### Clash of Crowns

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## Clash of Crowns

by [Renaerys](http://archiveofourown.org/)

### Summary

Unova’s nation-states are divided, Gym Leaders vie for power among themselves, and the fall of the mysterious N has enabled the rise of Neo Team Plasma, a shadowy organization with far-reaching goals and the drive to accomplish them no matter the cost.

Emboldened by battle and tempted by prophecy, six young people from all walks of life embark on a journey to change their fate—and the fate of all Unova. But there are ancient forces at work far beyond their understanding, and a dark history that refuses to be forgotten. They soon find themselves on a collision course with monsters, myths, and the men who dare to control them.

### Notes

If George R.R. Martin ever wrote for the Pokémon universe, it would be a story that is a thousand times better than this fic could ever be. But I'm giving it my best shot, anyway. This isn’t a crossover in any sense of the word, but fellow fans of the ASOIAF books may recognize stylistic and thematic homage to those books throughout. There will be romance here, but it is of the slow burn kind.
This is the official series sequel to Triumvirate, meaning it chronologically comes after the events of that fic, and certain characters from Triumvirate will make minor appearances/cameos in this fic later on (however, this story plot and its cast are completely distinct). You don't have to have read Triumvirate to fully understand this, but it could significantly add to your enjoyment here, so I would recommend it. Information about Tamers and this particular realistic AU can be found on my Tumblr, so check that out as you read if you need to.
Prologue

Six months ago

Yellow fingers and slimy tongues running over brown-stained teeth, a sniffle to his left, the clink of shot glass number who’s-counting-anyway as it’s slammed down on the cracked wooden table, smoothed and blackened from thousands of sticky fingers drumming and scraping and the ash that had fallen askew of the tin trays. The fetid smell of tobacco and cheap whiskey and Marley the barmaid’s cloyingly sweet perfume all blended together in a heady, honeyed cocktail of poison and petunias. Grimsley took a savory breath of it all, drinking in the venom that gave him his fix, and caught a glimpse of Marley’s ample cleavage as she refilled the glass of the sweaty Palpitoad masquerading as a man sitting across from him.

Moving, always moving (the sick ones are always moving), skittish and itching for the fix, ready to grab and jump and squeeze and never let go. It was under his grimy nails that he hadn’t cut in weeks and damn they were getting long. That leggy brunette he’d left in his dingy motel room this morning had complained about them. And listen, for the record, you don’t complain about shit when you’re getting paid, and he’d paid well. Money won spent better than money earned, but to a whore it’s all the same. Maybe he should’ve cut her some slack. She’d been doing this a lot longer than him and she’d had the decency not to lie to his face about his less than pleasing performance last night. Or maybe she just knew he’d catch her in the act. He always had been good at spotting a lie. The whores were better, and they knew it.

Grimsley eyed Marley’s heavy breasts as they threatened to spill out over her low-cut collar into Toady’s drink. You didn’t fuck around with Marley, he’d learned quick. She ran this place and the whores that haunted the corridors in the corner of your eye. If she didn’t like what she saw, she made it disappear. Last night Grimsley had watched her haul out a pimple-faced twenty-something who’d tried to grope one of her waitresses without paying for the privilege. She’d picked him up and thrown him over her mannish shoulder, kicked open the door, and literally tossed him out on his skinny ass on the pavement where he promptly vomited all over himself, too wasted even to realize what had happened. Marley then slapped the fondled waitress hard across the face and hissed a warning about keeping an eye on the ones who drank too much. It was her own fault the man had gotten a handful of her, and Marley didn’t pay her to give away free samples.

Marley looked up when she was finished refilling Toady’s drink, and Grimsley kept his eyes steadfastly on his cards. He knew better than to cross this termagant.

“I’ll call,” said Toady, his sweaty sausage fingers tossing a few chips into the pot. “And I’ll raise ya two hundred.”

More chips in the pot. The ones on top glistened with his sebum and sweat. Grimsley knocked the ash from his cigarette and took a protracted drag. White smoke billowed in front of his face, curled around his too-long bangs—the whore had twirled them around her painted fingers last night, said they made him look edgy, whatever the fuck that meant. To Grimsley’s right, the lone woman at their table ran her long, pianist’s finger over the rim of her half-drunk vodka, straight up and tepid. Fucking disgusting, if you asked Grimsley, but no one asked him. And besides, he’s one to talk.

“Call,” said the woman, a blonde in her forties with cartoonish, cat-eye glasses and lips like she’d been sucking face with a vampire. There were wrinkles around her severe mouth, her burgundy leather jacket and pants hugging her figure and hiding the sag in her skin. Grimsley imagined her standing alone in the dark of her room, naked save for high heels, black stilettos, biting her nails to get the blood and scraped flesh out from under them, whoever her latest victim had been silent on
the floor at her feet.

Bet she’s a screamer. A real banshee.

The Virago kept her five cards close to her flat chest as she tossed out the requisite number of chips to match Toady’s bet. Her leather sleeves *scratched* as she moved, like she was held together with cellophane.

It was Grimsley’s turn, and he snuffed out his cigarette in the tray. He tapped the backs of his cards with his forefinger, a tell that wasn’t really a tell—he knew his tells and he knew his tells that weren’t tells and he knew which ones Toady saw but thought Grimsley didn’t see him seeing and which ones Virago watched too closely to miss the ones Grimsley couldn’t always control, which was never because yeah, he had a bad relationship with personal hygiene and he was an addict (he *loves* that word, by the way, makes him feel important and he likes the way people turn into creatures of instinct when they smell it on him, like he’s dangerous, like he might snap, like he might just scream for no reason at all because fuck it, you’re still *young*, old man) and he generally dumped more shit out of his mouth than his ass, but he was a fucking fantastic liar and he knew people. He knew what made them anxious, what drove them, what they feared the most. People are only motivated by two things: fear and greed. The ones who claim not to be just haven’t found anything worth holding onto yet.

Phantom lips smiled against his ear, her lashes dragging over his cheek, drawing his eye—almost, but not quite. He liked to imagine her this way, his instincts and his paranoia and the luck he made for himself and the luck he tripped over by pure chance (but it’s not chance because he thinks, he *knows* luck is driven by will, and the only catch is *whose* will is strongest). Lady Luck ghosted her talon-tipped fingers over his stubble, invisible to all but him, and maybe that meant he needed to get himself checked out, but he was pretty sure any doctor would take one look at him and get on their knees and start begging. Hey now, not everyone can be a people person, okay? Fucking hell.

It wasn’t Toady or Virago he was performing for tonight, by the way, and his Lady knew that from the beginning. She’d tipped him off, zeroing in on the real reason he was in this shithole to begin with. The young man to his left watched Grimsley’s kinetic fingers dance on the backs of the cards, silent. Grimsley didn’t have to look at his cards, having memorized his hand moments after the dealing—he was doing okay by his standards, three of a kind, all tens, but not an iron-clad hand—and instead focused on watching the young man out of the corner of his eye.

He was barely more than plain-faced and nothing to write home about once you let your gaze settle into the pock mark relics of teenage acne. Muted red hair, almost orange like the rust and soap scum that build up in a kitchen sink if you don’t scrub it regularly, pale blue eyes, a splash of freckles, a square jaw, and a blessedly thin, straight nose that did his unremarkable eyes all the favors in the world. He had a small tell, the barest hint of a smile that betrayed the hidden dimple under his right cheek, as he watched Grimsley tap the cards. Watching the watcher, but anxious. Licking his lips as the itch clawed at his insides and begged to be fed. Any moment now and Grimsley was sure the kid would cream himself out of sheer frustration.

_Greed for this one_, Lady Luck whispered in his ear.

Minute Man was no simpering teenager, though, and Grimsley’s own itch was getting tougher to scratch. He needed the fix, and Minute Man could see the struggle they both shared. Never play cards with a guy as trigger happy as you are. You’re like to shoot each other before either one of you can take the pot.

But then, where’s the fun in that?
“You know what I love about five card draw?” Grimsley drawled. He could be a charming motherfucker when it suited him, and he was waist deep in shit already, so it was no big difference to take the plunge.

“I couldn’t give less of a shit,” Toady croaked across the table. “You gonna move or what?”

Grimsley smiled his magician’s smile and scratched his wrist under the black collar of his jacket—another tell that wasn’t a tell. “I love how much it reminds me of whoring.”

Virago eyed him over her glasses, her beady black eyes trying to read into his meaning. Maybe she liked him. Maybe she’d scream for him in that dark room in her stilettos if he asked.

Minute Man chuckled. “That so?”

*Keep it in your pants, kid.*

It was easy (if not a little boring) to keep himself from bursting out laughing. Grimsley downed the shot of warm tequila Marley had poured for him earlier and curled his toes in his shoes to help keep the bile down. *She* would kill him for drinking again. But *she* wasn’t here, and in thanks to whatever gods had helped him convince her to let him go in her stead, he would gladly down the whole goddamned bottle and smile for Toady and pay for Marley’s whores to keep her favor. That’s showbiz, ladies and gentlemen! He would say it with a little tap dance and maybe blow a kiss for dramatic effect. You never knew who was watching.

Grimsley waved the empty glass between his thumb and forefinger and, for the first time since the hand started, let his cobalt, soulless eyes meet Minute Man’s on his left. The greedy ones were easier to seduce, and again, Grimsley was a fucking fantastic liar, if he did say so himself. He did, regularly, by the way. He smirked at his silent praise, happy to let Minute Man and the others read into it what they liked. The only thing he liked better than an evening spent playing poker was playing a narcissist, their eyes glassy mirrors turned around in their heads and reflecting nothing but their own beatific phantasmagoria.

“Oh yes,” he said, all tequila and smoke. “Everybody thinks they’re a pro, but most can never tell the bluff from the real thing.”

Toady burst out laughing despite his earlier dismissiveness, and Virago adjusted her glasses and ran her wiry finger over the rim of her vodka glass. Minute Man smiled, and it made him look younger, more his age. The acne craters in his cheeks squished together.

“So you’re saying you’re a pro?” Minute Man said.

Grimsley fingered his small stack of chips, watching his hand twirl one in between his long fingers. Just under the table, nestled at his belt over his dark jeans, were four Pokéballs in a neat line. He dared not reach for them, no matter how much he’d like to. Lady Luck ran her harpy’s fingers over them in his stead. Liepard would have sunk her teeth into Minute Man’s neck as gently as a lover’s kiss and held him close, her eyes trained on his until he bled out in her sweet mouth.

“I’m saying we can all relate. Even when we may have nothing else in common.” He tossed some chips into the center. “Call.”

Minute Man watched him, those pale blue eyes piercing the hazy smoke curtain. He was good, Grimsley had to admit. He hadn’t fallen for Grimsley’s tells that weren’t tells, but he was hasty. Any minute now, and someone would need to grab a box of tissues for him.

Toady burped and flagged down Marley for more drinks. Grimsley smiled dashingly at her and
indicated his shot glass, and she refilled it for him. He slipped her a bill and she took it, but she didn’t return his smile. She also didn’t crush his fingers when they touched. He was pretty sure she liked him.

*Good boy.*

“Cards?” Toady said, a thin thread of spittle connected his jutting lower lip to the upper as his mouth hung open like the cards might pour out of his jowls.

“Three,” Virago said, slipping him three of her own cards face down.

“Two,” Grimsley said, sliding his own cards across the table.

Minute Man eyed him carefully and chewed on his lip. “Just one for me.”

Grimsley avoided eye contact, but through the humming tequila in his mind, his thoughts raced. Toady dealt him two cards off the top of the deck, face down, and Grimsley hesitated a breath before taking them. He briefly rationalized the consequences of losing. Minute Man could take the pot, which was more of a personal affront than a business failure. But hey, Grimsley had his pride to think about.

*Fear for this one, then,* Lady Luck purred at him.

The ones like him were always afraid. He pushed the thought to the back of his abyssal mind. He had a game to play. On the other hand, winning could turn out far worse. Which was the less volatile loser, fear or greed? Minute Man licked his lips again as he added his new card to his hand, but his gaze remained stony and cold.

*Motherfucker’s good.*

But Grimsley was better. It almost wasn’t fair, he supposed. But when you play a game of luck, you screw the Lady and rob her blind for your troubles.

Toady raised the pot on his turn, but only modestly. Virago rubbed her vodka-damp finger and licked it. She folded. Grimsley called, making sure not to look at his new hand because hey, even he’s not perfect, folks—meaning the decision to win or lose, not the cards, he’s perfect with the cards, thank you very much—and that’s tequila number who-gives-a-damn, anyway, that he’s about to throw back. And there is a point to this. There’s a *point.* Win or lose, there’s a point, and a sharp enough point can slide in between his ribs into that black heart, give it a lovely kiss. Well, who’s keeping track, anyway? The fear motivates him, remember. He’s not greedy.

Minute Man spread out his cards in his hand, then collapsed them and held them close to his shoulder. His knuckles were just a little white where they held onto the five card deck, and yeah this guy was good, but he couldn’t hide in the dark, this somber whiskey light suffused in cigarette smoke and black halos of lust, for the game, for the money, for the hunt. This kid liked the hunt. In the dark, Grimsley could see it all. Poor kid never stood a chance, really. You can’t defend against what you can’t see through inward-facing mirrors.

“I raise...four hundred,” Minute Man said, tossing some chips into the pot.

Toady grumbled something under his breath that came out sounding like curdling milk, and he tossed his cards down angrily.

*Fear,* Grimsley thought. Greed gave too much, and fear took it all away.
“Looks like it’s just you and me,” Minute Man said with false cheer.

“Indeed,” Grimsley returned. “Why don’t we make it more interesting?”

Minute Man leaned forward, and Grimsley had to stop himself from making a whistling sound like a fishing line casting over a shallow pond.

Let’s see if you’ll bite.

“I’m all in.” Grimsley pushed the rest of his chips into the pot.

Minute Man lit up like the dawn, glaring in the gloom, but only to Grimsley’s keen eyes. “Interesting, huh? I’ll see your bet and we’ll let the cards fall where they may.”

Unbidden, Grimsley had a sudden flash of her face, those milky grey eyes reflecting his, the only ones he couldn’t read.

“It has to be me,” he’d insisted in hushed tones, her smaller hands in his as he towered over her. “I’ll get the truth. I can see everything they’ll try to hide.”

“I don’t have to see to know what they’re hiding,” she’d whispered.

But he’d insisted. No way he was letting Caitlin anywhere near this cesspool. They’d eat her alive, or she’d kill them all before she got what she needed. Either way, it was a losing hand.

“Full house,” Minute Man said, displaying his three kings and two fives. “I assume you were going for four of a kind trading two cards. So tell me: did I tell the bluff from the real thing?”

Grimsley glanced at his hand, including the two cards Toady had dealt him. Four tens and an eight. He blinked, stacked his cards, and switched hands in a fluid motion. He then artfully splayed them across the table for Minute Man to see.

“Ouch, better luck next time, my friend.” Minute Man poked the splayed cards with his pinky, like they were a strange food he was loathe to taste. “Three tens won’t cut it.”

Grimsley plastered a fake smile on his long face that drew Minute Man’s eyes away from his left hand, where he slipped the exchanged ten he’d drawn from Toady with a two of hearts. “Bad luck, I guess. Can’t win them all, right?”

Lady Luck laughed in his ear, all rose petals and arsenic.

“Right.” Minute Man scooped the pot toward himself while Virago looked on. “Better luck next time.”

Yeah, go ahead and take those greasy chips you limp dick thrall, he swore silently.

No matter. If he’d read Minute Man correctly, the real prize was within reach of his spider silk fingers.

Toady stood up from the table, grumbling and pocketing the rest of his chips, and stormed off toward the back rooms. Virago also got up and, with a withering look over her sharp nose at the two remaining men, stalked off toward the end of the bar and sat down by herself.

Grimsley stretched with a yawn and ambled out of his chair. His black blazer reeked of smoke but it looked good on his wiry frame. The yellow scarf around his neck didn’t go with the outfit, but Caitlin had given it to him and he wasn’t afraid of being a little sentimental. Minute Man stood up
with him, his chips in a bag to exchange for cash at the bar. Security measures, of course. You wouldn’t want any sticky fingers swiping bills at the table when everyone else was busy tossing back tequila shots.

More than that, it was the house rules. The house tithe was ten percent to the bar’s patron, a man called Zinzolin who managed his organization’s finances on behalf of its new official leader. Minute Man, Grimsley knew from weeks spent skulking around this and other seedy establishments around Lacunosa, was an agent close to the leader, answering to one of his closest confidants. It was the closest Grimsley would get to the leader himself, and if he played this next hand right, he might be having a very good night.

“I’d offer to buy you a congratulatory drink,” Grimsley said as he followed Minute Man to the bar, “but you really cleaned me out.”

Minute Man lifted his chin and dropped the bag of chips on the bar, where Marley inspected it briefly and pulled it to the other side.

“You had a tell,” Grimsley went on. “That smile. But it was a ruse, wasn’t it?”

That got Minute Man’s attention, and he faced Grimsley. A good six inches shorter than Grimsley, the kid was young but hardened by something, acid in his veins where blood should have been. Those pale, blue eyes were unsettling and lonely, like the clear sky over snowy peaks where not even the hardiest pines could survive the cold.

“Perhaps, perhaps not,” Minute Man said, smiling now. He gave Grimsley a once-over, sizing him up. “Tell you what. I’ll get you that drink. Consider it a consolation.”

Grimsley smiled. “Thank you.”

Minute Man gestured to one of Marley’s waitresses for two fresh glasses, and the two of them took stools at the bar side by side.

“I’m Ace,” Grimsley said, but he didn’t offer his hand. “Been hanging around here for a couple nights. I was at the pub down the street before that, but I never found any card players worth their salt.”

Minute Man snorted. “I’m not surprised. Zinzolin’s is the only place where the drinks are full and the whores’re fuller. If you can pay.”

The waitress placed two tumblers filled halfway with the same cheap whiskey Minute Man had been suckling at the card table in front of them. The glasses were smudged with fingerprints and some brownish jelly on one end of the rim Grimsley pretended he didn’t see. Minute Man took his glass, and Grimsley followed.

“Barret,” he said.

“Good to know you, Barret,” Grimsley said. But he already knew everything about Barret thanks to Shauntal, an eccentric hermit with whom Grimsley had grown up. “Cheers.”

They clinked their glasses and drank, and Grimsley lit a fresh cigarette to give his fingers something to play with. Always moving.

“I haven’t seen you around before,” Barret said.

Grimsley shrugged. “Like I said, I’ve been making my way through town, looking for the right
crowd.”

Barret dangled his glass in front of his face, his orange bangs falling into his eyes. “Found it yet?”

“You tell me.”

Sky-high eyes turned on Grimsley. Marley slapped a sweaty wad of bills on the bar just then, held together with an old rubber band.

“It’s all there,” she said gruffly. “Minus the house cut.”

Barret accepted the cash and peeled a couple bills off the top. Grimsley took a long drag of his cigarette and blew a smoke ring over Marley’s head.

“Liber esse,” Barret muttered as he handed Marley the tip.

Marley nodded. “Liber sum.”

Grimsley listened carefully but made no reaction to their whispered mantra, focusing instead on his cigarette. Marley took her small cut, and Barret pocketed the rest.

“Why don’t you tell me what you really came here to say,” Barret said casually, sipping his drink.

“Oh, why ruin a nice evening? I enjoy making new friends.”

Grimsley could feel those eyes on his profile, searching for something, hungry. If he’d let him, Grimsley was sure Barret would sink his teeth into his arm and rip off as much as he could chew at a time.

Marley was quietly slicing some fruit below the bar that was a questionable shade of purple, her heavy breasts bouncing a little each time she brought the knife down.

“You don’t have any friends here,” Barret said.

“You have one shot,” Shauntal’s voice echoed in his head. “Need to be smart.”

“What I need is to get lucky.”

He could imagine her big, black eyes, wide with wonder and constantly moving, seeing what lurked over his shoulder just out of sight. Always moving. Everybody needs their fix. She had stopped glancing around and stared at him directly, and he remembered just why the hell she opted to live alone away from people. Better she run from them than they from her.

“There is no luck in death, Grims.”

Was it her talking? Or the things that lived inside her?

“Don’t I?” Grimsley swallowed the rest of his drink and tapped the empty glass on the bar counter. The numbing effects of the alcohol had little effect on one already numb, numb for as long as he could remember. Live without the light for too long and you forget it was ever there at all.

Marley eyed his glass, and he flashed her a dashing smile. “Please put the next round on my tab.”

She eyed him skeptically, perhaps weighing whether it was worth it to gamble on his continued patronage, but Grimsley had made sure to be a model customer during his stay here. He treated her girls better than most, tipped well, and didn’t look at anyone the wrong way. A glimpse inside
Marley’s shrewd matron’s brain would betray the flicker of fear she felt every time she looked at this dapper forty-something stranger, like an insect running its antennae over her flesh looking for the best place to sink its pincers in. There was something unnatural about him, something deranged hidden behind those white teeth, strong but inoffensive nose, stormy blue eyes, a smiling demon with a knife pointed at himself under the table courtesy of the villains in his head. But Marley had seen enough in her life not to let them see her fear, not to question it. If only she knew he could see it all the same. Horror spares us, not the other way around.

Grimsley licked his lips, and Marley moved to refill their drinks. He didn’t look at Barret, but he could hear the gears grinding in the young man’s head.

Come on, kid, come on.

Marley brought back their glasses and Grimsley held his up to Barret for a toast.

“What are we drinking to?” Barret asked.

Grimsley took a final drag of his cigarette and snuffed it out in the tin on his right. “To freedom.”

Barret lifted his chin and puffed out his hairless chest. Damn right to freedom, he seemed to secrete the thought like mucous, those inverted mirrors glittering with his own image. “Cheers.”

They clinked glasses, and Barret nodded to Marley. She flipped the sign on the door—Closed—and her girls shuffled the remaining few patrons out the door or back to their rooms with soft whispers and softer hands.

Grimsley savored the cheap whiskey, thinking it didn’t taste so bad. Lady Luck squeezed his shoulders, her raptor claws piercing the skin and digging into the muscle, and Grimsley repressed a shiver at the fleeting fantasy.

Cheers to that.

It was late even for the night owls, the prowlers who made the streets their red carpets, alleys their thrones, and dined on an ambrosia of starlight and sewage runoff. Grimsley had sent a messenger Tranquill to Shauntal relaying his progress with Barret, including the purpose of tonight’s meeting. He waited in the usual spot for Barret, the messenger ferret he’d picked up during a rigged game of five card draw he’d purposefully lost to let out the avaricious monster that dwelled within the young man’s shell of a heart.

Barret was fast in everything he did, be it cards or whiskey or talking or girls. His mind was also fast, which could have been a liability for anyone but Grimsley. For what he needed to do, he couldn’t waste his time with a tunnel visioned halfwit. Barret knew the game, or at least one side of it, and Grimsley gave him just enough to get what he wanted in the end.

Tonight was the end. Finally, after weeks of Barret toting him around to middle management, Grimsley was going to meet the top brass, the man in charge. Zinzolin had been a Sage, one of the seven trusted ones, and he had retained his position of prominence in the new order. Where others were ‘liberated’, Zinzolin played his cards right and now single-handedly ran the accounts and finances for the largest crime syndicate Unova had ever seen.

Team Plasma had grown as prolifically as a tumor in the decade since its inception, first as a peaceful educational movement, then as a more organized political party with ties to a number of
Gym Leaders in Unova and even a handful of internationally renowned scientific researchers. Call them whatever you like, but to Grimsley, they were nothing more than a cult of zealots happy to impose their spurious ideals of liberty and freedom on any who would listen, and especially to those who would not. But those had been the good old days.

An incident had ruptured Team Plasma’s ranks on the philosophical level, tearing the group in two after the mysterious disappearance of the cult’s even more mysterious founder and leader, N. Grimsley knew next to nothing about N, and he was not alone. No one even knew the man’s true name, where he had come from, why he commanded such fervent loyalty from his followers, or even what his true goal was. No one knew much about him until someone got close enough to find out. And she had paid the price.

Grimsley’s hand found Bisharp’s Pokéball at his belt and stroked it in search of comfort as the sudden wave of bitter resentment passed through him like a strong wind. Hilda had deserved better than the hand she was dealt, she and her brother.

_Calm down, old man._

He had one shot at this, like Shauntal had warned him. Caitlin had been right so far about Barret’s connections, and he wasn’t going to fuck this up when they were counting on him.

Lady Luck snaked her claws around his throat and caught his earlobe between her teeth.

_One shot, baby._

“Ace,” Barret said through the gloom.

The shorter man emerged from the shadows, hands in his pockets, calling out so as not to scare Grimsley. How thoughtful. But Grimsley had watched his approach from the end of the block where he’d turned, the darkness clear as day in his eyes, and feigned blindness. It would not do for Barret to know, to know the truth, what he was, what he’d caught on the end of his greedy fishing hook.

“Freezing my skinny ass off out here,” Grimsley said with a chuckle, the lie coming out easily. “Took you long enough.”

“There’s been a change of plans.”

Grimsley immediately went on high alert, his senses prickling and his constantly moving fingers spasming at his sides. He was outed. He’d slipped up somewhere, somehow, the lies getting too tangled even for him to keep track of. No, he was a pro, no way he slipped up.

Then someone had recognized him. They would have recognized Caitlin, maybe they’d seen him with her, that princess hair splayed over his chest like spun gold. Fuck, did that mean Caitlin was jeopardized, too? Fuck, fucking _fuck_—

“The boss is waiting outside of town, just north,” Barret went on, oblivious to the frantic trainwreck in ‘Ace’s’ head.

Cool as a Tentacool, Grimsley hid his inner turmoil well and ran a hand through his dark bangs. “Just north?”

_The woods._

Barret jerked his head north in confirmation and started walking that direction, hands in his
pockets. Grimsley followed as though nothing was amiss, but his thoughts reeled. The woods were secluded and dark—not that that bothered Grimsley, but it didn’t exactly smell like a warm welcome from old man Zinzolin. Like a condemned man on his last walk to the gallows, Grimsley fingered the four Pokéballs at his belt, counting the coins he would pay Lady Luck to give him one last sweet kiss.

“There is no luck in death.”

Lady Luck’s pale shadow laughed in his ear, playful like a post coitus lover in satin sheets flirting with the idea of a morning romp. But Grimsley knew her tells better than his own, and he swallowed any fantasy of backing out now, escaping with his life. Something told him she would not be there to take his hand if he gave into his fear and reached for it.

He let Barret lead him to the edge of Lacunos Town to the dense forests beyond. There was no moon tonight, and Barret had a flashlight.

“After you,” Barret said with a smile that made Grimsley’s skin crawl.

“You’re the one with the flashlight.”

“The path is easy to follow.”

Careful there, Slick.

“Sure, just keep the light ahead. I’d rather not fall and break my nose. Bad first impression and all.”

Barret said nothing and kept the light positioned just ahead of them. Did he know? It was hard to tell. If he did, he was doing a hell of a job faking it. Plebs like Barret, ones born without the gift, couldn’t have discerned Grimsley’s true nature unless they saw him in action, and he was careful not to give anything away. Had he slipped up somewhere?

No, I wouldn’t be going to meet Zinzolin if Barret considered me a threat.

The path would have been easy to follow even if Grimsley couldn’t already see perfectly in the dark. The forest at night under a new moon would have probably put even the toughest meatheads on edge—spindly, bare branches like too-long fingers, the creaking and snapping sounds with no origin source, the wind in the trees that really did sound like a lost child’s whispers no matter how much you rationalized it. But Grimsley could see it all, beyond the lies and the shadows. The branches were just branches, bare and dry with winter’s encroaching chill. The creaks and snaps were the leaves under his feet, sometimes twigs, sometimes a startled Venipede scampering away, or the slither of a sleek Seviper, red eyes like two blood rubies as it saw Grimsley as clearly as he could see it, just out of the corner of his eye within pouncing distance of Barret. The whispers? Just the wind, and voices ahead. So Barret was good for it, after all.

Grimsley said nothing of his vespertine observations. As a Reaper, a Tamer given his gift at a young age by another just like him to dwell in darkness along with the Dark Pokémon that loved his scent, he knew when to stay still, silent, numb in the shadows. Patient. He could hear Barret’s shallow breathing, detect the flutter in the flashlight’s beam, the steps just a little too quick to be calm. He could taste it as it escaped Barret’s pores, an insidious miasma that stirred something primal and precious in the pit of Grimsley’s stomach, in the tips of his twitching fingers that ached for the knife hidden in his boot. This awful energy.

Fear.

Grimsley was afraid, too, but not of the darkness. Like all Reapers, the only thing he feared was
losing it. Seviper tasted the air—maybe it tasted Barret’s fear, too—but let them pass unmolested. Never start a fight with a bigger fish, buddy.

Eventually, they got far enough along the winding dirt path and Barret began to hear the voices just ahead, too.

“It’s just ahead,” Barret said.

The path opened up into a natural clearing in the woods. Above, the sky was clear and this far out of town at such a late hour, the stars twinkled brightly. Millions of them, delightfully resplendent, shone down on the clearing and bathed it in pale light, enough for plebs like Barret to see well enough.

“Ah, Barret, you’re just in time.”

An old man dressed warmly in a long, violet overcoat stood in the center of the clearing flanked by two young people, a man and a woman, dressed in nondescript grey and black. Plain and forgettable, save for the embroidered coat of arms on the left breast of their uniforms, white and grey and the initials ‘TP’ emblazoned in blue.

*Looks like they’re finally done hiding.*

“Sir.” Barret clicked off his flashlight and bowed respectfully.

Grimsley tucked his hands in his pockets, closer to his Pokéballs, and plastered a grin on his face as he took a few steps toward Zinzolin. “You must be Zinzolin. The pleasure’s all mine.”

Zinzolin was a tall but wispy man with bushy white eyebrows and squinting eyes that struggled to stay open under multilayered, wrinkled lids. His cheeks were sallow and gaunt, his jaw severe, and his nose crooked like a bird’s beak. His overcoat, a fine piece that probably cost more than Grimsley had ever won in a game of cards, did little to mitigate his senescence and gave the impression of a man who counted the change in his wallet as a hobby. Those drooping eyes watched Grimsley now, and he had to wonder what Zinzolin was counting now. Maybe how many ways Grimsley could tenderize him with the switchblade in his pocket?

No, silly, that’s what I’m thinking, hah.

Haha!

Lady Luck spared him a knowing smile in the corner of his eye, but she didn’t share his laugh. He’d give Zinzolin something to count. Perhaps body parts, as he sliced them off one by one until the old man revealed what he wanted to know.

“I’m sure it is,” Zinzolin said with a smile in his tinny voice. “Now, perhaps you’d like to tell me why you’re here?”

“I’m looking to make some new friends,” Grimsley said fluidly. “And yours are the best ones to have.”

Zinzolin chuckled, which came out sounding more like nails on a chalkboard than any full-bodied, grandpa laugh. Damn, how old was this guy? “You would be right about that. I hear you’re quite the whiz at cards.”

Grimsley sniffled, wet and loud and objectively disgusting—a tell that’s not a tell—and wiped his nose. “I’m all right. Barret cleaned me out pretty good first night we played together.”
“And I hear from Marley that you pay on time.”

*All this crusty old hemorrhoid cares about is money.*

Lady Luck draped her arms around his shoulders, chilling him to the bone.

“We all die alone, but we take our debts with us. I’d rather leave this world unburdened.”

The old miser laughed again, and Grimsley had to fight the urge to cringe. “Good man. It’s a shame, really. Are you sure about this one? He could be useful to me.”

“...Excuse me?”

“Zinzolin, it’s not like you to question me.”

As though he’d been plunged into ice water, Grimsley froze where he stood. Someone, something, was here, suddenly revealed. He hadn’t even sensed it before—how? How could he miss this?

“I just thought, in case he isn’t who you suspected, that I could use him,” Zinzolin went on, oblivious to Grimsley’s rising panic. “But I can see you’re unflappable as ever, old friend. So be it.”

Footsteps, three sets of them. Grimsley swallowed hard. He had not been prepared for this, not in his wildest nightmares. Not yet. He was supposed to have time, time to plan from a safe distance, it wasn’t supposed to be *him* to face this man, this *thing* that had long ago forgotten how to be a man.

**Fear. This was fear.** Grimsley was only afraid of one thing.

He bit his tongue hard enough to bleed, a metallic twang mixing with the taste of stale tobacco and the memory of his dinner, hours ago now. Laughably, he wished he’d eaten something a little more memorable than a burger.

Grimsley turned, squared his shoulders, and came face to face with a man he had honest to god hoped he would never meet in person except at an open casket funeral.

“Ghetsis,” he said, unable to stop the almost (almost!) imperceptible hitch in his voice and hating himself for it.

Ghetsis noticed, and he smiled. “And you’re Grimsley. *Liber esse.*”

“Suck my dick.”

Ghetsis was average in every sense of the word. Nothing remarkable about his face—a nose that was neither too big nor too small, humble jaw line, crow’s feet and crags in his forehead that betrayed his advanced age, and neatly glossed grey hair pulled back in a low ponytail that disappeared into his collar. He was clad entirely in black, a generous robe that hung on his frame like a curtain, hiding who knew what underneath. Not even his hands were visible. But despite his rugose visage and the eternal rasp in his geriatric voice, his eyes were as sharp as Grimsley’s—Reaper’s eyes that could cut through the thickest darkness.

The woman flanking Ghetsis took two steps forward, but Ghetsis put out his hand to stop her. Her pale blue eyes blazed in the starlight, alight with elemental fury over the mask that hid the lower half of her face.

“Stand down, Aldith,” Ghetsis said. “This doesn’t concern you.”
“Grimsley?” Barret said, the surprise clear on his face. “But he told me his name was Ace.”

“That’s because he lied,” Zinzolin said, laughing at his own superfluous deduction.

_Fuck, Grimsley thought, his mind racing with possible ways to survive this encounter. Fucking fuck, fuck!_  

“Aren’t you dead yet?” he said, masking his inner turmoil. “A guy your age has to watch his health.”

“Oh, I consider myself young at heart.”

_Yeah, I bet you do you sick freak._

“Still, you look good for your age, better than the pictures.” He counted six here in the clearing, seven more stationed farther out in the woods. Terrible odds, but not necessarily for a Reaper of his caliber during a new moon. If he could get the timing right, he might get out of here after all.

“What are you now, three hundred something?”

Ghetsis chuckled. “You’re well informed. Tell me, how did you know to approach Barret? You must have realized he would lead you to Zinzolin and ultimately to me. Perhaps...you have some friends helping you?”

No. No way he was getting anything out of Grimsley that could compromise Caitlin or Shauntal. Over his dead body.

Lady Luck covered her mouth and giggled like a schoolgirl just behind him.

“Reapers don’t have friends,” Grimsley said. “What, haven’t you lived long enough to figure that out by now?”

He might still have a chance to salvage the mission and assassinate Zinzolin. Scrafty could take out Zinzolin and his agents by itself, and Krookodile could initiate an Earthquake that would throw the rest off guard long enough for Grimsley to get a head start deeper into the woods. Liepard would make sure anything that tried to follow didn’t catch him; it was fast enough to run down just about anything.

“So much hostility. You and I are the same, Grimsley,” Ghetsis entreated him.

His cover was blown, the entire operation and all the time that had gone into planning it, all down the drain. He hadn’t planned for Ghetsis. Goddamnit, how had he not anticipated this? Shauntal was so sure Ghetsis would never bother with low level recruiting procedures, that Zinzolin would be too territorial to let him interfere unless something aroused suspicion. All down the goddamned drain.

“I’m _nothing_ like you.” He fingered the four Pokéballs in his pocket, the itch becoming too much to bear.

Ghetsis’s eyes were a glowing brown, almost red in this light, and they saw right through Grimsley. He said nothing, but his curling smile said it all.

Grimsley tossed out all four of his Pokéballs, hoping for a couple seconds’ head start in the blinding light, and took off at a hard sprint toward Zinzolin.

“High Jump Kick!”
Scrafty leaped from the light of its released Pokéball and shot toward Zinzolin, but the agent at his left grabbed a Pokéball from Zinzolin’s pocket and tossed it out. Scrafty crashed into a wall of ice, a Cryogonal that materialized in a flash of light at the last second as the agent shielded Zinzolin with his own body. Cryogonal shattered into a thousand glittering pieces, dispersed, then came together again as though on rewind. The shattered glass merged once more into a flat disk smoking with cold and began to spin and churn up an Icy Wind.

Aldith angrily tossed a Pokéball, which revealed a massive, hulking Gigalith that stood between Ghetsis and Grimsley’s Krookodile.

“Earthquake!” Grimsley bit out.

Krookodile smashed the ground with its clubby fists, and Gigalith sank into the earth.

“Rock Tomb!” Aldith shouted.

Gigalith roared as the earth caved in around it, the red crystals adorning its head and shoulders glowing. The rocks burying it reversed their fall and burst with a vengeance skyward, hurtling toward Krookodile. Bisharp was faster, though, and slashed through the falling rocks with its bladed fists, reducing them to dust and saving Krookodile in the process.

Grimsley did not have the luxury of sticking around to see his Pokémon perform. With Liepard running at his heels, he attempted to give Zinzolin the slip and bypass the Plasma Agents protecting him. He drew the switchblade he’d been hiding and, barely slowing down, jammed it into the carotid artery of one of Zinzolin’s men as he moved to block Grimsley’s flight. Blood gushed over Grimsley’s fist as he sank the knife into the hilt and quickly withdrew, his sloppy movement ripping flesh and spilling excess blood that stained the yellow scarf Caitlin had given him.

“Stop him!” Zinzolin bellowed in his wispy zombie tone.

Liepard hissed and sank its teeth into one of the agents that had pursued Grimsley, catching him in the neck and dropping him like lightning wrecks a tall tree. He choked and dropped the Pokéball he’d been about to toss, sinking under Liepard’s weight. Grimsley whirled and threw his switchblade on instinct just in time to catch Aldith in the right shoulder before she could level a metal beater over his head. She grunted and tripped over herself, thrown by the violent and unexpected pain. Her Gigalith remained back at the edge of the clearing, still stonewalled by Krookodile.

Scrafty still faced Cryogonal, the ever self-repairing jigsaw puzzle, and another Plasma Agent had sent out a Garbodor. The Pokémon’s stench instantly permeated the clearing and its slime sweat putrified the earth and grass underfoot. On command from its trainer, Garbodor opened its gaping maw and belched out a stream of Poison Gas at Scrafty, who was moving sluggishly after several Icy Wind attacks.

Grimsley smashed his boot over Aldith’s right temple, hearing the crunch of her bones, and used her face for leverage to retrieve his switchblade from her shoulder. She writhed and grunted on the ground, her limbs contorting in pain, but Grimsley hardly slowed.

“Bisharp!” he shouted. “Night Slash!”

Bisharp abandoned its assault on Gigalith and sprinted to assist Scrafty. Its bladed arms leaked dark energy and it leaped directly into the line of Garbodor’s Poison Gas attack, fearless. Twin blades slashed into Garbodor’s malleable body, leaking tar and cutting through to the other side.
Garbodor roared, a guttural, bubbling sound, and collapsed in a pile of oozing sludge. Refuse it had picked up, everything from rusty cans to an old boot to soiled newspapers, splattered over the ground, smoking and turning any living flora it came into contact with black with rot.

Grimsley didn’t wait around to make sure Scrafty and Bisharp regrouped, and instead set his sights on Zinzolin. With Liepard having taken out one of his guards and now circling the other, Grimsley saw his opening to gut the old codger and rid the world of him for good. Zinzolin saw him coming, switchblade drawn, and he tried to limp to safety.

Out of nowhere, a Maractus flung itself at Grimsley and unleashed a barrage of needles. Grimsley swore and took the Pin Missile attack in his back. The needles buried themselves two inches into his back through his clothes, and the burning sting was almost immediate. He shuddered and sank to one knee. Hot blood soaked the back of his shirt. The wounds were small, but there were hundreds of them.

Liepard, having finished disemboweling the second of Zinzolin’s guards, jumped after the ungainly Maractus and tackled it to the ground before it could do more damage. The sentient cactus sank its roots into the earth as Liepard tore into its porous flesh and wetted its muzzle with green blood.

In the distance, the earth rumbled with another of Krookodile’s Earthquakes, but it was followed by a shrill squawk. Grimsley struggled to his feet, the pain in his back and buttocks crippling. He had half a mind to get the hell out of here with his Pokémon while he was ahead and fuck this mission, it was already blown, but it wasn’t his call to make. And he’d given his word, besides.

He pushed himself up, fighting the sway that threatened to topple him over again. Every movement inflamed the fiery pain in his back where the needles impaled him a hundred times over. Zinzolin watched him like he'd seen a corpse dig himself out of his own grave. He’d fallen to the ground, old eyes wide and mouth agape, a thin line of drool escaping his lips.

“Goddamn right, you should be scared of me,” Grimsley said, ignoring the lancing pain that accompanied every breath.

He advanced, but all of a sudden Liepard yelped in pain. Grimsley turned on instinct just in time to see a dark presence, impossibly large and liquid in the inky blackness, sink its teeth into Liepard’s belly. Another identical set of jaws latched onto Liepard’s haunches, and together they lifted it into the air. Grimsley looked on, slack-jawed and disbelieving, for the second and a half that Liepard struggled in the air before the two heads ripped her clean in half. Bloody entrails rained down on the Ingrained Maractus that had somehow healed itself enough to survive Liepard’s assault and coated its yellow and magenta flowers.

Zinzolin’s Cryogonal, previously outnumbered, now fought alongside a wicked Scolipede twice as long as a man was tall. The enormous Bug reared and crashed into Scrafty, Bug Biting it over and over and over until the scrappy Fighter passed out from the pain and blood loss. Bisharp was nearly frozen, its iron joints unmoving as Cryogonal continued to petrify it with Icy Winds. Krookodile’s grinding Earthquakes had come to an end as the battered Gigalith found assistance in a Mandibuzz larger than a Pidgeot. Gigalith’s Rock Tomb had buried Krookodile to the waist, and Mandibuzz was busy ripping into Krookodile’s armored neck and belly, her sharp beak relentless in its search for a weak point and her bald, raw head impervious to the hot blood that spurted when her beak found entry.

It had been fourteen minutes since the fighting began. Fourteen minutes and Grimsley was out of Pokémon. Fourteen minutes, four Plasma Agents dead by his and his Pokémon’s hands, and Zinzolin still lived.
Through the gloom overhead where Liepard’s mutilated body was Crunched repeatedly, a pair of bloodgy eyes each as big around as Grimsley’s head swiveled to look down on him. Its jaws, its true jaws, could have swallowed Krookodile whole while its two lesser heads squabbled over Liepard. When it growled, all Grimsley could think was that it was the last sound whole nations of men and women ever heard.

“You have not known horror until I have shown it to you,” Ghetsis said.

He walked slowly toward Grimsley and Zinzolin around the monster’s trunk-like legs and ran a hand over the side of its folded, tattered wings. Grimsley dropped his switchblade, his hands shaking from the pain, the blood loss, and the immobilizing terror that stared back at him through blood-red eyes.

“I rarely have to call on Hydreigon to assist me,” Ghetsis went on in that rasping baritone that sounded like many voices blended together. “For that, I’ll acknowledge your efforts tonight and the many weeks you spent arriving at this point.”

Zinzolin remained grounded. His pants were wet with urine where he’d soiled himself, but whatever dignity he had left did not stand up in the face of the ancient Dragon looming over him.

“G-Ghetsis! Help me!”

Ghetsis ignored him. “You’re not afraid of the darkness,” he addressed Grimsley. “I admire that.” Hydreigon lowered its primary head, oblivious to its smaller heads still chewing on Liepard’s remains, and hovered just behind Ghetsis like a shadow.

“But you are afraid of something,” Ghetsis went on. “I used to be just like you.”

Grimsley’s breathing was coming in ragged. He could feel the needles in his back sinking deeper, sapping more of his blood, and yet fear paralyzed him to the spot. “You think this is the end?” he managed. “More will come, and they’ll be better than me. I’m just the appetizer.”

Ghetsis leaned on his cane and bent over so he was almost at eye level with Grimsley. “Then I’ll feast on them, too.”

Before he could react, Ghetsis grabbed his chin and sank his too-long, yellowing nails into the skin. Grimsley’s eyes watered and blurred Lady Luck’s ethereal figure. She had her harpy’s talons draped around Ghetsis’s shoulders and watched Grimsley through her lashes, shedding a tear for him.

And he wanted to scream. He wanted to cry out, call for help. Most of all, he wanted to feel Caitlin’s touch again, hold her close, whisper an apology she would never hear about how he’d failed, just as the part of him that was still him had always known he would fail in the face of true horror. Unlike the demon sucking him dry, he was only human.

Ghetsis forced his face up, and there was nothing Grimsley could do to fight him off. His body had betrayed him to those sinister red eyes that could peek into his heart and swallow it whole. His skin cracked and exposed rapidly atrophying muscles and desiccated bones until even the darkness found no asylum in his hollow husk of a body.

Ghetsis took it all in silence. It filled in the crags between his wrinkles, bolstered his aging muscles with stolen vigor, and he threw out the cane he no longer needed to lean on. Until there was nothing left but the fear, the only part that ever remains when everything else is lost.

Ghetsis took it all, and when he breathed again, he was a new man with a whole life ahead of him.
and nothing but dust between his fingertips.

Leagues away, a woman with hair like spun gold woke in darkness, as she always did. She sat up in bed, eyes wide with the color of vision that visited her at this witching hour, unwelcome and unexpected.

“Caitlin!” Another woman wrapped in blankets rushed to her side at the bed, dropping the book and the maglight she’d been using to read it, forgotten. “Caitlin, what is it?”

Caitlin heaved, her unusually bright, golden eyes sparkling and seeing into a time and place far from here. She grabbed Shauntal’s arms and sank her filed nails into the skin as deeply as they would go, spilling a foul, violet gas where blood should have been. “I’ll feast on them, too!” she hissed in a thousand voices.

Shauntal did not react to the pain of Caitlin’s nails in her arms—there was none. Diamond eyes blinked in the darkness swathing her from behind, drawn by the sounds of suffering and anguish. Shauntal ignored the stirring susurrations in her head to focus on Caitlin.

“Caitlin, can you hear me? What do you see?”

Caitlin began to shake, her eyes impossibly wide. A worried jingle floated into the room from the window, where a Chimecho suctioned to the sill had woken and began to pulse with telepathic energy. Caitlin continued to shake and babbled incoherently. Drool escaped the corner of her mouth as she whispered in a dead language, louder and louder.

“Tell me what you see,” Shauntal entreated her, shaking her shoulders.

A figure appeared in front of the window, materialized from thin air, drawn by Chimecho’s ringing. Sleek and black with haunting, blue eyes, Gothitelle floated over the floor without taking a single step. Shauntal released Caitlin and backed away as the Psychic approached and ran its tapering hands over Caitlin’s head, easing her seizure. Caitlin’s toes curled and she fisted her sheets as she arched her back against the final throes of her vision, and as soon as it began, it was over.

Shauntal leaned over the bedside as Gothitelle pulled away and looked on in total silence. It did not flinch at Shauntal’s proximity despite their conflicting natures, having spent years around her and grown used to her moribund presence around its master. Caitlin’s eyes were squeezed shut and leaking a torrent of tears.

“Caitlin,” Shauntal said softly, laying a hand over her forehead. “Must tell me what you saw. Tell now.”

Caitlin’s breathing was shallow and harsh, but after a moment she opened her eyes. Milky grey stared up through Shauntal, blind in perpetual darkness without a trace of the golden vision from before.

“Caitlin,” Shauntal said again, wiping her damp hair from her face.

“Grimsley,” Caitlin croaked, her voice hitching with a fresh sob. “I saw... I saw Grimsley.”

Shauntal let her hand fall, and Caitlin continued to weep silently. The whispers in Shauntal’s ears grew louder, arcane languages as dead as the Ghosts they belonged to. They never lied to her.
“I saw him,” Caitlin said. “I can’t stop seeing him.”

Shauntal barely heard her over the whispers. She staggered back to the wall where the shadows were darkest, where they waited for her. Diamond eyes flickered next to her, smiling, and she covered her mouth to stifle the obscene laugh that wasn’t hers as tears flooded her vision.

The voices in her head roared with laughter.
Present day

The shores of Nuvema Town’s port were quiet this late in the afternoon. Trade barges from Hoenn and Kalos usually bypassed the small port on their way to the larger Virbank, while the local ships out of Castelia and even as far as Humilau arrived sparingly only a few times a month. The day was winding down. Fishermen had long since returned from their crepuscular hunting grounds. Harbor-facing stall owners and restaurateurs had bought, cooked, and sold the day’s wares. Even the smells of deep-fry and broil and smoke were lost to the salty sea breezes, and the harbor was quiet as it bid the setting sun goodnight.

It was to this scene of lonely tranquility that Rosa touched down with her Swanna on the sandy beach just out of town to the south. Her armor had seen better days. The joints were crusted with dirt, old blood, and salt. There were cracks in the plating and holes forming in the soft mesh underneath courtesy of her long days and nights over the open ocean. Her hair had been tied back in a tight bun held together with a gel of dehydrated sea water, grease, and wind blow. Her thighs ached and her back throbbed from the hours spent hunched over Swanna’s back, both in the air and floating in the water. When she removed her flight goggles, she had a light sunburn ringing her eyes where the goggles had shielded her from the sun’s daily assault.

But she breathed deeply and ran a hand over the tuft of impossibly soft, blue feathers adorning Swanna’s chest. The large Flyer had flown and ferried her all the way from Cinnabar Island in distant Kanto far to the south. Weeks of silence and solitude with only each other and Rosa’s other Pokémon for company, weeks to reflect on the war she’d stumbled upon in Cinnabar and the extraordinary people she had traveled so far to help, who had ended up helping her in return in ways unexpected. Swanna honked, enjoying the malleable give of the sand under her webbed feet, and Rosa smiled tiredly.

“We’re home,” she whispered.

Town was not far on foot, so Rosa hiked her small pack higher on her shoulders and started walking. Lost in thought, she barely noticed the painted houses and smoking chimney stacks that released the succulent smells of dinner as she trekked north through town, Swanna waddling along after her. The largest building in town save for the courthouse was her destination, and the sight of it looming ahead filled her with an aching nostalgia she had somehow kept at bay during the many months away and on the long journey here. Her cheeks stretched in a tired but true smile at the sight of that yellow-painted house, the wreath on the door, freshly picked and woven, the vast backyard where Rosa had spent her formative years among the trees and flowers and earth. Swanna honked and hopped forward, equally as eager.

Rosa didn’t even make it to the door when it burst open to reveal a familiar blonde head and green eyes magnified behind a pair of oversized red glasses. Bianca beamed and squealed like a child as she threw herself at Rosa and embraced her.

“Oh my gosh, Rosa! I had no idea you were coming back today! Oh wow, best day ever!”

Bianca talked a mile a minute with her usual ebullience, and Rosa laughed, surprised at how much she’d missed the older girl. Bianca was twenty-nine, just a couple years Rosa’s senior, but her effusive manner, button nose, dimples, and bright clothes suggested the opposite. Often, when they were together, onlookers took Rosa in all her reticent severity and aplomb as the elder. But while the two women were as different as night and day in demeanor, they were sisters in all but blood.
“Surprise,” Rosa said, Bianca’s mood contagious and palpably warm.

Bianca smiled brighter, she was positively effervescent, and hugged Rosa again. “Musha sensed you coming, so I ran out here as fast as I could! Oh, it’s so good to have you back! Did I say that already? Well, it’s true!”

Bianca let her go and Rosa took the opportunity to breathe. Over Bianca’s shoulder hovering in the doorway floated the ever drowsy Musharna, Bianca’s Pokémon companion since she was a girl. It exhaled an odd, pink mist from its curled trunk, sleepy eyes unfocused and belying its inattention. In reality, Musharna was a strong Psychic that could hold its own against even the likes of Hypno or Grumpig. This one was at least as old as Bianca and carefully raised. Even plebs like Bianca could raise powerful Pokémon with enough time and care.

Swanna ruffled its feathers and shifted its weight behind Rosa, unnerved at Musharna’s unblinking stare. It honked again, and Bianca giggled up at it.

“Oh, you must be hungry after the flight here, huh Swanna? Come on, let’s get you cleaned up and fed.” She winked at Rosa. “Both of you.”

Rosa clasped her hands behind her back. “Sorry, I must smell like a Trubbish.”

“Nothing a shower can’t fix. Come inside, already!”

Bianca grabbed her by the hand and dragged her inside, while Swanna took to the sky and flew toward the vast back yard. The house was old and lived in. Pictures crammed the walls and shelves, the kitchen was bursting with too many pots and pans collected over the years, and the ancient dining room table still had the old chips in it from when Rosa dug her fork into the grooves as a child. The wall that separated the kitchen from the living room was marked with little lines in marker to indicate change in height—green for Rosa and red for Bianca. Rosa had won that race by a couple inches in the end. Even the smell was the same as Rosa remembered it: chopped firewood, sage and rosemary and basil courtesy of Bianca’s signature cooking, and a hint of lemon due to the compulsive cleaning habits of the house’s mistress.

At the thought of her cousin-turned-adoptive-mother, Rosa let go of Bianca’s hand and lingered near the sliding door to the back yard. “Where’s Aurea?”

Bianca smirked. “Downstairs. She’s having one of her science parties.”

Aurea Juniper, Rosa’s cousin and owner of this house-slash-laboratory, was a nerd in every sense of the word when it came to her trade. She was brilliant, a paleogeneticist pioneering advances in her field the likes of which had hardly been seen before. She also did a mean Electric Slide and was prone to musical whim from time to time, often bursting into song when the mood suited her. A science party to Aurea Juniper often involved bottomless energy drinks, terrible music from the last decade that neither Rosa nor Bianca could abide unless forced, and an unwavering, almost obsessive concentration on whatever project was at hand. Usually, they ended in some kind of breakthrough that sent shockwaves through the scientific community. The last time Juniper had had one of her little ‘parties’, she’d emerged with a fully revived Archen chick, the first of its kind ever seen in millennia. She’d named it Archie and gifted it to a man from Pewter City who had passed through here last year and somehow found his way into her good graces and her bed.

“Wonder what kind of discovery she’ll make this time?” Rosa said.

“Well, obviously nothing that can’t wait until after dinner. Go get cleaned up, and I’ll let her know you’re back. She’ll be so excited to see you!”
Musharna floated slowly toward Bianca, trailing pink mist in its wake, and Rosa sneezed upon inhaling a bit. Her eyes suddenly grew heavy, and she remembered her exhaustion.

“Oh Musha, you know you shouldn’t spread that Dream Mist in the house,” Bianca scolded. “You’ll put us all to sleep, silly Zangoose.”

Musharna blinked sleepily and ceased its output. Rosa rubbed her eyes.

“Oh, before I go, lemme just feed Swanna,” Rosa said, pushing off the wall and heading for the backyard where Swanna had touched down and was already submerged in the small pond there to clean its feathers of the salt and sea water.

“I’ve got it, don’t worry!” Bianca said. “You go clean up and settle in, okay?”

Rosa nodded. “Thanks, Bianca.”

Bianca blinked, and her smile faded to a pensive simmer. She took Rosa’s hand in hers and squeezed it gently. “I’m glad you’re back in one piece. I was so worried about you.”

The simple gesture nonetheless tied a knot in Rosa’s throat, and it hurt to swallow. She squeezed Bianca’s hand back. “Yeah, me too. It’s good to be home.”

She and Bianca parted ways then. Rosa headed upstairs to the room that had been hers since she arrived in this place as a young girl of just four years. Same twin bed, same dark green comforter, same window she’d had enlarged so she could climb out of it and abscond to the leafy tree that grew just an arm’s length away, where she’d spent hours and hours on a daily basis just sitting in its branches, more at home among the leaves than in any feather bed. As a Sylvan, a Tamer with an affinity for Grass-type Pokémon, the natural world and the flora that filled it was her home.

She climbed out the window now and tossed out three of her four remaining Pokéballs into the backyard. In a swath of light, Leafeon, Serperior, and the tiny Ferroseed coalesced and looked around. Serperior’s liquid ruby eyes alighted on Rosa instantaneously, and she smiled down at it and the others.

“I’ll be down in a bit,” she called to them. “Go ahead and relax.”

Leafeon yawned and bared its sharp fangs as it stretched out in the grass and rolled around. Ferroseed, ever wanting to be included, hovered next to Leafeon and churned up the grass with its steely barbs. Serperior tasted the air with its forked tongue and curled up under the tree for a nap. Rosa watched her Pokémon for a moment, pensive, before retreating back inside for a shower.

Before she headed for the bathroom, she set her last Pokéball on the nightstand and let her fingers linger on it a moment. Her shoulders sagged at the sight of the long empty Pokéball, the sting of loss indelible no matter how many weeks had passed. She had considered getting rid of the empty Pokéball, but found she could not bring herself to part with it. It didn’t feel right.

Half an hour later, clean and refreshed and wearing comfortable cotton pants and a sleeveless shirt, Rosa towel dried her long brown hair and headed downstairs in search of Bianca. Musharna had curled up on the living room sofa for a nap and was swathed in a cloud of pink mist, so Rosa gave it a wide berth to avoid the soporific haze. Bianca was in the kitchen stirring a pot of homemade sauce.

“Hey there, feeling better?” she said with a smile.

Rosa ran a hand through her loose, long hair. The dampness was cool on her back in the early
summer warmth. “Yeah.”

“Excellent! We’re about ready to eat. Wanna set the table for me?”

Rosa and Bianca bustled about the kitchen and dining room ferrying plates and silverware, bowls of food, and fresh glasses for drinks. Ferroseed bumped the door to the backyard, and Rosa opened it. The spiny Pokémon rolled inside, its barbs clicking against the cool tile floor as it spun and circled Rosa excitedly. She kneeled down and held out a hand, waiting for it to slow before daring to pet it, wary of its sharp thorns.

“Ferroseed hasn’t changed a bit,” Bianca said, looking up from the kitchen sink.

“It’s Thorny now,” Rosa said, running her fingers between the barbs around Ferroseed’s eyes and eliciting a low whirring sound that usually indicated the little Pokémon’s approval.

“Aw, that’s cute. I didn’t think you were much into nicknames.”

An image of a smiling face popped into Rosa’s mind. His red eyes smiled as brightly as his cheeky grin in sharp contrast with his unkempt, dark hair and a ratty red ball cap that she had on good authority could have survived the apocalypse if it came to it. “It was a friend’s suggestion,” she said, smiling a little.

“Anyone I know?”

Rosa turned at the sound of that familiar voice and found Juniper beaming at her from the stairwell leading to the basement laboratory.

“Aurea,” she said, smiling wide.

Juniper met her halfway and they embraced fiercely in the dining room. Ferroseed rolled around them, clicking and clacking against the tile, while Leafeon, who had followed its spiny companion indoors, meowed from the dining table protesting its lack of attention.

“Oh, Rosa, it’s good to have you back!” Juniper gushed.

They parted, and Rosa nodded. “It’s good to be back.”

Juniper wore a white labcoat over a pale green sundress that brought out her eyes. A pair of thick, rubber gloves were tucked into the pocket of her labcoat, and her chestnut hair was pulled back in a bun. Three Pokéballs were clipped to the waist of her dress over her hip, one of which was currently empty.

Minccino scampered up the stairs behind Juniper, its grey fur standing on end and its pink nose turned up to take in the smells of Bianca’s home cooked dinner. But as soon as its dark eyes alighted on Leafeon perched on the dining room table, it froze and twitched its large, furry ears, alert. Leafeon crouched down on its haunches and wiggled its backside, getting ready to pounce.

“Look out!” Bianca cried out.

Leafeon leaped from the table and Minccino bolted into the kitchen. Rosa turned to see what the commotion was all about, but Leafeon sprinted between her legs and scared the life out of Ferroseed, who bumped into Juniper’s shin.

“Ouch!”
Juniper fell into a crouch and clutched her bare shin, which was bleeding where Ferroseed had accidentally bumped her. Minccino let out a high-pitched squeal as it scampered into the living room and under a couch, where Leafeon chased it relentlessly. Musharna jostled awake and floated into the air, its temporary bed transformed into a hunting ground. Temporarily thwarted with the little chinchilla hiding under the couch, Leafeon slashed its tail, sharpening the edges.

“Leafeon, hey!”

Rosa jogged to the living room and scooped up the puffed up feline before it could Leaf Blade Juniper’s favorite plush loveseat in two.

“Oh my gosh, Aurea, you’re bleeding!” Bianca rushed to Juniper’s side with a towel from the kitchen and pressed it to Juniper’s leg.

“It’s all right, Bianca. It was just a lovetap, right Thorny?”

Ferroseed clattered around the floor, unsure what the fuss was but basking in the attention the humans were giving it. It zoomed toward Juniper again for a hug, but this time she was prepared and stopped it with the rubber gloves in her pocket.

“Affectionate little guy, isn’t he?” she said.

“Aurea, I’m so sorry,” Rosa said, returning to the dining room with Leafeon in her arms. The feline peered over her shoulder at the couch, where Minccino still hid.

“It’s okay. I should have kept Minccino out of sight, it was my fault,” Juniper said.

“Since when do you have a Minccino, anyway?”

“He was a present from Cheren,” Bianca said, having retrieved bandages from the first-aid kit in the kitchen that she now carefully stuck to Juniper’s leg. “The last time we visited Aspertia, what, three weeks ago, I think? His Cinccino had a new litter and he insisted we take one.”

Leafeon was purring in Rosa’s arms as she did her best to appease it with a generous scratch behind its tapering ears. “Well, maybe for now let’s keep them apart until Leafeon has something to eat. Oh, and I’m really sorry about Thorny.”

Juniper had picked up Ferroseed and held it a safe distance from her person. It continued to spin its segmented body and blinked up at her with with its small, yellow eyes. “It’s all right. He just wants some lovin’, isn’t that right? Aw, you just want a hug, you little pincushion!”

Bianca caught Rosa’s eye and they shared a look at that motherly tone. Ferroseed wriggled in Juniper’s arms, even more excited than it had been before.

“For now, you two’re staying outside where Serperior can keep an eye on you.” Rosa opened the sliding door to the backyard and let Leafeon out.

Juniper set Ferroseed down outside, and Rosa slid the door closed. Serperior, roused from its light nap, caught her looking. In the darkening evening, its red eyes seemed to glow through the shade and it slowly uncoiled to slither into the forest. Leafeon and Ferroseed were happy to follow while Swanna remained in the large pond napping. Rosa felt Juniper hovering next to her.

“Where’s Beartic?” she asked.

As though someone had dumped a bucket of ice water over her head, Rosa tensed and froze up.
This close, Juniper did not miss the ripple of emotion that passed through her young protégé, and she put a hand on Rosa’s shoulder.

“Rosa?”

Rosa let go of the door and turned back to the dining room. Minccino had emerged from its hiding spot under the couch and ventured timidly into the dining room.

“Beartic didn’t make it,” Rosa whispered.

Bianca was busy in the kitchen, where Musharna had floated over to join her and watch as she bustled about making the final preparations.

“I see,” Juniper said. “What happened?”

She could still see it even now, that Electrode on Cinnabar under the command of Team Rocket and how in the blink of an eye, it was gone and took Beartic with it. The loud ringing in her ears after the Self-Destruct blast died down. And the smell of Beartic’s roasted carcass, nothing but a hunk of meat charred and burned beyond all recognition. Her first Pokémon. The one Juniper had given her as a Cubchoo when she first arrived here as a little girl, afraid and alone with no one and nothing in all the world.

“He just didn’t make it,” Rosa said. “A lot of people and Pokémon didn’t make it.”

Juniper watched her with glassy detachment, like her mind had left her body to avoid the painful truth of what she was hearing.

“Tell me,” she said, cold but not unkind.

Despite herself, Rosa began to tear up. “Professor Oak...”

Juniper stared at her, the life returning to her eyes as her jaw slackened and the hand she had on Rosa’s shoulder clenched.

“Okay, dinner’s served!” Bianca announced. “Hey, did you guys hear me? Hello?”

Neither Rosa nor Juniper responded or even looked at Bianca.

“Guys?” Bianca said again, softly like she was afraid to shatter whatever fragile peace remained.

Juniper blinked and a few tears fell from her eyes. She wiped her face with her sleeve over the rubber glove she still wore.

“Let’s eat,” she said, not sounding like herself. “And I want you to tell me everything that happened in Kanto. Everything.”

Bianca’s dinner was delicious and rich, exactly what Rosa’s stomach had been craving after so long over the open ocean and island hopping on her way back from Kanto. But it was wasted on her tonight as she relived the horrors of war she had gotten sucked into in Kanto.

Rosa recounted everything to Juniper and Bianca. Juniper had originally dispatched Rosa on Professor Samuel Oak’s request for assistance against an international crime syndicate known as Team Rocket that had been terrorizing Johto and Kanto not only through financial and political
manipulation, but also through a series of heinous Pokémon experiments known as ‘Chimera’. Juniper herself had discovered the awful genetic mutations cultivated in Pokémon at the hands of unknown perpetrators here in Unova when a horde of mutated Skorupi—what used to be Skorupi—emerged from the bowels of Pinwheel Forest and descended on Nacrene City to the north. Somehow, whatever technology had morphed the Skorupi and driven them mad had found its way into Team Rocket’s hands. It was for assistance in unraveling this mystery and putting a stop to it that Oak had beseeched his former student.

But Oak had lost his life just as he and Rosa, back in Kanto’s Indigo Plateau, had discovered perhaps the ugliest truth of the mystery surrounding Team Rocket and their insidious Chimera project. Kanto and Johto’s Elite Four had been secretly working with Team Rocket, giving them access to key cities on both continents and using their influence over certain Gym Leaders to aid Team Rocket’s nefarious scheming. Rosa and Oak had managed to free Agatha, a powerful Medium and former Elite Four, but he had lost his life in the process.

“How could this happen?” Juniper said, pale with shock. “Professor Oak was Clairvoyant. He was just as strong as any of those so-called Elite Four.”

“He sacrificed himself so Agatha and I could escape,” Rosa explained, her dinner long grown cold. “It was another Clairvoyant that got him.”

Juniper rubbed her temples, eyes wide and unseeing as she stared at the salt shaker in the center of the table. “I just can’t believe it.”

“Will and Karen, the ones responsible, got what was coming to them at the Battle of Cinnabar afterwards,” Rosa went on, stony faced. “Them, and the rest of the Elite Four and Team Rocket. I saw the bodies myself. Team Rocket’s finished, and there’s a new Elite Four in Kanto now. One I can trust.”

“Oh, Rosa,” Bianca said, finally breaking her silence as she listened to Rosa’s story. “I’m so sorry you had to go through this alone.”

“I wasn’t alone,” Rosa said. “The people I met there... I’ve never met anyone so brave. They were just kids, they’d never seen war, and they fought like hell. They won. I think... I know Professor Oak didn’t die in vain. I think he knew that, too.”

“Of course, of course he did,” Bianca said vehemently.

The three women shared a moment of silence. Minccino, who sat at the opposite end of the table, was munching on some bread it had swiped from the basket in the center, its dark eyes wide and sullen as it observed the three of them, perhaps sensing the gravity of their grief.

“But all those people and Pokémon...” Bianca hugged her arms. “And to think, that Chimera technology originated here? Is that really true?”

Juniper sat back in her chair and looked up, gaze hard. “Yes, it’s true. I had my suspicions before, but now I know them to be true.”

“What’re you saying?” Rosa demanded.

“Team Plasma.”

Rosa swallowed hard and wrung her hands in her lap. “Team Plasma? Why would you say that? Where’s your proof?”
Juniper held her gaze, unwavering. “I know you don’t want to hear it, Rosa, but it’s true. A lot’s happened while you were away these past months.”

“Well, how about explaining it to me instead of throwing out these wild accusations?”

“Rosa, calm down. She didn’t mean it like that,” Bianca said.

“Oh, yeah? Because it sounded to me like she was accusing Team Plasma of illegal experimentation and torture. What’s next, murder? Rape? War?”

