and promised the kitchen would be as quick as possible.

‘So, uh, yeah. I met a really nice girl, her name was Misaki Hana, last year and she just kind of flipped my world upside down. Too bad she was taken but she told me she was bi so that’s cool. Yep. But I’ve moved on. Found another really nice girl and we’re going slow.... Not sure how it’ll end but maybe I’ll get my first kiss with a girl out of it; or a girlfriend. I’m not sure... I don’t want to set my expectations too high and get disappointed.’ Yui replied. ‘But enough about me; your boyfriend – what’s he like?’

‘Suga? Oh, uh, his name is Sugawara Koushi and he’s from Johto. We met abroad. He’s a Coordinator, like us. He’s charming and people say he looks like an angel.’ Daichi said. He figured he better not mention that from time to time, Suga was the anti-thesis of an angel.

‘Wow, you’ve really scored.’ Yui replied.

From there, their conversation was natural. They talked about all their new memories and experiences over good coffee, and later, over good food. Time vanished swiftly around the two. They were suspended between minutes and hours, lost in a conversation that was nigh endless.
There was a lot to talk about between them and Yui was already naturally chatty so it was hard finding a good way to leave the café. They had gotten so comfortable and cozy, that booth had become something akin to a second home for them but Daichi did find a way to convince Yui to leave rather than add another round of coffees onto their tab.

He called Sugawara and said they should go do something else; a walk in a park, a battle behind the Pokémon Centre, anything. Yui was delighted by the chance to meet Daichi’s new boyfriend and immediately wanted to leave. But of course, Sugawara had to arrive first and being the type of person he was – a diva – he had to arrive a full five minutes after the decided time but it had been worth the wait.

Yui was humbled to meet him. She had been told he was an “angel” but that wasn’t an apt enough statement for how seemingly ethereal he was in appearance with his pretty face and silvery hair. She took a breath. Smiled; teeth showing and she bowed her head slightly, blushing.

‘Its good to meet you. I’m Michimiya Yui – Daichi’s ex-girlfriend. H-Has he talked about me?’ she asked shyly. Was that an appropriate question?

Sugawara smiled. He had a smile that put celestial constellations to shame.

‘He has only spoken of your determination and dexterity in battle. He has also praised your beauty from time to time; having dated Daichi, I’m sure you are aware of how awkward he can be.’ Sugawara said and he bowed his head in return to Yui.

Yui giggled. Daichi flushed crimson. This was going to be a good day – catching up with friends past and future.
City of Stone

Chapter Notes

I literally stopped writing this ten minutes before updating. So expect little; especially since it's taken me so long to write. I'll have some potentially grave news in the bottom notes:D:

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They say nothing is set in stone and romantic feelings are a marvellous example for the ancient adage because, long story short, for some people romantic feelings aren’t fixed and certainly aren’t worth a diamond set in silver. Monogamy is overrated; or at least that is the opinion of a young man named Nishinoya Yuu and his two boyfriends. Today had been a long time coming.

There had been plenty of occasions beforehand that would warrant the current jittering Nishinoya was feeling. These were momentous occasions such as the first time he got kissed by a girl, when he had received his Trainer’s licences, when he kissed a boy for the first time, and all the times he had fallen in love with random strangers here and there between his kiss with a girl at age nine and his kiss with a boy at age fifteen. Today had plenty in common with all those days but it was slightly different. See, until today, his boyfriends hadn’t met each other except through phone calls but that’s not the same as seeing someone face to face.

‘Ne, Noya-san, is he a punctual person?’ Ryu asked.

Nishinoya and Ryu had been friends for years but only dating for a year. It had been weird, bringing up the topic of Nishinoya having multiple partners two months ago because had met someone that he thought he really, really liked and wanted to explore those feelings. Luckily Ryu was cool with it so he gave Nishinoya the green light.

Nishinoya hadn’t expected these feelings to have gone anywhere but they had now he was in a committed relationship with two very great guys.

‘Oh yeah, definitely. He’s the complete opposite of us. But he’s super tall and he’s kinda handsome lookin’ but he’s cool. He’s surprisingly not as stick in the ass as he could be so, uh, don’t scare him.’ Nishinoya rambled as his Pikachu known as “Piko” nuzzled up against him also wanting attention. She sat on his shoulder and liked to rub up against his cheeks and neck. She was a very attention-seeking Pokémon who hated being confined in her PokeBall.

‘Scare him? How?’ Ryuu asked.

‘Don’t call him a “city boy” for starters.’ Nishinoya said with a sharp look. ‘Like you did with that guy with the mohawk thing. Can’t remember his name off the top of my head.’

‘Oh, you mean Tora. Yamamoto Kagegora. If I ever meet that punk bitch again, I’m gonna take a swing at him.’ Ryu complained.

‘I thought you were great friends with that dude?’ Nishinoya asked.

‘Well, yeah, but I still kind of want to punch him.’ Ryuu explained.
‘Weird.’ Nishinoya shrugged.

‘But to be fair, he’d do the same to me.’ Ryu added. He sounded vaguely proud as he even put his hands on his hips and puffed out his chest with a sparkling grin.

Nishinoya grunted to acknowledge what Ryu had said but not that he necessarily understood it.

Piko mimicked Nishinoya too to show she had some understanding of how a conversation went too.

There was half a pause in their conversation as they both wanted to mull over why best friends would ever willing engage in a fist fight when Nishinoya’s PokeGear buzzed. His whole pocket vibrated so he quickly fished it out of his cargo shorts.

‘Yo?’ he answered.

Piko’s nose twitched excitedly and she clambered onto Nishinoya’s head and peered down on him, trying to listen in too.

Ryu watched as the conversation unfolded from there. Nishinoya was quiet, listening patiently, and nodded his head furiously. He grinned.

‘Yep, yep, can do… wait, I can see you now, babe!’ Nishinoya practically yelled into his PokeGear then hung up. As he ripped his PokeGear away from his head, Ryu heard someone down the line protesting but that was cut off quickly with a sharp beep.

Nishinoya turned his head excitedly to Ryu.

‘Asahi should be coming soon!’ he announced.

‘Fantastic.’ Ryu roared and what ensued next, was quite the embarrassment. Not for them but for the passing pedestrians.

‘Now, he wants me to make sure he’s comin’ to the right spot. So, see you in a tick, babe.’ Nishinoya said. He went to dart off but Ryu stopped him by grabbing onto Nishinoya’s shoulder. He looked deathly serious.

‘You called Asahi “babe” too.’ Ryu pointed out with a frown. ‘Yeah?’ Nishinoya shrugged. Ryu let go.

‘You can’t call us both “babe”.’ Ryu said.

‘Pika!’ Piko chimed in defiantly, seemingly agreeing with Ryu. This was further confirmed when Piko leapt onto Ryu’s shoulder and began to nuzzle against him.

‘Why not?’ Nishinoya asked. ‘And Piko… you traitor…’ Nishinoya sounded heartbroken, tears were even in his eyes because of it. Ryu’s hand slipped down Nishinoya’s shoulder and he grabbed his hand. Ryu pulled in Nishinoya for a heartfelt scene.

‘It makes it less special.’ Ryu said, completely over-dramatic over what was an innocuous thing.

‘Oh… Babe…’ Nishinoya gasped, playing along with Ryu’s drama. They held their soap opera positions for a moment before Nishinoya had to find Asahi. He ripped himself away from Ryu then bounded off. He twisted back only for one second then yelled out: ‘Look after Piko for me!’
‘Will do!’ Ryu said and he affectionately scratched behind Piko’s long ears.

Veilstone City was a thriving city, if a little cold and hard to navigate because of its uneven territory. The city was built upon ridges and rocks. Those who had been born and bred in the extensive, sprawling megacity was used to its strange terrain but the tourists were uncomfortable with it to say the least. Veilstone City was the city of stone, what else was to be expected?

Apparently, from what Ryu could see through the cluster of people constantly coming and going in every direction; even in the park, Asahi was one of those tourists who simply couldn’t stand the clutter of Veilstone City. Veilstone City hadn’t been meticulously planned in grids and sections like the wonderful cities of Hearthome or Jubilife, instead, buildings were plonked down willy-nilly and the natural land was given some leeway to flourish without disturbance.

It wasn’t a long wait for Nishinoya to return with the retrieved tourist boyfriend known as Asahi. Ryu doesn’t really know what he was expecting today. He was meeting his boyfriend’s other boyfriend. He was expecting something weird and within Nishinoya’s type. Nishinoya had a type, he liked big, burly dudes who could pack a punch but Ryu wasn’t expecting Asahi.

‘Oooiii!’ Nishinoya screamed through the din of commuters.

For a single moment, Ryu couldn’t find Nishinoya until his eyes went up and above the general height of the passing populace. Then he saw that Nishinoya was on the shoulders of exactly the type of guy Ryu had been expecting to turn up. There was no doubt in Ryu’s mind that this was Asahi and he, for some unknown to science reason, was allowing Nishinoya – a hedgehog bird – to sit on his shoulders with his arms waving ridiculously and kicked his legs playfully.

Asahi was exactly what Ryu was expecting for the few moments in which he was wading through the crowd and had yet to say anything as of yet.

From afar alone, Ryu could easily analyse the type of guy Asahi was. He appeared a lot older than Ryu and Nishinoya. Nishinoya had mentioned him being older than him but Asahi looked like five, maybe even six, years older than them both. He looked like the type of guy who got into fist fights and brawls with all sorts of thugs; like those teams which usually want to take over the world. He looked like the type of guy who physically harassed women until they are coerced into buying illicit drugs. He looked exactly like that type of gross guy but Ryu had no problems with that whatsoever. Surprisingly.

He was super tall with broad shoulders. He wore a dark coloured jacket with an Alola type shirt underneath that was a bit faded. He wore boot-cut jeans with combat boots. He had a face like the nastiest, snarliest Granbull to have ever prowled and wild looking hair that was long and shaggy. The dude did not look like the kind of guy who ought to be letting Nishinoya, tiny and hyper like most twelve-year-old children, sit on his tight-looking shoulders.

Ryu had to admit. Nishinoya had taste: him, this dude, Shimizu Kiyoko the Unattainable Coordinator they’re both fans of. The guy had style. Damn son.

Asahi lumbered awkwardly over to where Ryu was standing; underneath an evergreen tree just off the pain stone path meandering through the park. Nishinoya scrambled off of Asahi’s shoulders. Nishinoya’s pushed his foot against Asahi’s face at one point and Asahi willingly put up with it. That was Ryu’s first hint that appearance could be super deceiving.

Nishinoya jumped down off of Asahi’s shoulders at long last and proudly stood in between Ryu and Asahi. He grinned brightly, victoriously even, through an awkward silence with his chest puffed out and his hands digging into his sides.
‘Isn’t this great?’ he asked.

‘Pika-Pika!’ Piko chirruped and she leapt onto Nishinoya’s shoulders again where she belonged.

‘Uh, yeah, it is… Yu.’ Asahi mumbled.

The second hint that Ryu would take to clue him into the fact that Asahi was not who he presented himself as.

Another awkward pause ensued.

‘So, like, you gonna, like, introduce us or what, half-pint?’ Ryu asked.

‘Shut the fuck up, Ryu. You’re barely taller than me.’ Nishinoya snarled.

‘But, it wold be polite if our mutual boyfriend introduced us.’ Asahi pointed out. He spoke very timidly and his huddled body language further emphasised his quiet point.

And that’s when it finally dawned on Ryu.

‘Dude… how are you dating him? You seem tame as fuck. I’ve met Jigglypuffs that were scarier than you.’ Ryu commented.

‘Hahaha, I’m well aware.’ Asahi replied, sullen. He was truly implying he had met tiny, round Balloon Pokémon tougher than him and Ryu had never pitied someone more than in that moment.

‘Well, I guess really should introduce you guys. I just thought you’d both be like: “What up, I’m Yu’s other boyfriend” and then we’d go get ice-cream or something.’ Nishinoya complained with a pout. Why did these two idiots have to complicate everything?

‘Oh…’ Asahi gasped. ‘Well, I’m Azumane Asahi, just “Asahi” is fine with me. I’m a Pokémon Breeder from Pastoria City. Battling and Coordinating isn’t really my thing so I just study Pokémon biology from observation, mostly. Contrary to popular belief, I am not twenty-two. I am seventeen. It’s good to meet you.’ He tipped his head forward.

‘Y-Yeah, good to meet you too, creampuff. I’m Tanaka Ryuunosuke. “Ryu” is fine, big guy.’ Ryu said and he bowed his head awkwardly. ‘I’m a Gym Trainer. For Sumomo; the Veilstone Gym Leader. So yeah, I specialise in fighting types.’

Asahi smiled gently. His eyes lit up with interest. ‘That must be amazing. Does that mean you’ve ever battled the Champion?’ he asked.

Ryu laughed awkward. ‘Buddy. My pal. Noya-san’s side hoe. Unfortunately… No. I don’t even have all eight Gym Badges yet. I only got the position because my sister’s well connected…’ he ashamedly explained.

‘I’m not Yu’s “side hoe”.’ Asahi said.

‘You kind of are my side hoe. Like, I wasn’t even expecting us to have chemistry.’ Nishinoya said.

‘Way to make me feel great, Yu.’ Asahi sighed.

‘So yeah. Side hoe.’ Nishinoya laughed and then he continued to tease Ryu. ‘Besides, it’s not like Ryu’s strutting much. He hasn’t even fully evolved his starter yet.’ Nishinoya teased.
‘Shut up, you haven’t fully evolved Piko. Don’t make fun of my Monferno.’ Ryu countered.

‘And you can’t call yourself a “fighting type specialist” if you’ve only got two fighting types.’ Nishinoya added.

‘Oi, oi, let’s not bicker.’ Asahi said.

‘It’s only in good fun, babe.’ Nishinoya shrugged with a sigh.

‘But still…’ Asahi mumbled.

‘And speaking of babe!’ Ryu pointed out.

‘I know, I know.’ Nishinoya huffed.

‘I don’t.’ Asahi said.

‘Ryu doesn’t like it that I call both you and him “babe” so I said we’d talk about it. So, what kind of pet name would you prefer.’ Nishinoya explained.

‘Well, I just don’t want to be called “side hoe”.’ Asahi said.

‘Dibs on “babe” then.’ Ryu chuckled.

‘C’mon, my dudes, let’s go get ice-cream and but I don’t like calling people “baby”. “Babe” just sounds better. It sounds like I should be popping the collar on a leather jacket and riding on a motorcycle in, like, Grease or something.’ Nishinoya continued.

‘Let’s just focus on the ice-cream. It’ll be a good way for Ryu and I to get to know each other better. Ice-cream flavours probably say a lot about people. I prefer vanilla.’ Asahi said.

‘Rocky road!’ Ryu grinned.

‘See? Already this is saying to much about the type of people we are.’ Asahi said.

‘So what does honeycomb say about me?’ Nishinoya asked.

Chapter End Notes

So, let's get down to the potentially grave news. I really need the Motivation™ to end this fic. We're a lot closer to the end than I originally thought. If I had to estimate, this is how the series will progress: Pastoria City (Chapter 60) to the Trophy Garden (Chapter 65ish) to Canaleave City (Chapter 67ish) to Snowpoint City (Chapter 70ish) to Sunnyshore City (Chapter 75ish) to the Finale (Chapter 80ish)

**Disclaimer: this is assuming that I use time skips and you guys are alright with not being there for every time one of our sons gets a Ribbon or catches a new Pokemon.

So, let's help Merry conclude PokeBall is Life by showering her with love by being annoying and helping her keep on track with updating. I would like to try bi-weekly updates. You can help by hitting me up on Tumblr (@merryfortune) or on Twitter (@merryasemily); pestering me back into writing (I won't bite you; I will appreciate
Fanfiction is so wild. Like literally nothing can stop me from using Blood on the Dancefloor lyrics as chapter titles. Wild.

With their Eevee Eggs in tow, as well as the awkwardly bulky gas cooker which had yet to be put to good use, Kageyama and Hinata were ready to move on from Solaceon Town and go explore Route 210. Kageyama and Hinata had spent over a week, around nine or so days, at Solaceon Town and they had exhausted all their possible sources of entertainment which was walking around town and doing some battling.

They had also visited the Ruins in brief but they smelt awfully musty and the Unown were utter nuisances. It had been a super disappointing visit. They couldn’t find any evidence of Mega Evolution in it and none of the weird rocks they found reacted even vaguely with their Pokémon. The ruins were home to a lot of sleek, grey rocks which were smooth to the touch and fun to stroke. But at least some of their teammates were able to grow stronger as a result from battling. Hinata noticed that Bunny seemed a lot stronger after battling the Unown than any of his other Pokémon whilst Kageyama thought that it Prinplup and Staravia had benefitted the most from their visits to the ruins.

It was a shame that Ralts hadn’t evolved yet. It must be something about Kageyama but he seems to attract the strangest Pokemon. His Prinplup was caring. His Staravia had more quirks than feathers. His Murkrow had taken a mate so early in its life. And his Ralts refused to evolve.

It had been last Friday when they had gone tramping through the ruins with their other friends. It had been quite spooky as the cave walls were grey-blue and no light penetrated the gaping maw of the cave’s entrance. Strange script was scrawled on the wall; taking the form of the Unown that lived cheerily inside the cave. It had been bizairre but it had been quite fun exploring and spelunking looking for clues into Mega Evolution.

The boys had thought there would be something clueing to Mega Evolution in the Ruins as the locals of Solaceon Town described it as one of the oldest things in the entirety of Sinnoh. The historians that passed through – quite frequently for some reason – had also mentioned to them that there was something about the Solaceon Ruins that was mysterious and enigmatic. They also claimed that any mysteries about it were utterly unsolved so it seemed like a fair jump to say that it might have something to do with Mega Evolution.

But apparently, they had been wrong. There was just a lot of ordinary rocks and incense. Although, it was weird for such a hospitable cave to not have Zubat or Geodude inhabiting it. So yes, aside from the battling, exploring the Solaceon Ruins had been something of a bust.

To add salt to the wounded pride of the boys hoping to make ground-breaking new discoveries, or perhaps specifically to insult Kageyama, Ralts refused to evolve.

Like all their Pokémon, Ralts had done a fair bit of battling and that had led to it eventually ending one battle then proceeding to glow. The silvery-white glow pulsed from within Ralts. I spread out from around the tiny creature and for a moment, all breaths were held in awe of the
beauty of evolution but it was not to last. Ralts shook himself violently and flapped his arms around; chasing away the power and even released Magical Leaf after Maigcal Leaf. The evolution was cancelled.

Then, before Kageyama could check Ralts for injuries and other reasons as to why he would refuse evolution, more light filled the cavern he and his friends had been battling in. His eyes were dazzled by the quick succession of darkness then light then darkness once more, now he was blinded.

He turned his head and quite frankly, his heart broke. Tsukishima stood around, slightly proud of his Pokémon with a smug smirk. He had been double battling using his Electrike and his Magikarp. Now, they were both evolving. Kageyama could definitely feel his heart break inside his chest.

Tsukishima watched proudly as his two Pokémon evolved into their secondary stages. His Magikarp went from tiny, puny, seemingly worthless to a great, leviathan-like creature which now knew useful moves such as Thrash and Bite. His Electrike with a bark bigger than its bite finally gained an appearance to match its snarly, nasty personality. It became a beast with huge paws and fangs with spiky fur.

Tsukishima returned his Gyarados to its PokeBall and then turned to his Manectric. He scratched underneath its chin then made a smug comment: ‘Even the King’s pawns don’t like him enough to evolve for him.’

Had Hinata and Yamaguchi not been there with Tsukishima and Kageyama, Kageyama totally would have clobbered Tsukishima for saying such a callous thing. Although, Kageyama did try to punch Tsukishima’s face over it. He had been stopped.

For the next few days, until today, it was something of a mystery as to why Ralts stubbornly refused to evolve for Kageyama. Kageyama had tried a variety of thing for Ralts: feeding him Poffins, feeding him human food as a treat, letting him out of his PokeBall more, as well as plenty more battles but nothing seemed to work. Every time, it seemed like Ralts was on the brink of transforming into a Kirlia, Ralts refused and let off attack after attack. Eventually, Kageyama gave up. If Ralts wanted to be a Ralts forever then that’s just how things were going to be.

However, new issue arose: Ralts no longer wanted to remain inside his PokeBall during periods of traveling and dormancy. Kageyama didn’t particularly mind as he kind of liked having Ralts at his side, stumbling after him as he made strides too big for Ralts to catch up with. Unfortunately, it also kind of felt like having a second Hinata around as Ralts tended to eat too much and be far merrier than the situation required. Still, it was kind of cute. Very cute.

But only for one of them!

Together as a trio, they checked out of the Pokémon Centre and the hilariously publicly affectionate couple they had been in close quarters with all this time were able to move into a different room so they could share a bed. It was a good deal. Trade in two idiots for some peace and quiet. They had been kind enough to bid Kageyama and Hinata farewell but they seemed like they had a fair bit they wanted to do. Something about the intensive training at the Day Care to boost the base stats of their Pokémon through Hyper Training or something. It sounded very exhausting.

Much like the journey ahead of Kageyama and Hinata. Route 210 was a laboriously long road that wound past long grass, tall trees but it branched unto imposing valleys but also into a rocky forest which was known as Route 215. According to rumour, there would be a fresh and exciting
new type of Contest this month in Veilstone City so the boys wanted to venture into Route 210 rather than traversing the eerie fog that permanently permeated the air further into the north-west of Route 210.

It was quite the hike to get through the long grass and high rocky ledges that spiked from the ground just beyond the Solaceon Town limits. With their Eggs and Ralts in tow, it had been a difficult ascent over the rugged terrain but they had made it eventually and from this small, quasi mountain, the view was quite spectacular.

From here, they could see the fog that plagued the north-west of the route like a foamy sea. Darkness pooled ahead in jagged patches from the clustered, jade green treetops. It was breathtaking to see so much variation in the environment from this miniature mountain summit. Just before where the fog began, there was a strange crowd of yellow and a peculiar house.

Behind them, Solaceon Town seemed as picturesque and perfect as a postcard. It seemed as perfect and modelled as a toy town with adorably rustic roofs and noticeable roads that were defined from the natural environment they meandered through rather than a cluster of farms and a cluster of commerce that united them all.

And to the north-east of their view, was the dreary Route 215. It seemed impossible to be able to see exactly where the rain began and ended but from here, the boys could see where the rain stopped and where it began. The division was as cleanly cut as a knife’s precision. It was ethereal. The shimmer of rain could be heard in the distance but could be seen so clearly: the dark clouds and gloom that followed because of it, the ceaseless lash of rain. It was gorgeous.

However, it was also concerning as they had to walk through that rain eventually and as far as the eye could see in that direction; the rain seemed utterly unending. It poured and poured and poured without stopping from what the boys could tell from afar.

‘Do you think the rain will stop any time soon, Kageyama?’ Hinata asked.

‘How should I know dumbass.’ Kageyama retorted as he crossed his arms.

‘Well, you have a weather app on your PokeGear.’ Hinata pointed out with a sharp pout in his voice.

‘Fine, fine I’ll check it.’ Kageyama grumbled.

He pulled out his PokeGear and Hinata huddled nearer; peering unto its screen. Ralts drew nearer to Kageyama’s legs too and he seemed interested in what the Trainers were doing. Kageyama navigated his PokeGear until he made it to the weather news app.

‘Well. That’s a downer.’ Hinata said.

‘Seventy percent chance of rain until tomorrow morning. C’mon, that’s still a good chance of sunshine.’ Kageyama argued.

‘Huh. Never known you to be the optimist.’ Hinata said. He sounded mildly awed.

‘Well, don’t you want to get to Veilstone City?’ Kageyama asked.

‘Not if I end up getting a cold.’ Hinata said with a grumble.

‘Well, they say idiots don’t catch colds so I think you’re right.’ Kageyama said.
‘Aw… Thank you, Kageya – wait! You’re such a meanie!’ Hinata said and he playfully banged his hands against Kageyama’s arm.

‘Whatever… Dumbass Hinata. Let’s just get going.’ Kageyama suggested.

‘Okay then… Grumpyama.’ Hinata said.

The descent from the miniature summit was a lot harder than it seemed. The backside of the ridge was treacherous with muddy slicks that seemed perfect for a bicycle to brave. For the two Trainers and Ralts, it was a very slow and difficult crab-like walk downwards onto even ground again.

Once they were on firm ground again, it was an easy trek. The bend in the road was easily followed and they ended up staying a moment in a strange, roadside café that felt like it was in the middle of nowhere. It had been the strange house they had seen from afar. It was called Café Cabin and it specialised in Moomoo Milk. It was a charmingly quaint highway house that was drenched in warm, welcoming autumnal colours. It smelt sweet and sugary inside. It burgeoned with a surprising number of people. Waitresses barked orders at the two cooks. Nerdy-looking men argued from every table in the room and it was awfully loud as a result but it felt homey to come inside and escape the cold and wet.

Prior to coming to Café Cabin, Hinata knew that Kageyama preferred milk over juice. He wanted to have a milky treat whenever possible; opting out only ever for something savoury like a meat bun. But Hinata had no idea that the extent of Kageyama’s love for milk actually ran so deep. It was supposed to be a short stop to get directions and weather advice but Kageyama soon became addicted to fresh from the udder Moomoo Milk.

They didn’t leave until two hours later because of this. Hinata was genuinely terrified for most this experience. Money had been no obstacle for Kageyama. He drank glass after glass of the Moomoo Milk. Hinata found it concerning but he held back from saying anything because Kageyama looked like he was really enjoying himself; the waitresses were also enjoying the business.

‘Hm, I only just remembered but… It’s been bothering me for a while Kageyama but the other day – after the Contest, you called me “Shouyou” and now you’ve gone back to “Dumbass Hinata”. What’s the deal with that?’ Hinata asked. He bounced his leg and Ralts’ head bobbed in time with him.

The waitresses had told them Pokemon were very much welcome at their establishment which was lucky given Ralts’ sudden, defiant disposition.

Kageyama took his eyes away from across the booth and pouted. He continued to sip from the lip of the milk bottle.

‘Aw… Don’t be like that, c’mon, tell me Kageyama. I don’t mind that you used my first name.’ Hinata said. ‘Just tell me why.’

Kageyama tipped the bottle upwards and drained the last of it. The milk brushed against his face and left a white moustache as he pulled away. He wiped his milk moustache away with the back of his hand, with a grumpy face, which made him seem cooler than he was.