Juniper stood up from her chair and glared down at Rosa. “That’s enough,” she said. “Don’t you dare speak to me like that. You know I never wanted to believe it, either. But things have changed since you’ve been gone. It’s time to face the truth.”

She marched to the bookcase in the nearby living room and rummaged in a drawer for something. Papers rustled and after a minute or two, she marched back to the dinner table and slapped a bundle of newspaper articles held together with a rubber band on the table in front of Rosa.

“Team Plasma’s undergone some organizational restructuring lately,” Juniper went on. “Perhaps you’ll be interested to know that they’ve come under new management.”

Rosa’s anger dissipated somewhat as she glanced at the article on top of the pile. The headline read, ‘Local Political Party Team Plasma Undergoes Ideological Split’. She reached for the bundle, removed the rubber band holding the leaflets together, and scanned the headlines. Some highlighted a rift in the organization, others talked about the new direction Team Plasma was headed in, now led by a man called Ghetsis. One mentioned Team Plasma’s true leader, N, and Rosa looked up.

“I don’t understand,” she said. “What happened to N?”

“No one knows,” Juniper said, arms crossed. “He’s disappeared. Some Plasma Agents decided to defect to stay true to him, hence the split, but no one seems to know where they’ve gone, either. There’s only Ghetsis’s Team Plasma now. And they’re interested in a lot more than peaceful protests and lobbying Gym Leaders.”

Rosa only half heard her as she continued to scan the news clippings, picking out key facts and developments here and there. “What the... Striaton and Nacrene ended their ceasefire? This is dated two days ago.”

“That’s right. Gym Leader Lenora personally reached out to me requesting help from us and from Aspertia. She knows our personal connection to Gym Leader Cheren.”

Suddenly, the aftertaste of Bianca’s dinner soured in Rosa’s mouth. “I don’t get it. What does Team Plasma have to do with this?”

“They’re backing Striaton. Those three princes are challenging Lenora’s sovereignty.”

“They want access to Pinwheel Forest,” Bianca said. “Striaton’s always been clamoring for more control of the timber industry. They have to buy everything. It’s always been like that.”

Rosa looked between the two women. “This is crazy. N would never get involved in something like this.”

“N’s gone, Rosa,” Juniper said. “This is Ghetsis’s Team Plasma. Lenora thinks he’s funding Striaton and providing feet on the ground.”
“And where’s the proof?”

Juniper said nothing as she headed back downstairs to her lab. Bianca got up and began clearing the plates.

“Bianca? Tell me this is all bullshit. Team Plasma isn’t a bunch of warmongers,” Rosa entreated her.

Bianca looked at her sadly. “I’m sorry, Rosa. Aurea’s right, a lot’s changed since you left. I don’t know about N, but what’s happening in Nacrene and Striaton is real.”

Juniper returned then and threw something down on the table in front of Rosa. The stench of it, wet and rotten and cloyingly sweet, assaulted her like a punch to the face and she scrambled up out of her chair to get away from it. Minccino jumped off the table and squeaked, frightened.

“What the hell is that?” Rosa said, covering her mouth and nose.

“At some point, it was a Lopunny,” Juniper said. “The head, at least.”

The head on the table was severed at the neck and black with rot. The fur was patchy and greasy, and its eyes were cloudy and white with rigor mortis. But its teeth, normally flat for grazing, were somehow sharp and saber-like, as though a Liepard’s jaws had been grafted into the gums. The lolling tongue was purple with poison, and its long, floppy ears were hairless and covered in needles like a Maractus’s hide. They leaked tiny beads of poison.

Juniper set something else on the table in front of Rosa. It was a glass canister that contained an odd metal contraption. Silver tentacles wriggled in the confined space, searching for a way out.

“In case you were wondering, I didn’t pry that Chimera tech out of this Lopunny’s head. It’s an older model sent over by Devon Corporation in Hoenn, the same model Professor Oak brought to them last year. This Lopunny has the same kind of genetic mutations as the monsters you saw in Kanto, isn’t that right?”

Rosa nodded numbly.

“I thought so. The problem is, this Lopunny didn’t have any hardware in its head when it went on a rampage in Nacrene a month ago. All we heard were reports of a weird melody playing from the radio on every station, then a whole herd of Lopunny and Buneary, genetically modified like this one, invaded Nacrene from Striaton. Lenora lost seven of her best Gym trainers stopping them.”

Rosa looked away from the Lopunny head. “I still don’t know what this has to do with Team Plasma.”

“None of this started happening until Team Plasma started operating out of Striaton.”

“That doesn’t prove anything.”

“It does if the same thing’s been happening everywhere Team Plasma gets a foothold. These aberrations follow Team Plasma like a plague, Rosa. It’s been that way ever since Ghetsis took control. They’re creating them. Team Rocket got the technology from them, I’m sure of it. It started with preliminary tests, like that Skorupi horde. Now, they’re clearly much more advanced, their technique perfected. The tech is getting better.”

“So you’re saying you don’t have any concrete proof.”
Juniper sighed in exasperation. “Rosa, wake up! I understand your sympathies for N, but he’s gone. Team Plasma is not the same group you used to know. Lenora has sent me reports of Plasma Agent sightings in Striaton over the last couple months. They have a definite and growing presence there. It’s only since they showed up that those three princes have turned their threats into actual hostilities. This can’t be a coincidence, not after everything that’s happened.”

Rosa shook her head in disbelief. “And I guess this means you want me to help destroy Team Plasma, is that it?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t have to.”

Rosa pushed past Juniper and headed for the stairs to the second floor.

“Rosa, wait,” Bianca called to her.

But Rosa ignored her and pounded up the steps to her room and slammed the door closed behind her. Fuming, she paced the room once, twice, three times, then finally went to the window and climbed outside to sit in the tree. Its leaves were thick and fleshy in early summer, the last of its spring flowers losing their pale blue petals to the wind. Rosa nestled among the branches, perfectly concealed from anyone looking up from the backyard. Swanna had gone to sleep in the pond, her long neck folded over her feathery back, while the Grass Pokémon were nowhere to be seen.

Rosa let out a long breath and gripped the bark with her bare hands. Eyes closed, the dark world lit up in a network of white, pale paths of light that wound down the tree, swirled among the leaves, and extended far into the forest west of Nuvema Town. They coiled faintly in the house around Bianca and Juniper, and they washed over Swanna in her pond, wild Burmy and nesting Taillow in the forest, until finally they bumped a familiar bundle of energy. Serperior, deep in the forest with Leafeon and Ferroseed, looked up from its kill—a plump Audino that it would swallow whole after having Constricted it to death—and shifted its bloody eyes south toward Rosa, sensing her silent probing.

Rosa sucked in a breath and shuddered. She was adept at following the lifelines, paths of natural energy that connected all living creatures and plants and visible to proficient Sylvans like herself with time and training, but the effort drained her nonetheless without the aid of a Grass-type Pokémon. It didn’t matter. Serperior and her other Pokémon would return soon now that she’d called them. And then she would not be alone.

The stars were out, and the moon was almost full. She peered up at it through the leaves, bright and white and so far away. It had been her constant companion on the long journey back here from Kanto.

“It can’t be,” she whispered to herself.

Juniper was reasonable and understanding. She always had been. Even when Rosa, just fifteen and eager to be around other Tamers like herself, had announced her intention to join the fledgling Team Plasma after being bewitched by its mysterious leader like so many others. N, as he was known to the masses, was a beguiling character with a pretty face and strong, pure convictions he would not compromise for anything or anyone. It had been his intoxicating charisma and his dedication to his cause that had drawn Rosa and so many others into his sphere of influence. She was doing good. She was helping Pokémon and people better cohabitate and share the earth. As a Sylvan, she treasured the earth and nature more than others, she liked to think. She knew more about it. She understood its importance. It was her duty to impart her knowledge and passion unto
others. N’s Team Plasma was the perfect vehicle through which to realize her own goals and find an actionable purpose in life.

Human civilization was expanding at an ever growing rate. Pokémon were being driven from their natural habitats as bulldozers plowed through trees and laid asphalt for roads. The Gym Leaders, autonomous lords that cared nothing for anything and anyone outside their domains, did nothing to stop the encroaching menace of the human diaspora, Tamer and pleb and skuff alike. Someone had to do something. Someone had to stand up and say, ‘Enough is enough’. The earth was not any one species’ property to poison and pillage as it saw fit.

N had stood up and said something. Team Plasma had begun as a force for change through education, and Rosa had been an eager disciple of N’s gospel, traveling all over Unova’s East Tine to enlighten people. She’d been everywhere from Nuvema far to the south, to Nacrene in the central west, and even as far as Undella in the north. Other Plasma Agents spread the word in the West Tine and in the Central Tine. The Trident, the Unova continent, would hear their plea and change its ways. This, Rosa and so many others had truly believed. She had found her calling, a purpose, a means to accomplish good in the world. Surely, there was no greater accomplishment than the satisfaction of achieving lasting good that touched the hearts of people near and far and cultivated a better world for generations to come.

There were rumors, of course. There are always rumors. Whenever someone embarks on a good quest to better the lives of others, there will always be naysayers looking to tear them down with slander and poison. They said N sanctioned theft. They pointed to many trainers, mostly plebs, who had lost their Pokémon to Plasma Agents who deemed them ‘unworthy’ of raising Pokémon. So what? Some people were not fit to raise Pokémon, just as some were not fit to raise children. Some people are not right in the head. Some are cruel. Some are vicious and selfish. Perhaps they deserved to have their Pokémon liberated. Perhaps they deserved to be cast out. Rosa could believe it. She’d seen abuse in her life, humans who mistreated Pokémon. Chimera, the awful experiments on Pokémon that altered their DNA and turned them into mindless monsters, pitiful creatures who suffered in life and were forced to do humans’ bidding. People like that should not deserve to be near Pokémon, much less partner with them.

They said N was a murderer. They said he ordered the killing of anyone deemed ‘unworthy’ who would not give up their Pokémon. They said Plasma Agents invaded homes and private property, stole Pokémon, and slaughtered would-be trainers who dared oppose them. They said these things, but there was no proof. This was a cruel, harsh world. People died. Pokémon died. Accidents happened. There was no proof. There had never been proof. Rosa would never do such a thing. She would never associate with anyone who did. She had killed, but always for a good cause. War was a part of life. There were bad people in the world. There was evil in the world. It needed culling, like weeds in a garden. But it was not the same. There was no proof.

Juniper had no proof, only circumstantial evidence. Hearsay, rumors, tall tales. How could she, a scientist well respected from Kanto to Kalos, be so naïve? How could she buy such spurious rumors? People fought. People were greedy. The Striaton princes had always had it out for Nacrene and the timber industry supplied by Pinwheel Forest. That was no secret. Why should N have anything to do with it?

But N was gone. That was what Juniper had said. He was gone, and a man called Ghetsis ran Team Plasma in his stead now. Rosa knew nothing of this Ghetsis aside from his name. He’d been one of the Seven Sages in the Team Plasma she knew, one of N’s trusted advisors. No one particularly special. It mattered little who was in charge. N’s Team Plasma would never become embroiled in petty political strife. And for what? It had nothing to do with bettering the lives of Pokémon and people. She could not believe it.
Rosa’s hand found the locket that hung around her neck under her shirt, and she held it up in front of her face and popped it open. It was a plain, round, golden locket with no identifying marks or engravings, but it was one of hundreds given out to many eager, young idealists like herself all those years ago. It connected them to each other and to their visionary leader. She ran her thumb over the faded, black and white picture of a man’s profile, no bigger than a fingernail pasted to the inside of the locket. N’s face was grainy in the picture, even taken at a close up, but his distinctive, wild hair and almost clairvoyant eyes marked him as something more, something beyond, a man to follow. A man to lead. A good man. A man who had disappeared without a trace.

“Where did you go?”

Only the crickets answered her on this clear summer night. Slithering below drew her eyes to the ground where Serperior and the others had finally returned. Serperior’s middle was engorged with Audino’s carcass, a meal that would keep the basilisk sated for the next couple weeks. Its bloody eyes found Rosa in the tree and it slowly slithered up the trunk. If it had wanted to, Serperior could have snapped the tree in two with a well-placed Constrict. Instead, it settled for draping its long, leafy body among the branches. Its head, more than twice as large as Rosa’s, settled in her lap and faced its tapering tail that hung off the next branch.

Rosa ran her hand over Serperior’s broad, scaly head and tickled the leafy tendrils that naturally grew from the skin around its neck like a starched collar. “I thought the fighting was over,” she whispered to the regal snake. “But now I have a bad feeling things are about to get much, much worse.”

Serperior was silent as it blinked its double eyelids and settled in for the night. Leafeon had curled up under the tree, and Ferroseed burrowed into the ground to lay its steely roots and soak up nutrients during the night.

Unbidden, Rosa thought of Nate, her childhood friend. Her only friend, if she was being honest. He always spent his summers here when they were kids to visit his father after his parents’ divorce. His father was long deceased, but he never missed a summer in Nuvema to visit Rosa regardless. They would spend hours outside, from dawn until dusk, exploring the forest, playing with their Pokémon, running around town. He hated water, so she often splashed him from the pond where she would happily swim fully clothed, much to his dismay. And they would lie together under the stars side by side, dreaming of the next day when the sun would come up again and they could spend another whole day together.

She thought of him now, pictured his face. He was due to arrive here soon now that summer was in full swing. How she’d missed him while she’d been away. Did he know about what was going on? What they were saying about N and Team Plasma? What did he think about it?

She drifted to sleep out there in the tree, as comfortable as could be with a giant grass snake draped over her body under the stars, and she dreamed of summer.

Rosa woke to the sounds of voices, loud and clamoring. She was in her tree and Serperior’s head still rested in her lap, but as soon as she stirred it opened its double eyelids and swiveled its red eyes around in search of the source of the voices. Below, Leafeon meowed up at Rosa and Ferroseed was still Ingrained in the grass.

Pushing up from her branch, Rosa rubbed her eyes and squinted past the house toward the road that ran in front of it. There were people walking into town, ragged and slumped and carrying all
manner of packs over their shoulders. Some rode in wagons pulled by hardy Gogoat and Taurus. But what made Rosa stare was the look of them.

They were almost all women and children. The only men among them were elderly or injured, and most rode in the wagons to accommodate them.

“What’s going on?” she said to no one in particular.

Bianca suddenly appeared in the backyard below, looked around, and spotted Serperior hanging off the tree above.

“Rosa, are you up there?” she called.

Rosa let her legs hang over the branch and disturbed Serperior. The grass snake slithered over the branches down the trunk, where it eyed Bianca with relative indifference. She backed away to get out of its way nonetheless. Bianca had always been a little nervous around Serperior ever since it had evolved years ago.

“I’m here,” Rosa called, shimmying onto the roof awning and leaning over so Bianca could see her.

“Hey, good morning,” Bianca said. “Slept out here, huh? Anyway, you better come downstairs. Something’s happened.”

“Does it have anything to do with those people spilling into town?”

Bianca’s expression fell and she kicked her toes against the grass. “Just come down as soon as you can, okay?”

She disappeared back inside the house, and Rosa had no choice but to head back inside. She put on a new shirt, having slept in yesterday’s, and pulled her long hair back in a ponytail just to get it out of her face. There was no time to brush it out, and she was curious about what all those people were doing here. Where they’d come from.

Beartic’s empty Pokéball still sat on her nightstand, and she cast it a lingering glance as she opened the door to her room. After a moment’s delay, she tore her gaze away and headed downstairs.

There were people in the living room. A lot of them.

“What’s going on?” she said, wandering into the kitchen where Bianca stood.

Musharna sat on the counter, its short trunk sniffing idly at the stovetop.

Bianca shook her head. “They’ve just been showing up for the last hour or so. They came from Accumula Town.”

Juniper was in the living room conversing with a few of the people that had filtered inside—women, a few with young children hiding behind their skirts. Bianca was busy piling sliced bread into a large bowl and spooning jam into smaller bowls.

“Hey, will you help me take these over there?” Bianca said.

“Um, sure.”

Rosa took two bowls of jam and followed Bianca into the living room, where they set all the food on the coffee table. A child grabbed one of the jam bowls out of Rosa’s hand and dipped his finger into it, then stuffed it into his mouth. His face was smudged with dirt, and he had a bandage around
his head that was soaked with old blood. Rosa stared and, without thinking, grabbed a piece of bread and slathered it with jam. She held it out for the boy.

“Here, eat this,” she said.

The boy grinned, revealing bloody gums where he’d lost four teeth, and happily took the offered food from Rosa to stuff in his mouth.

“I know,” Juniper was saying in hushed tones. “I’ve already sent word to Aspertia. We have ships leaving within the hour, so get to the docks and you’ll find safe passage, I promise you.”

The woman she was talking to was on the verge of tears. Her arm was in a sling made from an old shirt and hastily bundled on the road. “Thank you, thank you so much. You’ve saved us.”

The woman nodded and took her two children with her to the door. The other occupants followed after they each took food for themselves, thanking the women in rushed whispers as they filed out of the house. Rosa watched them go.

“What’s going on?” she said.

“You wanted proof?” Juniper said. She was dressed in jeans and a white button-down this morning. “That’s it.”

Rosa frowned. “What’re you talking about?”

“Those people are here from Accumula. They say their town’s been razed to the ground. Striaton invaded, the men fought back. I asked that woman there to describe to me what the invaders looked like. She said some of them wore uniforms, grey and black.” Juniper leveled Rosa with an apologetically cold look, like she hated being right. “They bore an insignia with blue embroidery: the letters ‘TP’ on a black and white shield. Rosa, it’s Team Plasma.”

Rosa stared blankly back at Juniper. “No, you can’t be serious.”

“I’m afraid I am. And I’m ordering a full evacuation to Aspertia City. Everyone will be out of here by the end of the week.”

“That’s not soon enough,” Bianca said. “If they’re in Accumula, we’re only a day’s walk here in Nuvema.”

“I know, Bianca,” Juniper assured her. “But from what the refugees said, the Striaton and Plasma forces suffered some key losses thanks to Accumula’s militia. They’ll have to retreat and pad their ranks before they can attempt any invasion this far south. If we move quickly, we could see everyone safely to Aspertia.”

Rosa could hardly believe what she was hearing. “This is insane.”

Juniper took her by the shoulders. “What’s insane is that we have half of Accumula Town pouring in here fleeing for their lives. Rosa, I love you very much and I don’t ever want to see you in pain. So you can forget about Team Plasma if you want. All that matters now is that we get to the bottom of whatever is happening. Can we agree on that?”

Bianca gasped. “What? You mean you want to go north and investigate? Aurea, that’s way too dangerous! Especially after Nacrene and Striaton ended their ceasefire a few days ago! For all we know, it could be a warzone up there.”
Juniper spared Bianca a glance. “I know it’s dangerous. That’s why I’m asking Rosa to accompany me.” She returned her gaze to Rosa. “You’re our resident Tamer, after all. I could use your help.”

“What about the refugees?” Rosa said.

“Bianca will see to it that they make it safely to Aspertia, and then she will follow them.”

“Aurea, no, I’m not leaving you,” Bianca protested.

“Yes, you are. I need you to warn Cheren. He trusts you, and he’ll listen to you. Speak for me. We may need to go as far north as Virbank for help if things are as bad as I suspect they are.”

Bianca bit her lip and nodded. “I—I’ll just get my things. I’m sure they need help down at the docks. Come on, Musha.”

Musharna floated after Bianca upstairs to her room, leaving Rosa alone with Juniper.

“I’m sorry to ask this of you,” Juniper said once they were alone. “I know you’ve had a rough time of it in Kanto and with the long journey back here. But I can’t do this by myself, you know that. I’m not like you.”

Juniper, like Bianca, was a pleb. She was gifted with her sharp mind and eye for innovation, but that was as far as her gifts extended. She was one of a minority of plebs who had kept and trained strong Pokémon for many years since she was a child and there was something to be said about that, but she was still no Tamer. She did not have the gift. If what Rosa was dreading was truly at hand up north, Juniper would indeed need all the help she could get.

“Oh course I’ll go with you,” Rosa said. “And I’ll prove that N’s not behind this.”

Juniper searched her eyes. “We’ll leave immediately. Get ready. I’ll meet you back down here in a half hour.”

Juniper headed upstairs to her own quarters, and Rosa was alone in the living room. The bowls of bread and jam were nearly empty after the refugees had taken their fill and filed out. She remembered the little boy with the bandage holding his head together and clutched her locket through her shirtfront.

_He can’t be behind this._

She would prove it to Juniper, to anyone who didn’t believe. N, Team Plasma, they would never drive innocent people from their homes. That wasn’t who they were. That wasn’t who Rosa was.

Determined, Rosa went back upstairs to clean up and pack for a new journey so soon after her last had come to an end. Nate and their languid summers under the sun and stars would have to wait.
Nate

Four-hundred and twenty-seven cracks spidered in the ceiling over Nate’s bed. They intersected at random points, angled around, criss-crossed again, all in complex chaos that was at the same time frustrating to detangle and wholly forgettable—who counts the cracks in the ceiling, anyway? There ought to be better things to do on a summer afternoon in the mountains. But Nate counted the cracks slowly.

Two-hundred and seventy-eight, two-hundred and seventy-nine...

A dull crashing noise sounded from somewhere downstairs, and Nate shot up in bed. He was fully clothed in khaki shorts and a blue T-shirt, having been up for hours as he lingered in his room. The window was open and let in the warm breeze, not too hot courtesy of the tall peaks that surrounded Aspertia to the northwest. He left it open and headed for the door, briefly catching his reflection in the mirror hanging next to it. His dark hair was a mess and in perpetual need of a trim. It hung down in his eyes, a dark molasses he’d inherited from his father. The scar that ran from the base of his left ear to just under his jaw from a tree-climbing accident when he was a boy shone like it had been polished.

Nate didn’t slow down and headed out the door down the stairs to the kitchen. His fingers instinctively went for the line of three Pokéballs attached to his belt, but he relaxed when he saw the source of the crash. His mother, Helena, was on the floor in her nightgown where she’d spilled an entire jug of milk and was trying her best to wipe up the mess and pick up the shards of shattered bottle. She noticed his approach and managed a tired smile.

“Hey Nate. Oh, look what I’ve done? It was in my hand one moment, and the next—”

She threw a thick shard of glass on the floor, where it split in two and scattered over the spilled milk. Her hand was bleeding where she’d cut herself trying to pick up the pieces.

Nate stared at her a moment, a small part of him wondering what would happen if he just walked away and left her to wallow in the mess. But the thought didn’t even register in his conscious mind as he automatically grabbed the roll of paper towels on the counter and kneeled down across from her.

“It’s okay, Mom. I’ll clean it up. You should wash your hand, you’re bleeding.”

Helena’s white nightgown was soiled with milk, but she hardly noticed as she got up and walked right through the mess to the kitchen sink. She left white footprints in her wake, and Nate sighed but remained silent. Carefully, he scooped up the broken bottle shards and began mopping up the spilled milk.

“I’m so clumsy all the time. You must be so fed up with me,” Helena said in her lilting, almost whiny voice.

“No, Mom, I’m not fed up with you,” Nate said, suddenly tired. “Don’t worry about it.”

He finished cleaning up the floor and dumped the soggy paper towels and broken glass in the trash can. As he stood up again, Helena wrapped her arms around his shoulders from behind. Nate was not a tall man, just shy of five-seven, but Helena was small and frail by comparison. She rested her cheek against the back of his shoulder, her loose, brown hair trailing down his back, and breathed deeply like it was the hardest thing she had ever done.
“I’m sorry, Nate, I’m just so tired today.”

Her fingers, the nails jagged from constant biting, left searing imprints on his collarbone where they ghosted the skin, but Nate did not flinch from the unnatural heat. Gently, he took her hands and spun them around so he was facing her. Her eyes, liquid amber and at one time beguiling to look upon from the pictures he’d seen of her in her youth, were unfocused and seemed to see right through him.

“Come on, why don’t you sit down.” He led her to the living room and fished the TV remote from the couch. “Your favorite soap is on.”

There was an ashtray filled almost to the brim with ashes and orange cigarette butts on the small table next to the sofa where Helena plopped down. Plates from lunch, breakfast, and last night’s dinner were stacked on top of each other on the coffee table between the sofa and TV set. Helena sat down without a fuss, stared at the TV, then followed Nate as he gathered up the used plates and ashtray to take back to the kitchen.

He felt her eyes on him as he deposited the dirty dishes in the sink and ran the water, then dumped the ashtray’s contents out in the trash. She was still watching him when he returned with the emptied ashtray, a glass of water, and a couple pills that he handed to her.

“I’m going out for a bit,” he said. “Here, take your meds. Bridget should be here soon to set up the guest room.”

He spoke softly and evenly, never rushed and eyes sharp and watchful as Helena accepted the pills and swallowed them with a sip of water.

“You’ll be okay for an hour until she gets here,” he went on.

All of a sudden, Helena shot out her hand and grabbed Nate by the arm. Her eyes were wide and had begun to tear up. “Don’t leave,” she said, voice cracking. “Don’t leave me alone.”

Nate gently pried her hand from his wrist, wincing at the searing heat she imparted without meaning to. “I’m not leaving, Mom. It’s summer. You know I always go to Nuvema in the summers, remember? Bridget will be here to settle in. I’ll still be here for a few more days.”

Helena shook her head. “No, I don’t want you to leave. I’m afraid you won’t come back this time.”

“I go every year, Mom, you know that. It’s only for a couple months—”

“I said don’t leave me, Paul!” she cried. “Please, I couldn’t bear it!”

Nate fell still as she trembled and averted her gaze, sniffing and reaching for the glass of water again. He watched her drink and rubbed his wrist where she would have burned him if he were anyone else.

“I’m not Paul, I’m Nate,” he said finally. “Dad’s gone. He left, but I’m still here. Mom?”

She blinked and looked up at him, really looked at him, and for a few seconds she was his mother again come up for air from the sea of sorrow that had slowly been drowning her these past years ever since the divorce. She’d never been the same. Maybe Paul had seen something of the darkness that slowly devoured her, patient and lying in wait, and he’d had enough. Nate would never know. Paul was dead now, had been for years, and there was no one left to answer Nate’s questions. On his worst days, he didn’t want to know.
“I’m sorry, Nate. You just look so much like him. I didn’t mean to frighten you,” Helena said.

“I know.”

“Go on, I’ll wait for Bridget. I’ll be fine now, I promise.”

Her meds would kick in fast and she would calm down enough to function normally, but tomorrow morning she would crash again. Some days were worse than others. Today had been relatively tame. As long as someone was here to watch her, Helena was fine. Bridget was her cousin and had gracially volunteered to live with Helena in the summers when Nate was away in Nuvema to visit his father. It became an annual event, a couple months out of the year when he could remember what it was like live without the shadow of another blocking out the sun.

But he didn’t mind it. She hadn’t been the one to leave. And he had friends here, people and places to whom he could escape for an hour here, an hour there. He didn’t need much, and staying in the house he grew up in to look after the parent who could no longer look after herself while the other twenty-somethings he knew were barely making rent in their cramped apartments in town was a price Nate was willing to pay. She was his mother.

“Go, Nate. I know who you’re going to see, and we both know he hates to wait.”

She offered him a shy smile, and he bent over to kiss her forehead.

“I’ll be back later tonight.”

Nate grabbed the keys from the hook near the door and cast Helena one last look. She was staring at the TV and lighting up a fresh cigarette. She likely would not budge from that spot for hours until either Bridget or he moved her. He let himself out the front door and locked it behind him.

Outside, the outskirts of Aspertia City were awash with summer sunlight and fresh mountain breeze. Nate held a hand over his eyes to shade them and took a deep breath. The mountains stretched far to the north with Aspertia nestled at their base. They were green here, but far to the north in the Upper West Tine, they would turn to iron and ice and stretch high above the clouds. There were people who lived up there in a placed called Icirrus, the city in the clouds, where it was said that the roads were paved with diamonds mined from the abundant veins deep in the icy Twist Mountains. Nate had never been and so could never verify such rumors, but even for a small-town dreamer the stories of such opulence were hard to believe.

Farther south here in Aspertia, though, there was no ice or snow and hardly any clouds at all today. The mountain lakes that dappled the landscape like puddles after a hard rain shimmered clear as the summer sky, and it was to one of these many lakes that Nate took off at a jog toward. It was only half a mile from his house and fed a river that passed through it from the mountains to the north and emptied out into the bay to the south. They always met up here, away from the bustle of the city.

Nate passed the few neighbors he had this far out from Aspertia proper. One was a farmer who kept Miltank and sold milk and homemade cheeses in town. He was a kind old man with a habit of chewing tobacco. Nate had been afraid of the poisonous spittle he would spew as a child, but the farmer’s wife made the best damn chocolate chip cookies in the entire world, Nate was convinced, so that had allayed his fears as a seven-year-old. The Miltank were out to pasture now grazing on the sweetgrass that grew naturally here, and the farmer’s daughter was driving a tractor in the field and didn’t see Nate passing.

The lake was just ahead. It didn’t have a name, like all the lakes around here. There were so many
that no one could be bothered to remember them all. This one was deep, over two-hundred feet, but its waters were so clear that to the uninitiated, it looked no deeper than a Tympole pond. Surskit skimmed the surface near the shores chewing on moss and algae, while Magikarp and Finneon lay in wait just below the surface to gobble them up. There were no aquatic predators to control the fish's numbers, but wild Braviary and Unfezant were known to make their nests in the mountains higher up and would snatch up any fish that got too fat and slow or wandered too close to the surface.

Nate had been just five when he saw it happen the first time. A Braviary, huge and regal and undoubtedly the scariest, coolest Pokémon he'd ever seen, swooped in from out of nowhere and sank its talons into a plump Magikarp just as the fish leaped out of the water and swallowed a Surskit whole. Braviary had snatched it in midair, the timing perfect, and crunched its bones in its raptor talons like they were nothing but toothpicks.

There were no Braviary here now, and the Magikarp and Finneon were glugging safely underwater, their feeding time long past. A flock of Swanna in elegant v-formation flew overhead toward the bay to the south, gliding on the winds as if by magic, and Nate watched them pass. He thought of Rosa and how he would see her again in a few days. It had been no longer than it usually was, but something about this year made the wait feel eternal. She'd mentioned something about heading to Kanto on request from Juniper, but she hadn't shared any details. He would ask her when he saw her. Surely she must be back by now.

Something splashed in the lake, and before Nate could dart out of the way, he got sprayed with water and fell on his butt from the shock.

"Damnit," he swore, wiping the water from his eyes and face. His front was splashed and his clothes were a little damp, and a light steam rose from his wet skin.

"Serves you right," a voice said from the water. "You were supposed to be here twenty minutes ago."

Nate wiped the water from his face and looked up only to find a fifteen-foot Milotic hovering over him. Depthless, dark eyes stared down at him as the serpentine Pokémon stuck its nose in his face, sawed off nostrils taking in his scent. The sunlight shone off Milotic's creamy scales and doused them in shades of fuchsia and cerulean and a violet so dark it was nearly black.

"I'm okay," Nate said, sitting up.

Milotic towered over him, its long head fins draped over the grass and dripping water from its recent dip in the lake where its long tail was still submerged. A young man of an age with Nate, also dripping water and clad in a dark wetsuit, walked around Milotic and ran his hand over her prism scales. Severe, sapphire eyes as sharp as knives alighted on Nate.

"Come on, no one likes a soggy Ignifer."

Nate accepted the offered hand and got to his feet. "Says the guy who splashed me. Nice to see you, too, Hugh."

Hugh smirked in a way that twisted his face. His was the kind of face that was at its most natural and comely in a frown, scowling at something or muttering curses. The grin thinned his lips as though his mouth were a papercut on his face, the razor blade smile of a man who'd mastered the motions but rarely resonated with them on a deeper level. Hugh was a tall man, towering a couple inches over Nate plus some wiggle room for his wild dark hair that had an odd habit of spiking like a pincushion except when it was wet, which was a majority of the time. While Nate avoided
submerging himself in water that was not necessary to maintain basic hygiene, Hugh took every opportunity to dive in for a swim.

“How long were you down there?” Nate asked.

Hugh checked his watch. “I dunno, maybe an hour or so. I wasn’t watching the clock.”

Nate peered at him. “You’re a little pruney. I’d say it was closer to two.”

Hugh blinked and examined his hands. Scowling he said, “I am not.”

Nate laughed. “I’m kidding, I’m kidding.”

Hugh crossed his arms. “For your information, Syreni don’t prune, idiot.”

“I heard you the first time. Don’t take everything so seriously, man.”

Hugh maintained his frown but let his arms drop, and Nate knew his heart wasn’t in it. It was an old exchange that they’d kept up since they were kids that had become second nature as the years dragged on. Syreni, the Water Tamers who could hold their breaths for hours with age and training and swim as swiftly in a rip tide as any fish, bore a nurtured aversion to Ignifers, Fire Tamers, like Nate. But with Helena having checked out of Nate’s childhood as she mourned what she saw as a defection by her ex-husband and Hugh’s family never having much cared for the natural distinctions between Tamers and plebs, the two eventually found each other, as children often do.

They got off to a rocky start in the beginning. Hugh and his younger sister, Hayley, had been playing a game of hide and seek near this very lake when Nate, just twelve at the time and still coping with his newfound independence while his mother slept all day and hardly left the house, stumbled upon them playing by chance. Hugh smiled a lot back then, and it had suited him as he ran around barefoot with mud in his hair and on his clothes and always damp from playing in the water. That much had not changed. That first day playing hide and seek, Hugh pushed Nate into the lake as a prank, quickly found out Nate could not swim, and had to dive in after him to save him from drowning as nine-year-old Hayley cried, the gurgling and splashing frightening her. It was bad enough that they had to take an unconscious Nate back to their house, where Hugh’s father, Lorenzo, acted quickly and decisively to revive him via emergency resuscitation.

He need not have bothered, in the end. The water Nate had swallowed came out as a cloud of steam that nearly melted Lorenzo’s face off when Nate coughed it up on the living room floor. From that day on, Hugh thought it was the coolest having an Ignifer for a best friend.

“I betcha no other Syreni’s best friends with an Iggy-fer!”

Lorenzo had laughed and ruffled his son’s hair, just as unkempt as his own. “No, I don’t think they are.”

As though it were some small accomplishment, Hugh vowed that day as Nate continued to cough up a lung and shiver in his wet clothes that they were now best friends forever and he would teach Nate how to swim properly because there was no way a Syreni worth his salt could be seen with someone who couldn’t swim. Nate just went with it. A friend? He’d never had one of those before, let alone a best friend.

They spent that first year together, Nate, Hugh, and Hayley, playing outside with each other and later with their first Pokémon. Hugh received an Oshawott from his mother, a tradition in their family, and used it to catch a Purrloin for Hayley that she treated more like a pet than a battling Pokémon. Nate befriended a Tepig, a runt from one of the herds of wild Pignite that roamed the
mountains in search of buried mushrooms to feast on. Hugh had asked him if he’d caught Tepig to fry up some bacon, and Nate didn’t talk to him for a week after that, afraid Hugh might actually try to serve poor Tepig for dinner.

It was a great year, and Nate was sad to leave at the beginning of summer to spend the next couple months in Nuvema Town across the sea with his father, who had resettled there and now invited his only son to visit. That had been a bitter fight between Nate’s parents, but Paul had won in the end and the next thing Nate knew, he was being shipped off on a barge headed for Nuvema Town early one summer morning. Hugh and Hayley and their father saw him off at the docks, while Helena stayed home, unable to bear the thought of her only son leaving her for the whole summer, a second kind of abandonment.

Once Nate got to Nuvema, though, he had the extraordinary luck of making another best friend. Because yes, even girls could be your friend if you got to know them, like Nate had gotten to know Hayley, too. And Rosa had a Snivy that had the coolest forked tongue Nate had ever seen, and he could have watched it make faces at him all day if he had the chance.

Rosa was always dragging him to the forest, to climb trees (which was when he fell and split his face open and got that scar under his ear) and catch Bugs and watch the sun through the canopy for hours. There was no water or swimming involved with Rosa (usually), but she sure liked being outside and running around more than regular people. Nate wondered what Hugh would think of her and decided to tell him all about her when he got back to Aspertia at the end of the summer.

When he got back, Hugh was waiting there with his father, but he wasn’t smiling. He didn’t wave like he had the day Nate had left. He didn’t ask about Nuvema, did Nate make any new friends there, did he have a good time.

Hayley was not there with them.

“Where’s Hayley and Purrloin?” Nate had asked them.

Hugh broke his silence then and turned that razor blade sneer on Nate. “She’s not here, so quit askin’!”

Hugh had stormed off then, but his father held Nate back. When Nate asked what the matter was, Lorenzo said it wasn’t Nate’s fault, don’t worry, and please don’t be mad at Hugh. He was upset because Hayley was gone.

“Where’d she go?”

Lorenzo looked a lot older that day than he ever had. He slumped like he was carrying a heavy pack, and there were bags under his eyes like an old man’s. Had he always looked so old?

“She’s gone to a place where we can’t follow.”

How queer, the things adults shield their children from, as if the lie stings less than the truth that lingers like a ghost with unfinished business. Her hands digging into your shoulders, her voice weeping in your ear, crying, asking why you didn’t stop it, why you weren’t there, why it was her and not you.

Hugh rarely smiled, and when he did he no longer looked like himself, as though someone was pulling strings and forcing the action. He rarely smiled, and he never forgot. Now, facing that frown, Nate could hardly remember the days before Hugh even knew how to frown.

Milotic tasted the air with her forked tongue and raised her tail from the water to settle protectively
around Hugh. Behind them, Hugh’s other Pokémon continued to swim in the lake. Samurott floated on its back and cleaned its sleek, cobalt fur, an almost comical sight considering the wicked foot-long horn on its head and the long mustachios that wiggled as it inhaled and sprayed water.

Carracosta, an ancient turtle as tall as a man and just as wide, floated near the water’s edge chewing on weeds and generally disturbing the wild Surskit that made the aquatic vegetation their homes and source of food. But Carracosta ignored their cacophonous buzzing and continued munching.

The water rippled behind where Hugh stood, and a five-foot electric eel slithered just below the surface. Elektrik was Hugh’s most antisocial and unlikeable Pokémon. It was silent, it stayed submerged in water out of necessity, and it sparked if anyone other than Hugh got too close. Nate had seen it latch onto an unassuming Magikarp once with its jawless mouth, small teeth suctioning the fish’s scales and drilling a hole in its side before Elektrik electrocuted the poor fish and proceeded to suck out its liquefied insides. A repulsive Pokémon, Elektrik was nonetheless effective in its natural aquatic habitat, able to direct its electric currents at a specific target and spare anything else in the water the debilitating shock.

“Whatever,” Hugh said. “Your mom hold you up again?”

Nate crossed his arms. “Bridget’s moving back in later tonight. I’m leaving in a couple days.”

Hugh let out a sharp breath and grabbed the towel he’d folded and set aside nearby. He toweled off his head, and his hair ended up sticking out at odd, sharp angles. “When’re you moving out for good? You’re twenty-six, for fuck’s sake.”

“You know it’s not that simple.”

Hugh looked at him like he’d heard the excuses a thousand times before. He had, in fact. “Look, man, I know she’s your mom, but she can’t be your problem forever. It’s not your fault.”

I know that.

But Nate stayed silent. Hugh peeled off his wetsuit to the waist and pulled on a white T-shirt, then recalled all his Pokémon save for Samurott.

“Well?” Hugh said. “You coming?”

Nate plucked the three Pokéballs at his belt and tossed them all out. From within the flash of light, a magnificent Rapidash large enough to carry two men on its back reared in a flurry of fire. At twenty hands, the fastest runner in the world towered over both Nate and Hugh and charred the sweetgrass at its feet with its black diamond hooves.

A phlegmatic Lucario balanced on its hind legs and reached Nate’s shoulders at its full height discounting its pointed jackal’s ears. It sniffed the air with its thick muzzle, but remained silent and watchful as its red eyes shifted from Rapidash to Samurott to Nate himself. It flexed its paw fists, and its steel-plated knuckles cracked.

Emboar was Nate’s oldest and strongest Pokémon. Its muscled arms were almost twice as long as its legs and hung down like a gorilla’s. Typically, it waddled on all fours with its snout to the ground to hunt for buried truffles and sweet roots, but with Samurott about it opted to stand on its hind legs to its full six-foot height and flex its cloven fists. Fiery mustachios tickled its chin when it exhaled, a sign of its confidence and ego as it puffed out its ample belly.

Samurott barked, its deadly horn lowered and its long flipper tail swishing. But Hugh patted the massive otter’s flank to calm it, and it snorted derisively.
“Looks like Blazed Ham’s been packing on the pounds,” Hugh said.

Nate ran a hand along Emboar’s thick bicep. The burnt orange and black hair was coarse and short and warm to the touch. Under his fingertips, Nate could feel the tendrils of heat swimming under the fire pig’s leathery skin, invigorating its muscles.

“Huh, it’s been fifteen years since you came up with that nickname and somehow it’s still not original or endearing,” Nate said.

“Don’t lie, you wish you’d come up with it.”

Nate laughed. He’d never been one to try to argue with Hugh. “You caught me. Guess there’s no point in hiding my true feelings.”

Hugh did not return his humor, as usual. “What the hell’s that supposed to mean?”

Rapidash whinnied and nudged Nate in the back with its muzzle. The enchanted fire on its mane licked at his shoulders but didn’t burn him.

“Nothing, forget about it. Let’s get outta here.”

They headed back the way Nate had come but took a turn to the south toward town, as they usually did. There was no discussion, it was just an unspoken ritual whenever they came from the lake. They passed Hugh’s parents’ house and the river that ran along behind it, which Nate’s Pokémon and Samurott followed without prompting. The river cut through a grove at the edge of a pine forest near the base of the closest mountain where sweetgrass grew thick for grazing. Several other Pokémon dotted the area, local Miltank and the occasional battling Pokémon belonging to the families that lived in the suburbs. Rapidash led the troupe east toward the grove, while Samurott plunged into the river. Only Lucario remained with the boys, ears alert and twitching as it caught invisible scents on the wind.

They said nothing as they approached the graveyard just a half mile from Hugh’s parents’ house. It was a small plot of land barely half a square acre in breadth and fenced in. Trees had been planted among the tombstones, their leaves lush and green with the onset of summer. The ground was littered with pink and white petals, a carpet of spring’s color as pristine as freshly fallen snow. Nate opened the small iron gate for Hugh to pass through first, then followed him in.

They wove their way among the tombstones, which were clustered together in a way that seemed cozy rather than claustrophobic. Some bore freshly cut flowers, others had blue and white porcelain bowls filled with sweet water or honey. Hand-painted statuettes of children dancing adorned a few. Picture frames with smiling families watched the boys pass. They had been coming here together for more than ten years, their path well trodden but every step heavy no matter how many times they made the trip.

Finally, Hugh stopped at a tombstone on the western side of the enclosed lot. It was no different from the others, just a marble plaque with a name and dates inscribed in the stone. Nate remained standing a few steps away with Lucario while Hugh kneeled down and retrieved something from the mesh pack he carried over his shoulder.

A flower, dripping wet, its fleshy pink petals thick with moisture, glistened in his palm as he gently set it at the base of the tombstone. Its dewy petals sparkled in the afternoon sun through the trees above. The water rose, found only at the bottoms of the crystal clear lakes around Aspertia, was soft and delicate as long as it remained in the water, but a couple hours in the sun and its petals hardened to crystal, trapping the moisture inside and preserving it for months in hibernation. The
petals became brittle, but they would shine like quartz. Popular for decoration and gifts, they were nonetheless rarely used due to the difficulty in procuring them. Not many could dive down to the bottom of a two-hundred-foot lake, carefully harvest the flowers, and return to the surface without damaging them.

“I brought you a present, Hayley,” Hugh said as he placed the flower on the grass at the foot of the grave marker. “Your favorite.”

Nate said nothing. He patted Lucario on the shoulder, and the jackal whined softly, its bushy tail swishing.

“I beat Dad’s record today,” Hugh went on as though Nate weren’t there at all. “Hundred and two minutes underwater. I’ll make one-twenty one day, just wait and see.”

So he was counting, Nate thought to himself.

Most Syreni could easily hold their breaths for over an hour underwater. Some could breach one hundred minutes with dedicated practice and endurance training, as Hugh had just accomplished. Only the best, the true elites, could last over two hours and brave a rip tide at the same time. Gym Leader Marlon of Humilau City here in Unova was said to be a true master among the Water Tamers, but news of him rarely reached the lower West Tine. Marlon and the other native people of Adria, the stretch of marsh and ocean-facing territory from Undella to Humilau to the unnamed islands far to the north in the upper East Tine, kept to themselves. They did not welcome outsiders to their lands or into their business.

“This idiot’s still a pansy around water, obviously. Can’t take the fire out of the Ignifer, I guess,” Hugh said.

Nate bade Lucario stay and kneeled down next to Hugh. For as long as he could remember, his nature had been just that—second nature. He didn’t think much about it, having learned little from his Ignifera mother as she mourned his father like a lover lost at sea. Unlike Hugh, who had been schooled in the techniques and technicalities of his gift from a young age, Nate acted on feeling and intuition. He reached out a hand for Hayley’s tombstone, black marble, and laid his palm flat against the stone. Like a sigh of relief, the heat left his fingertips and permeated the marble, made it glow and shimmer in the dying light of day, rejuvenated under a necromancer’s touch. The heat lingered even when he let his hand drop, cleansing the site of imperfections and weathering until it gleamed like the day they had buried Hayley here.

Hugh stared, but he didn’t question it. He wouldn’t, besides. Hugh never questioned anything unless it inflamed his passion or his furor. It was a decisive way to live, always on the edge of something and ready to fly or fall depending on the direction of the wind, but all the colors in the world were lost on someone who lived for the wind in his face at the edge of the earth with little regard for everything that had come before and all that would come next, the world he was leaving behind and the one that would be waiting at the top of the sky or the bottom of the sea. But then, that was a life of no regrets. Save for one, of course.

“I’m gonna get out of this town where nothing ever happens and find the ones who did this,” Hugh whispered as they kneeled there together, knights receiving a divine princess’s blessing for an impossible crusade. “Team Plasma. I’ll kill them all if I have to. Then I’ll be sure the ones who took Hayley away get what’s coming to them.”

The same as the day they first kneeled here together when they were just teenagers, boys in every sense of the word, Hugh renewed his vows to Hayley and to himself.
“It was those Team Plasma fanatics,” Hugh had insisted as they stood in this exact spot all those years ago and placed an entire bouquet of water roses at her tombstone. “They were hanging around and even demanded she release Purrloin. Who the fuck tells a little girl to turn out her Pokémon? She wasn’t even ten at the time.”

“There was never any evidence that Team Plasma was behind it,” Nate had said, thinking of Rosa and how she’d announced proudly that summer that she was joining the revolutionary group, that she would be helping people and Pokémon learn how to better coexist with each other and the natural environment. She would help change the world. Why would she join a group of people capable of murder? But why would Hugh falsely accuse them? Which of his friends was right? Who would fly and who would fall off the edge of the earth where they both teetered, so sure of themselves?

“Shut up, you sound like those asshole cops that did squat to help my sister,” Hugh snarled. “It’s just an excuse ‘cause they don’t wanna cause trouble with Team Plasma. You know how popular they’re getting. That damned N or whatever his name is, everybody loves the guy. Nobody even knows where he came from or anything else about him! And Hayley, she was just a kid. Nate, I saw them. I saw how they looked at her and Purrloin, like she was some...some lesser species or something. I’ll never forget that look.”

He hadn’t been there. No one had. After the harassment from Team Plasma, no one had been around to witness Purrloin’s disappearance and Hayley’s subsequent death. No eye-witness accounts of foul play or evidence of the perpetrators, but ten-year-old girls were incapable of ripping out their own throats.

“You want evidence? How about all the other mysterious disappearances happening all over the Trident? All those disappeared Pokémon? Plebs and even Tamers found dead for no reason? Team Plasma’s connected to all of ‘em, I’m sure of it.”

Hugh had been sure then, and he was sure now in his silence that clamored louder than his words ever could. It oozed from him, hung in the air around them, in this place, this liminal cradle for the dead to sequester themselves among the living and they two the intruders on this hallowed ground, this violated ground that had known violence and betrayal and wrong, so quiet. The dead may not speak to everyone, but Hugh didn’t need spirits to tell him what his heart already believed. Some would call his silence the wisdom of age. Nate just wished he would smile again like he used to.

Hugh stood up and stretched his back. He was drying in the sun, but his long wetsuit was damp and his aqua socks left wet imprints where he’d been crouched.

“Come on,” he said, offering Nate a hand up. “Day’s almost up, no thanks to you making me wait.”

Nate accepted his hand and stood. Lucario was crouched on one knee, its lurid eyes trained on Nate as though it could divine his every secret thought.

“You too, Fido.” Hugh nodded at Lucario.

Nate had to jog to catch up with him as they headed back toward the gate. “I take it back. That’s the most unoriginal nickname you’ve ever come up with.”

“He’s a canine, ain’t he? Whatever, stop being so jealous of my nicknaming skills.”

“You shoulda quit while you were ahead with nicknaming Samurott ‘Wotter’ when we were kids.”

Hugh smirked. “I’m handing out autographs today if you’re interested.”
Nate laughed and slung an arm around Hugh’s shoulders. “*Right*, I’ll get in line behind all your fangirls—Oh wait, where’d they all go?”

Hugh pushed him off as they exited the graveyard and made their way south toward town and Hugh’s single apartment. “Eat shit.”

Nate laughed again and Lucario loped alongside him, panting as it sensed his good humor. Hugh grumbled sourly and bit back the ghost of a grin.

An hour later, Nate and a cleaned up Hugh were walking along Aspertia City’s main street. Their Pokémon were returned to their Pokéballs, and the sun was nearly set. Hugh walked with his hands in his jean pockets and the collar of his red and white jacket popped. Summer nights in a mountain town brought with them the requisite chill that kept you awake and alert if you didn’t dress properly. Nate, however, had never minded the cold. Second nature, maybe. What did it matter?

Aspertia was a city carved of stone. The roads, the buildings, they were all the same grey slate harvested from the surrounding mountains. The streets were wide to accommodate large Pokémon and wagons headed north. They carried imported goods from the harbor north to Floccesny, Virbank, and even as far away as Driftveil when the ships would not travel that far north. Spices, sweet and savory, from Hoenn; silks and perfumes from Kalos; and precious metals from Sinnoh—they all passed through Aspertia’s port as their first point of entry, often on the way to the larger seaside metropolises like Castelia and Virbank. As a result, there were always new faces passing through the city.

But crime was no more of a problem here than in other port towns. In fact, Aspertia was known widely as a city that was tough on crime thanks to its no-nonsense Gym Leader, Cheren. Atlas were generally known for their punch first, ask questions later attitude. Cheren was the opposite. Lauded for his sharply analytical mind, he began his professional career as a close advisor to Gym Leader Lenora in Nacrene City across the sea, then relocated to Aspertia in his early twenties, where he eventually earned the title Gym Leader for himself after earning the previous Gym Leader’s approval. The man had passed over his own son for Cheren, but such was the nature of West Tine Gyms. The Gym Leaders were respected for their power and military acumen, not for their blood as was largely the case in the Central and East Tines.

Nate had met Cheren a number of times since the latter had come to Aspertia. As a resident Tamer from a longstanding local family, the Gym Leader was obliged to follow the proper etiquette and polity in order to secure popular favor from the very citizens who could take it away. But Cheren was a good man, intelligent and dependable and always thinking of Aspertia before himself. He was generally well-liked among the Tamer and pleb communities alike for his inclusionary policies. He had opened an academy at his Gym where children and young people, both Tamers and plebs and even the occasional skuffs, were welcomed and taught the tactics and strategies of battling with weapons and with their Pokémon. The local police department that often found itself short-handed now had a team of trainers schooled in self-defense and Pokémon battling to help them during times of mass influx from the trading barges. Aspertia’s streets were clean and safe enough, and the shipping industry boomed.

Hugh dragged Nate down the main street of town south of his apartment building to a noodle stall they’d been patronizing since they were teenagers. They grabbed two stools at the counter, and when the chef took notice of them, he waved and smiled and promised their usual orders. With beers and steaming bowls of noodles in broth in front of them, the boys heartily dug in.
“I forget how good this place is,” Nate said between mouthfuls of food.

“I know. Imagine if you moved in with me and you could come here as often as I do.”

“Hah, right. Then I’d be fat and broke.”

Hugh smirked. “You wanna talk about broke? You should see my rent bill. The city’s expensive without a roommate. Come on, think about it.”

Nate swirled the remainder of his beer in the mug, pensive. “Nah, I like the space out there. Everything in town is paved. My Pokémon would hate it.”

Hugh’s expression fell and settled into its usual stony frown. “Why?”

Nate looked up. “Well, because they like to run around in the mountains—”

“No, I mean, why do you still stay with that woman?”

Hugh had the look of a feral animal with its teeth sunk deep into prey’s flesh, and Nate knew he would not drop this without an explanation.

“She’s not some woman, she’s my mom,” Nate said, lowering his voice. “And you know why.”

“I know, but I don’t get it. Nate, come on, Helena’s messed up. It’s been over fifteen years. She’s clinically depressed and she needs professional help. She’s not your problem.”

“She’s my mom.”

“And you’re not a doctor, dumbass,” Hugh spat.

The people seated a few chairs away glanced at them briefly, but soon returned to their own meals and conversation when Hugh shot them a nasty look.

“So drop the filial piety bullshit and start living your life. It’s not over just ‘cause hers is.”

Ignifers were infamous for their tempers. All that heat couldn’t stay bottled up forever, people said. Nate had seen Helena lose her temper in her day, but as the years wore on and she got by on a diet of pills and cigarettes, her temperament mellowed out, more morose than the typical ornery Ignifer. Nate had never been the impassioned type, but as the years wore on and she got by on a diet of pills and cigarettes, her temperament mellowed out, more morose than the typical ornery Ignifer. Nate had never been the impassioned type, but there was as much fire in him as in any Ignifer, or so he liked to think. And Hugh knew the path of least resistance to Nate’s boiling point.

“Stop talking about her like she’s already dead.” Nate got up, fished out some cash from his wallet and tossed it on the table, and headed out of the stall.

Hugh was right behind him, but Nate ignored him. He needed some fresh air, room to breathe and calm down.

“Just explain one thing to me, and I’ll leave you alone about it,” Hugh said.

“What?” Nate snapped, whirling on him.

“How long’re you gonna stay there with her? Till we’re forty? Seventy? When’re you gonna start putting yourself first? Don’t you want a life that’s yours without having to pay for your parents’ mistakes?”

“That’s, like, four things.” Nate stuffed his hands in his pockets and continued walking down the
sidewalk.

“Well?”

Nate took a deep breath. Perhaps there was something wrong with him. Maybe he’d spent too much of his life around people who weren’t like him. With each step, that temper that should have made his fellow Ignifers proud dissipated, and Nate leaned his head back to look up at the night sky past the streetlights. The stars were peeking out, and a cool breeze was coming in from the harbor. Salty and wet, so different from the dry mountain winds. He came to a stop on a street corner, and Hugh waited impatiently.

“So?” Hugh pressed.

“Of course I want a life that’s mine. I already have that, even if you don’t believe it.” He met Hugh’s gaze and held it. “You wanna meet people and see the world, I get that. But all I’ve ever wanted to do is be here. Not in the city, but out by the mountains and the lakes. Somewhere I can breathe and feel alive. I want a simple life, something I can share with my Pokémon, maybe even a girl one day, I dunno. I don’t want adventure or mystery. That’s what you want.

“My mom’s sick, Hugh. I know it’s hard for you to understand ‘cause you don’t live with her. But as long as I’m in a position to help, I have to. I want to. Even if it’s hard sometimes, I’m all she’s got.”

Hugh crossed his arms and stared at his feet. “Well, shit. When you put it that way, I sound like the asshole.”

“As long as you admit it.”

People passed them by on their way to dinner or to their homes, laughing and chatting. No one paid them any mind except to wonder about Nate’s short sleeves on this brisk evening.

“So...you don’t wanna pay half my rent?” Hugh said.

It was hard to place, but something about Hugh in all his dour sobriety and occasional apoplectic fits of impassioned rage over Team Plasma, the so-called enemy in the shadows he held onto, made it nearly impossible for Nate to stay angry with him.

“Nah man, sorry.”

“Che, your loss. How you gonna meet that girl you’re dreaming about stuck in the boondocks all the time?”

Nate shrugged. “You don’t believe in fate?”

“Oh god, shut up. You sound like one of those fortune tellers peddling love horoscopes to teenaged girls for cash.”

“Well I don’t see you having much luck with your bachelor pad here in town. Camille broke up with you what, almost a year ago?”

Hugh flushed. “For your information, I broke up with her. And I don’t wanna talk about it.”

“Sure, whatever you say.”

Nate started down the street again in the vague direction of the harbor. Hugh jogged after him.
“Hey, at least I had a girlfriend for a while. When’s the last time you were with a girl, anyway? Not since Lucia I bet, right? And that was like two years ago.”

“Yeah, but I’m not insecure about it.”

Hugh sputtered. “What the fuck’s that supposed to mean? Hey!”

Nate laughed, but Hugh failed to see the humor. With much grumbling and feet shuffling, they eventually made it to the harbor and Hugh had simmered down somewhat. Nate hadn’t been paying much attention while he talked with Hugh, but now that they were closer to the docks and the boys walked side by side in silence, Nate started to notice the sheer number of people pouring in from the harbor.

This area was the first point of contact with the West Tine and was understandably congested during shipping hours and very early in the mornings with the fishing boats returned with their spoils, but at almost nine in the evening the docks should have been relatively empty. Instead, scores of people—mostly women and children—crowded the docks and spilled into downtown Aspertia. There were some men among them, but they were mostly elderly and required assistance walking.

“The hell?” Hugh said, drawing to a stop next to Nate to stare at the crowd.

The people walked with slumped shoulders, unseeing as they followed the heels of the people in front, shuffling along on autopilot. Many of them wore soiled clothes, dark in patches—mud? Or could it be blood? Some wore bandages to cover cuts or to hold together broken bones or to hide stunted limbs. Many were barefoot.

“They look like war refugees,” Hugh went on. “Where’d they come from?”

Nate followed their flow toward the east. “I dunno, but I’m more curious about where they’re going.”

“Only one way to find out. Come on!”

Hugh took off at a healthy jog down one of the side streets, and Nate had no choice but to follow. They both knew the city inside out, having grown up and lived here all their lives, and it was no great leap of the imagination to discover where the refugees were headed.

“They’re all going to the Gym!” Hugh said, skidding to a stop a block from the Aspertia City Gym. “Damn, what’s going on? Who’re all these people?”

Nate looked around the crowd, wondering the same thing, when amidst the group he spotted a blonde head bobbing about and shouting instructions to the people in front. He squinted, trying to get a better look.

“Hey, that’s Bianca,” Nate said.

“What? What the hell’s she doing here?”

“No idea, but let’s find out.”

Hugh didn’t need much prompting and took off toward the crowd ahead of Nate. They caught up to Bianca and her Musharna, who was hovering over her protectively and releasing pink mist into the atmosphere overhead.
“Bianca,” Nate said, reaching for her shoulder.

Bianca nearly tripped over herself turning around and pushed her large glasses up her nose. Blinking, it took her a moment to recognize the two young men in front of her.

“Oh! Nate, Hugh, I’m so relieved to see you here! You guys have great timing, actually. I could really use your help.”

“Whoa, whoa, hold up there, Blondie,” Hugh said. “First tell us what’s going on.”

“Where’s Professor Juniper? Are she and Rosa here with you?” Nate asked.

Bianca shook her head. There were dark circles under her eyes, like she hadn’t slept in days. “No, I’m afraid not. It’s just me and half the population of Accumula Town, as you can see.”

“Huh? What’s half of Accumula doing here? And why’re they hurt?”

The doors to the Gym opened, and the crowd clamored for entry. Several people in uniforms spilled out of the Gym and surrounded the crowd in order to escort them inside in an orderly fashion. Among the Gym trainers that had emerged was the Gym Leader himself, Cheren.

“Everyone, please remain calm. We have food and clean clothes for you,” Cheren announced. “Medical staff is already standing by inside for those of you who need medical attention.”

Local Aspertiants emerged from restaurants, apartments, and shops to gawk at the crowd gathered in their streets. They whispered amongst themselves and began to gather in groups that grew steadily larger as people called their friends and family and reported news of the massive influx.

“I’ll explain everything,” Bianca said. “Right now, I could really use your help getting all these people inside. Some of them are seriously injured, but there’s just so many of them and I don’t want anyone to fall through the cracks.”

“Of course we’ll help,” Nate said.

“Hey, don’t just speak for me,” Hugh protested.

“Oh, thank you both so much! Okay, let’s get everyone inside,” Bianca said.

Nate followed Bianca’s lead and helped usher the crowd of people inside. The Gym was a stone building in the gothic style with flying buttresses and a high, pointed arch that marked the entrance. A stained glass window depicting the mountain and lake scenery in northern Aspertia hung above the entryway. Inside, ribbed vaults lined the high ceilings and the room opened up into a massive arena constructed directly out of the ground. It was here that Cheren had set up the medical team, complete with gurneys for the injured and sick, as well as a sprawl of bedrolls and pads. Some of the Gym staff waited behind tables with bundles of clothes or trays of food to hand out.

Nate ushered a family toward the beds, where a young mother laid down her weeping toddler and thanked him for helping her.

“It’s not a problem, but can I ask what happened?” he said.

The woman’s wide, brown eyes were misty with exhaustion and fear. “We all came from Accumula Town. We thought Nuvema would be safe, but they sent us here.”

“What happened?” Hugh asked, kneeling down beside Nate. “Everyone looks like they came out of
a warzone.”

The woman nodded. “Y-Yes, I guess you could call it that. But we were severely outclassed.”

Her toddler began to wail.

“I’m sorry,” the young mother said. “I have to feed my child.”

Nate and Hugh backed off to give her some space, and Hugh backed up squarely into Cheren.

“Ow! Hey, watch where you’re going!” Hugh said, whirling.

Cheren glared back at him over his straight nose, but Hugh barely flinched at coming face to face with the Gym Leader, the strongest trainer around and by rights the lord of this fiefdom. Cheren was of a height with Nate, had broad shoulders, dark hair, and hawk-like eyes that saw everything that went on around him. The Gym trainers sometimes joked that he could even see through the back of his head, but in truth Cheren was exceptionally observant with a natural perspicacity that could make even tough guys like Hugh feel naked under his gaze.

Hugh being the rare exception to the rule, of course.

“Oh, it’s you.” Hugh made a face and crossed his arms, completely unfazed at having just bumped into the Gym Leader.

“Hugh,” Cheren said, dusting off his white collared shirt. “And Nathaniel. This is convenient. Now I don’t have to send for you like all the others.”

“Send for us? What’s that supposed to mean, anyway? We’re not Lillipup at your beck and call!” Hugh fumed.

Cheren sighed. “How about directing some of that energy to making yourself useful? Ahh, this is such a bother.”

“That’s not what you said when I got here earlier,” Bianca said, drawing up beside Cheren.

Cheren stuffed his hand in his pockets and averted his gaze. “It’s fine. I’m happy to help. It’s obvious you need it. But if many more of them show up, we’ll have to start putting them up somewhere else.”

“About that,” Nate said. “Can someone tell us what’s going on?”

Bianca bit her lip, and Musharna hovered behind her, sensing her distress. Cheren put an arm around her shoulders, and she took in a shaky breath.

“Yeah, of course.”

“Come on,” Cheren said. “The others should start arriving by now if they’re not already here.”

Cheren pulled Bianca by the hand to the other side of the crowded arena, and Nate and Hugh had no choice but to follow. Cheren led them into a large office he used during the day while the Academy was in session. Now, it was filled with a small group of people, middle-aged men and women Nate recognized but did not know well.

“Looks like Cheren called in the Council,” Hugh said. “What the fuck’s going on?”

The aging men and women gathered in Cheren’s office were members of the Aspertia City Council.
from the mayor’s office. Most were plebs, but Deputy Mayor Rostov, who was here in the mayor’s stead, was a Tamer from one of the oldest Tamer families in Aspertia. His was a family of Rock Adamantines, the same family from which the previous Gym Leader hailed before naming Cheren his successor.

“Everyone, thank you for coming on such short notice,” Cheren said, moving to stand behind his desk.

Bianca stood next to him, while Nate and Hugh lingered near the door behind the crowd.

“What exactly is going on?” a woman asked. “I’ve heard at least three different accounts and the only common element seems to be that Accumula Town has been razed to the ground.”

Conversation erupted in the office, and Nate felt his jaw slacken. Accumula was razed to the ground? That was crazy. An entire town... It couldn’t be.

“That explains the people,” Hugh said. “But who’s behind this? What’s going on over in the East Tine?”

“Everyone, please, I called you all here because we need to decide next steps,” Cheren said. “This is Bianca, a trusted associate who’s traveled here from Nuvema Town with the refugees to brief us on what’s happening. Bianca?”

Bianca nodded and pushed her glasses up her nose. Musharna floated behind her and snorted through its short trunk, startling some of the councilmen closer to the desk. “Right, um, well you see, I’m here because Professor Aurea Juniper asked me to come in her place.”

“Aurea Juniper? Where is she?” Rostov demanded.

Rostov was a portly man of middling height with a badly receding hairline. His thick lips were outdone only by his bulbous nose, where a puffy, pink wart balanced off center over his left nostril. Like most Rock Adamantines, he had once been physically strong, able to crush bones in his fingers and smash stone with his fists. When he shifted his weight, his joints cracked and made Nate wince. Rock Adamantines were hardy by nature, able to withstand extreme heat and cold better than most people, but they tended toward bullheaded obstinacy when backed into a corner. Cheren must have known that, too, and opted to make Bianca the bearer of bad news instead of himself. Give people a target to glare at and they show you the backs of their knees ready to be kicked in.

“Oh, like right now? Um, I suppose, and this is just a guess, but it’s been a couple days, so I’m guessing she must have reached Accumula by now,” Bianca said. “She went to investigate. Tensions between Nacrene and Striaton have turned violent, and Gym Leader Lenora—er, Professor Juniper—to send help. So, well, here I am!” Bianca spread her arms just in case someone in the room missed the fact that she was standing right there.

“Nacrene and Striaton?” Nate whispered to Hugh. “They’ve had it out for each other for years.”

“Hmph. I bet Nacrene finally had enough of those three asshats in Striaton. Seriously, who the hell calls himself a prince these days? Go back to Sinnoh, for fuck’s sake.” Hugh gritted his teeth and crossed his arms tighter over his chest.

“And what exactly do you think you can do about this?” Rostov said.

“Yes, you’ve brought all these refugees to our city without the proper clearance!” another councilman said. “They’ll overrun our streets at this rate!”
“I agree, we should not have to solve the problems of the East Tine,” another chimed in.

“Oh no,” Bianca said. “No, please, it’s not like that! It was an emergency, and Aurea, I mean, Professor Juniper herself went north to see what was happening.”

“This was a mistake,” one of the councilmen said. “What was Mayor Mason thinking with that emergency declaratory order?”

“Hey, listen to me!” Bianca shouted.

Musharna began to glow an eerie blue, and the light jumped from it to Cheren’s wide desk, whereupon the furniture began to float. Someone yelped in surprise, and the room fell silent.

“Get your Pokémon under control,” Rostov said, his meaty hand going for a Pokéball in his pocket.

Bianca gasped and turned to Musharna. “It’s okay, Musha! I’m sorry I got so anxious. You can stop, okay?”

Musharna’s sleepy, red eyes glowered at the room’s occupants, and Nate inadvertently pressed his back against the wall. Psychics gave him the creeps, always had. The idea that something could attack you just by looking at you seemed like impossible odds. If he could see it and his fist could punch it, then he could face it head on. But these mind tricks, these invisible strings that manipulated from afar were something else entirely. Ghosts, for that matter, were equally as creepy, perhaps even worse. Not that Nate had ever seen a Ghost. Most people hadn’t, and he was happy to keep it that way.

Cheren, however, was more than happy to make himself comfortable and sat down behind his now disorganized desk. Paper stacks had fallen, drawers hung out from their cabinets, and the floor was littered with staples that had fallen out of a box somewhere. Cheren rolled up the sleeves of his shirt to the elbow and leaned back in his chair.

“Bianca, just tell them the rest,” Cheren said. “I’m sure they’ll listen.”

Rostov glared at Cheren, but no one put up a fuss. Bianca pushed up her glasses again and smoothed her hair.

“Right, sure. As I was saying... Oh, that’s right.” She laid her hands flat on the desk and leaned forward. “We have reason to believe that Team Plasma’s behind the attack on Accumula Town and that they’re directly involved in the escalating conflict between Nacrene and Striaton.”

Hugh’s arms fell to his sides as he stared in shock at Bianca, speechless. Nate was equally as silent, but his thoughts were not of the nebulous Team Plasma, but rather of Rosa. She was there, she was involved, maybe along with Juniper. He was sure of it. Was she okay? Was she investigating Accumula right now?

A hand on his arm pulled him from his thoughts, and he found Hugh staring at him with wide, sapphire eyes.

“I was right,” Hugh hissed. “Did you hear her? I was right about them!”

“Team Plasma?” said the council woman. “I’m no supporter, but I find it hard to believe they would be behind something so heinous. They’re a political party and environmental rights group. This isn’t their style.”

“Perhaps in the past, but Team Plasma split not long ago. That man, N, he disappeared,” Rostov
said. “Who knows what his followers are doing now? They have enough members to fill Castelia City.”

“Team Plasma isn’t our concern,” Cheren said. “For now, all I want is to guarantee the safety of Accumula’s refugees until it’s safe for them to return to the East Tine.”

“And when will that be?” another councilman said.

“I-I don’t know,” Bianca said. “But I can promise you that we’re doing everything we can to get to the bottom of this!”

“Cheren,” Rostov said. “What do you really want? The mayor’s directive is iron clad. We can’t dispute it without a majority vote, and that can’t even happen until after the emergency grace period is over in three days. But you already knew that.”

Cheren clasped his hands behind his head. “That’s right. I’ll cut to the chase since it’s getting late. I’ve sent a Flyer to Virbank asking for their help. They have a full navy better equipped to send aid directly to Nacrene. What I need is this council’s permission to raise the militia. I can’t very well ask Virbank to clean up this mess without contributing boots on the ground myself.”

“He’s talking about going to war,” Nate said. “I can’t believe I’m hearing this.”

“Me neither,” Hugh said. “But it’s about damn time. Team Plasma’s days’re numbered.”

“It’s a bit early to start thinking of a draft,” one of the councilmen protested. “What a monstrous suggestion.”

“But if the violence should reach the West Tine, Aspertia would be hit first,” another argued. “We should be prepared.”

The council members argued among themselves, and Bianca looked to Cheren for help. Cheren got up, but before he could restore order to the room, the door burst open and a young boy tumbled into the room. He was dressed in the uniform all the Gym trainers wore, and he was out of breath.

“Cheren! Unfezant’s just got back with word from Virbank! You better come see!” the boy said.

Cheren crossed to the door, Bianca following close behind. “I’m coming. Council, we’ll finish this discussion when I get back.”

They stormed out the door, and Hugh yanked Nate’s arm to follow.

“No way we’re missing out on this.” Hugh growled.

Nate didn’t need to be told twice, and together they jogged after Cheren and Bianca outside to the training field behind the Gym.

Cheren’s Unfezant was a small bird compared to its larger cousins, Pidgeot and Staraptor. It could not carry a person on its back, but it could cross the distance from Aspertia to Virbank and back in a matter of hours, making it and its line excellent messenger birds and stealth attackers. This Unfezant, a male with a bright red head and wattle, was cleaning its fluffed, grey feathers when Nate and the others dashed outside to meet it.

“He was carrying a note,” the Gym trainer explained. “I didn’t wanna open it, so I just left it till you got here.”
“That’s fine, Alfie, thanks.”

Cheren caressed a hand over Unfezant’s long neck and reached for its foot, where a thin leather canister was strapped to its ankle. Inside was a rolled letter, which Cheren retrieved and hastily began to read.

“Cheren? What is it? What did they say?”

“I... I don’t believe it,” Cheren said. “This letter’s from Gym Leader Harrison.” He let it fall. “This is a request for me to send help to Virbank. He claims Castelian ships are pirating the trade routes. It sounds pretty serious.”

“Gimme that.” Hugh snatched the letter from Cheren and read it quickly. “Ugh, who cares about this crap? Bianca, you said Team Plasma’s behind the stuff happening in the East Tine, right?”

Cheren snatched the letter back. “I happen to care, Hugh. Virbank has the largest standing navy in the Trident except for Humilau’s. From what Bianca’s said about what’s going on in Nacrene and Striaton, they could really use the help.”

“So Virbank’s busy with Castelia and won’t send reinforcements?” Nate said.

“Oh my goodness,” Bianca said, clutching her cheeks. “If Nacrene and Striaton get ignored, a lot of people and Pokémon could die. Cheren, we have to do something!”

“I know, I know. Let me think.”

“Bianca,” Nate said. “Rosa... Is she with Professor Juniper?”

“Rosa?” Hugh said. “That chick you visit every summer?”

Bianca nodded. “Yeah, she left with Aurea the other day. They were going to check out Accumula Town and verify the townsfolk’s story, but I don’t see why they would lie about it considering what happened. Oh, I have a really bad feeling about all this.”

*Rosa...*

She and Juniper were investigating alone? What were they thinking?

“That’s it,” Cheren said. “If this is really happening, I can’t ignore the possibility that Aspertia could get dragged into things, too. Team Plasma... I don’t know much about them, but I’m not taking my chances after seeing all those refugees. I’ll go to Virbank myself and talk to Harrison.”

“But Cheren! You can’t leave Aspertia!” Alfie protested.

“I can if I leave someone in charge. And besides, this isn’t a social call.”

“We’re coming with you,” Hugh said.

“Wait, what?” Nate said.

“I don’t think so, kid. This isn’t gonna be some fun little adventure,” Cheren said.

“Kid? I’m twenty-six, genius!” Hugh said. “And I can fight.”

“I need Tamers with experience in the field. Your mother would be a better companion, actually. How about you run home and get her?”
Hugh was positively fuming. “What the hell did you just say to me?!”

Nate grabbed Hugh’s arms before he could do something suicidal like try to physically assault an Atlas. They were built like mountains and incredibly resilient. Even a punch from an Adamantine couldn’t reliably take them out.

“Cool it, Hugh,” Nate hissed. “Punching a Gym Leader? Worst idea you’ve had all night.”

“Cheren, this is a dangerous mission you’re talking about,” Bianca said. “The mountains are home to a ton of wild Pokémon. And with Team Plasma showing their true colors... With you gone from the Gym and all these refugees here, Aspertia will be really vulnerable.”

Cheren frowned. “I know that. I’m not suggesting I take a whole garrison. Just a few people, two or three maybe. Preferably Tamers.”

Hugh yanked free of Nate’s grip but did not try to attack Cheren again. “Hey, we’re going with you and that’s not up for debate. Me and Nate, you know us, Cheren. You know our Pokémon. We even went to your Academy to train. And you wanna know the hard truth? No one’s gonna wanna go with you to Virbank with all the shit happening here. Bianca’s right. You need the militia here. But we’re here, and we’re ready to go.”

“Hold on,” Nate said. “I never agreed to go. You can’t just volunteer me for a mission like this.”

Hugh whirled on him. “Nate, snap out of it! This is Team Plasma, the guys that murdered my sister! Don’t you dare stand there and tell me you don’t wanna get them for that, too.”

“Of course I want to find out who’s responsible for Hayley’s death,” Nate allowed.

Bianca gasped. “Team Plasma? Hugh, I had no idea. That’s awful.”

“I’m going,” Hugh said. “Even if I have to go alone.” He turned back to Nate. “You were the one saying if you’re in a position to help people, then you have to do it, right? What the hell does this look like to you?”

Nate said nothing, surprised to hear his own words thrown back in his face in challenge. He had said that, after all. Helping his mother was as natural as breathing. But this? Thousands of strangers he didn’t know? Cities and towns leagues away that he never would have dreamed he’d go to for any reason at all? And for what?

A baby burst out crying just inside, and its mother, one of the refugees from Accumula, began to rock it in her arms to soothe it. Beyond her, more refugees sat on the floor and ate. Some lay on stretchers with doctors and nurses bent over them. There were so many, more than before, in fact. They kept arriving by the boatload.

“We might not have a bunch of experience in the field, but we’re good for it,” Hugh said. “I can leave right now if you want.”

Would Team Plasma follow the refugees here to Aspertia? What would become of them? Of the people here? Not many were Tamers, and policing the streets for crime was not the same as defending a city from a hostile military force. Aspertia would need as many able Tamers and soldiers here as it could spare. None would be coming from Virbank to help.

Cheren studied Hugh. “I know you’re good for it, but you’re young. You don’t know what you’re asking to do.”
“That’s some bullshit and you know it. You’re what, thirty? Thirty-two? You became Gym Leader almost ten years ago! From where I’m standing, youth’s a prerequisite for this kinda thing.”

And if Team Plasma or Castelia or whoever was out there causing all this trouble came here, what would happen to Nate’s mother? She was Ignifera, but she was no fighter. She didn’t train many Pokémon, and not for battling, anyway. What would happen to her if they came to Aspertia? What would happen to his home? To the people here in the city, out in the mountains, the faces he’d grown up with?

“Cheren, I think Hugh has a point,” Bianca said. “I mean, it’s not like I can go with you. I’m not a fighter, and Musha’s my only Pokémon. Didn’t you call all the Tamer family heads here tonight?”

“Oh, yeah? Where are they?” Hugh demanded. “‘Cause I only see me ‘n Nate.”

“I’ll ignore that considering this was all very last minute and people can’t be expected to show up at the drop of a hat,” Cheren said, but he was looking away now.

“Nate, what do you think?” Bianca said.

Everyone turned to Nate, who was still staring inside at the refugees slowly settling in and trying to hold onto the broken pieces of their lives.

“I don’t want to go,” he said. “But... If I can help somehow, then I’ll do it. Whatever you need.” He turned to Hugh. “I guess you got me there.”

Alfie, who had been silent for this whole exchange, cleared his throat. “Um, Cheren? Should I tell Moira she’ll be acting Gym Leader while you’re gone?”

Cheren pinched the bridge of his nose. “This is such an enormous bother. I woke up this morning thinking I missed you, Bianca, and then you show up out of the blue and drop a possible war on my lap.”

Bianca covered her mouth, her eyes watering, and Musharna began to glow an ominous red. “I’m so sorry!” she said, sniffling. “I didn’t know who else to turn to.”

Cheren rested a hand on her shoulder and searched her eyes. “That Professor Juniper knows me too well.”

Nate watched their exchange, but Hugh was about ready to blow a gasket.

“So? Are we doing this or what?” Hugh demanded.

“Cheren?” Alfie said.

Cheren let his hand fall and sat down on the ground. Unfezant hopped to his side and settled down in a plump loaf of feathers next to him. “I guess we’re doing this. I can’t spare Aspertia’s best Tamers and soldiers for a parley mission, so you two’ll have to do. Alfie, go ahead and fill Moira in. I’ll have to brief her before I leave.”

Alfie nodded and darted inside. Hugh nodded to Nate grimly.

“We’re doing this,” he said. “Finally, I’ll avenge Hayley’s death and expose the truth.”

Nate’s shoulders slumped. He could not share Hugh’s grisly enthusiasm, and his gaze returned to the refugees huddled in the Gym.
“Yeah,” Nate said. “I’ll help them however I can.”

The dreams of a simple life lived in peace in Aspertia’s countryside would have to wait. They would be here when he got back one day, he told himself.
Iris

Shimmering heat cast illusory light waves over the sandy beach to the south and further out to sea, as though the ocean were slowly rising from the earth to merge with the sky. Deeper among the lush trees and grasses and plump, bulbous flowers with pink petals as large around as a man’s head, the heat did not rise, in illusion or otherwise, and instead lingered among the fronds, warming tepid pools to just the right temperature for those fleshy flowers to bear their swollen fruit. It was this fruit that sustained life on the strange island, and for this fruit that the humans had landed.

Iris plucked one of the fat berries—a Liechi berry—growing next to one of the stagnant green lagoons and studied its creamy flesh and orange seeds. She gave it a sniff, noting the subtle sourness under the sweet juicy aroma. A bushel of the fruit could sell for a thousand, more depending on the season and your bargaining skills. But to her untrained eyes, it looked no more or less delectable than a Pecha or Chesto berry. Then again, not everyone had the good fortune of landing on the elusive Mirage Island, the only place in the world where Liechi berries were known to grow naturally. They were nearly impossible to grow outside these conditions, and efforts to farm raise them were almost always futile.

“You don’t look very special to me,” Iris said in the rolling, singsong Adriati her mother had raised her on.

Movement behind her, and a hale man in his fifties appeared from within the brush carrying a basket with an entire Liechi plant, enormous pink flower and all. “What was that?”

Iris rose and dusted off her white shift. “I was just thinking this Liechi berry doesn’t look very special,” she translated into the common tongue.

The man nodded his understanding. He, like all the others in her crew, did not speak Adriati, Iris’s native tongue and the one her mother, Sonora, had spoken to her as a child. But growing up in Kanto’s Blackthorn City, the home of the Taki Dynasty, one of the three great Dragon Tamer clans, she had picked up the common tongue out of necessity. Her accent, while faint, was as unshakeable as a foot fungus. It was a constant reminder that she was not like them. That she never would be.

Her eyes were dark and narrow, almond-shaped, of a shade with her polished copper skin. But where her mother had been endlessly soft and round, Iris was angular and chiseled. As a child, her uncut edges made her bony and flat, but as a woman of twenty-three they accent ed her curves and swells to cut a striking figure. The heat on this island was asphyxiating, and despite the ponytail she’d pulled her long hair into, it still prickled the back of her neck like morning dew. Her dress would soon be soaked through and she would have to change. But not before a dip in the ocean. She had inherited her love of the sea from her mother, too. It was in her blood, Sonora would whisper to her at night. And Iris’s blood was strong.

“But it *is* special,” the man said. “It’ll fetch a high price when we arrive in Humilau.”

Belaron was a tall man with a plain, unremarkable face. Pale-skinned and light-eyed like most Blackthorn natives, he was Iris’s opposite in almost every way. His salt and pepper hair was tied back in a low bun at the base of his skull and neatly oiled and combed. His armor, studded leather and silver scales, was perfectly polished and pinned, everything in its place. For as long as Iris had known the old Ridder, a knight in the service of Dragon Tamers, Belaron had had an eye for formality and decorum almost to the point of absurdity. Iris could count the number of times she had seen him without his armor and sword, ever the diligent soldier as on the fields of battle as on
the shores of an uninhabited tropical island. He had been Iris’s tutor in military tactics and battling strategy from a young age, as he had been the Blackthorn Gym Leader Clair’s before her, and even the great Dragon Master Lance’s before that.

The Ridder knights had long been tasked with safeguarding their Titan wards since the Titans’ beginnings in Sinnoh millennia ago. They were not Titans themselves, but instead diluted skuff who could never hope to manifest the draconian control their Titan betters were famous for. While skuffs tended to find no sympathy from either pure plebs or pure Tamers, the Titans of old Sinnoh had seen potential in the legions of Titan skuffs, known as fortynblovs, and made them knights, named them Syrs, and put them to work as guardsmen and watchdogs. Today it was a noble calling in some respects—mere plebs could never become Ridder knights, and Ridder knights were trained in the art of Pokémon battling often better than many Tamers. Clair used to say that a Titan without her Ridder knight was like a sword without its scabbard—vulnerable and prone to lashing out.

“Let’s hope so,” Iris said.

She took a bite out of the Liechi berry she’d picked. Orange juice ran down her chin and dripped onto the vine-strewn ground. It was thick and sweet with a perfect hint of sour. It would make an excellent sweet wine.

“Anyway, Princess,” Belaron held out the basket for her to see, “I procured this strapping specimen especially for you. I thought you might like the blossoms in your cabin.”

Princess was a title very few had ever ascribed to Iris as anything but a cruel jest or taunt, but Belaron was one of the few who meant his words. As the only daughter of Cadmus, the late king of Opelucid City, Iris was a princess to those who had considered Cadmus a king. And there were many, according to Sonora. She would whisper tales of the Fafnir Dynasty, the Dragon Tamer clan of Opelucid, who would one day rejoice at their lost princess’s return. They were but tales to Iris who could not remember much of her childhood in Opelucid, but Sonora remembered. And she made sure her only daughter, whisked away from home at such a young age, would not forget them even after she herself was gone.

“Thank you, Syr Bel.” Iris used the nickname she’d affectionately called him by as a child.

She took the basket from him and ran a hand over the pulpy pink petals on the largest bloom, marveling at the plant’s vigor. There was nothing like this in Blackthorn, a solemn city of stone sequestered in the foothills of Johto’s Silver Mountains. All that grew there were hardy pines and dull shrubs, and only in the summer did the chest-high glass grass thrive for wild Pokémon to graze on.

Something growled, and she and Belaron turned to find a hulking, hunched beast with golden scales and a guillotine snout. Its teeth grew away from its jaw and curved like axe blades. Haxorus shifted its bloody eyes between Belaron and Iris and chewed something in its mouth—the remains of a Togetic. White feathers stuck to the Dragon’s jaws, and blood coated its snout. Haxorus towered eight feet high slightly hunched over, its bladed maw weighing down its head. It lumbered toward Iris, crushing the fragile vegetation in its way without care or concern, and whatever its blocky feet spared, its swishing tail was sure to smother in its wake.

Iris grinned and reached for Haxorus’s armored neck. Its scales were razor sharp at the edges but smooth to the touch. Haxorus lowered its head and rumbled low in its belly.

“Did you eat your fill?” she asked.
Another presence slithered into the pool to cleanse itself. Iris’s Dragonair was fifteen feet long and as thick around as a Milotic. The pearl at Dragonair’s throat was engorged in the thin sac that held it in place, seemingly ready to burst at any moment. Dragonair was Iris’s oldest Pokémon in years, but her second in terms of companionship after Haxorus.

“Don't overexert yourself, Dragonair,” Iris said.

“Dragonair will be fine,” Belaron said. “His kind has been doing this a lot longer than we know. He'll know when the time is right.”

Iris offered the Liechi berry she’d taken a bite out of to Dragonair, and the sapphire serpent accepted the fruit happily, swallowing it in one bite. Iris smiled and patted Dragonair's snout, mindful of the bone horn protruding from its forehead. The horn grew longer by the day, it seemed, and now stretched the length of Iris’s forearm. Dragonair had stopped whittling it down on stone and coral several weeks ago when Iris and her crew were already well on their way to Unova.

“Yes, you’re right. But still, I’d like to return to the ship. We’ve been here long enough.” Iris set off back toward the shore.

Belaron would have followed, but Haxorus cut him off and lumbered lazily after Iris, Togetic's entrails sloughing off its bladed teeth and spilling into water. Dragonair slithered along behind Iris, languid and slow.

The hike back to shore was not long, and this was not a large island. Iris and her small crew out of Blackthorn had intended to stop in Pacifidlog Town in Hoenn to resupply, but by chance happened upon Mirage Island and found the provisions they needed to cover the last leg of the long journey northeast to Unova. Iris was glad of it, too, having wanted to avoid detection in Hoenn that might give Opelucid a heads up as to her imminent return. There were those who would not react kindly to news of her return.

Mirage Island was a strange oasis for docile Pokémon unused to humans and predators. They peeked from the trees and ponds to gawk at Iris and her Dragons. Tiny Wynaut pulsed with latent Psychic energy but huddled together in groups of five or six, their beady eyes ever vigilant. Iris avoided them and ordered her Pokémon to avoid them, too. Wynaut were weak and pathetic Pokémon, but they defended themselves with Destiny Bond, a cruel technique that bestowed the same fate upon both predator and prey. Iris had no desire to lose one of her prized Dragons to such abominable tactics.

Hoppip and Skiploom floated in the sea breeze and sucked on tree sap, while Jumpluff spread spores that fell into the pools to germinate and one day grow into more Hoppip if they were not gobbled up by wading Azurill and Marill in the deeper pools. Shy Breloom peeked from behind the trees, more curious than afraid of the lurching Haxorus, but hopped away at high speed when they were spotted. A menagerie of monsters more innocent than babes on this island no one could find except for those who weren’t looking for it. Iris smiled to herself. She had found it.

The ship she had come on was given to her by Clair, the Blackthorn Gym Leader and her only true friend growing up. ‘Friend’ was stretching it, she supposed. If she had any friends, Clair would be one. But Titans are duplicitous by nature, arrogant and self-interested and obsessed with control—at least, the worst of their kind. But for the extremists to garner a reputation, there had to be moderates to compare them against. Iris was no different from Clair or the other Titans except in the ways they decided she was.

Halfbreed.
Tacha.

Bastard.

It didn’t matter what word they used, it all amounted to the same thing. Iris was not a true Dragon born to proud Titan parents, but a tacha, a woman of mixed blood marked by her copper skin and almond eyes and that accent she could never quite shake. A bastard, the illegitimate daughter of Cadmus, the great former king of Opelucid and the illustrious Fafnir Dynasty of Unova, and a common Adriatic woman who had once served his queen. Bastards couldn’t wear crowns, that was what they said. That was what Clair had warned her about the morning of her departure from Blackthorn on the ship Clair had given her. Not out of spite, but because it was true.

Truth? As far as Iris was concerned it was a farce. Truth was how her Dragonair was on the verge of evolving—only the strongest Titans could command a fully-evolved Dragonite. Truth was how she had honed her gift, proven the mettle of her supposedly tainted blood and become a Dragon Master in her own right under the Elder’s teachings in Blackthorn. Truth was how birth and status and all the legal titles in the world could not hold up against the reality of a prodigy of the Taki Dynasty holding all of Kanto and Johto hostage in a plot to summon a sea monster and raze the continent to the ground just because he could. Lance the Dragon Master, the golden boy of Blackthorn and the Elder’s legacy, had shown his true colors as a terrorist and warmonger when he dared to unleash Lugia, an ancient power lost to the world for a thousand years, on the world only to be stopped by an obscure fortynblod woman no one had believed in. The same woman who had gone on to take Lance’s coveted place as one of the Kanto and Johto Elite Four.

Truth was in the eye of the beholder, a construct shaped by the hands of the bold. It was an illusion born of ideals, the strongest and mightiest of which always prevailed, just as Iris and her crew had found this fabled Mirage Island. If this was a world where traitors like the great Champion Lance were revered and mixed-blood bastards like Iris were reviled simply by reason of birthright, then she would change this world and make a new truth.

“You’ll see,” she’d promised Clair. Iris would show her a sight she’d never seen before.

The sand was scorching even through her boots, so Iris jogged to the shoreline with the basket Belaron had gifted her in hand. The ship was anchored some yards off the coast, and the last of the crew with barrels and baskets full of Liechi berries and other food and fresh water gathered from the island’s interior waited in the shallows for the rowboats paddling toward shore to take them back to the ship. It floated on the serene ocean under the late afternoon sun, its red and white sails filled with the wind and proudly flying the Blackthorn colors.

One of the rowboats coming to shore carried Soriel, a woman over a decade Iris’s senior. She had bright blonde hair tied up in a braided bun, sparkling amber eyes, and an aquiline nose wholly at odds with the softness in her round face. She was a large woman with broad, mannish shoulders and meaty hands, built more for hard labor than for sword fighting, and she wore studded leather armor salt-stained from the journey at sea. Soriel waved to Iris and grinned.

“Oi, Princess! It’s hotter than a Magmar's ballsack on this island! 'Bout time we hoisted the colors.”

As though in agreement with its trainer’s demands, an enormous Seaking burst from the waves and rained water down on the little rowboat. Soriel laughed and shielded her face.

“We’re ready to leave, Soriel,” Iris assured the older woman as she came to shore. “We’ve spent more than enough time here as it is.”
Iris had not known Soriel long, but Clair had recommended Iris take Soriel with her, perhaps because Soriel had been a fortynblood living among strangers and could intuitively understand something of Iris’s situation better than others. Originally hailing from Blackthorn, Soriel was sent to Cinnabar when her Titan parents discovered she lacked the control required of true Titans to flourish in the Taki dynasty. She spent years in the Cinnabar navy as part of the Charizard Assault Team, where she and her Charizard had trained under General Marla, Gym Leader Blaine’s granddaughter. Soriel was skilled in all forms of non-infantry combat, from aerial to naval, that Belaron lacked.

Seaking waded in the shallows while Soriel jumped out of her boat and trudged to shore. She picked up two barrels full of Liechi berries, one over each shoulder, and led the men back to the boats scrambling after her.

“Pick up the pace!” Soriel barked at the other crew members. “I can’t do all the work for you lot!”

Belaron caught up to the group and took a spot on one of the rowboats in between two barrels. “Are you coming?” he asked Iris, who lingered on the shore.

“Yes. Go on ahead.”

Iris recalled Haxorus, while Dragonair slithered into the water. Soriel’s Seaking glugged after it, and they headed back toward the ship. Iris tossed out her last Pokéball directly into the sea, and from a flash of light a twenty-five-foot Gyarados materialized in the waves. Its gaping maw hung open and revealed three full rows of razor sharp fangs jumbled together as though its mouth could not accommodate them all. Gyarados’s cerulean scales glittered in the setting sun, blending it with the ocean tide so that it appeared as though the great water Dragon grew out of the very sea itself. Red eyes found Iris on the beach, and it lowered its massive head toward her.

Some of the crew shied away from Gyarados, wary of the Atrocious Pokémon’s reputation as a harbinger of calamity, even one carefully raised up under the tutelage of a fully-realized Titan. Iris had no such qualms, having been with Gyarados for the better part of a decade and knowing its temperament well. She waded into the water and climbed up onto Gyarados’s head so it could ferry her back to the ship.

The boats fell away behind Iris as she rode on Gyarados out to sea and left the mysterious Mirage Island behind. Gyarados rumbled underneath her.

“Halfway there,” she said. “That old man won’t know what hit him.”

But the sea breeze at sundown was too cathartic to dwell on such thoughts. She banished them and closed her eyes, breathed in deeply, and tasted the salty air. Riding Gyarados was so much smoother than riding on a ship. Humans were not meant to traverse whole oceans, of this Iris was convinced after weeks of close quarters and seasick passengers. But she had no Flyer and she needed a battalion, besides. There was no other choice. Once she got to Humilau, she could think about padding her fledgling navy for the noble task at hand.

But for now, she would relish this, this freedom. Never again would she bow her head to the Elder of the Taki Dynasty. Never again would she turn the other cheek to her fellow Titans’ whispered jibes and japes. A halfbreed tacha shouldn’t have the right to command true Dragons. A bastard could never wear a crown.

*Never again.*

“I’ll show you all,” she promised the darkling dusk and endless blue.
She didn’t need any of them.

The ship was just as she’d left it—wet and creaky and smelling of shit and vomit. Iris had spent much of her life in and on the water with her Pokémon. Johto and Kanto Titans had a preference for water Dragons, and so to tame them it was necessary to follow them to the depths of the ocean and out to sea. The crew was well trained and seaworthy, but on such a long journey halfway around the world braving storms and surges, even the hardiest of sailors could lose his stomach. Or perhaps it was just an expected element of life at sea. Sickness followed humans over the water, where they were never meant to survive in the first place.

Gyarados let her off on the starboard bow, and Iris leaned back over the edge give it a caress. Dragonair was in the water below, along with Soriel’s Seaking and Belaron’s Feraligatr. Other Water-type Pokémon floated among the waves finishing up their meals or just napping upon the rolling waves. Some would be recalled for the next leg of the journey. Others would stay in the water and scout ahead and behind for threats—hordes of Tentacruel that could stalk ships for days and veer them off course until the sailors ran out of food; undead Jellicent that would try to sink the ship just because they could; wild Gyarados that would attack anything in sight for no reason at all. No, humans were never meant to survive at sea alone. But with Pokémon to help them out, they could bend nature to their will.

“Stay nearby, and kill anything that gets too close,” Iris told Gyarados.

Gyarados sank into the water below with Dragonair, where the two of them disappeared beneath the waves. Iris took her Liechi berry plant and made for the sleeping quarters downstairs, but she ran into someone on her way there.

“Oh, excuse me, Princess,” the man said, bowing stiffly.

“Lieutenant Moros,” Iris said.

He was tall and lean, black of skin and dressed for utility in boiled leather and billowy cotton. His shaved head shone like a polished egg too big for his body, and his eyes were steady and deep. Iris liked his eyes and the feeling of reassurance they instilled. She had picked Moros herself to join the crew. He was a military commander specializing in large-scale infantry tactics and had not spent a day at sea in his life. Although he was a pleb by birth, Moros had been raised in Blackthorn by a military family with close ties to the Taki Dynasty and had thus learned the art of Pokémon battling. Iris had seen his Kangaskhan wreak havoc in an emergency deployment on Route Forty-Five when a pack of white Graveler had rolled into Blackthorn after a group of kids had unwittingly disturbed their nests. The monstrous kangaroo had picked up a Graveler with its bare hands and Seismic Tossed the brute thirty feet as though it were tossing bottle caps. Any pleb that could raise up such a fearsome Pokémon was the kind of man Iris wanted at her side.

“I have spoken with the captain. He says we’ll be ready to depart within the hour.”

“Good. Who has the first watch?” Iris asked.

“That would be me, Princess.”

“Okay. I’m going to rest in my cabin. Please let me know if Dragonair begins following the ship. He tires easily these days. I don’t care what time it is.”

Moros bowed stiffly once more. “As you wish.”

Iris thought fleetingly about telling him not to be so formal, they’d known each other for years.
Before she could find the words, however, he excused himself and headed for his post at the bow. Iris watched him go, noting how he wobbled slightly with each step. The man had hardly kept a meal down on the journey, but he returned to his duties without complaint every day.

The weight of the basket in her arms drew her eyes. The Liechi plant had a couple berries already ripe and ready for eating, with a dozen more ripening on the way. She considered offering Moros one, but he was already gone, and the whim left Iris just as quickly. He probably wouldn’t keep it down anyway, and theirs was a professional relationship. No need to blur the lines unnecessarily.

Iris headed below deck to her quarters near the front of the ship and separate from the others’ shared quarters. It was a cramped room but large enough for a journey at sea, and she couldn’t complain. The bed was barely a twin and smashed against the far wall. A small desk was squished against the foot of it in the corner with barely enough room to fit a chair and no way to access the storage drawers that were pushed against the foot of the bed. A small, round window let in the light over the desk. A chest with her things, mostly clothing, was shoved under the bed. Her sheathed longsword rested against the wall next to the head of the bed.

Iris set the Liechi plant on the desk after pushing some papers to the side messily. They contained old maps of Opelucid, outdated maps from before the Red Plague hit fifteen years ago and wiped out almost half the city’s population. But they served her purposes well enough. Dragonsong Castle was the same, in any case. It had stood there for centuries.

Iris pulled out the chair to her desk and sat down. She kicked off her boots. The wooden floor was a bit damp, but she didn’t mind it. From under her mattress in a plastic bag where it would not get wet, she retrieved a picture frame and traced her fingers over the two pictures separated by a folding joint. One side was her mother’s smiling face, brown like Iris’s with the same violet-black hair. She clutched a swaddled bundle—Iris as an infant—and waded up to her knees in the sea with her dress hiked up to keep it dry. Iris touched the image of her mother’s face, wondering what she would think of Iris now that she was finally fulfilling her dream, her duty, just as they had conspired to do all those years ago.

The other picture was the profile of a man bedecked in a full suit of mail and armor with a longsword strapped to his hip. Its pommel was a Haxorus head, the double axe jaw roaring and angry and with two rubies for eyes. His thick black hair fell about him in long waves, the envy of any woman, and his beard was rugged but neatly trimmed. Amber eyes like glared at an unseen point in the distance to Iris’s left over his strong hooked nose. But Iris remembered those sunshine eyes, that funny nose, and that scratchy beard in a different light. His eyes laughed when he laughed, and his beard tickled her cheeks when he kissed her, his little girl. His little princess.

Iris snapped the picture frame closed and returned it to its plastic bag, then held it close to her chest for a moment. She took a deep breath, a daily ritual as she sat once more with her parents for a few minutes and kept them alive. The Liechi plant drew her attention with its pungent, citrusy scent, and Iris set down the picture frame.

To think, people would pay exorbitant sums for a plant, of all things. Ridiculous. She’d tasted its fruit, and it tasted no better or worse than most other fruits she’d had. So why the fuss? Iris leaned on an elbow and poked the giant flower with a finger. Something under the petals drew her eye that she hadn’t noticed before, and she leaned in closer.

“What’s that?”

A bulbous, white sac was nestled under the petals about the size of her fist. It didn’t look like the ripening berries around it, but it didn’t move or react when she touched it. It was impossibly soft, like spun silk.
A knock on her door startled her, and Iris quickly shoved the picture frame back in its cache under her mattress.

“Yes?” she called.

The door opened, and a sailor whose name she had not bothered to remember poked his head in. “Ma’am—er, Princess, the cap’n asked me to tell you dinner’s ready, if you’re hungry, o’ course.”

Iris averted her gaze and clenched a fist under the desk. “Fine, tell him I’ll be right out.”

The sailor closed the door, and Iris sat there a moment in her simmering anger. She knew what the sailors said about her. They didn’t even have to say it. She could see it in their eyes, in their stammered words when they spoke to her. Princess? Princess of what? Bastards couldn't wear crowns. They never said a word to her face, or even much to each other. She sometimes let Haxorus roam the deck to stretch out and to feed. The sailors scattered whenever the Guillotine Pokémon was about.

Iris lost interest in the Liechi plant. She pulled out her chest of clothes and rummaged about for something to change into after the day on the island in the sweltering humidity. Finally settling on a blue dress and a leather vest, she quickly changed and pulled her boots back on.

The Liechi plant sat forgotten on her desk when she left, the small cocoon nestled among the flowers also forgotten.

It was another month before Iris and her crew made it to Unova. The day Humilau came into view, Iris got up and left Belaron in the middle of a strategy session on their future invasion of Opelucid to run to the deck and lean over the port bow.

“Land ho!” a sailor shouted from the crow’s nest above.

Iris squinted against the western horizon, trying to make out any details from the dark stretch of land in the distance.

“Princess, may I suggest this?”

Moros had appeared at Iris’s side and held out a spyglass. His expression was as stern as ever, but Iris could have smiled for him right there.

“Thank you.” She accepted the spyglass and excitedly held it over her right eye.

There it was, Humilau City. Thatched huts built out over the ocean itself and connected by many wooden walkways offered prime access to canoes and the vast fishing waters. Deeper inland, an intricate network of rivers and canals crisscrossed the jungle and cut all the way to the foothills of the misty mountains farther to the west, as though the ocean were trying to reclaim the land that had escaped it millions of years ago. Iris’s heart soared. It wasn’t Opelucid, but it was the closest she’d felt to home since she’d fled the continent in fear years ago with her mother.

A menacing roar sounded overhead just then, and Iris lowered the spyglass to follow Moros’s gaze skyward. A massive Charizard nearly fourteen feet long from its nose to the tip of its flaming tail soared majestically among the sails and wound around to land on the deck. Crewmembers scattered in fear of the pseudo-Dragon. Its sharp talons bit into the wooden deck, and its fiery tail slashed the air as it lowered its haunches to allow its rider to dismount. Soriel slid off Charizard’s
back with the grace of a dancer despite her disproportionate mannish frame. She lowered her flight goggles and removed her leather cap, and then she spotted Iris with Moros.

“Princess, just who I was looking for,” Soriel said.

“Sergeant,” Moros said, using her former rank and title. “I’ll ask you not to spook the crew with such ostentation.” He glared over her shoulder at Charizard, who was now balanced on its hind legs and dripping boiling drool on the deck, scaring away the crew members just trying to do their jobs.

Soriel made a face at him. “Moros. I see that stick up your ass braved the trip all the way from Blackthorn.”

Moros flared his nostrils, but Iris did not care to listen to their petty bickering.

“Soriel,” Iris said before Moros could retort, “do you have anything useful to report?”

Iris was on the shorter side for her gender at just north of five feet discounting the frizzy creature on her head that dared to call itself hair, courtesy of the humidity. Soriel towered a head and a half over her, and her broad shoulders shadowed Iris like a Redwood shadows a sapling. Nevertheless, Soriel took a knee and pulled out a crumpled roll of parchment from her studded jerkin.

“You bet. My drawing hand’s a little rusty, but I counted seven destroyers in the southern bay around the peninsula. It’s impossible to see from our current position.” She indicated the scrawled images captured at a bird’s-eye view.

Iris accepted the paper and scanned its contents. It was just as Soriel had said. “And these.” She pointed to the smaller circles to the north on the crude map. “More ships?”

“Yeah, sea sabers, from the looks of them,” Soriel confirmed. “They’ll be the vanguard. Small and fast and perfect suicide bombers. Sootopolis’s famous for them. Can’t say I’m surprised to see Humilau following in their footsteps.”

Iris folded the paper and handed it to Moros. “Take that to Syr Belaron. I’m sure he’ll come asking soon, and I won’t be here to explain it to him.”

Moros accepted the paper. “Explain what?”

Iris lifted the spyglass to her eye again and gazed at the distant shore, conspicuously devoid of warships. “Why I’m going on ahead.”

Moros faltered. “Ah, Princess, you’ll take a guard, won’t you?”

“Of course I will.”

Iris threw two of her Pokéballs over the ship’s railing, and within the ensuing splash, Gyarados reared its enormous head, mouth agape and forked tongue lolling in between its clustered fangs. Dragonair floated just below, its dark eyes quietly trained on Iris. She reached for Gyarados, and the water Dragon dutifully lowered its head for her to climb up and settle behind its horns.

“Moros, tell the captain to follow us into the harbor. I want my things brought ashore,” Iris said.

Charizard suddenly roared, and Moros looked up to see Soriel take flight to follow Iris. She saluted him with a salacious grin.
“Get that tight ass in gear, Moros!” she called down to him.

Moros bristled and crumpled the map in his hand without meaning to. “That’s Lieutenant to you!”

Soriel’s bawdy laughter was lost on the wind as she streamlined just over Gyarados’s head and followed Iris to shore. Dragonair spread its white head fins and the waves parted before it, lifting it into the air where it rode the currents as gracefully as a Gorebyss rides the deep-sea tides and leveled with Iris and Gyarados’s armored head.

Iris stood tall on Gyarados's head, breathing deeply. She barely felt the sticky sheen of salt that had coated her like a second skin since she set off over the open ocean on the long journey here, or her bangs that curled over her forehead and cheeks under the humidity. This was it. Today, she would take her first step on the land she’d always known as home in her dreams after so many long years away.

Dragonair let out a long, soulful note as it glided alongside Gyarados like a blue ribbon in the wind. Its enlarged head fins were closer to wings than fish fins as they caught the subtle, almost invisible air currents.

“That’s right,” Iris said. “We’re going home.”

As they neared the shallows and began to pass the thatched houses built directly over the bay waters, people emerged from the sea and their homes to gawk at the strangers come to them from the edge of the earth, that endless blue that stretched as far as the eye could see. They wore salt-stained shifts, shorts, or in the case of the smallest children, nothing at all. Clothing was nothing but a burden in the water. Dark eyes followed Iris and Soriel as they passed with their Pokémon, and the children laughed and reached their small, copper-tone hands toward Gyarados.

“They’re not afraid,” Iris thought to herself.

Gyarados, normally truculent if so much as a Wingull looked at it the wrong way, remained mysteriously placid as it slowly but deftly slithered past the wading children that jumped in the water to follow it. But the adults kept their distances and eyed the dark-eyed stranger and the Dragons that followed her who dared to trespass on their pristine shores. They did not shout at Iris, nor did they follow or resume whatever they had been doing. They merely stared, neither accusatory nor searching, merely acknowledging her presence. Something about the way they watched her pass, unperturbed by her sudden and unannounced appearance, made her uneasy.

The shore was not far, and as soon as they were in shallow water, Gyarados lowered its head for Iris to jump down. She landed in the water, soaking her sandals and the hem of her dress, a white, shapeless shift held in place with a thick leather belt around her waist. More Humilauans emerged from their houses and looked up from their daily duties to watch her and her Pokémon pass. Dragonair slithered onto the beach next to her, and Soriel touched down with Charizard just a couple yards away but did not recall the orange lizard. They exchanged a look, but neither woman said a word.

An old man approached. His white beard grew in patches, as if it were losing the ability to grow at all. He nonetheless stood up straight and strapping after years spent in and out of the ocean hammering wood to build ships, and there was a quiet determination in his dark eyes. “Who are you? What is your business in Humilau?” he asked in chopped Adriati.

He swallowed his consonants, and it took Iris a moment to understand his meaning through the rough accent. Sonora had always spoken clearly to her with little dialectic inflection, as one speaks to a child or a foreigner. Iris swallowed the sudden sting of displeasure that bubbled in the
back of her throat at the thought.

“My name is Iris,” she responded in Adriati. “I’m here to see Gym Leader Marlon. It’s a matter of extreme urgency.”

The old man and the people gathered nearby, men and women and children and elders, began to whisper discreetly among themselves. Some carried baskets of sundried kelp and Shello performed for shucking, and some dressed in the sleek Sealeon skin and Wailord bone armor typical of the Humilauan Navy. Perhaps they had not expected her to speak their tongue. Or maybe her accent sounded as foreign to them as Soriel looked.

Soriel stood silent. She did not speak Adriati, none of the crew Iris had brought with her from Blackthorn did, but she stood tall with a broadsword strapped to her back and Charizard cracking its knuckles behind her. Water-type Pokémon of all kinds seemed to stare along with the Humilauans—from brittle Corsola that emerged from the ocean among the waves, to Ducklett nesting in the palms, to the unsettling Frillish floating languidly in the brackish canals that cut through the beach and the verdant land beyond like veins through muscle.

“The Gym,” Iris went on, scanning the people’s faces. “If someone could direct me to it, I’ll be happy to evacuate the beach.”

“Iris who?” a man said from the crowd, but with all the people gathered, Iris could not tell who. She held her head high. “I’m Iris, daughter of Cadmus Fafnir, the last king of Opelucid.”

Soriel recognized the names she spoke and shot her a look of question, one hand on the pommel of her sword just in case. Dragonair slithered over the sand and looped around Iris’s feet.

“What do you want with the Gym Leader?” another voice asked, a woman this time. Again, Iris could not identify which of the women in the crowd had addressed her.

“That’s something I’ll discuss with him.”

More whispers.

“Hey, Princess?” Soriel said. “I’m getting a bad vibe from the locals. What’d they say?”

Iris did not answer her, straining to pick out what the locals were saying to each other but finding it futile.

“Who are you?” someone shouted from the crowd.

“Why are you here?” another asked.

Iris glared at the crowd. “I’ve told you that already. I’m here to speak to the Gym Leader and only to him.”

By now, rowboats carrying Iris's crew were approaching the shore.

“I bring gifts, the rare Liechi berry from Mirage Island in Hoenn,” Iris said, trying a different angle. “All I ask is to see the Gym Leader.”

No one spoke.

“What do you want to do?” Soriel asked. “They don’t look like the welcoming crowd.”
Clair had always warned Iris that her temper would be her undoing one day if she did not control it. Hurricane Iris, the older woman had called it. The storm brewed slow and potent, picking up speed and momentum until it could stay dormant no longer and exploded with reckless abandon. Clair had seen it a number of times in their days in Blackthorn. Iris felt the storm winds stirring within her now. This was not how she’d expected to land in her home country, her mother’s birthplace.

A child, a young girl no more than six or seven years old, broke from the crowd and approached Iris. Her dark eyes and thick, curling hair matched Iris’s, like looking into a mirror. The child blinked up at Gyarados, who towered over Iris like a water demon summoned from the depths of hell with its bloody eyes and vicious fangs.

“The sea is us,” the little girl said. “And we are the sea. We share.”

Iris frowned at the child. “Excuse me?”

The little girl held out her hand. There were grains of wet sand in between her sticky fingers.

“Share,” the little girl said again.

Iris stared at the girl’s offered hand, flummoxed and unable to move. Petrified by a mere girl-child. Why? Something about her, something strange and wholly foreign yet oddly alluring in the way only a child can ever exude. Iris reached for her, leaning over Dragonair’s swollen body, and brushed her fingers against the child’s.

The little girl smiled, revealing a few missing teeth in her bright grin. She turned back to the crowd, perhaps searching for her mother, and grinned wider.

One of the uniformed navy officers stepped forward holding a halberd. “You want to see the Gym Leader?” he said.

Iris let her hand fall. “That’s right.”

“Then follow me. I’ll take you to the Gym.” He paused and nodded toward the rowboats weighing anchor in the bay. “All of you. The Gym Leader will decide what to do with you.”

Iris swallowed the strange sensation of butterflies in her stomach and suddenly felt the sand giving under her weight. She laid a hand on Dragonair’s back for something to hold onto.

“What’d he say?” Soriel asked in the common tongue.

“He said he’ll take us to the Gym. Gather the others. We’re all going together,” Iris said.

Soriel nodded. “Sure thing.”

She reached for Charizard’s Pokéball, but Iris held up a hand. “No, let them see him.”

Soriel hesitated, but she didn’t argue. “Hell of an impression to make,” she mumbled.

Iris said nothing, her eyes ever trained on the crowd blocking her way into Humilau proper. They slowly began to disperse as the navy soldiers reassured them that they would handle things, go back to your work, don’t worry about the foreigners. But their gazes lingered like brands on Iris’s skin. She’d grown up with stares all her life, those pale strangers looking down at her. The disdain and the pity and even the repulsion no longer fazed her, no longer wheedled their way under her salt- and sea-hardened skin. But these Adriati, these people who were the blood of her blood, her mother’s blood—they looked at her and saw something that deserved neither pity nor repugnance.
It was like they saw nothing in her at all.

Iris clenched her teeth, her sharp incisors biting into her lower lip and threatening to puncture the skin. She was a daughter of Dragons, born of the Old Blood, the daughter of a king who traced his line back to the wellspring of Time and Space. She would not be intimidated or ignored. She had traveled halfway across the world to be seen and heard, and she would make sure their ears bled if that was what it took to hear her roar.

The little girl that had taken her hand watched her from the edge of the canal, and Iris caught her staring. There was no blindness there, no willful neglect, but a curiosity, the kind you see in familiar faces you can’t quite place but somehow remember. But something moved in between them and broke the contact, and Iris was forced to look up at Belaron, whose thin hair was plastered to his pale forehead under the heat of the summer sun.

“Princess, you’re always getting a head start,” he chided her.

Iris shrugged. “I’m the only one who speaks their language.”

Belaron nodded. “Indeed. Soriel tells me we’ll be shown to the Gym?”

The navy soldier that had offered to guide Iris to the Gym nodded. “The Gym is being this way,” he said in the common tongue, his thick accent warping the syllables curiously.

“Ah, they speak the common tongue,” Belaron said with a chortle. “I was afraid we would have to pantomime our way through the negotiations.”

Iris said nothing, but she moved away from Belaron, her earlier anger manifesting once more in itchy irritation just under her skin. She recalled Gyarados, but she left Dragonair out. There were impressions to be made, after all.

Soriel had gathered up the crew that had come ashore, and soon everyone was ready to trek to the Gym. The navy soldier, a strapping youth that towered over Iris, led the group deeper onto land along one of the spidery canals. More navy soldiers fell into step with him, both men and women, and Iris wondered which of them, if any, were Syreni. Humilau was known for its above-average concentration of Water Tamers in Unova. Adria, the region that stretched from Undella farther south to the unnamed islands and atolls far to the north, had long been Syreni land.

The soldiers led Iris and her crew through a city fought over by the jungle and the sea. Roads were paved and ran along the canals, but tall trees with thick, fan-like leaves grew directly out of the pathways, oblivious to man’s attempts to bring some semblance of order to nature. Iris had to walk around the trees, and she wondered just how the people moved carts or even large Pokémon around. Orchids in every color imaginable hung from the higher tree branches and grew wild around the brightly-painted wooden houses as though commanded by some unseen force to cover the city in petals. Wide panels of thinly-cut black glass—Dragonglass—topped the houses. It caught the sunlight, a natural power source and fitting solution to ocean-dwellers with a natural aversion to electricity and the Electric-type Pokémon that generated it. A family of Wingull honked at the humans’ passage under their tree.

“So this is the Floating City,” Belaron said, walking next to Iris and her Dragonair. “Impressive.”

“You think so?” she said.

“Don't you?”

Iris had not thought about it.
“I find it impressive,” Moros said, straight-backed and almost marching with every precise step he took. “Just as our native Blackthorn has found a way to survive along the Ice Path, Humilau has learned to survive half underwater.”

Soriel elbowed him in the side, and he stumbled. “Thinking of relocating, Moros?”

Moros collected himself and glared at the bionic woman. “Absolutely not. We don’t belong in a place like this. I’ll probably end up accidentally drowning if I take a walk around the city.”

The navy soldiers walked ahead, and while she knew they could understand the common tongue, they gave no indication that they’d heard the conversation. Iris stared holes into their backs, wishing they would say something, but she couldn’t imagine what.

The vegetation grew thicker and the buildings farther apart. Iris crossed a stone bridge covered in vines, and below in the wide canal it spanned she spotted pink and blue Frillish bobbing just under the surface, waiting for unwitting prey to drift their way on the current and become entangled in their sticky tentacles. As though they could feel her gaze, they swiveled their vacuous, smoky eyes in her direction. Iris averted her gaze, unwilling to indulge the staring contest. Ghosts were not to be trifled with, even for a Titan. Dragonair avoided looking at them entirely.

“We are arriving,” the navy soldier that had first offered to guide Iris to the Gym said in his thick accent.

Soriel whistled, and Charizard stood up on its hind legs to sniff the air. It didn’t like what it smelled and growled in warning.

“I think he means we’ve already arrived,” Belaron said, equally as awed by the structure in front of them.

A wide house rose out of the center of a natural lagoon fed by the converging canals and rivers, its waters so deeply blue that it had to stretch hundreds of feet below sea level. The house itself stood on stilts that kept it elevated just over the surface. Like the rest of the houses Iris had seen on the way here, this one was built of wood painted in bright blues and yellows and whites, with a sloping roof to help guide the rain. Panels of Dragonglass caught the sunlight like twinkling eyes.

A small shack at the western edge of the lagoon stored numerous surfboards and various underwater exploration gear. Some people in the lagoon wore masks with air-filtering apparatuses that would allow them to breathe freely underwater for a limited amount of time. Pokémon rippled the lagoon’s surface as they swam with the people. Iris noticed the chewed dorsal fin of a Sharpedo among them, and a bloated Wailmer as big as a boulder spouted a held breath and water from its blowhole as it surfaced.

The navy soldiers paused at the wooden bridge that led from the shore to the center of the lagoon and the mansion’s entrance. “Here is the Gym,” one of them said. “Now you will be going to the inside.”

Iris narrowed her eyes at the open Gym entrance and the blue shadows beyond which she could not make out the interior. An inexplicable wave of unease passed through her—what if Marlon would not hear her out? That was a risk she would have to take. She had not traveled thousands of miles just to be sent packing. She was a daughter of Dragons and kings; she would not be refused.

“Let’s go Syr Bel, Soriel, Moros.”

Iris and Dragonair led the procession once more, now to their final destination in Humilau’s
interior. The entrance was wide and tall enough to accommodate both Dragonair and Soriel’s Charizard, and if the navy soldiers took issue with the Pokémon, they did not let on. Inside, Gym trainers and more navy soldiers stopped what they were doing to face the newcomers. A slew of Water-type Pokémon accompanied them, some in the midst of training and others floating in the lagoon that took up almost the entire floor of the Gym in the center. A Crawdaunt’s bladed feet clicked and clacked on the tiling that wrapped around the lagoon as it paused its joust with a hefty Azumarill. A Swampert looked up from its nap as the Mudkip and Wooper whose play it had been ignoring suddenly spooked and hid behind it, the scent of Charizard and Dragonair unfamiliar and terrifying to the small Pokémon. An Alomomola, flat as a pancake and bubblegum pink, breached the lagoon’s surface on its flat side and swiveled one bulbous eye about the room. A Gym trainer who had been meditating atop a Tentacruel’s head broke his concentration and disturbed the floating jellyfish underneath him. Poisonous tentacles breached the water’s surface, feeling the air for changes in the wind. Hushed voices drifted toward Iris, the Gym trainers and soldiers whispering between themselves in Adriati, wondering at this group of pale-skinned foreigners who’d barged into their Gym unannounced. Moros reached for a Pokéball, but he did not release it.

“Gym Leader Marlon,” Iris announced in the common tongue. “Show yourself.”

The Gym trainers looked at her with vacant expressions. The Swampert that was guarding the smaller Pokémon shuffled to its feet and yawned, but its eyes were trained on Charizard.

“Who’s asking?”

A young woman around Iris’s age poked her head out of the water in the lagoon. She rose out of the water atop the bulbous head of a pink Jellicent as pale as a bloated corpse. She wore the same Sealeo skin and whalebone as the navy soldiers, and her short, chin-length hair was plastered to her cheeks. The suit clung to her figure and accented the toned curve of muscle, lean and sleek, the figure of a fighter and a swimmer.

Syreni, Iris thought instinctively. There was no mistaking that silky presence, how this woman seemed to extend from the water as an arm extends from the body.

Her Jellicent emanated a ghastly haze-like miasma, deeply violet for only a moment before dissipating into nothing. Its flesh was not so much pink as a translucent leather, like old cellophane, dyed rosy from its internal organs and choice of prey—mostly Luvdisc and Alomomola.

“I’m Iris, and I’ve already wasted enough time. Tell me where Marlon is, Syreni.”

“The Gym Leader doesn’t see just anyone,” the woman retorted in Adriati. “What do you want to see him for? I’ll be happy to pass along the message.”

Iris pursed her lips. “I’m not going to ask again,” she said in the common tongue, which the woman clearly understood. She raised her hand, and Dragonair slithered around her, its wicked horn lowered in threat.

“You understand me,” the woman said, “yet you refuse to speak our language.”

“Princess, what is she saying?” Moros asked, brandishing a Pokéball.

“Enough of this.” Belaron stepped away from the group and approached the Syreni woman. “Clearly, you can understand my speech. Take us to Gym Leader Marlon now. We’ve come all this way, and my princess will not be turned away by the likes of you.”

The Syreni woman glared at Belaron and stepped off Jellicent’s head onto the tile floor. Her
Pokémon reared up behind her. Its long tentacles, fleshy and tattered like ripped cloth, billowed in the air and leaked more violet haze as its vacuous eyes saw everything and nothing at all.

“That’s enough, Nuria,” a man’s voice said in harsh Adriati, like he was swallowing half his words and delivering the rest on the edge of a rusty knife. “I’ve kept our guests waiting long enough.”

A man separated himself from the rest of the Gym trainers that had paused their work and made himself known. He looked no different from the rest of them—burnished copper complexion, fighting fid, clad in a Sealeo skin wetsuit. All except his eyes, which were the most remarkable shade of blue, almost black, that Iris had ever seen. They were her mother’s eyes, the black of the ocean just where the last of the light dared to tread and show its colors before the abyss swallowed it whole. Beautiful eyes that Iris had not inherited, and seeing them now filled her with a strange wistfulness she had not known for many, many years.

“Are you the Gym Leader?” Belaron asked.

The man smiled broadly and spread his arms. “That’s me, Gym Leader Marlon. At your service, gentlemen and ladies.” He spoke the common tongue with easy fluency, crisp and fluid, so unlike his native tongue.

He bowed at the waist in a flourish and dripped water on the floor, and Belaron harrumphed. Iris, however, was not moved by his showy antics. There had been a moment, just a split second, really, when he’d paused and bared his teeth just before he let the smile shine through. A fleeting moment of threat, of warning. A mere skuff like Belaron, knight or no, would never have noticed it, this surge of aura unique to Tamers, Iris reasoned. But Iris closed a hand over the hilt of her sword on instinct, the lingering effects of that spike of dread still acutely felt in her trembling fingers, though it was long gone.

*I am a Titan for true,* Iris told herself. *I won’t be intimidated.*

“Gym Leader Marlon,” Iris said in the common tongue. “I’m Iris.”

“I know who you are,” Marlon said, straightening. “And I know why you’ve come.”

“Then you know that what I want will help us both in the end.”

Marlon crossed his arms and backed up. Behind him, a Lapras that towered over nine feet tall and carried a scarred, spiky shell on its back, hovered protectively.

“Know?” Marlon eyed Iris and her crew with disdain. “I know many things, girl, and I do not know many things. For example, why you have chosen my city to invade and demand help over others.”

The furious hurricane Iris had barricaded within whipped up again and rattled at the shutters of her sanity, demanding release. She had learned decorum and formality in Blackthorn, and she had mastered the art of holding her tongue and smiling demurely when others insulted or ignored her for no reason other than that their birth and status granted them that privilege without consequence. She had learned these things, and she was ready to toss them out to sea right here and now. This was not Blackthorn, and she was not a hostage any longer.

“Excuse me?” Iris said, not bothering to hide the edge in her tone.

Marlon grinned. “I know many things, Halfling Princess Iris. But I do not know why I should care that you are here now.”

He raised a hand and Lapras opened its mouth to reveal a glowing, bright light—the beginnings of
an Ice Beam attack. Dragonair flattened the fins that grew from the sides of its head and coiled, wary of Lapras’s chilling aura. Soriel cursed, and someone drew a sword, metal scraping leather. Nuria and the other Gym trainers began to move, anticipating the eruption of an ugly fight at any moment now.

Hurricane Iris burst through years of sensibility and training and ignited her blood, pumped it faster, and invigorated her limbs. Without thinking, she dashed forward straight for Marlon and Lapras and thrust out a hand just as Lapras was ready to fire of its attack. Belaron gasped and tried to reach for her as she lunged, but she fell through his grasp and he barely brushed the end of her ponytail.

“Yield!” Iris spat.

Lapras’s dark eyes rolled back in its skull, and its long neck bent backwards as it thrust its head back at the last second. The Ice Beam fired through a window and into the sky beyond like blue lightning returning to a thundercloud. Lapras shook out its head and watched Iris with wide, wary eyes, its head bent in submission. The Gym trainers stared in shock, and some of them even backed away from Iris’s group, stunned by this witchery. Iris didn’t have to read minds to know their thoughts.

Liar. Manipulator. Dragon Tamer. Only a true Titan could coerce Dragons and their descendants against their will.

Marlon let his arms fall, and he watched Iris with that same ocean-deep gaze like nothing at all had gone awry.

“Now I know,” Marlon said. “Sonora was not wrong about you. You are your father’s daughter.”

The adrenaline and fury still coursed through Iris’s system like a drug, and she heard Marlon’s words as though he were shouting them at her over the roar of the storm he’d called out of her. Damn right she was her father’s daughter. She was a Fafnir, a princess of Opelucid, and the Old Blood, Dragonsblood, was strong in her veins. This bastard tacha, this tarnished half breed was a Titan for true, and no amount of cruel words and petty insults about her parentage would ever change that. Nothing would drown it out. No one would ever hold it against her ever again, she would make sure of that.

Damn right I’m my father’s daughter.

She wanted to scream it at him. She would have, too, if he hadn’t interrupted her.

“And you’ll take back his throne from the brother who stole it from him and forced you to flee for your life. That is why you have come to me for help,” Marlon said. “You want to kill Drayden.”

Iris could picture Drayden easily. He had always seemed old to her, tall and rigid and always looking down his nose at her and everyone else. Those piercing yellow eyes, like lightning, violent and sudden in their striking. He’d never looked her in the eye when she lived in Opelucid, never offered her a pat on the head or a hug or a kind word, as an uncle might normally do. She did not exist in his eyes, a mixed-blood bastard child that had been the ruin of his brother and king. She could picture him so easily and the malice in those eyes when he would be forced to look at her now, now that she was grown and strong and ready to tear apart both him and the life he’d grown accustomed to just because she could. Just as he had once done to her and her mother.

“No,” she said, shaking with the force of the winds within her. “I want to destroy him.”
The fog was thick around what remained of Accumula Town. Once a small mountain hamlet nestled among the hills that made up the southern edge of the Reversal Mountains, Accumula was nothing more than a pile of smashed houses, charred grass, and bodies. So many bodies.

People and Pokémon lay in the streets, among the ruined houses, men and women alike in piecemeal armor wielding rusty swords that had never seen battle and farm tools dull from use in the fields. Others bore Striaton City’s coat of arms, the red, blue, and green triquetra. They were soldiers dispatched from the north to slaughter their vassals. And still others wore uniforms, sleek grey with masks and the initials ‘TP’ embroidered in cobalt over the breast. It was all the proof Juniper needed.

“This confirms it,” she said from her squatting position over a corpse dressed in the Team Plasma uniform. “Team Plasma’s working with Striaton.”

Juniper had changed into slim cargo pants, hiking boots, and a leather utility jacket worn in the elbows and shoulders from years in the field. A metal beater wrapped with oiled leather was strapped to her thigh, but so far there had been no need to use it. Everyone here was long dead. Already, the carrion beasts had begun their feasting. Mandibuzz and Vullaby crowded the center of Accumula, digging their bald raw heads into sun sweetened flesh, ripping tendons and muscle from bone in a rapacious frenzy as though the corpses might get up and walk away. Mightyena and Poochyena barked and snapped at the birds and at each other in an attempt to employ some semblance of order to the pecking and picking. But the wild Pokémon drawn by the scent of blood and death gave Juniper a wide berth. Her own Pokémon saw to that.

Armaldo hovered just a couple feet from Juniper, its trainer and creator. The prehistoric dino-Bug stood about six feet tall slightly hunched over with its arms folded before it. It could extend those folded arms into razor sharp blades in the blink of an eye and cut through rock and iron with ease. Its wings remained folded over its back, never used except in the water. Unlike its descendant, Scizor, Armaldo was incapable of flight. Bulging eyes extended almost comically from the sides of its wide head, but there was nothing funny about this ancient predator. Its rocky blue hide was tough enough to withstand even an Onix’s Stone Edge. As a tiny Anorith, Armaldo was the first Pokémon Juniper ever revived from fossilized remains and DNA splicing when she was still a spritely Ph.D. candidate studying under the illustrious Professor Samuel Oak, and she had decided to train it as a battling Pokémon under his suggestion. While slow, Armaldo was keenly perceptive and single-mindedly brutish if provoked. Rosa had never liked the air about the ancient Bug and made every effort to avoid it.

But Juniper’s other battling Pokémon was even more repulsive to Rosa than Armaldo. Floating about the carnage and probing the bodies, both human and Pokémon, for survivors, was Juniper’s Vanilluxe. A dreadful Ice-type Pokémon distantly related to the ancient Pokémon Omanyte and Omastar, Vanilluxe was little more than a pair of chambered conch shells. Like its nautilus ancestors, Vanilluxe was a master of buoyancy and pressure, though it made its home on land in snowy mountains or dank caves rather than twenty thousand leagues under the sea. It emitted chilled helium with every breath and stored the gas in the many chambers that divided up its shells, super-cooling it and compounding the pressure on a constant basis. Its true body, a slimy mollusk that hid inside its frozen shell, controlled the air pressure and temperature within its shells, enabling
it to float higher or sink. That same expert buoyancy control enabled Vanilluxe to emit chilling bursts of highly pressurized liquid helium in the form of Ice Beams in the style of several of its fellow Ice-type Pokémon, including Glalie and Cryogonal. The ghoulish mollusk was pejoratively likened to a pair of ice cream cones in certain academic circles due the layer of frost that accumulated over its conical shell as a result of its internal below-freezing temperature regardless of the surrounding environment. But there was nothing humorous or sophomoric about Vanilluxe’s fiendish ice powers. Even Rosa’s Beartic had kept its distance from its frosty brethren when it was still alive, wary of Vanilluxe’s potent cryokinesis. Vanilluxe moved in complete silence, shedding flurries in its path that froze the ground in its wake.

Rosa shivered just catching sight of the floating creature. Serperior noticed her unease but slithered to where Juniper was examining the dead Plasma Agent’s body as though Vanilluxe and Armaldo were not there. The green basilisk had never been one to show its fear or bow its head to others, not even in the face of a severe type disadvantage. Rosa envied Serperior its unflappable pride sometimes. Rosa followed Serperior and looked down on the body Juniper had found.

“We still don’t know the whole story,” she said.

Rosa wore a natural camouflage of animal skins and pelts. Her cargo pants were dark green leather culled from Tauros hide and able to withstand shallow cuts and scrapes. Her long-sleeved tunic was a patchwork of Ursaring, Stantler, and summer Deerling pelts layered in browns and whites and jades and fastened at the waist with a thick burgundy leather sash, both gifts from Bianca’s last trip to Aspertia City before Rosa had left to fight in Kanto. Fingerless leather gloves protected her hands. A utility pouch strapped to her left thigh held basic medical supplies, spare arrowheads, and sharpening tools. On her right thigh, she carried a serrated hunting knife perfect for gutting, skinning, and slashing wild game, but a poor choice in combat for its clunky weight and size. A longbow crafted from Trevenant wood was slung across her back. The bow itself was more durable than any crafted from the standard birch or oak of pine, infused as it was with an immortal Ghost’s Aura. It had been a gift from Juniper on her eighteenth birthday along with a promise never to use it unless absolutely necessary. A quiver full of arrows rested over her left shoulder. Twin buntails kept her long hair out of her face, a style she’d favored since she was a teenager and Nate had mentioned in passing that she looked nice with long hair.

“Calm down, Lara Croft. I never said we did.” Juniper got up and dusted off her pants. “I just have a very bad feeling that the whole story’s much worse than even this.”

Rosa stared at the Plasma Agent’s corpse. He’d been stabbed through the gut with a spear or a sword and bled to death, but the murder weapon was nowhere in sight. She averted her gaze and headed north along what had once been Accumula’s main street. “Either way, we won’t find anything useful sticking around here. The invaders obviously returned to Striaton.”

Juniper’s hand on her wrist stopped Rosa. “Hey.”

“What?”

Juniper leveled her with a cold stare that betrayed her fear. “Whatever we find, we stay together and stay out of it until we know what we’re dealing with. Okay?”

Rosa pursed her lips. “Don’t talk like I’ll break into a million pieces. Even if these Plasma Agents are involved in something shady doesn’t mean the organization is to blame. People can make their own choices, you know.”

_N would never choose this._
Juniper blinked and let her hand fall. “Of course I know that. I only wish you didn’t have see them making such terrible choices.”

Rosa turned on her heel and marched north again, not waiting for Juniper. Arguing would be pointless. The woman was a scientist, the type to ask questions and harp on the answers until she got them no matter the impediments in her path. There was never any point in arguing with one who knew only reason free from passion. Bianca had learned to accept Juniper’s pugilistic determination in the face of the unknown or the never-before-seen and even work around it. Rosa had learned to tune it out and leave Juniper be while Rosa pursued her own goals. She tuned it out now, and Juniper did not press the matter. Juniper, too, had learned not to press Rosa’s reticent rebelliousness. For now, at least.

Serperior slithered alongside Rosa, its forked tongue tasting the air and smelling for threats. A pack of Mightyena and Poochyena feasting on a bloody pile of bones that had once been recognizable as corpses snarled as they passed, but did not approach as long as Serperior was about. Vanilluxe drifted near in total silence, carrying a cold front with it, and the Poochyena tucked their tails and hid behind their larger evolved brethren.

“Still, this is worse than I could’ve imagined,” Juniper said, falling into step with Rosa and Serperior. Her Armaldo lumbered along just behind making a racket as it clunked over the cobblestones dragging its armored tail. “Accumula’s just...gone. All those people...”

Rosa said nothing, and her mind was eerily blank. She had visited Accumula many times growing up, both with Juniper and Bianca and with Nate. It had always been a quiet town where everyone knew everyone else, secrets were unheard of, and anyone’s greatest worry was who they would marry, which house down the street they would settle down in, how many children to have. Not even spirits remained in this empty hole in the ground. The carrion beasts had eaten them, too. There was nothing left here worth burying or burning.