‘I think I got carried away.’ Kageyama said as he plopped the bottle alongside the seven others he had drank.
'You don’t say.' Hinata taunted sarcastically.

‘I did say that though…?’ Kageyama said, completely missing Hinata’s joke. ‘I’m gonna pay for my drinks. You can pay for yours then we’ll leave. How’s that sound?’

‘I’ve already paid for my soda pops.’ Hinata replied.

‘Okay then. Give me two minutes and then we’ll get going.’ Kageyama corrected himself.

‘Sounds good.’ Hinata smiled. He stretched himself out and could feel energy return to his limbs. He’d been sitting down for way too long. Hinata slid out from the booth and he shimmied a little bit. Kageyama meanwhile paid for his last drink then met with him at the door. The waitresses farewelled them and wished the best for them on their journey to Veilstone City. They knew well what the weather was like so they knew the Trainers would need the best of luck.

Fuelled by milk and sugary drinks, the two boys held onto their Eevee Eggs and were able to make great pace to begin with. They tramped through the lush area that was inundated with heavy rain pour. It was gorgeous here although the grass was way too mushy underfoot but it was nice to look at. Everything was a vibrant green and planted flourished hardly beneath the nigh constant onslaught of rain.

At first it was fun to slosh through the puddles and wet grass but after an hour of extremely slow travel thanks to the rain, the novelty of it all wore off. It was impossible to tell it was noon through the thick, black cloud cover the Route was in abundance of. Underneath it all, it was impossible to discern shadows in the gluggy darkness.

The two Trainers trawled over bridges and through ridges. They trudged over what was mountain-like in terrain then back down into the forest. Every step was painfully slow and strained. It was hard walking through the rain; especially with their precious cargo. It was downright dangerous even. The terrain was rough and horrible when wet. The road was precariously slippery and the it pelted against the ridges loudly with enough vigour to erode them. Sometimes, mud or leaflitter would be set loose by a pelt of rain tackling against it which would in turn spook Hinata. Then, having been spooked, he would instinctively grab onto Kageyama. After a while, Kageyama gave up on tearing Hinata’s hands off of his shirt.

It was hard to believe anyone chose to wade through the muddy grass with such conditions but they passed one or two men dressed in karate gear, training with their fighting type Pokémon. Kageyama and Hinata were convinced they were insane.

They passed underneath a bridge and for a moment paused because of how intricately laid out the verdant environment was. It criss-crossed and incorporated forest and canyon. It was treacherous and beautiful all at once. For a brief moment, the boys’ hearts would swell with adventure before remembering how horrible it actually was to be stuck in the rain like it was.

The rain was horrendous. It was utterly unerring and a constant barrage on their ears. But for the past hour and a half, possible two, their walk had been treacherous and slow but in the last five minutes, the worst thing possible had happened: the rain had gotten harder. Squinting through the rain no longer worked and Hinata was practically knee deep water and mud.

‘I thought the rain would lighten up later. Remember? Sixty percent chance of rain…’ Kageyama groaned. He put his sopping wet arms against his face in a futile attempt of protecting himself.

Hinata coughed. ‘Kageyama, I’m really tired.’ he whined.
'Ra-ra!' Ra-ralts chimed in. Ra-ralts had been very good at keeping up but even he was feeling drained of energy.

Kageyama bent down and scooped up Ra-ralts. He then scanned his surroundings with bleary eyes. He was feeling just as exhausted as Hinata and Ra-ralts.

‘Ah! There!’ Kageyama cradled Ra-ralts against his chest then freed one of his hands. He pointed ahead. Among the evergreen trees was a copse of berry trees. Behind the berry trees was a ledge and what seemed like a good spot to rest. ‘Hinata, let’s set up camp for a bit. Wait things out.’

‘Sounds great.’ Hinata agreed with a smile.

He and Kageyama continued their trek further into the Route. They passed underneath another bridge then found the ledge that hovered over a cluster of berry trees. Their sweet scent was submerged by the odour of fresh water.

Hinata and Kageyama sat underneath the ledge. Their noses practically against the low branches of the berry tree. With a little bit of difficulty – if they just leaned forward enough – they could pluck berries from the tree to nibble on. Underneath the ledge, it was a little bit damp but not awfully. They set down their Eggs and that took up more room than they anticipated. It was also small underneath it but there was definitely enough room to build a fire; or, hopefully, at the very least have Nyta curl up with them.

‘Nyta.’ Hinata whispered to his PokeBall and in a shimmering, scarlet light, his Ponyta bounded out of her PokeBall. In her two seconds to realise the torrential downpour then she tried her hardest to fit in with the boys and Ra-ralts. She wedged herself between the boys, their Eggs, and Ra-ralts sat on her back. The boys were careful not to get in the way of her flames. They wanted to be warmed up but they didn’t want to be warmed up that badly.

It was nice though. Snug. It was good. The rain lashed the ledge overhead and it was familiar sound; as though it were a roof. Hinata smiled. Nyta whinnied and Ra-ralts cooed. Kageyama crossed his arms. It felt safe here and they were already warm. It was getting dry that would be the next issue for them.

‘So about earlier…’ he said and he cautiously side-eyed Kageyama who was perturbed almost immediately. ‘You didn’t want to tell me why you called me “Shouyou” the other day and why you’ve stopped. ‘Cause – ‘Cause I liked it when you called me “Shouyou”. Yeah, I was a little surprised at first but I liked it. Are you shy about calling me my given name? Because don’t be. I think I want you to call me my first name. Hell, you can call me “Shou-chan” if you like.’ Hinata jabbered. He glanced at Kageyama and he looked utterly concerned by this matter.

‘I don’t want to.’ Kageyama snapped.

Hinata was taken aback. ‘I – I’m sorry for bringing it up then.’

Kageyama’s stomach knotted and he clenched his fists until his knuckles turned white. Hinata blinked and he couldn’t believe that Kageyama was visibly trembling.

‘I – I wanted to make Oikawa-san jealous.’ He admitted at long last after he let go of a deep breath. His cheeks were cherry red.

‘Oh.’ Hinata mumbled.

‘I wanted to make it seem like I had moved on to someone else. Not just, moved on with no one.’ Kageyama explained.
“Oh!” Hinata gasped.

“I’m sorry.” Kageyama said and he sounded completely genuine and heartfelt about it.

“B-But you can still call me “Shouyou” if you like. To be honest, I’d really like it. Not to sound weird or anything but I felt really gwah inside when you did it. And I’ve been thinking about it and I’d really like to call you “Tobio” nowadays. Because we’re close friends right, surely we can call each other by our given names then, right?” Hinata asked.

“You really want to?” Kageyama asked, incredulous.

“Yep!” Hinata chirruped with a smile that seemed to light up the dark; or maybe it was just the way his hair and face was lit up by Nyta’s flames. Kageyama couldn’t tell.

He licked his lips and took a breath; became uncharacteristically shy and escapist.

“Shou…chan?” he murmured.

Hinata grinned like an idiot. ‘Y-Yeah?’ he stuttered foolishly. ‘I mean, y-yes, Tobio.’ He chuckled.

And his laughter was contagious. For a single moment, Kageyama laughed alongside Hinata and smiled openly. He didn’t look scary at all. Nyta whinnied.

“This sounds good.” Hinata replied awkwardly.

““Shou-chan” sounds dumb, I’m just going to stick to “Shouyou”.’ Kageyama grumbled.

“Sounds fine, To-bi-o.” Hinata dragged out the syllables of Kageyama’s name to tease him and Kageyama continued to become flustered. It was quite adorable.

“I think so to… Shou…you.” Kageyama said.

He smiled softly and Ralts scrambled off of Nyta and into Kageyama’s lap. Ralts cooed sweetly and reached up around Kageyama. Ralts gave Kageyama a kiss on his chin then proceeded to put his hands all over Kageyama’s face. Kageyama could feel the drool and it was revolting.

“Stop it.” Kageyama scolded Ralts whilst Hinata laughed.

“Do you think he’s hungry?” Hinata asked.

“Maybe. Pokémon probably get hungrier than humans faster.” Kageyama said.

“No, no, like for feelings. When was the last time he ate emotions? Can’t Ralts’ line do that? Eat feelings?” Hinata asked.

“I… believe so.” Kageyama said after a pause wherein he consulted his mental encyclopedia of Pokémon.

“Do you think that’s why Ralts hasn’t evolved yet? Hasn’t eaten the right tucker yet?” Hinata asked.

“Perhaps.” Kageyama said.

Ralts scrambled out of Kageyama’s lap. He smiled demurely as a silvery-white light began to emerge from beneath its velour-like skin. Kageyama was absolutely awed; especially when Ralts
did nothing to rebuke it like he had early.

‘Shouyou… I think your right.’ Kageyama said, breathless.

The two boys watched as Ralts transformed into a Kirlia. Ralts spun and twirled. Its body grew taller and thinner; strange tendrils spiralled out from its waist and its head shifted its form so it had ‘hair-like’ armour flowing off it and two cranial spikes.

With an elegant, ballet-like kick, Ralt’s transformation was complete. The light shattered off of it in a dazzle of brilliant sparkles. Ralts had evolved into Kirlia. Kageyama smiled, although briefly, and watched in awe as his newly evolved Kirlia got used to his new body and the new, dance-like movements that came with it.

Hinata clapped. ‘Way to go, Kirlia!’ he applauded.

‘Kir-Kirlia!’ Kirlia sang as he performed a pirouette that spiralled out from underneath the ledge. He danced out into the rain but quickly tip-toed back under to where it was safely warm and dry.

But light began to filter through from above. Hinata cautiously crept out from underneath and turned his head towards the sky. He beamed.

‘Kage – I mean, Tobio! Tobio! It’s stopped raining.’ Hinata laughed.

Kageyama came out from beneath the ledge. He looked up at the sky and great shafts of light penetrated the thick cloud coverage which was slowly thinning out. The only water that dripped came from the trees.

‘Let’s keep going.’ Hinata suggested.

‘Y-Yeah, we definitely should… Shouyou.’ Kageyama agreed.

He and Hinata stood up and their Pokémon followed. It would be an easier journey now to Veilstone City. That is, of course, assuming that the sunshine remains rather than a second coming of horrible downpour.
I did an experiment in Pokémon Platinum to see when their Eggs would hatch based on their movements and yeah, it’s gonna be a long while. Probably; it was an inaccurate experiment. Also, this chapter was supposed to be a LOT longer but I’ve been distracted by my one of my other longfics so it’ll probably post… soon?

Shouyou had been desperately hoping that by the time they trudged into the rocky city of Veilstone that his and Tobio’s Eevee Eggs would hatch. By the time he and Tobio stepped foot inside the warm and dry Pokémon Centre, their Eggs were still quite unresponsive. It was shame. They had walked such a distance and the Eggs were still silent and unmoving but at least they were cute.

Veilstone City was exactly what the two Trainers had been expecting: huge and noisy. It was also a fair few other things that the boys hadn’t been expecting too. The city was a mess. Not in terms of cleanliness but in terms of style. It wasn’t as rigid as Hearthome City or Jubilife City. Instead, it was a sprawling mess of bizarrely sized districts and worse yet, it the environment itself was also hard to navigate too.

Getting to the Pokemon Centre was an adventure and a half in its own right. It had been hill after hill; wrong turn after wrong turn. Had it not been for Kageyama’s handy-dandy PokeGear, they likely could have hatched their Eevee Eggs with the amount of running around they had to do.

It was lovely when they finally did arrive though. The Veilstone Pokémon Centre was a sight to behold. It was spectacular and as they stepped inside, it was like they were embarking upon a journey to another planet. The ceiling was an inky blue punctuated by stars that were either painted or stuck on. It was breathtaking and Shouyou let out a visible gasp when he saw the ceiling of the PokeCentre. His eyes sparkled celestially too.

He and Tobio waltzed into the PokeCentre, momentarily enamoured with their astral surroundings, and wandered vaguely. Too entranced for a moment to recall why they had come here which was to obtain shelter and food but after a little bit of exploration, the two could refocus and get back of track.

Shouyou scooted around the food court and organised a late lunch. He was in the mood for burgers and Tobio was in the mood for some sort of meat dish; preferably with nuts and rice. Whilst Shouyou found food that Tobio took care of reserving a room. A supposedly easy task for Tobio soon turned difficult but he was able to fulfil it nonetheless.

‘Here ya go. I hear cashew Pidove is nice. A little expensive though; probably because they probably had to come from abroad.’ Shouyou said as he put a piping hot container in front of Tobio. He grinned. ‘I’ve been craving a good ol’ burger for ages.’

‘I can tell.’ Tobio said; he rolled his eyes then grew hesitant. He played with the wrapper as he took out his plastic and knife fork.

Hinata went to take a greedy gobble out of his burger but he paused; beetroot almost wriggling
‘Hey… Are you okay? You seem weirder than normal, Tobio.’

‘Oh, uh, I don’t think you’d make a deal out of it but, um, the PokeCentre is really busy, y’know? Nurse Joy had to give us one of the smaller rooms so we’ll be sharing a bed.’ Tobio explained.

Hinata paused. He blinked and set down his burger. He pushed its escaping innards in, distracted momentarily.

‘No big deal. I promise I don’t kick in my sleep.’ Hinata said calmly then he took the bite out of the burger he had been wanting for so long.

‘Nif… knife… Nice.’ Tobio said and then he eagerly tucked into his Unovan dish. Anything to escape the awkwardness he was feeling.

A little while later, he calmed down. His cheeks were no longer as flushed although were flecked with brown rice.

‘Hey, Hina- I mean, Shouyou. I’ve been thinking.’

‘That’s dangerous.’ Shouyou sniggered.

‘Oh shut up; it’s not like you can talk. You realise your mother showed me your school report cards back in January, right?’ Tobio asked and Hinata paled. Tobio then continued. ‘Anyway, I’ve been thinking. Isn’t it about time that you buy your own PokeGear. I know your broke and everything but I’m happy to chip in. I mean, yesterday, we had some really nice-ish food using your little gas cooker so in exchange for buying it, I’ll buy you the cheapest PokeGear we can find. Sound good?’

Tobio looked up shyly from his food and he was genuinely startled by how widely Shouyou was grinning. His eyes shone like amber in sunlight. But he also looked kind of grubby because of the crumbs and grease around his mouth so Tobio chose to focus on that rather than how pretty his smile and his eyes were.

‘You really mean it?’ Shouyou asked. ‘I’ve always wanted my own PokeGear but it’s always been so expensive and it was never necessary on the farm. Dad knew he could trust me to only keep to the first two paddocks and I always had one of his Pokémon with me so my parents hadn’t been too worried and it’s not like I had super close friends before you. I mean, I had friends just no one I needed to be in constant communication but… what brought this on?’

‘You keep having to use mine. It’s irritating. That’s all. Dumbass.’ Tobio snapped and he went back to eating.

Shouyou didn’t mind though. He chuckled to himself as he grabbed a serviette and began mopping up his face.

‘Okay, okay, no need to insult me… Tobiuo.’ Shouyou teased with a cheeky grin on his now clean face.

‘Don’t call me that.’ Tobio pouted and he scrunched up his serviette and started tidying up his rubbish. He grabbed Shouyou’s too then excused himself momentarily so he could throw it all away.

Afterwards, the two Trainers decided that they would go out and hunt for some cheap PokeGear for Shouyou. Veilstone was famous for its huge department store so they were feeling a little bit confident.
Veilstone City was very different to Jubilife City, Tobio soon realised. It was colder and strangely quieter than Jubilife City. Here, people kept to themselves so the din of traffic was stronger than the ordinance of laughter and people. Also, there weren’t random flashes of colour on street corners. Everything was grey but the graffiti they passed, it was stunning. Absolutely astral. The street art in Jubilife City wasn’t as nearly as eye-catching though.

The Veilstone Department Store stood out from its surroundings with its interesting choice of colour in its outer facade: a peachy pink. It was a tall building and it stood out but it was a nice kind of unique that wasn’t harsh on the eyes. The department store was different but it still fitted in. That was a rare quality.

Tobio and Shouyou entered the Veilstone Department Store and were immediately met with a welcome blast of hot air. The floor that greeted them was pastel and all sorts of people mingled in unruly swaths and goods were stocked from floor to ceiling.

The two boys tramped through the building as they pleased. The noise they made melded into the surrounding ordinance that echoed off of the shiny, clean tiles the building’s insides were mainly comprised of structurally. It didn’t take them too long to find a level brimming with stores and salespeople pitching different types of technology.

As they were scouring racks of earphones looking for one of those tables displaying tester PokeGear, Shouyou spotted someone in the thinning crowd that looked very familiar: a blonde, bobbed woman and a blonde man; both whom were a tad taller than the general populace so they stuck out a little bit. ‘I’m telling you,’ Shouyou said to Tobio quietly as they continued to wade through endless technological gear; none of which they were looking for. ‘It’s the news reporters from Floaroma Town. Saeko-san and Akiteru-san.’

Tobio rolled his eyes. ‘Let’s just get in, get out.’ he sighed.

‘Argh! I’m so right and I’m sooooo proving it to you.’ Shouyou boasted. Shouyou then marched off and Tobio was a tad too slow to catch him so the best he could do was try to keep pace with Shouyou who was getting to the dawdling couple fast.

‘Hey!’ He tried not to shout but he was louder than intended. ‘Excuse me?’ Shouyou slowed down and the woman turned around like a fierce whip; a glare across her face.

‘Oi, can’t you see we’re – wait, hang on, little dude. I know you, hey, hey, Akiteru – look who’s found us.’

Shouyou grinned. He was right. Tsukishima’s elder brother turned around and he smiled warmly.

‘Well what do you know. Hey there, Hinata. Did you get taller since the last time we saw you?’ Akiteru asked.

‘I… don’t think so.’ Shouyou pouted.

‘You’ll hit a growth spurt soon; don’t you worry. So, where’s Kageyama?’ Akiteru asked.

‘He’s around. Somewhere. I kinda ditched him.’ Shouyou admitted.

‘I think it’s that kid over there who looks like he’s about to be forcibly escorted out of the building for, uh, bad Joker imitations?’ Saeko guessed and he covertly pointed out a teenager who looked a lot like Tobio being scolded by a security guard.

‘Whoop, we better do something about that.’ Saeko shrugged so the three made their way to the
security guard and Tobio avoided being temporarily arrested for bad Joker impressions and other civil disobedience.

The four stood against the back wall out of the way of the other customers and began to have a chat.

‘So, how’s Kei doing?’ Akiteru asked. ‘Last update I got from him, he told me had been travelling with you? Is he and Tadashi in town at the moment?’

‘Dunno. We haven’t heard anything from Tsukishima or Yamaguchi since we left Solaceon Town. I reckon they’re probably on Route 215 now.’ Shouyou replied.

‘So what’re you two in town for? Not the Gym challenge, I suppose.’ Saeko chuckled.

‘Just… passing through I guess.’ Shouyou replied.

‘Well, we’re currently looking to buy PokeGear for this dumbass.’ Tobio explained and he clamped his hand over Shouyou’s head then began to muss up his hair and just irritate him in general.

‘I mightn’t look it but I’m great with that sort of stuff. I can totally help.’ Akiteru said brightly with a smile.

‘Thank you!’ Shouyou chirruped.

‘Just tell me what you’re looking for.’ he replied.

‘And then, later, why don’t we you come to dinner with us at this nice little family restaurant I know and we can catch up on all the latest goss.’ Saeko grinned and she clasped her hands together.

‘Saeko, are you sure? Tonight, was going to be Ryu’s night, remember? Y’know, so he could introduce us to Yu and Asahi properly.’ Akiteru pointed out.

‘You three go find PokeGear or whatever; I’ll sweet talk my brother. I have a trump card, remember?’ Saeko said.

‘I dunno…’ Akiteru mumbled whilst Saeko excitedly dialled up her brother.

‘Yo, wassup, Ryu? You know Shimizu Kiyoko? Yeah? Well, I met two of her groupies. These two know her personally. Can they come to dinner?’ Saeko rambled and she recoiled away from her PokeGear and there was a lot of yelling on the other side of the line; multiple voices too. She then cautiously put her ear next to her PokeGear again. ‘Sweet. See you there then.’ She hung up and put away her PokeGear. ‘Ryu, Yu, and Asahi are all fine with it. They all reckon the more the merrier. Might make things less awkward, y’know? Like, these aren’t ordinary circumstances, ya feel?’

‘Wow.’ Akiteru said, stunned.

‘What’s tonight? We’re not invading anything are we?’ Shouyou asked.

‘Ryu and Yu have been friends forever and recently started dating but Yu’s polyamorous so he’s got another boyfriend and tonight is like a mixer so we can get to know this other fella.’ Saeko explained.
‘Cool.’ Shouyou nodded.

‘So c’mon, boys, let’s get the show on the road. Let’s find Hinata the coolest PokeGear on the market.’ Saeko grinned.

‘I’m broke…’ Hinata said then went onto ramble about the parameters he had for what he and Tobio wanted to buy.

Akiteru nodded thoughtfully and then, in the next twenty minutes, they were at the checkout with the perfect fit for what Hinata needed. It was an older sort of model but it would do the job. It came with a good plan. Tobio had paid for the bulk of it so that was what made it really special to Shouyou.

The news reporters stuck to Shouyou and Tobio for the rest of the day so they could come to the restaurant with them. The two Trainers wondered what type of people they were about to meet. They were probably going to be quite wild given their connection to Saeko but it wasn’t confirmed.

The three – Ryu, Yu, and Asahi – were running late, apparently.
A Comedy of Ill-Manners

Chapter Notes

I’m sorry that I haven’t updated as frequently as I would like; or as frequently as any of you would have liked. It was because of a severe case of writer’s block and seduction from other fics (same fandom though so hit up my other HQ!! fics). Updates will be very spotty.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It had been arranged prior to encountering Shouyou and Tobio that everyone would meet at the Wagnaria family restaurant at seven then they would be eating by seven-thirty and maybe leaving by nine or a little bit after. Wagnaria was a nice restaurant though and no one minded the wait; it was just going to make a bad impression that’s all. Though, once more, given Saeko’s wild streak, it seemed no wonder that her little brother, his boyfriend, and his boyfriend’s other boyfriend were also going to be a bit untamed.

Shouyou and Tobio were feeling a tad awkward by this point. After all, they weren’t supposed to be at this dinner. It really was quite intrusive but they weren’t exactly filled with enough social grace to know what to do in this situation; it also didn’t help they were both seduced by the idea of a good meal. The restaurant smelt amazing: thick with stews and steaks. It was absolutely mouth-watering.

And they couldn’t even order. Akiteru and Saeko thought it would be rude to order without Ryu, Yu, and Asahi. So, all they could do was sit there and sip on bubbly soft drinks. The lemonade here was nice though; made Shouyou’s nose twinkle to be honest.

The four of them were sitting in a booth with a good view of the glass, double doors and the teeny-tiny waitress in a puffy, yellow-orange skirt who jollily greeted everyone. She seemed very nice; she had been the one to bring them their lemonades too.

Also from the booth, they had a good view of the street. It was dark out with pooling yellow lights and neon shop signs from across the road. Cars padded past but mostly people came to-and-fro: all rugged up in parkas and scarves. They kept their heads down but sometimes, there would be an exception to such social coldness.

Saeko huffed and she turned her head. ‘And I thought I’d raised Ryu better than that. Being late on such an important day. I’d much rather have you two as my brothers.’ she growled.

A bawdy and noisy group of teenagers passed the restaurant. Saeko ignored them but something about them caught Akiteru’s attention as he straightened up when he noticed them.

‘Um, Saeko, what does Asahi-san look like again?’ he asked.

‘Fuck if I know.’ Saeko cussed. She then dropped her hand to the table with a thwap. ‘Sorry! I shouldn’t swear in front of Shou-chan and Tobio.’

‘It’s fine, really.’ Tobio mumbled with startled eyes.
‘Definitely; yeah, definitely.’ Shouyou added nervously.

The ruffian trio from the street – all in leather jackets and skinny jeans – bustled into the restaurant. The waitress was unfazed; and if anything, she made the conscious effort to match their energy levels. She perked up and grinned. The shortest of the trio – he was absolutely tiny with hair that stuck up and a funny little blonde streak – came forward and he leapt. He leapt higher than the waitress. She may have only been five foot tops but this guy – who was just taller than that – managed to jump that high.

The squeal the waitress made was not a noise made for human voice boxes. The entire restaurant heard her and were suddenly on edge as a result.

The midget ruffian then proceeded to lace his arm around the waitress whilst his groupies, or at least the one with the buzzcut and draconic eyes, encouraged him.

‘Of all your curves, my favourite one is your smile.’ Midget said with a wink.

The waitress laughed then blithely decided to take matters into her own hands. Although, more accurately: she took it into the Midget’s hands. She grabbed the Midget’s hands and then proceeded to slam him down. As it would turn out, the waitress had some judo moves so now, the Midget was lying on the wooden floor, arms and legs spread out and looking a tad star-struck.

The waitress stuck her nose in the air and was then called to the kitchen by a furious voice. Her pride was then shot down from there as she was doubtlessly going to be getting an earful from her boss as judo slamming customers was probably not an encouraged behaviour in waitresses at a family restaurant.

‘I’ve always wanted a girlfriend who could kick my ass.’ he grinned.

‘We’ve noticed; you’ve got a type.’ Buzzcut snickered.

The tallest guy with chin hair and a bun gesticulated awkwardly; as though to disagree but couldn’t find his words.

‘Oh… fuck me sideways.’ Saeko grumbled.

‘Saeko! Language!’ Akiteru hissed, absolutely scandalised.

From that, Shouyou and Tobio were going to hazard a guess: the trio who had just come in were the trio they had been waiting for. And now, they could totally see a resemblance between Buzzcut and Saeko: they had very similar eyes therefore, he must be Ryu.

Saeko slid out from the booth which was very inconvenient for Akiteru as Saeko had been sitting next to him; caged in. She scooted past and wiggled her bottom in front of him. She grumbled furiously as she attempted to get out of the booth. Shouyou tried not to laugh but it was so hard. Akiteru was going red as a Tamato Berry!

Saeko stood her ground over the Midget as the other two helped him up.

‘Idiots, the lot of ya… but yer my idiots!’ Saeko said and she hooked her arms around Buzzcut and Midget. The pair giggled and grinned; playfully went along with Saeko’s game. The third guy – the tallest of the three – stood around awkwardly; he glanced over his shoulders as though looking for an escape.