“We better hurry,” Rosa said. “I want to get as far away from here as we can before nightfall.”

The fog swept south past them, swallowing them, the dead, and the crater that was their grave in its murky mist.

It took another three days of hard hiking to reach the outskirts of Striaton. And from what Rosa could tell from her vantage in a tree in woods surrounding the southern edge of the city, they were late to the party.

“Rosa, what do you see?” Juniper called from the forest floor where she waited with Armaldo.

It was early, just after dawn. They had made camp at night for four or five hours to rest, but neither Juniper nor Rosa had wanted to dawdle on the journey here. Last night, they had pressed on through the darkness to reach Striaton by first light. The closer they came, the more acute the sense of urgency became, inexplicable but undeniable. Their growing anxiety was not left wanting.

“...Nothing,” Rosa said. “I don’t see anyone.”

Striaton was a large and sprawling city, just as large as Nacrene to the west. Far to the east lay a protected habitat known as the Dreamyard, which was closed to the public on the grounds that it was a sanctuary for rare and endangered Pokémon species. Striaton stood as a fortress at the mouth of the vast Dreamyard, a Trojan wall to keep out invaders and imprison those within. Striaton was
home to Unova’s top military academy, boasting more current and former Gym Leaders from around the world among its alumni than any other similar institution. As a result, the city was like a military base dropped into the otherwise rural lower East Tine out of the sky. Rosa had never been to Striaton because they didn’t let visitors in beyond the outskirts. Guards were usually stationed on every street corner, plebs armed with swords and beaters and axes. But today, there was not a soul in sight.

“No one?” Juniper said. “Are you sure?”

Rosa jumped down from the tree, and Leafeon landed beside her. It eyed Armaldo warily, but the dino-Bug ignored it.

“Positive. Which means everyone must be gathered somewhere deeper in the city.”

Juniper thought about that a moment. “...We need to hurry, but stay close. We’re here to observe.”

“Aurea, what’re you thinking?”

Juniper avoided her gaze. “Let’s just go.”

Juniper recalled Armaldo, and she and Rosa jogged into the town with Leafeon at their heels. The streets were deserted. Trash, everything from crushed soda bottles to soiled newspapers and cigarette butts, littered the streets and sidewalks as though the sweepers had not been through in weeks. Or they couldn’t keep up with the exploding influx of people. Rosa forced her mind to clear and focused on the impact of her boots on the pavement as she ran between shops and restaurants and eventually office and administration buildings on the outskirts of the heart of the city, the military base and community.

That was when she began to hear the voices.

It was a slow rushing din at first, like waves crashing against the shallows and picking up speed and sound as they broke. The cacophony of riotous cheering and jeering erupted like an avalanche when Rosa turned onto the main street leading directly to the city’s center. An enormous plaza made up the heart of the city, complete with patches of maintained gardens, fountains, and plenty of benches. The space was cobblestone paved and open for leisure and for large-scale military drills. Now, it was the stage for an enormous crowd of people gathered together and facing an imposing, fortified warehouse built a story above the rest of the buildings in the area—the Striaton City Gym.

“Oh my god,” Juniper said.

There had to be a few thousand people gathered in the packed square. Even more occupied the alleys feeding into the square. People had ascended the buildings lining the square and leaned out the windows, perched on roofs, stood on each others shoulders, all to get an unobstructed view of the Gym. The red, blue, and green triquetra crest of the Striaton Gym hung on a massive banner over the front of that building, and before it at the top of the stone steps stood a small group of people. Rosa recognized most of them.

“That’s Lenora!” she hissed.

Rosa and Juniper were at the edge of the square hiding behind a building and peering around the corner. From their position, they could barely make out what was going on in front of the Gym, much less hear anything over the crowd.

“We have to get closer,” Rosa said. “Come on.”
Juniper followed closely, and the two women merged with the gathered crowd. People’s warm bodies pressed against Rosa as she attempted to wend her way through them like steering around hazardous rapids in a river raft. All the while, she held onto Juniper’s hand so they would not be separated. Leafeon had jumped up onto Rosa’s shoulder and balanced its front paws on her head to better see over the crowd.

As they went, Rosa could not help but notice more Plasma uniforms among the crowd. They were few, but up ahead near the Gym, their numbers swelled. The smells of blood and sweat and vomit permeated the air. People threw rotten Tamato and Pomeg berries at the Gym where Lenora stood. Some managed to hit her, and when they did, the crowd whooped and hollered. Eventually, Rosa and Juniper made it close enough to the Gym to hear what was being said.

The Striaton Gym Leaders, three brothers who claimed to have royal blood that traced back to the original settlers of the lower East Tine a thousand years ago, stood near Lenora and addressed the crowd. Chili, his face as red as his hair as he blustered and peacocked about the stage true to his pompous form, spoke for the brother-princes.

“And how many generations have we endured this humiliation as Nacrene gorged on the spoils of Pinwheel Forest? Too long!” Chili shouted.

The crowd echoed their outrage and clapped. Cilan, tall and severe of both personality and physical presence, remained silent with his arms crossed as his fiery brother continued his ranting demagoguery, sharp eyes sweeping the crowd.

“But we were first!” Chili went on. “We built up this great city when the East Tine was once as wild as the White Forest! We were here first! This land is ours by rights and by claim, is that not so?”

The crowd roared their agreement. Cress, the youngest brother and Gym Leader, was seated behind his brothers and wholly uninterested in Chili’s harangue as he sharpened a great axe almost as tall as he was. Cool and forbidding, the youngest princeling was rumored to be a mute. All three brothers had been born plebs, but like their ancestors who had ruled Striaton from the Gym behind them, they had trained from an early age to fight with Pokémon and win the hearts of the masses. Tamers were the minority in Striaton, just as they were in the world at large. The three brother-princes knew the strength of numbers. All of Striaton and then some had turned out for today’s events.

“They’ve captured Lenora,” Juniper said to Rosa as they huddled among the faces of the crowd and tried not to get knocked down by the jostling people. “What is going on?”

“Then I declare! I declare here and today before all of you who my brothers and I humbly serve,” Chili said.

The crowd whooped at his flattery and fluff, eating it up.

“I declare that no longer will Striaton yield to the yoke of oppression! No longer will we take second pickings to those who would elevate themselves by virtue of birth! Today, Striaton rises!”

As the crowd cheered, Lenora remained standing tall and proud at the top of the stairs near Chili. She held her head high despite her restraints. Blood stained her leather and mail armor and matted her hair. Her left eye was swollen shut, her lip was split badly, and her leg was dark with a bloodstain that appeared to be growing larger. A group of people stood far to the left, all clad in Team Plasma uniforms. They watched in silence as Chili blustered on.

“They’ve captured Lenora,” Juniper said to Rosa as they huddled among the faces of the crowd and tried not to get knocked down by the jostling people. “What is going on?”
“If I had to guess, Striaton won,” Rosa said grimly.

And they had help doing it.

A war had been waged right in Nuvema’s backyard, and Rosa had had no idea. Generations of political feuding, of backdoor deals and alliances and betrayals and renewed promises to work together, had all come to a bloody and riotous demise. Gym Leader Lenora stood before them a prisoner, alone and beaten and without a soul on her side. This was not the Lenora Rosa knew. This was not the strong Atlas woman who had spent her life strengthening the alliances between Nacrene and the smaller Nuvema and Accumula, towns with no Gym Leader and no standing militia to defend them. Lenora had offered them training, protection, a forum to voice their wants and grievances and an opportunity to have them answered. She had united the lower East Tine save for Striaton, and had devoted her life to ending the longstanding feud between Nacrene and Striaton that had been going on for far too long to no avail.

This Lenora, however, stood silent. Gone was the no-nonsense candor, the easy strength of position and confidence and compassion. This was not the Lenora Rosa knew, the Lenora who had been Juniper’s dear friend since Rosa was still a girl.

Rosa watched the Team Plasma Agents gathered to the left, all high-ranking officers if she had to guess. What were they thinking? Why were they here? What was the point of all this? Of Accumula?

N would never...

“Gym Leader Lenora,” Chili said, approaching Lenora and pacing around her like she was a caged exotic animal, as repulsive as she was rare. “Do you have anything to say for yourself? What explanation can you offer the good people of Striaton for Nacrene’s gross selfishness?”

Lenora kept her head high and did not even look at Chili. “Only this,” she said, voice booming and powerful as it had always been. They could not take that from her. “Striaton, you’ve been horribly deceived and taken advantage of. These three pretenders have whored out your city and condemned you to a life of slavery to Team Plasma—”

Cilan punched Lenora in the stomach before she could say anything more, and she doubled over and coughed up blood, an old wound aggravated. Chili looked about ready to blow up, but the crowds hooting and hollering for Cilan appeased him enough to keep his temper and what little remained of his dignity.

But Lenora would not be silenced. Heaving, she straightened up and wobbled on shaky legs. Blood coated her lower lip and chin and dripped to the ground. “I...Nacrene does not stand alone,” she bellowed. “Do your worst and suffer the consequences!”

Cilan took her by the shoulders and forced her to her knees. He pushed her head down over a wooden block and held her in place, but she didn’t struggle. Cress, silent as death, rose and dragged his great axe behind him until he towered over Lenora. Chili faced the crowd again and spread his arms with a grin.

“This is our time!” he announced. “Your time!”

The crowd roared and threw more rotten fruit at Lenora. A spoiled Tamato berry hit Cilan in the shoulder, and he glared at the crowd, rising off Lenora to wipe the red mess from his shirt.

“Shit,” Rosa said. “They’re going to kill her!”
She was already reaching for Serperior’s Pokéball when Juniper’s hand closed around her wrist and stayed her hand. Rosa whirled.

“What’re you doing?” she hissed.

“Rosa,” Juniper said, barely audible over the crowd. Her eyes glistened with unshed tears. Rosa just stared, wide-eyed and disbelieving.

No.

This was not happening.

*This is not happening!*

Cress situated himself near Lenora’s bent head and lifted the great axe with some trouble, but he managed.

“No, stop!” Rosa screamed.

But her protests were drowned out in the crowd, and all she could do was watch as Cress let the axe fall. Lenora’s head popped right off her shoulders and rolled across the stage. It made it down a couple steps, bouncing like a basketball, before Chili jogged after it and snatched it up by the hair. Rosa stared in horrified shock, and Juniper’s grip on her wrist was painfully crushing.

Chili lifted the severed head, dripping blood from the neck, to the crowd like a trophy. “Even an *almighty* Atlas’s head rolls like everybody else’s!”

Rosa tore her eyes away from the grisly scene and found Juniper, transfixed at the sight, with tears streaming down her face. She still gripped Rosa’s wrist in a bruising hold.

“Aurea,” Rosa said. “Hey!”

Juniper blinked rapidly, her hiccups lost to the wash of cheers. Bodies bumped them, and Leafeon hissed at the people around them to little avail. Rosa did the only thing she could think of and yanked Juniper to her bodily. The women crushed together in a forced embrace, shaking and about to fall if not for the other. Rosa’s mind raced with the scene she had just witnessed, over and over and over again. The crowd continued to cheer and Chili rambled on.

This was the second time Rosa had watched, helpless, while another a million times better than she was and ever would be died in her stead while she did nothing. She dug her nails into Juniper’s soft leather jacket in a moment of weakness, a moment of absolute lucidity. There was nothing she could have done.

Nothing at all.

Serperior could have stopped the princes. Maybe she and Juniper would have gotten to Lenora. Maybe they even would have made it past the Plasma Agents. But there were thousands of people in this square today. There were strong trainers, both Tamers and plebs, here today. There were unreliable emotions in the mix. There was the threat of mortality, all too real in a crowd of thousands that cheered for the public beheading of a woman who for as long as Rosa had known her had done whatever she could to improve the lots of those less fortunate than herself. There was nothing she could have done and lived to tell about.

And in the couple seconds it took her to rationalize what she had just witnessed, to
compartmentalize it away for further analysis later in a place far from here, Juniper gave into that passion she normally tamped down and chained up and tried to wrest free of Rosa’s grasp to get to Lenora.

“Aurea!”

Juniper yanked free of Rosa’s grip, and Rosa had to almost jump on her from behind to restrain her from going any farther. They staggered together and bumped a woman next to them, who shouted a disgruntled obscenity and shoved them back. Leafeon puffed out its fur in agitation and dug its claws into Rosa’s shoulder and scalp. Perhaps realizing the situation, or perhaps because it was so in tune with Rosa’s moods and habits, Leafeon leaped from her shoulders to Juniper’s and bit Juniper’s ear. It was enough to shock her into submission long enough for Rosa to grab her by the waist and arm and haul her back a ways.

“We have to leave,” Rosa snapped.

She managed to drag Juniper through the crowd, but it was like trudging through quicksand with each step resisting more and more. And then suddenly, something in the gathered crowd shifted, like a sudden wind changing the tide of the current. Jostled between bodies, Rosa turned with Juniper to look back at the stage.

The Plasma guard had parted to let a man pass. He was tall with an air of regency about him. He was draped in long black robes and walked with an ornate staff. His face was neither old nor young, but his skin was smooth and his hair a sleek silver. His eyes, however, were like two black pits, abyssal depths that could see into another world, somewhere beyond this time and place. His unusually youthful vigor almost rendered him unrecognizable—improbable. But Rosa had seen his picture many times, had even heard him speak once, his voice a tinny rasp characteristic of an old man’s. In the flesh today, however, his voice was strong and vigorous to match his uncannily youthful visage.

There was no mistaking it, improbable as it was. This man was a former Sage, a once trusted advisor and mentor to N, a leader in Team Plasma. This was Ghetsis.

“Impressive display,” Ghetsis said with the hint of a smile. He paced onto the stage among the three princes, his walking staff clicking on the stone with each step.

“People of Striaton,” Chili said, “I give you Lord Ghetsis! His Team Plasma has pledged their allegiance to our great city, and together we have overthrown Nacrene’s tyranny!”

The crowd cheered and clapped, pulled in by Chili’s magnetism and Ghetsis’s powerful atmosphere. The Plasma Agents on stage fanned out behind the princes in a line.

Ghetsis rubbed his chin, pensive. “So, an Atlas is no different from a mere pleb,” Ghetsis said as he stopped in the center of the stage and cast an uninterested glance at Lenora’s head in Chili’s hand. “Let’s test your theory, shall we?”

It happened so fast, Rosa almost believed she’d imagined it for a moment. One moment, the three Striaton princes were standing on stage basking in the glow of their adoring fans and citizens. The next, three hooded figures in black appeared next to them at blinding speed with a twinkle of steel. Chili, Cilan, and Cress teetered where they stood, eyes wide. Chili was still grinning, his haughty expression forever frozen even as the knife slipped across his throat and opened a red smile in his neck. The bodies wavered where they stood, tilted, and finally crumpled to the ground like all the bones had been dissolved and the skin and sinew was left to pool in a heap.
Rosa and Juniper watched, silent and speechless without even the comfort of horror and disgust to guide them in this newest and unexpected turn of events. Many in the crowd shared their shock. Ghetsis raised a hand, and the three assassins flanked him silently, moving like shadows.

“People of Striaton,” Ghetsis declared. “As promised, I grant you liberty from *all* tyranny!”

Not everyone was silent. Some cheered. Then more. And more. Like an avalanche, gathering speed and momentum and force, the crowd soon regained its former fervor. The Plasma Agents among them cheered in tandem, clapping and shouting and whooping, and Rosa had the sudden urge to throw up.

*All this time*...

There was no time even to be outraged. No time for shock. No time to linger. Before she even realized what she was doing, Rosa was dragging Juniper back the way they’d come. She shoved people aside as best she could, one body at a time and step after step, until finally they broke from the crowd and could no longer make out Ghetsis’s speech.

*All this time*, Rosa thought to herself as she picked up the pace and dragged Juniper along behind her. *All this time, they were infecting the city and building them up to this very moment.*

*“But how do we convince people to care about our cause?”* a young agent had asked during a caucus in the early days.

N had smiled from his podium, like he’d been expecting that question all night. *“Convince them by becoming one of them. Listen, and they’ll feed you their deepest desires and fears. All you have to do is listen, and they’ll sell you their souls.”*

Rosa covered her mouth, truly afraid she would throw up for real this time, and yanked Juniper around a corner. Like a curtain had been cast over the crowd in the square, the sound dulled as they huddled behind a building and got their bearings. Juniper was white as a sheet.

“This is...” she began.

*This is exactly what N taught us to do,* Rosa thought.

“This is madness,” Juniper went on. She was still weeping and wiped her eyes with her sleeve. “I have to get back to Nuvema.”

“What?” Rosa said.

“I have to get everyone out. There’s nothing else we can do.”

Rosa took her by the shoulders and shook her lightly. “Aurea, snap out of it.”

Juniper blinked and swatted Rosa’s hands away. “You were right to stop me. I... I lost control.”

“I don’t blame you.”

“Even so...” Juniper sniffled and wiped her face again. Her eyes were red and puffy from crying. “Oh my god.” She rubbed her eyes, and Rosa waited for her to recover. “Okay. The most important thing now is to make sure the people of Nuvema are safe. I’ll have to report this immediately. We need the militia in the wings in case of another invasion.”

“Invasion? After what happened here today? There’s no point in going after Nuvema. They have
Nacrene. That’s all they need.”

“Even so, I have no idea what Team Plasma will do. And there’s the matter of the Chimera experiments.”

Rosa narrowed her eyes and peered back at the square. “Come on, let’s get out of here first.”

They returned to the outskirts of the city, and the farther Rosa got from the square, from Ghetsis and his Team Plasma, the less she felt the churning queasiness in her stomach. The woods were just as they left them, and the sun was up and bright now. She was sweating a little under her skins and leather, but the heat didn’t bother her much.

Among the trees again, Rosa breathed deeply and tried to calm her racing heart. It had been some time since she’d seen such brutal deaths, not since the Battle of Cinnabar in Kanto some months ago. But this... This was nothing for which any of her past experiences with war could have prepared her.

“Okay,” Rosa said, more to herself than to Juniper. “What about Chimera?”

“The behavior modification technology Team Plasma’s behind,” Juniper said. “I have to know more about it. Who invented it? Why? If I can find that out, we’ll be one step closer to stopping these monsters.”

Leafeon jumped down from Rosa’s shoulders to the forest floor and paced, while Rosa stood rigid and glared at Juniper.

“This isn’t Team Plasma,” she said. “N would never condone this. Whatever we just saw, that’s not N’s doing.”

Juniper looked at her like she’d grown another head. “Rosa, do you even hear yourself right now? N’s gone. That,” she pointed back toward Striaton, “isn’t the Team Plasma you knew, if it ever was.”

“I never said it was, but this isn’t what N wanted,” Rosa protested. “You weren’t there. You didn’t see what I saw. This isn’t Team Plasma!”

“Oh really? Then what is? Because I just saw my friend beheaded and her executioners assassinated just after by guys working for Team Plasma.”

“That’s not N’s Team Plasma!” Rosa shouted. “You said yourself there’s people who still follow him, not Ghetsis, right? Well, this isn’t them! This isn’t me!”

“Then they’re following a ghost!” Juniper was crying again, the tears streaming freely down her face as she looked at Rosa in exasperation. “No one’s seen or heard from N in months, not since that apocalyptic lightning storm razed all of Vertress City to the ground. He probably died along with all the others there. That place is dead now, Rosa. No one survived. They didn’t even find any bodies and the searches went on for weeks.”

Rosa’s vision blurred with tears of her own, and Leafeon growled in warning, sensing her distress.

“Stop,” she said. “Don’t say that. It doesn’t matter what people think. I know N. He wouldn’t die so easy. He could still be out there. People still follow him, you said it yourself.”

“Oh really? Well, if he’s still out there somewhere in hiding, why doesn’t he return and take back control of his organization? Why doesn’t he stop this? If he’s so against what we just saw, why
doesn’t he do anything about it?”

Rosa gritted her teeth. “That’s not fair.”

But Juniper was not having any of it. “No, what’s not fair is that I just saw my dear friend beheaded in front of a crowd. A cheering crowd.” Juniper held her face in her hands and took a moment to compose herself. After a few moments, her tears wiped clean and her eyes red and puffy, she looked up again. “Look, I know how important Team Plasma was to you, how important N was. But you must see the reality. And the reality now is Lenora’s dead and a madman just executed three Gym Leaders to a cheering crowd. That’s your Team Plasma now. That’s the monster N created, whether he meant to or not. It’s too late for that to matter.”

Rosa had no words. There was nothing she could think of to refute Juniper, to silence her into submission. After all, she’d seen it, too. She’d watched as a respected Gym Leader was brutally murdered in front of a crowd of sheep. She’d seen the results of Team Plasma’s magic worked upon Striaton, infiltrating its ranks and gaining its trust enough to show them a new path, a new leader, one better equipped to bring the city into greatness. Striaton belonged to Ghetsis now. Team Plasma belonged to Ghetsis now. She had seen it all.

But that didn’t mean she had to accept it.

And so, Rosa fell back on her tried and true method for dealing with Professor Aurea Juniper’s precocious pragmatism and tuned her out.

“Do what you have to do,” Rosa said.

“I will. We both will.”

“No, I’m not going back.”

Juniper frowned. “What?”

“I’m not going back to Nuvema with you. I can’t just sit around and do nothing.”

Juniper shook her head. “I don’t understand. What’re you going to do? Stay here?”

“Of course not.” Rosa hugged her arms.

Juniper studied her a moment. “All right. You’re an adult, and you have to make your own decisions. But let me make a suggestion. Go to Castelia.”

That did surprise Rosa. “Castelia? Why?”

“You want to find out about N’s followers, right? The rumors are that there are people still loyal to N in Castelia. Go, find out what you can. If you won’t listen to me, then you’ll have to discover the truth for yourself.” Juniper took a deep breath and crossed her arms. “There’s a war coming. A real war. You understand that, right?”

Rosa blinked and looked down. “I know what war looks like.”

“I’m afraid this is just the beginning. So go, get the answers you need, and try to find out what’s really going on with Team Plasma. Find a way to stop them.”

Rosa said nothing as she continued to stare at the ground. Leafeon meowed and rubbed against her legs. Warm hands landed on her shoulders all of a sudden, and she looked up to find Juniper
smiling at her, fresh tears in her eyes.

“Rosa, I know you and I don’t always agree. But I hope you know... I want you to know that I support you in whatever you do. I love you. I know you’ll do what’s right, even if it’s hard. You always have.”

Before she could object, Juniper pulled Rosa into a tight embrace and held her close. After a moment’s hesitation, Rosa returned the contact. She would never voice it aloud, but the comfort of Juniper’s warmth and strength in that moment was almost enough to sway Rosa from her determination to continue onward. How easy it would be to go home, to stay behind closed doors, to shut out the world and wait for the future to pass by. It was someone else’s problem, someone else’s fate, if you believed in that kind of thing. Rosa did. What was the point of anything without a destiny to give our actions meaning?

What was the point of being a former Team Plasma Agent if she couldn’t use her sympathies to help a group, to champion an ideal that had been wrongfully maligned? What was the point of trusting her instincts unless she believed they were true?

What was the point of having power if she didn’t mean to use it?

“I love you, too,” Rosa said finally. “And I promise I’ll prove you wrong about N and Team Plasma. Lenora’s death won’t be for nothing.”

Juniper smiled shakily. “No, it most certainly won’t be.”

They stood there together for a few moments, absorbing the weight of their decisions and of the new reality that had not existed until they witnessed the atrocities committed in Striaton. Neither said a word, but Rosa could see it in the sunlight diffusing through the trees—this was not the world she knew anymore.

“I should get going,” Juniper said. “The sooner I get back to the lab, the sooner I can get back to work getting to the bottom of the Chimera mystery.”

Rosa nodded. “Stick to the off roads. And if you meet anyone on the way back...”

Juniper tossed out her three Pokéballs. Minccino squeaked from her shoulder where it nuzzled her ear, while Armaldo and Vanilluxe flanked her. Leafeon watched Minccino like a starving man watches others indulge themselves, but Armaldo and Vanilluxe’s presence stayed it from foolish action. Armaldo’s protruding eyes swiveled in their sockets to look around its surroundings, but Vanilluxe merely hovered at shoulder height. The mollusk stayed safe in its shell armor, and the accumulated frost in the twin shells’ grooves froze in a fiendish pattern that almost looked like a pair of smiling faces. Rosa hugged herself reflexively and did her best not to recoil.

“Don’t worry. Vanilluxe will keep an eye on me,” Juniper said.

Did that thing even have eyes? Could it see Rosa now? She didn’t want to know. “I don’t know how you can stand that thing.”

Juniper smiled tiredly and touched a finger lightly to Vanilluxe’s snow-swirled ‘head’. The Pokémon did not freeze her, and the bit of frost that came away with Juniper’s finger melted in response to her body heat. “Vanilluxe is a terribly misunderstood species. It’s really quite peaceful if it’s left alone.”

*My ass.*
“Just stay out of sight,” Rosa said, showing Juniper her back.

A warm hand on her shoulder bade her turn around. Juniper’s eyes were still red and puffy from crying, but there was a hard glint of determination in her bright eyes, a look Rosa knew all too well.

“Be careful.”

Rosa removed Juniper’s hand from her shoulder and squeezed it between hers. With a last lingering look, she set off west among the trees, careful to avoid the main road to Nacrene. Leafeon trotted along after her, bounding gracefully between fallen branches and making hardly a sound. She felt Juniper’s eyes on her back, but soon the trees accumulated behind her and blocked the view completely. Pausing, she turned back on a whim, but there was no sight of Juniper or her Pokémon anymore. Sighing, Rosa squatted and scratched Leafeon behind its tapering leafy ears.

“Well, boy? It’s just us.”

She let her hand fall, and Leafeon purred as it looked up at her. Rosa laid a hand on the ground, sinking her bare fingers into the mulch and grass and the dirt beneath it. The other she raised to Leafeon’s head for a gentle pat, then fell still. When she closed her eyes, the world came alive in black and white.

Lifelines glowed brilliantly around Leafeon and herself and extended to the trees around them, among the mushrooms and moss hiding in the shade of the canopy. She followed them with Leafeon’s help west, far west, over the long road to Nacrene to the city gates and into the city itself until a wall of white rebuffed her, too thick to see beyond. Pinwheel Forest was so dense in places that there was no ground to walk on in between the trees.

The lifelines were still and pulsing until they bumped into people. In Nacrene, they undulated together like ocean waves, one for every person and every Pokémon. On the road from Striaton, Rosa encountered only a few ripples. They were out there, Team Plasma or the lunatics posing as them, as it were. They could not hide, not from her.

Rosa opened her eyes and teetered on her toes. She caught herself with her hands and sank to her knees. Leafeon meowed, its dark eyes wondering but steady, having seen what Rosa had seen and waiting now for her determination.

“Come on,” she said, getting to her feet and swallowing the light dizzy spell in her head from extending her reach so far. “We’ll have to go around them on foot.”

She drew her bow and a single arrow and held the weapon loosely in her hands as she set off along the tree line. The first cluster of people she’d found was just a mile outside the city, stationary guards. She would be ready for them.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact, I thought Vanilluxe was the most ridiculous design GF had ever come up with (yeah, even more than that nasty trash bag Garbodor, ick), so I just had to try to find a way to make it “realistic” enough for this world. Whether you like my idea or hate it, the snow cone from hell will be back later to do some major slaying.
Hugh had barely slept a wink last night after the commotion at the Gym with all the Accumula refugees flooding the city. More importantly, Bianca had confirmed what he’d known all along: Team Plasma was rotten to the core. More than that. They were murderers and warmongers, and now no one could say any different. Fuck them. They had it coming, and now their sins were finally catching up to them. Hugh would be first in line to mete out justice with fists and blades and anything else he could get his hands on.

The Gym happened to have a pair of hook swords in the armory with Hugh’s name on them. He made sure to grab them before Nate could get any ideas about claiming them for himself on the morning of their departure.

“Don’t you need some ID to be double fisting?” Nate said.

Hugh wielded two hook swords, one in each hand, and tested their weight. He’d trained with blades and bludgeons at the Academy, but never with weapons such as these. There was something primeval about them, an old kind of pain that hurt worse the more time passed, tried and true. Hugh had always favored bludgeons, farraginous and crude and always reliable when they connected with bone. The hook swords emanated the same aura, but there was something refined about them, something old but classic. Hugh imagined the hooked barbs at their tips digging into a Plasma Agent’s flank, piercing the belly from behind like a fish on a hook, and him reeling the guy in for a savage punch to the nose that would shove the bone into his brain, an instant kill. Hook, line, and sinker.

“These’re perfect,” Hugh said, testing their swing and the weight in his hands.

“Nathaniel.” Cheren held out a hand axe to Nate. “You’ll need a weapon, too.”

Nate turned the hand axe over in his hands, testing out its leather-bound handle and running a thumb over the sharpened blade. “I’ve never used an axe.”

“You’ll learn.”

Cheren was dressed in a leather jerkin over long sleeves, fireproof Ponyta hair pants, and combat boots. Hugh leaned on his two swords and gave the Gym Leader a once-over.

“No sword for you? I hope you don’t expect me to watch your ass out there.”

Cheren rolled up the sleeves of his shirt to the elbows. “I don’t like knives. And while I’m flattered, you don’t need to watch my ass, Hugh. Worry about your own.”

Dick.

Cheren was the kind of asshole who thought he was better than everybody. Probably because he was. Gym Leader status was nothing to sneeze at, but the guy didn’t have to be such a fucking prick about it. Whatever. Cheren was Hugh’s ticket out of Aspertia to hunt Team Plasma, and Hugh would glue his eyes to the guy’s ass if that was what it took to find Hayley’s killers. He would not return to Aspertia until justice was served.

Hugh did not divulge any of this to Nate, of course. Nate had an annoying tendency to ‘think’ about their every move, to rationalize and ponder and deliberate, and honestly? He loved Nate, but the guy could be such a wet blanket sometimes. Someone had to step up and make the hard
choices. Someone had to take some goddamned responsibility. Nate was with him all the way, Hugh knew that. Sometimes people just needed a little motivation. No big deal. Hugh was motivated as fuck, and everything was on the line.

“Whatever,” Hugh said. “When’re we leaving?”

“As soon as possible,” a woman said from the door to the armory. “The sooner you leave, the sooner you’ll be back.”

“Moira,” Cheren said, approaching her.

Moira was a tall woman, thin and lithe as a dancer. Her black skin shone like polished coral, flawless, and her steady, dark eyes saw more even than Cheren. Nothing got past Moira and lived to tell about it. A cousin of Gym Leader Lenora, Moira had left Nacrene and the family that did not need her for a fresh start in Aspertia. She was an Atlas skuff who had come with Cheren years ago when he made the move to become Gym Leader. Her Delcatty was with her, and it rubbed against her leg affectionately but did not purr. Dark eyes bore holes into Hugh and Nate, possibly plotting their sudden disappearances and subsequent murder by disembowelment. You could never really tell with cats. Cheren did not attempt to pet it, and anything Cheren didn’t trust, Hugh would sure as hell stay far away from.

“You’ll be fine,” Cheren went on, stopping just short of her without touching. “There’s no one I trust more with Aspertia’s safety in my absence. I’ll be back before you know it.”

“That’s not the point.” Moira fixed him with a withering glare.

“She’s right, you know,” Nate whispered out of earshot.

Hugh grunted. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Cheren’s the Gym Leader, and he’s leaving his post. This isn’t some vacation.”

Hugh scowled, unable to decipher Cheren’s whispered conversation with Moira and not really giving a shit, anyway. Yeah, Cheren was the Gym Leader, so he had a responsibility to the city. But if he didn’t go to Virbank, then he’d be here twiddling his thumbs like an asshole and nothing would get done. Cheren was whatever, but at least he had the guts to do something. And he had the sense to bring along Nate and Hugh instead of playing the naïve hero by himself. The guy was probably lauded as a genius for a reason, after all.

“Who cares? Aspertia’s in the shit, and it’s his job to set things right. If he didn’t go, he’d be a coward and a deserter.”

Nate glanced askance at Hugh. “I guess you’re right, when you put it that way.”

“Obviously.”

“Are you two ready?” Cheren called.

Moira lingered in the doorway with Delcatty, but their conversation appeared to be over. Hugh slung his hook swords over his shoulders.

“Yeah, let’s get moving already.”

“I’m ready,” Nate said.
Nate strapped his hand axe to his hip. He’d come today in khaki cargo pants, hiking boots, and a navy Henley over a dark, lightweight underarmor shirt sewn from fine Jumpluff cotton and thick enough to protect from most surface abrasions and lacerations. Hugh had forgone armor of any kind, hating the weight of it in the water. He’d worn a thin neoprene shortie under his red and white jacket and jeans, and now he had a utility belt that could hold his hook swords, one at each hip. Ready as he’d ever be, he supposed.

Cheren led them outside where Bianca was waiting for them. Moira followed them out with Delcatty, ever silent.

“You guys’re ready to leave?” Bianca said, pushing up her glasses. “Did you say your goodbyes?”

It was a beautiful summer morning in Aspertia, blue sky dappled with fluffy white clouds and the sun bright and warm. Musharna hovered just behind Bianca, its sleepy red eyes alert as ever as it emitted a noxious dream mist that could have lulled a fully-grown Snorlax.

“Yes,” Nate said.

Helena would be alone without Nate. But she was alone every summer when Nate left for Nuvema to be with that Rosa girl whom Nate never said much about, so it was all the same. This would be good for Nate. For the first time in his life, he’d be out in the world without an anchor, without some sense of familiarity to hold his hand. He’d have to grow and fend for himself, see people for who they really were. It would be great for him, a small-town boy who still lived with his mother and didn’t have a girlfriend. Hugh didn’t have a girlfriend either, but that wasn’t the point. He wasn’t afraid of this new adventure. He knew what it meant, what it could offer. And he would make sure it wasn’t wasted, especially not for his best friend. Nate would not regret this.

“We can’t fly,” Cheren explained. “Neither of these two has a suitable Flyer, so we have no choice.”

“Hey,” Hugh said. “Don’t blame your vertigo bullshit on us. Everyone south of Driftveil knows you hate flying.”

“I would fly in an emergency like this,” Cheren returned easily, like the words were almost too burdensome to utter. “But then I’d be going alone, and that would be even more foolish than letting you tag along.”

“Dude—” Hugh got in Cheren’s face, but Nate yanked him back.

“Dude,” Nate hissed. “Seriously, it hasn’t even been twenty-four hours. Keep it in your pants. Fuck.”

Hugh yanked himself free and straightened his shirt. “Whatever, Nate. You gotta stop letting people walk all over you. I won’t be around forever to stick up for you.”

“Sure you will,” Nate said with a grin. “You couldn’t even stand leaving Aspertia without me.”

Hugh scowled. “What the hell’s that supposed to mean, huh?”

“Yveltal can take you both,” Cheren muttered. “How did it end up like this? God, what a bother.”

Bianca took his hands in hers and smiled. “Everything will be okay as long as you’re on the job, Cheren. Hugh and Nate are here to help, right?”

“Uh, yeah,” Nate said. “Of course.”
“Hey, are we going or what?” Hugh groused.

“Yes,” Cheren said. He checked his belt to double check that his Pokéballs were all in order. “Let’s get going.”

“I’ll walk you to the edge of the city,” Bianca said, setting off ahead of them.

Moira lingered behind. “Safe trip. See you in a couple weeks.”

Nate waved amiably, and Cheren nodded. Hugh started after Bianca. There was no time for this crap.

Each of the three men wore packs replete with food rations, medical supplies, and other provisions necessary for a long trip in the wilds. When Hugh had gone home last night to tell his parents that he would be leaving with Cheren and Nate, they had been neither happy for him nor worried. Hugh was an adult and he could make his own choices, and beyond that he was a trained Syreni. His parents had overseen his training from a young age, and he had strong Pokémon. By all accounts, he was ready to venture into the wilds and face whatever waited there.

Even so, Lorenzo had taken him aside when they were alone and offered his hand and the promise that Hugh would come back safely. There was no telling what would happen with the news of Accumula Town and Team Plasma’s involvement, and Syreni or not, Hugh was still his son. The only child he had left.

So Hugh had promised, and he’d gone his separate way from his parents this morning as they reported to the Aspertia Council along with the other Tamers to assume their militia responsibilities and prepare for possible hostilities. The city was abuzz with whispers of war on the horizon, and Mayor Mason was already taking stock of his available resources to plan a defensive. There was always a chance that Cheren’s trip to Virbank would yield no assistance.

Nate had arrived at the Gym this morning alone, no sign of Helena. Hugh would have asked, but there was no point. It was always the same with that woman. She cried when Nate left, often throwing childish fits. Sometimes Nate’s clothes were blackened with burn marks in the shape of handprints, but Nate never said a word. There were no burn marks today.

Yeah, the sooner they got out of here and away from that woman, the better.

“Is there something on my face?” Nate asked.

Hugh blinked. He hadn’t realized he’d been staring and abruptly looked away. “Yeah, your face.”

Nate sighed. “Smooth.”

They reached the northern edge of Aspertia along a familiar road that led to the outlying suburbs and farms where Hugh’s parents lived and stopped. Bianca pushed up her red glasses and clasped her hands behind her back.

“Well, I guess this is as far as I go,” she said. “You guys take care of each other out there, okay?”

“We will,” Nate said with a smile.

Cheren frowned deeply and moved to stand directly in front of Bianca. “Listen, Bianca, I want you to send word to Professor Juniper about what’s happening here. And send me word if anything changes on the East Tine.”
“Of course. You got it.”

Cheren paused and studied Bianca’s face as she smiled up at him. They just stood there like a pair of idiots, and Hugh had half a mind to drag Cheren out of Aspertia because at this rate, they were never going to leave.

Cheren raised his hand toward Bianca, but hesitated and let it fall. He swallowed and looked away. “Right, good. Then I’ll see you in a couple weeks.”

Bianca grabbed his hand in hers and squeezed. “Come back safe.”

Hugh rolled his eyes and showed them his back—couldn’t they have said all this on the walk here? Nate was watching them like they were the most interesting sight he’d ever seen, though. Before he could question his best friend, Cheren walked past them and headed out of town.

“Come on, you two. We can make it to Floccesy Town by tonight if we set a decent pace,” Cheren called over his shoulder.

About goddamned time.

Hugh jogged after him but turned back to get a last look at Aspertia. Bianca was staring back, a hand over her mouth and her cheeks flushed like she’d just eaten a Lava Cookie.

“Thought you wanted to hurry up and leave,” Nate said, passing him.

Hugh scowled. “Yeah, yeah. Whatever. See ya, Bianca.”

Bianca’s eyes widened and she nearly tripped over herself waving goodbye, embarrassed like she’d forgotten all about it.

What a weird woman.

Up ahead, Cheren had released his Stoutland to accompany them on the hike north. Stoutland was a big canine with beige and navy fur so shaggy you could hardly make out its face and limbs under the stuff. It stood at a healthy four feet tall at the shoulder, and its triangular ears twitched as it listened for sounds of danger or threat. Panting, it gave Cheren a loving lick on the cheek when he scratched it behind the ears.

“Stoutland’s nose will alert us to any feral Pokémon that wander too close,” Cheren explained. “I’d rather go around anything in our path than engage it, obviously, so try not to attract any attention, Hugh.”

“Me? What about Nate?”

“I’m sure Nathaniel knows how to be discreet.”

Hugh bared his teeth. “What’s that supposed to mean, huh?”

When Nate didn’t interject to tell Hugh to calm down, Hugh hesitated and looked around for his best friend. Nate was looking back at Aspertia City in silence, just standing there.

“Hey.” Hugh tapped him on the shoulder.

“Hm? Oh, sorry. What’d you say?” Nate said.

Hugh looked back at Aspertia. The city looked so small this far out in the outskirts where the hills
began to roll into the mountains farther north. It was grey and stony, but in the bright summer sun under a pristine sky and surrounded by the blue sea, it seemed to shimmer with a crystalline light. The lakes dappling the countryside just outside the city limits sparkled like so many mirrors under the light of the morning sun, pools of silver surrounding a city of stone. Sometimes Hugh forgot it looked like this all the way out here where he’d grown up, the place he’d left behind to move into a trendy apartment downtown surrounded by steel and glass and stone and people.

“It’ll look the same when you get back,” he said.

Nate smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “Yeah, for sure. I guess I just don’t wanna forget this feeling, you know?”

“I know.”

Nate had never been the type to complain or say a bad word about anyone unless they deserved it. He didn’t complain now, either. Someone had to do it for him or Nate would live his life as a doormat or a shadow, seen but never really acknowledged. Hugh wouldn’t let that happen, not in a million years. Helena might not give a damn, but Helena wasn’t fucking here.

“Samurott hates walking long distances,” Hugh said. “Why don’t you let Blazed Ham out? We all know that porker could use the exercise.”

Nate chuckled, and the spell was broken. “Sure, but you gotta work on your body image positivity.”

“For fuck’s sake.”

Nate tossed out Emboar’s Pokéball, and the big fire pig appeared on its hind legs with its clubby fists hanging at its sides like useless dumbbells. When it spotted Nate, its squatted down on its cloven fists and sniffed at his hair, grunting faintly. Its fiery beard was snuffed for the time being without any threat of danger about.

“Emboar’s looking healthy. You’ve been keeping up with training?” Cheren said.

“Of course.” Nate patted Emboar’s belly appreciatively. “The big guy’s a real tank. I bet he could take Stoutland’s Hyper Beam no sweat.”

Cheren smirked. “Let’s not get carried away.”

Stoutland barked and wagged its shaggy tail.

“Oh, we’re going. Stoutland, go scout ahead,” Cheren said.

Stoutland panted and eagerly bounded off, excited for a chance to run around the grassy farmland surrounding northern Aspertia. Emboar leaned its weight on its front legs and ambled along next to Nate with its nose to the ground in search of buried mushrooms.

The three men set off on their journey, and Hugh could not have been happier about it.

Route Nineteen spanned the hilly stretch of wild land between Aspertia City and Floccesy Town to the northeast. The hills here were soft and low in altitude compared to the taller Twist Mountains farther to the north that extended all the way to Icirrus City, but they were high enough to leave the
sea behind and thin the trees. Hugh, Nate, and Cheren walked along the designated path merchants
and traders traveled to bring goods and wares north on a daily basis, though they encountered no
merchants today. This high up, the winds were crisp and the air was cool enough to stave off the
swelter of the summer sun overhead. Hugh welcomed the breeze as he suckled his canteen every
half hour.

“If you keep drinking, you’ll run out before we stop for lunch,” Cheren warned.

Stoutland walked a ways ahead, sometimes darting off the path to sniff at something that had
captured its attention. Cheren had let his Cinccino out of her Pokéball, and she perched on his
shoulder to keep an eye out for danger.

Hugh took a nice long swig from his canteen. “Do you get off commenting on everything that bugs
you?”

“I’m only concerned that you’ll run out.”

“Well, don’t be. It’s out of character for you and it’s fucking weird.”

Nate clasped his hands behind his head. “Hugh has to keep hydrated. Apparently, it’s a Syreni
thing.”

“A good Syreni would train himself to go for long periods without water. Otherwise, it’s a
weakness that can be used against him.”

“Huh, I take it back. Using fake concern to cover for you just being a bag of dicks is just what I’d
expect,” Hugh said.

Cheren shot him a look over his shoulder. “I didn’t bring it up to put you down. Take it as a
suggestion. You’re Syreni. You’re in a better position than anyone to learn how to subsist on a
limited water supply.”

Hugh frowned. “There’s plenty of water around here.”

Cheren was unmoved. “Here, maybe. But if you ever find yourself in a desert or some other place
where fresh water is lacking, you’ll wish you’d listened to me.”

“I’ll be sure to think of you if I’m ever dying of thirst in a desert.”

Cheren shook his head and Hugh crossed his arms.

Nate bit his lip. “...You know, he has a point—”

“Shut up,” Hugh cut him off.

He put the canteen away and stoppered the cap as tightly as he could. Desert? Pshh, he’d show
Cheren. He could definitely train himself to go without water.

They walked mostly in silence, concentrating on gaining some distance over enjoying the outdoors.
But even so, Hugh made a point to check his surroundings, not trusting that overweight pork dinner
to watch his back as it grunted along sniffing for buried roots and mushrooms.

A family of Patrat and Watchog watched their group pass. They stood tall on their hind legs with
their rope-like tails high in the air, alert for danger and never taking their yellow eyes off the
passersby. Stoutland got wind of them and barked after them, spooking them back into their holes.
After a late lunch of bread, cheese, and fruit, the group came upon a pack of Liepard and Purrloin sunning by a lake. The cats got wind of the intruders into their territory and moved to intercept them. Cinccino squealed in alarm but nonetheless hopped down from Cheren’s shoulder to defend him. Stoutland barked angrily at the cats, scattering them.

“Watch out!” Hugh shouted.

A lithe Liepard ran down Cheren and Cinccino, and Hugh drew his hook swords to intervene. He swung, but caught nothing but air. The Liepard was too fast and dodged his swords effortlessly. Cinccino was faster than Hugh and unafraid facing off against a natural predator.

“Tail Slap!” Cheren ordered.

Cinccino jumped high into the air after the Liepard, who was crouched low on its haunches as it prepared to double around, and came down hard with its long, fluffy white tail. The ensuing *smack* rang like a leather lash on skin, and Liepard hissed in pain. Hugh saw his chance and swung with both his swords. Their hooked ends connected with the earth and spewed a small burst of dirt and grass, narrowly grazing Liepard and forcing it to retreat to safety.

Cinccino shrieked after it, its scarf-like white fur standing on end and puffing it out to twice its size. Hugh spit on the ground and stared at Cinccino, surprised by a flicker of admiration. That stupid chinchilla was damn fast.

Cheren gave him a hand up. “I thought I told you not to worry about me.”

Hugh let him help him up, then abruptly swatted his hand away. “Whatever, just drop it.”

In the end, it was Emboar who saved the day. Sort of.

A pair of Liepard lunged at Nate while Hugh was busy not saving Cheren, leaking tar-like energy as they powered up twin Dark Pulses, and Emboar reared up on its hind legs.

“Flare Blitz!” Nate shouted as he backtracked from the advancing cats.

Emboar beat its chest and lowered its head for a menacing charge. Its coarse hairs erupted with embers that fell in its path, and fire leaked from its mouth and snout as it prepared to ram the attacking Liepard.

The wild cats shied at the last minute, wary of the larger Emboar, and dodged to avoid the strong attack. Their Dark Pulses dissipated as they dispersed in a frenzy of hissing and spitting, but with Stoutland and Cinccino also there, the cats decided to retreat to higher ground for today.

Emboar kept going and ran smack into a tree by the lake. The force of its attack not only felled the tree, but also ignited it in flames. Emboar shook itself out, a little dazed by the reckless charge, and shed glowing embers on the grass, which in turn began to smoke and char.

“Oh, come *on.*” Hugh tossed out Samurott’s Pokéball, and the hefty otter appeared next to Emboar. “Put out the fire before we burn down half of Route Nineteen.”

Samurott barked at Emboar like it blamed the pig for this, too, but dutifully unleashed a Water Gun at the smoldering tree and doused the flames before they could spread. Emboar ignored Samurott and, once the Water Gun died down, began to dig around the disturbed earth with its snout. When it came away with a particularly thick and juicy sweet root, Hugh threw up his hands.

“Un-fucking-believable. Nate, all that pig cares about is food!”
“So what? Emboar scared off the Liepard. He earned a treat.” Nate grinned and jogged to join Emboar to pat it on the back for a job well done.

Samurott gave Emboar a wide berth and moved to inspect the lake where the Liepard and their Purloin young had been lounging. It slipped into the water, sleek as a Seviper, and disappeared below the surface. Hugh followed Samurott to the water’s edge to rinse the dirt from his hook swords. Stoutland joined Hugh and began to drink from the lake.

“Congratulations on surviving your first encounter with hostile wild Pokémon,” Cheren said.

“You know, Nate and me fought plenty of Pokémon growing up, for your information,” Hugh grumbled.

“Oh yeah, remember that one time a bunch of Tauros and Miltank got loose from old man Wilson’s farm?” Nate said, joining the others by the lake as Emboar continued to forage for buried treats. “Buncha Mightyena broke through the fence and ran down a few Miltank before we got there. It was pretty scary until Rapidash ran them out.”

“That’s funny, ‘cause I remember it was me ‘n Milotic that blasted those Mightyena,” Hugh said.

“You mean Milotic blasted the fence and made the hole bigger.”

“What? That’s totally not what happened.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s exactly what happened.”

Hugh was about to argue further when Samurott broke the surface once more, this time with a struggling Krabby in its paws. Using a sharpened seamitar it liked to carry around in the sheath-like armor over its front limbs, Samurott bludgeoned the crab over its tough shell until it cracked. Krabby attempted to pinch Samurott’s face, but the armored otter was an efficient clubber and made quick work of its prey. Once Krabby fell still, Samurott alternated between bashing in the hard exoskeleton with the seamitar and feasting on the tender meat within. Crab meat and juices sluiced over its magnificent pelt, and Stoutland growled, smelling the food but unwilling to approach Samurott in its natural element.

Nate laughed. “Hey, looks like Samurott’s just here for the food, too.”

*Way to make me look bad,* Hugh thought to himself, but he refused to respond and stowed his hook swords.

“Just bear in mind that out here, there are no fences to keep the wild Pokémon at bay,” Cheren said. “Those Liepard were more concerned with protecting their young than fighting. That might not be the case next time.”

Hugh again said nothing. Of course he knew that.

“I’ll remember,” Nate said. “Should we keep going?”

“Yes. Floccesy Town shouldn’t be much farther. Stoutland.”

Stoutland shook out its fur, and its impossibly long whiskers flailed about like a woman’s scarf, damp at the ends where they had slipped into the lake water. Energized and refreshed, the big canine trotted on ahead of Cheren while Cinccino resumed its perch on his shoulder. Nate called for Emboar, and the lumbering fire pig walked along after him munching on some root it had scavenged.
“You too, Samurott,” Hugh called.

Samurott emerged from the lake, licking bits of crabmeat from its whiskers and paws, and shook out its thick fur. Hugh patted its nose and the steely shell armor that covered its face. The seamitar it had used to crack Krabby’s Hardened shell was properly sheathed in the brace over its left front limb. Samurott poked its nose at one of Hugh’s hook swords, sniffing it curiously.

“Guess we match now,” Hugh said, scratching Samurott behind its damp ear.

Samurott barked and nudged Hugh in the chest with its soft nose.

“Hey, don’t fall behind, Hugh!” Nate called back.

Hugh held out Samurott’s Pokéball and recalled it before taking off at a jog to catch up. “Yeah, yeah, I’m coming!”

They reached Floccesy Town after dusk, and Cheren led them into town in search of a place to stay for the night and food for dinner. Floccesy was a very small town with a population of about 1,500, a fraction of Aspertia’s size. The town had no Gym Leader and was officially a part of Virbank’s fiefdom, with Virbank’s Gym sworn to protect it from outside threats should the need arise. Even so, the threat of wild Pokémon, criminals, and of course Team Plasma necessitated constant surveillance and vigilance. How this backwater smear on the map had persisted without a Gym of its own for this long, Hugh had no idea.

Floccesy was known for its many ranches that raised Mareep. Mareep wool and clothing made from it was the town’s main source of income. Part of its deal with Virbank was protection in exchange for exclusive control over Mareep wool exports. Floccesy was not a rich town by the looks of it—most of the buildings were weatherworn and ancient, especially the stone clock tower in the center of town that didn’t even work—but people filled the streets, laughing and gossiping and bustling about.

Nate and Cheren recalled Emboar and Stoutland as they approached the town, though Cheren allowed Cinccino to remain on his shoulder. A couple kids playing a game in the street delighted in stepping on each other’s shadows under the newly lit street lamps, giggling as they made their way down the street. They spotted the three men and stopped to gawk at Hugh’s hook swords, exposed for all to see. One little girl pointed up at Cinccino and whispered something to a little boy, who smiled and revealed his missing two front teeth. Cheren smiled politely down at them and waved. Cinccino squeaked, and the kids beamed like it was the greatest sight they’d ever seen. Hugh rolled his eyes and stuffed his hands deeper in his pockets.

Nate was quiet as usual as he looked around. Hugh had been to Floccesy with his father a few times before, so the place was nothing too novel, but Nate had never left Aspertia aside from his summers spent in the rural Nuvema Town. He took in the sights, humble as they were, with the awe and wonder of a child seeing something for the first time. Nate slowed down as they passed the old clock tower and looked up at it.

“That thing hasn’t worked for ages,” Hugh said, also stopping to look. “Every time I came here with my dad, he told me the same thing. They just don’t bother fixing it.”

“It’s like time here is frozen,” Nate said. “Maybe they don’t fix it on purpose, so things here will never change.”
Hugh frowned. “That’s pretty dumb. What’s a clock got to do with keeping this place the same? If you ask me, it’s just annoying to anyone walking by wondering what time it is.”

Nate shrugged. “Maybe.”

He didn’t look convinced. Nate was an all-around agreeable guy, but there was something mysteriously stubborn about him that Hugh had never quite been able to reconcile. Nate was happy to cede points to Hugh or to anyone else and always willing to hear what other people thought, but there was something about him that felt closed off sometimes, like he kept his true feelings and thoughts buried deep to share with no one. Often, Hugh didn’t know what Nate was thinking at all, and usually it didn’t matter because they ended up doing things Hugh’s way regardless. But the way Nate gazed up at that clock tower like he wished he could stay in this spot forever put a bad taste in Hugh’s mouth. He grabbed Nate by the arm and pulled him away.

“Come on, or Cheren’s gonna leave us behind.”

“Right, sorry.”

Cheren found an inn on the main street that happened to have some vacancy. The place doubled as a tavern, and from the looks of the patrons, it may have been the only one in town.

“Yer in luck, lads,” the innkeeper said as he handed Cheren a key with a leather strip attached to it emblazoned with the number twelve. Like the little boy that had been so delighted to see Cinccino, the innkeeper was also missing his two front teeth. “We don’t get many visitors passing through. Most ‘o my rooms go to the customers who get a lick too friendly with their ale mugs.”

“Thank you.” Cheren accepted the key. “Are we in time for dinner?”

The innkeeper, an old man with snowy hair that grew in patches from his brown splotchy head and wore a moth-eaten green sweater, nodded and smiled, revealing those missing teeth. “Missus is makin’ it now. Best come on down while it’s hot, ya hear? Mutton stew’s no good cold.”

“We will.”

Cheren nodded to Hugh and Nate and led them upstairs to the room he’d rented for them. The inn was fairly well maintained with few stains on the blue wallpaper and even a vase full of fake flowers at the end of the hall. Their room was toward the end of the hall, and inside it had two twin beds and a narrow loveseat situated in front of an old TV complete with a y-shaped antenna and channel dials on the set itself. The room was carpeted, a dark brown to hide the stains of body fluid and vomit. Hugh resolved to keep his shoes on in here.

Cinccino hopped onto one of the beds and curled up among its fluffy scarf and tail fur, while Cheren checked the closet next to the modest bathroom. He returned with a blanket and an extra pillow without a case on it.

“You two can draw lots for who takes the couch.” Cheren tossed the blanket and pillow onto the loveseat.

“Gym Leader privilege, huh?” Hugh groused.

“I paid for the room, so I get a bed.”

“It’s fine, I’ll take the couch,” Nate offered. “I don’t mind. Thanks for getting the room, Cheren.”

Hugh crossed his arms and scowled deeply, but words eluded him. Nate began to set up the couch
while Cheren set down his pack next to Cinccino. Hugh walked around to the other bed at the far side of the room and did the same. The hook swords were not particularly heavy, but he noticed the loss of their weight when he removed the leather utility belt that strapped them in place.

“You heard that innkeeper. We better head downstairs if we want to make dinner,” Cheren said. “Cinccino will stay here and watch over our things.”

“The door has a lock,” Nate said.

Cheren smirked. “Unfortunately, I don’t share your faith in humanity, Nathaniel.”

Cheren headed out before them to wait in the hall. Hugh grabbed Nate by the shoulder.

“Pretty sure that wasn’t a compliment.”

“I guess Cheren would know better than me.”

Hugh studied him a moment. “Hey, thanks for taking the couch, by the way. I’ll, uh, well, if we stay in another shitty motel somewhere, you can have the bed next time.”

Nate grinned. “I’m touched by your generosity.”

Hugh let his hand fall and huffed. “Whatever man, I was tryna be nice.”

Nate laughed. “I know. It was cute. Remember that the next time you meet a pretty girl.”

Nate headed for the door, his pack and axe discarded on the floor next to the couch, and Hugh was left to grumble curses under his breath and trudge after his two travel companions.

Downstairs, the pub was abuzz with patrons. Most sat at the long communal tables while barmaids served them bowls of piping hot mutton stew and crusty bread. A few loners sat at the bar to eat their meals in silence. Just about everyone had a mug of ale or beer, and raucous laughter abounded among the drunkest of the crowd. But the space was fairly large and the trio soon found places at one of the tables. A barmaid soon found them and set down bowls of stew in front of them, along with a basket of hard bread in the middle. Cheren ordered three beers for them, and the barmaid promised she would return with their drinks shortly.

“This place looks like the golden jewel of all Floccesy,” Hugh said, looking around.

Most of the patrons were middle-aged men with a few exceptions. Many looked like they knew each other well as they exchanged bawdy jokes and told slurried stories of old escapades with beautiful women, travels across the Trident, and the like. No one bothered Hugh and the others, though Cheren seemed uncomfortable sitting there if the dour look on his face was anything to go by. He scanned the room, those hawk eyes absorbing everything and betraying nothing as he leaned into his clasped hands.

The barmaid soon returned with three large mugs overflowing with beer. Some sloshed onto the table and followed the cracks in the wood to spill onto the sticky floor, and she used her soiled apron to mop up the table a bit. When she was gone, Hugh took a long drink of his beer. It was hoppier than his usual taste, but washing down the mutton stew and a mouthful of the stale bread soon convinced him that the brewers here knew what the hell they were doing despite appearances, at least.

“This is great,” Nate said in between mouthfuls of food and drink.
“Floccesy Ranch raises Mareep for wool, but when they get too old, the ranchers slaughter them for the meat. You won’t find a better mutton stew anywhere on the Trident,” Cheren said.

Hugh wasn’t about to dispute that and happily cleaned out his bowl. The barmaid came around offering seconds, which all three men heartily accepted along with refills on their drinks.

“So what’s the plan when we get to Virbank?” Hugh asked.

Cheren washed down his food with beer and leaned on the table on one elbow. His eyes continued to scan the room even as he answered Hugh’s question.

“I don’t have one.”

“What? Seriously?”

“That doesn’t sound like you, Cheren,” Nate added.

“I’ve gone through all the scenarios,” Cheren defended in that sleepy lilt he had that said he’d rather be doing anything else than talking to them. “It doesn’t matter what I plan. If there’s something going on between Castelia and Virbank, nothing I say or do can change it.”

“What the hell kinda strategy is that? You’re just gonna do nothing?” Hugh hissed.

“Of course not. But sometimes the wisest course of action is to wait and see what’s in front of you before acting. Depending on the situation in Virbank and the damage Castelia’s allegedly done, I’ll determine the best way to approach Gym Leader Harrison.”

“So you’re saying there’s a chance we won’t be able to get Virbank’s help if what’s happening with Castelia is really that bad?” Nate said, lowering his voice.

“That’s exactly what I’m saying. Of course, I hope that’s not the case, but I can be persuasive when I want to be.” Cheren sighed and ran a hand through his dark hair. “I just hate all these political maneuvers. It’s such a bother.”

“Hmpf. Well, if this Harrison guy doesn’t think Team Plasma’s war’s worth his time, then he’s not much of a Gym Leader if you ask me,” Hugh said.

“Careful, Hugh. I understand your feelings and I sympathize, but it’s not wise to be so vocal about them. You never know who’s listening,” Cheren admonished.

“Let ‘em hear. I’d relish the opportunity to take ‘em out.”

Nate looked between the two of them but said nothing. Cheren took a long drink of his beer, effectively ending the conversation.

Whatever, Hugh thought to himself. There was no way any Team Plasma members would get past him. No matter what it took, he would find the ones who were responsible for Hayley’s death even if it cost him his own life. He owed it to her.

A commotion at the bar drew Hugh’s attention just then. An old man in a burlap tunic that hung as shapeless and limp as a curtain over his frame shouted something at the barkeep and slammed his empty mug down on the bar. Looking at him now, Hugh was surprised he’d missed the man’s presence. He had a shock of wild orange hair tied back in a low ponytail that reached his waist, more of a mane than regular hair. An older man, probably in his seventies or so, he was nonetheless a big man with broad shoulders, at least six feet tall, and his voice was strong if not
slurred from drink. The barkeep was trying to reason with him in hushed tones that Hugh could not decipher from this distance.

But the old man was practically belligerent and threw his empty mug at the barkeep, who suffered a blow to the temple. He clutched his bleeding face and crumpled over the bar, while a barmaid rushed to his aid. Hugh was about to comment on the old drunkard’s behavior when Cheren suddenly got up and crossed the room to the man’s side.

“The hell?” Hugh said.

Nate got up. “Come on.”

Hugh had no choice but to follow and leave his half drunk beer behind. Cheren was trying to get the old drunk to leave the bar with him, but the man swatted him away. Cheren easily deflected the man’s blows with a hidden strength unapparent from just looking at the man, and this seemed to give the old drunkard pause.

“Get him out of here,” Cheren said to Nate and Hugh while he went to deal with the injured barkeep.

“Are you kidding me?” Hugh said.

But Nate approached the old drunkard with caution and held out a hand. “Take my hand, I’ll help you out.”

The man babbled something and tried to push Nate away, but he stumbled in his inebriation and Nate had to catch him before he cracked his head open over the wooden bar counter. Hugh moved on instinct to help his friend, but as though a switch had clicked in the old man’s head, he stilled and let Nate support him. Red eyes, perpetually half lidded like it was an extreme effort just to keep them open, stared down at Nate and the place where Nate’s hands gripped his bare arm to keep him standing.

“Hugh, help me out,” Nate said.

Frowning, Hugh nonetheless offered the old man his arm, too, and together the boys helped him get outside. People had stopped their conversations to watch, but no one jeered or said a word.

*What the hell is going on?*

The man’s touch was uncomfortably warm through Hugh’s jacket. Why the hell did Cheren want to help this man? A drunkard’s problems were his own. It was his own fault if he wanted to get sloshed and start a fight and get thrown out on his ass.

Outside, the sky was overcast with the threat of rain. The smell of humidity, dank and full, filled Hugh’s nostrils and made him smile in spite of himself. He’d always loved the rain, like any true Syreni. The rumble of thunder was distant, and the clouds would not spill for a while yet. Even so, he could almost feel Nate shudder at the thought of an impending downpour. Nate had always hated the rain.

“Sir, are you all right? Are you going to be sick?” Nate asked.

“Hm,” the old man grumbled. “You, boy... Name...”

“I’m Nate, and this is Hugh. Where do you live? We’ll help you get home.”
“We will?” Hugh blurted out.

Cheren emerged from the tavern just then. “Nate, send out your Rapidash, please. It’ll need to carry him back to his house.”

“Okay.”

Nate released Rapidash in a flurry of white light. The fiery unicorn stomped the ground lightly and whinnied, its mane and tail blazing with unshed embers and lighting up the darkened street. Hugh helped Nate maneuver the old man toward Rapidash, and Nate instructed his Pokémon to carry the old man gently. It took a few minutes, but they eventually managed to hoist the old man onto Rapidash’s back and get him to hold on loosely as he draped over the horse’s back.

“This way,” Cheren said, setting off down the road to the north.

“Hey Cheren, your Bouffalant could’ve carried that old drunkard just as easy and attracted less attention,” Hugh said, jogging to catch up to Cheren out of Nate’s earshot.

“No it could not have. Rapidash is uniquely qualified for this task.”

Hugh shot a look over his shoulder at Rapidash and Nate. Nate had a hand on Rapidash’s flank as he guided her along the street and tried to reassure the old man, who looked passed out on Rapidash’s back. Hugh scowled and shoved his hands in his pockets. They walked mostly in silence until they left downtown Floccesy behind.

“Why’re we helping this guy, anyway? He’s obviously a town drunk.”

“Because, Hugh,” Cheren said as they turned down a side street with a single house at the end surrounded by thick trees. “That ‘town drunk’ happens to be Alder, the most powerful Pokémon trainer in Unova.”

“Alder?” Hugh looked back at Nate and Rapidash. Alder was slowly coming to and muttering something to Nate. “As in, Champion Alder?”

“The one and only.”

“Holy crap.”

Unova had no Elite Four or official Champion the way Kanto and Johto and Hoenn did. Like the situation in Kalos, the so-called Champion of Unova was an unofficial title conferred to a person who had proven themselves the strongest Pokémon trainer on the continent. Most Gym Leaders revered this person, though he or she held no political or landed power whatsoever. Champion Alder was a famous and arguably the most powerful Ignifer in the world. He had made his name during the civil wars thirty years ago that pitted the Upper West Tine against the Lower West Tine and its East Tine allies, making him something of a legend and household name to many young Tamers growing up even so long after the hostilities had ended. The civil wars had left the West Tine divided politically, with the north having all but seceded from the rest of the Trident. Driftveil, Mistralton, and Icirrus had become largely self-sufficient in the wake of the civil wars, having nothing to do with the rest of the continent. For his power and strength and military leadership on behalf of the Lower West Tine during the civil wars, Alder had earned the unofficial title of Champion of Unova and spent many years of his life thereafter wandering Unova and distant lands like Hoenn and Sinnoh.

Hugh had heard that he’d settled down here in Floccesy Town some time ago, but given the man’s old age and fading importance on the Trident, he hadn’t thought much of it. And now, he was
standing just a couple feet from the myth, the legend, the man that had done what all young Tamers like Hugh dreamed of doing when they came of age. The apocryphal Champion Alder was a mere two feet from Hugh and half conscious in a drunken stupor draped over Rapidash’s back and drooling onto her fur.

“Talk about a let down,” Hugh said under his breath.

“Here, let me help you down.” Nate draped Alder’s arm over his shoulders and gently pulled him down from Rapidash’s back.

Alder stumbled on the ground, and Hugh had to rush to catch him before he brought Nate down with him. The man’s skin was burning up to the touch, and Hugh made a face.

_Ignifer, just like Nate._

But Nate wasn’t this hot to the touch. Could the stories be true? Could this old drunken has-been be the most powerful Ignifer the world had ever known? Or was it just his blood-alcohol content raising his body temperature?

Alder’s house was large compared to the other dwellings Hugh had seen around town. Two stories, brick, and a shingled roof with a wide yard in front and the dark woods behind it, the house was lavish for such a pastoral setting. Cheren tried the door and, finding it unlocked, led the others inside and fumbled around for a light.

The room was a living room with leather sofas, a dusty TV that looked like it hadn’t been used in ages, a table, and access to the small kitchen. Empty bottles of whiskey and scotch littered the counter top, and dirty dishes filled the kitchen sink in stacks. There was a distinct stench in the house, like vomit and mold and the barest hint of drain cleaner. A questionable pinkish-brown splatter stain had dried in crispy chunks on the kitchen floor.

“There’s a bedroom through here,” Cheren said after a quick exploration of the first floor.

Hugh and Nate dragged Alder to the other side of the living room, past the kitchen, and into a large bedroom at Cheren’s direction. They lowered him down onto the bed gently, but Alder brushed Hugh’s cheek by accident and his burning touch seared Hugh’s skin.

“Ow, fuck!”

Hugh let go and clutched his face. Boiling steam rose from his face, and Cheren was instantly in front of him pulling his hand away to examine the damage.

“Your skin’ll be tender for a couple days, but you’ll heal back to normal.” Cheren dropped his hand. “Be happy you’re Syreni. He could’ve burned you to the bone if you weren’t.”

Nate managed to get Alder’s sandaled feet up onto the bed and gently positioned his head to rest on the pillows on his side. Cheren brought the wastebasket from the connecting bathroom and set it down on the floor under Alder’s head.

Outside, thunder rumbled low and rolling. The rains were upon Floccesy Town, and Alder frowned in his drunken torpor. “People in my house...” he slurred.

Nate took his hand. “It’s all right. Try to get some rest.”

Hugh eyed their clasped hands. No steam rose from their contact, and Nate did not recoil in pain.
“Okay, someone wanna tell me why the famous Alder’s a drunken mess and why we’re the ones taking care of him?"

“I had the thought of enlisting Champion Alder to our cause,” Cheren said, “but I had no idea his condition had deteriorated this much. Ah, such a bother.”

“Man, will you shut up already about how everything in the whole goddamned world is such a bother to you? You’re not doing anybody any favors, for fuck’s sake,” Hugh snapped. “And answer the question while you’re at it. Why’s it have to be us?”

“It doesn’t,” Nate said. “I’ll stay with him. You guys go back to the inn and get some rest.”

“Huh? Shit no. Nate, I’m not leaving you with this crazy drunk.”

“He’s not crazy, he just needs to recover.”

Thunder cracked again. By now, the torrential rains were pounding against the windows. Rapidash whinnied outside, and Nate swore under his breath and ran back outside to recall it to its Pokéball. While he was gone, Hugh turned on Cheren.

“Seriously, Cheren. What gives?”

Cheren sighed. “He’s right. We should return to the inn for now. Alder will be better in the morning and he’ll be able to speak with us then.”

“Hey, no way am I leaving Nate here all alone.”

“Nathaniel can make his own decisions. Besides.” Cheren glanced out the window at the pouring rain. “I doubt he’ll want to venture outside in this weather.”

Nate returned then, a little damp from the rain and visibly irritated as a light steam rose off him where the water evaporated on contact with his bare skin. Alder coughed violently, and he heaved and clutched his stomach before vomiting into the wastebasket over the side of the bed. Hugh wrinkled his nose at the fetid smell.

“It’s okay, let it out,” Nate said as he patted Alder’s shoulder and brushed his shaggy bangs out of his face so they wouldn’t soil with vomit.

Hugh rubbed his temples. “God, it’s like nothing’s changed at all. Nate, you really wanna stay here tonight?”

“Yeah, I don’t think he should be alone.”

“Fine. I’ll bring your pack by in the morning. But just to be clear, you don’t owe this old man anything, got it? If he gives you any shit, don’t take it.”

“It’s fine, Hugh. Just go and get some sleep. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

*You just gotta help everybody who’s got a problem, huh?*

Cheren tapped Hugh’s shoulder. “Come on. Let’s get back to the inn before the storm gets any worse.”

“Speak for yourself, Atlas.”

But Hugh begrudgingly followed Cheren out, leaving Nate behind to look after Alder. Nate was so
absorbed in cleaning up Alder’s face after he finished vomiting that he didn’t even notice Hugh leave.

Outside, the rain was coming down in sheets. Cheren shielded his eyes and began heading back toward the inn. Hugh followed a few steps behind. They made the trip back to the inn in silence, but when the arrived Cheren hesitated before going inside.

“You know, Hugh,” he said as the rain ran down his face in a hundred rivers, soaking him through his leather jerkin. “One of the hardest parts of loving another person is to accept that the choices they make might not involve you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Hugh said, equally soaked to the bone.

Cheren shrugged. “Just something I’ve had to learn to live with. It’s up to you whether or not you do the same.”

Cheren went inside then, but Hugh lingered. He looked to the sky and let the rain run down his face, his neck, under his jacket and over his skin that absorbed it, drank it in. After a few moments, he let his head fall and headed inside. The rain continued to fall when he was gone, not missing his presence at all.

The next morning, Hugh woke up early and grabbed both his pack and Nate’s. Cheren headed downstairs for breakfast, but Hugh went on ahead to Alder’s house. The ground was damp from the previous night’s hard rain, and when Hugh crossed the paved street to the dirt road that led to Alder’s house, the mud squelched underfoot. The smell of petrichor filled the air, and he took a deep breath.

Grinning to himself, he released Carracosta, Milotic, and Samurott all at once in front of Alder’s house. “Go find some food and explore. Bring something back for Eelektrik while you’re at it,” he said. “I’ll be here. Don’t go too far.”

Milotic hummed and nudged him in the chest, wanting a pet before taking off. Hugh was happy to oblige. Carracosta lumbered on all fours and sniffed the air for something to eat, its lazy eyes half lidded. Samurott was a bit livelier and barked, its nose in the air, and bounded off into the woods behind Alder’s house. Milotic slithered after it as sleek as a snake.

The door to Alder’s house was unlocked, just like last night, so Hugh let himself inside. Immediately, the smell of eggs and bacon and coffee hit him like a slap in the face and he almost melted right there. Nate was in the kitchen bent over the stovetop cooking. He looked up when he heard the front door open.

“Hey, you’re just in time for breakfast,” he greeted.

“Great.”

Hugh wandered into the living room and set down both his pack and Nate’s. He paused, however, when he got a brief look at the space. The empty bottles he’d seen last night were all gone. The dishes were drying in the drainer. Even the vomit stain on the floor had been mopped up and the kitchen floor sparkled. Hugh narrowed his eyes.

“I brought your stuff,” he said. “You’ve been busy here?”
Nate preoccupied himself with preparing two plates of food while Hugh wandered into the kitchen to pour himself a cup of coffee from the pot.

“Oh, yeah. I stayed up with Alder a bit last night to make sure he’d be okay, but I couldn’t sleep with that storm. So I figured I’d clean up. How much do you want?”

Hugh eyed the food Nate had prepared. “That’s good. Thanks.”

The two of them brought the plates and coffee to the table in the living room, a modest wooden table with four chairs.

“Hey, where’s Cheren?” Nate asked as they sat down.

“He’s having breakfast at the inn. I’m sure he’ll be here in a bit to give us grief about something.” Hugh could feel Nate’s gaze on him as he began to eat, so he set down his fork and looked pointedly at his best friend. “What?”

“You shouldn’t be so hard on Cheren. He’s got a lot on his plate.”

“I get that, but the guy’s insufferable. Like he can’t just leave shit alone, you know what I mean?”

“Yeah, but he’s dealing with some stuff. Let it go.”

“Dealing with what? You know something I don’t?”

Nate poked at his food, thinking.

“Nate, come on,” Hugh pressed.

Nate set down his fork. “You didn’t notice when we left Aspertia?”

“Notice what?”

“The way he left Bianca. And the other night at the Gym. You really didn’t see it?”

Hugh made a face. “What’re you talking about?”

Nate let his gaze fall and sipped his coffee. “He’s in love with Bianca. I thought it was obvious.”

“Huh? In what universe?”

_in love with Bianca?_ Hugh tried to remember how Cheren had acted around the bubbly blonde, but he was drawing a blank. He knew they’d known each other for years, but love? He didn’t see it.

“Cheren tried to kiss her when we left. I think your back was turned,” Nate went on. “She... Well, she kinda turned her head.”

Hugh grunted. “Maybe she didn’t wanna be kissed. That’s Cheren’s problem, not hers.”

“Yeah, that’s my point. He’s in love with Bianca, but Bianca doesn’t love him. Not like that, at least.”

Hugh shoved a mouthful of food into his mouth. “So?” he said in between chews.

Nate hung his head in his hands. “I mean, unrequited loves really sucks, you know? And how long have Cheren and Bianca been friends? Like, forever? He must feel really shitty.”
Hugh shrugged. “Look dude, if she doesn’t love him, she doesn’t love him. It’s not like she owes him something just ‘cause he decided he loves her.”

“Yeah, I know, I get that. I wasn’t trying to say she did. It’s just... I dunno, I guess it’s just sad. It’s sad because there’s nothing anyone can do about it. You can’t change how people feel, and you can’t hold it against them.”

Hugh swallowed his food and set down his fork. “When you put it that way, I kinda feel sorry for the guy.”

“Well, obviously. I kinda feel sorry for Bianca, too. You can’t make yourself love someone no matter how good a person they are.”

There was a thumping sound from the first floor bedroom just then, and Alder opened the door. He rubbed his eyes and blinked as his vision adjusted to the light of day. He was no longer in his clothes from last night, but in loose fitting pants and a fresh shirt. His face looked recently washed, and when he approached, there was no stench of vomit or booze on his breath.

Nate got up and went to the kitchen. “Alder, I made breakfast. Please sit and I’ll get you a plate. How do you take your coffee?”

Alder rubbed his stubbly face and took a moment to look between the breakfast table, Hugh, and Nate in the kitchen. “Black,” he said gruffly.

Hugh watched as Alder lumbered toward the table and pulled out the chair at the head of the table. He sighed when he sat down and hung his head in his hand. Hugh munched a strip of bacon.

“Rough night?” he said.

“A bit,” Alder said. He looked up after a moment. “Who are you?”

Hugh grinned. “I helped carry you to that bed last night after you smashed a bartender’s face with your ale mug. You don’t remember?”

Alder rubbed his eyes and shuddered. “Oh, not again.”

Nate returned with a plate piled high with scrambled eggs and bacon and a steaming cup of black coffee, which he set down in front of Alder. “Here, try to eat.”

Alder took up his fork and slowly began to eat. “Thank you, Nate. You didn’t have to do this.”

“That’s right, he didn’t,” Hugh said.

“Hugh,” Nate said, the warning evident in his tone.

They ate in silence for a while. Alder focused on filling his belly with something other than alcohol and drained his coffee. Nate refilled it twice before he just brought the pot to the table and let Alder drink his fill. When Alder had eaten his fill, he leaned back in his chair and laid his hands over his belly. His wild orange hair was duller than Hugh remembered it being last night. It was streaked with grey and white in Alder’s old age. Wrinkles surrounded his mouth and eyes and pooled in his neck. His hands were veiny and spotted with small splotches of brown. He got up after a moment, coffee in hand, and went to the kitchen. Nate and Hugh both watched as Alder rummaged about the kitchen cabinets and found a bottle of vodka, half empty, and poured some into his coffee. He returned to the table with the bottle and his spiked coffee.
“You know,” Hugh said, “when my parents told me stories about you growing up, I had no idea you’d turn out to be a drunkard who can’t even make it home after a night out. They left that part out of the stories.”

“Hugh,” Nate warned.

Alder sipped his spiked coffee and didn’t flinch at Hugh’s abrasiveness. “Fairytales. They start with a kernel of truth and embellish the rest. If you came here looking for the man in the myth, I’ll have to disappoint you.”

“I’m not disappointed. That’s probably the most disappointing part.”

Alder paused to catch Hugh’s eye a moment before drinking more of his coffee. “You’re Syreni, aren’t you?”

“So what if I am? You got a problem with that?”

Alder downed the rest of his coffee and poured out more of his caffeinated cocktail. “If you had asked me that twenty-five years ago, I would have said yes.” He jerked his head toward Nate. “Nate seems to like you, though.”

“I’m his best friend,” Hugh said before he could stop himself.

Alder chuckled. “That’s good. An Ignifer’s the best weapon against a Sylvan, if you ever encounter one. You should consider yourself lucky, Syreni.”

Hugh had had just about enough of this old drunkard. “Hey, I don’t care who you are. Nate just spent all night taking care of you and cleaning up your house and making you breakfast. The least you can do is show a little goddamned gratitude.”

“Hugh, stop,” Nate said. “Not now.”

Alder set down his cup. “You’re right. Nate, thank you for your help last night. Now you can be on your way, and I’ll simply continue as I’ve done in the past. I hope you enjoyed yourself.”

Hugh stood up in his chair abruptly. “You ungrateful piece of—”

Nate grabbed Hugh’s shoulder and forced him back down into his chair. Taken aback, Hugh stared back into Nate’s eyes, an expression he rarely saw. The fire Ignifers were so famous for, reviled for, burned in his dark eyes, like someone had hollowed out his eye sockets with a piece of smoldering charcoal until all that was left were two foreboding black pits.

“That’s enough,” Nate said, barely over a whisper. “He doesn’t deserve our judgment.”

Hugh did not know what to say, so he said nothing.

“What makes you say that?” Alder said.

Nate released Hugh and turned to the old man. “I don’t want to judge people or situations as I see them. Not when I don’t know the whole story.”

Hugh bit back a sneer. This was the same crap Nate liked to pull when Helena came up in conversation.

“What if what you see is all the truth there is?” Alder asked.
“It never is,” Nate said confidently, like he’d believed it all his life. “People all see the world the way they want to see it, but they only see one version of it. I don’t believe it’s fair to judge on that narrow glimpse. Everyone has a reason for why they believe what they believe. Condemning them for that would be like killing first and asking questions later. It’s not my place.”

Alder said nothing as he sipped his vodka coffee, and the table lapsed into silence again for a few moments.

The door opened then, and Cheren let himself inside.

“Good morning,” Nate said as Cheren joined them at the table. “Did you eat?”

“I did, thanks. Alder, good to see you.”

“Cheren,” Alder said. “It’s been a long time. Things are going well at your Gym?”

“They were until I received an influx of refugees from Accumula and Nuvema in the East Tine.” Cheren took a seat at the table and briefly explained the situation in Aspertia to Alder. He said nothing of the bottle of vodka sitting next to Alder’s coffee.

“Team Plasma,” Alder said when Cheren finished his tale. “It sounds to me like a war is coming.”

“I hope not. We’ll be heading to Virbank next to request help from Gym Leader Harrison,” Cheren said. “To be honest, I had an ulterior motive for coming here first. I’d like you to join us.”

Hugh could have laughed. A drunkard join them? Yeah, right.

“If you had come a couple decades ago, I may have been tempted,” Alder said. “But as you can see, I’m of no use to anyone these days.”

“That isn’t true, sir,” Cheren said. “The West Tine could really use your help.”

“I’m sorry you came all this way, but my answer is no. Good luck in your mission.”

Alder stood up and headed for the door, spiked coffee in hand. Hugh caught Nate’s eye and sprang out of his seat.

“You’re just gonna let him leave like that?” Hugh said. “After everything you did for him?”

Nate said nothing, but he got up and followed Alder outside. The front yard was large enough to run around in, and the woods behind the house offered privacy and quiet. Alder sipped his coffee and tossed out a few Pokéballs. Hugh reeled at the sight of Alder’s Pokémon.

Arcanine pawed the ground and towered a good five feet tall at the shoulder. Panting, it trotted toward Alder and licked his face before setting off around the yard and rolling in the grass, which smoked and charred under its ember-laden fur.

Heatmor, the fiery anteater Pokémon, was squat and fubsy and hunched over. Its long tongue tasted the air and it lumbered off toward the woods in search of Durant to prey on. Once it got its teeth in a Durant, it could send ripples of heat into the Bug’s body and liquefy its insides, roasting it from the inside out. A repulsive Pokémon, few trainers were willing to keep Heatmor around.

Infernape remained sitting in the grass cross-legged and ignoring Arcanine’s antics. The Fighter monkey was a native of Sinnoh and not often seen in Unova. Alder must have acquired it on one of his many travels across the world. Infernape was lanky and limber even sitting down, its muscles
rippling with power and tendrils of heat that warmed the air around it. It eyed Hugh like he was a blight on an otherwise pristine morning, and Hugh glared back at it.

Charizard was Alder’s final Pokémon. The great pseudo-Dragon stood a proud nine feet tall. It was missing an eye, and a nasty scar stretched across its chest from an old wound. Alder patted its chest and whispered something to it. Charizard soon took off into the morning sky in search of prey in the vast forests surrounding Floccesy.

“Wow,” Nate said, approaching Infernape but not daring to touch it.

Alder watched him watching Infernape. “Go ahead,” he said.

Nate looked back at Alder, then again at Infernape, who was watching him like it would rather be anywhere but here. Tentative, Nate reached out a hand and petted its head, which burst into flames as the thick fur gathered between its ears released a flurry of embers. But Nate merely smiled, unaffected by the heat. Infernape stood up. It was of a height with Nate.

“Wow,” Nate said again.

“Alder, are you sure I can’t convince you to join us? I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t a matter of national emergency,” Cheren said.

Alder watched Nate and Infernape a moment longer. “No. I won’t be joining you. Go to Virbank and talk to Harrison. He’s reasonable.”

Cheren sighed and stuffed his hands in his pockets. Hugh remembered what Nate had revealed about Cheren and Bianca.

“Forget it, man. We don’t need him,” he said.

Cheren eyed him askance. “The problem is I don’t know if that’s true or not.”

“Nate,” Alder said. “Come with me. I want to show you something.”

“Oh, okay.”

Nate cast a glance back at Hugh, who shrugged, and followed Alder.

“Come on!”

Hugh grabbed Cheren’s wrist and dragged him along after Alder and Nate. Infernape and Arcanine followed them, the latter bounding along happily like it had not a care in the world. Hugh avoided eye contact with it. Arcanine was the largest canine species in the world and its fur was known to resist water. He did not want to tango with this dog if he could help it.

Alder led them around the back of the house to what appeared to be a greenhouse of some sort. He led the group inside, where a number of trees grew that looked leaffier and flesherier than the ones growing naturally around Floccesy. Hugh also noticed that a number of them bore holes, like they’d been chewed through, but the edges of the holes were charred black as though burned. A narrow path meandered through the small glass house.

“What is this?” Hugh said.

“This is what I’ve done to make up for everything,” Alder said. “I don’t know if it will ever be enough, but today I think I’m coming close.”
Alder stopped in front of one of the trees and looked up. Hugh and the others followed his gaze, but all Hugh saw was a white tuft or growth of some sort holed up among the tree’s leaves. Alder held out his hand.

“Come down, it’s all right.”

The white tuft moved and expanded. A brown carapace emerged behind it, followed by a head and two blue eyes. Noticing Hugh and the others, the creature raised orange feelers around its neck that began to smoke, burning the leaves around it. But Alder called to it again, and the creature crawled down the tree trunk onto his outstretched arm. It was a Bug of some kind, if Hugh had to guess, though he’d never seen one quite like it.

“This is Larvesta,” Alder explained. “It’s a very rare Pokémon. Even though it’s a Bug, it can’t live around other Bugs because of its Fire typing. It burns through all their food, you see. The species is nearly extinct, so I’ve been raising a small number here.”

“Why?” Hugh blurted out. “Seems like a lot of work.”

Alder smiled, but his gaze was far away. “Many years ago, when I was a man in my prime, I had a Larvesta. It evolved and fought with me in the civil wars you’ve probably heard so much about. But it died prematurely in battle, long before its time. I... I wasn’t the same. So now, I raise Larvesta in the hopes of releasing them back into the wild one day.” He grabbed Nate’s hand and handed Larvesta to him. “Nate, I want you to take this Larvesta. It’s the oldest of the bunch.”

Nate’s eyes were wide as Larvesta crawled onto his arm, its fiery feelers twitching as it eyed him warily. “I’m... I don’t know what to say.”

“Larvesta may not look like much now, but when it evolves, Volcarona is a terribly powerful Pokémon. She’ll serve you well in battle.”

“She?” Nate said.

“Yes. Her mate left this place a long time ago, so she should leave, too. The females are the larger of the species,” Alder said. “She’s stronger than she looks, trust me.”

Alder’s eyes were bloodshot and half-lidded no matter how much coffee he drank. The vodka surely wasn’t helping. But he seemed lucid and serious enough in handing over such a rare and precious Pokémon to Nate.

“I have an extra Pokéball if you need it,” Cheren said, handing Nate the empty ball.

“Thanks.” Nate accepted the Pokéball and tapped it lightly against Larvesta’s back.

The Bug disappeared in a flash of red light into the Pokéball, captured. Nate stared at the ball, pensive, and looked back up at Alder. “Why?”

“I suppose... You remind me a little of my grandson. Like you, he’s never found his place among others. But I think... I believe he’ll find that place one day. And I know you will, too. Until then, take care of Larvesta. She’s a very special Pokémon to my family.”

Nate stared at Larvesta’s Pokéball. “I don’t know what to say. Thank you, Alder. I promise I’ll take good care of Larvesta.”

“Alder, I implore you to reconsider,” Cheren said. “You could make a real difference in whatever’s coming.”
Alder rubbed his sore eyes. “I’m an old man, Cheren. It’s your generation’s turn to fight for what you want to protect. I would only get in your way. I’m washed up, a has-been. This is the most I can do for you.”

*Figures*, Hugh thought to himself.

Cheren sighed. “Fine. But if you change you mind, we would be humbled to have you help. I’m sure Professor Juniper would be, too.”

Alder said nothing and took another swig of his spiked coffee. He was swaying a bit, pleasantly buzzed, and rubbed the back of his neck.

“Come on,” Hugh said, fighting to hold back his disgust. “Let’s get out of here.”

The group exited the greenhouse, Nate with his new Larvesta in its Pokéball at his hip with the others. Infernape and Arcanine were waiting outside for them. Hugh glared at them both for good measure.

“Take care of yourself, Alder,” Cheren said politely, shaking Alder’s hand. “I’ll pass on your best to Gym Leader Harrison.”

“You too. These days, it’s better to surround yourself with people you trust to watch your back,” Alder said.

Cheren looked over at Hugh, and something about that look really pissed Hugh off. He crossed his arms and joined Nate, ignoring Cheren and that drunkard.

“So, new Pokémon. I guess that’s the least he can do for you after you took care of him last night,” Hugh said.

“Don’t say that,” Nate said. “It’s not his fault.”

“Uh, hello? He’s the one who decided to be an alcoholic. Pretty sure that’s his fault.”

Nate shook his head. “I think it’s more complicated than that. Cut him some slack.”

“Right, whatever. If you become an alcoholic one day, I’ll be sure to give you the benefit of the doubt.”

Nate waved him off and stalked off, leaving Hugh wondering what the hell he’d said this time.

“So, let’s go, Hugh.” Cheren passed him and met up with Nate back at the house to retrieve their packs.

With little choice, Hugh followed, gathered his things, and set off in a northeasterly direction on the long road to Virbank City. Alder stood in his yard next to Infernape and Arcanine to watch them go, but he didn’t wave or shout any goodbyes. He just poured more vodka in his coffee and slurped it down like a fucking garbage disposal.

*Pathetic.*

Hugh’s Pokémon were waiting for him at the edge of the woods, and Hugh recalled them all. The dead Magikarp Samurott had brought back for Eelektrik ended up in a sack that Hugh tied to his pack for later. He would feed Eelektrik later once they found some water where he could release the electric eel.
“Virbank’s another few days’ hiking away,” Cheren said. “No inns along the way.”

“Whatever, let’s just not waste anymore time,” Hugh said.

Nate let out Larvesta and Lucario to accompany him today, while Cheren released both Cinccino and Stoutland again. Larvesta huddled atop Nate’s head in his hair, tangling it and probably burning it, but Nate didn’t seem to mind. The timid Bug kept a close eye on the sky for any aerial predators that might come swooping in. Lucario eyed the Bug warily, but it did nothing and simply walked alongside Nate, serious to a fault.

Hugh fell into step with Nate and Cheren and Lucario while Stoutland scouted ahead. The sky was clear and the path was straight ahead. Virbank City, and the future of Aspertia and the war with Team Plasma, lay ahead. Whatever it entailed, Hugh was convinced they didn’t need some drunk old man to help them with it.
Iris and her three guards were given quarters in a villa near the Gym, while the rest of the crew from Blackthorn returned to the ship to spend the night there. It was nothing particularly extravagant, but Iris was grateful for the space and a bed large enough to roll over in after months at sea. Gossamer nets hung down from the canopies over the beds to keep out Bugs and spores that might drift in through the open windows along with the warm summer breeze and ocean salt.

Dinner had been brought to their villa. The spread was impressive and delicious. Iris had had almost nothing but seafood since she set off from Blackthorn, and the unfamiliar vegetarian options were a delicacy after so much of the same.

“What is this? It’s like nothing I’ve ever tried,” Moros said as he spooned a black paste over crispy flat bread.

He was looking at Iris, but she shrugged. “How should I know?” she said.

Soriel ate an entire spoonful of the paste. “Whatever it is, it’s damn good.”

“I’m sure it’s some kind of legume or other plant cultivated from the jungle,” Belaron said. “Look around. It’s hard to believe this is even a proper city.”

“Hm, well, I don’t know about that, but they do know how to cook a proper meal. I’ve never tasted grilled Octillery this delicious,” Moros said as he continued to eat five things at once.

Soriel slapped him on the shoulder. “Let’s hope for your sake you can actually keep this meal down for a change!”

She laughed at her own joke, and Moros almost choked on the food he was chewing. Iris got up from the table, her appetite suddenly lost and wanting to hear no more of their conversation.

“Princess?” Belaron asked, getting up after her. “Where are you going?”

“I’m not hungry,” Iris said.

“But you’ve hardly touched your food.”

She glared at him over her shoulder. “I’m not a child, Syr Bel. Do not presume to treat me like one.”

Belaron blinked, taken aback by her sudden flash of anger, and wisely decided to back off. Iris left the table and the villa itself and headed outside. It was dark and quite late, but the summer in Humilau was muggy and sticky, and her shift was already sticking to her chest and growing damp under her leather belt. As always, Iris wore her longsword at her hip, but tonight she also released Haxorus to walk with her.

The hunched Dragon raised its bladed snout to the sky and breathed in the new smells of the jungle city. The villa Iris and her guards were staying at was surrounded by lush jungle trees and other flora, and two canals ran on either side of it. The water reflected the stars in the night sky, where only a few long, foggy clouds cut through the starscape like deep claw marks in the fabric of the sky. A crescent moon offered little additional light, but it made no difference. The stars were in such abundance out here that even the street lanterns were superfluous.
Iris set off down the cobbledstone road with no particular destination in mind, and Haxorus lumbered along behind her, dragging its heavy tail and making a soft scraping sound with each step. There were no voices to be heard tonight, and no one was out on the streets. There was only the jungle, the Bugs singing their midnight songs, and the nightwalkers skulking about in search of prey. The Frillish that had floated in moribund silence in the canals had disappeared for the night. It was just Iris and her Dragon, and for the first time since she’d arrived on these shores, she let her shoulders slump.

“Do you remember this place, Haxorus?” she asked as they continued their crepuscular stroll. “You were small when we used to come here.”

Haxorus was still smelling the air, pungent with salt and humidity and orchids’ heady nectar. It made a pleasant rumbling sound and lowered its head to gently nudge Iris in the back. She stopped to scratch its nose.

“I guess you remember better than me.”

“Nonsense, you must remember something. After all, Sonora brought you here when you were small.”

Iris whirled and found Marlon leaning against a tree growing out of the middle of the road ahead. He wore loose pants cut off at the knee, sandals, and a wife beater that did not cling to his skin the way Iris’s dress stuck to her, impervious to the humid heat as he was. Four Pokéballs lined the waist of his pants. Haxorus pushed its head past Iris, jaws first, and growled in warning.

“And that Dragon was not so upset to see me back then,” Marlon said with a grin.

He spoke to her in the common tongue, which on some level Iris found a bit strange, but she went with it.

“You knew my mother,” she said.

“You don’t see the resemblance? We were cousins. Many mistook us for siblings.” He tapped his temple. “The eyes, you see?”

Iris crossed her arms. “I noticed. She never mentioned you were related, just that you would help me if I came to you.”

Marlon watched her and let the silence stretch for a moment. “Come with me.”

He did not wait and headed back down the path the way he’d come, leaving Iris to follow if she chose.

“Come on, Haxorus.”

Iris marched after Marlon, and Haxorus bumbled along after her like an overweight house pet unwilling to be left alone in any room of the house. Marlon led her along a northern path that ran parallel with the coast. They passed through the edge of downtown Humilau with its clustered shops and restaurants, all in the same wood and stone style as the larger villas on the outskirts. But Marlon skirted the downtown and instead led Iris up a side path that emptied onto a cliff overhang with a spectacular view of the bay.

The stars were even more brilliant up here, and below water lapped at the cliff’s side. The sea sabers Soriel had spotted in her aerial scouting of the area bobbed in the sea farther to the north, and to the south were the thatched houses that seemed to float on the waves under the muted
moonlight. Marlon sat with his legs hanging over the edge of the cliff, but Iris remained standing behind him with Haxorus.

“You don’t remember anything at all?” he asked, not looking back.

“I remember what matters.”

He chuckled. “Halfling Princess Iris, you are too serious for one so young and beautiful.”

She bit back a growl as the beginnings of a maelstrom whorled inside her. “Don’t call me that.”

Haxorus yawned and wandered farther out onto the cliff, smelling the air and the wildflowers that grew underfoot. It found a spot it liked, spun around like a cat looking for just the right angle, and soon hunkered down.

“Hm, looks like he remembers. He used to sit in that very spot while you and the other children took turns jumping.” Marlon leaned back on his hands and peered at Haxorus as it cradled its axe jaw on its folded tail.

“Did you even hear me? I said stop calling me that name.” Iris marched up to Marlon’s back and glared down at him.

He let his head fall back and looked up at her upside down. “You really don’t remember playing here as a child? Sit here so you can see the edge. Here, right here is good.”

Hurricane Iris roared deep inside, but Haxorus yawned again and draped a claw over its eyes. Docile as a Mareep, just looking at the mighty Dragon drained the ire from Iris somewhat. And besides, she needed Marlon’s help. Perhaps antagonizing him was not the wisest course of action.

Summoning the self-control and silence she had learned in her years in Blackthorn, Iris swallowed her anger and took a seat where he’d indicated, letting her legs dangle over the edge just as he did. The drop was nothing to slouch at, a good fifteen feet at least from the edge down to the bay below. A wooden dock floated to the side, anchored to the bottom, and provided a platform to reach the narrow stairs carved into the side of the cliff. Those stairs were smooth after so many children ran back up them to get to the top and jump off again.

“Hm? Did you remember something?” Marlon asked.

Iris stared at the steps and the gentle waves that lapped at them, the bobbing, creaky dock. “There used to be a rope swing here.” She looked to her left. “That tree, it used to have a branch that grew over the edge.”

“Yes. You used to swing off that rope with the other small children.”

Iris leaned back on her hands, the sea breeze working wonders to stave off the heat. “I haven’t thought about that in a long time. How did I forget?”

“You did not forget. You simply chose not to remember. It doesn’t matter, as you said.”

“That’s not...”

*That’s not what I meant.*

But she didn’t finish her words and quashed the thought.

“It does not surprise me that you remember pain and fear,” Marlon said. “Those things are hard to
forget, especially when they happen to us as children. What your mother did spiriting you away perhaps was a terrible thing. But if she had not run with you, Drayden would have had you killed, and this would have been an awful thing.”

Iris sank her fingers into the grassy earth and stared up at the starry sky. “He’ll rue the day he didn’t kill me. Because now I’m coming for him. Marlon, that’s why I need your help. Opelucid’s just over the mountains and across the strait. With the right men and the element of surprise, I can take back my father’s throne and Humilau won’t have a knife pointed at its back anymore.”

Marlon grinned. “You know many things even though you have been gone for so long. Is it perhaps the case that you have spent many years coming to know these things?”

“It’s all I’ve thought about my whole life.” She sat up and faced him. “My mother swore you would help me, and now I know why. I’m right about Opelucid, aren’t I? They’re no friends of Humilau. You’d be better off with Drayden gone.”

“Iris girl, for all the bright stars in the sky, they cannot banish the darkness of night. You know many things, but there is much you have yet to learn. You have been gone a long time, and Unova is not the home you remember it to be.” He looked at the rope tree over her shoulder. “We had to remove that rope because a young boy’s neck became tangled as he swung, and he lost his life. Now, no children swing off this cliff.”

Iris had nothing to say to that. It explained why the rope was gone, in any case.

“I remember what matters,” she repeated her earlier words.

Marlon sighed. “What you ask is impossible. An army to cross the Reversal Mountains to the Central Tine is not a thing I can give you. My soldiers are equipped to fight on the sea, not to climb mountains. And Drayden may not be the man you remember him to be.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Marlon lifted one leg over the edge of the cliff and folded it in front of him to face her fully. “Sonora left Opelucid with you before the Blood Sickness hit.”

“You mean the Red Plague.”

“Yes, that one. Fifteen years ago, Opelucid and its vassal lands suffered terrible infection and sorrow. Many died, especially children.”

“I know, that’s why I have to strike now that I’m ready to fight and Opelucid’s still recovering. If I wait a few more years, the new generation will be old enough to fight and things will be much harder,” Iris argued.

“Just a moment. This is not the point I wish to make. What you must understand is that it was Drayden who shouldered Opelucid’s grief through such a savage ordeal. He and his Ridder Knights put the kingdom back together piece by piece. Why do you imagine Drayden has remained king all this time?”

“Because he took the throne when my father died! Of course Opelucid wouldn’t put up a fight when their families were dying.”

“And now?”

Iris frowned. “What do you mean, now? He’s still the leader. It doesn’t matter what I think about
him, he’s still a strong Titan. I’m not disputing that.”

Marlon said nothing for a while, and they simply sat there in silence. Iris simmered at the thought of Drayden and the people of Opelucid that had lived under his reign for so long. Maybe he was a great leader. Some of the vilest people in history were. It changed nothing.

“There is something else you must know,” Marlon said. “As you travel through Unova, you will undoubtedly run into Team Plasma. Do you know this name?”

“Team Plasma? No, I’ve never heard of it.”

“They are a group of people who used to be nothing more than a peaceful environmental group, but now they have become something more. Something dangerous. They will not hesitate to strike down trainers they deem unworthy and set free their Pokémon.”

Iris hugged a knee to her chest. “Even if they are, they’re not my concern.”

“They will be if you decide to travel to Opelucid and pick a fight with Drayden. Team Plasma has their hands in many circles of power. Being who you are, you will surely come across them. They are led by a man called Ghetsis, a Reaper of terrible power. It is said he is more than three hundred years old. Should you come across this monster, you must not fight him.”

“Three hundred? So he’s a cannibal. I didn’t think there were many of those left.”

Marlon took her hand all of a sudden and forced her to look directly at him. “Listen well, Iris girl. Do not trust Team Plasma. It would not be ideal if you were to lose your life to them.”

Iris yanked her hand away and glowered at him. “I’m not losing my life to anyone. And I told you already. This Team Plasma isn’t my concern. I don’t care about them or some ancient Reaper leading them around. I’m here for one thing, and one thing only.”

“Yes, I know this thing. But I wonder if you have thought about what will happen after you usurp Drayden. Let’s assume it all goes according to your years of planning. You will still have the Team Plasma chewing your heels and terrorizing the people.”

Iris made a face and averted her gaze. “I’m here for Opelucid. When I take the throne, Opelucid will be mine, and all the people in the kingdom, too. I’m not here to conquer Unova. I have no interest in such a quest.”

Or the power to do it, she added silently. Not that it mattered. Unova was not her concern, Opelucid was.

“Tell me, Halfling Princess Iris,” Marlon said with an edge to his tone that had not been there before.

Iris whipped around to snap at him, but she choked on her words when she saw the feral look in his eyes, the abyss that lingered just beyond the last of the light that penetrated the ocean’s depths. The same look he’d had for that transient moment before he’d smiled and greeted her group.

“How can a queen stand tall and revered if she does not have the shoulders of loyal believers to stand on?”

There was not much in this world that scared Iris. Sometimes, when she was visited by nightmares, Drayden appeared as a great Dragon a hundred times her size with fangs dripping poison and those glacial eyes that froze her in place while he flayed her flesh with his talons. But even such a
monster could not deter her. Losing to such a man, however, that terrified her to the bone. Failure to reclaim her father’s throne and avenge his honor—that terrified her.

Marlon did not scare her. Try as he might, she would not let him.

“Say what you mean, Syreni,” she bit out. “I’m not a river you can trick and bend with riddles and games. I’m a Titan of the Fafnir Dynasty and my father’s only living legacy. Will you help me or won’t you? Answer me, and let’s end this useless back and forth.”

Haxorus stirred as it sensed Iris’s latent rage. Red eyes opened under double eyelids, and the Dragon lifted its armored head and bared its fangs in warning. The look in Marlon’s eyes, so like Sonora’s, withdrew back into itself and took the threat with it. But he did not submit, did not lower his gaze or give her the satisfaction of seeing him tremble. He, too, was not afraid, and that more than his words sent a chill through Iris that she rarely felt.

“You come to this land, your mother’s homeland, in your father’s name. You speak to your mother’s people in your father’s tongue. You ask us to fight for a throne we have never needed. Why should we come to your aid when you offer nothing in return? Not even our lives if we were in danger?” Marlon said.

Iris stood up abruptly, her inner fury driving her and bidding her to move, she could not sit on the edge of this jumping cliff where she had once laughed and played and never knew a thing of the world. “Is that what this is about? I’m also my mother’s daughter. Why do you think I came here in the first place? Of all the places I could have gone, I chose Humilau. I chose you. Don’t you know that?”

Marlon stared up at her like he didn’t even see her. “There are many things I don’t know, Halfling Princess Iris. But one thing I have always known is this: it’s never about who your parents were; it’s about who you are.”

“I’m Iris!” she shouted at him.

Haxorus lurched to its feet and began to growl in warning behind Iris.

Marlon was not done. “No. Right now, you are still your father’s daughter. And you are that tacha bastard you let others claim you are. You are hardly Iris at all. But...I will help you, because I believe that one day, you will be.”

Hurricane Iris raged within her, screaming for Marlon’s blood, but Iris kept it barricaded inside as his words reached her.

“You... You’ll help me?” Iris said, feeling her long incisors biting into her lower lip as she clenched her teeth.

Marlon got up and looked down at her. How old was he? He’d seemed like such a young man when she met him, but now he simply looked weary. Weary and afraid, but still standing. “I will give you a ship and a crew. And when you are ready to storm Opelucid, I’ll be there to fight with you.”

Iris swallowed as Haxorus drew up behind her, a faithful shadow. “Then we have an agreement.”

Marlon held out his hand for her to take and spoke to her in their native Adriati. “I’ll help Iris, and no one else.”

Iris took his hand and shook it, willing herself not to wonder at his peculiar words.
They left the Floating City not long after Iris secured Marlon’s support on behalf of Humilau. Marlon had told Iris that she would have to sail south along the edge of the East Tine and around the cape at Nuvema Town in order to reach Castelia City. From there, she could invade Opelucid via the Western Strait that separated the West and Central Tines. Drayden would not be expecting her to come from the west, and Humilau could bolster her force from the east.

Iris did not understand why they could not attack now via the Reversal Mountains, but Marlon was insistent. Team Plasma had a stronghold in Lacunosa Town in the mountains, and if they were going to take Opelucid, they would surely encounter the syndicate’s resistance on the way. No, it was better to try to recruit more Gym Leaders to the cause. Discreetly, of course. No one knew Iris had returned to Unova, least of all Drayden, and Marlon warned her to keep it that way for as long as possible if she wanted a chance against his Knights of Ridder and army of Dragon Tamers.

And Marlon’s idea of discretion turned out to be one hell of a divergence from what Iris had been expecting.

“You know Nuria already,” Marlon said, indicating the Syreni woman Iris had clashed with when she first arrived at the Humilau Gym. “I can’t go with you, obviously, so think of Nuria as my official Syreni representative on your quest.”

Nuria wore fitted taupe cargo pants, leather boots waterproofed with Wailmer blubber, a navy tank top, and a leather utility belt. A curved chromium pickaxe hung from her left hip and winked in the sunlight as Iris approached. Nuria had her arms crossed as she looked down at Iris over her nose. She was several inches taller than Iris, though they were about the same age.

“I remember,” Iris said, keeping her voice carefully blank and polite.

Nuria pressed her lips together in a thin line. “And I remember you,” she said in the common tongue. Her accent was so faint it was almost nonexistent.

“So, she speaks our language after all,” Belaron said, drawing up beside Iris. He had a hand on the longsword at his hip as he smiled jovially.

“Don’t worry, old Syr. I’ll be sure to use your language if we’re attacked by wild Gyarados to warn you.”

Belaron’s smile faded, but Iris walked in between the two of them to get to the ship Marlon had said would be taking them south from here on out. It floated in the marina at the end of a long pier, but it looked like no ship Iris had ever seen in her life. It was made entirely of metal save for the enormous, bulging, glass window at the front that offered a 270-degree view from the bow. Much smaller identical windows peppered the ship’s long oblong hull like a pox. From the part Iris could see above the water, it had to be at least fifty yards long. The ‘ship’ looked more likely to sink than to ferry Iris and her crew over the open ocean.

“What’s that supposed to be, exactly?” Iris asked.

Marlon was standing just ahead on the beach with an older man in a heavy jacket, blue with gold embroidery, polished bald head, and only one ear. The skin around the hole that was his missing ear was shiny from an old burn, hairless, and the burn scar trickled to the edge of his left eye, swelling the lid and brow. He was clean-shaven and carried a saber at his hip, long and thin and
built for speedy slashes rather than deep gouges. The image of him alone could have sent children running, but as soon as he opened his mouth, the foreboding pirate melted into something entirely innocuous, almost quirky.

“What is meaning this question?” the man asked in the common tongue, thickly accented. “People sees with eyes that it is a ship!”

“Iris, this is Nymo. He’s the captain of this fine vessel and Nuria’s father. How lucky, isn’t it?” Marlon said.

“I feel completely lost in translation,” Soriel muttered.

“What kind of ship is it? I’ve never seen such a vessel,” Iris said.

“Is more than a ship, Iris Lady,” Nymo said. “She is being named my eye, my *Oculus.”* He pointed to his good eye.

Marlon nodded. “Exactly. This is *Oculus,* the Eye of the Sea. There’s no better way to sail undercover.”

“Oh please,” Nuria said. “She didn’t mean the name of the ship, but what it actually is.” Turning to Iris, Nuria tucked her chin-length hair behind an ear. “This is a submersible vessel, or ‘sub’ for short. My father pioneered the technology and spent his life building it. Even Sootopolis’s engineers haven’t figured out how to replicate it, and they’ve been begging my father to sell them the specs for years.”

“Submersible?” Soriel asked. “Wait, you don’t actually mean...”

Nuria puffed out her chest and grinned. “That’s right. This is the only ship in all of Unova that sails underwater.”

“I think I’m going to be sick just thinking about it,” Moros said, clutching his fragile stomach.

“Pull yourself together, Lieutenant. We haven’t even boarded this submersible ship yet,” Belaron said.

“Still, how does it all work? Does it carry its own air? Or does it filter it from the ocean? Damn, Cinnabar would pay out of their asses for this,” Soriel said.

Nuria grinned, her pride shining in her dark eyes. “You bet they would.”

“Oh yes, the breathing is like for Wailord. He is taking in a big breath.” Nymo sucked in a large breath and clutched his belly. “And he is keeping it for some time, until it wants to come out and he is looking for more breaths.” He blew out his held breath to make sure everyone got the picture.

“In other words, the *Oculus* has to surface every so often to replenish the air supply. We can filter some air from the ocean, but the vessel’s too big for the filtration to keep up. We’re still working on that. It’s just a matter of time before we have a fully functional filtration system with no more need to surface,” Nuria explained.

“What about pressure?” Moros asked. “How deep is the sub’s cruising depth? What happens if we sink too far down?”

Nuria laughed. “Don’t worry so much! My father figured all that out years ago. And if anything goes wrong while we’re underwater, *I* can fix it.”
“Your modesty knows no limits,” Iris said.

Nuria’s good mood evaporated and she leveled Iris with a venomous look, but Nymo spread his arms and stepped forward before his headstrong daughter could assault Iris.

“Iris Lady and companions, we are being ready to dive now, so put on your haste! We depart!”

“Captain Nymo has his own crew specially trained for sailing the Oculus,” Marlon said, taking Iris aside and speaking in Adriati so her guards would not hear. “They’re all trained in hand-to-hand combat, and a few have Pokémon for battling. What will you do with the crew you brought from Blackthorn?”

“I’ll send them home. They’ve fulfilled their obligation to me. I can’t ask anything more of them,” Iris said.

“I see. You’re confident you won’t return to Blackthorn.”

“Confidence has nothing to do with it. Blackthorn was never home.”

Marlon averted his gaze to Iris’s three guards who would accompany her here in Unova. “And them? Unova is not their home.”

Iris followed his gaze. “If Soriel and Moros wish to return when this is over, I won’t stop them. Syr Belaron will stay. He vowed to stay with me to the end.”

“That’s not an easy vow to make, to stay in a foreign land with foreign customs.”

Belaron and the others were still talking to Nuria about the Oculus, firing off questions about its functionality, the crew, how fast it could travel, and Nuria was happy as a Clamperl to explain the ins and outs of her father’s ingenuity. Soriel seemed to be eating it up, while Moros looked ever more morose with each answered query. Belaron remained silent, politely supervising his younger counterparts.

“He’s loyal,” Iris said. “It was an easy vow for him to make.”

Marlon smiled and placed his hands on her shoulders. “Well then, Halfling Princess Iris. When I see you again, I’ll be happy to call you Iris and take you cliff diving.”

Iris did not return his smile, but she didn’t snap at him for using that infernal title. It didn’t seem worth it on the eve of her departure.

“Oh, and one more thing.” He switched to the common tongue and waved to Iris’s guards to join them. “You’ll be stopping in Undella Town to the south to re-oxygenate. It is under my jurisdiction, like all of Adria. When you are there, I want you to visit a close acquaintance of mine.”

“We’re not here to run errands for you, Gym Leader,” Belaron said. “Princess Iris has much to do, as you know.”

“It is no errand, merely a request. You will want to meet my acquaintance,” Marlon said to Iris. “She specifically requested that I relay to you her desire to meet.”

Iris frowned. “Someone knows I’m here? How?”

“I think it will be clear when you meet her. She is trustworthy, on my honor. Here, I have written
her address.” Marlon passed Iris a slip of paper. “Undella is small. You will not have trouble
finding the house.”

Iris glanced at the paper. It was just a regular street address, and none she recognized.

“If we have time, then perhaps. But don’t expect the princess to make you any promises,” Belaron
said.

“Of course. But I hope you will not disappoint her. She isn’t the most agreeable person when she is
angry.”

With that, Marlon said his goodbyes and stayed behind on the beach with a crowd gathered to
watch the Oculus set sail. The sun was still low on the eastern horizon, and the fishing trawlers
were just returning from a long night out at sea with the day’s catch. The smells of cooking
seafood in the morning markets and stalls permeated the air and blended with the salty sea breeze
coming in from the north. But everywhere, people paused in their morning routines to watch Iris
and her group board the sub and prepare to embark on a quest that had nothing to do with them, and
yet they stopped to see her off.

Iris was the last of her group to board and cast a last look at the ship with red and white sails that
had carried her all the way here.

“Are you getting in or not, Princess?” Nuria said behind her.

Iris turned to tell her off, but something pink caught her eye on the beach. The little girl she had
seen the day she arrived, once more clad in a pink swimsuit and yellow skirt, balanced on Marlon’s
shoulders and smiled toothlessly at Iris.

“Share.”

Iris climbed onto the sub’s deck and lowered herself down a narrow chute into the interior,
ignoring Nuria and wondering why she couldn’t get that little girl’s cryptic entreaty out of her head.
Nuria climbed down soon after her and closed the hatch.

Inside, the sub was little more than a metal bubble. The hallways were narrow and the doors were
circular. Electric lights were embedded in the ceiling and ran the length of the corridor Iris had
landed in, casting a stale, yellowish light on the slate-grey walls and grated floor. Nuria touched
down next to Iris.

“Command center’s this way.” She jerked her head to the left through the next doorway. “Try not
to get lost. No one will come looking.”

Iris had half a mind to cut Nuria down to size right there, but her curiosity about this sub far
outweighed whatever trivial annoyance Nuria posed. Iris had been on the receiving end of plenty of
scorn in her life. Some self-important Syreni woman was barely a scratch on her emotional armor.
So she followed Nuria wordlessly into the command center, where Nymo and the rest of Iris’s
guard, as well as Nymo’s secondary officers, were busy getting the Oculus ready to dive.

The giant glass eye Iris had noted when she first spotted the ship encompassed the entire command
center and more, stretching behind it to other rooms in the ship’s bow. Iris moved to stand with her
guards to watch the water level rising around them outside the glass.

“I can’t believe I’m doing this,” Moros said.

Soriel threw her arm around his shoulder. “Cheer up, Moros. Maybe this time you’ll finally get
your sea legs. If we don’t run out of air, I mean.”

Moros shrugged her off roughly. “It’s Lieutenant, and your comments belong in the trashcan.”

“Oh, I didn’t know you had such brazen insults in you! Be careful, Moros, or that stick might just fall out of your ass one day.”

“Would you two give it a rest for five minutes?” Belaron grumbled.

“Here we go, my darlings! Everyone hold on and keep your eyes open! Hah!” Nymo shouted in harsh Adriati.

“What did he say?” Belaron asked Iris.

She gripped the metal railing near the wheel. “Hold on and watch.”

The roar of the ocean grew louder around them as blue sky turned to blue water, and they slowly left the light behind. Nuria cut the lights and plunged the control room into darkness broken only by the lights on the control panels and periscope and what managed to penetrate the sea beyond the glass. They were sinking fast, but Iris’s ears did not pop with the changing pressure. It was as if she had not left the surface at all.

Schools of aquatic Pokémon, from Magikarp to Basculin to Lumineon, gaped at the sinking sub with their wide eyes. Some, like the bolder Goldeen and Luvdisc, followed them down. But most incredible of all were the people, Syreni and their Pokémon that dove after the Oculus to see off its crew.

Syreni and their skuffs in armored wetsuits held onto or swam alongside their Pokémon, from sleek Milotic to haunting Huntail and even a Sharpedo or two. None of them wore breathing apparatuses, instead relying on their innate ability to hold their breaths for extended periods to follow the sub. The crew in the command center cheered and waved to them as they passed before the sub’s eye and among the bright corals—sea fans and sponges and spidery fire corals in every color imaginable.

The light began to fade as the sub sank deeper, and the skuffs returned to the surface with their Pokémon, from sleek Milotic to haunting Huntail and even a Sharpedo or two. None of them wore breathing apparatuses, instead relying on their innate ability to hold their breaths for extended periods to follow the sub. The crew in the command center cheered and waved to them as they passed before the sub’s eye and among the bright corals—sea fans and sponges and spidery fire corals in every color imaginable.

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“Holy shit!” Soriel exclaimed.

A truly colossal Wailord drifted into view of the Oculus’s nose and swiveled its dark eye to see the crew. The beast’s eye alone was as tall as Iris. It swam ahead of the sub, and soon Marlon appeared hanging onto its dorsal fin. He grinned at the glass and waved to the crew, and everyone whooped in cheer again. An equally impressive Mantine glided just over Wailord’s back and followed Marlon closely. Its wingspan had to be at least thirty feet across, and it toted a few Remoraid under its wings. Marlon’s Jellicent, a ghastly creature with flesh like a frostbitten corpse, floated a little higher up, riding Wailord’s water currents. Its fleshy tentacles dragged behind it and caressed the glass, leaving a thin trail of violet miasma along the glass that quickly dissipated in the current.

“He and Wailord could dive deeper with us,” Nuria said as she followed Iris’s gaze after Marlon, “but Mantine doesn’t like the deeper waters, and Jellicent’s too slow.”

“Syreni, huh,” Soriel said. “Now that’s a man.”
Moros made a face. “What does that even mean?”

“You’d like to know, eh?”

“Of course not. Not in the way you seem to be implying, Sergeant. Honestly, how did General Marla put up with your crass attitude back on Cinnabar?”

“I’m sure I speak for us all when I say I don’t want to know the answer to that,” Belaron said. “Nor do I care.”

Iris was still watching the sea beyond the sub’s glass eye as it turned from blue to sapphire to nearly black, the color of her mother’s eyes, of Marlon’s eyes. And finally, the last of the light surrendered to darkness, and there was nothing but the abyss in all directions.

“Scared?” Nuria leaned in to whisper to Iris.

“Awed,” Iris said, not missing a beat. “We all should be in the face of something that exists beyond our understanding.”

Nuria blinked and fell short of whatever retort she had ready to fire back.

“Captain, we’ve reached thirty atmospheres and we’re currently settling in for a cruising speed of twenty knots,” one of the crewmembers said in Adriati from the control panel. “We’ll reach Undella in four days’ time.”

“Good, keep her steady,” Nymo said. “XO, monitor our stern. I want no surprises today.”

“Captain,” Nuria said, saluting her father.

“You’re the XO?” Iris asked in the common tongue.

“That’s quite the position for one so young,” Belaron agreed.

Nuria looked between the two of them and frowned. “I’ve spent my life doing this. There’s no one better suited than me.”

With that, she set off from the command center and left Iris and the others with the crew. Nymo smiled like a grandfather and spread his arms.

“Compadres, you will have your rooms for seeing, yes? My comrade here will be showing the way now.”

“Thank you,” Iris said.

A young sailor in the same blue jumpsuit uniform most of the other crewmembers wore saluted Iris and her group. His black hair was cropped close to his skull and he had the look of a trained soldier in his eyes. A shortsword hung at his hip in its sheath.

“I’ll take you to your rooms,” he said clearly in the common tongue. “This way.”

Iris and her guards followed, and a not insignificant part of her was glad to be leaving that window into the tidal abyss. The sailor led them down a network of identical corridors, careful to point out the signage at each corner that would help them navigate the ship with time. After walking down what seemed like an endless iron tube, they arrived at the sleeping quarters. Everyone had their own rooms, for which Iris was grateful. After parting, Iris unlocked her room and barricaded herself inside, soaking in the blissful silence of solitude.
When she opened her eyes, she was pleased to find all her things brought in from the Blackthorn ship. The chest of clothing was under her bed, which seemed to be large enough to accommodate a regular sized person. There was a desk with a lamp in addition to the overhead lights. A nautical map of the Ottavo, the eighth of the world’s nine oceans, which surrounded Unova hung in a frame over the desk. There was a bulging window over her bed that looked out into the dark ocean, but Iris could make nothing out in the aphotic expanse beyond. Thirty atmospheres was about nine hundred feet below sea level, surely too deep for large predators like Gyarados or Sharpedo or Tentacruel to molest the sub.

Something on the desk caught Iris’s eye; the Liechi plant Belaron had procured for her had been brought over with the rest of her things. Hopping off the bed, Iris approached the plant and gave the large flower a sniff. It wouldn’t get much sun down here. She would have to take it on deck the next time the sub surfaced and hope it would get enough sunlight to survive.

A quick look through the desk drawers revealed the folders filled with notes and outdated blueprints of Opelucid City. She retrieved them and lay them out on the desk, thinking. Perhaps Belaron would be available to strategize with her later. Maybe she could question Nymo’s crew, glean any information they might have about Opelucid that could help in her quest. Determined, Iris removed her sword and boots and relocated a stack of notes to her bed to pore over while she had this time alone.

She soon fell asleep, however, her notes and maps splayed over her like a blanket. The Liechi plant shook almost imperceptibly as she slumbered, oblivious, and a pair of small orange eyes peeked out at her from behind a silken veil, watching her sleep.

On the morning of the fourth day in the deep, Iris had slept in a bit and woke slowly and naturally from a surprisingly pleasant slumber. The sub moved so smoothly that she often forgot she was moving through water. Even Moros had managed to keep his violent seasickness at bay over the past few days, having thrown up only twice since they left Humilau.

Iris’s mind woke before her body and began going through the list of things she would have to do today. Breakfast was always held in the mess hall, which was nothing more than a single, long table where all the crew ate together before a bulbous window in a room decorated with framed pictures of Nymo’s life at sea growing up, including expeditions on this very sub. Iris found it strange that Nymo elected to share his table with his crew. Did he not worry that he could not discuss matters of importance in front of them? What if there was a problem and panic ensued at the dining table simply because there was nowhere else to dine? Iris, for her part, forbade any discussion of her plans for Opelucid during meals for fear of alerting the wrong person or raising unnecessary questions. These were Marlon’s men, true enough, but they were not Iris’s.

Nymo seemed not to care and freely discussed the Oculus’s status and the trip’s progress with all his crewmembers, from his second-in-command daughter to his engineers and the navigation team. Moros said nothing of it, though he would have certainly considered it impolite to gossip about a host crew’s house rules, but Belaron always had a choice caustic comment on the matter. Soriel seemed to enjoy the time to get to know the crew and, predictably, made fast friends with a number of them. They laughed at her bawdy jokes and reveled at her tales of aerial combat during her time with the Charizard Assault Team on Cinnabar. Flying a fire Dragon was about as different as it got for a crew of submarine sailors. Often, Soriel found ways to drag Moros into her jocular banter, much to his chagrin, but he always rose to the occasion and was happy to engage the crew.

Iris would watch it all in her usual reticence, observing but never participating unless necessary.
Her guards were making friends, she supposed. There was nothing wrong with that. Nuria perhaps mistook Iris’s natural introversion for meek diffidence and came alive at meals, opting to tell stories of her own or recounting tales from her father’s youth or of the crew’s past missions, always to the fanfare of approval from the rest of the crew, Soriel included. Iris could not have cared if she was getting paid. What use did a Dragon Princess like her have for mariners’ stories?

These thoughts spun through Iris’s somnolent consciousness as she slowly came to with a yawn. But when she opened her mouth, something soft and fluffy got sucked in. Choking and coughing, Iris bolted upright in bed and hacked violently, spitting to get whatever she’d inhaled out of her mouth. When she could breathe again, her fingers came away from her mouth covered in wads of damp cotton fluff.

“What?”

Something tickled her ears and she violently whipped her head around only to spill more cotton from her bushy hair. Wide-eyed and uncomprehending, she threw off her sheets and found them drizzled with the same ubiquitous fluff. It was everywhere, in her hair, in her clothes, stuck to her skin with static electricity.

Something cooed overhead, like a gourd rattle, and Iris pressed her back against the wall and looked up. The thing, whatever it was, zoomed through the air around the room on leafy wings, shedding tufts of cotton as it floated about.

“Hey!” Iris shouted at it.

The sentient cotton ball bounced off the wall and flew back the way it came, grunting and clicking and cooing—"laughing"—as it went. Iris glared up at it, suspecting some kind of prank from the crew, but the thing plunged out of the air straight for her and she yelped in surprise as it ran smack into her hair.

“Ah!” Iris cried out as she fell back onto the bed and sent a cloud of cotton floating into the air a few inches off the bed.

It fell back down into her mouth and nose and eyes, and she sputtered to get it out of her face. Her body shuddered, and it was all she could do to slap her hands over her mouth and nose to stifle the gargantuan sneeze that racked her body. Seeing stars, Iris fell back to the bed on her back, suddenly exhausted. The grunting, almost like a Pidove’s soft cooing, sounded directly in her ear, and she tentatively opened her eyes only to come face to face with a ball of cotton staring back down at her.

Jerking in surprise, Iris knocked the creature off her head and scrambled toward the head of the bed away from where it landed on her comforter. Breathing in short gasps, Iris clutched her pillow to her chest as if that would help her at all. The creature righted itself with its leafy wings and blinked up at her with round, orange eyes.

“Huh?” Iris said. “You’re a...Cottonee?”

Cottonee, substantively little more than a white cotton ball a little smaller than a volleyball, grunted happily at the mention of its name and flapped its leafy wings to hover in the air. It bounced toward Iris again, surprisingly agile for such a fluffy Pokémon, but this time Iris was ready with her pillow chest plate and caught it in a small explosion of cotton. She coughed again.

“Cut that out! You’re making a mess in here!”

Cottonee whined and tucked its leaves under its body at the sound of Iris’s raised voice.
Inexplicably, Iris began to regret raising her voice at the little thing. It hadn’t done any real harm, she supposed.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to yell,” she muttered.

Cottonee looked up at her again and cooed, hesitant, but when Iris lowered her defensive pillow, it took that as an unequivocal invitation to chest-butt her without warning.

“Whoa!”

Iris fell back on her bed with Cottonee. It was stronger than it looked. Iris raised herself up on her elbows so she could look down at the lightweight Pokémon.

“Where did you even come from?”

Cottonee looked back up at her with those big orange eyes, as though it had been wondering the same thing itself. Something on the desk caught Iris’s eye, and she gasped. The Liechi plant, which up until last night had been perfectly intact, was all but destroyed in its basket. The petals had fallen, some of them crushed on the floor, and the fruit, all of it, was gone. Shriveled husks no bigger than a finger littered the desk and floor. The fruits had been sucked dry of their meat and juices.

“That cocoon,” Iris mused. “That was you? You ate the Liechi plant?”

Cottonee spread its leafy wings as if to take a little bow, but that was the extent of its response.

“Wow, all right, then.”

Iris got up off the bed, sending Cottonee tumbling onto the floor without a care. She pulled out the chest from under the bed and focused on changing out of her pajamas into regular clothing. As she was adjusting a belt over her dress, Cottonee floated back into her hair and began to nest.

“Stop that!” Iris shook out her hair and sent a rain of cotton onto the floor. “Oh my god. This’ll never come out.”

Cottonee burrowed deeper into her loose hair and she growled. Pulling on her boots and grabbing the small bag by the door where she kept her toiletries, Iris marched out of her room and down the hall to the bathroom. One look in the mirror and she had half a mind to throw her brush at it. Cottonee peeked at her through a mess of tangles in her violet hair like it had been caught red-handed in some scheme. Iris narrowed her eyes at it.

“You’re coming out of there if I have to cut you out,” she threatened.

“There’s more than one stall, you know. Or do you need the entire bathroom to yourself, Princess?”

Nuria’s voice was the absolute last one Iris wanted to hear right now, but it was Nuria who emerged from one of the two toilet stalls just then and approached the sink to wash her hands. But when she saw Iris’s predicament, she paused for a second and then burst out laughing.

“Oh my god, your hair! It’s come alive!”

Iris had the overwhelming urge to scream, but she settled for her usual death glare. She had to preserve some dignity, after all.
“No, you twit. That’s a Cottonee that decided to take up refuge in my hair in case your eyes aren’t working this morning,” she bit out.

Cottonee grunted and buried itself deeper among Iris’s luscious locks, spooked by the women’s exchange and raised voices. Iris growled in frustration and furiously opened up her bag to retrieve her brush, which she promptly turned on her hair like this was the last and greatest battle she would ever fight for the rest of her young life.

“Come on, get out!” she said.

Nuria washed her hands and approached Iris. “Whoa, hey, stop that, you’re just making it worse. Ugh, let me see—just give it to me!”

Nuria snatched the brush from Iris after a brief altercation.

“Give it back!” Iris snapped.

Nuria swatted her hand away. “No way. You’ll just make it worse. Here, turn around, yeah, like that. Now hold still.”

Iris gripped the edge of the metal sink to keep her hands from shaking as Nuria set to work on her hair one brush stroke at a time. Cottonee peeped from its little nest, and Iris glared up at it.

“You’re in so much trouble,” she said.

“Looks to me like you’re the one in trouble,” Nuria retorted. “Man, how much hair does one woman even need? This is ridiculous.”

“My hair is none of your business. And I was talking to Cottonee, not you.”

Nuria yanked the brush hard enough to hurt, and Iris hissed. “Careful of your tone, Princess. I’ve got your hair’s last hope in my hands.”

Nuria kept at it, slowly working her way through the tangles that sleep and Cottonee’s incessant burrowing had created, smoothing them all out, until she reached the Pokémon itself.

“Gotcha!”

Cottonee shrieked and lifted out of Iris’s hair in an attempt to flee, but Iris was ready and caught it in her hands before it could get far. Cotton came apart under her fingers and shed all over the front of her dress and the sink, and Iris sneezed again. Cottonee wriggled in her grip and she brought it to eye level.

“And now I’ve got you, Cottonee. Promise to sit still and quit shedding, and I’ll set you down. Understand?” Iris said.

Cottonee squirmed a little more, but after a few moments it began to calm down and blinked up at Iris and Nuria over her shoulder. Gingerly, Iris set the cotton puff down on the sink and it stayed, rocking a little and using its leafy wings to balance.

Iris sighed. “Good. Just...stay there while I clean up.”

Nuria watched the entire exchange in silence, and Iris turned on her.

“What?” she demanded.
Nuria shook her head. “Nothing. Turn around so I can finish.”

“I’m perfectly capable of brushing my own hair.

Nuria gave her a withering look. “Yeah, not with all that cotton stuck in it. You’ll never get it all out without being able to see out the back of your head. Allow this humble servant to serve, Princess.”

Iris bristled at her rudeness, but found she could not come up with any logical counterargument. It would have taken her much too long to get all the cotton out of her hair and her clothes alone unless she showered. Sighing, Iris once more leaned on the sink and held up her head. “Fine. But try not to pull out all my hair.”

“No guarantees.”

As it turned out, Nuria worked out all the kinks and removed all the cotton with a surprisingly gentle touch. She worked in silence, meticulous and thorough, and Iris chewed her lip for something to say. She was supposed to say something, right? Standing here in the bathroom alone with Nuria was awkward if she didn’t say something. She had to say something. Anything at all. What?

“So where’d Cottonee come from?” Nuria broke the silence. “You seem surprised to have it around, and you’re definitely not the type to have one in your party.”

Everything that came out of Nuria’s mouth somehow made Iris want to punch her in the face. She refrained, however. Nobly. “I’ll assume you meant no offense.”

“Oh, of course.”

Jerk.

Iris chewed her lip again, unsure how to make this sound even remotely not ridiculous. “I had a Liechi plant that I brought with me from Mirage Island. Cottonee was stuck to it. Well, in its cocoon form. I guess it was just born this morning. It ate all my fruit.”

Nuria snorted. “And you didn’t notice it earlier?”

“Of course I did! I noticed the cocoon when Syr Belaron first gave me the plant, for your information. I just...”

“...Just? You forgot, didn’t you?”

Iris huffed. “It doesn’t matter now. Cottonee’s here. I’ll just release it when we land in Undella Town.”

Nuria stopped brushing. “Really? You’ll just turn it loose?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

Nuria shrugged, and for the first time in their rocky acquaintance, Iris thought she looked her age, a regular young woman without the burdens and responsibilities of being a Tamer. “I just thought you’d want to keep a rare Pokémon like that. Fairies aren’t exactly a dime a dozen.”

Iris said nothing and looked down at Cottonee. It stared back up at her with those luminous orange eyes. Just a baby, born this morning. Green and untrained and far too young.
“Fairies and Dragons don’t mix,” Iris said.

Nuria brushed out a few more locks of Iris’s hair and handed her back the brush. Iris’s hair was back to its wavy sheen and cotton-free. “All the more reason to hold onto the little guy, don’t you think?”

Nuria headed for the door, and Iris was once more at a loss for words. What to say? What was appropriate? Maybe she’d ruin things if she spoke? She agonized for the couple seconds it took Nuria to reach the door.

“Don’t call me ‘princess’,” she blurted out.

Nuria paused in the doorway, bemused. “Oh? But how will I address you? You are the rightful princess with all that Dragonsblood, aren’t you?”

The bait was cast, but Iris did not rise to meet it. For some reason she could not name, she no longer had the energy to. Maybe she was just tired, or she was already so late in her morning routine that she had better things to think about. Whatever the reason, Hurricane Iris did not stir this morning.

“Just call me ‘Iris’,” she said finally, still staring at the sink.

Nuria stared at her a moment, perhaps as perplexed as Iris felt, and eventually nodded. “See you at breakfast, Iris.”

When Iris looked up, Nuria was long gone. She swallowed the ghost of a thank you in the back of her throat. No one would be here to hear it, anyway, and it would not change anything, besides. Cottonee looked up at her and cooed tentatively.

Iris rubbed her eyes. “What use do I have for a Fairy, anyway?”

Cottonee flapped its little leaf wings, and Iris peered down at it through her fingertips.

“Quiet, you. Behave and I promise to find you something eat.”

Cottonee bounced happily at the prospect of food but dutifully kept its cotton to itself. Iris narrowed her eyes, skeptical, but pulled out her toothbrush and proceeded with her morning ablutions. Cottonee watched her with rapt attention, but it heeded her command. The promise of food could sway even the trickiest mischief-makers, after all.

When the Oculus surfaced in the Bay of Undella, Iris had not realized how stale the air in the sub had become until she breathed in the fresh ocean air on the deck. Cottonee had claimed her hair as its preferred mode of travel and had become almost impossible to pry off whenever food was not around as a proper motivator, but it had stopped shedding so much. It was a compromise Iris was willing to live with until she could find somewhere to set the little Fairy free.