Saeko let go of the two boys. She opened her arms wide and smiled warmly. ‘C’mere, yer my boy too.’
'Oh? Uh? Um… sure.’ He stammered.

He stiffened like a statue as Saeko gave him a huge hug. She squeezed him tightly and she strained herself quite visibly in a futile attempt to lift him off his lumbering feet. Bless her for trying and as butch and muscular as she was, this was something she failed to do. Saeko didn’t mind. She laughed as she let him go. She patted him hard on his back and invited him to the table where the others were.

Saeko wriggled past Akiteru again. Shouyou resisted the urge to laugh. Again. And Tobio just glared. These were exactly the type of people he was expecting to meet tonight over dinner but honestly? They were so much scarier than he had imagined earlier and he was genuinely scared beneath his scowling façade – but no one could ever know.

‘So,’ Saeko announced cheerfully as she clasped her hands together, ‘introductions are in order. How about we start with Asahi since he’s new with everyone.’

‘Huh? Me?’ Giant said. ‘Well, I am Azumane Asahi and it is good to meet you all. Yu and I haven’t known each other that long but we have made the mutual decision to date regardless. I am from Pastoria City and I aspire to be a breeder.’

‘That’s so cool!’ Shouyou piped up.

‘I know, I know.’ Midget grinned and he enthusiastically slapped Asahi’s back. ‘I’m very proud of Asahi.’

‘Ryu, good to meet you. You can call me “Senpai” since I’m older than you and I have more badges than you.’ Buzzcut gloated and he pointed at himself with his thumb quite proudly.

‘Wow.’ Shouyou gasped; he was inexplicably impressed by Ryu because it seemed like the natural thing to do. His amber eyes glittered.

‘And I’m Nishinoya Yu and you can totally call me “Senpai” too. I can probably teach you plenty of stuff too. I fought a Graveller once and won. And my “fought”, I mean I literally grabbed that round-ass piece of rock and fought it. My Pokémon didn’t even touch it.’

Everyone gawked at that little fun fact of Nishinoya’s. He grinned proudly.

‘Yu!’ Saeko squealed. ‘How weren’t you killed?! Didn’t your parents ever instil some form of self-preservation in you?!”

‘Nope!’ Nishinoya proudly proclaimed.

‘Yeah, I was there. I was the fence on Route 214.’ Tanaka deadpanned. He crossed his arms and rolled his eyes.

‘Ouch. But like, it’s totally true though.’ Nishinoya insisted.

‘Sure, sure.’ Tanaka taunted.

With the arrival of these three, dinner became quite excited. No one settled down. Knees bumped into each other under the table and the clang and clutter of cutlery seemed to never cease. It was great fun. Riveting.

‘Hm… so you two’re Coordinators?’ Nishinoya mused sagely as he pointed at Tobio with his fork. ‘Does that mean you two’re in town for the Extreme Contest?’
'The what Contest?' Shouyou asked.

'The Extreme Contest? To generate new interest in Coordinating, some people were able to come together and curate the “Extreme Contest”. It’s supposed to be like the X Games or similar but with Pokémon Contests. I have a feeling that it will catch on for a year or so. I think the usual formula of a Contest is much better but it’s the first of its kind so I don’t want to judge it too hard.’ Asahi explained.

Shouyou took a breath as his smile split across his face; his eyes crinkling in the corner. He turned slightly so that he could meet Tobio who seemed much perkier than before.

'Oh yeah, I remember hearing about it on the radio. Begins day after tomorrow, right?’ Tanaka added.

'Yep. On Saturday.’ Asahi confirmed.

'We’re in.’ Shouyou said after he watched Tobio nod in the corner of his eyes.

'Hey, Saeko, don’t we have the Extreme Contest as our latest assignment?’ Akiteru asked.

Saeko cringed and she smacked her forehead with her palm. ‘Argh, I’d totally forgotten. Good thing I forgot today; not Saturday.’ Saeko said. ‘Guess we’ll see you boys there too. She bore her shark-like grin and a thumbs up.

'Yeah, see you guys there.’ Shouyou said.

The waitress – the one Nishinoya had flirted with earlier – sauntered over. ‘Ready for me to take plates…?’ she asked.

Everyone shifted in their seats and came to the conclusion they were finished eating.

'We’ll take the bill too.’ Akiteru added.

'Understood.’ the waitress replied.

'And do you guys take tips here? Think of it as an apology for his-’ Saeko pointed out Nishinoya who was shrinking in his seat ‘- idiocy.’

The waitress sighed. ‘I wouldn’t mind.’ she murmured.

From around the table, the group was able to give the waitress some compensation for earlier on top of their bill. She walked away secretly chuffed.

'Well, I guess we’ll catch up on Saturday, right?’ Saeko asked as everyone left the table; full and accomplished. That had been a great meal. It had been truly delightful. Everyone was smiley and lingering; like they wanted to remain here a little longer.

'Y-Yes, on Saturday.’ Tobio agreed stiffly.

'You’re so funny.’ Nishinoya said and he affectionately – aggressively? – slapped Tobio’s back and even caused him to stumble forward.

He blinked and glared; mostly confused, not angry. Or at least that’s what Nishinoya is hoping for given that Tobio was not exactly pleased looking.

'Ryu and Asahi and I will definitely come to watch.’ Nishinoya replied.
‘Thanks, Noya-senpai.’ Shouyou piped up.

The group bustled out of the restaurant then parted. Tobio and Shouyou split off from them and headed towards the Pokémon Centre whilst they returned to the Tanaka residence which was in the stark opposite direction. And as they parted cheerily, Tobio dawned an unsettling realisation that threatened to spoil his night; their night… Hinata’s… no, Shouyou’s night.

Chapter End Notes

Some Side Notes: Happy Holidays & Have a Lovey New Year
Long story short, I am petty but I just want to announce that I fucking called it! Mega Evolution is evil; see any of the PokeDex entries on them from Sun & Moon.
Tonight, he and Shouyou would have to... share a bed. That’s how it had to be arranged because the PokeCentre was so filled up; doubtlessly because of the Extreme Content on Saturday. It had been a forty-minute walk and Tobio had trudged behind Shouyou for most of it. Shouyou didn’t mind; happy to assume it was because Tobio was trying to keep up with Shouyou’s short legs whilst Shouyou sped on ahead naturally. He didn’t even realise there might be something else to it.

Eventually, they arrived at their “nest” and by that point, Shouyou had utterly exhausted himself. He took one and a half steps into their cushy room – generic, same as any other they had stayed at apart from the single, queen sized bed – and began to strip. He was quick to get into his pyjamas and Tobio awkwardly hovered by the door. He came in further once Shouyou meandered to the bathroom to brush his teeth.

Shouyou spat into the basin, five or so minutes later, and looked up. He could see Tobio behaving oddly in the mirror. He turned around: his eyes seemed huge and bright in the dim light. Neither of them had turned a light on so the orangey-yellow fluorescents from the hall and from the street were all they had, and even they weren’t very strong.

'Ne, what’s wrong, Tobio?’ Shouyou asked.

Tobio seemed utterly shaken by the question; averted Shouyou’s intense gaze but his eyes returned to Shouyou’s regardless.

'Oh, uh, you have a little something.’ he mumbled and he tapped the corner of his mouth. Shouyou mirrored him and soon rubbed away some leftover toothpaste with the back of his hand.

'Thank you.’ Shouyou replied and he stretched his upper body; his bed shirt lifting slightly and he yawned. ‘I’m tired as anything after all this walking. Veilstone kills, y’know? Or are you used to it? Being a city boy and everything.’

'I – I guess, I’m used to it. Jubilife City is nothing like Veilstone though…’ Tobio replied. He swallowed and approached the bed. He was just as tired at Shouyou but he masked it better. Shouyou was very much a sloppy sleepy person.

Shouyou pursed his lips and tilted his head. ‘Tobio… you seem… strange.’

'I-It’s nothing.’ Tobio muttered and he acted like he had touched something hot: recoiled away quite dramatically.

'No, you’re not.’ Shouyou stated firmly. He sighed. ‘C’mon, Tobio, you can tell me what’s wrong. That’s what best friends are for.’
'Best friends?'

Tobio relished the phrase. His eyes absolutely lit up with them and his body seemed to life. Shouyou giggled and felt blessed to see such a rare, and almost uncharacteristic side of Tobio.

'Duh. First name basis, remember… Tobiuo.’ Shouyou snickered.

'Don’t call me that!' Tobio roused. He tried to appear grouchy – grouchier than usual even – but all he managed to do was amuse Shouyou. Had him in absolute stitches even.

'To-bi-u-o.’ Shouyou teased. He held his belly and he smiled. 'C’mon, Tobio, tell me… tell me! What’s wrong?'

Tobio came towards the bed and he sat on it; away from Shouyou so he scrambled to that side of the bed. It squeaked and groaned. He laid down next to Tobio with his feet in the air; not that they would hang over the edge or anything but instead so he could let them sway and keep him occupied.

'I feel weird.’ Tobio stated.

'About…?' Shouyou asked.

'About sharing a bed with you.’ He admitted in a tiny voice. A blush graced his cheeks but Shouyou didn’t notice. It was all Tobio could notice though. He felt like his cheeks were aflame. It was horrible.

'Why?’ Shouyou asked.

'Because it’s… it’s… not appropriate?’ Tobio didn’t sound certain as he replied.

'But we’re best friends. It doesn’t matter. Is it, um, because you’re gay that you think it matters?’ Shouyou’s voice was very quiet but he seemed like he was trying to be respectful.

'Y-Yeah.’ Tobio stuttered.

'Do I make you uncomfortable? 'Cause I’m a pretty cuddly sleeper.’ Shouyou asked.

'Well, um, I’m worried about making you… uncomfortable.’ Tobio replied.

'So… well, you will be glad to know you don’t make me uncomfortable. It was my idea, remember? If it made me uncomfortable, don’t you think I would have arranged something else with Nurse Joy?’ Shouyou explained.

'Y-Yeah, but…’ Tobio said.

'But nothing. Let’s just… get some sleep? And feel free to steal sheets back or push me off, just not off the bed.’ Shouyou suggested.

'Okay.’ Tobio replied. He swivelled around, almost hitting Shouyou and the pair soon wriggled underneath the mass-produced sheets.

It felt good. Shouyou was very warm. He was also small. The bed was huge. It was a good combination. It really did feel good, being with Shouyou like this: back to back and sharing their bed.
But still, there was something about this situation.

Tobio was fine. He felt comfortable. It wasn’t as weird or strange or awkward as he had feared it
would be. It was pleasant. He could definitely tolerate it for the next few days. He knew he would
get sick of it. Shouyou was like a furnace. One that stole blankets but Tobio didn’t really mind.

Shouyou’s heart was pounding. He was wide awake now. His legs were bouncing but they
always bounced when he was trying to sleep. He was just the type to fidget all the time but his type
of fidget was never this type of fidget. This felt like a nervous kind of fidget.

Why would he be nervous?

He had literally just established that there was nothing strange about sleeping in the same bed as
his best friend.

Then, he had an epiphany. His eyes bolted wide open and his leg quit bouncing. Of course! It all
made sense now. The bouncing leg, the sweaty palms, and the pounding heart: they were clearly
all symptoms of nervousness. He hadn’t stopped thinking about the Extreme Contest and that had
been fun nervousness so it made sense to him that now that he was supposed to settle down and
sleep that his mind wanted to confront with all the unknown. He’d only just gotten used to the
froufrou formula of regular Contests and now they wanted to change it. Yes.

Clearly, it was because he was nervous about the Extreme Contest. Nothing else made sense. It
had absolutely nothing to do with Tobio. Of course not. There was no reason for it to be about
himself.

With that, his mind settled and Shouyou was able to curl up, grasp tightly onto the sheets and
snuggle onto his pillow much easier. His leg stopped bouncing and he was able to finally get to
sleep. He was very much comfortable in this huge bed with Tobio. It was really quite pleasant.

However, in the morning, it became apparent that Shouyou was far too comfortable in this bed with
Tobio.

Tobio woke up the following morning very, very stiff. He had slept well. Out like a light and in
full darkness. He only woke up because he felt some odd on his lower back. He hazarded a guess
but it felt a lot like a bony, pokey little foot. And speaking of other strange sensations, on his upper
back, he was definitely damp.

The lull of sleep dulled his senses for a few seconds but irritation quickly caused his energy
levels to spike. He excused himself awkwardly from the bed and stared at the mess that remained.

Shouyou was sprawled out on the bed as though he owned it. As though he weren’t supposed to
be sharing it. His foot was on Tobio’s pillow. His head wasn’t anywhere near his pillow. The
sheets were tangled up and unrooted from beneath the mattress. His cheeks seemed slick and
sticky; from that Tobio realised the reason his back was wet must be because at some point during
the night, Shouyou had smushed his face up against Tobio. Gross.

‘Dumbass Hinata!’ growled Tobio.

Shouyou grumbled and he tucked himself in again.

Tobio bent down and he grabbed Shouyou; forcibly waking him up by tickling him. Tobio’s
hands slipped underneath Shouyou’s bed shirt and skipped around his smooth back. Shouyou threw
something of a fit. He rolled around and resisted; no longer asleep but determined to feign it. He
laughed and tried his best to hide his face but he was smiling wide.
'Stop it!' Shouyou finally gave up and he wriggled away from Tobio who also resigned. ‘What was that for?’

‘You drooled on me, for starters.’ Tobio groused.

‘Sorry.’

Shouyou didn’t even sound remotely sincere about his apology but Tobio sighed.

‘I forgive you. Just don’t do it again.’ Tobio decided harshly.

‘So…’ Shouyou pondered aloud. ‘How’d you sleep last night?’

Tobio’s eyes widened at the question and a scant trace of scarlet splashed across his cheeks. He acted as though Shouyou had asked a far more probing question than he had.

‘Greet – I mean, great, yeah great… actually.’ Tobio replied awkwardly.

‘That’s good. I slept great too!’ Shouyou enthused as put his hands in the air ‘…Until you woke me up, that is.’ His eyes narrowed he pouted.

‘I wanted an apology. I’m sorry I find being drooled on gross.’ Tobio snapped back, snarky.

‘Won’t happen again.’ Shouyou replied with a yawn. ‘So, what’re we doing today? I was thinking some training would be good since we have a Contest tomorrow.’

‘My thoughts exactly.’ Tobio said.

‘Well, let’s get changed, find a park, and stay there for most the day.’ Shouyou suggested.

‘Sounds good.’ Tobio agreed.

They tumbled downstairs soon after, hankering for some fast food and ended up with just that as they bolted through the doors, excited and competitive. A new kind of Contest was going to be unveiled tomorrow and they weren’t going to miss out on all the fun. It really flared up their rivalry which had become something of a very affectionate friendship. Still there of course as they competed from the silliest things to things like this: racing to train, racing to compete. It was great fun.

The park they ended up in had a few basketball courts lined up against what felt like a tamed forest. It was rocky and bumpy underfoot for the most part and there were plenty of Trainers about: keening for a fierce battle which was perfect for the boys.

Battle after battle, the two were able to hone their skills and have their Pokémon become used to the quasi mountainous terrain of Veilstone which would likely come in handy tomorrow. There was plenty of buzz about tomorrow too. Everyone was here, trying to find a blend of a perfection and adaptability. No one knew too much about tomorrow’s requirements. Everyone had their own strategy that was unique to them, made up of guessed estimates.

That did include the boys. They were told that the Contest was supposed to be sporty and that was very fitting given it was volleyball which had given them equal footing in their beginning friendship to find points they liked about each other. With that, the boys were able to find their own edge for tomorrow’s Contest.

They had seen lacrosse, football, and even ultimate Frisbee: everyone was teaching their Pokémon tips and tricks from sports they knew about. But amid all the Trainers – almost a hundred, for sure – there were only two practicing volleyball: Hinata Shouyou and Kageyama.
Tobio, the Freak Quick Duo from the Floaroma February Rendezvous.

Shouyou and Tobio were going to prove themselves as a threat tomorrow and their Pokémon who trained just as hard – if not harder – were going to help them achieve that goal. They trained hard and were able to level up quickly. From Shouyou’s team: Oink, Nyta, and Karasu no were able to learn new moves and were able to help Shouyou formulate new ideas as to how they can be used in combination with pre-existing moves, as well as each other. Meanwhile, all of Tobio’s Pokémon were able to learn new moves and he too was able to come up with new ideas he could potentially use tomorrow.

He had some help though, planning these new strategies and techniques of his. So had Shouyou. Their help was each other. They were hell to deal with by themselves but together, it felt like they could accomplish anything in combination. It really was a shame that not all Contests were to be in pair.

The only downside of today was that there was no improvement in the states of their Eevee Eggs. Both Eggs seemed as immobile and unresponsive as they had when they had received them but they were getting warmer; if that counted towards anything.

By the end of the day, it felt like they had taken another good slog at the daily grind. It was like bit by bit, they got over barriers and obstacles that they had seen earlier, when their Pokémon were weaker, when they had experienced their first losses at Contest. It was like there was a giant iron wall guarding victory and sometimes, they could jump so high, they could hear the celebrations and see a golden light only to come back down, aching but there had been a lot of progress today, even if it only felt small now because it had yet to come to full fruition. Tonight, they could go to bed satisfied and know that they would wake up pumped and prepped for tomorrow. It was great.

Little did they know, the greatest obstacle of all was about to appear before them. He may not be the personification of an iron wall but he was an insurmountable nonetheless. He was an intense force. They called him… the “Miracle Boy”.

The following morning, there was a lot less struggle this time. Shouyou kept to himself, mostly – he did at one point kick Tobio in the back but that was forgivable as it was the only offence of the night. Both boys were in a serious state of mind but dazzled by their inexplicably bright room. It seemed brighter because there was so much hope and fun riding with today. It also helped the forecast was sunny with no chance of cloud or rain.

This morning, they were quick to get into their Contest gear; for once, they were more than appropriately dressed. Then they moved on and had a healthy breakfast where they downed it fast. The both got mass texts from Saeko to remind them of where they had to head to sign up. Turns out that the Contest was being held within the vicinity of the park they had visited yesterday; no wonder it was so popular with the other Coordinators intending to compete.

When they arrived at the Contest venue, there were all these banners strung about and makeshift food carts. It had the intense atmosphere of a grand final match with all the fun in the air of a carnival. It was riveting; got the blood pumping even though nothing had happened yet.

Tobio and Shouyou moved through the swaths of people attending, and their Pokémon. Eventually, they were able to make it to where the sign-ups were being handled. It wasn’t as long as they had expected. The bureaucratic side of things was much quicker as they had quite the expanse of people signing up and filling out waivers. The boys were happy to put their names down wherever, without a second glance.

However, like all grand final matches Shouyou had attended he was also feeling the dreaded
sensation that causes him to beeline for the closest restroom stall.

‘Oi, Tobio.’ Shouyou piped up as he and Tobio found refuge out of the main walkways; beneath a giant maple tree.

‘Yeah?’ Tobio replied blankly; acknowledging vaguely that Shouyou had spoken.

'I gotta go, for like two minutes. I’ll be back soon. I really gotta, uh, pee.’ Shouyou explained.

Tobio shrugged. ‘I’ll come with too. Y’know, so you don’t get lost.’

‘Tobio. You can say it, you know. If you need to pee, then you can say it.’ Shouyou said.

‘Dumbass.’ Tobio grumbled and he surged on ahead.

Shouyou stumbled after Tobio but soon caught up to them. He was a little bit giggly but he soon cut it out. The park’s restrooms had been beautified for the event but there were a lot of people hanging around. It took longer here than at the sign-ups which is ridiculous.

As they were exiting the line, having finished up and washed their hands, they encountered someone extremely tall with a menacing aura. Something about his Trainer immediately rubbed them both the wrong way; it probably didn’t help that Shouyou didn’t make a stellar impression as he had run headlong into this Trainer’s stomach.

Shouyou stumbled away and he grabbed onto the base of Tobio’s shirt. He was immediately peeved; even though, logically, he would be in the wrong as he had not been looking where he was going. Tobio stopped in his tracks too and as soon as he saw that Shouyou was mad, he got mad too but in a supportive kind of way. The shared anger between friends; reached only during high levels of friendship, apparently.

‘Oi, what it!’ Shouyou grumbled as he looked up at the Trainer he had bumped into. He glared and he received a neutral but still threatening look back. He had deep eyes that made Shouyou want to fight.

‘Oi, oi, oi, Shrimpy – are you really pickin’ a fight with my boy, here?’ the other Trainer spoke. He had been completely swamped by the immense presence of his friend.

Shouyou paused. He wanted to pick a fight but given that he was more or less at naval height of this Trainer, he wasn’t so certain now. He was too riled up to think clearly though but there was something about these Trainers. They exuded a veteran aura and they were obviously tough: tall, broad shouldered with intense eyes.

Shouyou pouted. ‘Guess not.’

Tobio decided to let go his irrational anger but he didn’t let go of his scowl.

The red-head of the pair had dead fish-like eyes and his eyebrows wiggled as he looked at Shouyou and Tobio: assessed them.

‘Ah!’ He plopped his fist into his palm. ‘I recognise you two from the Floarama Meadow Contest back in February! Those were some risky-frisky moves, kiddos.’

‘Thank you.’ Shouyou replied, suspicious.

He sniggered. ‘D’aw, he thought it was a compliment.
My name is Ushijima Wakatoshi and whilst I recall your names and have some respect you, er, brave ideas in Contest, I must condemn them for being foolish. You have potential but you’re spoiling it with unfavourable risks….’ He turned his head and his attention shifted off of Shouyou and his harsh eyes found a new target.

‘Hm, it has come to my attention that you – Kageyama Tobio, I do believe learned much from that insufferable Oikawa Tooru. A shame; he has talent too but he squanders it also. Pokémon are like gardens. They require the best to flourish and Oikawa’s methods are akin to sowing in infertile grounds.’

‘So what does that make us?’ Shouyou cut in fiercely. His eyes flashed like fire and he bore an unexpectedly cruel face. He grabbed his PokeBalls and looked ready to pop them. ‘Concrete?’

‘Oi, oi, oi, save it for later, Shrimpy.’ Ushi-Waka’s friend said.

‘Indeed. I hope we get a chance to battle soon.’ Ushi-Waka replied and he stepped back.

Shouyou stepped forward and looked up. It was like some sort of aura had flared to life and raising him higher; making him intimidating and Ushi-Waka sensed it. Shouyou didn’t even realise what he was doing. He was just standing his ground. His hard work was just as valid as this Trainer’s – just because he was some sort of veteran, Shouyou partially recognised him though.

‘I’ll beat you.’ Shouyou said and his breath was as powerful as a gale.

Kageyama grinned. He couldn’t believe Shouyou was doing that and he was supporting everything about it. There was no way in which he couldn’t because not only was Ushi-Waka attacking Shouyou but him as well and Shouyou was making his warlike declarations not just for him but Tobio too. Moreover, Oikawa was a fantastic Trainer and whilst he and Kageyama weren’t on the best of terms, he couldn’t accept Ushi-Waka’s comments about him.

‘Try me.’ Ushi-Waka said.

Before things could escalate, an announcement was made over the loud speakers. The Contest was starting in five minutes and all participants were to report to the martialling area.

Ushi-Waka and his friend left first. Shouyou needed some time by himself so he could fizzle out but Kageyama. And in the meantime, Kageyama found the nonsense Shouyou was grumbling about to be somewhat entertaining.

‘Grr… I can’t believe he said any of those things. Whatever. I’m gonna beat him and if I can’t, Tobio: you better, you flying fish! Argh! I hate him! Hate! Him! Whatever, like, what’s with his name? Like, his family name – “Ushijima” – bah! Imagine being naked after cow island. That’s ridiculous!’ Shouyou threw his hands in the air after having them previously crossed.

Tobio stifled a laugh as he found himself being caught off-guard by something Shouyou had said.

‘Naked after cow island, you say.’

‘Wh-What are you talking about? I said his family is named after cow island or something like that? Where did you get naked from?’ Shouyou asked; utterly offended.

‘You somehow managed to mix up “naked” and “named”.’ Tobio replied.

‘I did not.’ Shouyou replied with a huff before trudging off. He knew, deep down even though he
did not want to admit it, that he had managed to mix up “naked” and “named”.

Chapter End Notes

Don’t forget to check out my latest Haikyuu!! oneshot starring the lads from Shiratorizawa. It’s called "You Can Fly So I Want to Be Like You".
Tobio and Shouyou made it to the martialling area. As they had arrived somewhat late – they still had time to spare, not much but it was there – and were kept to the outer of the crowd. That was probably good thing. The two were packed in tight and whispers boomed in their ears. The unfamiliar Trainers bustling excitedly with them were all gossiping about the fearsome veteran amid their ranks: “Miracle Boy” Ushijima Wakatoshi.

From the gossip, the two learned a little bit about Ushi-Waka. He was eighteen years old and single. He was a Leo astrologically; although, he was also a Braviary by the Unovan horoscope. He was left-handed and from Eterna City’s old money. His most powerful partner was his Torterra.

But the most important thing that they heard about him was the methods he uses to raise his Pokémon. It was rare to see such a dedicated Trainer but no wonder he prizes good potential raised right: he breeds his own Pokémon to ensure he has the best of the best. His competitive team had all been hatched from Eggs of his own planning and research. This included the Torterra he had wreaked havoc through many battles with.

Static crackled over the airways and the crowds were hushed. Eyes looked up expectantly and soon, a bubbly announcement followed:

‘Phase one shall be commencing in just a moment, guys! The mystery of the Extreme Contest: a new form of competitive Coordination shall be brought to life today: no slowing down, full throttle! In keeping the beauty brought to us from Hoenn, we shall also be taking elements from Johto’s Pokéathlon and Alola’s Battle Royale and a whole new Sinnoh experience shall be blasting off with a rocketing start! I, your lovely host Musashi and my not as lovely but still quite lovely supervisor Kojiro shall be overseeing this hot off the backburner Extreme Contest!’

There was another crackle over the air waves and heavy, awkward breathing: the exchange of whoever had the microphone originally.

‘Now, I know we didn’t organise any waivers but if for some reason – such as medical issues – you cannot exhaust yourself physically, now is the time to leave. That being said, if you can’t run ten kilometres in fifteen minutes – with or without the aid of one of your darling Pokémon – then you can opt now!’