The wind proved too much for Cottonee, though, and it made a frantic whistling sound as the currents tried to whisk it away. Iris caught it without thinking and hugged the ball of cotton to her chest. In its fright, Cottonee burst with tufts of white fluff that blew into Iris’s face. She sputtered as some of it got into her mouth and into her eyes.

“Hold still.”
Something cool wiped her face, startling Iris even more, but before she could do anything about it, the damp cloth was gone and the excess cotton with it. Iris blinked at Nuria, who was frowning and shaking out the damp cloth over the edge of the deck railing. Tufts of soggy cotton fell from the rag into the sea.

“I don’t need your help,” Iris snapped.

Nuria rolled her eyes. “Oh sure, next time I’ll let you choke on all that cotton. Won’t that be a glamorous way for the great Halfling Dragon Princess to go?”

Heat gathered in Iris’s neck and cheeks. Cottonée squealed in her arms and began to squirm. Its struggling broke through Iris’s rising temper—she’d been squeezing it too tightly. Surprised, Iris loosened her grip and cradled the puffy Fairy. Cottonée was happy to settle into her folded arms like a toddler in a knapsack, ready to see the world.

“I told you to call me Iris. Next time I won’t tell you with words,” Iris said, showing Nuria her back and heading for the dock where the sub had pulled up.

Undella Town was smaller than Humilau and lacked the warships and navy presence of its neighbor. Nymo docked the Oculus in the trade port where fishing boats and cargo transports brought in their hauls for trade in town. Even above water, the metal and glass submersible drew stares from the sailors and merchants at port who had probably never seen such an odd ship before.

Belaron, Moros, and Soriel joined Iris on the pier, and they were soon joined by Nuria and Nymo.

“Iris Lady, you have your business here, yes? I will buy the supplies in town while Nuria Daughter inflates my eye,” Nymo explained.

“He means we have to replenish the Oculus’s air supply. That’ll take at least an hour, plus time for maintenance,” Nuria translated her father’s thickly accented common tongue. “That should give you enough time to do whatever you need to do.”

“Fine,” Iris said. She released Gyarados and Dragonair into the bay so they could swim and procure food for themselves while she would track down the mysterious address Marlon had given her. Belaron released his Feraligatr to join them, but the blue croc kept its distance and disappeared below the surface to hunt on its own. “Syr Bel, let’s go.”

“Excuse me, Princess?” Moros said. “If it’s all right with you, I’d like to take this opportunity to let my Pokémon get a little exercise. I’ll meet you back here in a couple of hours.”

“Not a problem. Soriel, go with him.”

“Huh? I was going to check out the town,” Soriel complained.

“So check out the town if you must. But stay together. This isn’t Blackthorn, and we’re strangers here.”

Moros averted his gaze, and Soriel bit her tongue. Satisfied that they saw things her way, Iris gestured to Belaron and set off toward the beach. Behind her, she heard Soriel and Moros complaining to each other.

“Town first,” Soriel said.

“Absolutely not. Nidoking and the others have been cooped up in their Pokéballs for days. I won’t subject them to this treatment another minute,” Moros said.
“So turn ’em loose and let’s go already.”

Moros sputtered. “T-Turn Nidoking loose?! Sergeant, have you quite lost your marbles?”

Soriel snorted rudely. “If I have, that makes two of us.” She eyed his pants in the seediest way possible, and Moros stiffened and closed his legs on instinct.

They continued to squabble, but Iris tuned out the rest. They would get over it, they always did.

“Those two are more trouble than they’re worth,” Belaron said, as though it pained him to admit such a travesty.

“They’re just excited about being in a new land. Don’t hold it against them.”

“No, of course not, Princess. I wouldn’t dream of it,” he backtracked.

Iris was less interested in Belaron’s small talk and more in the sight of Undella Town unfolding before her eyes. The sea breeze fluttered her white shift over her knees and filled her thick hair. Cottonee made a whistling cooing sound and flapped its little leaf wings as it caught the wind and enjoyed the rushing sensation from the safety of Iris’s arms.

Undella was a seaside town on a pristine white beach with the finest sand Iris had ever seen. Beyond the small commercial port to the north, the beaches were bare and residential, reserved for exclusive use by the owners of the many palatial villas nestled among the leafy tropical trees for privacy. Undella was a popular tourist destination for Unovans wanting to escape tiresome city life from Castelia to Virbank to Nimbasa, and with good reason—the place was an island paradise like none Iris had ever seen.

Rocky cliffs rose high over the beaches in layered terraces. Villas popped up above and around them like mushrooms after a hard rain, and in between everything was green. The waters were crystal clear, like the sky on a cloudless summer day. People lay on the white beaches sunning or playing volleyball or walking hand in hand. Vendors patrolled the beaches with boxes of sweets—coconut honey bars, sweet tamarind paste, salted nuts, fruits in every shape, size, and color. Kids ran around flying papalotes, colorful kites that trailed ribbons and caught the wind, a traditional toy of Adria that Iris remembered flying herself when she was a child running on beaches just like this one without a care in the world.

“That’s quite a lot of sand,” Belaron commented.

Iris said nothing and ignored the fleeting desire to kick off her sandals and sink her toes into that sand, to run along the shallows and fly a kite like she used to. “I’m going to ask about this address Marlon gave me. We’ll never find it if we wander around by ourselves.”

“Yes, very good.”

Belaron wore his Ridder armor, which consisted of boiled leather, mail, and iron plates over his shoulders and chest. A heavy sword swung in its sheath at his hip. His hair was slicked back and kempt as usual, but he dabbed his pale forehead every thirty seconds when it grew damp with sweat. He would burn soon if he didn’t find any shade.

Iris led the charge into town, where Undella unfolded in much the same manner as downtown Humilau. Shops and restaurants and hotels with only three or four rooms were packed together like it was a competition. Locals worked the service windows in shorts and sandals and sundresses, dark of skin like Iris and immune to the summer sun’s swelter. The tourist season was in full force, and unlike in Humilau, there were many different faces milling about the streets of Undella on this
day. People of all colors and builds and speaking a variety of languages perused the shops, frequented restaurants, and gathered in boutique hotel lobbies to sip champagne and enjoy precious time away from the job, from family responsibilities, from life itself just to indulge. Iris could almost smell the money in the air changing hands as the hardworking locals waited on the tourists and accepted generous tips.

“Ah, how about there?” Belaron suggested. “That restaurant may know where to find our mysterious host. It looks like it’s been around for years.”

Iris glanced at the establishment in question. The sign boasted its longevity as one of the first restaurants in town, sure enough. But it was filled with tourists settling in for the lunch rush, and the staff all looked about ready to trip over themselves running around to wait on all the tables. She said nothing and looked around. A small stall, one of the many along the street, caught her eye. An old woman who looked like she’d been around since the town was founded was hunched over a cast iron griddle cooking something. Iris approached, leaving Belaron to follow.

“Hello,” Iris said in Adriati. “What are you making?”

The old woman looked up, surprised to hear her native tongue in such a touristy spot. She smiled when she saw Iris, revealing a mouthful of an impressive two teeth. “Plátanos Maduros,” she said.

“How wonderful, he will love them. My plantains are the best in the bay, you can ask anyone,” the old woman said.

Iris spared the woman a small smile. “I’m sure they are, thank you.”

The old woman prepared a small tray of freshly fried fruit and generously drizzled cane sugar over them. “The Tropius in Undella grow the sweetest plantains,” the old woman went on. “My son owns a farm and raises Tropius, like my husband before him, and his father before that. My family has always made sweet plantains thanks to Tropius.”

She handed Iris the carton with a few toothpicks. Iris tried one, and her expression softened. “Delicious.”

The old woman smiled, and her many wrinkles stretched her face around the eyes and mouth pleasantly.

“You’ve lived here for a long time,” Iris said, handing Belaron the carton. “I wonder if you could tell me where I can find this address?”

Iris handed the old woman the paper onto which Marlon had scribbled the address she was to visit. The old woman squinted as she read the chicken scrawl, and after a moment she handed the paper back.

“No one goes there,” she warned. “She doesn’t like visitors.”

Iris frowned. She?

“What did she say?” Belaron pressed.

Iris put up a hand to silence him. “All the same, Gym Leader Marlon himself asked me to find this address. Please, can you help me?”
The old woman blinked up at her, then let her eyes fall to Cottonee in Iris’s arms. The little Fairy had smelled the fried plantains and was struggling to snatch one from the carton just out of reach in Belaron’s hold.

“You are a Pokémon trainer,” she said. “A Tamer?”

Iris kept her expression carefully blank. “That’s right.”

The old woman seemed to consider this a moment, then nodded. “All right. She lives on the cliff. Go west down that road, then follow the only path north. There is a sign. That villa is the only one on the path, you cannot miss it.”

Iris nodded and handed the old woman a couple bills to cover the cost of the food and a little extra for the information. “Thank you.”

The old woman grabbed her wrist in a grip that had surprising strength. Cottonee squeaked in surprise, and Belaron went for his sword.

“She will know you are coming. Be careful.”

Iris resisted the urge to pull away, and almost as soon as the old woman had assaulted her, she let go and went back to her cooking as though nothing were amiss.

“Princess,” Belaron hissed.

Iris backed up and turned away. “Let’s go.”

Belaron had no choice but to follow. Iris led the way down the street the old woman had told her about, and soon they left the bustle of the downtown lunch hour behind. Belaron still carried the carton of fried plantains, and Cottonee still scrambled in Iris’s arms to get at it.

“What was that all about? Did she tell you where to find the address?” Belaron asked, sniffing a slice of sweetened plantain experimentally.

“Yes. It’s up on the cliff at the end of the path.” Cottonee continued to squirm, and Iris was nearing her wit’s end. “Ugh, give me one of those.”

Iris snatched a slice of plantain from the carton and dangled it over Cottonee’s head. The fluffy Fairy escaped Iris’s hold and leaped to grab the fruit in midair. Cotton surrounded its small mouth, and it almost seemed like the fruit had disappeared among its fluffy folds. Cottonee cooed happily and settled on Iris’s head at the base of her thick ponytail.

“If you get any sugar in my hair, I’ll leave you here,” Iris warned.

“To think, a Cottonee had stowed away on that Liechi plant I procured for you,” Belaron said.

He was still dangling a toothpick with an uneaten plantain on the end.

“Try it. It’s very good,” Iris said.

Belaron eyed the fruit skeptically. “I’m sure it is, but it could be contaminated. Who knows what that old woman used to cook with? Or even if she washed her hands.”

Iris frowned, a twinge of irritation spiking the hairs on the back of her neck, but she ignored it. “Then give it to me.” She held out her hand.
Belaron passed her back the carton, and Iris stuffed a couple pieces of fruit in her mouth. It was good, just like she remembered it being. The taste was a little sweeter down south here in Undella than it was in Humilau, but the differences were negligible. For a transient moment, it was Sonora walking beside her, not Belaron, and they shared a carton of fried Tropius plantains together as they walked along the beach. Axew rode on her shoulder instead of Cottonee, and her fingers were sticky with sugar.

Cottonee cooed on Iris’s head, jostling her from the memory, and she wordlessly passed another slice of fruit to it. The fluffy Fairy was delighted over the food and whistled happily as it bounced lightly on Iris’s head. She had to bite her lip from chuckling at Cottonee’s simple nature, like a child. It was still only a few days old.

They left the downtown behind and wandered onto the path the old woman had mentioned to Iris. The trees were overgrown and thick. Their fruits were fat and ripe for picking. Wild Chatot perched in the high branches above, singing a cacophonous tune that combined the calls of other birds and even human speech. Iris was sure she heard one scream a dirty curse in Adriati and snorted with laughter before she could help herself. Belaron gave her a weird look, but said nothing of it.

Beyond the trees, Iris caught a glimpse of the Tropius farms the old woman had talked about. Tropius were gentle giants that made their homes in the tropics, where the plantains that grew at the base of their throats could thrive and feed other wild Pokémon, such as Taillow and Chatot and the elemental monkeys native to Unova. The Tropius had space to roam around and sun themselves, but because they could fly the farmers had to keep their food supply plentiful and fresh water for bathing and drinking, or the giant Flyers could abandon the farms.

“Impressive,” Belaron said. “I’ve never seen such large Tropius before.”

The path was wide enough and town was far enough behind them as they climbed higher along the cliff’s incline, so Iris released Haxorus. Cottonee immediately tensed up and squealed, and it attempted to burrow into Iris’s hair the way it had the first morning.

“Oh no you don’t.” Iris plucked Cottonee from her hair and held it out to Haxorus. “If you can’t get along with Haxorus, then you can’t stay with us. Got it?”

Cottonee had frozen in Iris’s grip as it came face to face with Haxorus, but the Axe Jaw Dragon had no such qualms. It let its heavy lower jaw hang open and swiveled its red eye to get a good look at the tiny Fairy.

“It’s difficult to believe Dragons are supposed to fear Fairies when you compare Cottonee to Haxorus,” Belaron said with a laugh.

Haxorus’s gaze lingered on Cottonee a moment, but it soon lost interest and looked up at the colorful fruits hanging down from the trees above. The wild Chatot squawked down at Haxorus but dared not come within chomping range. Not that Haxorus would ever waste his time on those skinny chickens.

Cottonee calmed down a little and its natural curiosity began to win out against instinctual fear of the unknown. It squirmed in Iris’s hands, and she let it float away toward Haxorus, where it settled on the lumbering Dragon’s head in between the massive guillotine jaws that extended over its head like horns. Haxorus didn’t even notice it was there, or if it did, then it could not have cared less.

Huh.
There was another flash of light, and Belaron’s Arbok coalesced on the path behind them. The purple snake was twelve feet long with a venomous bite that could bring down an Arcanine. Arbok hissed and tasted the air with its forked tongue, flaring its patterned hood like a ghoulish mask. Cottonee shuddered again and tried to burrow into Haxorus’s head, but there was nowhere to go. Arbok eyed the little cotton ball, but it dared not approach with Haxorus there. The old Dragon growled in warning and trudged alongside Iris, one red eye trained suspiciously on Arbok. The two Pokémon had never gotten along, but few species got along with Arbok’s line in general.

“Shall we?” Belaron said, indicating the path ahead.

“Yes. I want to get this over with.”

They walked on, Haxorus and Cottonee trailing just behind Iris while Arbok slithered along farther behind, its dark eyes peering up at the Chatot that taunted it from the relative safety of the trees.

Soon, they came upon the end of the path near the edge of the cliff. A path carved into the cliff side led down to the beach below, and a white-painted villa sat among the trees with blue shutters and cloudy glass windows that made it difficult to see inside. Ivy curled along the old walls, but the bungalow looked to be well maintained. It was just a single story, perhaps large enough to accommodate a small family of four for an extended vacation. No one looked to be home.

Belaron dismissed Arbok to hunt for something to eat, but Haxorus was busy exploring the yard and the surrounding forest. Cottonee floated back to Iris, its large, orange eyes luminous as it peered around, but it had fallen silent.

In fact, the entire area had fallen silent. Iris no longer heard the annoying Chatot, or the rustles of the sea breeze, or the Tropius bumbling about farther back. This place was quiet, almost unnaturally so. And yet, the wind blew gently and disturbed a chime on the wrap-around porch. Iris was drawn to the soft tinkling, beautiful in its sheer simplicity, and climbed the porch steps.

The chime hung on the roof of the porch over the railing, a small thing, pink and white. Its gentle jingle sent a wave of calm through Iris, inexplicable, and she stared up at it. All of a sudden, Cottonee shrieked and floated off Iris’s head. It flapped its little leaf wings and generated a gust of wind, thick with a pink fog-like dust, and blasted it at the hanging chime.

The chime clanged and detached from the roof of the cottage but hovered in mid-air. It generated a shimmering yellow wall of light that buffeted the gust of Fairy Wind, protecting it from the surprise attack. Iris gasped and stumbled backwards.

“Princess!” Belaron ran to her side, sword drawn. “Stay back, that’s no ordinary wind chime. It’s a Chimecho, a Psychic!”

But Chimecho did not try to attack as it hid behind its Light Screen from the remains of Cottonee’s attack. Cottonee shrieked angrily from Iris’s head, flapping its little wings but not advancing any further. Iris steadied herself on the porch railing.

“It’s all right, Chimecho,” a woman’s voice called from behind the screen door inside. “She’s the one we’ve been expecting.”

Belaron turned his sword on the figure shadowed behind the door. “Show yourself, woman. Who are you? Why have you sent for my mistress?”

The woman approached the door, but the shadows inside kept her face and figure hidden. “Sent for? You’re mistaken, good Syr. The Dragon Princess was fated to appear before me. I have seen
“Witch,” Belaron hissed under his breath.

Iris laid a hand on his sword arm to lower it. “Sheath your sword, Syr Bel.”

“But Princess—”

“Do not defy me.”

Iris tentatively climbed the porch steps and approached the door. It was as though some invisible energy were pulling her feet forward, step by step, like she’d memorized the motions but had no control over them. Something about this place, the quiet, the woman in the shadows drew her near despite the voice in her head that whispered of danger, of the unknown.

Belaron followed behind, sword still drawn, but the woman inside raised her hand and Iris stopped instinctively.

“Just you,” she said to Iris. “The good knight must stay behind.”

“I stay with the princess,” Belaron objected. “I am sworn to protect her.”

“No,” Iris said. “Syr Bel, I’ll go alone. Stay here until my business is finished.”

Belaron sputtered. “But Princess! We don’t even know who this woman is! I swore an oath to protect you, to stay by your side.”

“You also swore to obey me, and I know you to be a man of your word.”

Belaron fell silent in shock, but he was not the type to argue with Iris when she had given him a direct order. With visible reluctance, he backed down the porch stairs, but Iris could feel his scathing glare on her back and shivered. Still, this was something she had to do alone. Every bone in her body told her so, and she would not ignore the instinct. She could look out for herself, besides. This didn’t concern him.

“Come,” the woman beckoned, sliding back into the darkness of the villa.

Iris opened the door and let herself inside. Cottonee huddled down into her hair, and for once Iris didn’t reprimand it. The house was dark, but natural light filtering through the windows illuminated the interior well enough. It was a typical nautical themed seaside cottage with white sofas, blue throw rugs over hardwood floors, and paintings of the sea and sea life on the walls. A clock ticked over the kitchen counter, pounding in the natural quiet that permeated this place.

“This way.”

Iris followed the voice toward the back of the house into an enclosed veranda overlooking the ocean. A set of couches framed a coffee table, where a pitcher of iced tea, a pair of empty glasses, and a plate of sliced local Mago berries sat waiting. But Iris stilled at the sight of the dark figure hovering by the open door to the backyard.

A Gothitelle floated inches above the hardwood floor, its tapering arms like frayed cloth and its bodice tattered at the ends, like a dress worn too long and unraveling with age. Piercing blue eyes trained on Iris, saw through her behind a mask of black. Iris had encountered a number of Psychics in her day, but this one was in a league above most others. She could taste the power emanating from it. In that split second of recognition, Iris knew this Gothitelle was responsible for whatever
Psychic barrier enforced the eerie quiet and calm around the villa. She also knew that there was only one way such a powerful Psychic would be living here in a human settlement—the woman in the shadows was Clairvoyant.

“Please sit.”

The voice startled Iris and she whirled. Somehow the woman had managed to get behind her and approached in total silence like a Ghost. Iris swallowed hard but remained standing. The woman was older than her, perhaps in her mid thirties, but her face retained an unmistakable air of youth far younger than her years, almost angelic, childlike. Her golden hair fell about her in waves, the kind of hair young girls see in high fashion magazines full of extensions and product to make it shine, but there was nothing cosmetic about this woman with hair so long and heavy it must break her back to carry it all around. In her arms, she carried what looked like a stuffed plushie, but it moved when it yawned, its dark eyes heavy with sleep. The Reuniclus was curled up inside a pale jelly membrane, impenetrable and amorphous and subservient to its vast Psychic powers.

More than the woman’s looks or the innocuous Psychic in her arms, however, it was the eyes that captured Iris’s attention. They were milky and grey and reflected the sunlight back like a corpse’s. She was blind.

“I…” Iris stammered.

“Sit.” The woman walked past her and took a seat on the far couch, dainty as a porcelain doll in her shapeless pink and white dress, perhaps a nightgown. Reuniclus settled on her lap, the gelatinous membrane surrounding it shifting like a water balloon. She poured two glasses of iced tea, seemingly unburdened by her blindness.

Iris watched the woman and her unblinking, dead stare, hesitated a moment, then sat down on the edge of the couch sitting opposite her host.

“Iris Fafnir,” the woman said, pushing a glass of iced tea toward Iris. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

“How do you know me?”

The woman smiled, but it only sent a shiver down Iris’s spine. Cottonee sensed her unease and cooed. The woman tilted her head.

“That Cottonee... It’s very attached to you. It seems it was waiting for you, too.”

“Answer my question. Marlon sent me here, so I want some answers. I have a lot to do, and I can’t afford to waste time here.”

The woman took a sip of her tea and wiped her mouth on her long sleeve. Gothitelle hovered closer to her and looked her over, but the woman seemed not to notice.

“Yes... You have much to do, Halfling Dragon Princess.”

Iris pricked at that infernal reminder of her diluted blood. “Listen, lady. I don’t have time for games. Who are you, and what do you want?”

The woman folded her dainty hands on her lap over Reuniclus’s slumbering body and held Iris’s gaze in spite of her blindness. For the life of her, Iris could not remember ever meeting the eyes of another and feeling so naked, like she could not have lied to this woman even if she’d wanted to.

“I’m known by many names,” the woman said. “Some call me the Blind Seer. Others call me the...”
Graea. To the fearful, like your good knight, I am simply Witch. But you may call me Caitlin. As for why you’re here...”

Caitlin held out a hand to Iris, and in spite of herself, Iris had the ridiculous urge to reach back.

“You’re here to show me a prophecy three thousand years in the making.”
Rosa passed three guard stations along Route Three on her way to Nacrene City. By sticking to the wooded edges of the path, she was able to avoid detection the first four days of traveling, but on the fifth day when the signature painted, refurbished warehouses of Nacrene City came into view over the hill, her luck finally ran out.

Men and women in Team Plasma uniforms guarded the main entrance to the city, but Nacrene was not Rosa's intended destination. With Lenora gone and Ghetsis in control of everything north of Accumula Town, there was nothing Rosa could do in Nacrene. She had to get to Castelia, and she had to do it without being seen or apprehended.

Emerging from the trees, Rosa and Leafeon darted along the outskirts of town, careful to avoid detection by the guards at the main entrance. Once out of sight, she stuck to the shadowed sides of the long, graffiti-painted warehouses that acted as new age apartment buildings, restaurants, shops, even the local courthouse. Worming her way around Nacrene became a game of cat and mouse. Leafeon's presence magnified the distance Rosa could see with the lifelines, but she was vulnerable to ambush while she crouched on the ground and followed their paths. About three quarters of the way to Pinwheel Forest, the impregnable wall of black and green on the western edge of Nacrene City, Rosa was just a second too slow to avoid the ambush her paranoia told her was coming.

"Hey, who's there?" a voice called.

It was midday with nowhere to hide. Rosa pressed her body against the side of a yellow-painted building, but her spotters were already jogging to her location. She caught a flash of bright light, and the sounds of their footsteps drew closer. There would be no sneaking past these guards, but engaging them could draw more until they swarmed her.

Thinking quickly, Rosa drew her bow and grabbed a Pokéball at her waist. "Leaf Blade!" she shouted.

Leafeon was fast, and even before Rosa had tossed out the other Pokéball and drawn a fresh arrow, Leafeon was already upon the enemy. The feline's target, a woman in a black Plasma uniform, dropped the chain she was carrying and fell to her knees. Leafeon's bladed tail had struck her in the juncture between the shoulder and neck, severing the carotid artery and snapping the woman's collarbone. Her scream died on her lips as she choked, blood filling her collapsing lungs. She was dead before she hit the ground, her blood expanding around her in a growing puddle as it rushed to escape her cooling body.

"Oh, shit!"

The other Plasma guard, a young man in the same uniform as his partner, skidded in his tracks and held out his sword to protect himself. A mean looking Toxicroak hunched over next to him, the source of the Pokéball light Rosa had seen before.

Barely glancing at the bipedal Fighter frog, she said, "Silence that Toxicroak!"

Without waiting to see her command carried out, she let loose an arrow. The sharpened shaft hit the Plasma guard in his right breast, jerking his body off balance, and he staggered back.
The next couple seconds went by fast. The guard reached for the orange whistle hooked to his belt and put it to his lips. He managed to get off a half second's shrill scream through the little plastic whistle, but Rosa fired a second arrow that caught him in the neck and snapped his head back. Blood exploded from his ripped windpipe, and he convulsed. The orange whistle fell from his lips as his body hit the ground, speckled with his blood. His tongue lolled and collected dirt where he fell.

Rosa drew another arrow, lightning fast, but Toxicroak was too preoccupied to pose much of a threat. Serperior's Vine Whip wrapped around the Fighter frog, shackling its arms and legs and tightening by the second like a hundred snakes constricting. Toxicroak struggled and sweated Poison Gas from its porous skin, slowly chewing through Serperior's vines, but Serperior unleashed more and more vines to replace the ones that rotted away. A well-placed Glare froze Toxicroak mid-struggle, petrifying it with paralysis. Leafeon hissed at Toxicroak and the fetid stench of its poison and paced back and forth next to Serperior, but dared not interfere.

Finally, Serperior yanked on the vines, tightening them with all its might until they began to glow. Toxicroak jerked in its bone-crushing prison. Rosa looked on as the frog's bones crunched and its muscles atrophied before her eyes, as though it was aging in rapid time. Toxicroak's bright blue skin lost its predatory luster and shriveled as Serperior's Giga Drain rapidly and excruciatingly siphoned the frog's life force. Rosa lowered her bow, and soon Serperior released Toxicroak. A mummified husk fell to the ground, twisted and broken and little more than an emaciated bag of bone powder and blood. Leafeon hissed at Toxicroak's remains for good measure. The female Plasma guard's blood was beginning to dry in Leafeon's tail and the speckled trail behind it.

Rosa inspected Serperior's receding vines. Toxicroak had rotted a number of them, and the poison was still eating away at them. Stashing her bow, Rosa pulled out her serrated hunting knife and grabbed a handful of the festering vines.

"Hold still," she said gently before swiftly slicing the knife over the healthy green yet untainted by blight.

Serperior opened its mouth in a baleful hiss, revealing a set of fangs each as long as Rosa's hand that folded flat for concealment. But the great serpent did not attack Rosa and let her finish, wary of the poison that could infect it and cause irreparable harm if it wasn't dealt with. Once Rosa had finished her work, Serperior withdrew its trimmed vines into the folds of its leafy collar. It would take a couple days for them to heal and grow back, but the energy Serperior had leeched from Toxicroak would expedite the process.

Rosa ran a hand over Serperior's regal neck, a silent apology for the pain she'd caused it. But Serperior was a tough son of a bitch that could take a little pain. And right now, Rosa didn't have time to hang around worrying about it.

Moving fast, Rosa brought her foot down on the body of the male Plasma guard she'd taken out with her bow and used her weight as leverage to retrieve one of the arrows. The other had snapped when he hit the ground and was useless. Stashing the bloody arrow in her quiver and sheathing her hunting knife, Rosa recalled Serperior and took off with Leafeon. Someone may have heard the guard's distress signal, short as it had been, and she wasn't about to stick around to meet his friends.

Running at almost a full sprint now, Rosa paused only to check around corners down alleys that led deeper into the heart of the city. She spotted the blue-painted roof of the Nacrene Museum, which doubled as the city's Gym, in the distance, and her heart wrenched. Tears, unbidden, blurred her vision and she furiously wiped her face. Some of the dead Plasma guard's blood was on her hands from when she'd retrieved the arrow from his body. Could he have been an ally once? Could he
have been among the crowd of gathered young people who had come to hear N speak of a
revolution in one of these very warehouses so many years ago? Could he have been standing next
to her? Had she bumped into him?

Rosa's bloody fingers found the locket around her neck and clutched it tightly. Shouts sounded
somewhere in the near distance, but they seemed to be moving farther away. It wouldn't be long
before the bodies were found, and then all the Plasma guards in Nacrene would be hunting for her.
Leafeon meowed, uneasy now that Rosa had paused her mad dash, and she held out a hand for the
small feline.

"Come on."

Leafeon understood her meaning and hopped up onto her shoulder. Wiping the rest of her tears,
Rosa took off again with her eye on the edge of the vast Pinwheel Forest to the west. When she
finally made it to the mouth of the forest, she almost tripped over herself skidding to a stop and
flattening herself against the wall of a warehouse to avoid detection.

A group of people, a couple in Team Plasma uniforms and some in plain clothes, were conversing
near the large guard post where the Nacrene Gym usually stationed strong Pokémon trainers to
survey the forest for any feral Pokémon that might wander too close to the city. Rosa strained her
hearing, but she could only make out fragments of the conversation.

"...team already...yesterday..."

"But...dark and...lost? The ship..."

"...sawmill's deep in the..."

Rosa frowned, trying to make sense of the bits of information she overheard, but the group soon
dispersed with the Plasma Agents heading back into Nacrene proper and the plainclothes returning
to the guard post. Rosa counted the seconds, waiting a full minute before she deemed it safe to
continue. The shouts were still faint behind her, but if she slipped into the forest now, she might
evade any pursuit. No one was foolish enough to venture into Pinwheel Forest without a guide or a
garrison unless they had a death wish. Or unless they were on the run from capture.

Rosa skirted the guardhouse, careful to stay low in the grass, until she reached the beginnings of
Pinwheel Forest. Pausing to catch her breath and listen, Rosa crouched among the first trees that
gave way to the larger woods. She was just south of the designated path, but there were plenty of
animal trails to follow while avoiding the main path and whatever foot traffic might be on it. A
scuffle in the forest was not ideal for her bow and arrow or Serperior's size.

Rosa touched a hand to the forest floor, reaching past the dead fallen leaves to the earth beneath,
and closed her eyes. Lifelines came alive in white spider webs in her mind's eye as she tried to trace
a path through the forest, but as she'd already known and dreaded, Pinwheel Forest was too dense
to find any dominant path through to the other side. It was like standing in front of a wall of
endlessly undulating light, each flicker the flutter of a Yanma's wings or an Ekans's slither among
the branches. The trees stacked together like one continuous entity, bricks in a wall separated by
the thick and stagnant concrete air where little sunlight could penetrate.

Voices drew closer from behind, and Rosa swore under her breath. Reaching for a Pokéball, she
released Ferroseed. The living pinecone crunched the leaves underfoot as it rolled around to get its
bearings. Tiny yellow eyes peered into the forest, curious.

"Find the path, Thorny," Rosa whispered. "Avoid people."
Ferroseed whirred like an engine cog, its steely thorns clicking against pebbles buried in the dirt as it churned up the earth and rolled forward. Leafeon trotted after it, and Rosa brought up the rear. She looked up at the blue sky and the few fat clouds that drifted lazily over the canopy. If only she could Fly over the forest on Swanna, there would be no need for any of this. But if those Plasma Agents spotted her and forced her into an aerial battle, she would be done for.

The voices were getting closer, and she could have sworn she heard someone shouting about a killer in their midst, although it could have been her paranoia. Swallowing hard, Rosa darted into the ominous forest after her Pokémon, leaving the bright sun and blue sky behind. The shadows soon swallowed her up, and there was no trace of her left to find.

Ferroseed plowed away through the dense darkness of Pinwheel Forest, churning up mulch and moss and rotten leaves whenever they blocked the rough animal path Rosa was following. It wended and wound in strange loops, impossible to follow without a Pokémon's keen eyesight and sense of smell. Together, Leafeon and Ferroseed managed to keep up with the trail and lead Rosa deeper into the ominous woods.

The forest canopy was a network of crisscrossing leafy branches that blocked out most sunlight and insulated the air below. There was no breeze, and the air was cool and damp and stagnant. Bugs and birds and a few Grass-type Pokémon poked their heads out of their hiding places to watch Rosa, Leafeon, and Ferroseed pass.

Sewaddle and Swadloon bundled up in leaves and moss to protect their growing bodies huddled in tree hollows and silken nests high off the forest floor to avoid predators like the larger Pinsir and Parasect and Venipede. Pidove and Tranquill nested even higher in the canopy near the sunlight and the sky. Leafeon hissed at a nearby tree, and Rosa jumped when a small family of Pansage and Simisage screeched and leaped from the tree. They jumped along the branches deeper into the forest and spooked a flock of sleeping Pidove and Tranquill, who took to the skies in a fanfare of angry squawking and flapping feathers.

"Eyes on the path," Rosa whispered. If Ferroseed and Leafeon lost it, she would be doomed to wander the forest blind.

The forest floor was a mess of fallen trees that had rotted, decomposed, and become food for new trees and Pokémon. The larger ones were hollowed with rot and Pokémon burrowing, and Rosa could walk through the very largest ones. Ferroseed whirred to a stop in front of one such fallen hollow log, unsure where to go. Leafeon sniffed the air and curled back its upper lip in a snarl, not liking the stench of wet decomposition. Rosa kneeled down and peered through the gloom. Movement inside the log drew her eye to a cluster of Foongus Ingrained in the rotted wood and thriving in the damp shadows. They made sucking sounds in warning, but when Rosa didn't retreat, they released a cloud of Spores.

Rosa swore and covered her nose and mouth as she scrambled out of the way. Ferroseed burrowed backwards, surprisingly fast for such an awkward Pokémon, while Leafeon leaped on top of the log and crossed that way.

"Great, but how am I gonna get around?" Rosa grumbled.

Ferroseed poked its spiny head out of the ground and looked around. Sighing, Rosa picked up the little pinecone Pokémon in one arm and backtracked. Leafeon followed at a trot.
"We'll have to find another way around."

She set Ferroseed back down on the ground, and it began to roll against her booted leg, wanting to be picked up again.

"Later, Thorny. Find a new path right now, okay? And hurry."

Leafeon led the way down a very tight trail in between the trees. Rosa had to remove her bow and quiver and squeeze in between the tree trunks. For the next ten minutes, the sensation of the forest closing in on her from all sides was enough to make her start to imagine the trees coming to life—giant Sudowoodo that would crush her between them. She closed her eyes, but the lifelines surrounding them were thick and too close together, and she could not make sense of them. Only Ferroseed bumping into her from behind reassured her that the path was not closing behind her and swallowing her whole.

After what seemed like ages, the trees widened and Rosa stumbled out from between them. She was not particularly claustrophobic, but the world spun as she crouched on her hands and knees on the ground, fingers crunching leaves and damp earth, and breathed deeply. Her forehead was clammy with sweat when she wiped it. Ferroseed crunched through the leaves to her side, bumping her thigh and making a clicking noise. Up ahead, Leafeon had frozen in its tracks, bladed tail slicing the air as its hair stood on end, spooked.

"Huh?"

Rosa shook the leaves from her hair and clothes and stowed her bow and quiver. When she got to her feet, she saw the source of Leafeon's trepidation. It was her turn to freeze.

"Oh..."

A Sawsbuck lay on its side, unmoving. An impressive rack of antlers—Rosa counted at least twelve points—sat like a crown on its head festooned with lush green leaves. The edges had begun to wilt and curl with rot, their host dead. The Sawsbuck's magnificent sorrel hide gleamed, but Rosa could not see any sign of a mortal wound or blood. Most intriguing of all, though, was the small creature curled up under its belly that stared back at Rosa with wide, dark eyes full of fear and uncertainty.

A summer Deerling, barely three feet tall at the shoulder and with a lustrous pelt tinted green where the moss it hosted accumulated, remained seated while Rosa and Leafeon stared back at it. Its long ears twitched, listening for even a threatening breath from the intruders. The beginnings of antlers poked out of its head, also covered in summer moss. This Deerling had to be at least a yearling, perhaps older. They stayed with their mothers for one or two years until they were big and strong enough to evolve, after which they typically left to join a larger herd and seek out a mate. Deerling did not last long in the wild on their own without a Sawsbuck mother to protect them with her mighty antlers, a trait shared by both the males and females of the species.

This Deerling had the bad luck of losing its mother before it was old enough to evolve. Some predator would no doubt pick it off in time, a Scolipede or Leavanny or a pack of wild Herdier, all native to Pinwheel Forest and all unlikely to pass up a chance to run down a defenseless Deerling.

"It's okay," Rosa said. "I won't hurt you. I just want to take a look at your mama."

Deerling spooked and got up on its spindly legs as Rosa crept closer. It backed up but refused to leave its mother Sawsbuck's side. Rosa took a chance and inched closer, reaching out a hand. Deerling bleated in warning, calling for its mother for help, though she would no longer save it.
"It's okay," Rosa said again.

Deerling lost its patience and opened its mouth. A greenish smoky light began to gather between its flat teeth, and Rosa gasped. Leafeon hissed and ran at Deerling before it could attack, and the fawn stumbled backwards as it powered up the attack to meet Leafeon head on. Thinking quickly, Rosa grabbed the only empty Pokéball she had—Beartic's old Pokéball—and tossed it at Deerling just as it was about to unleash its attack. Deerling disappeared within a flash of red light, and the Pokéball fell to the forest floor to settle among the bed of leaves next to Sawsbuck.

Rosa let out the breath she'd been holding. "Damn. That was an Energy Ball. That Deerling's definitely closer to two years old."

She checked on Leafeon, but it appeared to have escaped the plucky Deerling's aggression unscathed and was currently sniffing around Sawsbuck. Rosa wiped her brow, her nerves shot after the unexpected bout with claustrophobia and now this. She picked up Deerling's Pokéball and turned it around in her hand.

*Never thought I'd use this ball again.*

She thought about Beartic and how she hadn't been able to get rid of the empty Pokéball. It still bore a scratch on the red top where Beartic, as a Cubchoo many years ago, had tried to eat the ball and chipped a tooth on it. Sniffling, Rosa pushed the memory from her mind.

Deerling and Sawsbuck were rarely employed as battling Pokémon. Farmers raised them for slaughter, and they were otherwise considered nuisances to people's gardens. Their purpose in the wild was largely as prey to carnivorous predators. But Deerling was a Grass-type Pokémon, she supposed, if not an odd one with its dual Normal typing.

"I can't just leave you here," she said to the small Pokéball containing the surprisingly abrasive fawn.

Sawsbuck lay unmoving just a foot to Rosa's right. Now that Deerling was safely in a Pokéball, she had a chance to inspect the doe. Running a hand over it, she felt about for any sign of what had brought down the large deer. Ferroseed unhelpfully rolled around Sawsbuck's corpse, bumping into it as though in an attempt to rouse it. Soon, Rosa found the source of the deer's demise.

"Broken leg," she said, feeling the abnormal split in the bones of Sawsbuck's rear right leg.

She wouldn't have been able to walk like this. Perhaps she'd starved to death. It was pure luck that no scavengers had found the carcass yet. Resolving herself to what she would have to do next, Rosa drew her serrated hunting knife, which was heavy in her palm. At least Deerling would not be around to see this.

She dragged the knife over Sawsbuck's glossy pelt, shaving away the skin to get to the meat beneath. At least this had saved her the trouble of having to hunt for her dinner. She made quick work of Sawsbuck's flanks and wrapped strips of bloody meat in waxy banana leaves she'd brought along just for such a purpose. When she was finished, her hands were bloody and her pack was full of wrapped meat that would last her for several days in the forest. She had no idea how long it would take to reach the other side, if she could even manage to navigate the labyrinthine forest.

The smell of raw meat and blood would draw scavengers in no time, and Rosa did not plan to linger here to meet them. Wiping her hands on a rag she wetted with water from her canteen, Rosa gathered her things, sidestepped Sawsbuck, and looked around for the path Leafeon had supposedly led her here to find. The leafy feline was chewing on a hunk of Sawsbuck meat it had
ripped from the body, bloodying its nose and its sharp fangs.

"Come on, boy. Let's get out of here. You too, Thorny."

Ferroseed happily rolled along, delighting in the crinkling sound the leaves made beneath it. Leafeon ripped off one last chunk of bloody meat to take with it and bounded ahead. With one last look back at Sawsbuck, Rosa followed her Pokémon deeper into the forest, trusting their sense of direction and hoping there would be no more surprises along the way.

The next three days in Pinwheel Forest were some of the longest of Rosa's life. She had spent years in the woods around Nuvema and Accumula Towns learning how to survive on nothing but the land, drawn to it like a fish to water. She pulled out every trick in her book to stay safe and survive. She slept in trees and cradled either Ferroseed or Leafeon or sometimes both to help her keep a lookout while she slept. When the trees thinned enough, she released Serperior and Swanna to feed themselves and to ward off larger predators. But no matter how much distance she thought she put between Nacrene and herself, she had the eerie sensation that she was wandering in circles and that she might never find a way out of this place.

On her second day in the forest, she ran into a deep pool where she refilled her canteen. Unfortunately, the wild Carnivine that dwelled in the depths did not take kindly to her partaking of their purified water and attacked. Thankfully, the pool necessitated a thinned section of the forest where Swanna could move around and skate over the water. The giant swan dug her beak into the closest Carnivine and Pecked it to death, staining the pond green with its blood. The other Carnivine rose up to avenge their fallen comrade like an army of swamp creatures out of a science fiction novel, and Rosa ordered Swanna to blow them away with a Surf attack. The pond erupted in a mighty wave under Swanna's powerfully beating wings, and the Carnivine spilled out onto the forest floor, uprooted and scrambling. Rosa made her escape while the carnivorous plants regrouped.

She'd cooked all the Sawsbuck meat not long after she cut it from the doe, rationalizing that a single campfire during the day would hurt her chances of escaping detection far less than campfires every night. The smells drew hungry eyes in the shadows, but with Serperior coiled around Rosa and the campfire, nothing dared to approach.

Nights in the forest were dreadful. Kricketune sang throughout the night, which could have been pleasant if not for the fog and the cold that muffled their dirges and gave the impression that Rosa had slipped into a netherworld where the night would never end. The forest was freezing at night, and a film of white haze hid the ground from view when Rosa was curled up in a tree such that she couldn't see the ground at all, and if she fell she imagined she would fall forever to the pit of some dank, cold hell.

But nights weren't the worst part. This was now the fourth day, and she had absolutely no idea where she was. Rosa was a decent enough tracker, having learned as a child and honed her skills throughout the years. But the sheer viscosity of Pinwheel Forest, thicker than any forest she had ever been in, rendered her lifeline sight practically useless. It was not until now that she realized how much of a crutch it had become. To be able to pinpoint another person's or Pokémon's location precisely from miles away was a gift, but it was useless to her in these woods. The more time went on, the more she began to wonder if she would ever find her way out of these woods. The animal paths Leafeon and Ferroseed continued to follow seemed to be going in circles. Rosa had never felt so helpless in all her life.
Until the afternoon of the fourth day, when the sun was still high in the sky and penetrated the canopy in honeyed fingers. Rosa sat in a tree she'd climbed, Leafeon perched on the branch next to her, and she held her bow still while she looked down the length of a nocked shaft at the scene that had drawn her to this very spot.

An old sawmill had been erected in a cleared out section of the forest, but it was dilapidated and out of use for decades. An old train track led away from it back east, presumably to Nacrene City, but the carts on it had also not been used in this century and were falling apart where they sat. A hole had been blown into the roof of the old wooden sawmill that no one had bothered repairing. The long chute upon which logs had traveled like ducks in a row extended from the southern wall of the mill, but the end was decayed and falling apart. Rosa shivered. The whole scene reminded her of an old black and white horror flick. Somewhere inside, a chainsaw murderer in a mask could be lurking.

More troubling than the decrepit sawmill were the people gathered on the ground just west of it. Some were standing, some were kneeling, and one man lay on the ground with his limbs bent at odd angles, like he'd fallen over unconscious...or dead. The people standing, four men and one woman, wore Team Plasma uniforms. Three people, two men and a woman, remained kneeling. Like Rosa, they wore skins and leather and none looked like they'd showered in weeks.

"I'll ask you again," one of the Plasma men said. He was pacing back and forth in front of the people kneeling and waving a machete around. "Where's the sawmill?"

"Right behind you," the kneeling woman sneered. "Don't you have eyes?"

One of the other men smacked her hard across the cheek, and her face whipped around to the side. She was a comely woman with a round face and chestnut hair and a splash of freckles all over her nose and cheeks that tended to blend together into larger splotches, like she'd spent her whole life under the sun. She could not have been much older than Rosa.

"Last chance," the agent brandishing the machete said. "We know there's a working sawmill somewhere in the forest, and this one ain't it."

Rosa watched the exchange from her hiding place in the tree. So Team Plasma was looking for the sawmill that processed all of Nacrene's timber. If they found it, they could claim the lower East Tine timber trade for themselves, likely in Striaton's name, and solidify their economic stronghold on the peninsula. How had it come to this? How could N disappear and leave Team Plasma in the hands of a man who used the organization's numbers and good name for malicious megalomania? But then, if this had been Ghetsis's intention all along, why had he not acted earlier when he was one of N's Seven Sages? Surely he'd had the position and power to do something. Why wait until N was nowhere to be found?

Could he have had something to do with N's mysterious disappearance? All Rosa and anyone else knew was that N had last been seen in Vertress City, his preferred base of operations, and a terrible lightning storm swept through the city, killing all its inhabitants. There was no way to positively identify N's remains in the wreckage. Most of the bodies had been charred to shapeless deformations, unidentifiable to surviving loved ones who mourned and grieved together over the city's remains. The Iron Keep, the castle N had lived in during his time as Team Plasma's king, was reduced to crumbling ruins, burned black after multiple lightning strikes. By all accounts, N had perished in the disaster like everyone else. Ghetsis may be able to manipulate his way into conquering the Lower East Tine, but he could not harness the power of nature to do his bidding. No one could. She had to be missing something, but what? Nothing made any sense.

If N could see what had become of his team now, Rosa wondered if he would weep. She wondered
what he would say if he knew she had raised her bow against these new-age Plasma Agents, even killed some of them already. But she quashed the thought as soon as it popped into her head.

_They're not Team Plasma. They're pretenders in masks._

N would want them culled, she was sure of it. They were corrupting the organization's pure ideals and founding vision. They were a cancer that needed eradicating. And they were simply following orders, Ghetsis's orders. Ghetsis, who had ordered the public killing of the Striaton Gym Leaders. Ghetsis, who Juniper claimed was the head of Neo Team Plasma in N's absence. It all came back to Ghetsis. Cut off the head of the snake and the body would lose its will to live. Ghetsis had to go.

But Ghetsis was not here now, and these Plasma Agents had three people on their knees at knifepoint. Rosa was sure the one already sprawled on the floor was not merely unconscious. She drew her arrow until the bowstring was taut and parallel with her right shoulder, steady and confident in her marksmanship.

"You guys call yourselves Team Plasma," the kneeling woman said, "but you're nothing but common thugs. The real Team Plasma would never invade cities and kidnap their Gym Leaders."

"Vivian, cut it out," one of the men kneeling beside her hissed.

_She doesn't know about Lenora's execution,_ Rosa surmised.

"We are Team Plasma, the one and only. And if you know what's good for you, you'll tell us what we want to know."

Vivian spat at the man's feet. Her spittle splashed on his shin and trickled down his boot. "You're a disgrace. N would be ashamed of what you've become!"

The Plasma Agent she'd spit on opened his mouth to scream at her, maybe slap her around, and Rosa inhaled sharply as she prepared to put an arrow through his skull. But all of a sudden, the Plasma woman, who had been silent until now, drew a dagger from her hip and swiftly plunged it into Vivian's sternum. The male Plasma Agents were taken aback and backed away, but the woman dug her knife in deeper, twisting it remorselessly. Vivian choked on her breath, and blood bubbled over her lower lip. Wide-eyed, she slumped over the dagger and sagged to the ground.

The men kneeling beside her—whom Rosa just now noticed were identical in every way, twins without a doubt—cried out and struggled in their restraints to get to Vivian. The Plasma Agent wielding the machete shouted at them to cease and desist, waving his big knife around, but the twins would not be silent. The Plasma woman withdrew her knife and wiped Vivian's blood off on her leather tunic, while the rest of her bled out on the forest floor. The other Plasma Agents were still in shock at the sudden killing and had not yet gone for their weapons. Rosa stared in shock at the moral turpitude unfolding before her.

She recovered after a second and let loose her arrow with a sharp exhale and followed the predetermined path it took with her eyes. The steel shaft hit the Plasma woman through her cheek and poked out of the other side of her head through her cropped blonde hair. Her dark eyes widened, instantly filling with blood where the arrow had severed her optic nerves and churned her brain, and fell over next to Vivian's body, dead in an instant.

In the following moments, the abandoned sawmill's courtyard erupted in a dance of death. One of the captive twins reacted quickly to Rosa's intervention and lunged at the Plasma Agent with the machete, head-butting him in the stomach and sending them both falling. The agent lost his machete when he fell.
The other three Plasma Agents scrambled to draw their swords and knives, backing up and looking around for the invisible shooter, but Rosa had already drawn another arrow and let it fly. It hit one of the men just above the collarbone, knocking him down on his rear where he dropped his knife and tried to pull out the arrow before he bled out.

The second twin took advantage of the confusion and used the discarded machete to sever his wrist restraints. Free to move, he picked up the machete and brought it down over its previous owner's left arm. The Plasma Agent howled in pain, and his severed hand wriggled its fingers as the last shock of nerves exploded in the tips. Stunned, the first twin who had originally head-butted him to the ground crawled on top of him and smashed his head into the Plasma Agent's repeatedly. The agent's face turned red with blood, but there was no telling if it was his or his assailant's.

The remaining two agents joined forces and rallied to save their comrade from the violent assault, but the second twin lunged at the closer of the two with his pilfered machete. Rosa jumped down from her perch in the tree, Leafeon close behind, and ran to the clearing.

"Cut his restraints," she ordered.

Leafeon was quick to obey and dashed toward the first twin. By now, the agent he had bludgeoned with his head had fallen still. His face was almost unrecognizable, covered in blood and swollen as though he'd been stung by Combee repeatedly. Leafeon reached the first twin and, before the man knew what was happening, Leaf Bladed the rope binding his wrists in place behind his back. He looked around at his impromptu savior, his face red with the Plasma Agent's blood and his own.

Rosa had already tossed out Serperior's Pokéball and drew another arrow from her quiver. The second twin was fighting off one of the Plasma Agents, while the other released a Floatzel and a Tangrowth to defend him. Serperior bared its unfolded fangs in a skin-crawling hiss and took off after Tangrowth.

"Dragon Tail!" Rosa shouted.

Serperior launched into the air and spun to bring down its thick tail, now glowing red with draconian energy.

"Use Power Whip!" the Plasma Agent shouted.

The tentacle-vines covering Tangrowth's body exploded outward as though with a mind of their own and caught Serperior in the air as it plummeted back to the ground. The two Grass-type Pokémon crashed to the ground, which cracked under the force of Serperior's mighty Dragon Tail. They struggled as Tangrowth tried to Constrict Serperior on every side.

"Floatzel, Ice Fang!"

Floatzel ran on all fours toward the grappling Serperior and Tangrowth, and Rosa let fly her nocked arrow at the charging otter. Floatzel was fast and narrowly avoided the projectile as it veered a hard left and jumped. Its maw shed a misty trail of ice crystals as it prepared its attack.

Another light flashed in Rosa's peripheral vision, followed by an angry buzzing sound. Out of nowhere, a four-foot-tall Pinsir rammed into Floatzel before it could rip into the tangled Serperior with Ice Fang. Pinsir's underdeveloped wings kept it afloat just long enough to make the big leap, then crashed back to earth on top of Floatzel and dug its serrated pincers into Floatzel's belly with reckless abandon. They clamped down on Floatzel's middle, and Pinsir did not leg go even as the large otter Slashed with its sharp claws and tried to rip Pinsir's tough exoskeleton. Pinsir seemed to feel no pain at all as it squeezed and squeezed its giant pincers. Floatzel screeched, a terrible sound.
that Rosa felt down to her bones, and finally its body gave out. Pinsir's Guillotine cut clean through Floatzel's middle, ripping the Pokémon in half and raining blood all over the ground and Pinsir itself. The ugly, angry bug reared its head and made an awful clicking noise as it announced its victory and gloated.

Rosa composed herself enough to shout at Leafeon. "Leaf Blade!"

Leafeon ran after the Plasma Agent who had released Floatzel and Tangrowth, but he was ready with a short sword and slashed it at Leafeon before it could tackle him.

"Stay back!" he shouted.

The second twin had managed to cut his Plasma opponent in the thigh with the machete, and the agent reached for a Pokéball. But the second twin was faster and tossed out a Pokéball of his own. A low thrumming accompanied the Escavalier that coalesced in the light. Escavalier brandished its jousting stingers at the Plasma Agent and zoomed straight for him, carried on large, translucent wings. The Bug caught him by surprise and caused him to drop the Pokéball he'd been reaching for. It rolled away in the grass out of reach.

"X-Scissor!" the second twin commanded.

Escavalier thrummed louder and charged the Plasma Agent, who tried to dodge to avoid it. But Escavalier was already upon him despite its middling speed and impaled him in the chest with its stingers. Displaying a level of strength beyond its small stature, the steely Bug ripped its stingers outward through the agent's chest cavity, slicing him up with a surgeon's precision and an axe murderer's strength. The Plasma Agent coughed, eyes glassy and wide with shock as he clutched the gouged out X over his chest oozing with his blood, and fell face first on the ground.

Serperior was still struggling with Tangrowth, who was slowly sapping Serperior's energy with a combination Leech Seed and Constrict. The regal serpent thrashed and flailed, but every time it bit through a mouthful of Tangrowth's vines, more replaced them and tightened the hold. Rosa leveled her bow at Tangrowth, but it was so tangled up around Serperior that she was afraid she might pierce Serperior by mistake.

"Move!" the first twin shouted as he drew up next to Rosa and threw out another Pokéball. An Accelgor floated where the light faded, its hooded face obscured and its small arms tucked closely over its sides. "Free Serperior!"

"No, you'll hit him!" Rosa protested.

The first twin, whose face was still blood splattered from the earlier bludgeoning he'd given the Plasma Agent, shoved her off. "No we won't," he snapped. "Water Shuriken!"

Accelgor took off at blinding speed. Rosa could not even see the small translucent wings that moved too fast for the eye to detect and gifted Accelgor with precision speed. The small Bug unfolded its arms and somersaulted through the air, making sharp turns and ricocheting against its own momentum as it circled Serperior and Tangrowth. Rosa could not detect exactly what was happening, but soon Tangrowth began to scream in pain. Its vines severed at a rate faster than it could regenerate them as tiny water projectiles, paper-thin, struck the vines and cut them from every side. Accelgor was so fast and its aim was so precise that it did not hit Serperior even once.

As soon as Tangrowth's hold began to loosen, Seperior's struggling intensified. Rosa gasped.

"That's it! Now, Razor Leaf!"
Serperior bared its fangs and the leafy collar around its neck quivered as it released a flurry of bladed leaves that shot out in all directions like shrapnel. Serperior and Accelgor reduced Tangrowth's vines to shreds under their combined attacks, and soon the mass of sentient vines fell to the ground, freeing Serperior. What was left of Tangrowth twitched pathetically as Accelgor circled it like a ravenous Mandibuzz looking for the best place to tear into first.

All that was left was Tangrowth and Floatzel's trainer, the remaining Plasma Agent who was still defending himself against Leafeon. By now, the second twin and his Escavalier had cornered him but kept a healthy distance from Leafeon.

"I'm warning you, stay back!" the remaining Plasma Agent said as he swung his sword.

The first twin ran to join his brother, his Pinsir and Accelgor in tow, and Rosa followed with Serperior. She still had an arrow nocked and leveled it at the remaining Plasma Agent.

"Drop the sword," she commanded. "You already know I'm a good shot."

The Plasma Agent took one look at her with the bow trained on him and threw down his sword. "Please, don't kill me! I-I never wanted it to be like this!"

"You killed our comrades!" the bloody first twin snarled. "Don't give me that bullshit, you goddamned turncoat!"

The Plasma Agent covered his face with his hands and fell to his knees, heaving as he tried not to burst into tears. The guy was average in build and height, and like his fellow Plasma Agents, he wore a black mask that covered half his face so Rosa could not get a good picture of what he looked like.

"Jack, calm down," the second twin said. "We could use him."

"We could, but I don't feel like it, Louis," Jack said. "I just wanna gut this son of a bitch."

"Whoa there, Trigger Happy Jack," Rosa said, turning her bow on Jack. "No one's gutting anyone until I get some answers."

"Hey, I saved your life."

"You helped free Serperior, which is why I haven't shot you yet. Keep talking, see if I change my mind."

Louis approached Rosa, and she had to do a double take between his brother and him. Their resemblance was truly uncanny save for the blood splatter on Jack's face. They had cropped blond hair, dirty naturally and from their time in the forest, and cloudy grey eyes. Being twins, they shared the same long face, flat nose, and angular jawline. They were of average build, neither too skinny nor too beefy, and they shared a height with Rosa even though they were at least a decade older.

"Okay, let's back up a minute. For the record, you saved us back there when you shot that woman."

"You mean the bitch who killed Vivian," Jack spat.

"Jack," Louis warned. To Rosa he said, "Look, Miss, I think we're on the same side here. You're obviously not with him." He jerked his head toward the last Team Plasma Agent. "And neither are we."
Rosa said nothing. Serperior and Leafeon flanked her, and Leafeon kept a close eye on the Plasma Agent. Serperior glared down at Pinsir and the other Bugs, stubbornly unafraid in the face of a natural type disadvantage against them.

"How about we start with a name," Louis went on. "I'm Louis, and this bottle rocket's my brother, Jack. And you are...?"

"Rosa."

"Rosa, okay. Thanks for your help back there."

"Hey, this is great, huh? Everyone's getting along," the Plasma Agent said. "I'm Danny, by the way."

He went to remove his mask, and Rosa whirled on him. Danny froze and put up his hands. His mask was only halfway down and still covered his mouth. His nose, now visible, was crooked from many past breaks and resets.

"Shut up," Rosa said coldly.

The bodies on the ground filled the stagnant forest air with the coppery tang of blood. If Rosa closed her eyes, she would see the lifelines ebbing from the dead, leaving them as surely as their blood and soaking into the ground, absorbed like rainwater. The dead did not glow.

"Wait a minute," Jack said. "You're a Sylvan, aren't you? Mm, I can smell it on you now, damp soil and moss. That's why we didn't sense you coming in the middle of the woods."

Rosa did not flinch and kept her bow trained on Danny the Plasma Agent. "And you must be Volucris if you can smell my aura. You must not be very good Volucris to let Danny and his friends ambush you like they did."

Jack snorted and licked some of the blood that wasn't his from his lips.

"Yes, we're Volucris," Louis said calmly. "And we work directly under Gym Leader Burgh of Castelia. I know our kinds don't mix well, but we mean you no harm, Rosa. I can tell you don't mean us harm, either."

"Yeah, the way I see it, no one here means anybody any harm," Danny chimed in.

Rosa drew her arrow tauter, and Danny flinched. "Speak again, I dare you."

_Castelia Gym trainers_, she thought to herself. _Castelia was always sympathetic to N. Maybe I can use them._

"What're two Castelian Volucris doing in the middle of Pinwheel Forest at a time like this?" she said.

"Kill that traitor and we'll tell you," Jack said.

"We came to assist Gym Leader Lenora. Our mission was direct from Gym Leader Burgh himself when he got word of her abduction by Striaton. We ran into these wannabe Team Plasma goons on our way there," Louis clarified.

Rosa blinked, and the memories of Lenora's public beheading replayed in her mind's eye as fresh as the day she had been there to witness them. "So you really don't know, then."
"Know what?"

She loosened her grip on the bow and lowered it a little as the weight of those memories became almost too much to bear. "Striaton beheaded her. It was a public execution." Rosa sniffled. "Ghetsis's Shadow Triad killed Cilan, Chili, and Cress just after."

Louis gaped at her in disbelief, and Jack gritted his teeth.


"Beheaded," Louis said, white as a sheet. "You're certain?"

"I was there. I saw it all happen. That's why I'm heading to Castelia now, to find out what's going on with Team Plasma. To find out what happened to N."

Jack and Louis exchanged a look that Rosa could not read. She narrowed her eyes at them.

"And since according to you we're on the same side," she went on, "I'm sure you'd be happy to escort me there."

Louis looked back at her and suddenly exclaimed, "No!"

Rosa was thrown by his odd behavior, but she soon got her answer when Danny threw a knife at her that he'd hidden somewhere on his person. Rosa tried to dodge and let her arrow fly, but it landed in a tree somewhere behind Danny, missing him completely. His knife cut a deep gash in her right arm, managing to scrape through the tough Stantler hide sleeves. Serperior reared up and Leafeon hissed, but Danny was already running for his life to escape. Jack's Accelgor was faster and soon ran Danny down.

"U-Turn!" Jack barked.

Accelgor buzzed past Danny and swiftly backtracked, a blur of blue and red. Danny convulsed mid-step and face-planted. Accelgor's curling hood dripped with blood where it had slashed Danny's flank for a lightning fast double hit. He twitched on the ground and gripped his side, greasy with blood and body fat. Jack, Louis, and Rosa ran to catch up to him, but Rosa was closest and got to him first.

She grabbed him by the collar with her healthy left hand and brandished her hunting knife at his ashen face. "Big mistake, Danny."

Despite his rapidly deteriorating condition, Danny managed to laugh bitterly. "S-Stupid woman, joke's on you, hah, ha—" His laughter turned to coughs as he struggled against his wounds.

"What're you talking about?" Jack demanded. "Answer me!"

"Castelia," Danny rasped. "Y-You'll never see it again."

Rosa jammed the hilt of her knife over the grievous wounds in Danny's side, and he cried out. "Be more specific."


"Wait, he must mean our ship," Louis said. "The one we took to sail here from Castelia."

"Our ship," Danny said, barely audible. "It's our ship...now."
"They took our ship," Jack said. "The crew..."

Danny laughed again, a rattling wet sound. "Probably all dead by now."

Jack punched him hard in the face before Rosa or Louis could stop him. Danny's head whipped around with a hard smacking sound, and he spit blood from a newly split lip. He was still wheezing with laughter through the pain of his wounds.

Rosa dropped him and got up, her mind racing as she processed this new information. A ship overrun with Team Plasma Agents was waiting somewhere at the other end of the forest in Pinwheel Harbor. A ship that had belonged to the Volucris dispatched to Nacrene. It could work...

Danny continued to bleed out on the ground, but Rosa ignored him and the twin Volucris as she inspected the bodies on the ground. Leafeon trotted alongside her, while Serperior remained still with its head high and its collar open to soak up the sun and power a Synthesis to recover after the taxing fight with Tangrowth. The serpent kept a red eye on Rosa and Leafeon, though, tracking their movements around the clearing in case of further threat.

Louis caught up to Rosa just as she approached the body of Vivian, the woman Team Plasma had murdered just before Rosa intervened. This wasn't the body Rosa was looking for, but she paused when Louis kneeled down and gently cupped Vivian's blood-splattered cheek.

"She didn't deserve this," he said softly. "Vivian was a good person. A good Volucris."

Rosa frowned as she looked between them. "You knew her pretty well?"

"Yeah. We're cousins. Vivian was also Burgh's sister sister. She'd been on plenty of missions through Pinwheel Forest, knew this forest like she'd grown up here." He took Vivian's cold hand in his and held it to his face as he hung his head. His shoulders shuddered. "What am I going to tell Burgh?"

Rosa averted her gaze when she heard the hitch in his throat. Could she have saved Vivian if she'd taken out the female Plasma Agent a couple seconds earlier? Could she have been quick enough to predict that stealth kill out of nowhere? Would it have made a difference?

"I'm sorry," she said, meaning it.

Louis took a shuddering breath. "Thank you." He looked up at her. "And thank you for showing up when you did. If you hadn't I might be lying next to her."

Rosa said nothing to that and busied herself shifting her weight between the balls of her feet. The tickle of lifelines in her mind's eye drew her attention, and she turned to see Jack standing a few feet away, a vacant look in his eyes as he stared down at Louis and Vivian.

"Louis," he said. "Vivian's Heracross. Take it with you."

Louis looked up and hastily wiped his eyes. "Huh? Oh." He fumbled around Vivian's pockets and found a lone Net Ball. Escavalier thrummed as it hovered just next to him, dark eyes revealing nothing as it gazed down at Vivian's unmoving corpse. "Damnit," he swore, like he had no other words left for Vivian and the atrocity done to her.

"We'll take her back with us," Jack said. "Her and Rick." He walked to the other body that had already been lying on the ground when Rosa arrived. Rick had a large net strapped to his back, industrial strength made from Ariados silk, the kind best suited for trapping birds and Bugs. Jack rummaged around Rick's remains for money, a roll of parchment sealed with red wax, and a couple
jars of colored pastes Rosa did not recognize. He pocketed them all and rolled Rick over onto his back.

Rosa gave them some privacy and kept looking around for the body she had in mind. When she came upon the dead female Plasma Agent, she kneeled down and scanned the body. The woman had been about five foot five with hips rounder and fuller than Rosa's. Her feet looked like they were at least two sizes smaller than Rosa's, but no one ever looked at shoes. Her face was a pulpy mess where Rosa's arrow had pierced through her cheek and came out the other side next to her eye. Her left eye had drooped and dribbled out of the socket in a cheesy goop. The black mask over her lower face was soaked with blood and discharge, but the rest of her uniform was intact.

Leafeon sniffed the woman's face experimentally. Rosa ran her good left hand over Leafeon's back affectionately as she grappled with the thought of what she would do.

*It'll work,* she told herself. *I'll make it work.*

Resolved, Rosa set down her bow and quiver and set to work disrobing the dead woman. The uniform was surprisingly sturdy for something so fitted and sleek, definitely military-grade synthetic armor built for comfort and flexibility. Rosa paused when she got the long skirted tunic off and fingered the cerulean Team Plasma insignia sewn into the left breast. That much had not changed from the old days, but it seemed everything else had. Shaking her head, she set aside the tunic and pulled off the woman's boots before starting on the pants.

"What the hell are you doing?" Jack demanded. He'd found a rag to wipe the blood from his face, revealing a patchy beard his brother did not share. Red smeared around his face like a child's finger painting.

"Danny said Team Plasma has your ship," Rosa explained as she carefully shimmied the pants down the woman's legs. "And I happen to need a ship to get to Castelia. They won't let me on dressed like this."

Accelgor buzzed in place over his head, arms folded like it disdained everything in sight. Pinsir was busy feasting on Floatzel's severed lower half nearby, crunching and grinding as it ripped into the meat.

"Let you on? Lady, there won't be any letting. Louis 'n I are gonna take back our ship from those turncoats and mow down every last one of them."

"Oh really? Because you fared so well against this group? Who knows how many more of them are crawling all over your ship?"

Jack shot her a venomous look and crouched down to her eye level. "You're on your own. You wouldn't stand even half our chance against them."

Rosa got the pants off and folded them. "That's why I'm not going to fight them. I'm going to join them."

"What's going on?" Louis said. He'd recovered a little and joined them with Escavalier in tow. "Rosa, why are you taking that woman's uniform?"

"Super Sylvan here thinks she can waltz onto our ship posing as Team Plasma and trick them into taking her to Castelia," Jack said. "It's suicide. They'll see through that half-assed disguise in a second."

"Not if I've fulfilled an important mission for them." Rosa looked pointedly between Jack and
Louis's face lit up in curious understanding. "You want to pose as one of them and take us in as prisoners. Is that it?"


"You heard what Danny said. They know you're here, and you can bet this group got orders to stop you on their way to finding that sawmill they were so concerned about. If I come back with you, they'll only care that the mission was a success."

"No way. We're not abandoning the mission."

"Jack," Louis said. "Vivian and Rick are gone."

"And so is Lenora," Rosa interjected. "Listen, I really am sorry for your loss. Believe me, I've seen my share of unjust death in the last few days. But I came through Striaton and Nacrene. There's nothing for you there. If you go, you'll just be signing your own death warrants. Ghetsis controls everything north of Accumula."

"Burgh deserves to know about Vivian," Louis said quietly. "I don't want him finding out from someone else."

Jack looked at his brother like he was crazy. "She's a Sylvan, Louis. And we don't even know her. You're too trusting, and if you don't wise up, you're gonna get burned all over again."

Louis and Jack shared a look that Rosa did not understand. There were secrets there, old wounds, something dark and ugly, but it wasn't her place to pry. And there was no time to waste, besides.

"Look, you don't have to trust me and we don't have to be BFFs," Rosa said, folded Plasma uniform bundled and strapped to her utility belt. "But you can trust that we have a similar objective. I helped you out of this mess, so you can help me get out of this forest. I assume you know the way."

Jack snorted. "Volucris are the best trackers in the world. Who the hell d'you think you're talking to?"

"Then let me propose this. You get me out of this forest, and I'll get you back to Castelia in one piece."

"You really think you can fool Team Plasma into thinking you're one of them?" Louis asked.

Jack gaped at his brother. "You're not seriously considering this?"

"Yes," Rosa said confidently. "If you can stomach teaming up with a Sylvan, then I promise to get you back to Castelia safely."

"I say we have a deal," Louis said. "Jack? I don't see a better option. We have to get back to Burgh and tell him what's happened here."

Jack took a moment to glower at the both of them, but eventually relented with a few choice grievances muttered under his breath. "Fine. We'll try your plan for now." He glared at the wound on Rosa's arm, which was still bleeding and dripping on the ground. "But you better patch that up. Scolipede can smell a drop of blood miles away even with no wind. They'll be on this place within the hour."
He tossed Rosa one of the jars he'd confiscated from Rick's corpse. It was filled with a sickly chartreuse paste and smelled like citrus and vinegar.

"Sitrus berry paste," Louis said, taking the jar from Rosa. "It can heal any surface cut within hours. Works as well as any Super Potion. Here, let me."

Rosa let Louis clean her wound with water from his canteen, apply the Sitrus berry paste, and wrap it in a bit of leather and cloth from her bag for just such a situation. Blood stained her sleeve in little rivers where it had trickled down.

"You'll have to wash that as soon as we find some water," Louis warned. "The Scolipede in Pinwheel Forest get up to fifteen feet long. Even your Serperior would have trouble with them."

"I appreciate the concern," Rosa said unappreciatively.

Louis spared her a grim smile but took her gruffness in stride. "Anyway, Jack's right. We should get moving. The Bugs in the forest will leave us alone, but they won't do the same for you."

How comforting.

Serperior slithered to her side looking much better than it had just minutes ago courtesy of the bright afternoon sun. It tasted the stagnant air with its forked tongue, pupils dilated with the heavy odor of blood and death in the air. Rosa ran her hand over its snout, more for her own sake than for Serperior's. She took a deep breath.

"Okay," she said. "Let me just collect my arrows."

Chapter End Notes

Just a quick note: I know Escavalier and Accelgor don't have wings in their original designs, but they can mysteriously float, and in the real world we might wonder why that is. So this was my solution to that, and since they’re Bugs, I think having insect wings fits. Just an FYI to anyone who read that and thought it was different from canon. It is, but I hope it’s not so different that it detracts from their design too much to upset anyone.
The hike northeast via Route Twenty was more pleasant than Nate expected it would be. Hugh was quieter than usual and surprisingly in a good mood. Route Twenty was a network of interconnecting rivers and creeks serviced by waterfalls of all sizes. Their spray filled the air with fine mist and Hugh breathed in deeply. He had even released Eelektrik to swim upriver alongside the group. The electric eel made the jumps up smaller waterfalls with relative ease and slithered through the ripples, its jawless mouth full of teeth and constantly searching for an unsuspecting fish to suction to death.

Even Cheren seemed to be in better spirits after the disappointing meeting with Alder. Stoutland alternated drinking stream water, running through it after a flock of skating Surskit and Masquerain, and scouting ahead. The canine’s fun was contagious, and Cheren was content to soak up the summer sun and cooling water spray as they walked at a manageable pace.

Champion Alder was not joining their group, but he had done a little to help. Little Larvesta, still perched on Nate’s head, quivered as it shook out the water mist that accumulated in its white hair and took in the sight of the outside world with wonder. Nate could feel the heat the little firefly emanated, surging when it was excited by something, perhaps a scampering Patrat. Even Lucario took a dip in the water and humored Stoutland’s playfulness when the larger canine barked and instigated a game of chase in the shallows.

Nate smiled to himself and reached up to pat Larvesta. “I guess it’s not so bad out here.”

Route Twenty was nothing like Aspertia. Where Aspertia was surrounded by open fields and rolling hills, Route Twenty was wooded and cluttered. Where Aspertia boasted countless lakes, all still and deep and crystal clear, Route Twenty was a maze of babbling brooks and waterfalls. The air in Aspertia was crisp and clean outside the city, and heavy with salt near the docks. The air out here was humid and a bit warm, and only a slight breeze kept the summer heat at bay. It wasn’t home, but for the first time since he had left Aspertia, the pain of nostalgia ebbed enough to forget it for just a little while.

When they broke for lunch on the third day of hiking, a small family of Sunkern wandered near from out of a patch of tall grass at the edge of a copse, drawn by the smell of their food. Larvesta was instantly stricken with curiosity and hopped down from Nate’s head to investigate the waddling plants, but its natural heat spooked the Sunkern, who huddled together in a defensive position, their little leaf antennas twitching. Larvesta looked back at Nate with its compound blue eyes as if to ask, ‘Now what?’

Nate laughed and Hugh scowled. “That Bug probably couldn’t take a shit without you holding its hand.”

“Don’t be jealous because Champion Alder gave me a Pokémon and not you,” Nate said.

Hugh choked on a bit of bread. “In what universe?!”

Cheren tossed a couple slices of Pinap berry at the Sunkern, and they immediately parted to gobble up the sweet fruit. Their mouths were little, but the large chunks of fruit soon disappeared among the hopping kernel Pokémon amongst a cacophony of thumping and squeaking. Larvesta watched them hop around with rapt interest.

“Alder only did what was easiest for him given his situation,” Cheren said, watching the Sunkern
gobble up the fruit. “He should have agreed to accompany us. As Champion, it’s incumbent upon him to ensure the safety of all Unova, not just himself.”

Nate scooped up Larvesta and she crawled back onto his head. He stretched his arms out and sighed. “I know, Cheren. But people don’t change just because someone else tells them to.”

“Yes, that’s the problem,” Cheren said, crossing his arms.

“Have a little faith.” Nate passed one of the remaining Pinap berry slices up to Larvesta, and she happily accepted it. “He might surprise you one day.”

“Unfortunately, Nathaniel, I know Alder better than you. Not everyone can climb back up from rock bottom, especially not after so many years.”

“Whatever,” Hugh said. “If it’s about that old drunkard, don’t hold your breath, man. All we got out here is the three of us and nobody else if shit starts going down the drain.”

Nate remained silent and decided not to push the subject. Any other day and he would have probably agreed with Hugh and Cheren. Helena wasn’t an alcoholic, but she was also stuck at the bottom of a deep ocean where no lifeline could reach her. Perhaps even if she wanted to return to the surface, her mental illness would have prevented it. Some things simply cannot change, no matter how much faith you have. Praying and wishing, Nate had learned at far too young an age, were more for his own comfort than for anyone else’s.

But still, something about Alder continued to bug him. He wasn’t like Helena, whose illness was genetic with no way out except through medication and constant care and support. He had let himself drown without seeking help, and with no apparent desire to change. But why? What had happened to him to convince him that endlessly freefalling into the abyss was his only option? What could hurt so much that the only way to survive was to numb the pain and feel nothing at all? Just one night spent with Alder revealed little of his past, but it was enough to convince Nate that there was more to him than the belligerent town drunk.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

Alder’s tearful apology, repeated over and over throughout the night while Nate watched over him, stayed with Nate. At first, he reassured Alder that it was no trouble, he just wanted to make sure Alder would recover, but soon it became apparent that the apologies were not meant for Nate. Alder had wronged someone, someone important to him, and the guilt haunted him even in the haze of inebriation. No matter how deep he sank into the abyss, that guilt, the memory of whoever he had wronged, followed.

Nate said nothing of this to either Hugh or Cheren. It would accomplish nothing, and they didn’t want to hear it. So he contented himself with playing with Larvesta, getting to know her quirks and gently coaxing her out of her shell. Nate had been thrown into this situation having to leave Aspertia through something of a forced hand. He would make sure Larvesta had a smoother transition.

It rained on their sixth and final night hiking through Route Twenty. Hugh’s Samurott and Carracosta kept watch on the group’s camp throughout the night, happy to stay up and enjoy the rain. Nate was not so happy sandwiched between Hugh and Cheren as they huddled under a lean-to that covered barely four square feet of ground. The rain was relentless, a real downpour, and Nate shivered despite the humid summer warmth.

“Some Water-type Pokémon can use Rain Dance to induce storms,” Cheren said conversationally
as he wiped rainwater off his pants. “Unfortunately, there’s not much to be done to stop said storm.”

“Oh my god, go to sleep, dude,” Hugh grumbled. “No one asked for an Academy lesson.”

“I’m surprised you’re even under this shelter,” Cheren shot back. “A Syreni like you should be right at home in the rain. Why don’t you move so Nathaniel and I can be more comfortable?”

“Fuck off. It’s not like I wanna be wet when I’m tryna sleep.”

Nate sighed as he leaned back against the tree against which they’d constructed the shanty. “Talking’s just as hard to fall asleep to as being wet.”

“We should reach Virbank tomorrow,” Cheren said, more to himself than the others. “We only have to endure this for tonight.”

“And tomorrow,” Hugh said. “Rain like this’ll last for days. Trust me.”

Great, Nate thought. Just what he wanted, a hike through the pouring rain. He would have to keep Larvesta in her Pokéball until they reached Virbank if that was the case.

They had camped near a stream where the trees were thick to avoid as much of the rain as possible, but the ground was damp and only getting wetter the longer the storm persisted. Lightning flashed overhead, and Nate counted the seconds in his head until the thunder followed.

“Well, at least the storm’s far away,” Nate said as thunder rumbled low in the distance after he reached a count of fifteen in his head. “We probably don’t have to worry about getting struck by lightning.”

“Joy,” Hugh grumbled.

“Actually, I’ve heard that Syreni are more prone to electrocution than other Tamers. Hugh, maybe you should camp somewhere else so you don’t put us in danger,” Cheren said.

Nate didn’t even have time to roll his eyes before Hugh inevitably blew up at Cheren.

“Listen, asshole. I’m this close to punching that smarmy smirk off your pretty-boy face if you keep that shit up. You know I can do it, too.”

“Really, Cheren? Really, though?” Nate said.

Cheren chuckled in that uppity way he had. “We’re not going to get any sleep tonight as it is. Hugh has his uses here and there.”

“Shove it, Cheren,” Hugh snarled. “For the record, you’d be dead already without me. That Liepard back on Route Nineteen had it bad for you.”

“Have a little faith, Hugh. I am a Gym Leader.”

“Gym Leaders can die just as easy as anybody else.”

Cheren shifted next to Nate. “Not in the least. We’re built to last.”

“Right, you keep tellin’ yourself that. I won’t ask for a thank you the next time I save your sorry ass.”
“Okay, unlike you two tough guys, I need some sleep if I’m gonna brave a hike in the rain tomorrow,” Nate said. “I agreed to be in the middle, so give me a break already.”

Hugh grunted. “Yeah, whatever. Get your beauty sleep, Nate. I’m sure our mighty Gym Leader will protect you from the big bad rain tomorrow.”

“With pleasure,” Cheren said.

Nate rubbed his eyes. “Is it morning yet?”

At some point, Nate must have fallen asleep because the next thing he knew, he had a terrible crick in his neck, he couldn’t feel his butt from sitting for so long, and he was more tired than he could remember being last night. Hugh was no longer at his left, and Cheren snored softly to his right.

“Hey, Cheren.”

Nate nudged Cheren lightly, stirring him from sleep.

“Hm?” Cheren woke with a yawn and hissed as he rubbed his shoulder. “Ah, the joys of camping.”

Nate crawled out from under the lean-to and stretched out. His neck was sore and his legs were stiff. His clothes were a little damp, but it didn’t matter much in this rain. The downpour had relented a little, but it showed no signs of stopping anytime soon. Steam rose from his skin where the drops connected, veiling him in a thin layer of mist. He offered Cheren a hand up.

“There’s more joy to come,” he said grimly. “How long until we reach Virbank from here?”

Cheren got up and stretched out. He looked around a moment. “We should reach the city by early afternoon,” he said after checking his watch. “Where’s Hugh?”

“Getting your breakfast,” Hugh said. He joined the two of them and held out a couple of Bluk berries, freshly plucked. “Carracosta found a tree earlier this morning. You’re welcome.”

Nate bit into his breakfast happily. “Thanks, Carracosta.”

Hugh bristled but said nothing of it. “You two ready to hit the road? I’m getting bored.”

“Did you sleep at all?” Cheren asked. “It’s not an easy hike the rest of the way to Aspertia.”

“I got enough. I don’t need so much when it’s raining a lot. Let’s just go.”

Nate and Cheren exchanged a look, and Nate shrugged as he finished off his Bluk berry. He’d never been one to question Hugh’s Syreni thing. Cheren looked like he wanted to know more, but he didn’t press the issue.

Nate released Lucario and caught up with Hugh. “Give your Pokémon a rest. Lucario doesn’t mind the rain.”

Hugh grunted and mumbled a thank you under his breath. “You gonna be okay with the rain?”

“Do I have a choice?” Nate sighed. “It’s not like I hate it. I just don’t like being wet for so long.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

Cheren released Stoutland, who took to the rain rather happily and barked at Lucario. Lucario ignored the larger dog and walked alongside Nate, impervious to the rain. Hugh’s Eelektrik
remained in the stream and swam alongside the group lazily, soaking up the rain and ever searching for unsuspecting prey. Nate averted his gaze. Eelektrik had always given him the creeps.

“Home stretch, guys,” Cheren said. “Let’s make good time.”

Everyone was happy to agree to that, and they pressed on in comfortable silence through the rain. In a way, it was almost peaceful, Nate mused to himself. The wetness was sticky and uncomfortable, but when he let his mind wander and focus on the smells, the sounds, the sight of a new place he’d never been before, he found it was somewhat tolerable, even serene in its own way.

Lucario’s presence beside him helped. The jackal had been with him since his teenage years as a tiny Riolu. Back then, it had been much more curious and eager to engage the world around it. Now, it was much more paranoid, wary, unflappable. Nate depended on Lucario to be his eyes and ears when his Fire-type Pokémon could not be.

It was Lucario who came through for the group, as it turned out, when around midmorning Cheren almost took the last step he would ever take. With a yip of alarm, Lucario cut Cheren off and Force Palmed the damp earth just in front of him without warning.

“What the— Lucario!” Nate shouted.

Cheren lost his balance and stumbled backwards, where he landed on his rear in the muddy grass. “Ugh, bothersome doesn’t even begin to cover this.”

Nate helped Cheren up to his feet while Hugh checked on Lucario.

“Oh, shit,” Hugh said. “Cheren, you better kiss Lucario’s feet. He just saved your life.”

Nate and Cheren gathered around the area where Lucario had angrily punched the earth. Stunned still with paralysis, a Stunfisk lay in the muddy grass, its eyes wide and dilated as it sparked with latent static electricity. Its mud-brown flat body blended in almost perfectly with the damp earth, making it impossible to see unless you were looking for it. Lucario glowered down at it, ready to strike again if the flat fish recovered from its paralysis.

“Stunfisk,” Nate said. “Ouch.”

“I suppose they would be out with all this rain,” Cheren allowed, sounding a little embarrassed. “I should’ve known.”

“Whoa, can I get that on tape?” Hugh said. “Cheren admitting he messed up? I never thought I’d hear it.”

“Be grateful it was me and not you, Hugh,” Cheren shot back. “I could have survived a Thundershock from a Sunfisk. You may have gone into a coma.”

“Dude.” Hugh advanced on Cheren, and Nate held him back without thinking.

“How’re we gonna get through here if there’s Stunfisk hiding in the mud?” Nate asked Cheren. “I’d rather not get shocked.”

Cheren thought about that for a moment. “I’m afraid we’ll have to wade in the stream. I know you don’t like that answer, Nathaniel, but I don’t like the idea of suffering a shock out here even more.”

*Sorry I asked.*
Nate held his tongue, knowing it was futile to argue. By the end of this trip, he would be so used to water that maybe he’d even develop an affinity for it. That’d be the day. An Ignifer who likes to get his feet wet. Yeah, right.

*Keep dreaming.*

“You gonna be okay?” Hugh asked as they all waded into the water in single file with Hugh in front.

“Well, what doesn’t kill me makes me stronger, right?” Nate forced a smile.

“Our seriously fucks you up. Milotic can ferry you. It’s not a problem.”

Nate frowned. “I’ll be okay. It’s just water. And if we’re gonna be out here, I should probably get used to things not going my way, right?”

Hugh watched him a moment. “Yeah, you’re right. Okay then, I won’t offer again.”

“Don’t sweat it,” Cheren said conspiratorially. “If you guys ever find yourselves in a desert, you’ll get your revenge.”

Nate laughed. “Yeah, like that’ll ever happen.”

They waded through the stream shallows up to their thighs, following the winding water for what seemed like hours. Eelektrik slithered through the shallow rapids alongside them. Lucario growled when it swam too close to Nate, but the eel was slick and quick to swim ahead to scout. Stoutland brought up the rear, splashing happily.

“Nothing gets Stoutland down, huh?” Nate said conversationally as they ate lunch—soggy sandwiches—on the go.

“He’s always energetic,” Cheren said tiredly. “Bianca calls him my better half.”

Stoutland yipped when it spotted a fish somewhere downstream and tried to pounce, but it only scared the fish away.

“Speaking of Bianca,” Hugh said. “I hear she’s not that into you.”

Nate could have died right there. “For fuck’s sake, Hugh,” he growled.

Cheren averted his gaze to focus on finishing his sandwich, but he seemed to consider Hugh’s words. “You heard correctly,” he said dejectedly.

“Cheren...” Nate trailed of, unsure what to say.

“It’s not your concern,” Cheren said, trying to sound less miserable than he looked. “It’s just the way things are.”

Hugh looked back, annoyed. “Listen, Cheren. If Bianca’s not that into you, then stop wasting your time moping over her. Find someone else. You’re a Gym Leader, aren’t you? I bet girls literally fight to get in your pants. You have no right to complain.”

“Hugh, *seriously,*” Nate said, knocking him in the back of the head.

“Ow! Hey, what the hell?”
Cheren chuckled. “You have a totally distorted view of what it means to be a Gym Leader, Hugh. Sorry to disappoint you, but it’s not like that at all. I’m usually too busy even to have proper meals, let alone worry about women. I suppose... I’ve known Bianca a long time. She’s... Well, she’s my best friend. And that kind of friendship between a man and a woman usually leads to something more. I guess we’re not there yet. Maybe we never will be.”

Hugh grunted. “Well if you ask me, you better hurry up and move on. It’s not like you get points for waiting around for her.”

“Okay, Hugh, that’s enough,” Nate snapped. “It’s none of our business. You’re being an ass.”

“I’m the ass? Wake up, both of you. Bianca’s not some video game princess in a castle, she’s a person.”

“I’m not disagreeing with you, but you could be a little nicer about it,” Nate shot back. “Do you even hear yourself? Geez.”

“It’s okay, Nathaniel,” Cheren said. “I guess... Sometimes you want to believe things will go your way if you work hard enough at them. I’ve always believed that. It’s gotten me this far. But... Bianca’s a person, of course. A person I admire and respect. She makes her own decisions. I shouldn’t hold that against her, but I can’t help but feel upset anyway...”

Nate didn’t know what to say. What was there to say? Cheren was a Gym Leader, the best trainer in Aspertia. He was an Atlas, sturdy as a mountain and able to overcome any obstacle. He’d made a name for himself by working hard, getting better every day, and all his labor paid off. He was what young Pokémon trainers aspired to be one day. They believed that if they worked hard, learned all they could, and kept at it, they could be like him one day.

But the game changed completely when suddenly what you wanted to win was a person’s heart. Suddenly, it didn’t matter how hard you worked or how badly you wanted it. If it wasn’t meant to be, it wasn’t meant to be. The world shouldn’t revolve around the strong and the accomplished and the hardworking at the expense of everybody else.

“So feel upset. It’s not like you’re not allowed to be,” Hugh said. “Whatever, you’ll be fine. Bianca’s still your best friend. You should be thankful for that if you care about her so much. She cares about you enough to stick around even when you’re fucking up. Not a lotta people have that.”

Cheren chuckled, but it wasn’t the condescending laugh he usually used around Hugh and Nate. “Hugh, I had no idea you were so sentimental. I wonder why you don’t have legions of ladies flocking to you? I’m sure it has nothing to do with your sour personality.”

“Ha ha, fuck you,” Hugh said, but there was a smile in his tone.

“Am I dreaming? Is this some alternate universe and nobody told me?” Nate said, incredulous. “I mean, really.”

Cheren patted his shoulder. “There, there, Nathaniel. You know I have a soft spot for you both.”

“Gross, no thanks,” Hugh said.

At least they’re getting along, Nate thought to himself. It was enough for now. A crazy thought occurred to him just then. Maybe Hugh said exactly what Cheren needed to hear. Maybe it was harsh, and maybe it was unwelcomed, but maybe Cheren needed to hear it aloud for it to really sink in. Hugh was the best for that kind of thing. He always said what he thought, and he didn’t care if it rubbed others the wrong way.
Nate laughed softly to himself. How wonderful this world was, filled with such different people and unexpected surprises around every corner. Maybe this was what Hugh meant when he said he wanted to see more of it. If that was the case, maybe this wasn’t so bad, after all.

“What?” Hugh said, hearing Nate’s laughter.

“Nothing,” Nate said. “It’s nothing.”

Hugh scowled but didn’t press the issue. They continued on in the stream, spreading out a bit as they lapsed into silence again. The clouds and rain made it impossible to see where the sun was in the sky, but Nate figured they must be close by now. He let his mind wander, trusting Lucario to look out for anything that might catch him off guard. He daydreamed about the inn they would book, the clean sheets and soft bed and, best of all, a dry change of clothes. It all awaited him in Virbank City.

Lucario’s yip of warning hit him rather sluggishly, as though with a delayed reaction. Nate had been so lost in thought that he didn’t realize what was happening until it was too late.

“Thunderbolt!” Hugh shouted somewhere ahead.

Nate blinked and looked around, but he came face to face with a putrid cloud of violet smoke and began to choke. Wheezing, he staggered and fell to his knees in the river.

“Nathaniel! Shit, Stoutland!” Cheren shouted.

Something smashed into Nate hard, and for a terrifying moment he was underwater and drowning. His lungs ached as they filled with water and something more insidious. The pain spread through his chest, down his arms and legs, and doubled back as though his blood carried the pain with each pump of his heart. Something pulled him above the water and he choked for air, but each breath was laced with sticky pain, and he clutched his throat.

His vision was blurry, but he could make out Hugh’s red jacket as he swung at something purple in the air with his swords. Eelektrik fired off another Thunderbolt when it leaped out of the water, and a sickening crack followed the light. Lucario splashed in the water next to Nate and lunged at something in the air behind Nate.

“Come on, Nathaniel, stay with me!”

Cheren hauled him backwards to shore and tried to revive him. Nate felt his mouth opening and something was poured in. It was viscous and bitter, and he choked.

“You have to drink this, okay? Come on, now,” Cheren said, forcing the liquid down Nate’s throat.

It went down, and it burned like drowning. Nate gagged and his body jerked, but moving only amplified the pain. Tears blurred his eyes and snot ran from his nose. The rain pounded down and washed it all away as Cheren hovered over him. Behind him, flashes of lightning continued to light up the grey sky until finally a blast of pressurized water exploded, earth shattering, followed by erratic splashing.

“Nate!” Hugh’s voice sounded far away.

Nate tried to say something, but the words knotted in his swollen throat. It was hard to breathe, but not impossible. He could hear his breaths, wet and ragged like he was gargling water. The light began to fade, and his vision doubled until all he could make out were shapeless colors.
“Nathaniel! Hang on...” Cheren’s voice faded.

Something smooth jostled Nate’s body and lifted him up, but he felt like he was falling instead of rising. His thoughts muddled, and soon there was only the pain and the raindrops rolling down his cheeks and neck. He tried to speak again, but his tongue was fat and heavy in his mouth.

The grey sky faded to black, and he saw no more.

When Nate came to, the first thing he noticed was the warmth. Whatever he was lying on was soft and cushioned, and it retained his naturally high temperature to warm him up. His clothes were dry and clean, and his breathing came easy. There was a terrible sour taste in his mouth when he tried to swallow. He was thirsty.

Something pitter-pattered on a window nearby, most likely the rain. Perhaps not much time had passed since he’d blacked out. Something cool rested over his heart. No, that wasn’t quite right. There was no weight to it, just the sensation of soothing coolness, but not cold. He tried to raise a hand and feel about, but he felt heavy and lethargic.

“Oh, you’re awake,” a girl’s voice said. “Stay still.”

Nate tried to open his eyes, but it took immense effort and he was tempted to give up. Everything felt heavy and sluggish. The sensation of hands fluttered over his chest, and he realized someone was sitting next to him and unbuttoning his shirt. Cool fingers ghosted over his bare flesh over his heart, and he felt five pinpricks of pain before another wave of soothing liquid cool. It washed over him, emanating outwards to the tips of his toes and fingers, flushing him clean, and it took some of the weight with it. With some effort, he finally managed to get his eyes open.

A girl was hovering over him, but her eyes were fixed on his chest where her hands rested. She was quite young, probably fifteen or sixteen. Her pale face was furrowed in concentration, almost annoyance, and her sky blue eyes were dark in the room’s dim lighting. Platinum blonde hair, nearly white, framed her face in unkempt bangs and was pulled back in a high, spiky ponytail for utility rather than vanity. Her clothes looked like they were a size too big for her. Striped long sleeves draped her hands past the wrists like a doll’s.

“Wh-who...” Nate rasped.

His throat tickled and he coughed violently. The girl didn’t even flinch, but she leaned back and turned her head to avoid his coughing. When she looked back, she seemed even more pissed off than she’d been before.

“Look, I’m only doing this because Cheren asked me. So the least you can do is sit still and let me finish if you wanna live,” she snapped.

She brushed her bangs out of her face with her right hand, and Nate noticed that she wore a thick black glove over it. It was a bit strange considering the summer heat, but the soothing cooling sensation in his chest seemed to obliterate all coherent thought and he let it go. Something occurred to him then, and he blinked up at the girl, fighting the soporific effects of the sensation.

“Is that... Are you doing...?”

She looked down at him, surprised he was still trying to engage her. “Obviously. You didn’t get better on your own, dumbass.”
He had very little strength, and the cooling effects were pulling him under again, but he managed to find her sleeve and tugged on it until he found her gloved hand. He did his best to wrap his fingers around hers to get her attention, and she gasped at the contact.

“Thank you,” Nate managed, hoping she could hear his half-formed words.

She stared at him, and he thought perhaps she hadn’t heard him, but there was nothing he could do about it anymore. Sleep pulled him under, and the last sensation he could feel was her gloved fingers in his, holding his hand and reminding him that he was still here.

The next time he awoke, the rain was no longer falling, and light streamed in through the window. The cooling sensation was gone, but so was the heaviness in his limbs. The bad taste in his mouth had gotten worse, and he winced as he swallowed.

_Need water._

He turned his head, eyes bleary from sleep and illness, and found a glass of water on a nightstand next to the bed he was on. It was bubbly from sitting stagnant for hours, but it would do. Trying his arms, he pushed himself up in bed. Aside from feeling like he hadn’t sat up in days, he found his strength had more or less returned and was able to sit up normally. Not questioning it, Nate grabbed the water glass and chugged the entire thing in a few gulps. When he finished, he looked around, hoping there would be a sink or something where he could get more.

Hugh was asleep in street clothes on a couch near the foot of the bed. A made bed, identical to Nate’s, sat to the left, unused. Cheren was nowhere to be seen, nor was the blonde girl who’d been tending to Nate earlier. There was a sink in the room next to a coffee maker and some paper cups wrapped in plastic. Nate got out of bed and went to refill his glass. The wrapped cups bore a stamped green logo for the Bay Hotel – Virbank City on the side.

“So we made it,” he said after he’d downed another glass of water.

He took a moment to take stock of himself. He was wearing dry clothes, but not ones he recognized. They were a cheap button-down with matching pants, probably pajamas picked up at a dollar store somewhere, but they were clean. His shirt was open, and he remembered the girl and the cooling sensation she had imparted to him. He shrugged off the shirt and inspected his bare chest in the mirror.

There were faint scars over his heart, five in total, spaced out almost evenly in a circle. Knife incisions? They were too small. Maybe she’d cut him with her fingernails? He couldn’t imagine why she would do such a thing. Who was she?

“Bad news, you’re still ugly as shit even without a shirt.”

Hugh sat up on the couch with a yawn and managed a tired grin.

“Hugh.” Nate pulled his shirt back on and went to him.

“Hey.” Hugh got up and put his hands on Nate’s shoulders, looking him over. “How you feeling?”

“Ugly, apparently.”

Hugh grinned. “Glad to see you’re yourself again.”

“What happened?”
“You scared the shit outta me ‘n Cheren is what happened. You don’t remember anything?”

“Not really. I think... Did I get jumped or something? I think I got pretty sick.”

Hugh looked at him gravely. “You were poisoned. It was pretty bad, too. We ran into a nest of Koffing and they Poison Gassed you. Cheren had an Antidote on him, but it wasn’t enough to cure you. Damnit, Nate, you really scared me back there.”

He looked away, and Nate’s gaze softened. “I’m okay, see? Totally fine.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Cheren said.

The door swung shut behind Cheren as he entered with a couple brown paper bags and a tray with three coffees. Cinccino was perched on his shoulder and nibbling on a bit of scone.

“Why didn’t you wake me up?” Hugh grumbled, ruffling his perpetually spiky hair in a futile effort to tame it.

“You of all people need your beauty sleep, Hugh,” Cheren quipped. “I brought breakfast.”

They gathered around the coffee table with Nate sitting at the foot of the bed and Hugh and Cheren on the couch. Nate was hungrier than he knew and practically inhaled the food, but Cheren had brought plenty.

“So I hear I ended up on the bad end of a Koffing ambush,” Nate said.

Cheren’s expression darkened. “Yes. I’m so sorry. I had no idea we would run into Koffing on Route Twenty. They’re not native to these parts, and the Antidote I had was meant for Venipede and Skorupi poison. If I’d known...”

Nate smiled a little. “It’s okay. Hugh said your Antidote’s what kept me holding on until we got here. I mean, I’m not dead, so no harm done.”

Cheren and Hugh stared at him accusatorily, and Nate’s smile faded.

“...Was it really that bad?” he said softly.

“I’m afraid so,” Cheren said darkly. “You nearly died. If it hadn’t been for Roxie, you wouldn’t be here now.”

“Roxie?”

“That Veleno chick who saved your life,” Hugh said.

“A Poison Tamer? Whoa...”

“Nathaniel,” Cheren said, warming his hands on his coffee. “You’ve missed a little since we arrived. Roxie is Gym Leader Harrison’s teenaged daughter. We found her at the Gym in place of her father, who’s been out to sea for the past couple weeks, apparently. My note reached him just as he was setting off.” Cheren gritted his teeth, troubled. “In any case, I’ve sent word to him of our arrival. He’s scheduled to return today, so if you’re feeling up to it, I’d like you to join Hugh and me when he gets back. I’m sure you’d like to thank Roxie for saving your life, too.”

Nate rubbed the back of his neck as he tried to process what he was hearing. “Um, yeah, of course. Where’re my clothes?”
“I had to toss everything in the wash,” Hugh said. “Should be dry by now. Everything was pretty rank by the time we got here. Damned Koffing.”

“Get cleaned up and changed.” Cheren stood up with his coffee. “I’ll be in my room across the hall. Come and get me when you’re ready.”

Cincino squeaked and scampered after Cheren as he headed for the door and let himself out. Soon, Nate was alone with Hugh in the small room.

“Did I really almost die?” Nate said, not quite recognizing his own voice.

“Yeah,” Hugh said softly. “Don't fucking do it again.”

They shared a look, and Nate saw a glint in Hugh’s eyes that he hadn’t seen in a very long time, not since they visited Hayley’s grave for the first time together all those years ago. Not many things scared Hugh, but the thought of losing one of the very few people he loved scared him to the core.

“I won’t,” Nate said, finding his confidence.

“Swear it.”

“Huh?”

Hugh glared at him, and if Nate didn’t know him better, he was sure Hugh might cry. He didn’t.

“You heard me,” Hugh said. “Swear to me you won’t die.”

Nate was taken aback, and for a moment he stayed silent. Of course he couldn’t swear to that. No one could. The world was a dangerous place. Even Aspertia could be dangerous. People died all the time. But Hugh needed to hear it, and Nate needed to say it.

“I swear,” he said. “I won’t die.”

“Good. ‘Cause we both know I’m shit without you.”

Nate’s throat clenched. “No you’re not,” he said without thinking. “Hey.”

Hugh was glaring at a point on the table.

“Look at me, Hugh.”

Hugh looked up, scowling in his usual way, daring Nate to keep talking.

“You’re not shit without me,” Nate said. “You’re not. Don’t fucking say that.”

Hugh searched his eyes and after a moment’s hesitation, nodded brusquely. Nate slipped off the bed and offered him a hand.

“Come on. If we don’t hurry up, Cheren’ll come storming in here and lecture us about wasting time.”

Hugh snorted. “You got that right.”

Twenty minutes later, both Hugh and Nate had showered and changed into freshly washed clothes. The twin bed next to Nate’s was pristine. Hugh must have stayed up with Nate all night and finally crashed on the couch. Nate said nothing about it, knowing Hugh would probably become flustered
and lob some half-hearted insult at him if he brought it up. He shook his head and smiled to himself.

“What’re you grinning about?” Hugh said as he pulled on a shirt.

“What? You ready?”

They headed out and grabbed Cheren, who managed to comment on how long it took them to get ready in spite of everything. Nate was just happy to be outside in the sun again.

“Glad it’s not raining anymore,” Nate said, breathing deeply. His throat still stung a little from the lingering effects of the poison.

“So am I,” Cheren agreed. “Let’s just hope this good weather will prevail and help Gym Leader Harrison return swiftly.”

Cheren walked ahead with Cinccino on his shoulder, his posture stiff and his hands in his pockets. Hugh leaned in conspiratorially.

“He’s been more uppity than usual since we found out about Gym Leader Harrison being away,” Hugh said.

“There was stuff with Castelia going on, right?” Nate said. “I wonder how bad it really is if the Gym Leader left his own city.”

“I dunno, but I got a bad feeling we’re gonna be dragged into it whether we like it or not.”

“You’re the one who wanted to come.”

Hugh shot him a dirty look. “Oh, sure, it’s my fault Castelia’s being a bag of dicks and pirating Virbank’s waters. Real mature, Nate.”

“You’re the one who called Castelia a bag of dicks, not me.”

“Oh, shut up.”

They walked along the coastline in a southerly direction from the Bay Hotel, which, true to its name, was located right on the bay. Boutique cafés, restaurants with patio seating, and a park with manicured gardens for people and Pokémon to exercise or hang out in lined the shore to their right as they walked south. The beach was on the left. Sunbathers, surfers, and swimmers hung out on the sand. Recreational ships of all sizes floated in the marina, from tiny wave riders to sail boats to yachts.

“Equality at its finest, huh,” Hugh said, side-eyeing one of the fifty-foot yachts where someone was hosting a party for people dressed all in white drinking champagne at ten in the morning. Virbank was the largest city Nate had ever seen. Its skyscrapers were taller than Aspertia’s and seemed to go on for miles in the heart of the city. The roads were wide enough for electric trams, Pokémon, and people to share all at the same time. Electronic billboards flashed with images of supermodels advertising a refreshing new Pomeg berry soda or the latest from Nimbasa’s high-fashion designers. There was so much noise and chatter that Nate could hardly hear the breeze or the vast ocean once they walked just a block deeper into the city. It was like wandering into a forest where all the trees were concrete and glass, but he felt just as lost.

“I don’t know if I’d ever be able to live in a place like this,” Nate admitted as they waited at a busy
street corner for the light to change.

“You get used to it,” Cheren said. “But I agree. I prefer the quieter life in Aspertia.”

“The city must have its perks,” Hugh said. “They must have everything here. I bet you could go to a store and get the latest X-Transceiver model anytime you want.”

“I’m sure you could, but we’re not here on a shopping spree, Hugh,” Cheren admonished.

“I dunno, I wouldn’t even have anyone to call,” Nate said when the light changed and they crossed with the sea of people also waiting.

“You guys’re literally the worst,” Hugh grumbled.

Canals crisscrossed the city under bridges and glass walkways, and Water-type Pokémon ferried people and goods along them for fast transport across the city. Many buildings even had their front entrances right on the water, not bothering with the busy and crowded main streets. Hugh was so taken with the city’s design that Nate had to smile.

“If we have time, we should explore later,” Nate offered as they watched a Lapras pulling a small boat of people dressed for their workdays. “I’d like to see more of the city, too.”

“Now you’re talkin’,” Hugh said.

The Virbank City Gym was south of downtown, but a ring of forest surrounded the Gym that absorbed the sounds of the city. Gardeners worked in the forest to maintain its health, weeding out the bad and cultivating the good. They paid Nate and the others no mind as they passed by along the paved path to the Gym itself.

“A forest in the middle of the city,” Hugh said. “A little ostentatious, don’t you think?”

“Cheren’s Gym is practically a Gothic castle,” Nate said. “I guess nothing’s too good for a Gym Leader.”

Hugh guffawed at that, and Cheren rolled his eyes.

“You two better change your attitudes before we get inside. The last thing we need is to give Harrison any reason to dislike us,” he said. “And for your information, I inherited the Aspertia Gym, obviously. I have no control over what the building looks like.”

“Oh sure, and I bet living in the best digs in town’s just such a bother to you,” Hugh goaded.

Cheren shot him a dirty look, but said nothing.

They soon arrived at the Gym’s entrance, and Nate was astounded at the air of tranquility and quiet that surrounded the place despite being located in the middle of a major city. The Gym itself was a rather modest building, built for longevity rather than style. It was steel and concrete and glass, sturdy and functional. A large canal disappeared into an entrance at the southern end of the Gym and dumped out directly into the ocean.

“Come on,” Cheren said, leading the way through the double glass doors.

Nate and Hugh followed. Inside, the Gym was much the same as the outside. Sturdy, practical, no-nonsense. But once they reached the main arena, Nate felt as though he’d been transported to another world. A forest grew in the arena, thicker around the edges than in the center, and as green
as any natural forest. The canal that fed into the sea swept through the forest and turned it into a swampy morass, deep and dark on the southern edge for large Water-type Pokémon to dive.

The roof of the Gym was a skylight, open today to let in the warm sunlight. Taillow and Tranquill and Chatot squawked in the branches above from their nests. Pansage and Panpour jumped among the trees, making a racket and stuffing sweet berries in their mouths. Magikarp, Surskit, and Basculin swam in the shallows, but Nate couldn’t see anything in the dark depths of the deeper pools. An Ekans hissed from a tree hollow, spooking Hugh. He muttered a string of curses under his breath and quickly jogged past the snake.

“Great, so we just walked into a game of Jumanji,” Hugh said bitterly, still rattled from the encounter with Ekans.

“Hey, what’s that sound?” Nate said.

A soft but noticeable pounding reverberated somewhere in the Gym, booming. He stopped to listen while Cheren asked one of the Gym trainers working with a Servine about the Gym Leader.

“He’s not back yet,” the trainer said. He was a lanky, middle-aged man in a straw hat and rolled up jeans to keep them from getting wet. His Servine waded in the shallows on its stubby legs and tasted the air with its forked tongue, yellow eyes unblinking and eerie as they stared at Nate and Hugh. “We’re expecting him within the hour if you wanted to wait.”

“We will, thank you.”

Nate was more interested in the booming sound and followed the path back the way they’d come, this time taking a right instead of a left.

“Hey, wait up,” Hugh said, jogging to catch up.

“You hear that, right?” Nate said.

“The music?”

“Music?”

“Yeah, it’s a bass. Why?”

Nate followed the music. “I just wanna check it out.”

They left Cheren to talk with the Gym trainer and followed the music to a closed door on the main floor. There was a sign written in hasty handwriting that read, ‘Keep out!!!’ with three exclamation points.

“Subtle,” Hugh deadpanned.

Nate knocked, but there was no answer.

“Idiot, that bass is so loud, there’s no way they heard you. Move.” Hugh shoved Nate aside and opened the door. It was unlocked and opened easily into a stairwell leading down. The music was much louder in here, but still muffled. Nate could make out a tune now, electric and fluid, not unpleasant but not a style he was very familiar with.

They rounded the corner and came upon another door, this one slightly cracked. Nate opened it up and walked into a spacious, underground room. The walls were concrete and covered in cloth
banners and posters, black and red and purple, depicting band logos and group shots. Some were famous groups Nate recognized, others he'd never seen before, perhaps local or indie groups. The music was loudest here, and the source soon became apparent.

A young girl stood toward the back of the room surrounded by electronic recording equipment. A keyboard played back a synthesized tune, and a computer screen scrolled with what looked like EKG readings, spiking with each chord progression and recording every note. The girl, who Nate recognized as the young blonde who had supposedly cured him of his poisoning, was playing a violet bass guitar along with the synthesized tune coming from the keyboard.

Nate lost his nerve for a moment, unsure what to say or if he should interrupt what was obviously a private jam session. They had clearly trespassed into this girl’s room uninvited. Hugh shouted at her, cupping his hands around his mouth.

“Hey! Turn it down a sec!”

The girl’s eyes flew open, her concentration broken, and blazing blue flared with anger at the sight of them. The bass stopped, but the keyboard continued playing the twangy tune. She reached for a Pokéball at her hip with lightning speed and threw it at the boys before they could react.

“Holy—!”

Nate and Hugh scrambled back against the wall as a thick Seviper coalesced and bared its wicked fangs at them. They were drenched red with poison that dripped onto the floor and smoked on the concrete. The snake was a good ten feet long and could have probably eaten Nate for breakfast.

“What the fuck!” Hugh said.

The girl switched off the keyboard and the recording equipment and confronted them in a rage. Her bass guitar swung on the leather thong around her shoulder.

“That’s my line, what the fuck,” she hissed. “How dare you barge into a girl’s room uninvited! What are you, a stalker?”

“Me?!” Hugh sputtered, collecting his courage and perhaps forgetting that he was facing down a deadly snake twice his size. “He’s the one who wanted to come here, you know!”

Nate found his composure and swallowed. He pushed off the wall and took a moment to look the girl over. It was the same girl who had tended to him, that much was clear. She wore a black dress and purple striped leggings with combat boots, and her platinum blonde hair was in that messy ponytail he remembered.

But what drew his attention were her hands. She wore no gloves as she clutched her bass guitar. Her right hand was rotted and black at the fingertips as though badly frostbitten. The nails were long and pointed, serrated. Animalistic. The veins in her right hand throbbed dark and purple. Her left hand, by contrast, was white and pale as though the blood had been drained from it entirely. The nails on the left hand were smooth and manicured but ghastly pale, moribund.

The girl caught him looking and, as though remembering something, gasped and spun around. When she faced them again, she wore a pair of long black gloves with frayed holes in the elbows.

“Roxie?” Nate said.

She blinked those angry blue eyes and sneered. “Yeah, what’s it to you?”
Seviper hissed menacingly, its bloody eyes trained on Nate as its forked tongue tasted the air.

“I’m sorry we barged in here uninvited,” Nate said quickly. “I just wanted to thank you for helping me before.”

She hesitated and some of the blazing fury faded from her blue eyes. Hugh noticed it, too.

“Hey, how ‘bout you call off your snake since we’re not here to molest you, obviously,” Hugh said.

Roxie sneered at him. “Watch it, Syreni.”

But she considered the situation a moment and called off Seviper. The sleek black snake folded its fangs and closed its mouth. Slowly and betraying none of its speed, Seviper slithered over a woven rug and curled up around the chair Roxie sat in amidst her recording equipment. She set down her bass guitar on a stand. Movement under the chair revealed a small Foongus huddling in the shadows. It poked its head out from under the chair and looked up at Roxie, timid. She reached down a gloved hand and pulled it into her lap, where it happily curled up and made a squeaking sound like a chew toy, bouncing a little.

“Well?” she said.

“Well, what?” Hugh snapped.

“Hugh,” Nate warned.

“You said you wanted to thank me,” Roxie said.

Nate looked around, but the couch was on the other side of the room by a television set and an old chest that doubled as a coffee table. He showed her the palms of his hands and took a couple steps forward.

“I do,” he said. “I don’t really remember what happened, but...” He touched a hand to his chest over his heart where the strange scars marked him. “I know I would’ve died if it wasn’t for you. So thank you. I mean that.”

She eyed him thoughtfully, that hint of annoyance and teenaged anger lingering, but she nodded.

“You’re welcome. Koffing poison’s a real bitch. You got lucky.”

There was an awkward silence that Hugh seemed to have no intention of breaking. Nate had never been good at meeting new people, and he struggled for something to say.

“You’re the Gym Leader’s kid, right?” Hugh said suddenly.

“Yeah, so what?”

Hugh frowned. “It’s not like that’s a bad thing.”

“I never said it was.”

Hugh shot Nate a look like he couldn’t even believe this conversation was happening.

“Roxie,” Nate said. “You record your own music?”

At this, she perked up a bit. “Yeah, a little. What’s it to you?”
Nate shrugged. “Actually, I don’t know much about music... I can’t even play an instrument.”

She looked away and patted Foongus on its wide-brimmed head. The little mushroom Pokémon made an awful squeaky slurping sound like a babbling baby, and Hugh visibly cringed.

“But I think it’s pretty cool that you play bass,” Nate added, hoping he didn’t sound like a complete moron.

“...I play lead guitar, too,” Roxie said, the barest hint of a smile on her face. “I’ve been playing for years.”

“Wow, that’s a lot. Did your dad teach you?”

Roxie stopped petting Foongus and glared back at Nate. “No.”

And that was the end of that.

They stood there in silence for a moment. Was it really this hard to talk to a sixteen-year-old girl? Nate couldn’t remember having many problems talking to women in the past regardless of their age. Rosa was so easy to talk to that sometimes they didn’t even need to talk as long as they were just together. Maybe he was getting too old. Maybe he was too far removed from the teenaged generation now that he’d forgotten completely how to communicate with them. Given the difference in their home environments, Nate found it depressingly easy to see how he might have nothing in common with someone like Roxie.

As he warred with his inner thoughts, Hugh cut right to the chase, as usual.

“So what’s up with your hands?” he asked. “I hear Veleno can poison people. Is that true?”

Roxie’s former anger returned full force and she got up out of her chair, Foongus in her arms. “That’s none of your goddamned business.”

“Hey, it was just a question!” Hugh shot back.

“You’re an asshole,” Roxie spat.

“Excuse me?” Hugh gaped at her.

“There you are,” Cheren said from the door. “Oh, Roxie, hello. Sorry to barge in like this. I just received word that Harrison pulled into the harbor. Hugh, Nathaniel, let’s meet him upstairs when he arrives.”

“There’s nowhere I’d rather be,” Hugh said, scowling at Roxie.

Nate followed him to the door but paused. “Are you coming?”

“What for? It’s not like I can help.”

“But you’re Veleno, and the Gym Leader’s your dad. You’ll take over for him one day, right?”

Roxie bared her teeth at Nate, and he paled at the sudden thought that he’d woken an ancient evil long sleeping dormant. “Over my dead body,” she spat.

He swallowed and looked away. “Okay, well, um...” He shook his head. “Thanks again for your help.”
He ran out of her room without looking back, happy to be out of there. Teenagers often went through rebellious phases, Nate had been no exception, but something about Roxie struck him as off. Something was bothering her deeply, something more than the progression of adolescence. It had to be for her to lash out like she did for seemingly no reason.

Despite her scathing reception, he found himself wondering about her and what her deal was. Why had she clammed up when he asked her about her father? When Hugh asked her about her hands? Nate didn’t know much about Veleno, only that they were supposedly able to poison people just like the Poison-type Pokémon that took to them. He touched his chest as he climbed the stairs. How had she saved him?

Back upstairs, Nate found Cheren and Hugh in the Gym proper where they waited for him to be escorted to a room off the northern wall. It was a small conference room, sensibly furnished, and Nate took a seat in one of the empty swivel chairs. A large whiteboard adorned the wall, and a window opened up to look out over the forested grounds.

“So you met Roxie,” Cheren said.

Nate nodded. “Yeah. She was...”

“She was a jerk,” Hugh said. “What’s her problem? We were definitely not like that when we were sixteen, right Nate?”

Cheren gave him a withering look. “I’m sure. Roxie’s a good kid. She’s smart, and she’s got a lot of promise as a Veleno. It’s just a shame that there’s no one here to teach her how to use her gifts.”

“What do you mean?” Nate asked.

“You’re aware that Gym Leader Harrison is a pleb, right? Roxie takes after her mother, Gina, who was also Veleno. Sadly, Gina passed away when Roxie was just a little girl.”

Hugh averted his gaze. “That’s the worst.”

Nate wondered if he was thinking about Hayley, but he said nothing about it. “So she’s growing up without a mentor to teach her about being a Tamer.”

“There are other Tamers that train at the Gym,” Cheren said. “But we learn from our parents. It’s different. I know she may seem a little rough around the edges, but remember that the next time you talk to her. Sometimes there’s more to people than meets the eye.”

Like with Champion Alder, Nate wanted to say, but he held his tongue. Cheren would just roll his eyes, anyway.

“Hey, you’re the resident genius around here,” Hugh said. “What’s with the gloves? Is it true Veleno can kill people just by touching them?”

Cheren shifted in his chair. “Not like you might be imagining. With Veleno, a scratch, even a shallow one, from the right hand will poison you and can kill you, just like an Ekans’s bite, for example. But a similar wound from the left hand can heal any poison administered from a Pokémon.” Cheren glanced at Nate. “That’s how she saved you.”

Nate touched a hand to his chest where the scars from Roxie’s fingernails remained, the only trace of his brush with death. “Wow, any poison?”

“From what I’ve gathered, yes. But the price is a steep one. Many Veleno in the past have
accidentally killed loved ones with a tender touch. The older they get, the more potent their poison becomes. Even gloves aren’t a hundred percent guarantee of safety. Ironically, their healing hands don’t work on their own poison. To date, no cure has been found for Veleno poison.”


“Yeah,” Nate said hoarsely.

“Yes, it does suck,” Cheren agreed softly. “As a result, in many parts of the world, Veleno are deeply hated and feared.”

The door opened, and a large man dressed in a violet and white captain’s overcoat walked through the door accompanied by a couple of Gym trainers. He wore a bandana over his buzzed platinum blond hair, and his blue eyes matched Roxie’s perfectly. A thick scar bisected his forehead and ended over the bump of his flat, fleshy nose. He was older, in his late fifties or early sixties, broad shouldered, and quite tall. He walked with confidence, and if Nate didn’t know he was a pleb, he would not have guessed it in a million years. Next to this man, he felt like an insignificant Bug.

“Cheren! I was looking all over for ya!” he bellowed.  

Cheren got up and extended his hand politely. “Harrison, good to see you. I take it you got my message.”

Harrison grunted. “I got it. But ya should know better than to interrupt a man when he’s eating, when he’s with a woman, and when he’s out to sea.”

Cheren’s lip twitched in annoyance. “I’ll be sure to remember that.”

Harrison grinned and looked around. “And who’re these two?”

Nate and Hugh stood up.

“This is Nathaniel and Hugh, my associates. They accompanied me here from Aspertia.”

Harrison sized them up, but his gaze lingered on Hugh and he grinned, revealing a blackened tooth from an old fight. “You’re Syreni, ain’t ya?”

Hugh’s perpetual scowl deepened. “What’s it to you?”

Harrison guffawed. “Got some bite to ya, too. That’s good, that’s good. Most o’ the Syreni I worked with back in Hoenn had as much bite as a toothless Sharpedo. Heh, no wonder Team Aqua lost so much ground to those Magma pissants. Got outta that clusterfuck ‘fore the shit hit the Rotom fan, I did.”

Hugh’s expression morphed from annoyance to mild interest. “You were part of Team Aqua? Those lunatic pirates who wanted to flood all of Hoenn a few years back?”

“Hugh,” Cheren warned.

But Harrison guffawed again and clutched his belly. “Ha! You got more bite, I tell ya! I like you, kid. What’d ya say your name was?”

“Hugh.”

“Hugh, fine name, that is. You keep that bite, got that? Team Aqua or whoever else, they wanna spread fear and recruit people into their cult. Ya fall for it ‘cause it all sounds nice and dandy in the
beginning, and by the time ya smell the shit under the roses, y’already gone and drunk the Kool-Aid. That Team Rocket, they were the same damn thing till that tyrant Giovanni got offed by his own son. Talk about bite!”

“Actually, that’s sort of why we’re here,” Cheren interrupted smoothly. “You’ll recall that I sent word to you about Team Plasma and their atrocities in the lower East Tine. They’ve already razed Accumula to the ground and seized control of Striaton. I realize you have your own problems with Castelia, but if we don’t join forces and act now, Nacrene could be in danger.”

Harrison’s good mood evaporated and his expression turned grave and sullen. He walked around the table to Cheren and took the seat next to him. “Cheren, take a seat, please.”

Nate frowned and exchanged a glance with Hugh, but Hugh shrugged and shook his head.

Cheren watched Harrison suspiciously, but complied. “What is it?”

Harrison’s shoulders slumped, and he leaned forward on his knees. He looked as though he’d aged ten years, Nate thought.

“The other day, I got word from your associate in Aspertia, Bianca,” Harrison said. “It was addressed to us both, so I went ahead and opened up the message.” He paused and took a steadying breath. “Gym Leader Lenora’s dead.”

The room grew still as Nate tried to process what he’d just heard.

“That’s...” Cheren stumbled over his words. “I’m sorry, what?”

“They executed her in Striaton,” Harrison went on grimly. “Those three royal pains in the ass. And then Team Plasma killed ‘em off right after.”

Hugh stared wide-eyed, for once stunned into silence. Nate raised a hand to cover his gaping mouth.

No way.

Cheren blinked rapidly. “Lenora’s... No, that can’t be right.”

Harrison said nothing, but he gestured to one of the trainers that had accompanied him into the conference room. The trainer handed him a rumpled roll of parchment, which he handed to Cheren. Hands shaking, Cheren scanned the parchment and shook his head.

“No, that’s impossible. She wouldn’t... They can’t kill her.” He clenched his fists, crumpling the note. Tears watered in his eyes and splashed onto the wrinkled paper. “It’s not possible. She’s an Atlas, the strongest one I know.”

“I know she was your mentor,” Harrison said softly. “I’m deeply sorry.”

“Beheaded,” Cheren read, his voice strained.

“Fucking hell,” Hugh said, incredulous.

Cheren crumpled Bianca’s note in his fist and slammed it on the table as hard as he could. The hard top cracked under his strength, and a couple chunks tumbled to the carpeted floor. Nate jumped at the sound and bit his tongue by mistake, tasting blood.

“I know this’s hard to hear, Cheren,” Harrison said, “but now there’s no point in sending help to
Nacrene. I’d be sendin’ my navy to the abyssal trenches if I did.”

Cheren glared at Harrison through his tears and stood up. “How can you say that?” he shouted. He threw the crumbled parchment at Harrison, and it bounced off his shoulder. “How can you fucking sit there and say that to me?”

Harrison remained seated and let Cheren vent. Nate’s knees wobbled as he tried to grasp the reality of what he had just learned. Lenora was dead. The Striaton princes were dead. Team Plasma effectively controlled the lower East Tine. And Rosa was somewhere over there in the middle of it all, if she was even still alive.

This can’t be happening.

“Listen to me,” Harrison said. “You got as sharp a mind as I ever saw. Think for a minute. Team Plasma’s got the lower East Tine. It’s done. For now. The next step is Castelia.”

Cheren was shaking with rage as tears streamed down his face. “I don’t want to hear it. I have to go to Nacrene. We have to go to Nacrene.”

For such a large and intimidating man, Harrison had the patience of a saint. He calmly let Cheren finish his tirade, and then responded in even tones. “Castelia’s the bigger threat. They have a navy and an even bigger infantry. And they’re scared. Burgh’s got the knife twisting him from all sides. Nimbasa cut off all trade decades ago, ya know that, and Team Plasma’s got their main staple crop supply by the balls now that they got Nacrene and Striaton. Castelia’s a paradise built on a wasteland, and they’re getting’ squeezed tighter’n a hooker at happy hour.”

Cheren blinked away his tears, collecting himself somewhat as his rational side began to wrest back control of his emotions a little. “What does Castelia have to do with it? It’s Team Plasma that’s the threat, not them.”

“Because,” Harrison said grimly. “If Team Plasma takes Castelia, they’ll control the entire seaboard. Trade routes, transportation, immigration, all of it. It’s a hop, skip, and a jump from there to full-scale attack against Nimbasa and Opelucid. If those fuckers take Castelia, they’ll have the power to take the whole Trident.

“I thought it was just a few Castelia ships pirating Virbank trade vessels, so I went to investigate. But I found out it’s bigger’n that. It’s bigger’n Nacrene and Lenora, rest her soul. It’s bigger’n you and me. I was naïve. I thought I’d seen the last of this irredentist whatever the flying fuck bullshit in Hoenn, but I recognize the signs here. You had the right of it, Cheren. Team Plasma’s got to go. But we start with Castelia, cut ‘em off ‘fore they get any farther.”

Cheren sniffled and eyed the cracked dent he’d made in the table. “Castelia...”

Harrison stood up and held out his hand for Cheren. “For Lenora. We’ll get those fuckers.”

Cheren continued to weep silently, and he didn’t bother to wipe the rest of his tears. With a trembling hand, he took Harrison’s hand and shook on it. “For Lenora,” he said softly, voice strained.

“Damn straight,” Hugh said. “Finally, Team Plasma’s going down. No way we’re letting them get away with this. Right, Nate?”

Nate looked on, a knot of trepidation building in the pit of his stomach as he realized his small hopes for a smooth journey had been dashed. The world was much, much bigger than his little slice of peace and quiet in Aspertia, and its problems had suddenly become his, too. Rosa was out there
somewhere in the heat of the mess, and he was here on the brink of it. More had already lost their lives to it, and still more would in the coming days, weeks, however long it took to purge the Trident of Team Plasma.

He thought of Alder, probably halfway to the bottom of a bottle of gin at this time of day, drowning in his fishbowl as he looked out at the world beyond from behind the glass. He thought of Helena, his ailing mother back in Aspertia who would know even less as her fingers turned black with every cigarette she smoked down to the filter, maybe this one would kill her and silence the demons in her head telling her to just get it over with herself. He thought of Hayley, who would have been twenty-three now had she lived long enough to see the world in the state it was in today if the evil burning it to the ground hadn’t already claimed her life years ago.

*For them*, Nate thought silently.

For the people who were too broken, too far-gone, or had missed their chance entirely. For them, he would do what he could to help. Roxie had given him a second chance. He would not waste it.

“Yeah,” he said to Hugh. “I’m with you.”
Iris

The suffocating seconds stretched as Iris stared at Caitlin’s offered hand and tried to convince herself that this was not a dream. “Prophecy?” she blurted out. “You can’t be serious.”

Caitlin retracted her hand. Her unseeing eyes focused unblinking on a spot near Iris’s shoulder, and the stare gave Iris goose bumps despite the summer heat and humidity. Outside, a flock of Wingull and Pelipper flew by the cliff face with raucous honks as they descended on the bay and circled the fishing boats. Gothitelle also stared at Iris, statuesque and vacant.

“You know what I am,” Caitlin said softly.

Iris glared at Caitlin, channeling her inner unease and fear into her natural confidence and determination. “Clairvoyant.”

Caitlin nodded demurely. “Yes, I’m Clairvoyant. And prophecy is my gift.”

Iris had not known many Clairvoyants in her day, and she was glad of it. They were a strange breed, traditional, clan-oriented, much like Titans in that regard. But where Titans were masters of the physical world with their larger-than-life Dragons, the Clairvoyants’ domain was a place no other could reach. They fought with their thoughts, some even with their dreams. Iris had heard of a powerful Clairvoyant in Sinnoh, a Dreamwalker called Lucian who could not only communicate through dreams, but could supposedly even influence his victims’ actions in the waking world from leagues away. Titans were the product of Time and Space; Clairvoyants were immune to the concept entirely.

Caitlin laughed daintily, so softly that it could have been a sleepy sigh, and Iris tensed—could she hear her thoughts? Was this even real? Was she really here talking to Caitlin? Or was it all a dream? A manipulation?

“Don’t worry,” Caitlin said. “Whatever you may be thinking, I assure you I’m not reading your thoughts. That is not my power.” She ran her pink fingers, long and unmarred by physical labor or exertion, over Reuniclus’s gelatinous skin. The bulbous Psychic yawned and blinked its beady eyes up at Iris.

Iris did her best not to look at Reuniclus. Caitlin may claim not to be able to read her mind, but Psychic Pokémon were capable of feats beyond human comprehension.

“No, you just manipulated the one person you knew could get me to come here,” Iris shot back. She bit back a wince at her scathing tone, harsher and louder than usual to mask her anxiety.

Caitlin’s milky eyes locked with Iris’s all of a sudden, and Iris dug her fingers into Cottonee’s fluff in a vice grip. The Fairy squeaked and squirmed a little, shedding tufts of cotton on Iris’s lap and the sofa.

“You’re afraid, but you’re not stupid,” Caitlin said. “That will make things easier for us both.”

Iris released Cottonee, and it floated to land in her hair, eyes trained on Gothitelle. “We’re done here.”

She got up, but all of a sudden, Reuniclus was mere inches from her face. Its sleepy, dark eyes were trained on hers, and its jellied body glowed blue with telekinetic energy. Iris opened her mouth and reached for Cottonee to knock it away to safety, but whispers erupted in her head, a thousand
different voices squabbling all at once:

“Sit down!”

Before she could pass a coherent thought through the foreign cacophony in her head, Iris’s body slumped back into the sofa without her consent. Invisible hands dug their nails into her shoulders and pressed down, pushing her into the sofa, and when she tried to sit up again, they held her down. Reuniclus hovered over her, its translucent arms spread wide and the thick sausage fingers at the ends rolling and clicking like a puppeteer’s, though there were no strings. Cottonee shrieked at Reuniclus, but it dared not attack.

“Please stay,” Caitlin said demurely. “I’d like you to show me your prophecy.”

Iris counted her breaths—one, two, three—and began to feel the summer heat. Reuniclus continued to hover over her, and she glared up at it. Her throat was knotted with fear and trepidation and impossible to swallow. Reuniclus did not blink as it gazed down at her, deeper and deeper, searching for the end with Iris helpless to stop it.

Cottonee found its courage and bounced into the air over Iris’s head. It conjured up a robust Fairy Wind that buffeted Reuniclus back, enough to break the hold on Iris and silence the awful skin-crawling echoes in her head that scraped and probed deeper and deeper. Iris jerked as if waking from a falling dream and pressed her back into the sofa, eyes wide. The eerie pressure in her head was gone.

Gothitelle raised a hand, but Caitlin stopped it. “That’s enough,” she commanded, eerily quiet and icy enough to mean it.

Both Psychics stayed their hands, and Reuniclus shook itself out after the Fairy Wind attack. It had barely fazed the Multiplying Pokémon beyond catching it by surprise. Iris wished Haxorus was here, but the Dragon was outside somewhere, oblivious to her situation.

“I’m not your enemy,” Caitlin went on. “But I must insist on your cooperation.”

“Insist? You’ve got no right to summon me here and order me around like some nobody.”

“What makes you think you’re not nobody? That you’re not just like everyone else? What makes you any better than the old Adriati woman who sold you fried sweet plantains and warned you not to come here?”

Iris hesitated. How did Caitlin know about that?

“Your prophecy,” she went on. “It’s not just for you. You didn’t think you were special, did you?”

Silence fell between them. The birds outside sounded a thousand miles away as Caitlin’s silence filled the room and moored Iris to her seat with all the force a powerful Psychic did not need. She said nothing.

“Three thousand years ago, the world was on the brink of destruction. The Kalosian War was coming to an end, but like an insidious disease, the violence found its way here. Unova nearly perished. The Trident avoided total annihilation in the end, but the arrogance of man that almost destroyed it then will live on so long as there are men and women who mistake narcissism for sanctified uniqueness. We are all the same—Tamer, pleb, and skuff. That is the hardest lesson we must learn.”

Hurricane Iris roared in Iris’s ears as she fought the urge to rip out Caitlin’s dead eyes. “Is that so?
Then why am I here and not someone else? You said this was my prophecy.”

“You’re here because you chose to be. It’s in your nature, the audacity to prove what you have been taught to refute so violently.”

“You don’t know a thing about me.”

“I know you are the Halfling Dragon Princess. And I know you are Iris. The question is, who will you be when this is over?”

The condensation on the iced tea glasses had leaked onto the glass tabletop in amorphous puddles under the heat. The sliced fruit had begun to brown. Chimecho tinkled faintly from the porch where it kept a careful eye on Belaron and Haxorus and anything else that wandered too close. Caitlin waited for Iris to admit what they both already knew.

“I don’t believe in prophecies,” Iris said, her voice hoarse. “Whatever you can do, no one can see the future accurately.”

“No, they cannot. That’s why I have no need for my eyes. Sight is a distraction.” Caitlin once more held out her hand. “Neither of us has the time for distraction.”

What the hell am I doing?

Clairvoyants could do impossible things, but every story fell victim to embellishment. What was real? What was true? Could Caitlin truly foretell Iris’s future? Could she see what would happen when Iris finally marched on Opelucid? Was Iris’s destiny already set in stone?

No.

The thought reverberated in her mind with the force of a storm, howling winds and torrential rains drowning out any shred of doubt. No, destiny was a farce fed to little girls who knew no better to keep them from questioning the way things were, the way they had always been, and the way they would always remain. Unless little girls grew up and said enough was enough.

Caitlin was wrong. Iris was not the same as the rest of them. She would not let things remain as they were, the way they had always been. She would rather die. She would rather see this so-called prophecy for herself and prove it wrong. If that was narcissism, then she would gladly play the narcissist and reforge the world in the image that suited her.

So she offered Caitlin her hand in return. Caitlin’s hand was small and cold, and her nails were uneven, the product of a blind woman’s attempts to trim them. Her skin was so pale that Iris could make out the blue veins pulsing just under the flesh. Caitlin’s vacant gaze fell, and she blinked heavily before letting her eyes fall shut. Then, nothing.

“Now what?” Iris asked impatiently.

Caitlin said nothing as her head slumped. Their hands were gripped in a light grasp, neither too firm nor too slack. The seconds ticked by with Gothitelle boring a hole into Iris’s profile like Iris was a convicted serial killer marching to the gallows. Reuniclus had curled up on the couch next to Caitlin and yawned, innocuous as a Buneary. Cottonee remained quiet and mercifully still as it perched on Iris’s head and watched.

After several moments, Iris had had enough of this charade and made to stand. But as soon as she tried to pull her hand away, Caitlin’s grip tightened painfully. Iris gasped as she felt the pinch of Caitlin’s jagged nails in her wrist and palm. She opened her mouth to protest, but just then Caitlin
looked up and all the fight fled from Iris like air from a stuck balloon. Her stomach turned and nullified her control over her limbs in the shock.

Caitlin stared back at Iris, but instead of filmy grey, her eyes glittered golden and brilliant, inhuman even, as though she’d gazed into the sun and taken it unto herself. There was no mistaking that look, a look of sight despite Caitlin’s demonstrated blindness, and it sent a horrific chill through Iris that she had not known even in her worst nightmares.