That must have been the announcer called Kojiro talking. There was another struggle over the microphone but eventually, the female speaker Musashi, regained control. She followed up with more chatter:

‘Yes, yes, exactly like Kojiro said. If for some reason, you can’t fulfil the demands of the Extreme Contest, there is some – I mean – no shame, no shame whatsoever at pulling out. You see…’ Her voice started to rev up. You could hear the sparkle of enthusiasm in her lively, raucous voice. ‘Extreme Phase One is a triathlon: there will be various obstacles scattered throughout of the park and you have to overcome at least sixty percent of them – and we will know! We have PokéTchs prepared – from our very generous sponsors – and they have apps that will calculate whether or not you have satisfied the demands of the Extreme Phase One!’

‘Understand?’ Kojiro asked then proceeded to give a shortened, less frilly version of what Musashi had established.
‘Ten k in fifteen minutes?’ Shouyou whispered to Tobio. ‘We do that easy-peasy. This Contest was made for us.’

‘I know right.’ Tobio replied.

And he flashed a smile at Shouyou: excitement buzzed around him; his steely blue eyes positively lit up. Then it was gone. Like a flash and Shouyou was left feeling curtly blessed. Tobio rarely smiled like that. It was basically an honoured privilege to have been exposed to such a smile. His heart skipped a beat; unconsciously, unaware. But, it did.

The martalling area was soon accosted by swarm of yellow clowns in harlequin print. Upon their chests was the PokéTch logo and they handed out the red and blue watches to those in the crowd without on and updated the Trainers who already owned them.

Shouyou was gifted a blue PokéTch and he immediately became fond of it. Pressing the buttons on the side and scrolling through its various applications. He soon realised that they had been gifted with all twenty-five apps as well as their own software. It was quite impressive.

Tobio, meanwhile, had been assigned a red one and wasn’t as taken by it. He used to have one but it broke a while back during volleyball practice. He had been… careless with it to say the least.

Soon, the organiser’s app – the Obstacle App, as they so lovingly called it – flashed on the slick, somewhat pixelated screens of their PokéTeches. With that at the ready and those who had opted out of the first phase of the Extreme Contest now safely on the sidelines, the organisers were ready to descend upon the competing Coordinators and bellow the mighty words they all wanted to hear:

‘Coordinators…. Ready to go the extreme? It’s time to blast off in T-minus three… two… one!’ Musashi screamed into her microphone.

A confetti gun was then fired and a burst of brightly coloured streamers was released with a puff of smoke. Chaos ensued. The Coordinators – all of whom were standing on the edge of the martalling area, all trying to get a leg up on their rivals – burst through the invisible barrier; what was beyond the white line painted onto the crisp grass underfoot. Pokémon were let out of their PokeBalls and it was utter entropy. Too many bodies – too big, too small – attempted to get through the beginning lines. Their PokéTeches screeched.

‘Fifteen minutes; ten kilometres can they do it?’ Kojiro asked.

‘Meowth; that’s right!’ a third, unknown voice with an odd tic piped up before being quashed by Musashi and Kojiro.

Shouyou and Tobio were squashed against each other in the beginning turmoil where it was everyone for themselves. Their bodies were rammed rigid against each other; chest to chest and faces smushed against each other. They could barely move; let alone reach for their PokeBalls – Shouyou wanted to ride through the obstacle course on Nyta’s back and Tobio was hoping that his dopey Staravia was strong enough to fly him short paces over the obstacles.

Finally, a lull in the competition arose and the two were able to back away from each other. Stinking of each other and everyone else now. With breath back into their lungs, it felt good to be free. Shouyou stepped a little bit away from Tobio so that he would have space to call out Staravia. This, of all things, turned out to be a mistake. It was like taking a thick iron spear to the forehead, someone rushed past like a machine and conked Shouyou fair in the face. It left a nasty red mark but an even nastier expression on Shouyou. He’d know that elbow anywhere: The Miracle Boy himself was here and in front of him.
Striding through like an unquestioned, dominative force but Shouyou wasn’t intimidated.

No, he was far from it. He was pissed.

This wasn’t just anger. This was pure and righteous fury that welled up inside of Shouyou and felt hotter than a desert sun. He didn’t know where it came from. It was just there. Always had been… but now more than ever. It had been a long time since he felt this way. Yes, the last time he had felt so revved up and full of rivalry was June last year; the exact day of his birthday – the twenty-first: after he had run amok of Tobio’s good side. Except this time, it was stronger. He was stronger.

‘Nyta…. Jump out.’ he drawled; a low, murderous voice. His PokeBall tipped open on his palm with a click. A crimson light shot forth and Nyta – in a high arc – came forth. She landed roughly on the ground; kicking up dirt and grass. She sensed the anger radiating from Shouyou and she was channelling it. She seemed tougher than usual.

There wasn’t a rule against what Shouyou had in mind. As far as he knows anyway.

Nyta was calm for Shouyou as he mounted her. He sat, awkwardly, on her back as he avoided her flames. He stroked her muzzle. She was velvety beneath him. Shouyou kept his legs close to her gut and soon, the flames didn’t spook him as much. He heard wives’ tales about how Nyta’s species would only allow a rider who is trusted upon them. All others would be burnt. It must be true for now, the flames that licked at his forearms and calves were tame. Gentle; pleasant even.

‘C’mon, Nyta, let’s do it.’ Shouyou murmured.

Nyta whinnied loudly in agreement. She reared up onto her hind legs – for show – then she became serious. She swiftly turned a small leap into a gallop with pounding hooves. Shouyou steeled himself. Together, they right on course. Nyta knew what to do. As did he. He prematurely flinched and then, Nyta launched herself.

She kept her head down. Shouyou angled himself so that his shoulder would take the brunt of it. Nyta slammed into Ushijima. He wasn’t knocked down. Even though Shouyou was sure it would bring the tall, muscular Trainer to his knees. He wasn’t insulted though. Instead, he let Nyta trot backwards and raise her head once more.

Ushijima took a steady breath. He didn’t seem perturbed but beneath the serenity of his body language, he had to be seething. Anybody would. His shoulders heaved with his breath. He lowered his arm; he had a PokeBall clamped between his fingers. He turned around. Shouyou straightened his back; puffed out his chest.

‘A declaration of rivalry, perchance?’ Ushijima asked. Slowly; a not quite threatening voice but it was there. It hinged on how Shouyou replied. There was a twinge of curiosity in the way his eyebrow arched and the shine in his olive irises.

‘No.’ Shouyou replied. Bravado fuelled him like fresh petrol in an engine. ‘It’s a declaration of victory. Watch me fly.’

‘Interesting.’ Ushijima said.

‘Torterra, I choose you.’

In a shining crackle of scarlet light, a huge and hulking Pokémon came forth. Slow and steady can win the race according to the old tale but Shouyou would make certain that this Torterra doesn’t get the opportunity. It snapped its strong jaws at him and Ushijima hefted himself onto its
shell. He held onto the tree – gradually deflowering because of the autumnal time of year – and onto the rocks jutting out of its back.

Let the best Trainer win.

And what a mighty battle it would turn out to be. Tobio was left in their dust as the two set off on an epic sprint. The best their Pokémon could manage. It was like they were the only ones competing as they tore through the obstacle course like madmen.

Torterra plodded along as fast as it could. It strode through with heavy thuds and a determined look in its eyes. People parted for it easily. Everyone was in awe of the veteran Coordinator. It was like he was a noble among commoners. He commanded them and got instant respect.

Meanwhile, Shouyou – a nobody – had much more trouble. Luckily, Nyta was as agile as she was silly. She was having the time of her life; bounding giddily through the people and over obstacles such as makeshift fences and puddles. Shouyou was also having fun but nowhere near as much as Nyta. He was giggling and hollering but he was also holding on for dear life as ever jump Nyta made, Shouyou felt like he was about to bucked off.

The obstacles were of many different varieties. There were the already there and could not be moved variety: such as the slides and swing sets; the ponds and barbeque sets. That sort of thing. And then there was what the organisers had laid out to ensnare their competing Coordinators. Those were things such as hurdles and nets.

The park seemed nigh endless in the heat of fierce competition. It was hard to believe this park was in Veilstone City thought. It was lovely and verdant. Seemingly untouched by man in some places; like a true forest. But the grass was neatly cut and the trees were at a safe height; no branches would fall here. It was obvious children played here; the swings in constant motion even when alone. There was an innate sense of excitement that rushed with the wind and rustled the leaves. A quiet, natural symphony against the vivid and intense competition of the Extreme Contest.

Tobio, who had been completely made irrelevant thanks to Shouyou’s competitive and focused nature, ended up getting provoked by Ushijima’s friend; someone he decided upon based on principle. Your friend and my friend aren’t friends; therefore, we can’t be friends either. That sort of thing. And this was the first time, Tobio wished that Shouyou had used that friendly nature over his competitive one because of if this guy – spikey red hair, a seemingly reptilian face, and freckles – was anything like Ushijima then both were screwed.

Staravia, as it would turn out, was more than capable in carrying Tobio’s full weight; even by his claws. But, of course, being his Staravia; things were never quite simple. Staravia saw no point in going anywhere near the obstacles. Why should he? And attempted to avoid them completely. Fortunately, many utilising avian Pokémon were having this issue.

Ushijima’s friend was not one of those people with that issue. He was using a flying type but not a conventional one. He was flying happily with his Drifblim whom he named “Loony”. Loony was a far more obedient and placid Pokémon compared to Staravia. Loony was content to its Trainer swing his legs and control the course of flight to his whim. Tobio was a little bit jealous.

Both Tobio and Ushijima’s friend, placed at the nine-minute mark. Ushijima’s friend getting the leg up as he hadn’t had to back track as much as Tobio. Still, like most flyers, they did have issues with their PokeTch screaming that they’re not interacting enough with the obstacle course.

That placed Tobio and Usjima’s friend in the mid percentile of those who had completed the race
altogether. It wasn’t the best place but it wasn’t the worst place. However, Ushijima learned that slow and steady only narrowly wins the race. He, of all people, ended up in the lowest percentile of those who had completed the course. That being said though, he did take out the record for most percentage of obstacles cleared at an unprecedented and whopping eighty-eight percent.

Finally, it was Shouyou ended up in the top percentile of competitors who finished the race quickly. Thanks to Nyta’s swiftness and agility, they were able to manoeuvre everything that popped up in her dash so they managed to rank at the eight-minute mark. Shouyou was quite impressed with himself; even though compared to the others riding Ponyta managed to come in at the seven-minute mark.

He revelled in knowing that he had fared better than Ushijima… and Tobio. But mostly because he fared better than Ushijima. Welling up inside of Shouyou was a viscous, sweeter than sugar sensation and it was really hopping him up. He did better than the Miracle Boy. HE did better than the Miracle Boy. It was fabulous.

Shouyou grinned. Thin lips and ferocity dancing on the tip of his teeth. In the background, the microphones were sizzling and crackling. The organisers getting ready to herd the Coordinators into the next phase of their “Extreme Contest”.

Sunlight caught on his eyes and Tobio saw it. He saw swirling amber and gold in Shouyou’s eyes. He was ready. He craved it like a starved beast. He would devour the enemy and drink up victory. Tobio knew he could.

‘Let’s do this.’ Shouyou muttered to himself.

Chapter End Notes

This probably goes without saying but, getting comments (reviews or simple "hurry up with the next chapter" type things) inspire me to write!! I got next to nothing on the last chapter and that demotivated me. Please, it takes about five seconds to type "I really like this” and that alone would make me smile!! Please, it helps!
Battle Royale

Chapter Notes

You can’t truly appreciate this chapter unless you’ve read the Smogon page for Wormadam. It’s a fucking GIFT to humanity.
http://www.smogon.com/dex/xy/pokemon/wormadam/

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shouyou was in an amazing headspace. He was hot and sweaty. The sun shone harder now. He could feel it on its skin; the tingle that sparked something deeper than skin inside of him. He felt ragged after the first phase and already, the faceless organisers were getting ready for the second phase of their Extreme Contest.

The higher a king rises, the lower he falls.

‘Okeydokey everybody, let’s get the show on the road! We’ve everyone’s cute little names in the draw and we’re working out who’s going to be battle who! Drawing inspiration from -’

‘I believe you mean: “Blatantly ripping off”.’ The unknown, third speaker.

‘Shut. It. Me-….’ Kojiro hissed into, what seemed to be anyway, a singular microphone. A scuffle was then heard before flamboyant Musashi took back its control.

‘Drawing inspiration from the gorgeous Alola region: Extreme Phase Two is a Battle Royale and it’s sure to be a fire cracker of a time!’ Musashi announced.

‘For those of you not hopping on the latest trends, a Battle Royale is a four-way Pokémon Trainer. Four Trainers, four Pokémon, one winner: sounds easy, right?’ explained Kojiro

‘Wrong!’ Musashi screamed joyously. ‘Battle Royales are brutal: will you scheme up and team up? Or will you flail under the pressure of defending yourself from three rivals? We shall find out soon!’

‘Indeed we shall.’ The unknown third voice piped up.

‘Shut it.’ Kojiro hissed before properly speaking once more. ‘As there are two of us hosting this Extreme Contest, we shall be running Battle Royales simultaneously until we get to the knock out round and what a rocketing round it shall be. Who? Shall? Make it?’

‘For now, let’s just get our first lot ready.’ Musashi said. ‘Coordinators would you be so kind to listen carefully. Now, I shall be adjudicating the match between: Hinata Shouyou… Ushijima Wakatoshi… Kageyama Tobio… and Tendo Satori. I repeat: Hinata Shouyou, Ushijima Wakatoshi, Kageyama Tobio, and Tendo Satori to the martially area…’

There was a crackle and half a conversation was overheard: ‘Man, can you imagine your family being named after “Cow Island”?’

The martialling area and the finishing zone had been transformed by the staff; mostly consisting of the sponsor’s clowns. Both pots in the park were sealed off and decorated like a boxer’s ring.
Each corner of the new, raised platform was colour coded: red, blue, green, and yellow. People crowded around it curiously; hyping themselves up as well as the competitors.

Shouyou, for one, was excited. He was beyond excited. His blood pumped through his veins and his lips tingled. All he could do was grin. He wishes he could grin wider than he already was. There was a mean gleam in his eyes.

A woman – middle aged but pretending to be younger with furs and a pencil skirt – came flouncing through the crowd. Her makeup was caked and her earrings dangled like baubles. She had perfect hair though. People parted for her out of both respect and terror. She had a boastful air of confidence but with her squared shoulders and high heels sharper and taller than what should be possible to walk in, she had probably earned her presumed arrogance. She had to be Musashi.

She had velvety, scarlet lips that smacked together in a giddy smirk. She clasped her hands together and then had one of her staff reluctantly help her onto the raised platform.

‘I, the lovely and vivacious Musashi, shall be handling the Hinata, Ushijima, Tendo, and Kageyama match whilst Kojiro, bless his soul, handles the other four.’ she explained to the crowd.

The four Coordinators approached the platform and Musashi welcomed them warmly. A shine in her eyes however let them know her joy was likely an embittered façade. Still, she put on a good show and as an entertainer, that’s all what matter. She selected the corners the four of them would be battling from.

Shouyou jittered with excitement and rage and nervousness and all sorts of other effervescent and terrifying emotions. He bounced in his corner of the boxing ring: the red corner. He was opposite Tobio who was snarling in the blue corner. Unfortunately, Shouyou felt encaged by his foes as he had Ushijima to his left side in the green corner and Tendo to his right in the yellow corner.

Still, having Tobio’s face was a comfort. Shouyou could see through that scary smile. He knew that was just Tobio’s excited smile. Sharp teeth and demon eyes. Yes, his excited smile.

‘It’s a free-for-all round: a battle of speed and skill; let’s see who can rocket to the top! Like a normal contest, there’s a two-minute time limit and those who can battle beautifully get bigger damage boosts! Understand, good. Now, in T-minus two minutes, we’ll start: PokeBalls at the ready boys!’

Tobio locked eyes with Shouyou and with just a quirk of their eyebrows and half a movement of their lips, both came to the same understanding. They knew who the other would pick from their team and they were both going to back each other. Just as they knew Ushijima and his friend would do the same as they had all piled into this situation with the same luck and misfortune.

Tendo Satori was his name; per Musashi’s announcements anyway. He was lanky and barefoot. His height and skinny ankles emphasised by the way his three-quarter pants didn’t naturally fit on him. He had a pointed face with eerie, sleepy eyes. He held onto a dinged-up PokeBall – like he had dropped it a lot of times – with elongated fingers with knobbly knuckles. He glared. Ready to begin. He gave Tobio and Shouyou a bad feeling.

‘Keep on breaking them! What, you say? Their hearts! Keep on shattering them! What you saaay?’

Tendo sang to himself; fingers waggling, shoulders bouncing up and down; his toe tapped. Ushijima’s friend was bizarre to say the least. He pointed to a guy in the front row of the crowd. They seemed to know each other. This guy had dual toned hair and a leather jacket.
‘Those blocks?’ he suggested.

His reply left a flat response on Tendo’s face but nevertheless, he continued his song to its correct lyrics: ‘Nah, their spirits.’

He flaunted his hips too until Musashi shot him a dirty glare to which he replied with poking his tongue out to her. She huffed and stomped her foot but quickly regained composure and, with that, most of the two minutes Musashi needed earlier were used up. Finally, it was time for the first battle of the second phase of the Extreme Contest to commence.

‘Three! Two! One!’ Musashi yelled and it was a free-for-all indeed. It was chaos as PokeBalls and names were all thrown into the centre of the boxing ring.

‘Wormadam: I choose you!’ Ushijima called out.

‘Jump out, Bunny!’ yelled Shouyou.

‘Kirlia!’ Kageyama shouted.

‘Hey-ho, off you go: Patches!’ sang Tendo; a little jig which included a spin on the ball of his foot and all.

The four Pokémon selected by their Pokémon came to the ring with a blinding, scarlet flash and they glared and crowed at one another. Between each other, they were quick to understand the unusual situation and adopted alliances as per necessary; as their Trainers, would like.

‘A free-for-all duel begins now…’ Musashi reminded.

In that instant, panic exploded inside of their veins. Each Trainer had to trust that they could burst through this barrier provided by panic or their Pokémon would merely out-speed each other. Still, each seemed calm in their own way: Shouyou smiled, Tendo danced on the spot, Ushijima was stern, and Tobio scowled.

It was Tendo who grasped the opportunity to pull through first. He and Patches the Pachirisu managed to carve out a turn for themselves in the chaos of the Battle Royale’s riveting opening.

‘Patches!’ he yelled. ‘Use Nuzzle on the lil Bun-Bun-Buneary over there!’

His Pachirisu’s eyes gleamed nefariously and puffed out its cheeks. There was a noticeable sizzle of electricity on them. It then dashed towards Bunny. Bunny steeled her resolve and got ready for an attack. Pachirisu rubbed its face against Bunny. Bunny attempted to push it away but she seemed rather confused by the affection. That was before she realised that she was stricken by yellow electricity.

‘Don’t just let that happen, Bunny!’ Shouyou called out; breaking through the queue. ‘Use Sweet Kiss!’

Bunny smooched Pachirisu’s forehead. It gnashed back at Bunny with its larger than they probably should be front teeth but ultimately succumbed to the kiss. From that little display, it could be asserted that Patches the Pachirisu was vicious as anything draconic or insurmountably bigger than it.

‘Magical Leaf!’ barked Tobio.

His Kirlia, sensing his direction, spun around and with pointed and almost cruel delicacy ended
up defending Bunny from further attacks from Patches. With elegant gestures, Kirlia conducted an array of verdant leaves that shone all the colours of the rainbow. With a thrust like a sword, Kirlia fired off the leaves into Patches’ direction. Patches sustained minimal damage but the fluid movement Kirlia used was enough to leave an impression on Musashi.

‘Such elegant movements; a prima donna!’ she cooed.

And then, in the green corner, came a foreboding and calm voice: ‘Wormadam, use Shadow Ball on Kirlia.’

Wormadam was not a threatening Pokémon, and yet it managed to spook Kirlia. Kirlia gracefully spun back as Wormadam prepared its attack. It gathered dark energy which manifested as purple and black, clogged up shadows into an orb. It concentrated said energy between its limp, leaf-like appendages but upon the tip of its nose. It thrust itself forward and all that power shot through the air.

Kirlia attempted to spin away from the attack but it would prove futile. Wormadam had moved faster. Kirlia took direct damage; unable to even defend himself from it. His arms flung back and head tilted upwards; a tiny whimper heard. A tiny pathetic whimper which did not to bring about pity as Tobio lost many points from his bar because of such an elegant and strong attack. He growled.

‘It’s fine Kirlia, we’ll get them back for it!’ he yelled. It seemed futile. He threw a hasty, angered glance at his foes: Tendo, carefree and relaxed, and Ushijima; tall, unyielding, impossible. He had a horrible feeling in his gut.

Tobio did not need to check upon to know how Shouyou looked. Or how he felt. Tobio knew that Shouyou would have been enraged with his eyes aflame and competition and rivalry fuelling him like air filled his lungs.

But now, it was back to Tendo and as his face split into an eerie grin, there could be no mistaking it: he had a plan and a cruel or devious one that. Only time could tell and there was no time like the present. He clucked and smacked his hands together.

‘Patches use Toxic on that Kir-Kirlia!’ Tendo cried out.

‘Pachi! Pachi!’ his Pachirisu squeaked, a tad muffled from confusion. Unfortunately, after a moment of almost drunken staggering and other confused behaviour, Patches pulled through.

Patches generated purple sludge from its body and wore it like an ugly halo above its head. It threw itself around wildly. The sludge collecting turned to fat, sizeable droplets. Patches wielded them with inexperience but they found their target easily. Patches waved its paws around. The sludge went flying. Kirlia was drenched. He tried to resist, tried to dodge but it useless. The sludge covered Kirlia. Blotting and clotting across its white, dainty limbs and inevitably sank in. Kirlia shivered and cooed in pain. He was badly poisoned. Once more, Tobio’s health bar was robbed of points. So far, he was losing.

Shouyou swore to avenge him.

‘Jump Kick that Pachirisu!’ Shouyou shouted; he jumped and punched the air.

Bunny leaped forward like a warrior. She darted around the stage in hot pursuit of the squirming Pachirisu doing its best to flee. It was however no match for Bunny. In a fateful bound, Bunny poised herself. Leg extended and determination etched unto her fuzzy face. She was ready. Patches
was cornered. Bunny flew into Patches with a decisive kick. The kick connected and Patches was pinned to the ground, squirming and whining beneath Bunny’s weight. Patches sustained a fair bit of damage. It would appear that a critical hit has taken place.

‘Way to go Bunny!’ cheered Shouyou.

Tendo lost many points as a result of Bunny’s strong Jump Kick. He grumbled inaudibly too himself. Ushijima gazed towards him and made an odd, perhaps soothing, expression. This calmed Tendo down somewhat but did bring out some immaturity as he poked his tongue out at Shouyou.

Now, the turn fell upon Tobio. He clenched his fist and readied himself for command. It was an uphill battle but he trusted that with Shouyou by his side it will be a cinch. He trusted his Kirlia as well and Bunny too.

‘Magical Leaf once more, on Pachirisu!’ Tobio yelled with a sweeping hand gesture. He truly composed himself like a king or a general.

Kirlia spun around and commanded his own, miniature army of leaves to bend as he pleases. Graceful, lithe arms outspread. Leaves, razor sharp, coated in a rainbow sheen manifested. They glinted in the sunlight; accentuating their sharpness. With an elegant strike, the leaves were thrust forward.

The leaves cut through the air like throwing stars. They shot past; honing in on their target. There was no escape for Patches. Patches’ eyes widened and as it pitifully tried to defend itself from Kirlia’s attack. Patches sustained much damage as it was barraged with shiny leaves that cut through its thick fur. It whined and whinnied. It spun around backwards like the dramatic little creature that it was. A second critical hit in a row had struck against all odds.

Tendo worried from the sidelines. The crowd made hushed noises. Everyone begged and prayed for their favourable outcome.

Patches teetered on the edges. Its eyes spun. Its tai lowered and ears flickered. At long last, Patches decided that it had no more energy to put into the battle. With a dramatic flop, Patches came tumbling down belly-first and into the fray. Patches fainted. Patches is no longer able to battle.

Kirlia cooed and danced only to sustain poison damage a little later. He shuddered and lost health points; not a severe amount but enough to put quite the dampen in his step. Consequently, Tobio also lost points in his health bar.

‘Un-flipping-fortunate!’ Musashi shrieked.

‘Aw nooooo.’ Tendo crooned as he collected his PokeBall. ‘Patches, return.’ He slowly admitted defeat on his own terms; his facial expressions going through the quite the journey with all five stages of grief being accurately and aptly represented along with others. No wonder his partner was a dramatic little creature if had such a Trainer to model after.

Celebration bubbled up through Tobio and Shouyou. They shared excited glances between each other. They disregarded the fact that they were only half way through this battle and most of it was still quite uphill.

‘It’s two against one! The second half of this battle with be full of shock twists, no doubt! You could pay good money to see this but this was free – aren’t we kind? Half time remains…’ Musashi announced.
Ushijima glared across the stage. Tendo shrugged. Ushijima crossed his arms. It was once more his turn. The stage was his domain now even light of Tendo’s loss; of Shouyou and Tobio’s intermediate victory. He cleared his throat.

‘Wormadam, use Growth.’ Ushijima decided.

His Wormadam created an odd energy around itself. It had a determined look in its eyes. It absorbed the silvery aura unto itself and this had a peculiar effect: Wormadam stretched and squashed like a giant, invisible hand was rendering it like candy. Eventually it settled and had become bigger and more physically intimidating, for a precious and dainty looking Wormadam with burgeoning blossoms upon its breast.

It was unbelievable, to Tobio and Shouyou anyway, that Ushijima would more or less give them a free shot. Was it poor planning or something more devious? The two, of course, believe it was the former and the salivated in the opportunity.

The turn cycled back to Shouyou. He felt cocky and puffed up. His shoulders raised and were square. He oozed confidence.

‘Bunny!’ he shouted with bright eyes. ‘Let’s do this! Use Quick Attack!’

‘Bun-Bun!’ Bunny squeaked back at him.

Bunny got down onto all fours – like she was doing a push-up – and got ready for take-off. She lunged into the air at a blistering speed. Her afterimages blended into one, pure silver trail. She swiftly knocked into Wormadam. Bunny ploughed it as best as she could; bringing Wormadam down. She launched off Wormadam’s forehead when her attack was done.

Ushijima lost considerable points for that. Shouyou cooed encouragement from the sidelines and Bunny soaked the praise up. Now, it was back to Tobio. He had a bad feeling about this. He never considered his instinct wrong but the odds were so stacked up against Ushijima that his intuition just had to be wrong. It just had to be.

‘Kirlia: use Draining Kiss!’ Tobio instructed.

What unfolded was like a fairy tale from a ballet. Kirlia pranced and danced and spun. All of it punctuated by swirls and twirls and grand leaps. Pink sparkles emanated from Kirlia. Everyone was entranced but it was Wormadam most enchanted. Kirlia drew closer and bestowed a kiss upon the side of Wormadam’s face. Its eyes transformed to cartoonish hearts. From the kiss, Kirlia stole energy from Wormadam and restored its own health.

Unfortunately, what Kirlia took from Wormadam was robbed from Kirlia by poison damage. And a bit more. Not to mention, Tobio took damage; not much but some especially compared to Ushijima. Draining Kiss with all its cuteness and elegance damaged Ushijima’s health bar quite severely. It was a little more hope for victory.

‘Wormadam use Shadow Ball on Kirlia.’ Ushijima instructed.

The previous Shadow Ball had been strong but with the Growth boost, it was even more terrifying. Wormadam conjured deep, black and purple shadows and gathered them in an ever spiralling, hellish orb that barely maintained a spherical façade. It was shaking and moving and wriggling. It was a miracle that Wormadam was managing it at all but it was and skilfully.

With a single thrust of its head, Wormadam sent the Shadow Ball flying. It didn’t lose form even though it had seemed like it would earlier. Its trajectory was inevitable. Kirlia was unable to avoid
the attack and took it head on. Upon his body, the shadows burst with fiery aftermath. Kirlia was consumed by the attack and was left emptied of energy as a result. With a final twirl upon his toes, Kirlia gave up and fell backwards.

‘Oh no!’ Tobio yelped, eyes bugging.

‘No way…’ Shouyou muttered.

‘Return, Kirlia.’ Tobio said. He seemed like he was only going through the motions. It would appear that some part of him had been emptied also.

And then there were two. Shouyou was rattled to say the least; especially before Ushijima. He was so calm and methodical. It was like he was made of steel. He had been so unflappable thus far and it could be seen; albeit slightly. Ushijima was coming to relish the change in power dynamics upon the stage. To Shouyou, he was truly a rival – a villain. All that remained was win or lose. And Shouyou wanted to win; for himself, for Bunny, but especially for Tobio.

‘Well, well, well… we’re down to Hinata Shouyou in the red corner and Ushijima Wakatoshi in the yellow corner. Only time can tell who shall be victorious of this round! Two minutes remains!’ Musashi announced.

‘W-We can do this, Bunny.’ Shouyou said but he was quickly losing all certainty. ‘Sweet Kiss!’

Bunny let loose a cutesy air kiss. She pranced about and cooed. Wormadam fell for it and was soon confused. Waddling and wobbling where it stood with spinning eyes. It was a good start to this new battle phase; wrangled in Shouyou’s fleeing confidence.

‘Come on Wormadam, pull through.’ Ushijima encouraged.

‘Wor-Wor-Wormadam!’ his Pokémon cooed. It spun around and tumbled.

Shouyou crossed his fingers. Everyone watched intently. Wormadam broke through the confusion. Shouyou gasped. The crowd roared. Wormadam resumed its normal capacity of action; no extraneous movements or spinning eyes any longer. Ushijima smiled to himself. He oozed well placed pride.

‘Now, use Energy Ball!’ Ushijima instructed.

Wormadam gathered energy between its long, leaf appendages. Its antenna glowed a vibrant, apple-like green. Determination filled it. The sphere the energy manifested off was more like light than anything born of plant matter. It was coloured like it contained a galaxy rather than a forest. It swirled and glimmered like it held the stars. With great agency, Wormadam thrust the orb forward. It soared through the air: sparkling and sizzling; the energy slowly unravelling from its original concentration the further it flew from its maker.

Bunny took the hit and stumbled backwards. She shivered; no doubt a sign that her special defence had fallen by a stage or two. Shouyou shouted garbled words but Bunny pulled through. She got back up and was once more ready to fight it but garishly obvious how close to the brink Bunny was. Not to mention the hit that Shouyou’s health bar took. He too was barely hanging in. It was hopeless. This battle was good as Ushijima’s win.

‘We can do it, Bunny. Jus’ a little more: use Quick Attack!’ Shouyou shouted.

Despite the slight sway in Bunny’s step, she lunged forth. She was slower now but still her speed was well show cased. Her afterimages, though sloppy, still blurred into a solid grey trail.
Bunny whipped around Wormadam and attack from behind. With a great thump, she pounded into Wormadam’s back. Wormadam stumbled forward but unlike last, it didn’t fall. Still, damage to Wormadam and Ushijima was done and Shouyou was settled to be content with that.

‘Finish this, use Psychic.’ Ushijima’s voice boomed like godly thunder. It was like retribution. The rapture. All that stuff. It felt like the apocalypse. Shouyou was crushed as he helplessly watched what was undoubtedly the final turn unfold.

Wormadam’s white eyes glowed electric blue as the psionic energy it was channelling emanated from its body. Its antennae and leaf-like appendages were outlined in a same coloured aura. From her toes to the tip of her extended ear, Bunny became caught up in the aura and became Wormadam’s to control. Bunny was lifted into the air like she was weightless in anti-gravity but it was all very careful. Bunny squirmed and resisted but in her fragile state it was futile. Bunny was elevated further. All heads tilted upwards to watch.

Then… blam!

She was brought back onto the stage and pummelled by gravity; such a cruel mistress. Ushijima nodded. Bunny’s eyes spun. The battle was over. There was not much left to say or do. It had been decided.

‘A thrilling conclusion: Ushijima Wakatoshi of the green corner is the winner of this Battle Royale; he shall be the one to advance further! The next match will take place in two minutes’ time!’ Musashi fussed.

Ushijima turned to exit the stage; Tendo already had. But, Shouyou called out from where he stood like an enraged statue:

‘I swear I’ll do it!’

Ushijima turned his head slowly, slightly intrigued but not miffed. Perhaps even bored by Shouyou’s sudden and vague declaration.

‘Do what?’ he answered.

‘Beat you!’ Shouyou announced.

He raised an eyebrow. A curt smile uplifted his stony lips. A small part of him seemed enthralled by the challenge.

‘You have until August thirteenth of next year then. From thereafter, I shall not be eligible in most mainstream Contests. See if you can do it before then. I highly doubt it; your team is in shambles. Pokémon are like crops after all; they need good soil to flourish and you have given them concrete.’

‘Well, my team and I are like dandelions. We grow from the concrete and make wishes come true. Mine’s that I’ll beat you at the Grand Festival. I’ll see you there and you better be prepared to get weeded.’ Shouyou quipped.

Tobio made faces in the background to Tendo. He was dripping with pride. Tendo poked his tongue back at Tobio.

‘We’ll see about that.’ Ushijima murmured.
Shouyou’s final piece of dialogue is heavily edited from what I originally wrote but I wanna share it with you guys anyway as an apology for not updating all of March. Or twice in February. I got over confident. I went to university and university hit me like a truck of bricks, I’m so sorry.

So, here’s the original quote: “Well, my team and I are like dandelions. We can grow from the concrete and make wishes come true. I will see your bitch ass at this year’s Grand Festival there and you can fucking blow me.”
Why this chapter took for-fucking-ever to publish: I was seduced by another fandom, university stuff, and general executive dysfunction. This chapter isn’t even technically complete but I really don’t have the motivation to finish it so enjoy what you get. I don’t know when the next chapter will be finished. But given that I’ve been seduced by another fandom, that’ll work well for you guys since I refuse to push PBL beyond my dashboard’s top 5 recent fics worked on.

Shouyou and Tobio, despite their dismay, stayed to watch the rest of the Contest even though the conclusion was foregone. Eventually, they regrouped with Akiteru, Saeko and her brother, Nishinoya, and Asahi. They were just as disgruntled about how Shouyou and Tobio’s Battle Royale had gone. It was a bit rich that they had been shuffled into a battle with two of the top veterans but that was life sometimes. At least, they had been taught the bitter taste of defeat and were now revved up on it.

The battles were intense and heated. It really came down to the wire each time and there was never a dull moment. Still, the conclusion foregone, it left a dull note when it was well into the afternoon and the overall champion was to be given their Ribbon. Said person, of course, being none other than Ushijima Wakatoshi – the Miracle Boy.

At the centre of it all, Ushijima stood tall and strong but also gracious. He was bathed in lavish attention and cheering. He was no doubt a fan favourite. Perhaps even more so than Oikawa. He bowed his head before the two hosts, Musashi and Kojiro.

He stood with his hands balled by his side. He was stiff and stoic. The judgements prepped and poised the Ribbon: black, white, and red with gold flourishes that looked like infinity symbols, or perhaps a stylised “R”. Ushijima accepted the Ribbon gratefully. They pinned it awkwardly onto the lapels of his button-up shirt. Musashi smoothed it over and Kojiro just made a fuss about how it suited Ushijima’s fashion when it did not, in fact, suit what he was wearing.

‘Give it up for the first ever winner of The Extreme Contest: Ushijima Wakatoshi! The Miracle Boy!’ Musashi and Kojiro shouted, arm in arm.

The applause was thunderous. It came from every corner of the park: both competitor and spectator. Even Shouyou and Tobio, despite their bitterness over the first match, participated. Then again, Shouyou did holler some odd stuff that was supposed to be mean but was not. He was drowned out by all the positive stuff people were yelling as a collective which was probably a good thing.

From there, the competitors and spectators wandered away from the park. The official staff began to clean and take down. Shouyou and Tobio’s group found a park table and bench, with the last of what the food stalls around were selling in hand, they sat down to discuss plans for tomorrow against the city skyline sunset.

‘So, what’re the plans for tomorrow? Besides get stronger?’ Saeko asked with a cheeky smile.
‘I don’t know about him but I wanna leave Veilstone.’ both boys said in more-or-less cohesion.

‘Imagine if we did that? We’d be annoying as-f.’ Nishinoya chuckled. His Pikachu, ever present on his shoulder, nuzzled against his cheek as though jealous of the sound of his laughter and wanting some attention of her own.

‘There are some strong Trainers down Route 214; not to mention the really tough Pokémon.’ Akiteru pointed out.

‘True, true.’ Tanaka said, nodding. ‘I caught one of my strongest partners on that Route.’

‘Nif-Nice.’ Tobio said, getting so excited his words were jumbling.

‘Yeah, can’t wait.’ Shouyou agreed.

‘Then what about you three?’ Saeko asked.

‘Hm…’ Nishinoya paused and deep consideration crossed his face. ‘I think I want to challenge the Hearthome Gym again. I think I can do it this time; especially since Piko is stronger than last time we tried and I’ve got Burimaru too! They’re super strong against that old hag’s MVP.’

‘Don’t call Fantina a “hag”!’ Akiteru roused. ‘She is quite good looking still for her age, not to mention a tremendous battler and Contest-goer.’

‘I’m happy to go with Yu…’ Asahi murmured.

‘You know what? I think I’ll try Hearthome Gym again too! Duskull will be good too and I’ve got Elekid now too.’ Tanka said.

Saeko laced her arm over her brother. ‘Ryu, I think you need to train a bit more rather than hit up the casino. That’s what [x] told me. I think you ought to do a lot of training before here and Hearthome.’

‘I will, Sis.’ Tanaka huffed.

‘So, I guess that means goodbye then.’ Akiteru said.

‘Mm… yeah.’ Saeko mumbled. ‘See ya, get stronger you two. I reckon you can beat that mean ol’ Ushi-Waka.’

‘Same.’ Shouyou said.

He and Nishinoya high-fived and their hands clamped together.

‘Don’t you dare lose.’ Shouyou said.

‘Hell naw. I was ‘bout to tell you the same thing. I hope our paths cross again soon. Love to have a battle.’

‘Sounds good.’

They nodded and had a fiery understanding between each other. No doubt a battle between those two shorties would be explosive and entertaining to watch.

Meanwhile, Tanaka was playfully roughhousing Tobio whilst Asahi watched and tried to intervene pointlessly. Tobio didn’t mind. He missed this kind of thing. It has been a while since he
It used to be him. Oikawa, Iwaizumi, Kumimi, and Kindaichi too. Sometimes. When they decided they wanted to like him. When he decided that he wanted to like them. He even though Tanaka was giving him a noogie, he wondered what they were up to. Especially Kumimi and Kindaichi as he hadn’t seen them at all this year, or last year after they graduated.

It felt good. A little bit like having his hair pulled – because, it was – but it felt good. Tobio enjoyed that but he didn’t know how to verbalise it; or even put a proper smile on his face. He just hoped… they knew.

Eventually, Tanaka release his loose, half-effort chokehold on Tobio. Nishinoya and Shouyou let go. It was time to leave. They split into two groups: those who were going to the Pokémon Centre and those who were going to Saeko’s apartment. They said their goodbyes and headed off into two, opposite directions. So once more, it was Shouyou and Tobio alone together.

They hiked along bumpy paths and beside traffic. It was loud. In the seclusion of the park, they had forgotten how noisy it was having cars and people. They didn’t mind. They walked in silence. Their hands balled into fists. Heads looking up and beyond; filled with hope, filled with dread. It was a long walk. Cheerful company really must shorten the miles.

It was only once they had returned to their room in the Pokémon Centre that they started talking. At first, it was grunts and monosyllabic sentences. They turned around and got changed into their pyjamas. Once comfy, they pulled the sheets back on their bed; the only bed in the room which didn’t seem to matter anymore. They got into together and into each other’s personal space even though there was plenty of room in the bed to leave a little space.

They were practically nose-and-nose now. Tobio could see every fleck of colour in Shouyou’s eyes. They were wide. Excited. His heart skipped a beat.


‘I – I feel the same way. But, I think we can do it. I promise I’ll help you do it. When we’re by each other’s sides, I think we can be invincible. We’ll have to train like all hell though.’

‘Good. I want to. I’m glad… that you feel the same way. I like that. I mean… what you just said. Invincible by each other’s sides. I really like that too…’

‘Today wasn’t a good day.’

‘No, not at all.’

‘But I think we can turn it into a good day. Never let today happen again.’

‘Sounds great.’

It was odd but somehow, the bed grew warmer. Shouyou turned over. He was shaking with excitement; with motivation. He grinned to himself.

‘Good night.’

‘Yeah, night.’

There was a lull in conversation. Darkness swirled about the room. Streaks of light entered the
room through slats of space like under the curtains or under the door. It was quiet. Not a peep outside their room even though the light, ever changing, seemed to indicate cars and people. Then, Shouyou spoke again:

‘Thank you… Tobio.’

‘For what?’ Tobio asked, he straightened up and put his hands under his head. He stared at the ceiling. He cursed his face which he knew was turning red – why else would it feel so hot?

‘For everything.’

With that, everything had been said and done. There was nothing more either could think of, and yet there was so much more they could just say. But they were only voiceless, wordless, confusing feelings that were vague echoes of anything that made sense.

What did they mean?

Eventually, they drifted off into a fitful, dreamless sleep for there was too much on their minds. In the morning, they woke late and with spiky bed-heads. Their minds were groggy and so much of what they had been thinking about how been erased by the night. It didn’t matter. After all, if it was forgotten could it really be important?

It took them forever to get dressed. They were stopping and starting. Their backs creaky and achy. It had been a horrid sleep but likely, tonight’s would be worse as they were probably going to be camping. They were already so far into the morning, they would be lucky to leave by noon.

Once they had filled their bellies at the food stalls and gathered everything they owned in their room, they could check out of the PokeCentre. With that, they left. Shouyou bounded down the streets with Tobio in tow. They navigated the city and tried not to get distracted along the way. Eventually, the found the exit terminal.

They wound through the people loitering and chatting. They were too excited to stop. They wondered what type of place Route 214. Soon, they would wonder no more as they burst through the gates. What they saw was something of a disappointment.

What caught their eyes first was the high noon sun’s rays reflecting off a large lake so it was a good start but once their eyes adjusted and they got a better look, all what met them was a very rough-looking Route. The grass was long and choppy. A rotten wooden fence winded through the curvy, loose gravel roads that tumbled into nothingness.

Although with that being established, from what Shouyou and Tobio could estimate from the Trainers that were hanging about, they did look extremely tough. They had that look about them: sharp, shifty eyes and large Pokémon by their side. This was no doubt going to be quite the adventure in order to get through Route 214.

The two trekked through the long, yellow grass and got into battles along the way. The wild Pokémon here were just as agitated as the Trainers. Everyone here seemed to have a chip on their shoulder. It was like the perfect Route for those who had come to a turnabout point in their life and it was either give up or get stronger – and everyone here had chosen the latter.

Tobio decided to keep Kirlia by his side. Kirlia was still very downtrodden from his loss in the Battle Royale; as was Tobio so it was a good combination as Kirlia could feed off of the anger and disappointment Tobio was exuding in a last resort of making Kirlia feel better about his own emotions.
‘Hey, Tobio,’ Shouyou murmured, ‘do you think you should evolve Kirlia?’

Tobio blinked. He hadn’t thought of that. He dug out the Dawn Stone Shouyou’s father had given him. It felt good in his hands. It was soft and smooth; caught the sunshine and reflected it back as an almost bluish green colour. Perhaps it was time.

‘Hey, you two twerps!’ a voice from afar suddenly rang out.

Shouyou and Tobio stopped in their footsteps.

‘Oh my goodness…’ a second voice mumbled.

Soon, the two made themselves known to Tobio and Shouyou. They were Trainers neither of them recognised. The first voice belonged to a young man with bleach blonde hair with black, horizontal streaks around his head. He wore a leather jacket and baggy, holey jeans. His friend was a lot cleaner and a lot less intimidating but he had an untrustworthy face nonetheless. He had fluffy, brown hair and was wearing a neat button-up and skinny jean combo. They did not seem to want to battle… yet.

‘I’m Kyoutani.’ the Trainer in the leather jacket said.

‘I’m Yahaba. We’re double battlers. It’s been a while since we’ve seen two Trainers come through but we’re not looking for a battle,’ a pause, a sigh, ‘no, Kentarou here would like to ask you a favour.’

Kyoutani became sheepish. ‘That’s a really cute Kirlia, may I pet it? It’s been so long since I’ve seen one up close before, it makes me miss when my Gallade was a baby Ralts…’

‘Huh? What?!’ Shouyou almost shouted.

Kyoutani’s personality seemed to be direct contrast to his appearance. That being said, even though he had asked politely, he was still death-staring Tobio – as though telling him “I dare you to say ‘no’ to me”.

‘I, uh, um… sure?’ Tobio replied.

‘Awww, thank you.’

Kyoutani crouched down and put his hand out. He did not invade Kirlia’s personal space and waited for Kirlia to accept him. The horns on Kirlia’s head glowed; no doubt having a taste of the emotions Kyoutani was emanating. Kirlia allowed Kyoutani to stroke the side of its head.

‘Aaah, it’s so warm. I didn’t expect that. And soft,’ Kyoutani said. ‘That’s a healthy Kirlia. It must really like you, um… uh… who are you two?’

‘Kageyama Tobio.’

‘Hinata Shouyou.’

‘No way,’ Yahaba gasped. ‘I thought I recognised you two from the Valentine’s Day edition of Contest Spectacular. The Freak Duo! Those were some risky moves you pulled, according to the article.’

‘Since we’re both double battlers, we should go two on two, I reckon,’ Kyoutani said as he got up.
Tobio and Shouyou glanced at each other.

‘Yeah, we totally should.’ Shouyou decided.

‘On one condition.’ Tobio piped up.

‘What is it?’ Yahaba asked, eying him suspicious.

‘You’ve been Trainers longer than we have. I want some advice. Should I evolve my Kirlia into a Gallade now or later?’

Yahaba smirked as he crossed his arm. ‘I’ll teach you the virtues of delayed evolution.’

‘And I’ll teach you the vices of raw power.’

‘From there, you can decide for yourself.’ both Yahaba and Kyoutani concluded together.

‘Sounds good.’ Tobio replied.

The two sets of Trainers put distance between each other. They found a medium sized pocket of dirt and short grass to battle within. It would be one Pokémon each; two to a team. They readied their PokeBalls and counted themselves into a free-for-all throw in to begin.

‘Tsuki!’

‘Jump in, Nyta!’

‘Kirlia!’

‘I choose you, Arcanine!’
The Dawn Stone's Destiny

Their Pokémon came out of their spinning PokeBalls apart from Kirlia who simply leapt into Tobio’s space. A Lopunny and Arcanine stood before Yahaba and Kyou. It would be a battle of speed stats now.


His Lopunny, Tsuki, brushed its ears off its shoulders then surged forward. It charged at Nyta. Tsuki was swift-footed; almost disappearing from line of sight before reappearing in a courageous bound. It stuck out its leg and came down with a great chop upon Nyta’s back. Nyta squealed and whinnied as she was forced down. Tsuki took no time at all to recover; even pulling a magnificent back-flip to remove itself from the fight.

‘Fire Fang! Attack Kirlia!’ Kyouth shouted; his thrust out his arm and pointed in Tobio and Kirlia’s direction.

His Arcanine growled, threw back its head then bared its teeth which erupted into orangey-red flames. It pounced forward. Its huge paws raking through the dirt and ground beneath it; puffs of dust blooming behind it. Arcanine dashed forward; eyes blazing and posed to bite.

‘Dodge it, Kirlia!’ Tobio pleaded.

‘Take the hit, Nyta!’ Shouyou urged; having a moment of both clarity and fog for he could not remember Nyta’s Ability but if he was right, and if it was Flash Fire then by taking the hit, Nyta’s own attacks would become boosted.

Kirlia edged away from Arcanine; not as quickly as it approached. Nyta’s whinny caught Kirlia’s attention and Nyta pulled through with a sudden bound. There was a collision; a moment of intensity where no one could quite see what had happened until Kirlia spun away, unharmed.

Arcanine growled. Nyta took damage and neighed. She did not sound pained but rather inconvenienced. Shouyou grimaced. Somehow, from the look of everything, it was safe to assume that he was wrong about Nyta’s Ability being Flash Fire. It must be Run Away after all. He sighed. Arcanine let go of Nyta’s rump.

‘It’s okay, Nyta! We’ll get ‘em back for it all!’ Shouyou shouted; bouncing where he stood, shaking his fist in the air. ‘Low Kick Lopunny!’

‘Ponyta!’ Nyta whinnied.

She charged towards Lopunny as quick as a flash. Her hooves thumped against the ground and she kept low. Lopunny attempted to avoid Nyta by jumping out of the way but Nyta jumped first. There was a second’s worth of delay between them but already Lopunny was higher given its fully evolved stature but already, Nyta had whipped around. Her hind legs extended and her hooves, clogged with dirt and mud, bludgeoned Lopunny.

Nyta kicked Lopunny with unprecedented force. It was like Lopunny rag-dolled before being brought back down to the ground where it broke beneath it. Lopunny mumbled as it struggled to get back to its pointed feet. It would appear that Lopunny had taken a critical hit from Nyta given the devastation she had inflicted upon the Rabbit Pokémon.

‘Oh yeah! Way to go, Nyta!’ Shouyou shouted.
‘We can finish this, Kirlia! Use Confusion on Lopunny.’ Tobio instructed.

Kirlia raise a dainty arm and spun elegantly towards Lopunny. With poised swoop, Kirlia bent down. In the wake of its controlled, beautiful movements, strange and wondrous light manifested. It ribboned through the air with ethereal beauty as it shimmered in all the colours of the rainbow and more. Kirlia raised itself with a grandiose and over-the-top movement. The colours were brought up with it and released in glimmering, razor-like waves towards Lopunny.

There was no escape from the beautiful psychic energy Kirlia released. Lopunny sustained a decent amount of damage that briefly it knocked it back onto its tail and into a patch of long grass. It made guttural, angered noises without form.

‘Let’s get our revenge, Tsuki-sweetie, use Shadow Ball on Kirlia.’ Yahaba said firmly.

Lopunny puffed up its chest. Between its paws, it concentrated a mass of shadows and dark, gluggy energy. The energy manifested as a sphere. Lopunny pushed the sphere forward. It surged towards Kirlia. It didn’t lose shape once as it swiftly cut through the air, leaving tiny winds in its wake. Kirlia took the attack to his abdomen. It was an attack with a strong type advantage against Kirlia and it was obvious that because of that, Kirlia had taken quite the hit but he refused to bow. The show would go on but Kirlia stumbled, no doubt hanging onto shreds of health points.

Kyoutani grinned. Perfect, he thought to himself. He knew that Arcanine could easily take care of Kirlia so long as that damn Ponyta and Shouyou kept out of the fight.

‘Let’s finish Kirlia off, Arcanine. Use Crunch!’ he instructed.

Yahaba sighed. He supposed a Dark type move would be efficient for finishing off a Psychic-Fairy type but still, he was a little wary to say the least.

Arcanine pounded forward. It wagged its tongue as it excitedly bounded towards Kirlia. Kirlia attempted to back away from Arcanine but soon, Arcanine tackled it affectionately and pinned it between its forelegs. Kirlia did not have the energy to struggle. Nor was he afforded the opportunity to as Arcanine chomped down onto Kirlia. Its teeth jutting around Kirlia’s neck.

Kirlia lolled back and fainted. Tobio muttered under his breath. He clutched onto his PokeBall dearly before calling Kirlia back to him. He gritted his teeth through the whole loss.

‘It’s okay, Tobio, Nyta and I’ll get ‘em!’ Shouyou enthused.

‘Thanks.’ Tobio replied and he let go of his breath. He felt a little better but in all honesty, he felt worse than before. That was another loss on Kirlia’s tally. Suddenly, he was nowhere closer to deciding if he ought to evolve Kirlia…

‘Low Kick on Lopunny!’ Shouyou yelled.

Nyta reared up onto her back legs then came crashing down to the ground once more. She kicked off dramatically. She ran at Lopunny with determination in her charcoal coloured eyes. Lopunny attempted to swing away; a beautiful curl of a jump but Nyta brought her back legs around first. Nyta swung into Lopunny; her hooves kicking into Lopunny’s vulnerable ribs.

Lopunny hit the ground with a slight skid. A puff of dust followed in its wake. Lopunny tried to get up but was left disorientated. Its eyes began to spin. With much determination and refusal, Lopunny tried to fight a little more but before long, it fell onto its back with its arms spread. Its eyes spun and Lopunny gurgled.
Yahaba grimaced. ‘Return Lopunny.’ he said as he brought his PokeBall out of his pocket. Lopunny was snapped up by a scarlet light in a matter of seconds. Yahaba turned to Kyoutani and shrugged. ‘You’re up, Mad Dog.’

‘Don’t call me that.’ Kyoutani grumbled.

‘Whatever.’ Yahaba giggled. He kissed his PokeBall. ‘Get some rest, princess.’

‘Alrighty, let’s finish this up, Arcanine. Use Bulldoze!’

Arcanine lifted its head and gave a mighty howl. The earth shook and trembled beneath its large paws. It split through the battle arena and the ground cracked. Nyta lost her balance and wobbled around but was able to regain her balance being a Ponyta but it was useless. She had been hanging on by a thread and that was an attack that can destroy fire types so with much dramatics, Nyta flounced around then fainted.

Nyta ended up on her belly and her eyes spun. Kyoutani and Yahaba were the victors of this match. Shouyou grimaced. He brought out Nyta’s PokeBall and returned her to it with a great mope across his face. He turned to Tobio grimly.

‘I’m sorry I couldn’t avenge you.’ he lamented.

‘It’s fine. You did good.’ Tobio replied. His words were stilted; almost unnatural but not to the point that it felt insincere but rather coming from an untapped, genuine emotion.

‘So, what now Ka-ge-ya-ma-kun?’ Yahaba called out, sing-song. ‘You’ve seen the pros and cons of evolving early as opposed to evolving later. What kind of choice do you want to make?’

Tobio’s handed turned to a fist. ‘I still don’t know.’ he admitted. ‘But, I think I want to let Kirlia decide.’

Yahaba and Kyoutani drew nearer. Yahaba had a sly smile on his face. ‘That sounds like a good plan.’

Kyoutani huffed; half a smile crept onto his face.

Tobio somehow suspected that the two veteran Trainers hadn’t been trying to lead him one or the other, just towards Kirlia and what Kirlia wanted. He smiled on the inside.

‘C’mon back out, Kirlia.’ Tobio said.

In a magnificent swirl, Kirlia reappeared before the Trainers. He still looked pretty drained from his battle as his movements drooped. Tobio began to riffle through his bag in search of Dawn Stone; and for some potions.

‘Here, let me.’ Yahaba said as he produced a spray bottle marked with medical symbols.

‘Thank you.’ Tobio mumbled.

‘Not a problem.’ Yahaba replied.

He knelt next to Kirlia and spritzed Kirlia with the contents of the spray bottle. In a few seconds, Kirlia’s health, and mood, improved considerably. Yahaba got to his full height again and rested his elbow on Kyoutani’s shoulder; despite Kyoutani being taller and quite irate with the action.

‘Well, it was good to meet – and battle – with you boys but I think it’s time for me and this one
here to be on our way. May our paths cross again someday; who knows, maybe you’ll beat us one
day?’ Yahaba laughed.

‘Hell yeah we will!’ Shouyou replied exuberantly.

‘I like your energy, kid.’ Kyoutani replied. He held his fist out and Shouyou happily bumped
their knuckles together.

‘Well, bye, have a good trip.’ Shouyou jabbered.

Kyoutani and Yabaha started to move along once they said their official farewells to Tobio and
Shouyou. Once they left, Tobio nervously stared down Kirlia who could already predict why these
emotions were manifesting around his Trainers. He could taste the cause; bitter and a tad sour.

Tobio thrust out his hand. The Dawn Stone gleamed in the dappled sunlight. Kirlia inspected it.

‘Do you want to evolve?’

Kirlia met his gaze resolutely. Nodded. Then placed his hand on the beautiful, lustrous gem. The
transformation in response to the Dawn Stone was nigh instantaneous. Light unfurled from beneath
Kirlia’s velour-like skin and he began to shift.

Kirlia grew taller; his legs became thicker and body morphed completely but his eyes – sharp,
crimson – remained the same. In a matter of seconds, Kirlia was Kirlia no more. Kirlia had become
Gallade.

Gallade bowed to Tobio. Tobio realised that he was still taller than Gallade which he found both
bizarre and uncomfortable. He had always thought Gallade would be taller but he was proud.

‘I wonder if Gallade knows any new moves now?’ Shouyou asked. He puts his hands behind his
head and let his elbows jut out behind the orange fuzz of his hair.

‘that’s a good question.’ Tobio agreed. ‘Well? Do you know any new moves?’

Gallade proceeded to hack through the air with its extended pointed elbows; once to demonstrate
that he now knew “Slash” and a second time, with much more flair, to demonstrate that he now
knew “Leaf Blade”.

Tobio beamed. ‘Doing great, Gallade!’

‘Gall-ade!’ Gallade replied with a tip of its head.

‘I think you made a good choice, Yamayama-kun.’ Shouyou teased. ‘C’mon, let’s keep hitting
the road. I reckon if we keep going, we might make it to Pastoria City before sundown.’

‘I think your right.’ Tobio replied.

The two would soon discover that Shouyou was quite wrong but they got there in the end; and
before midnight to boot!
It was good to be sleeping in a warm, fluffy bed than camping in the cold winds. The weather had certainly turned for the worst once Shouyou and Tobio arrived at the Pastoria City Pokémon Centre. Nurse Joy welcomed them warmly as they toddled in, wind rushed and shivering, just before midnight. She happily gave them a key and a room.

As soon as they were curled up in their own, separate beds, that’s when the window took a lashing from rain. Rain pounded the roof and ground. The smell of fresh rain permeated the room and turned it stagnant; or maybe it was just because the boys were breathing through the thick fabric of their flannelette sheets. The rain smeared in off white streaks across the window pane but it was quite lovely to fall asleep to the din of the storm.

The following morning, the boys were in awe of the view that was beyond their window. Pastoria City had been drenched by the rain and the beaches to the south-east of the Pokémon Centre had swollen significantly. No wonder there were no houses or other buildings even close to the beach. The grounds were soggy and pooled with water. To the west, just past the city limits, it appeared to still be raining. And yet?

People were buzzing excitedly and the building down the road was most animated with people flocking to it.

‘Wonder what that’s about?’ Shouyou asked as he and Tobio got changed.

‘Dunno… There’s a Gym in this town, isn’t there? Maybe there’s some epic Gym battle scheduled today.’ Tobio suggested.

‘Wanna go get breakfast? Maybe Nurse Joy knows what’s going on; we can ask her. Whatever it is, I bet it’s fun. Let’s check it out.’ Shouyou jabbered.

‘Good a’ plan as any, I guess.’ Tobio shrugged.

Now that the pair was clothed in day clothes and rain coats, they ventured downstairs. They bought themselves some hash browns and juice from the fast food stall in the downstairs space. Having eaten to their fill, they ventured back to Nurse Joy’s marble counter once some other Trainers had moved on with their PokeBalls back in their pockets.

‘What can I do for you boys? Checking out already?’ she asked. She had a coarse voice but a chirpy attitude. These two characteristics of her appeared at be at odds with each other.

‘No, ma’am. We saw a big crowd down that way, we were wondering if you knew what it’s about?’ Shouyou asked.

The trainers from moments earlier started to urge each other to hurry up. Their noisiness caught the attention of Tobio. Soon enough, those four random Trainers were chuffing off with much excitement.

A big grin split across Nurse Joy’s face and she clasped her hands together. Shouyou and Tobio jittered with excitement in reaction to Nurse Joy’s.
‘You boys look like you’ve come a long way, I wouldn’t even say yer local to either Veilstone or Jubilife, even so you may not know this but today is a great day to go adventuring in Pastoria’s pride an’ joy: The Great Marsh! With that big storm, a lotta water type Pokémon have come out of hiding in The Great Marsh so it’s a great time to catch ’em. And! And! Rare Pokémon have been known to make The Great Marsh its home. For five hundred PokeYen, you two can purchase thirty Safari Balls and get access to every inch of The Great Marsh. An’, since it’s still early in the morning, you might have some good luck finding some if you get a wriggle on.’ Nurse Joy explained.

‘Thanks, Nurse Joy,’ Shouyou said.

Shouyou marched off. He tugged on Tobio’s wrist and got him to move out of the way too. Shouyou sat down on the pleather couch with a plop. He gloomily placed his head between his hands as he propped his elbows up on his knees. Tobio sat down next to Shouyou.

‘What’s the matter? I thought you’d be raring to go check out that Great Marsh place.’ Tobio said.

‘I am desperate to go!’ Shouyou replied, loud and exasperated as he dramatically straightened up; lifting his head from his hands. ‘It’s just…’ He became glum again. ‘It’s just… five hundred PokeYen is a fair bit of money. I – I don’t know if I have those sorts of savings.’

Tobio hunched over his knees as well. He frowned.

‘That sucks…’ he murmured.

‘Yeah…’

‘But, um,’ Tobio licked his lips, ‘would you let me pay for… you?’

First, Shouyou perked up but then he grew hesitant and awkward.

‘I kind of do but I kind of don’t.’ he managed to choke out in between bizarre, conflicted facial expressions.

‘I pay for this and you buy us food for the rest of the week. That sound fair?’ Tobio asked.

‘I guess so…’ Shouyou replied.

Tobio got to his feet and held out his hand. ‘C’mon, let’s go explore this Great Marsh place.’

‘Heck yeah!’ Shouyou replied, getting to his feet. He high-fived Tobio who became confused but shrugged it off.

They went upstairs, grabbed their backpacks and then it turned into a mad dash to see who could get to The Great Marsh’s building first. It was a straight street from the Pokémon Centre to The Great Marsh building which was very distinctive for its size and for the Crogunk themed billboard on its side. It was also quite a short road and very wide too. It would have been the perfect place for Tobio and Shouyou to race had it not been for the pedestrians. From here to bloody everywhere, this place was packed with people and truly tested Shouyou and Tobio’s agility.

It was good fun though; when they weren’t being scolded for being road hazards anyway. Shouyou and Tobio squeezed through masses of people and made a few cheeky shortcuts through the very haphazard lines which were blocked and messy. It was fine though since it was nowhere near the vicinity of organised chaos. Everyone was doing it.
The inside of the Great Marsh’s building was a lot like a train station. It smelt kind of swampy in here though; rather than overly sterile and bleachy. It was very blue inside as well: teal tiles and baby blue, plaster walls with ornate windows. There was a staircase and elevator combo though that was silver as they were made from steel and glass.

The front desks were manned by a trio of office ladies. They were taking money and giving out tickets and PokeBalls in exchange. The lines before them were too thick for Tobio and Shouyou to even try to wheedle their way in so, instead, they decided to check out where the stairs led to.

There were another two floors with incredibly high ceilings. The second floor was a safari themed café very much geared towards a younger crowd. It was extremely busy: all noisy and clustered. The khaki clad staff looked overworked but their goods smelt citrusy and enticing. The boys decided that Shouyou would treat them to either morning tea or lunch there depending on how long it takes for them to trek through The Great Marsh.

However, the third floor was very exciting. All the walls were windows as it was an observatory level. From here, they had a grand view of The Great Marsh and Pastoria City. The Great Marsh most certainly lived up to its name. It was countless yards of swamp and marshland connected by thin strips of somewhat firm looking grasslands. It was burgeoning with tall, thick trees and people. It looked like it would be an excellent place to catch Pokémon and have a little adventure.

Throughout the observatory level, there was binoculars and cameras to use. Curious, Shouyou put some loose change in the binoculars. He and Tobio attempted to share a pair. They smushed their faces together and peered awkwardly through the lenses. They got a horrible image and swung each other around the sturdy base the binoculars were fastened to. They had more fun with it than the images they were seeing through still. When they did settle and get a solid clip, they were amazed to see the diversity of Pokémon all living alongside the ponds and grasses. Unfortunately, just as they had learned to share, the screen had turned black and other people wanted to use the binoculars so they politely gave it up.

‘I’ve got it.’ Shouyou said, hyping himself up.

‘Got what?’ Tobio replied.

‘Did you see that cute blue Pokémon – Marill? – in the binoculars?’ Shouyou asked.

‘Hm… I think so.’ Tobio replied, a little uncertain.

‘I’m gonna catch one, I’ve decided.’ Shouyou enthused.

Tobio frowned. He thought about Marill: sparkly, small, cute. He thought about Shouyou: also sparkly, also small, also cute.

‘I think you and Marill would be a good match.’ Tobio replied through thorough thought and pursed lips.

‘Really? Why?’ Shouyou asked; his little fists quivered and his eyes glittered.

‘Small, annoying, too much energy.’ Tobio grumbled. He flushed slightly as he crossed his arms.

‘You’re so mean, Tobiuo.’ teased Shouyou.

Shouyou chuckled as Tobio play-fought with him. He crouched down and Tobio scrunched up Shouyou’s hair between his fingers. It was silly and stupid but it was fun. At least until Tobio gave up and let Shouyou squirm from beneath him. Shouyou mussed up his hair in his preferred style
‘Did you see any Pokémon you wanted to catch?’ Shouyou asked.

‘Crogunk… maybe?’ Tobio replied, unsurely and with a shrug.

‘I can totally see you and Crogunk though,’ Shouyou then made an unamused face with a slack jaw, narrowed his eyes too, ‘because you both make this face.’

‘Whatever.’ Tobio snapped, somewhat irked as Shouyou giggled. ‘I do not.’

‘Do too.’ Shouyou insisted.

Tobio huffed. ‘Let’s get in line or else we’ll be here ‘til next week.’

‘Okeydokey.’

The two chuffed off and descended the stairs. The lines had become more formalised now but plenty of people were still coming through the double doors. Tobio and Shouyou slotted into the pre-existing lines easily. It was a half an hour wait but eventually, they were served.

Tobio paid for the two of them. The lady behind the counter handed them a set of thirty Safari PokeBalls each and bid them on their way once explaining the rules of The Great Marsh. Battling was strictly prohibited and only Safari Balls were permitted. She also gave them tickets for the tram system that winds through the park. She told them that once they ran out of Safari Balls, they were to come straight back and she ominously mentioned the front desk would know if they tried to linger without Safari Balls.

The Great Marsh was even bigger from the ground level. Seeing its huge expanse filled the boys to the brim with excitement and they were quick to go out and get dirty. It was lucky they were wearing their rain coats or their clothes would be still be muddy even after going through the laundry three times.

Catching Pokémon proved to be a lot more difficult than they first thought it would be. Whittling down health and inflicting status conditions in a battle was so much easier than just lobbing a Ball at a Pokémon and hoping for the best. And being two hot-headed youths didn’t help either. It barely took any time at all for the two to run low on Safari Balls.

Shouyou lobbed his at anything vaguely spherical and blue; more often than not, he would startle a Wooper or Quagsire than encountering a Marill through this impatience. Tobio, meanwhile, was slightly more conservative with his supply of Safari Balls as he was still uncertain of what he wanted to catch.

It was fortunate that it was autumn or all this running amok in mud would have become quite repugnant by noon. Now, between the two of them, they had three PokeBalls and neither had yet to find the Pokémon they were after. Tobio had managed to capture a Crogunk by this point. Crogunk had put up quite a fight and Tobio had used most of his PokeBalls up trying to catch it but it had resigned eventually. He felt contented now that he had caught something made the money he spent worth his while but Shouyou?

Shouyou was heartbroken.

The two sat on a ridge; shoes and socks off so their toes could dangle in freezing water. Lily pads were scattered through this pond ribbed with reed. They could see Magikarp fins in the centre of it. Nothing had tried to take a nibble of them yet.
'I’m hungry.’ Shouyou whined. ‘Wait!’

He swung his bag around so it would be in his lap rather than his back. He rifled through it and got out a container. He opened it and the sweet smell of berries wafted around them.

‘Want one?’ Shouyou asked

‘I’m gonna save myself for when we head back to the café.’ Tobio replied.

‘Oh yeah, I’d almost forgotten. It’s my treat too.’ Shouyou replied.

‘It is.’ Tobio nodded.

Shouyou went to put away his container but the aroma it had released had drawn in a curious critter. It was small and blue with bright eyes and a curious smile.

‘Marill?’

Shouyou’s heart fluttered as he twisted around. He felt paws on his back and shyly, a Marill peeped around. Its nose twitched as it took interest in Shouyou’s container full of berries. Its tongue lolled; eyes shone.

‘Want some?’ Shouyou asked.

He set a piece down beside him. Marill investigated it shyly. Tobio glanced excitedly at Shouyou who met his gaze with ten times more enthusiasm. Marill took a cautious nibble of the corner but soon scarfed it down, eyes glittering and begging for more.

This is my chance, Shouyou thought to himself. He gave Marill another berry. He readied a Safari Ball. He bopped it into the air. In a small arc, it landed on Marill’s tail and bounced back. It opened and readied its capture function but first, Marill outstretched its tail and knocked it away. The Safari Ball was knocked off course and into the pond.

Shouyou glanced at Tobio.

‘You’ve got two more chances – you can have my leftover Pokeball, if you like. Shouyou, it’s fine.’ Tobio briefly quelled Shouyou’s concern.

Still, having two chances was simultaneously good and horrible. Shouyou took a breath. Marill squeaked and begged for more having finished its second portion. Shouyou readied his last PokeBall but he smiled to himself. He liked knowing Tobio would give up his for him if this failed but Shouyou refused to fail. Determination glinted in his amber eyes.

Shouyou lobbed this second PokeBall at Marill. The ball arced then came down; bounced against Marill. It opened and readied its capsule functions. Shouyou held his breath as he watched the PokeBall expel its scarlet light. Only once more to be both disappointed and impressed. The PokeBall flew over and soon dropped into the pond.

Shouyou watched the ripples in disbelief. Marill turned back to it and was once more grovelling for food. Shouyou huffed but he had an idea. It was time for a change of plan. Tobio nudged his shoulder.

‘Here.’ He offered the third and final Safari Ball between them.

‘Thank you.’ Shouyou replied.
He turned to face Marill who was still trying to feed off of Shouyou’s berries. Shouyou glared down at it and picked up a Nanab berry. Its beady black eyes lit up.

‘You want this?’ he asked.

‘Rill-Rill!’ Marill replied.

‘What about this?’ Shouyou replaced the single Nanab berry with the whole container.

The Marill rocked on its hindlegs. It flurried its front paws and made excited noises.

‘Do you want to eat whenever?’ Shouyou asked.

Tobio wondered what Shouyou was doing but it was certainly having a positive effect on Marill.

‘Then do you want to come and travel with me? I can train you up and you’ll get stronger. And, I’ll give you all sorts of yummy snacks. How about that? What do you say?’

Shouyou balanced the PokeBall in a cage of his fingers. Marill sniffed his hands: sweet and sticky from having handled all that food. Marill made an uncertain squeak but then pressed its nose unto the button. The PokeBall opened; rocked in Shouyou’s hand as he flattened out his fingers. The scarlet light captured Marill and sucked it into the PokeBall.

The PokeBall rocked violently from side to side. Shouyou could just imagine Marill squirming inside of it, trying to get comfortable. His heart trembled and then. The rocking stopped. His heart did to then, he heard it: a high-pitched click. A flash of red scattered across the button. Shouyou leapt to his feet; as did Tobio.

Shouyou eyed his PokeBall. He noticed the camouflage pattern on the top half of the PokeBall. The green will certainly stand out among his other PokeBalls. There was no way to confusing Marill – no, he needed a nickname – for his other Pokémon.

‘Welcome to the team, Marill.’ Shouyou whispered to the PokeBall with a placid smile. ‘I hope you don’t mind but I’m gonna call you “Mari” – is that a nice name? I think it’s a nice name.’

Tobio and Shouyou turned to each other and were equally excited.

‘I did it! I caught Marill!’ Shouyou screamed.

‘That was great!’ Tobio replied.

‘C’mon, let’s celebrate with milkshakes!’ Shouyou decided and he started to march off.

Chapter End Notes

Hey, let me know what you guys want to see next because I'm stumped. I have two plans: another Contest arc or skipping straight to Blacklot Mansion (which will be owned by the Haiba siblings!!!) but I'm not sure because if I go with another Contest arc, I'd like to develop Mai and Sakunami but maybe you guys want the Haiba siblings. But if we go down the Contest arc route, there'd most definitely be an epic scene where Shouyou's getting a beat down and it looks like his opponent would win but THEN: Mari evolves mid battle and changes everything.
But, like, I don't know. Let me know your thoughts.
The satisfaction of bringing back two new PokeBalls for Nurse Joy to heal up at the Pokémon Centre was immense. The boys were grinning ear to ear as Nurse Joy chattered to them in the downtime. She kindly asked them about what exactly they had captured and if they had fun or not; that sort of thing. Though, by appearance, it was obvious they must have had a blast at one point or another.

She leaned over the counter. ‘So, what’s next for you boys after this? Gym? Contest? Hearthome?’

‘Heart- wait, did you say Contest?!’ Shouyou jabbered; eyes widening upon hearing that.

‘Yep, Contest. The good ol’ Rainy Season Romp. I won it bac the day.’ Nurse Joy laughed. ‘Yeah, the opening show is the day after tomorrow, lads. I can sign you up from here since I’m on the panel. I’m a lot nicer than my cousins; don’t tell ‘em that though. What do you say?’

‘Sounds great – sign us both up, please, ma’am.’ Shouyou said.

‘Okeydokey so that’s…’ Nurse Joy hauled back and sat down before her computer. She began to start typing away on the off-white keyboard before. ‘So that’s one entry for a Hinata Shouyou… and one entry… for a… Kageyama Tobio… There we go… All done.’

She looked up and beamed at the boys. Shouyou met her with an equally sunny smile. Tobio tried.

Soon after registering them and healing their Pokémon, the boys set to work to putting together a last-minute Appeal Round performance. They were getting better at brainstorming, working out what was and wasn’t possible. It helped hugely having each other around too. It was fortunate, over all, that today and the next day had both been sunny albeit one that was a tad muggy and humid. Still, better the sun over rain.

Somehow, by the time they had wrestled everything up and headed off to the Contest Hall, everything was as perfect as it could be. The pair stood before a generic looking Contest Hall that was bedecked with swamp themed decorations and swathes of fellow Coordinators. There was a great and excited atmosphere. With a brave breath in lung, the boys exchanged a quick word between each other with eager, determined eyes.

‘It’s gonna be my win today.’ Tobio declared.

‘You’re on.’ Shouyou replied with an almost snarly smile.

The two nodded and acknowledged the flare of rivalry between them. Then, they barged through the masses of Trainers. They got through the doors and found solace to the side of the grand innards of the Contest Hall. They also found a pair of familiar faces who warmly greeted.

‘Long time no see, kiddos.’ Mai greeted them with a joking salute.

‘Good to see you again, Nametsu, Sakunami.’ Shouyou greeted them as a group, they cramped along the side of the planked, wooden wall so others could get past them easily.

‘How’s the training going you two?’ Sakunami asked, bright-eyed and genuinely inquisitive.
‘We’re here to win.’ Tobio replied.

Mai laughed boisterously at him; she slapped his back and her over-the-top affection left Tobio slightly bewildered.

‘It’s what you wanna hear but trust me, boys, I’m going to be taking home that Ribbon today but I’ll see one of you in the finals, I trust. Saku-kun, it will be you though.’ Mai teased and nuded him; mussed up his hair and was a playful nuisance to him in general.

‘You’re on, Mai.’ Sakunami replied, a tad testy but all in good jest since he gave her a playful shove back that dissolved her resolve to win into giggles.

One Mai calmed down, she gave the boys a thumbs-up. ‘I’m going to go head off to the girls changerooms. See you lot on stage soon. Probably five minutes now to opening curtain. Break a leg.’

‘Will do.’ Shouyou replied.

Mai waved them off and headed towards where all the female Trainers were clustering. The boys soon headed off in the opposite direction and filtered through the crowds into the male changerooms.

The changerooms were packed and everyone gathered in thick swathes around the flat screens. Everyone eagerly watched as Marian welcomed the audience to today’s Contest. She was in top form on stage and the audience readily responded to her cues. It looked like a good crowd: every seat was filled from the back of the Hall to front. The judges – Nurse Joy, Takeda Ittetsu, and Ukai Keishin - weren’t as tired looking as well. Soon enough, Marian brought out the first performer.

It was a good hour in before Shouyou was brought on stage; the first out of him, Tobio, Sakunami and Tobio but at least the thirtieth performer today. He didn’t mind. Being in the upper middle of things gave him some comfortable confidence.

Shouyou bounded on stage and the audience gave him some applause for his enthusiasm. He stomped up onto the podium provided and took a bow. He hadn’t realised before but he had been craving this sort of attention and now that he’d gotten a fix, his confidence was boosted some more. He had a very good feeling about today.

He selected a PokeBall off his belt: one covered in a blue film and stickers. He grinned to himself. He struck a pose then tossed his PokeBall into the air.

‘Jump out, Karasuno!’ Shouyou yelled.

From a burst of frothing, black smoke, his Murkrow made his appearance. Karasuno let loose a shrill, haunting caw and hovered around Shouyou with succinct flaps of his wings. Shouyou grinned.

‘Just like we practiced.’ Shouyou murmured.

‘Krow!’ Karasuno squawked.

‘Now… let’s high five the sky! Use Sky Attack, Karasuno!’ Shouyou yelled.

Karasuno swooped downwards in a lazy flap but soon bolted straight the ceiling with magnificent speed. His wings stiffened and became crowned with a solid, steely-grey light. His eyes aflame. Karasuno became an arrow head ready to pierce the air and more. Shouyou watched just as eagerly
as the audience; he counted the seconds and kept the distance between Karasuno’s beak and ceiling in mind. Then, he saw it: the split-second opportunity.

‘Astonish!’ Shouyou instructed.

Karasuno let rip a great squawk then disappeared before the eyes of everyone in the crowd. He completely disappeared from the air. The silver light vanished and there was no trace of the Pokémon in sight. Shouyou’s face split into an ear-to-ear grin. Exactly like planed. He couldn’t be happier or prouder.

Karasuno was heard once more with an ear-piercing shriek. Then, he reappeared, his belly skimmed the surface of the floor as he flew precarious close to it. The audience went wild with awe and applause. The judges perked up significantly at the marvellous sleight of hand.

‘Thank you for watching!’ Shouyou yelled as he took a bow. His eyes glittered with hopeful excitement.

Karasuno cawed and served back. With a flutter of his wings, he took perch upon the messy mop of orange hair atop of Shouyou’s head. In something akin to jest, Karasuno stretched out his right wing then took a bow of his own. The pair bathed in glorious, rapturous applause but the audience was kind enough to greet the finish of all acts that way but still, it felt marvellous.

Shouyou reared back and returned Karasuno to his PokeBall as he waited on the judges’ deliberation. They exchanged nods amongst themselves then elected, silently and unanimously, that Nurse Joy would be the first to speak. Her eyes were lit up and she was grinning. A good feeling blossomed in the pit of Shouyou’s stomach.

‘A quick game’s a good game or so they say but I must say you packed so many thrills in such a short space of time: eight of ten.’ Nurse Joy tittered.

Following Nurse Joy’s adjudication was Ukai’s. Shouyou remembers that he is usually a tough nut to crack and knows better than to get his hoes up since Ukai can be an incredibly tough marker. Contrary to that a good feeling in his stomach, Shouyou prepared himself for some harsh criticism.

‘A certain stylistic choice is emerging in your Appeals.’ Ukai said. ‘Short, snappy, visually appealing with high risk but high reward. That says something about you… dunno what but I will keep reminding you of this ‘til the day I die: remain aware of your surroundings. High reward doesn’t always justify high risk. Overall… six points.’

‘Osu.’ Shouyou nodded. He made eye contact with Ukai.

Then, finally, it was Takeda’s turn to speak. He always bore such a gentle expression. It was oddly calming amidst the nerves and adrenaline of performing.

‘Ukai-sensei raises some valuable points, Hinata-kun. I would take them very deeply, in my opinion. He is very correct though when he says that you have a signature style, I hope that you can safely develop it. I grant you seven points.’ Takeda replied.

‘Thank you! Shouyou replied; to all of them.

Soon, Marian swept in and attention went to her and her microphone.

‘Hinata Shouyou gathers up a cool twenty-one points from the judges and a round of applause from the audience. Good for him! Now, let’s get our next Coordinator up here…’
It wasn’t for another twenty minutes before Tobio was brought onto stage. He came onto stage and did his best to muster up a smile. Somehow, it was easier with lots of people – strangers – looking at him compared to when it was Shouyou or someone else close to him. He’s not sure why. He thinks it’s his mode of thinking because right now, he’s calm and in control. It’s time to set the standard.

‘Prinplup!’ Tobio said and he tossed his PokeBall into the air.

His faithful starter emerged from her PokeBall in a cloud of white and blue confetti. She joined Tobio on the stage quite promptly. She took a curt bow then readied herself for Tobio’s instructions.

‘Use Bubblebeam!’ yelled Tobio.

From his side, Prinplup charged out: her wings flared behind her back. She opened her beak as wide as she could and a steady stream of bubbles burst forth. She was surprisingly light on her feet as she navigated the stage; spun on her heel and the stream twirled with her. Awe widened the eyes of the audience as they were curious as to what was planned.

The bubbles floated and glittered in the air. The slight scent of sea salt drifted amid the bubbles and the hall. Prinplup awaited her next order amid them all. So many bubbles had been generated, she was almost lost among them. Her figure distorted through the floating spheres so she turned monstrous.

‘Pound!’ Tobio yelled; his voice cracked.

Yesterday’s practices of this performance had gone excellently. Tobio’s hands curled into a fist as he tentatively watched. He was concerned that his performance might be a bit plain but it was supposed to be concise: a true testament to both himself and Prinplup. The idea was to showcase Prinplup’s strengths: beauty and toughness. He swallowed thickly and hoped for the best and that his concept would be executed and conveyed to best of Prinplup’s ability.

Prinplup gathered its focus and strength and it burst in a controlled and elegantly poised kick. Prinplup swung up and the audience gasped as they marvelled at the height Prinplup got. Prinplup somersaulted once and then outspread its leg. Prinplup struck the floor unflinchingly. A great and thundersome crack reverberated inside the hall. It was a miracle that such a noise was not the product of broken bones or a broken floor.

The bubbles burst because of the vibrations though the noises were lost in the crack. Prinplup got up and toddled back to Tobio’s side. Tobio sucked down a cumbersome breath of air. Together, they took a nerve-wracking bow. The judges then followed the finale with an exchange of glances; their minds clearly buzzing with plenty of thoughts. Tobio wondered if he had somehow managed to trigger a controversial round of adjudication.

It was Ukai who elected to speak first for a change. He made a bridge using his hands and arms; rested his chin on his interlocked fingers. His brows furrowed. He made a serious expression. Tobio’s stomach wretched. He sighed and put his hands on his desk again.

‘There were a lot of ways I had expected this performance to go and that had not been in the vicinity of what I expected.’ Ukai said. His voice was stern but soon turned fair. ‘But I appreciate the surprise. More is less and this has most certainly been the case. I commend your use of combining the two traits most commonly associated with the Piplup line which is beauty and toughness. You’ve exhibited your Prinplup’s capabilities effectively, I have few complaints… Seven points, overall.’
Tobio’s eyes widened; head lifted. It would appear that his intent had been heard loud and clear.

‘Yes, remarkably concise and conveying what it is that makes your Prinplup talented; that being said, I personally found your piece to be a tad too brutishly simple. Still, the raw power Prinplup displayed is, so far today, unparalleled. Hm, it’s been tough but seven points.’ Takeda evaluated. He half smiled: ‘Still, it’s very… “you”, or at least that’s how it feels.’

Then, remained Nurse Joy who was sitting ominously rather than bearing her usual, broad grin. The change in her behaviour made Tobio uneasy and he feared for the worst.

‘Seven points, I give you.’ she said. Calm like the mildness before a storm. To say she was “serious” was an understatement. ‘I am all one for having fun and testing strength but it would have been disastrous if you broke the floorboards but the fact you didn’t, despite it all, is quite the testament to the control you must have drilled into Prinplup in order to achieve such greatness to such little risk. I can appreciate the small details of this seemingly brutishly simple performance. Yes, seven points will do you quite nicely.’

Marian took the attention to her after that with a twirl on her private, raised podium. The cameras swung with her.

‘And a cool twenty-one points for Kageyama Tobio and his princely Prinplup.’ Marian announced and politely shooed the pair off stage as the audience gave them a cavalcade of applause. ‘Now, let’s bring the ever charming Namestu Mai on stage…’

Marian winked at Ukai who stifled an exhausted groan to the amusement of his fellow judge Takeda.
But Bigger is Better

Chapter Notes

I don’t use the word ‘dabbing’ here but please know, that is exactly what is going on during Mai’s performance.

Mai’s mere presence – a wide smile and squinty eyes wrinkled with happy eyes – brought much cheer and liveliness to the stage alone. She was something of a dark horse favourite: no one put much stock in her as she was far outside the top tier Coordinators such as Oikawa Tooru or Kuroo Tetsuro, for example, but when she was on stage there was not a nary complaint in the audience. They loved her and the jubilance she radiated.

Arms outspread and lights basked her; illuminating her natural, homely beauty. She looked stunning in her maroon dress and high heels. She crossed her arms over and from sleight of hand, with a sudden jerk of her wrists, she magically produced a film covered PokeBall covered in seals. The audience cheered; roused with excitement already.

With much grace, Mai tossed the PokeBall in the air and her eyes watched as it peaked. As it began to fall, it cracked open and in a brilliant white light and a multitude of multi-coloured scraps of confetti, she swooped down with an over the top bow with one arm extended above her ducked her head and the other brushing against her nose. Beside her was her ever faithful companion, Bibarel. And Bibarel had also taken a similar, albeit more clumsily put-together version of Mai’s odd bow.

The two reared back and straightened up. The audience laughed. Though Mai was dressed like a glamorous movie star, she was a graceless comedian at heart. She just loves to make people laugh. Her smile transformed; she glowed with self-satisfaction. Even Bibarel, next to her, puffed up with a little bit of pride. It’s true what they say about Pokémon taking after their masters.

‘The fun has only just begun!’ Mai talked to the audience; well aware of their energy and trying to vibe off that. It was an ambitious strategy but one she was confident in regardless.

‘Biba-Biba!’ Bibarel crooned; nodding its head furiously.

‘Today, Bibarel and I will be making a splash!’ Mai yelled.

She finger-gunned the audience with a wink; her Bibarel mimicked. They had very good synergy as a duo; giving life and chemistry to all that they did. It was admirable to say the least and the judges had most certainly noticed. Already they were placing high expectations of Mai and her Bibarel.

‘Let’s start with, Defence Curl!’ Mai instructed.

Bibarel bounded out to the centre of the stage on all fours. Its tail slapped against the floor raucously as it got to where it felt it needed to be. From there, it curled up tightly into a somewhat lumpy sphere. Once satisfied with the fortifying of its defences, Bibarel unfurled with great energy. It whipped itself around and jumped slightly into the air.
‘Now, let’s use Surf!’ Mai yelled.

‘Biiiba!’ Bibarel cooed in reply.

Bibarel whipped around again but this time the curl of azure water manifested in the wake of its movement. The water rose up and glistened in the yellow-white hue of the stage lights. Sparkles reflected on its crystal-like surface as Bibarel controlled it. The water ribbed like a wave but it was oddly precise; every movement well practiced and calculated. It was especially apparent when it was realised that Bibarel remained dry amid the water. The water swished and swirled around Bibarel until it, from a bird’s eye view, was like a blooming flower with petals flourishing outwards and upwards.

‘Okay, just like we practiced…’ Mai mumbled before raising her voice for her next instruction: ‘Charge Beam!’

The audience gasped. With all the water around it and being a water type, it seemed self-destructive to use an electric type move but nevertheless, Bibarel obeyed.

Its stout body began to shine with a dazzlingly bright yellow gleam. Electricity crackled in haphazard circles around it. Each energetic leap of the energy building up teased at the water Bibarel was surrounded with; and was remaining in control of even though it was preparing a second attack. The electricity continued to concentrate until Bibarel reached its tantalising close limit. From its gaping mouth burst a powerful beam of light and electricity.

The grandiose yellow beam shot upwards and futilely grabbed at the ceiling with its sparks. Before they could even reach the ceiling, they scattered and loosened. A gentle shimmer fell over the stage as glitter rained down softly. The energy still within of Bibarel, however, had not gone upwards but rather downwards and into the water.

Sparks of electricity coursed viciously through the water Bibarel continued to move. The electricity turned a sort of greenish hue as it turned the water into a circuit for its race. It spiralled around Bibarel in a pattern against the twirl of the water. It was beautifully executed.

‘We’re just about done folks… let’s give ‘em a show, Biba-kun! Use Rollout!’ Mai yelled.

Unthinkingly, she pointed her hand to the ceiling and struck a pose. She laughed at herself and at how lost in the energy she was. She was positively thriving with all the audience’s eyes on her and Bibarel.

Bibarel sucked down a big breath. It hefted its arms and its black eyes gleamed with determination. Mai gave it the thumbs-up and a big grin:

‘You can do it; just like we practiced.’ she urged.

Bibarel bounded into the air. Upon launching itself, it got great height and used that time to curl up in a ball. When Bibarel plummeted to the centre of the breaking apart water and electricity, it was like watching a bouncy ball. Bibarel smacked into the floor with great ordinance which echoed in everyone’s ears. Then bounded back up and in the wake, the water and electricity grabbed after it.

The water and electricity jumped. It tried to reach out to Bibarel but in the ending, such effort was meaningless. Bibarel’s thud had scattered it all and rendered it into nothingness. It was a slow, glittering process that left the eyes awed; but ears assaulted.

Bibarel uncurled and outspread its stubby arms; basked in the glory it had created. The
audience’s noises swelled to the loudest point. Applause rumbled throughout the contest hall.

‘With a-one, and a two, and a three…’ Mai coordinated Bibarel and the two took a proper bow together.

Mai reared up and Bibarel toddled in closer to her. Mai’s eyes lit up with joy as she cast them towards the beaming judges. It was time to have her fortune told and she was feeling more than lucky after that display. Her heart pounded in her chest. Her hands clasped together in prayer and waited with bated breaths.

‘And, with that wondrous display, let’s see how the judges score Mai and her darling Bibarel.’ Marian said into her booming microphone; her hand sweeping across in front of her for extra emphasis.

‘I am speechless.’ Nurse Joy began. Her voice excitedly bubbled up from her throat; cluttered and genuine. She blinked and slowly began to phase out her words and ideas; her hands tapping against her podium as she thought. ‘This was a very high-risk performance but not once did it feel like it was high risk. It truly gave the sense that it was rehearsed bit by bit to ensure maximum safety. And the little details – the way the electricity spun one way; the water going the other – were fabulous! I am in awe. Nine points; easy-peasy-lemon-squeezy.’

Mai’s breath hitched in her throat, her shoulders raised unconsciously, and her smile broaded. Mechanically, she swivelled herself so she could face the next person down the line the judges sat in.

‘I would prefer not speaking over Nurse Joy’s points as they are concise, accurate, and well-put so I would like to raise the other most glaring virtue of this performance which is you and Bibarel’s onstage charisma. The way you communicate not only with each other but the audience as well is spectacular. Being unafraid to truly entertain; some Coordinators today have proved they are still quite shy in that regard so your performance sticks out even more. I can’t help but admire the bond between you and Bibarel and that is what a Contest ought to be about. Nine points.’ Takeda enthused.

Mai almost swooned but she kept herself composed. She had to after such lavishing good word. Then her stomach knotted. Everyone knew that Ukai was a hard-ass and it’s not like she made a good impression on him earlier this year when she had aggravated his headache with a horribly noisy performance but she – and her Pokemon – have grown so much since then. She was certain that this time around, she would earn his favour. No less than seven points from him she prayed.

He took a breath and sighed. His hardened eyes glinted; as though to draw out the anxiety swirling in the pit of Mai’s stomach. Then he cracked a smirk. He chuckled. He folded his arms and raised his head as his smirk transformed into a grin. Mai honestly thought her heart had stopped beating in that moment.

‘You’ve got me.’ he stated. ‘I’m genuinely struggling to find a way to burst your bubble but you’ve got all the bases covered: creativity, safety, originality, and charm. The performance was close to flawless, honestly. But there is an incessant ringing in my ear currently so I suppose I can only, in all honesty, mark you down there. But, overall, this was a brilliant piece and I have very high hopes for you now, Nametsu. Eight points.’ He concluded himself with a wink and nod.

‘Nametsu Mai surfs in at a cool twenty-six points; easily putting her in a gnarly top percent of today’s performances.’ Marian announced.

Mai turned to Bibarel and stretched out her hands.
‘You hear that, Biba-kun: twenty-six points!’ she squealed then tackled Bibarel into a giant hug. She swung bibarel around and the two then toddled offstage as Mai could sense that Marian wanted her to vacate so she could bring on the next act.

‘And now, we have the ever-charming Sakunami Kosuke joining us!’ Marian said.

Mai and Sakunami passed each other in the corridor and though being somewhat pressed for time, on Sakunami’s side, they still found time to jibe each other.

‘Twenty-six points, Saku-kun, beat that.’ Mai said as she blew a raspberry at him.

‘Gladly.’ Sakunami replied, a touchy snarky then grew irritated; crossed his arms. ‘You promised you wouldn’t do anything embarrassing.’

‘Whatever.’ Mai laughed.

Sakunami huffed then continued to march off down the corridor. He ended up onstage and countless curious eyes were looking forward to this performance. Everybody had some awareness that Sakunami and Mai were something of a package deal. Last year, Mai had been a decent soloist and at some point earlier this year, she had taken the younger Trainer under her wing for reasons unknown. It was by Sakunami’s appearance by her side, that Mai was beginning to flourish – especially in double battles with him. And, having the aid of a slightly senior Trainer, Sakunami was growing at an astonishing rate. At least compared to his fellow peers from this year who have not been so privileged to have an older Trainer absorb them into tutelage.

Sakunami took a breath as he looked out against the stage lights. He was a little bit nervous but he thirsted to show off his rehearsals more. He brought out a PokeBall from the inner pocket of his vest. He took another breath and a nervous smile split across his face.

‘Umbreon!’ Sakunami yelled as he tossed his PokeBall into the air.

His PokeBall opened wide and a plume of blue-black smoke drooled from within it and crawled in lazy globs along the floor. From within the murky depths of the smoke, Sakunami’s Umbreon revealed itself with a fearsome prowl. It raised its head and yowled.

‘Here we go, Umbreon…’ Sakunami murmured whilst Umbreon’s voice turned into a whine before becoming choppy yips. ‘Let’s start! Use Moonlight!’

Umbreon threw back its head and a beautiful visual was summoned. A full moon unfurled above it: luminous but eerie; it cast a pink-silver glow over that beneath it.

‘Alright, now use Confuse Ray.’ Sakunami said, he tapped his toes, as though counting to an unknown rhythm. Like he was trying to keep pace to practice.

A soft, magnificent light blossomed from the crown of Umbreon’s head; produced from the ring of golden fur embedded amid the charcoal black of the rest of its body. Soon, the other loops of gold-yellow furs lit up just as softly like starlight. Between the shafts of light produced from
Umbreon’s body, a mysterious and mystical of shapeless, blue-violet fire took form. It aimlessly floated. No pattern to its gentle swaying as it moved around the lights, star, and moon. Recoloured and miscoloured as it went.

‘C’mon, buddy, hold it a little longer.’ Sakunami urged; his voice beneath his breath so only Umbreon’s sensitive ears could pick up his encouragement. His lips barely moved as he spoke.

It was like observing space. Ever moving and illuminated softly. It was nigh biblical: capturing something so vast in a smidgen of the expanse. It wasn’t true to life but it was innately holy and beautiful with Umbreon, the centrepiece, representing the black, inky abyss of night with the moon, stars, and fictionalised planets upon its mantle. The visual left the audience breathless.

‘Alrighty, time to finish up,’ Sakunami decided and he struck out against the hair, ‘Umbreon, use Dark Pulse!’

Umbreon’s body stiffened as it took a breath; an exhaled snort through its nostrils soon after. Then came a most ferocious howl. It was not quite deafening but it was loud and all encompassing. From beneath its tiny paws, a brown-black, like the colour of dried blood, miasma erupted. Evil and cloying it came before becoming somewhat purified. The colour changed to more of that of a malicious purple than anything than it was before. It ringed and ringed like a coil as it sprung upwards.

Soon, the darkness engulfed the rest of Umbreon and Sakunami’s display of space. With voracious greed, the darkness spread from the confines of the moon and stars. It blackened the entire stage: only the lunar rings of muted yellow upon Umbreon’s fur remained…

And even they soon disappeared into the darkness like the waxing of the moons they represented.

A silver lightning strike soon purged the darkness: Sakunami returning Umbreon to its PokeBall. A clever illusion that parted the darkness and heralded the end of the performance. There was a pause. A breath. Silence. Sakunami swallowed and took a bow. Again, there was still silence until a lone person in the audience began to clap; a dazed, stunned look in their eyes before an eruption of applause ensued.

Sakunami’s heart was fit to burst; his eyes watered and his smile wobbled. He reared back, held his hands, and greeted the audience with an earnest expression of disbelief.

Not being one to let the audience’s cheer reign for too long as there was a schedule to keep, Marian corralled the audience and gestured the judges. Her grin was wide. Her eyes sparkled. She held her microphone to her mouth then spoke.

‘Will stars align for young Sakunami Kosuke, here? Only his fortune will tell.’ Marian punned.

‘I am over the moon, er, forgive my, uh, wordplay with this performance!’ Takeda jabbered animatedly. His eyes shone with utter admiration. ‘The concept and execution were, in my humble opinion, flawless. The lunar theme to the performance truly accentuates Umbreon’s natural charms and excellently utilises its move pool. I haven’t enough time or breath to fully convey how thoroughly impressed I am with this performance. Nine points, overall because there’s always room for improvement… I’m not sure where though; perhaps,’ Takeda cautiously eyed his fellow judge, ‘Ukai-sensei might have a word or two for that.’

‘Heck yeah, I do.’ Ukai almost leaped out of his chair on that on then regained his composure a moment later. He coughed into his fist as he blushed slightly.
Takeda chuckled discretely.

‘Yes, there is always room for improvement. What you’ve shown us today is that you are ready to use more advanced tactics during your Appeal Rounds. Combing and overlaying attacks to create something new is something us judges eat up; your almost there as you’ve show your Umbreon’s propensity for prolonged attacks so polish that up, I reckon, and then you’ll be getting the big points. For now, eight points as I can see that you have a little bit more polishing up but I swear, you’ll get a perfect score eventually.’ Ukai delivered his enthusiastic dissertation of Sakunami’s performance.

‘I believe both my fellow judges have accurately torn apart and put your performance back together again, Sakunami-kun. I feel like there is little I could say that has not already been one and thought I love to smack my lips and lollygag, I feel that would not be very useful to anyone. I loved your performance. Nine points, my boy.’ Nurse Joy rambled with a big smile on her sweet face.

Sakunami’s brow twitched as he tallied up his own points; the nine-nine-eight pattern very familiar. He sighed.

‘Twenty-six points!’ Marian’s voice boomed across the Contest Hall.

‘The same as…’ Sakunami mumbled.

‘The same as his predecessor and partner in crime, Nametsu Mai!’ Marian announced.

Marian continued to speak and Sakunami quietly escorted himself off of the stage. He could already envision the teasing Mai would give him over getting the same score as him. But still, that put them both in with a good chance of making it through to the next round and that is all which really matters.
After Sakunami’s performance, it became clear that they were in the last leg of the Performance Round as, soon enough, the Coordinators backstage were confronted with the nerve-wracking question of who will be permitted to enter the Battle Round?

There was a ten-minute interval of nothingness wherein the judges took a breath and the points were tallied. An interval in which the cut-off point score would be decided. Ten minutes seemed to turn to ten hours for the Coordinators. Everybody clustered around the flat screen television mounted to the wall. Everybody held bated breath as they watched Marian go through the motions of jokes and chatter and then, her eyes gleamed. She was interrupted by herself. She adjusted her headset. Her grin widened.

‘We have our results, folks!’ she bellowed. ‘From the hundred-and-seventy-two Coordinators who performed in our Appeal Round, only twenty-four shall make it to the Battle Round. Let’s begin with the cut-off: twenty-one points! As there were a few stragglers down with twenty-one points, the judges put forth their favourites as the bottom line. Those who do not see their face on the screen or have their name called out, unfortunately, you have been dismissed. Better luck next time!’

Marian’s face left the television screen. It went to an electric blue that was somewhat hard on the eye but then, it was like a packet of cards were spread out over it. In totally, there were twenty-four of these cards. Gradually, the cards began to flip over. The first face revealed was that of Nametsu Mai and her name was then heard over the loud-speaker. The next card flipped over to reveal Sakunami Kosuke. It was only natural they would be selected first as they had easily left the strongest impressions on the judges and had been the only ones to get as high as twenty-six points.

Tobio and Shouyou stood next to each other; shoulder-shoulder, packed in against the crowd tightly. Their fingers grazing over their hands accidentally but they were so affectionate with each other nowadays, that they barely noticed that they had ended up holding hands since everyone around them was pushing and shoving.

It was horribly, horribly slow to wait for the cards to flip over. Both were part of the many that had scored poorly. Everyone was hoping that it would be them. The second last card finally flipped over: sharp, blue eyes, black hair, and a scowl.

‘Kageyama Tobio!’ Marian announced.

Shouyou looked up at Tobio: warmth swirled in his eyes as Tobio met his gaze.

‘Congratulations.’ Shouyou beamed.

Tobio blinked. He seemed too awkward to smile. He trying to hide his pity. It seemed so slim of a chance for them both to make it through the next round but, nevertheless, he prayed. He was so proud of Shouyou’s talents. Surely, surely, he’ll make it. Tobio told himself uselessly.

Those there was sunshine in his eyes, Shouyou was quite murky with emotion on the inside. Inwardly, he was burning hot with fear and jealousy. But for Tobio, he’d put on a smile. Weakly, Shouyou returned his gaze to the television screen only to have his worst fears confirmed.

He didn’t recognise the Trainer. Or the name. He just recognised that those weren’t his eyes. Those eyes were green; not brown. That wasn’t his messy mop of orange hair. That was someone
else’s curtain of sleek, brunette hair. That wasn’t his face.

‘The Battle Round will commence in twenty-five minutes’ time. Grab lunch, drink, and seat!’ Marian reminded.

Around them, the Trainers dispersed. Either to get changed into their casual clothes and leave or to prepare for the next round, they left until only Shouyou and Tobio remained in front of the television screen.

Shouyou’s hand slipped from Tobio. He darted his eyes away from Tobio, slightly embarrassed that they had accidentally been holding hands. Tobio lowered his gaze also.

‘I’m so sorry.’ he apologised.

‘It’s fine. I just have to do better next time.’ Shouyou replied. An unusual sting to his tone of voice that wounded Tobio.

‘Yeah.’ Tobio replied. His voice cracked. ‘It was going to happen eventually.’

‘Well, good luck, you deserved to place. Don’t waste your chance.’ Shouyou said. ‘I’m gonna go get changed and I’ll be cheering for you the whole time.’

‘Thanks.’ Tobio smiled.

He was glad that Shouyou had brightened up somewhat. Shouyou breathed in deeply and pumped himself up. Tobio always felt a little bit more confident with Shouyou backing him than without. He wasn’t sure why. They were supposed to be rivals, after all. Not each other’s cheer leaders. Then again, nowadays they were friends first rather than rivals so perhaps that was just natural progression of their relationship.

Shouyou got changed and hustled up his things. He grabbed a hot dog from one of the concession stands, as well as a bottle of soft drink, then headed back to the bleachers. He found an empty seat along the second last row and sat down. That had consumed most of the twenty-five-minute break. Still, by the time the Contest was to resume, he was very comfortable. He had also forgotten about his bitterness too. It was still there and it still hurt but Tobio genuinely did deserve a spot and Shouyou was Tobio’s friend first rather than his own selfish emotions.

Shouyou took a second bite from his hot dog. Mustard and tomato sauce smeared across his face. It was a fantastic hot dog. He lifted his head when he heard an electric crackle and sure enough, Marian’s face was televised to the big screen. She looked oddly surprised rather than charismatic and in control like usual.

‘There’s been an issue. Unfortunately, one girl’s diabetes has begun to act up and she has told us that she would like to pull out. Not being able to run the roster with only twenty-three Coordinators, there’s been a last-minute delay. The judges and I would like to welcome back Hinata Shouyou to the stage!’ Marian rambled.

Shouyou’s eyes were dazzled as the bright, white spotlight homed in on him. He squinted into blackness; hyperaware of the mustard stains on his face. With him and his mess in full view due being projected onto the big flat screen, the audience around Shouyou couldn’t help but to erupt in a crash of giggles. Shouyou went red and haphazardly rubbed the drying stains off his face before stuffing the last of his hot dog into his mouth.

He begged for another minute as he got to his feet and grabbed his bag. There was no time to get changed so his everyday Trainer clothes – a yellow shirt, shorts – would have to do rather than
Tobio’s fancy hand-me-downs. Despite the rough start, Shouyou wouldn’t change a thing because he was so thankful for this freak chance.

Shouyou raced behind the stands and he dashed into the short-cut towards the toilets then turned off that corridor so he ended up backstage. He had no trouble getting backstage but it was kind of embarrassing that security let him pass with a chuckle rather than the request of a Trainer ID or similar; like he had earlier.

Tobio greeted him proudly. ‘You lucky dumbass.’ he said fondly.

‘I’m not gonna waste this chance; if we get matched, I’m beating you to the ground.’ Shouyou defended himself.

‘Too bad I have other plans.’ Tobio said.

Before the boys could continue a volley of rivalrous banter, Marian interrupted them. She practically glittered as the light fell softly upon her and she extended her hand to the audience.

‘Time for the first battle…’

Over the next half an hour, she introduced the Contestants who would duke it out. Soon enough, only four Trainers remained – and Shouyou was among them; and by now fluke. Though it was extraordinary lucky but he had earned his place among the top four. He and his partner Pokémon had been battling beautifully with a fire lit in their bellies.

To no one’s surprise, the other three joining Shouyou in the top four were the judges’ favourites: Kageyama Tobio, Nametsu Mai, and Sakunami Kosuke. Those three had been battling ferociously as well. Every position was hard won but worth every expense of effort.

And from these four, a winner must emerge. They nervously waited as Marian introduced the pair who would become runner-up and third place.

‘Now… let’s bring back… Kageyama Tobio and Nametsu Mai to the stage!’

Her words came like a bucket of cold water. From their loss and their win, a surely epic battle was likely to proceed as everyone wants to believe them and their best friend would make it through.

Shouyou and Sakunami held onto bated breath as their beloved best friends took the stage. Both equal in determination but would they be equal in skill?

Only two minutes would part them and deliver an answer to that question.

Mai grinned widely and Tobio burned with quiet but fierce concentration. The audience was lapping it up. Their stage presences were very different but both adored nevertheless. The two Coordinators readied their selected PokeBalls as Marian continued with the proceedings. She extend her hand daintily towards the camera – towards the viewers at – home and greeted them all with a saucy wink.

‘With two minutes on the clock, who will just make it short of bronze? Who will claim victory? Let’s find out!’ Marian commentated.

On the flat screen, electronic numbers burst to life with a lemony vibrancy. With the utmost urgency, two PokeBalls were flung forward and from clusters of confetti Mai and Tobio’s selected Pokémon appeared. The battle began.
Mai VS Tobio

Mai and Tobio’s battle commenced with much anticipation radiating from the audience.

‘Wormadam, go!’

‘Gallade!’

Their PokeBalls opened and there was a radiant burst of sparks from both PokeBalls. Electricity, harmless but beautiful, cascaded over their Pokémon as they took the stage in which their battle would be conducted. Their Pokémon stared each other down and playfully grunted; signifying competition.

‘Magical Leaf!’ Tobio instructed.

He chewed his lip as he threw his arm across the air in façade of confidence. Gallade and Wormadam was an ill-fitting match-up; Mai had the advantage. None of Gallade’s attacks would be enough to knock out Wormadam with anything super-effective but maybe Tobio would get lucky. Gallade knew a lot of “pretty” attacks after all and this was a battle where the sustenance was beauty rather than strength.

Gallade thrust its arms forward like the slash of a sabre. In the wake and through the displaced air, beautiful leaves spawned. They were sharp-edged and gleamed with all the iridescent colours of a rainbow. The leaves shot forth swiftly. They chased Wormadam who was unable to evade; their accuracy deadly. Wormadam was shredded by the leaves. The ruff of its foliaged neck wobbled as it podded back in slight pain. It was able to resist well though.

The metre bar of yellow that represented Mai shrank by the tiniest margin. She clicked her tongue and waggled her finger at Tobio. She bore a frustratingly cheeky grin because of it.

‘Tsk, tsk, Yamayama-kun, you’ll have to do better than that to defeat my lovely Wormadam and I.’ she taunted.

‘Hey, don’t call me Yamayama-kun!’ Tobio shouted back, blushing.

‘D’aw, is only the little shrimp kid allowed to call you that?’ Mai teased.

‘Wait, what?!’ Tobio yelped.

Mai chuckled. ‘He’s where I picked it up from. Any-who… Wormadam, use Hidden Power!’

‘Worm!’ her Pokémon cooed shrilly.

Tobio glared. His Gallade readied itself for anything. Wormadam twirled where it stood. Its eyes lit up like headlights as it exuded a mysterious, pale blue aura. The aura thickened; turned from light to liquid. Three orbs of water were conducted through the air and with a powerful thrust of its antenna forward, the orbs of water were sent flying. Gallade attempted to deflect them by protectively raising up its arms but failed ultimately. With a shower of mist, the orbs split across Gallade’s arms. It howled as it took the brunt of the attack.

The yellow health bar that represented Tobio was depleted somewhat. He gritted his teeth. Perhaps one-sixth of his health had been taken by that attack. Mai beamed as she praised her chuffed Wormadam.
‘Let’s get payback, Gallade: use a combination of Confusion and Disarming Voice!’ Tobio instructed.

This would be the only way he could attack Mai’s health points whilst bypassing the type disadvantage that was set up. Gallade nodded and Tobio entrusted hope on his Pokémon. He was certain that Gallade would rise to the occasion and fulfil all of Tobio’s expectations and more. He was certain that Gallade was capable of something spectacular and fantastic despite the pressure that this would be the first time in which they had tried such a combination inside a battle – and one for the Ribbon at that.

His Gallade’s shoulders rose as it inhaled a large breath. There was a determined glint in its crimson eyes. It concentrated; visualised how it thought Tobio would want such a complicated instruction to be fulfilled. It took a second breath; shallow this time and then, upon exhalation, it threw its voice forward.

Its voice manifested with a pastel pink aura. It appeared like there were visible strands of the noises Gallade was making. Though Gallade sounded akin to yowling, there was something oddly soothing about the tone of the voice. Such an empathetic cry for help, almost. It was irresistible to the ears.

Meanwhile, energy, a mystical pink-purple in colour, danced along the thin, ivory arms of Gallade. The energy was thick and droopy, like viscous slime, but it moved with such vivacity that it clumped and jumped from Gallade’s arms. Gallade swung its arm through the air with a vicious, sharp chop contrary to the delicate colours spurning forth freely from it.

The energy swung off Gallade’s arm and catapulted through the air. The ring of baby pink light caused by Gallade’s attack became something of a dart’s target for it. The Confusion spun clockwise whilst the Disarming Voice spun the opposite way, and yet in their concentric circles, they looked beautiful together and perfectly synchronised.

Wormadam steadied itself for the attack. Mai smirked. She folded her arms and much like her partner Pokémon, she too braced herself for what was about to happen next. She was beyond confident and it struck a deep chord of fear inside of Tobio.

What if this attack combination wasn’t enough?

There was only one way to find out.

Gallade puffed out its chest once more and from its mouth, burst a second Disarming Voice; one that had not been commanded by Tobio. The attack spiralled and frothed with an almost foamy light. The attack pushed past the first and gave it momentum. The attacks spun and collided; fizzled and spat like toy fireworks. It was quite adorable, really which made it unbecoming for such a stern and knightly Pokémon such as Gallade.

But it was thanks to that push that Wormadam finally was hit with the attack. Wormadam had taken it head on though; unflinchingly, even. The attack dissolved across its front. Pink sparkles crashed over the ruff of its plant cloak. Wormadam’s eyes narrowed. It seemed to have taken no damage at all.

Tobio’s heart sank.

‘What a wonderful combination of attacks but Wormadam was able to resist the psychic-type Confusion and fairy-type Disarming Voices. But will Kageyama Tobio have earned points for style?’ Marian asked.
Tobio couldn’t look.

Both he and Mai had taken damage to their health bars for the technique that Tobio had used. Wormadam had taken a smidgen of physical damage if any. That tiny bit of hurt Gallade had dealt was represented on the board but most of what was removed from Mai’s health bar was from the prettiness of the combination. Tobio, of course, for seemingly stupidly pitting ineffective damage against Mai’s Wormadam was also represented on the board. If Mai took slightly less than a quarter of her full health bar, then Tobio took some of that as well. It was strangely fair.

‘Now, let’s show this fool how type match-ups are really done, eh, Wormy?’

‘Worm!’ Wormadam cooed back to Mai’s cool taunts.

‘Use Bug Bite, boo!’ Mai called out with a jaunty point of her hand like a gun.

Wormadam shuffled forward; eyes drawn in a determined glare despite its cutesy appearance. It lifted its protruding, long nose and flashed the tiny teeth that was hidden between its chin and the ruff of its fluffy with foliage cloak. Wormadam tackled Gallade and with a noisy chomp, sank its many, tiny teeth into Gallade’s arm. Gallade swung its arms around in an effort to dispel Wormadam’s efforts to bite it but it only aggravated the attack. Wormadam only sank its teeth in further.

It seemed like a puny, inelegant attack but the consequences were larger than they appeared. Gallade was slowly sapped of its strength. Gallade dropped to its knee but tried to have its head remain up, valiant and in poise like a knight. But gradually, its energy drooped and it could only falter.

Gallade silently flopped forward. Wormadam scurried away from Gallade’s falling body. Wormadam returned to Mai’s side. She got up on her tip-toes; her pointed heels slightly lifting from the linoleum floor as she gasped. As she watched; as Tobio watched.

Tobio’s fists curled in by his side. He had utter faith in his Gallade that it could rebound from such a blow but an insidious doubt chilled his organs. He nervously glanced towards the health bar on the plasma widescreen and his stomach dropped. His mouth went dry. His Gallade’s eyes spun as it was unable to get up. The thud of its movements resounded through the auditorium like a hallowed echo of loss.

The yellow colouring of Tobio’s health bar was obliterated. Completely and totally erased into nothing but blackness. There was a moment of pause before the screen faded and was replaced by the visage of Mai’s Trainer photo: bearing a grin that did not match the one she bore now. The beam she bore now was silly and joyous.

The crowd erupted into applause for her. Tobio had put up a good fight, all things considered but it was not enough. Marian shot him a sympathetic smile but perhaps half a second before twirling on her podium and bringing attention to her.

‘What a fantastic battle, folks! Kageyama Tobio and his Gallade performed a spectacular combo but Nametsu Mai once again proving that there is beauty in resistance! Now, young Nametsu Mai and her Wormadam will be the ones ascending to the next round!’ Marian commentated.

‘Good game, Yamayama-kyun.’ Mai teased as she poked out her tongue at Tobio.

‘Yeah, good game.’ Tobio said. He hoped that he didn’t sound as bitter as he felt. Or looked that matter. He frowned. ‘And don’t call me that!’
Mai giggled.

‘Now, let’s welcome to stage, our next set of Trainers. From this win, one will spring forth against Nametsu Mai for the Ribbon! Will it be… faithful companion to our lovely lady Mai; Sakunami Kosuke?! Or will it be the boy from the boonies, Hinata Shouyou?’ Marian commentated.

Mai sauntered towards Tobio, chuffed by her win but visibly playful. Tobio, unused to such demeanour, stiffened at her affectionate touch. She ran her hands along his collar and pulled him in for a hug.

‘You did your best and that’s all you can ever ask. C’mon, let’s see how our beloved Shou-chan and Saku-kun go.’ she said.

‘Yeah.’ Tobio awkwardly agreed.

Whilst they strangely shuffled through the corridor thanks to height difference and Mai’s refusal to let go of Tobio, they passed Shouyou and Sakunami. Those two practically bounded through the chilly hall; beaming. They were almost racing: who would appear on stage first and brush against the thunderous applause of the audience first?

Mai and Sakunami exchanged a quick handshake; an unspoken promise to meet one another in the finals. Shouyou and Tobio, meanwhile, gave each other a firm glance. They had no need for fanciful gestures or even words to meet their understanding. Shouyou was resolute. Tobio wanted to give him his support. It was their understanding that Shouyou would be the one to win a blaze of fantastic glory. Tobio was certain.
Audience energy was already quite hyper after Mai’s win but with Shouyou and Sakunami bounding onto the stage, the people of the crowd became all the more riled up. As a pair, they had a unique synergy that was distinct from when it was Tobio and Mai; or even when they were paired up with their iconic friend.

Shouyou grinned. He stretched out his shoulders, his hair catching on his collar as he loosened up. Sakunami was opposite him, psyching himself up with a more focused expression. There was a lull of movement and sound before the crackle of breath over the speakers.

‘Here we are ladies, gentlemen, and distinguished guests: the semi-finals. Of these two strapping young lads, one will emerge victorious and go onto either best – or be bested by – Nametsu Mai. Only two minutes remains between who will win between these boys pitted against each other. Hinata Shouyou… Sakunami Kosuke… heads or tails?’ Marian asked with a wry wink to match her voice.

‘Heads!’ Shouyou yipped.

‘Tails.’ Sakunami replied.

There was a moment of pause in which the television screen blackened and the image was replaced by a golden coin with the image of a Magikarp and a crown etched upon its two faces. The toss deliberated over a few moments. However, soon the figure of a crown was illuminated.

‘Heads it is so the first turn belongs to Hinata!’ Marian said. The television screen’s image changed once more. ‘Your match begins, now!’

There was a split second in which both boys glanced at the plasma, flat screen. It had, moments before, displayed their faces and health bars with the timer not yet set but now, time was already ticking. Shouyou grinned as he tossed out a PokeBall and his enthusiasm was met with respect from Sakunami.

‘Mothim!’

‘Nyta!’

The PokeBall were tossed into high arcs. When they opened, they opened with grandeur: explosions of colourful confetti that faded into nothingness after a moment’s passing. In a blaze of amber glory, Nyta took the stage with a bouncy and rollicking movement. Sakunami’s Mothim meanwhile unfurled its wings with a seemingly stern expression.

A cocky grin smeared across Shouyou’s face. He struck the air with a thrust of his arm and soon followed a command in the wake of the displaced particles.

‘Ember!’ Shouyou yelled.

Nyta charged towards Mothim with a buck to her gallop. She threw her head back and the flames that danced along her neck seemed to grow stronger. From deep within her gut, she expelled a barrage of fiery pellets from her mouth. The embers sprayed across Mothim; battering it and it winced with every impact.

In consequence, Shouyou had managed to knock out part of Sakunami’s health bar. Where it had
once been fully yellow, it had now been depleted perhaps one fifth with black filling the once vibrant yellow colouring of the bar. Shouyou grinned. Sakunami’s brow twinged with irritation.

‘Hit us once, we’ll come back twice as hard!’ Sakunami warned. ‘Mothim, use Hidden Power!’

Mothim became effervescent with a white aura. Around its fragile, glowing body manifested pale brown orbs which seemed to have the consistency of mud. With a cry it fearfully threw itself forward slightly. Its wings flickered and flapped. The orbs were sent flying.

Nyta was bombarded with the attack. Upon contact, the gleaming consistency of the orb turned to a bomb of mud. Nyta whinnied loudly as she was barraged with a powerful, ground-type attack. Sakunami grinned viciously, but not smugly, whilst his Mothim made trilling noises out of the thrill of the small victory. On the television screen, Shouyou had sustained at least one quarter’s worth of damage.

‘A stunning comeback! This match isn’t as one-sided as type match-ups might make you believe!’ Maria commentated.

‘We can do this Nyta!’ Shouyou piped up, a determined glint blazing in his eyes.

Sakunami paused, swallowed: intimidated but he didn’t know why. He was slightly taller and had a year’s worth of experience up on Shouyou and yet, he was intimidated regardless. There was something uncannily fierce about those eyes of Shouyou’s. But it excited Sakunami. Nothing was better than fighting tooth and nail and he considered himself to be of the utmost defence which was an excellent par since Shouyou was the offensive type.

‘Flame Wheel, Nyta!’ Shouyou shouted.

Nyta bounded forward. The flames on the tips of her elbows and along her back erupted into flames of inferno-like proportions. The fire she donned was magical and majestic: royal hues of red and orange. Nyta tackled into the foe Mothim and both Pokémon became engulfed in enormous flames that burned like the summer sun. Both Pokémon crooned: one out of pain, one out of power.

The flames died down. Mothim broke free and with a desperate twirl of its wings, it broke free of its burns. It refused to bow. It refused to faint. It had survived the critical hit that Nyta had damaged it with.

‘Attaboy, Mothim!’ Sakunami called out. ‘I’m proud of you! We can still win this, I believe in you, Mothim… Use Confusion!’

Shakily, wearily even, his Mothim outstretched its wings and its eyes glowed with prismatic colours. Spiralling out from its pupils, bizarre light and energy was radiated. Nyta attempted to get away from it but instead, she was drawn. She was utterly enchanted by the alluring, kaleidoscope colours.

In a vibrant cascade, the colours shattered over Nyta. Her eyes glazed over and took on all the hues of the rainbow. She began to stumble around and made odd noises. Shouyou’s brow twitched as he recognised that these were symptoms of confusion. Sakunami smirked, smug as a smudge.

Shouyou glanced at the flat screen. He’d taken a fair bit of damage from that and as a result, much of his health bar had blackened. He was nervous but he knew, he knew he could still win. If he could get the knock-out on this next turn, he’d win.

‘What’re you going to do now, Hinata-kun?’ Sakunami taunted.
'We’ll overcome any challenge!' Shouyou brashly replied on the top of his lungs.

Nyta made a noise which was like a crackle of fire but it was faint. Shouyou could taste his brashness turn bitter on his tongue. Words clogged in the back of his throat but he trusted Nyta. He knew Nyta could overcome any hurdle with a magnificent leap. Now would be no different.

‘A minute remains…’ Marian ominously reminded the Trainers and all the auditorium.

‘Nyta!’ Shouyou shouted; a sharp breach of the air turning electric with suspense and dramatics. ‘Use Flame Charge!’

Nyta lifted her head. Her ears flicked about and she blinked. For a moment, it seemed likely that she would succumb to the spell of confusion but she shook her head violently. She stomped down and her tail rose. From her hooves up, she erupted into a vivacious inferno. She lowered her head and there was utter clarity in her charcoal black eyes. There was a pause; the numbers on the screen ticked then she surged forward at top speed.

Nyta bolted straight at Mothim. Mothim trilled out of panic as the enormous flames engulfed it and as Nyta tackled it. Nyta soared the through the air, a gorgeous leap, and tackled right into Mothim’s chest. She pinned it to the floor and there was the faint scent of burning plastic.

Nyta bucked her hind legs and zig-zagged off. She knew the battle had been one. There was a moment of deliberation before it was decided: Mothim’s eyes truly were spinning. The health bar by Sakunami’s image turned to black. There was a pause and a breath over the speakers.

‘Hinata Shouyou has claimed victory!’ Marian yelled.

The screen turned completely black before Shouyou’s image took to the centre: large and proud.

‘Hinata Shouyou will be the one to proceed to the finals against Nametsu Mai!’ Marian continued.

The audience went wild. Their cheer and applause reverberated throughout the whole of the arena. It was exhilarating. Shouyou couldn’t help but grin ear-to-ear even as his gaze fell upon Sakunami who had turned bitter.

Sakunami returned his Mothim to its PokeBall. He muttered something to it, lost beneath the ordinance of the applause. Then, he tucked away his PokeBall with something of a scowl on his baby face.

‘Whilst part is such sweet sorrow, dearest Sakunami Kosuke, we must welcome back Nametsu Mai to the stage. Only two minutes stands between Nametsu Mai and Hinata Shouyou as the destined recipient of this Contest’s Ribbon! Now, let’s make Nametsu Mai feel welcome!’

Just as the applause seemed to die down, it was stirred to a triumphant crescendo once more. Mai bounded onto stage. Her heels banging against the floor. She high-fived the dejected Sakunami as they exchanged places by the corridor.

‘Don’t you worry, Saku-kun, my team and I’ll avenge you. We’ll wipe the floor with that little pipsqueak.’ Mai boasted.

Sakunami paused, turned back and watched as Mai flounced onto the stage. It seemed useless, but he called out to her regardless.

‘I could be wrong but I get the feeling he’s a wily one, but I believe in you!’
Mai lifted her hand and gave him a thumbs-up. It was fortunate that Sakunami could only see her back because she was blushing crimson; feeling like one real cool Coordinator. But, she kept herself together. She pretended it was merely the stage lights counteracting with her make-up even though she knew that everyone knew she was blushing.

She strutted onto the stage and took position opposite Shouyou.

‘Let’s have a real good battle!’ she called out to him

‘Yeah!’ he agreed, exuberant as anything with excited eyes.

‘Here we have it, ladies, gentlemen, and distinguished guests: Nametsu Mai versus Hinata Shouyou. Only one can claim the Ribbon! Two minutes stand between their fate! C’mon, kiddos, pick: heads or tails!’

‘Heads!’ Mai yelped.

‘He-Tails!’ Shouyou shouted; his yell clipping through Mai but he accepted that she had gotten in before him.

‘Let’s look to the screen…’ Marian said ominously and all heads turned.

The coin flipped. Just what would be the result?
I have made the decision to discontinue this fic. I no longer have interest pursuing its conclusion. I've come to see it more like a burden than a product of passion. Rather than leave my readers in the dark as this is the most popular fic I've ever written, I shall leave on this note: an outline of what could have been had I not lost interest and motivation and inspiration towards this fic.

The numbers present are supposed to be what chapter it was supposed to coordinate to but as you can see... I'm not very good at sticking to my plan.

63. Pastoria City Contest Part One
   - We’ll let Hinata win this one
   - The Performance Rounds
   - Kageyama and Hinata only

64. Pastoria City Contest Part Two
   - The Battle rounds
   - Kageyama and Hinata only
   - Probably they will need to because we want to save King Versus Queen for the Finale

65. Trophy Garden
   - Hinata catches a Pikachu
   - Kageyama’s Egg hatches
   - YakuLev
   - Lev and Alisa are the heirs of the Trophy Estate. Their summer home.
   - Yaku is the disgruntled butler Lev and Alisa like to tease
   - Fucken rich people

66. Canalave City
   - KuroKen
   - Contest

67. Grandma Wilma’s Baby Dragon
   - Kageyama catches a Bagon and it later learns Draco Meteor from Grandma Wilma

68. The Pitter-Patter of Tiny Feet
69. Celestic Town/Mega Evolution
   - Yachi backstory
• C Y N T H I A shall make an appearance because fuck you
• I believe I know how my ladies get their Mega Stones
• If this chapter ends up existing then its just the boys going from Point A to Point B

70. Mount Coronet
• Largely unimportant chapter
• We’re getting from Place A to Place B
• Setting up Chapter 68 though

71. Diamond Dust
• Hinata gets into an accident where he breaks his arm
• He and Kags have to do a lot of teamwork and huddling together for survival

72. Snowpoint City
• Hinata’s Eevee evolves into Sylveon
• Because Hinata is hella gay for Kageyama
• If this chapter becomes 70 again; remember: Snowpoint City Tastes Like Mouthwash

73. Parting is Such Sweet Sorrow
• T I M E S K I P A N G S T
• Absence makes the heart grow fonder

74. Sunnyshore City
• Hinata and Kageyama reunite after [X] amount of months they spent apart.
• Build the atmosphere for the Grand Festival
• Professor Juniper reappears like “yo, whaddup bitches I got presents for you”

75. Townsperson B Can Fight Too
• The Grand Festival Performance Round 1
• Kiyoko
• Yachi
• Yamaguchi
• Tsukishima

76. Place to Play
• The Grand Festival Performance Round 2
• Mai
• Yui
• Sakunami

77. The Grand Festival Performance Round 3
• Kyoutani
• Yahaba
• Kuroo
• Kenma

78. The Grand Festival Round 4
79. The Grand Festival Performance Final Round (5)
   - Plus KageHina
   - This seems like a bad idea but also a good idea

80. The Iron Wall Can Be Rebuilt Again and Again
   - The Grand Festival Battle Round 1
   - We'll definitely just skip right to the finalists
   - Kiyoyachi with Kiyoko progressing
   - SakuMai with Sakunami progressing

81. The Grand Festival Battle Round 2
   - KuroKen with Kuroo progressing
   - Kyouhaba with God knows who progressing

82. The Point That Changes Momentum
   - The Grand Festival Battle Round 2
   - Yamaguchi vs Hinata with Hinata progressing
   - Kageyama vs Tsukishima with Kageyama progressing

83. Oikawa Tooru is Not a Genius
   - The Grand Festival Battle Round 3
   - Ushijima vs Oikawa with Ushijima progressing

84. The Grand Festival Battle Rounds(s) Part Two Pt 1
   - Kiyoko versus Kuroo with Kuroo progressing
   - Sakunami versus Ushijima with Ushijima progressing

85. The Grand Festival Battle Rounds(s) Part Two Pt 2
   - One Half of Kyouhaba versus Hinata with Hinata progressing
   - Kageyama vs ??? with Kageyama progressing [mentioned in passing, unfortunately]

86. Declaration of War
   - The Grand Festival Battle Rounds(s) Part Two Pt 3
   - Hinata vs Ushijima with Hinata progressing

87. The Grand Festival Battle Round(s) Part Two Pt 4
   - Kageyama vs Kuroo with Kageyama progressing

88. Checkmate! The King’s Final Gambit
   - Kageyama versus Hinata

89. Regicide
- Hinata loses
- Kageyama is crowned King
- They become an official couple
- And, the curtain falls with a kiss and confetti

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for everything. I apologise.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!