Caitlin spoke, and a thousand voices echoed hers from all sides, pushing and pulling in waves to be heard. “The Dragon is thrice blind,” she bellowed. “One eye is fixated on the nebulous past, one is trapped in a timeless present, and one looks to a future that can never be.”

Iris shuddered in Caitlin’s iron grip, but Caitlin would not let go. Frail as she appeared, it was as though a hidden inner strength had come to life and filled her with incredible vigor, enough to overpower a Titan like Iris.

Caitlin sucked in a rattling breath, but those glittering eyes did not blink or waver even once as they gazed into Iris’s very soul. “When all three eyes see as one, the Crown will shatter, and a Truthseeker will appear to fill the Void left behind.”

As suddenly as she had transformed, Caitlin heaved and closed her frightful eyes. She released Iris, and Iris clutched her abused hand protectively against her chest. Cottonee patted her head with its leafy wings, cooing in concern.

Gothitelle was at Caitlin’s side in an instant and began to glow a warm yellow. The aegis engulfed Caitlin and Reuniclus, and Iris watched as Caitlin regained her composure slowly. Shaking hands reached for the diluted iced tea on the table, fumbling, and Caitlin spilled a little on the floor as she brought the glass to her lips for a few sips. When she opened her eyes again, they were once more frosted and moribund and unfocused as they stared at a spot on the edge of the table.

“What the hell was that?” Iris demanded, not bothering to mask her tinny voice.

“I can glimpse the future,” Caitlin rasped, her hands shaking as she held onto her iced tea like it was all she had left in the world. “But even I cannot demystify its meaning. You’ll understand when the prophecy comes to pass.”

“What good is that? How can I change the future if I don’t know what that prophecy means? A Dragon with three eyes? There’s no such Pokémon, let alone a blind one. And I’m here to take the crown, not destroy it.”

“I’m sorry, but my part is done. There’s nothing more for you here.”

Caitlin got to her feet with Gothitelle’s help, though the dark skinned Psychic did not physically touch her. Reuniclus yawned and stretched its tapering arms.

Iris got up with her, Cottonee secured firmly at the base of her ponytail on her head, and moved to intercept Caitlin’s path to the door. “Not until you explain what that was all about.”

“That’s your part, not mine.”

“I’m not Clairvoyant!”

They faced off, Caitlin with her bolts of gold-spun hair matted to her forehead with sweat and clutching a half-drunk glass of iced tea, and Iris shaking as she heard the words of the prophecy over and over in her head, spinning round and round like carrousel horses, faster and faster and
Caitlin stared at a point beyond Iris’s shoulder. “You don’t need to see the future to change it. Often, it’s quite the opposite.”

There was a sadness in her voice that had not been there before, a hint of something deeper normally kept hidden and locked away, but that had managed to slip past. She indicated the door, and Iris had no choice but to head back to the porch entrance with Caitlin’s powerful Pokémon around to back up their master’s authority. Iris turned to Caitlin once more before opening the door.

“Answer me one question. I’ve done what you asked of me.”

Caitlin nodded. “Of course.”

Iris hesitated, afraid to utter the words lest they gain power and sentience. But Caitlin was Clairvoyant, and there may never be another chance. “Do you know what will happen to me? Will I take back Opelucid? Everything I’ve worked for...”

Will it all be worth it?

“That’s not a question I can answer,” Caitlin said.

A flash of anger flared up Iris’s spine and she gritted her teeth. A Clairvoyant who could see the future couldn’t even answer her one simple question? Yeah, right. Iris turned on her heel and reached for the door.

“Fine. Goodbye.”

Before she could leave, Caitlin’s wispy voice stopped her once more. “I cannot answer your question, but I can answer the one you should have asked.”

Iris paused but said nothing. Her hand was clammy on the doorknob.

“You cannot be a queen so long as your father’s ghost sits the throne you seek,” Caitlin said.

Iris shot Caitlin a dirty look over her shoulder, a small part of her angry that Caitlin’s blindness prevented her from seeing it. Caitlin was looking away, her creepy gaze affixed on a nondescript point on the wall.

“Ghosts don’t scare me,” Iris hissed.

She yanked open the door and stormed out, the challenge bitter on her tongue as she marched across the porch and down the steps to the yard. Belaron was in the yard with Arbok, and they both perked up when Iris exited the bungalow. Haxorus had been resting near the palms and immediately stirred when Iris reappeared. It bared its sharp teeth in a snarl and shot Arbok a warning look as it lumbered toward Iris. Caitlin remained inside behind the screen door that creaked when it slammed shut, shielded behind her small army of Psychics and out of reach of Iris’s loyal Dragon.

Come out here and tell me I can’t be a queen.

“Princess!” Belaron said as he rushed over. “What happened?”

“We’re leaving,” Iris said flatly.
She stormed past Belaron with Haxorus in tow, leaving him to follow in his heavy armor. He soon worked up a fierce sweat as he hurried after her, glancing back suspiciously at Caitlin’s villa. Arbok slithered along after him, silent as death.

Caitlin lingered in the doorway as if to watch them depart, her vacant eyes following their retreat.

Back on the Oculus, Iris leaned over the deck railing breathing in the warm, salty, summer air. She had sent Belaron to search for Soriel and Moros and inform them to return immediately, they were leaving as soon as Nymo deemed the sub ready to dive. Every minute they lingered here, Iris’s skin crawled as though blazing gold eyes watched her silently from afar, spying.

She shivered and rubbed her arms in spite of the late afternoon heat. Those eyes, Caitlin’s transformation into something otherworldly, haunted her even from the safety of this iron ship surrounded by a crew pledged to serve her. The Clairvoyant had claimed not to be Iris’s enemy. If that was so, Iris wondered what it would be like to be on the hostile end of Caitlin’s Sight. Putting distance between Undella and herself would assure that she would never know. She hoped.

Soon, the rest of the crew began wandering back to the sub with supplies purchased in town for the trip ahead. Nuria emerged from below deck to meet them and help, and when she saw Iris, she spared her a lopsided smile.

“So, couldn’t let the little guy go, after all, huh?”

Nuria’s Adriati was smooth and fluid, like the waves that gently rocked the sub. Just hearing it pulled Iris from her troubled thoughts of Caitlin, and before she could brush the girl off, she was already responding.

“Cottonee? Oh, I guess not.”

Cottonee bobbed on Iris’s head, where it had anchored itself in place to keep from blowing away. It blinked at Nuria and cooed at hearing its name.

“I’m glad. He definitely takes the edge off you.”

Iris frowned, but the returning crew was beginning to load up the sub through a side door in the hull and Nuria hopped over the railing and climbed down to the dock to help.

“Hey, just Iris, how about lending us a hand with this stuff?” Nuria called back up to her.

Iris walked toward the ladder without thinking, but she spotted Belaron returning with Soriel and Moros and thought better of it. “I’m busy. You have a full crew to help you.”

Nuria watched her with an unreadable look, but she said nothing and turned to help the crew. Iris signaled to her guards when they drew closer and slipped below deck. Her Dragons were back in their Pokéballs and fed, ready for the next leg of the trip.

Crewmembers scurried about below deck loading up the sub and making the final preparations for embarkation. Nymo was in the control room shouting in Adriati for the navigators to set the proper course, the one currently in place was all wrong, and if he found out who had the terrible idea to cruise through the Lanturn and Chinchou breeding grounds off the coast of Undella, he would toss them overboard to be electrocuted.
Iris and her guards retreated to the mess hall, which was currently unoccupied as the crew was busy preparing the ship.

“We’re leaving already?” Soriel said. She was chewing on a stick of grilled Octillery tentacle. “Shame.”

Moros carried a large stuffed Wailmer plushie under one arm and wore a scowl. “That depends on your perspective.”

“I won you that Wailmer plushie, so don’t complain.”

“I did not want this useless doll!”

“I imagine we’ll be under again for another four or five days,” Iris interrupted their squabbling. “I hope your Pokémon had time to feed and stretch. They won’t get another opportunity until we resurface.”

Moros forgot his irritation and stood stiffly. “Yes, Princess. Nidoking and Kangaskhan will be fine. Thank you for thinking of them.”

Soriel snorted. “So, what about you? You find whoever you were lookin’ for?”

“We did, as a matter of fact,” Belaron said. “She was a Clairvoyant, isn’t that right, Princess?”

“It’s not your concern,” Iris said. “We’ll continue our journey to Opelucid. Rest while you can.”

Belaron blinked in surprise and made to speak, but ended up losing his words and stuttering like a fish out of water. “Princess...”

Iris showed her guards her back and retreated to her room, exhausted from the day’s events. All she wanted to do was curl up in bed and forget it all, forget those glittering eyes and those voices that still echoed in her head, whispering about crowns and Dragons and a Truthseeker, whatever that was. Nothing made sense, and with each passing hour, she was more and more convinced that Marlon had sent her on some fool’s errand.

She caught the tail end of her companions’ conversation as she retreated.

“Wow, so she didn’t even tell her esteemed Ridder Knight what happened back there?” Soriel said.

“Don’t worry, Syr Belaron,” Moros said politely. “I’m sure the princess has her reasons...”

The rest faded, and Iris did not care to listen to anything further. She trusted Belaron, but this was her secret to carry, one he had no right to. It was her prophecy, Caitlin had said.

Cottonee zipped about the small room, happy to be around familiar surroundings again, and Iris collapsed onto the bed and stared out the window. The blue sky was bright outside and cast a column of golden sunlight onto her bare legs on the bed. Cottonee alighted on her stomach and bounced, its weight nearly imperceptible.

Iris ran her tongue over her sharp incisors, feeling their subtle points and thinking about her Dragon Pokémon. None of them had three eyes.

“It’s obviously a metaphor,” she said aloud. “It wouldn’t be that easy.”

But what did it mean? She didn't have the slightest clue.
Cottonee cooed and bounced onto her chest, wanting attention. Iris obliged it with a light pet, running her fingers through the little Fairy’s soft woolen fur. It was so fine and soft that Iris imagined this must be what a cloud felt like to a Flyer who could soar higher than any man or woman could ever hope to go. An impossible thing.

But the world was full of impossible things. Dragons were real. There was a woman who could glimpse the future. A Fairy could befriend a Titan. And Iris had returned to the land of her birth to claim a throne no one believed she could take. A legacy no one believed she had earned.

“I don’t care about some prophecy,” she said as Cottonee watched her with wide, orange eyes. “The future’s what I make it, nothing else.”

Cottonee watched her quizzically and cooed again. Iris rolled her eyes and turned onto her side. Cottonee tumbled onto the bed, but Iris curled up and hugged her pillow. The Oculus groaned and shifted, and the blue sky outside the window turned dark as the sub began to sink back into the deep. Cottonee snuggled up against Iris’s belly and got comfortable.

The sunlight faded as the sub sank into darkness, and Iris pulled Cottonee close and drifted off to sleep.

The next several days on the Oculus passed by largely uneventful. There was not much to do in a metal box trapped nine hundred feet below sea level, and Iris could only pour over her outdated maps of the Trident for so many hours in a day. Belaron brought up the subject of Undella and Caitlin in passing a few times, and once he outright demanded to know what had transpired between Caitlin and Iris in that villa. Iris had told him to drop it, it was not his concern, and if he brought it up with her again, there would be consequences.

By the third day submerged, Iris was starting feel claustrophobic. She could not look at Belaron without her skin crawling, knowing he watched her trying to divine what had happened with Caitlin back in Undella. So she spent much of her time alone in her room studying military tactics she had learned growing up in Blackthorn.

Nuria, who for some reason kept talking to Iris like she didn’t get the hint that Iris did not particularly care for her, had loaned her a book on the history and cultures of Unova.

“You probably don’t know much about Unova since you’ve been gone for so long, so you better learn,” Nuria had said in that caustic tone she reserved especially for Iris.

Iris had refused outright, but later that evening she found the book on her bed. Nuria had somehow gotten in and delivered the book without her knowing, and now it was here. Iris shelved it on the desk, stubbornly resolving not to read it. She was here for Opelucid. What did she care for the rest of Unova? It wasn’t her problem.

But boredom encouraged her thoughts to wander, and they wandered to the prophecy Caitlin had spoken to her. The more Iris told herself it didn’t matter, the more she wondered what it really meant. The Dragon with three blinded eyes—was it her? Caitlin said the prophecy was not just for her. Then for whom? Caitlin had given her no answers, and the mystery added to her festering madness cooped up in the metal sub without a soul to talk to about it.

Finally, on the fourth day, Nymo announced that they would have to surface to replenish the depleted air supply. They were still a good week away from Striaton City in the lower East Tine,
but once they passed that city, it would be a short journey around the cape and into Castelia waters to the north. Iris was among the first on deck when the Oculus breached the water’s surface, and she sucked in her breaths like she hadn’t tasted air in weeks.

Cottonee was just as happy to be outside in the fresh air again, too, and Iris had to clutch the little Fairy to her chest when it got too excited and nearly blew away in the sea breeze. Dragonair and Gyarados took to the waves eager to swim and stretch and search for food.

“Where are we?” Iris asked.

“If you’d read the book I gave you, you’d know,” Nuria chastised, appearing behind her on the deck.

Iris scowled, but Nymo was with her and spread his arms with a grin. “Welcome, Iris Lady. We are here in wild but beautiful White Forest. It is being named for its whiteness, you can see?”

He pointed to the shore, beyond which lay a vast wood unlike any Iris had ever laid eyes on. The trees were blanched and bare like bones left to dry in the sweltering sun. Their canopies were equally as pale, the leaves thick and fleshy and almost translucent. And they were packed together so tightly that it was impossible to see too far beyond the small seaside town, the only sign of human civilization around for miles in all directions. It was to this town that the crew prepared inflatable rafts and Water-type Pokémon for transport.

“I see,” Iris said.

“This is Perry Town,” Nuria said, the annoyance clear in her tone. “It’s one of the only settlements along the White Forest. This is lower East Tine territory. We’re not in Adria anymore.”

Iris frowned and tried to catch Nuria’s eye, but the girl was staring at the pale bone forest surrounding Perry Town, threatening to swallow it whole with its alabaster teeth at any moment. Something about the way Nuria had said it, about not being in Adria anymore, sent a shiver down Iris’s spine.

“Two hours.” Nymo wagged two fingers in front of Iris’s face. “We are having these two hours before the next big splash.”

Iris understood well enough and promised to be back before the cutoff so as not to make the crew wait. Soriel, Moros, and Belaron had emerged onto the deck, and Soriel released her Seaking and Charizard, the latter of which took to the skies toward the vast forest.

“What is that?” Moros asked, squinting against the sunlight.


“You all go ahead. I’ll stay here with the Pokémon,” Soriel said.

“You’re not going ashore?” Belaron asked, incredulous.

Soriel wore a grim expression. “I don’t like the feel of this place.”

_Neither do I_, Iris added silently.

Something about those bare trees, unnaturally pale, seemed to exude a baleful aura, an omen against those who would dare enter. Iris couldn’t explain it. She had visited graveyards before, especially to pay her respects to her mother after she had died, and that same emptiness lingered
over the white woods. Lonely, but surrounded by the inescapable feeling of eyes everywhere, watching.

But the thought of remaining within the confines of the metal sub was unconscionable. Cottonee seemed to read Iris’s thoughts and squirmed and whistled in her arms, eager to go ashore.

“I’m going ahead,” Iris said.

“I’ll join you,” Belaron said, reaching for Feraligatr’s Pokéball.

“Not this time, Syr Bel. I want to be alone.”

He blinked, taken aback, and Iris pressed her lips together. That had come out sounding harsher than she’d meant.

“I just meant that I’d like to get some air. I want to take a walk, enjoy the sunshine while I can. I won’t go past the town.”

Belaron masked his emotions, but she noticed the stiffness in his shoulders and the way he gripped the pommel of his sword. “Of course, Princess. As you will.”

Gyarados waited for Iris to climb onto its head and lifted her into the air. The other Water-type Pokémon the crewmembers had let out gave the Atrocious Pokémon a wide berth, wary of its mercurial temperament.

Iris situated herself behind Gyarados’s horns, and the water Dragon growled, its jaws hanging open as though they were too heavy to keep closed. Belaron and the others backed up, unwilling to get too close.

“Let’s go,” Iris commanded.

Gyarados set off through the waves at a smooth cruise. Dragonair slithered over the water’s surface alongside it, its ear fins spread to catch the wind and lift it gently into the air. Iris gave Gyarados a pat on its broad head, and Cottonee whistled excitedly feeling the wind in its fluffy fur.

As they approached the shoreline, Gyarados growled again and swayed erratically. Iris frowned.

“You don’t like this place, either,” she said.

What could put a Gyarados on edge?

She eyed the vast forest, gazing west as far as she could see. The misty Reversal Mountains loomed miles in the distance, but beyond them, there was only the endless blue sky and the wispy clouds above. The White Forest’s trees bent at odd angles, broken bones cluttered together where something had gone to die eons ago, leaving only the white totems behind. Iris repressed a shiver.

She hopped down from Gyarados in the shallows, relishing the feel of the cool seawater on her sandaled feet. The ends of her shift splashed with water, but it was so hot out that she was tempted to dunk her head in right there, appearances be damned. Cottonee would not have appreciated a surprise swim, however.

As soon as Iris was safely on the beach, Gyarados retreated. It stared after Iris, but she waved it off to do as it pleased until she returned. Dragonair, however, lingered.

“Don’t you want to swim?”
The Dragon slithered through the shallows and wrapped loosely around Iris like a boa constrictor. She ran her hands over its glossy, iron hard scales, as blue and brilliant as the sea itself. Dragonair gently butted her in the chest with its snout and splashed a bit of water on her.

“You want to come with me?”

She considered it a moment. Most people had never seen a Dragon before, let alone up close. There were Dragons in Unova, of course, but they dwelled in notoriously remote and dangerous areas where humans typically did not venture to disturb them. It could send the wrong impression to the locals if they saw Iris with a Dragon in their midst.

But she dismissed the thought as soon as it came to her. What did she care about some backwater town in the middle of nowhere? It wasn’t as if she was here to cause any trouble, just to reclaim a bit of her sanity before she returned to that metal abomination masquerading as a ship. And after what had happened with Caitlin, there was no way she was going anywhere without one of her Dragons at her side.

“Come on, then.” Iris managed a small smile for Dragonair, and it sang a soulful note, deep and mellifluous, in return.

Iris, Dragonair, and Cottonee wandered onto the shore and ventured into town together. She braced herself for the stares, for the whispers. Was that a real Dragon? Who was the girl walking with it? Did she train it? Was she a Dragon Tamer? Don’t get too close, they say Titans aren’t even fully human.

People did stop to look. They wore simple clothes, earthy colors to match their tanned skin, but the locals were far lighter than the Adriati people to the north. Iris caught flourishes of a local dialect, common tongue with a splash of Adriati and something she couldn’t understand. Most of them were in the middle of their workday filleting the day’s catch to auction at market, preparing food at small stalls and restaurants, laboring on a new dock that would one day accommodate larger trade vessels out of Striaton and Humilau. She paused to watch the laborers toiling. They had Machop and a few Gurdurr helping them carry the heavy equipment and logs.

*Huh,* she thought, eyeing the honey colored wood they hammered and sawed. *It’s not white.*

Why would they not use the timber so readily available from the White Forest? Surely there was no dearth of lumber to build their docks and raise houses. But now that she stopped to look, the buildings had a run-down quality to them, and there was only one dock next to the one currently being built that looked like it had seen the turn of the last century. All the lumber used to build up the town was a rich honey color, the same as one might find in any typical city to the north in Adria.

The laborers stopped to watch her watching them, but they soon lost interest and went back to their work. Men, women, and children passed her as she meandered along the beach and deeper into the seaside town. They cast her the barest of glances—her Adriati looks were no doubt commonplace in these parts—and gave Dragonair little more of their attention before hurrying on. No whispers. No lingering stares.

“What’s with this place?” she wondered aloud, stepping closer to Dragonair unconsciously.

It had been hours since breakfast, and she had skipped lunch. Food sounded like an acceptable way to pass some time and an excuse to talk to some locals about the eerie White Forest engulfing the town. Now that she was closer and had a better view, she couldn’t even see darkness in between the porous trees. It was as if nothing penetrated the tree line, not even night and day.
Iris looped around away from the forest a ways and headed south, figuring Belaron and Moros and the other members of the Oculus crew would not stray too far from their mooring location, and she did not want to run into anyone for the precious little time she had here on dry land. The roads were dirt and sand, not a cobblestone in sight, and many children ran around barefoot. One child chased a family of tamed Patrat that looked delighted to be outside playing. Women balanced baskets of large green Lum berries on their heads. Houses and shops were a dull grey or brown, unpainted and weathered.

Iris came upon an alley filled with food stalls and locals waiting in line. From the looks of it, it was a favorite local haunt. A good sign. She picked the nearest stall and got in line. Cottonee sniffed the air and cooed as it took in the aromas. There was a mother and her two young sons in line ahead of Iris. The boys begged their mother for sweet Pecha berry juice to go with their lunch.

As she waited for the line to move, Iris ran a hand over Dragonair’s sleek hide and thought about Caitlin’s prophecy. Say it was real, and whatever it contained would come to pass. That still left the problem of figuring out what it all meant. How was she supposed to do that? She didn’t even know where to start. Dragonair’s eye gazed back at her, reflecting almost no sunlight in its dark depths.

“The Dragon is thrice blind.”

Could I be the Dragon?

That might make sense. She was a Titan, a Dragon Tamer, after all, and Caitlin had given her the prophecy, no one else. But there was something Caitlin had said to her, something that struck a deep chord and festered even now.

“You didn’t think you were special, did you?”

No, she’d wanted to scream at Caitlin. Not once, not ever. In what universe was it considered ‘special’ to have to flee from your country in shame and secret to be raised in a foreign land with a foreign culture and treated like a second-class citizen simply because you were different? The Blackthorn Titans looked at Iris and saw a bastard, a cast-off, a tacha no deeper than the coppery tone of her skin. But in Humilau, all they saw was the mask, a shell that reflected their image and nothing else. She didn’t belong in Blackthorn, and Humilau didn’t seem to want her, either.

“I’m not here for them,” she whispered.

One of the little boys in line in front of her heard her and turned around to stare. He immediately caught sight of Dragonair and grinned.

“Hey! You got one, too!”

“What?” Iris frowned at his rushed words and the lilt of a dialect.

“No, stupid, that one’s blue,” the boy’s brother said. “‘Sides, it’s no Bushy Tail.”

“Duh, I knew that,” the first boy pouted.

The mother gathered her young sons about her. They matched her tanned coloring and honey eyes perfectly, three of a kind. “That’s enough, boys. Don’t bother the lady. Sorry, Miss.”

Iris meant to tell them it was fine, but the mother was already turning away and placing her order with the chef at the stall. Her chance gone, Iris let the words die on her lips, inexplicably disappointed all of a sudden.
Soon, she was next in line. The mother and her sons took their food and headed for one of the long communal tables in the middle of the alley where patrons from all the different stalls sat together to eat. There were a few Pokémon among them, from Ducklett quacking and poking at the bits of food tossed to them by children, to a warty Palpitoad glistening as it sweated under the hot sun and kept an old woman company as she ate. Wingull and Taillow perched on the roofs of nearby buildings and swooped to the ground whenever someone tossed out scraps to feed them. The alley was abuzz with cheerful chatter.

“Miss? Yer food,” the chef said gruffly.

“Oh, right.” Iris glanced at the menu, written in chalk on a board, and placed her order. She stood to the side to wait for her food.

“I said, you’re in my seat, Thrall.”

The curse reached Iris’s ears through the din of chatter and drew her attention. Thrall was a derogatory word for a pleb, originally used by Tamers or skuffs with delusions of grandeur about their place in the world. Nowadays, the word had reached a broader audience and became as vile as it was ubiquitous. The alley chatter dulled as people stopped what they were doing to stare at the scene unfolding.

A group of three men clad in identical grey and black suits, uniforms perhaps, had confronted the woman and her two sons as they sat down to enjoy their lunch. The woman, small of stature compared to the men, abandoned her food to pull her two young children close like a mother hen and huddled over them.

“I-I’m sorry, this is a communal table, so I thought...” she mumbled.

“Ah, there’s your problem, sweetheart,” the uniformed guy said. “Don’t think; just do what you’re told. That’s the agreement. You do know about our arrangement, don’t you?”

No one said a word. The family sitting next to the woman and her sons stared and pulled their food closer, but none spoke up. The chef at the stall tapped Iris on the shoulder.

“Yer order, Miss,” he said.

Iris blinked, suddenly feeling the heat, and wiped her forehead. The chef held out a small tray of food to her, an impatient look on his face. There were more customers behind her that needed service, and she was holding up the line. She accepted the tray without really thinking about it. Dragonair’s tail coiled around her like it sensed a foul stench in the air.

“Come on, boys,” the mother said, pulling her children off the bench. “Get your food, we’ll find somewhere else to sit.”

“I don’t wanna!” one of the boys whined.

“There’s nowhere else to sit, Mama,” the other boy complained.

“Sure there is, let’s go now.”

“Hey, are you slow? I said move.”

The three uniformed men were beginning to form an arc around the woman and her sons, forcing them out with their bodies. The woman shrank into herself even more and kept her head down as she did her best to get her boys out of there. The children did not understand what was happening.
Finally, one lost his temper.

“I don’t wanna go!” the little boy shouted.

The uniformed aggressor, the one who had done all the talking up until now, grinned and bared his teeth. “Nobody likes a mouthy brat, Thrall. Get him under control, or my friend here’ll do it for you.”

The other two snickered. Iris stared, unsure exactly what she was seeing. Why was no one doing anything? All the locals knew each other, so surely someone should step in. Who were these men? Why were they hassling the woman and her sons?

“We’re going,” the woman mumbled.

“No!” the little boy shouted again.

One of the uniformed men grabbed the kid by the collar of his blue shirt and smacked him hard across the face. After a moment of shock, the little boy burst into tears and began wailing. The other locals were whispering amongst themselves. The adults were exchanging dirty looks and dirtier words, but still no one seemed willing to intervene.

Without thinking, Iris stepped forward, her food tray in hand and not even a coherent thought in her mind about what she was doing. The only thing on her mind was that a grown man had just hit a child that was not his for no reason other than to cause pain. The mother gasped and began to cry as she grabbed at her son, still in the man’s grasp, and her other son tugged at her pants, sniffing as his eyes began to water.

“Oh please, give him back, he didn’t mean it!” the woman wailed.

Iris clenched her teeth, remembering the sting of many slaps hard enough to bruise when she was a child growing up in Blackthorn around strangers who didn’t speak her language or look like her. Her hands began to shake, and a command for Dragonair was stinging the back of her throat, aching to get out.

*If I intervene, this could get back to Opelucid. To Drayden. I could lose my cover.*

Even so, she took another step forward, a command for Dragonair on the tip of her tongue.

“Hey, is that seat taken?”

Iris faltered when a young man around her age appeared at the other side of the table with a large tray piled high with food enough to feed three people. He set it down on the table at one of the places the mother and her two sons had been forced to vacate.

He was angular and sharp. That was the first thought Iris had when she saw him. That, and the shocking sunburst orange of his hair, partially buzzed on the left side like he’d wanted to try out a new style and changed his mind halfway through. The rest of his hair was as wild as a Pyroar’s mane and, along with a barbed wire smirk that he looked like he’d been born with, made him look like he’d been kicked out of a local street gang. His clothes were the same as the locals’, frayed capris, salt-stained shirt, reed and leather thongs securing four Pokéballs across his chest, pouches for supplies, and stained brass and feather charms, possibly local and hand-crafted. Grime and dirt smeared his bare arms and face, like he hadn’t bathed in days. He looked like he’d been on a spirit quest in the jungle for months and had just now rolled into town.

A large Pokémon lumbered along after him. It was about four feet tall, covered in blue scales and
black fur, and it had two heads that growled at each other. The uniformed guys immediately noticed his Pokémon, a Zweilous, and reached for their own, but didn’t release them.

“This ain’t your business, kid,” the uniformed thugs’ ringleader said.

“Oh, hey,” the youth said to the sniveling woman. “You wanna sit? If you don’t mind the smell, we can scooch in.”

“Hey, I’m talking to you!” the uniform said.

The youth finally seemed to notice the three thugs as he chewed on a piece of grilled fish from his plate. Dark eyes alighted on the three of them, and he tossed a chunk of fish to Zweilous. The two heads snapped at the food, each trying to beat the other to it, and ripped it apart mercilessly. Their sharp teeth crunched and snapped both the food and at each other, revealing a viciousness that could escalate at any moment.

“But I wasn’t talking to you,” the youth said. “Ma’am, please.” He indicated the seat across from him where the mother and her young sons had been sitting a moment ago. “It’s all right.”

“Do you have any idea who you’re talking to?” the uniformed ringleader said.

The youth chewed on another bite of food and reached for one of the Pokéballs on his leather sash. He stood up from his spot at the table. “I said, I’m not talking to you.”

He released the Pokéball, and from within the flash of light, a six-foot-tall Sceptile materialized. Iris stared along with the others gathered in the alley. She had never seen a Sceptile before. They were native only to Hoenn and some of the southern Orange Islands where the weather was humid and sticky all year round. Sceptile were the fastest Grass-type Pokémon in the world, able to out speed even the likes of Dodrio when they leaped through the treetops. More importantly, Sceptile was a Dragon descendant. Just looking at it now, Iris could see the Old Blood’s signature in its curved talons, green-scaled body, and powerful hind legs. This particular Sceptile’s body was riddled with scars, most of them small but deep enough to have left a mark. Cottonee squealed and bounced off Iris’s head, and she was forced to grab it and haul it against her chest before it could intervene.

“Bushy Tail!” said the boy still in the uniformed thug’s grasp, his tears all but forgotten as he smiled, delighted.

Like a domino effect, the other locals began to stand at their places around the table. Some reached for their own Pokéballs, others for the fish gutting knives at their belts. Iris had lost her appetite as she watched, entranced.

Facing a Sceptile that looked like it had seen its fair share of battles, a hungry Zweilous, scores of angry locals, and the threat of Pokémon violence and numbers they could not possibly hope to match, the thugs made the smart decision and backed off. The captive little boy was released, and his mother hugged him fiercely, whispering to him as she tried to control her shaking.

“Whatever, piss off,” the ringleader said, spitting on the ground and jerking his head for his goons to follow. “I won’t forget this. You all know who runs this town. My superiors’ll hear about this.”

The youth said nothing, merely watched them go as the locals and their Pokémon stared them down.

“Bushy Tail!” the little boys cheered as they ran around the table toward Sceptile. “So cool!”
The youth laughed. “Hey guys, you wanna sit here? You can feed him if you want.” He hauled a brown sack onto the table, and a few Lum berries rolled out of it.

The boys looked like they might burst with happiness as they scrambled onto the narrow stretch of bench next to the youth for a chance to feed Sceptile. Zweilous’s two heads poked around them to try to get at the food. The mother thanked him and the nearest locals quietly, wiping her eyes and still shaking as she cast looks in the direction the thugs had wandered off to. The other locals settled back into their meals, and in a matter of moments, it was as if nothing had transpired at all.

Iris watched, her lips set in a grim line. It was over, and all for the better. She hadn’t had to intervene and cause a huge scene. If she had blown her own cover by rising to the rescue of some people she didn’t even know, then her entire plan for Opelucid and Drayden would have been ruined. The element of surprise was crucial, and blowing it now would have been foolish, if not suicidal. The woman and her sons were safe, no real harm done. Taking a deep breath, she returned Cottonee to her head and decided to eat elsewhere, this place was getting too crowded.

“Let’s go, Dragonair,” she said, heading past the tables and back toward the beach.

She passed by the mother, who was looking much better now and even enjoying her lunch, and the two boys who were barely eating at all as they admired Sceptile and Zweilous and argued over which Pokémon was cooler. Iris cast them a cursory glance but forced herself to look away so as not to draw their attention. The youth with the wild orange hair caught her gaze for the briefest of moments in passing, no more than a second, and Iris walked on, not giving him or the others a second thought.

As she left the alley with Dragonair slithering alongside her, she felt the weight of his gaze on her back.

Iris returned to the beach where the Oculus was moored offshore. After she’d eaten her fill and shared some with Cottonee, she had wandered back the way she’d come, taking her time and enjoying the give of sand underfoot. There were no further incidents with people in black uniforms, but on her walk back, she started to notice more of them lurking about. They sat in lounge chairs and ate at restaurants and food stalls, conversing among themselves and never with any locals. Some had their Pokémon out—Liepard and Dwebble and Watchog and many other species. They had to be uncomfortable in those uniforms, Iris thought. She wondered who they were, what they were doing here, but decided it didn’t really matter. She would be leaving shortly, anyway.

Some watched her pass, pausing their conversation, but no one approached. Dragonair tended to have that effect on people. There was something about the way they watched her, though. Something resentful, like they disdained her for some unknown reason. She hurried along to the beach, eager to be rid of this place once and for all.

“Go find Gyarados,” Iris said to Dragonair.

Dragonair rubbed against her side affectionately, and Iris marveled at its sleek sapphire scales. Dragonite scales were orange and bright like the sun. She had the sudden thought that she would miss Dragonair’s blue coloring that blended in so well with the sea once it evolved. Frowning at the useless thought, she dismissed it and watched Dragonair slip underwater to search for Gyarados to ferry her back to the Oculus.

Cottonee cooed, almost sad as it watched Dragonair slip away, and Iris reached up a hand to pat its
fluff. “Crying never solved anything, Cottonee.”

“Aw c’mon, everybody cries once in a while.”

Iris whirled at the sound of that voice behind her. The orange-haired youth from earlier was standing a short distance away on the otherwise relatively empty beach. His Zweilous and Sceptile were with him, and the latter wandered in circles in the sand before settling on a perfect spot to lie down on its side and soak up the sun. Zweilous’s two heads sniffed around Sceptile, but did not get too close.

“And it can feel damn good to just let it all out. Don’t you ever scream as loud as you can just for that feeling?” he said.

Iris reached for Haxorus’s Pokéball at her hip. “Are you following me? Leave. I want to be left alone.”

He gave her a weird look. Not for the first time, Iris was amazed at the color and volume of his hair, like it was frozen fire on his head. Not many people had such bright orange hair, not in Blackthorn and certainly not anywhere in Adria.

“Nobody wants to be left alone.”

What the hell was this guy’s deal?

“You’re alone,” she countered.

Sceptile was a strong Pokémon, but Iris was sure Haxorus could take it, no problem. Zweilous could be problematic, but Haxorus had years of experience battling other Dragons. Haxorus could probably deal with them both until Dragonair and Gyarados returned. The guy had two more Pokémon with him that she didn’t know, though. If things escalated, she could be in trouble without Gyarados and Dragonair here. It would be necessary to stall him until they returned, if his intentions were in fact to pick a fight.

The youth gave her a once-over, and his dark eyes lingered on the sword at her hip and the Pokéball in her hand. “You some kinda warrior or something?”

He changed the subject, she thought. Gotcha.

“Or something,” she said. “Why are you alone? Are you some kind of hermit? Or do you just dislike showers?”

He blinked, taken aback, then burst out laughing. “Really? That’s all you got?”

He approached, and Iris brandished Haxorus’s Pokéball at him. “Stop,” she warned.

He walked closer and reached for something at his hip—a small switchblade. Iris lost her patience and tossed the Pokéball. Haxorus appeared in a flash of light, hunched with its massive jaws hanging open. The youth stopped suddenly, and Haxorus growled in warning.

Immediately, Sceptile was at his side, yellow eyes narrowed and claws clicking. Its bushy tail swished, the needles deadly sharp, and it hissed in challenge.

“Well, that escalated quickly,” he said, almost disappointed.

“Back off,” Iris bit out. “I don’t know who you are, but you don’t want to piss me off. Trust me.”
He sighed, the switchblade in his hand reflecting the bright sunlight. “So I have to do this the hard way, then. Sceptile.”

Sceptile hissed again, and Iris racked her brains for a plan. If he really planned to attack her, she could be in trouble. Cottonee squealed on her head, shaking with trepidation.

*I’ll have to stop him myself.*

It would blow her cover, but there was no other choice. If a fight broke out, the whole town would come snooping, and this little hiccup could blow the lid on her entire operation. Decided, she reached out a hand toward Sceptile.

“Stand down,” she commanded.

Sceptile clicked its long talons together, its yellow eyes dilating as it reacted to her command. The youth grinned, baring his teeth like he wanted to sink them into something.

“So I guessed right,” he said. “You are a Titan.”

“I am so much more than that,” Iris said. “Haxorus.”

The Dragon needed no further direction to prepare for a fight and braced itself in the sand, claws flexing with the beginnings of a Dragon Claw attack.

“What’s your name? Where’re you from? You look Adriati, but I dunno of any Titans from there,” the youth went on like Iris wasn’t about to beat the living shit out of him.

Zweilous’s two heads united and took a stand next to the youth, teeth bared at Iris and Haxorus. Sceptile remained motionless, subject to Iris’s subduing command.

Behind Iris, the waters churned and Gyarados reared her massive head with a snarl. Dragonair slithered through the shallows toward Iris and looped protectively in front of her, its sharp horn lowered in warning at the youth.

“A Gyarados? Man, you really know how to pick ‘em,” he said, leaning back to get a look at the Atrocious Pokémon.

“This is your final warning,” Iris said. “Leave now, and I’ll spare you.”

“I guess that kinda makes sense, if you’re Adriati. Gyarados’s a good bet in the water.”

*Is he even hearing me?*

Iris had had enough. This guy needed to be taught a lesson. “Gyarados, Crunch!”

Gyarados roared and lunged at the youth and his Pokémon maw first. Water sprayed down from its golden underbelly onto Iris as she glared at him. This would scare him off, she was sure of it.

But just as Gyarados lunged, the youth held out his hand, switchblade first, and shouted, “Freeze!”

A shiver of dread bloomed in Iris’s belly, and then spread up her spine and down her limbs, chilling. In the split second after he had shouted at Gyarados, she watched as the water Dragon stopped its attack in mid air, red eyes blazing with fury. It didn’t move a muscle. Water continued to rain down on Iris and her Pokémon where Gyarados hovered over her, petrified. That shiver of dread burst, and a shadow of fear passed across her face as she came face to face with a threat she was not prepared to face until she reached Opelucid.
“You...” she said, her voice thin and raspy with disbelief. “You’re...”

“Just like you,” he said, the lackadaisical humor gone from his tone as he faced her on a level playing field. “A Titan for true.”

Iris swallowed and managed to collect herself enough to hide her growing trepidation. Where the hell was her crew? Surely they must see Gyarados from the sub.

“Who are you?” she demanded, not sure she wanted to know the answer.

The most logical explanation was that he was an Opelucid Titan. The Fafnir Dynasty Titans, like their Taki Dynasty counterparts, lived as an extended family and kept each other close, both to protect them and to keep an eye on them. Titans were liars, they could not be trusted. Best to keep your friends and family close to be ready for the day they turned on you. And if he was here from Opelucid, that meant Drayden already knew she was here. Or if he didn’t, he would as soon as this rat reported her to him.

She would have to kill him. It was the only way.

“I asked you first,” he said. “I’ve never seen you before, and I know all the Titans in Opelucid.”

Iris bristled at the mention of her birthplace. So he was one of them, after all.

“If you’re from Opelucid, then you should know me well. You were obviously sent here to inform on me.”

“What? I never said that.”

She bared her teeth. “Your lies won’t work on me. You should have kept away from me. I’ll have to kill you now.”

“Whoa, hold on a hot second—”

“Dragon Claw!” Iris shouted.

Haxorus roared and lunged, its claws glowing an angry crimson as it aimed for Sceptile. The youth scrambled back, and Zweilous was ready to intervene. Its two mouths opened and unleashed two terrible beams of red energy that merged into a single cannon blast and slammed into Haxorus just as it swung for the kill. The Dragon Pulse attack buffeted Haxorus back, canceling out its mighty Dragon Claw and saving Sceptile and the youth just in time.

Iris swore and drew her sword. Dragonair slithered forward to stand with Haxorus, ready to fight. In the wake of the collision, the sand and dust settled to reveal the youth standing just behind his Sceptile. His hand was slashed and bleeding, and his switchblade was red with his blood. Iris had little time to wonder at why on earth he would harm himself.

“I don’t wanna fight you,” he said. “That’s not a lie. Whatever you think about me, you’re wrong. I’ll prove it to you.”

He touched his bloody hand to Sceptile’s back to Iris’s bewilderment. As long as she had Sceptile under her control, it would not budge to help him. Only a bond between them stronger than Iris’s level of control could break her hold on Sceptile, and few could accomplish such a feat. Only Clair, the Elder, and the late Kanto Champion, Lance, had ever been able to disrupt Iris’s control.

But Iris hesitated as she watched something strange unfold before her eyes. The youth’s blood ran
between Sceptile’s scales as though guided by some invisible force, sentient in its own right. It spread, and incredibly, Iris felt her control begin to wane.

**Impossible...**

The word echoed in her mind further and further away as she witnessed the impossible happening right before her eyes. Sceptile began to change. It grew two feet in height, its bushy tail lengthened and sharpened to a bladed point, and the scales on its belly grew a darker green, reinforced with thicker plating. Before her very eyes, Sceptile transformed into something else entirely. Iris’s hold on it was completely gone.

Gyarados snarled, released from the youth’s hold, and hovered protectively over Iris. It glared down at the youth and his transformed Sceptile, wary.

**What the hell is this?**

The new Sceptile hissed and glowed red with the beginnings of a Dragon Pulse attack. Iris balked at its manifest power. Sceptile was a Dragon descendant, no question there, but to possess so much draconian energy? It was impossible. And it was happening.

“I just wanna know your name,” the youth said. “Tell me, and I’ll explain everything.”

Iris was at a loss for words. Whatever this power was, however he had accomplished it, it was beyond her. She had trained with the best in Blackthorn, raised up a team of strong Pokémon, and made it across the world to the home that had chased her out years ago with a mind to set it all right. She had done more than most would ever dream of doing, and she would do more still. But this... This was beyond dreams.

“Iris,” she said, a little breathless as she still tried to process what she was seeing. “Iris Fafnir.”

“Iris Fafnir?” The youth gaped at her. “Wait, you’re... I know you. You’re King Cadmus’s daughter... But you died. Before the Red Plague hit, they said you died.”

“I know what they said,” she bit out, regaining some of her confidence. “Drayden tried to have me killed, but sadly for him I fled before that could happen.”

“Holy shit,” he said. “So you’re alive... Why’re you here? Wait, are you gonna take on Drayden or something? Is that why you came back?”

By now, there were crewmembers rushing to shore on the backs of Pokémon. Nuria was among them, her Sharpedo swiftly ferrying her over the waves. She shouted something, but she was too far away for Iris to make it out. Some locals had stopped to watch the scene on the beach, slowly gaining in their numbers as the sight of fearsome Pokémon facing off drew them.

“Who are you? What did you do to that Sceptile?” Iris said, forgetting her concern about keeping her identity a secret as she was faced with something she couldn’t explain.

He showed her his bloody hand. “I passed on my Titan blood to Sceptile. It’s how I can revert it back to its original Dragon form, before it lost that power.”

Iris gasped. He had turned Sceptile into a Dragon using his own blood? But how? How was that even possible? Dragon descendants were just that—descendant. They had lost the Old Blood millennia ago, and with it their Dragon typing, though traces of it remained that a skilled Titan could quicken and use to control them against their will. To awaken that part of Sceptile to the point of transforming it into a Dragon for true...
“Some people call it Mega Evolution,” the youth went on. “As long as Sceptile’s like this, he can fight like a true Dragon.”

*Mega Evolution...*

The term rang familiar. She had heard it somewhere before in passing, sometime in Blackthorn, she was sure of it. Maybe Clair had mentioned it? No, that wasn’t right. Someone had said something about Mega Evolution, the power to imbue Dragons with Titan power and awaken or augment their draconian powers. She could remember the words, but not the face...

By now, Nuria and some of the other crew, including Moros and Belaron, had arrived on the beach. Belaron had his Feraligatr at his side, and Moros released Kangaskhan.

“Princess!” Belaron shouted, rushing to her side and drawing his sword. “What’s going on? Who is this? You there, stand down!”

“What’s going on, Iris?” Nuria said in Adriati. “Do we need to take care of this guy?”

“What is that thing?” Moros said, staring openly at Sceptile. His Kangaskhan growled and flexed her clubby fists.

The youth put up his hands. “Easy there. You don’t wanna give our audience any more of a show, do you?”

The crowd on the beach was growing as locals and a number of the uniformed people began to gather and approach her party. If this went on any longer, she could kiss goodbye any chance of remaining under the radar. Whether Opelucid’s spies were here or not, word of a showdown between two Titans on a beach would be news to anyone, and it would eventually get back to Opelucid, anyway.

Iris wordlessly recalled both Dragonair and Haxorus. “Recall your Pokémon,” she ordered.

“Princess, I don’t think—” Belaron began.

“Do not defy me, Syr Bel,” she snapped. “I gave you a direct order. Obey it.”

Nuria seemed to understand what Iris was trying to do, however, and barked to the other crewmembers that still bobbed in the water to back off and call off their Pokémon. Moros obliged, recalling Kangaskhan without a fuss, but he kept a hand on his sword and squinted at the youth through the sun in his eyes, ready to act at a moment’s notice. Belaron was the last to oblige, but he recalled Feraligatr with a scowl.

“Speak,” Iris commanded. “Quickly.”

The youth looked between her and the trainers gathered around her. Gyarados remained in the water in case he got any ideas. Sceptile thumped the ground with its serrated tail, blowing up the sand and making an awful clicking noise when it opened its mouth. Cottonee burrowed deeper in Iris’s hair, put off by the eerie sound.

“I’m Benga,” the youth said.

“Benga,” Iris repeated. “Why did you follow me?”

“To find out if you really were a Titan like me. Now that I know, I wanna make you an offer.”
“Young man, you are in no position to talk to the princess so informally,” Belaron said.

Iris put up a hand to silence him. “You’ll hand over that Mega Sceptile of yours?”

Benga chuckled. “Not a chance. But I’ll do you one better.” He held out his bloody hand for Iris. “I’ll get you into Opelucid undetected, or anywhere else you wanna go. No one knows the Trident like I do.”

“Clearly, you’ve never been to Adria, punk,” Nuria retorted. “My crew and I know these waters better than anyone.”

“Maybe the waters, but not the Heart Tine,” Benga returned. “I was born and raised in Opelucid. I know the city like the back of my hand. I’ve been all over the Trident, even as far as the Moor of Icirrus. You won’t find anyone better, I promise you that.”

“I was born in Opelucid, too,” Iris said.

“Yeah, but you’ve been gone since the Red Plague. You don’t know Unova. That’s why you got this fancy crew with you. I bet none of ‘em’s even been to the Heart Tine, let alone Opelucid. Tell me I’m wrong, I dare you.”

This was unexpected. Help was the last thing Iris had expected from this person. People didn’t help strangers without an ulterior motive. Iris had learned that lesson well growing up as a stranger all her life.

“I can’t trust you. You’re a Titan.”

“Which means I’m out for myself. Why would I come to you outnumbered if I was lying? Titan to Titan, you can trust that I’ll do anything to stay alive.”

Iris hesitated. She thought about the outdated maps that waited for her back in her room on the Oculus, the forces Marlon would send on a dangerous march through the Reversal Mountains to Opelucid from the east. Not all would survive the journey, let alone the war that waited at the end of it. And there was the matter of simply getting to Opelucid. The Oculus could only take her so far. What if he was telling the truth? What if he could do what he said he could? She could glean whatever information he had, then cast him aside when he was no longer useful. It was no better than he would do to her if their situations were reversed.

“Titan to Titan, what’s in it for you? You seem to have a good life playing the hero here,” Iris said. “I’m a Dragon. I don’t need a knight in shining armor.”

“I’m no knight,” Benga said. “And the truth is I’m ready for something new. I hate staying anywhere too long. And I’ve got no love for Opelucid. There’s nothing left for me there. I’ve been a Vander for the last seven years.”

Iris narrowed her eyes. He was hiding something, but Titans always hid something. Vanders especially. They were loners, wanderers with no Dragon Clan to return to, either by choice or by exile.

“Princess,” Belaron said. “I don’t think this is a good idea. We should dispose of him quietly to ensure his silence.”

Yes, we should, Iris thought.

But something was telling her to wait. Titans lied, but a part of her wanted to believe Benga. He
was hiding something, but he’d exposed himself to her knowing he could lose his life in so doing. That wasn’t courage, and it definitely wasn’t stupidity. It was planning. Whether he could help her or not, her options were to kill him now or take him with her to keep him silent and perhaps discover what he was hiding. A Titan on his own in the middle of nowhere with a power beyond anything she’d ever seen... It could not be mere coincidence.

An image of Caitlin and her ghastly golden eyes appeared in Iris’s mind just then, and she thought again of the cryptic prophecy. Ever since she had returned to Unova, people had come into her life out of the blue and left her questioning. She didn’t have answers, but the more the questions piled up, the more she wanted to find them.

“Iris,” Benga said. “What have you got to lose?”

Iris sheathed her sword and beckoned to Gyarados. The Atrocious Pokémon lowered its head for her to climb on and lifted her high into the air. She looked down over her nose at Benga and the others. Sceptile glared up at her and Gyarados, small and shrinking the higher Gyarados lifted her up.

“Nothing at all,” she said. “You’re welcome to come along for as long as you’re useful.”

And not a day longer.

Belaron looked up at her like she’d lost her mind. Nuria cast Benga a suspicious glance, but she went back to the water to her Sharpedo and didn’t question Iris’s decision.

“The sub’s prepped to dive,” Nuria announced. “Everyone back to the sub. We’ll be leaving as soon as we’re ready.”

The crowd gathered on the beach continued to watch, but some began to disperse once it became apparent that there would be no fighting and the visitors were leaving. Benga recalled Zweilous and Mega Sceptile. Alone on the beach, he appeared small and insignificant.

“I assume you have a way to get to our ship?” Iris called down to him. “Gyarados doesn’t like ferrying anyone but me.”

Benga laughed, taking her challenge in stride. If he was coming aboard, Iris wanted to know exactly what kinds of Pokémon he had with him in case she was forced to eliminate him. More battles were lost due to lack of preparation than any difference in strength and skill.

“I fully mean to be cliché here, but you’ve got serious control issues,” Benga said as he selected a Pokéball from the leather thong across his chest. “Guess we got that in common.”

Benga tossed out his Pokéball, and a large Flyer coalesced in the light. Iris could not hide her surprise at the sight of a living Volcarona perched on the sand. They were exceedingly rare, native only to Unova and long endangered. People had hunted down and exterminated their kind to keep them from starting forest fires. Larvesta, the pre-evolution, could not always control its fire and could light up miles of forest if left unchecked. Over time, hunting Volcarona and Larvesta for sport had become a lucrative business. Their hides were a beautiful snowy white and fireproof, able to guard against even a Magmortar’s or Camerupt’s fire. The armor crafted from their hides was disgustingly expensive.

This Volcarona was an impressive ten feet tall with six magnificent orange wings. Known as the Sun Pokémon, it was said that with one flap of those wings, it could unleash Fire Spins that could swallow an entire square acre of rainforest and everything in it. Volcarona crouched to let Benga
climb onto its back. In a matter of moments, he was in the air and Volcarona buzzed, its elegant wings shimmering as they gave off heat that put the summer sun to shame.

Benga leveled with Iris and smirked. “After you.”

Even as her rage roiled within her, Hurricane Iris made no appearance today. Every minute she spent around Benga both enraged her to him and fueled a fire of challenge she had rarely experienced. He was hiding something, a very big something if his collection of Pokémon was anything to go by. And the more he revealed, the more questions she had. Questions she wanted answered.

“Try to keep up,” she said.

Gyarados turned toward the sub and glided easily through the waters, happy to be leaving Perry Town and the ominous White Forest behind. Volcarona floated on the sea breeze just behind, leaving a trail of shimmering heat in its wake.

Perhaps this was all a ruse, and Benga was in fact working for Drayden, sent to assassinate Iris in her sleep. Perhaps he was who he said he was, a Vander wandering the Trident for years with no home to return to. Maybe he could help, or maybe he was just as curious about her as she was about him. But whatever the case, one thing was clear to her as they approached the Oculus together: there was nowhere to hide in a metal sub nine hundred feet below sea level. Whatever Benga was keeping hidden, she would find it.
There was no one here, no soft weeping or the hushed whispers of one-sided conversations. This plot was closed to all but family, and the only family left found himself standing alone among the tombstones, as he always did every afternoon at a quarter past three for the past fifteen years.

Drayden stood still and tall in his starched collared shirt rolled up around the elbows and slacks freshly pressed this morning held up by suspenders. He pressed them himself. He liked the steam and the heat of the iron and the banality of running it back and forth, smoothing out the kinks and imperfections until there was no trace that they had ever been there at all. Good as new.

He slipped his hands in his pockets and breathed deeply, eyes closed. Pidove and Fletchling chirped in nearby trees. Sentret that lived around here scampered lightly through the grass in search of Apricorns to horde. The smell of freshly cut flowers was pungent in the air. It was warm today. Summers in the Heart Tine were always pleasant before the monsoons arrived. The sun warmed his cheeks under his kempt beard. It was white to match his hair, but the toned muscles that filled his shirt and crisscrossed his strong back betrayed his healthy forty-eight years. One day, he’d woken up and saw in the mirror a man who had lived and aged a lifetime in the span of a few months. That had been fifteen years ago, and those few months had been more than most men endured in just one lifetime.

Drayden opened his eyes, amber eyes that had grown darker over the years, and the world came back into focus. Weathered wrinkles bunched around his eyes as he squinted against the light. His thin severe nose stung with a light sunburn from standing outside for just this relatively short visit. In his pockets, his hands balled into fists, not too tight but wanting for something to hold onto.

The three tombstones in front of him were nothing ostentatious. Just the typical black and white granite inlaid with Opelucid opals in the shape of the Fafnir crest—two opposite-facing dragon heads, one black and one white—above the standard names and dates. No inscriptions, no embellishments. They weren’t needed. The ones left to remember them kept the memories in a place they would never wither or fade. Drayden kneeled down and traced his fingers over their names one at a time, as he always did.

Braeia.

Aeron.

Aedon.

Their names were smooth under his rough fingers, polished from so many days and so many years running those same fingers over them, afraid he might forget the sound of those names if he let them be. Names were not meant to live in stone. They were meant to be spoken, called out in the throes of laughter, whispered in the candlelit shadows of a bedroom, sung softly at night when it was time to sleep. In stone, they were cold and bitter and silent, but he traced them all the same, willing himself to remember the laughter, the intimacy, the love. Every day he remembered a little less.

“Promise me,” Braeia had begged him as he held her hand, swollen with red veins that throbbed like fat worms just beneath her glassy skin. “Promise me you’ll make it right.”

Their boys, just two and three at the time, had long since succumbed to the insidious disease, and Braeia had taken ill tending to them night and day. The children and the elderly had been the first
to go, as though singled out by some predator for their inherent weakness, like the disease knew their loss would weaken the healthier adults, the real prize. But Braeia had not listened to the physician’s warnings. Looking back, it had only been a matter of time.

“Promise me,” she begged him over and over again in the throes of delusion and pain.

But Drayden promised her anyway, if only to coax out whatever familiar sliver remained of his young bride before the fever sucked her under. When that happened, it was only a short while before the end. He’d stayed with her the whole time, fingers sticky with the coagulated blood that burst from her engorged veins, and he promised.

“Excuse me, Your Grace? My deepest apologies for disturbing you.”

Drayden looked over his shoulder at the portly man addressing him. “Ryon.”

Ryon, the chief scribe and Drayden’s personal assistant and sometimes informant, was a paunchy balding man of middling height and personality. He was a thrill in a court full of Titans and fortynblods with no name and no fortune to offset his low birth, so even the skuff Ridder Knights wanted little to do with him. Demure as a little girl and sharing a number of qualities in common with a mouse, not the least of which was his ability to burrow where he was unwanted and leech information not meant for his ears, Drayden had promoted him the day he was named king over scores of others with better blood and better birth. Unctuous and obsequious, Ryon’s information was nevertheless always accurate, always early, and always for Drayden’s ears only. If he was interrupting him at a time when doing so could (and had in times past) end in a flogging, then it could not wait.

Drayden stood. He was more than a head taller than Ryon, and the smaller man wrung his plump pink hands just over his chest like he meant to drive a dagger deep into his sternum. “What is it?” Drayden said.

Even after so many years together, Drayden’s soft tone, like viscous poison poured over smoldering embers, visibly rattled Ryon, and he wrung his hands harder. But he spoke quietly in that oily way he had, conscious of any ears to the ground.

“It’s Castelia,” Ryon said. “That is, Gym Leader Burgh. My spies in the city have just sent me confirmation that he’s ill.”

Drayden stared at Ryon but said nothing, a silent encouragement—or threat—to continue.

“They say it’s his heart,” Ryon elaborated.

“How serious?”

Ryon grinned and rubbed his fat fingers together. Oh, but he just loved a juicy bit of gossip. “Serious enough to warrant assistance from the former Team Plasma. From the reports I received, it would seem his condition has been deteriorating for months, perhaps even years. It’s a miracle the secret remained until now.”

Drayden’s face was a marble façade. Ryon leaned forward on his toes a bit in anticipation, a lap dog looking for a congratulatory pet, but Drayden gave nothing away.

“That’s...interesting,” he said finally, mind racing.

“What would you like to do, Your Grace?”
“Call the council. I want a meeting right now, I don’t care what they’re doing.”

Ryon bowed. “Right away.”

“And Ryon,” Drayden said as the little man backed away. “Good work.”

Ryon turned bright red and bowed his head over and over like a pigeon bobbing as it scuttled. Drayden showed him his back and listened as the paunchy man’s footsteps receded. He was alone again. Breathing deeply, he unclenched his fists and let his shoulders sag. His body relaxed as Ryon’s secret filled him like an elixir, rushing through his veins and reaching the tips of his fingers and toes.

“I promise, Braeia,” he said softly, a hint of honey tempering his tone. “This time, I’ll make it right.”

Turning on his heel, he stalked off at a long gait among the tombstones. Dragonsong Castle loomed just to the east, its imposing grey façade and two-toned banners rising against the horizon like a creature of lore frozen in time and space, reaching for the heavens. In the heart of the castle, the Opelucid Gym housed the main training arena for the city’s elite Dragon Tamers. But first, he had one stop to make at the castle’s small chapel. There was one more person Drayden wanted at this meeting with the council, and while Ryon had no problem interrupting Drayden’s daily rituals in the case of emergency, he would not have interrupted her even on pain of death. Like so many others, Ryon felt death’s specter in her presence even all these years later. There was no helping it.

Drayden reached the back of the graveyard, the Kingsplot, where all the kings and queens of Opelucid were buried in a place of honor next to their spouses. There was no avoiding it on the way to the chapel, and Drayden was not one to take unnecessary detours with a particular destination in mind. He walked swiftly, but the pull of this place, the stink of nostalgia and loss made him pause just a moment to look.

The grave that had caught his eye was defaced with the mark of gid to denote the deceased’s commission of one of society’s cardinal wrongs. A great tree was carved into the granite headstone, as it was in most all the others. But this one also depicted a serpentine Dragon coiled about the roots, gnawing on them. ‘Cadmus’, the inscription read. Drayden frosted over as he passed the headstone, ostentatious and grand much like its predecessors. All the graves of the kings and queens of Opelucid before him were lavish and grand, though few but Cadmus’s bore the mark of Giratina, a ravenous Dragon specter of myth and legend said to devour the souls of Titans that had wronged their fellow Dragons in life.

But it was not to his elder brother’s grave that Drayden’s eyes were drawn as he passed. Instead, he slowed his confident gait at the small, unassuming grave next to it. There was no name, no date, and no inscription. It was nothing but a blank granite slab. Drayden’s stride stuttered just a breath, unnoticeable to anyone who wasn’t looking for it, but he may as well have tripped over his feet. That blank grave was the only one of its kind in this plot, an abnormality among the others. The headstone’s empty face reflected nothing in the rippling stone, not even a name.

Aedith, he thought before he could stop himself.

Names were not meant to live in stone, but in stone they could live on, immortalized. Hers would die with him and anyone else who still remembered her sin and her husband’s.

“What have you done?” he could hear his own voice echoing in his memory as he stood with Aedith over the body of Cadmus, his brother and king, her husband. The cup of wine that had poisoned him lay spilled on the floor, its rosy contents mixing with Cadmus’s bile and soaking his
“What have you done?” she uttered, her last words that same night as she clutched Cadmus’s gilded sword, the king’s sword, now Drayden’s sword, where it lay impaled through her belly. Her beautiful violet eyes so cloudy and full of despair, of dashed hopes for what could have been, what they’d lost before they’d ever really had it, as Drayden twisted the sword inside her and watched her fall to the floor next to the husband she’d never loved. Gone, when the bastard child that wasn’t hers still lived, a legacy of Cadmus’s love, but never for her.

Drayden never stopped walking, and as soon as he passed that blank grave, he picked up his gait and headed purposefully toward the chapel, banishing the dark memories from fifteen long years ago. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end, and in a rare moment of weakness he imagined Giratina rising from its stone carving, a myth made real, to slither after him. His grave was meant for this place, too, and no matter how much time passed, the voracious specter would not forget it.

A chilling wind swept over the back of his neck, and Drayden whirled. The grass rustled underfoot, and a Sentret that had been hoarding white Apricorns from a nearby tree spooked, spilling its cache and scampering to safety in a tree hollow. Drayden’s breath came in short gasps, and his neck was chilled with perspiration. But there was no one there, no shadow and certainly no phantom conjured by parents to scare their children into submission. There were only the tombstones, and only him walking along among them.

“Promise me,” Braeia’s dying wish echoed in his ears.

His soul belonged to the living at the behest of the dead. He had no time for children’s fairytales and primeval traditions steeped in blood and shame. Cadmus had had both their fills, as far as Drayden was concerned.

Hurrying out of the cemetery, Drayden crossed a stone courtyard and entered Dragonsong Castle. The castle was an impressive edifice built over three thousand years ago by the founders of the Fafnir Dynasty. It was well maintained and had remained the stronghold of all Fafnir kings and queens. Drayden was the latest in that long line of ordained rulers after his brother Cadmus passed before his time without an heir to inherit the throne and title of Gym Leader. He’d grown up in this castle, as his queen mother had before him, and her father before her.

The other Opelucid Titans, those without royal blood, also lived in the castle or on its near outskirts, never straying far. Before the Red Plague, their numbers had spread them all over Opelucid. Now, the remaining Titans and their families lived within the castle walls. They were born here, trained here, and died here if they were lucky. Every life was precious, every Titan—every Dragon—meant something. Each of them was all the rest had left.

One such Titan was born and raised outside the castle walls in relative obscurity. She had been of common blood, born to fortyynblods far removed from the royal family, but her control was strong, stronger than most. The blood was funny like that—it might curse a prince with anemia and gift a commoner with all the powers of Time and Space should she choose to pursue them. Breeding could control for a little of it, but there were always the strays, the ones that slipped through the cracks and got away with something never meant for them, something they didn’t deserve. Usually, they had to be eliminated. But every so often, one would find her way back to the clan.

Drayden arrived at the castle chapel, which was a small room behind closed wooden doors containing just four pews before a wide altar. It was more of a broom closet than a place of worship, and very few visited it. But she visited it every day while he haunted the dead, and it was here that he found her.
She was nude, her clothes folded in a neat pile at the edge of the altar. She kneeled before a ceremonial brass bowl, and something dripped against it like *plip, plip, plip*. Her body was small and pale, even frail to the uninitiated. But Drayden had known her since she was a girl of fifteen years, barely a woman when the Red Plague swept through Opelucid and claimed so many. But not her.

Engorged red veins crisscrossed her body like a network of spider webs. Most were flecked with scabbed flesh, chafed and healing and pulsing with each heartbeat. They covered her arms, her legs, her buttocks, her back. Drayden had never seen her before all this, and he’d never known the true color of her hair, now ghastly white and thin as floss, papery and short just brushing her shoulders. Her figure was slim and fit under the disease, and her heart beat confidently and proudly.

She muttered under her breath, prayers in the old tongue Drayden had learned as a child but never cared to master. They were a formality, a dusty tradition kept alive only in name and never in spirit. Except to her, the one who had lived. One of the rare few. Drayden had lived, too, but his scars were invisible to all but him. If he’d come out of it like she did, perhaps he would have prayed to anyone who was listening, too.

She dragged a stone knife over her arms and sliced through the prominent veins slithering over her flesh, drawing blood. It dripped into the brass bowl, *plip, plip, plip*, and coated her arms in rivers of red that made her glisten. She bobbed her head softly and continued to mutter in prayer. Above her head, the wall behind the altar depicted an ancient mural. Upon it, three Dragons clashed. Dialga represented Time, the beginning. Palkia represented Space, the life after the beginning until the end of Time. And Giratina, the spectral wyrm, represented the Void, the end and everything beyond the end. The three mythical Dragon gods circled each other in a cycle, a constant struggle none would ever win. They were the old gods of Sinnoh, the wellspring of the original Titans created by Palkia and Dialga until Giratina banished the Titans to the ends of the earth—to this place, and to others. The three of them, the Trinity, were the highest powers to which all Titans were beholden—if you believed in fairytales.

She believed. Ever since the Red Plague that had claimed young and old alike fifteen years ago, mysteriously sparing only her and few others from its ravaging touch, she believed.

Drayden watched as she spilled her blood and filled the small brass dish to the brim. It spilled over the edge and dripped onto the stone floor, filling the spaces between the slabs and seeping into the earth. It was a gift, a sacrifice of blood made stronger by the disease that had killed so many of their kind. But not her.

Drayden, however, was not about to wait around and let her offer so much blood to a trio of stone Dragon gods that she passed out. There was business to attend to. He stepped into the chapel, letting his steps echo, and she froze. Only her blood continued to drip down her scarred arms from the severed veins.

“Sire,” she said, not looking back. “You disturb my ablutions?”

Drayden curled his lip and drew up behind her. He quickly masked his annoyance and picked up her folded clothes. “I’ve received urgent news. It’s what I’ve been waiting for, Caelith.”

Caelith rose. Blood ran down her hips and thighs—she’d been thorough today—and dripped onto the floor. The stone knife in her hand glistened red. Unabashed, she faced him and fixed him with a hollow stare. Sunken dark eyes with perpetual bags under them glowed with lucidity and acute focus Drayden rarely saw in anyone else. As on her backside, inflamed red veins zigzagged over her belly and chest, up her neck, and over her cheeks. She wore them like war paint. Her uncombed
hair hung in her eyes, stringy and a little greasy. She held out a hand for her clothes.

“Good,” she said. “I’ve longed to carry out your vision for this city. So have they.”

As she pulled on her clothes, Drayden’s eyes flickered to the stone mural of the three mythical Dragons behind her, but their chiseled fangs and lifeless stares failed to stir his faith, much less a desire to self-flagellate. Caelith wrapped her tunic around her body and pulled on her pants and clogs. They were beige and brown, but her blood blotted the sleeves and pant legs as she adjusted them over her body. Drayden said nothing of it, and she kneeled down to retrieve the brass bowl filled to the brim with her blood. Careful not to spill any, she approached the pedestal before the Dragon mural and set it down on top, muttering prayers all the while. Drayden waited patiently for her to finish, and then escorted her out of the chapel.

“I’ll explain the details at the council meeting. I assume you’re ready for this,” he said.

“Of course.”

She followed him out, a thin trail of blood drying in her wake.

The council, a panel of four men and women meant to represent the many Titan families, Ridder Knight skuffs, and the common plebs living under Drayden’s protection in the Opelucid fiefdom, dulled their chatter when Drayden entered the council chambers in the Gym and made his way to the head of the table. His gait was long and purposeful, each step echoing fatefully against the stone walls, and the councilmen were as the condemned awaiting judgment from a laconic executioner. But their eyes flickered from their king to Caelith and the crimson splotches on her linens. Caelith’s sunken eyes bored holes in Drayden’s back, oblivious to their cowering gazes. That was why he chose her. She knew to keep her focus on what mattered and tune out the superfluous background noise.

Drayden took his seat at the long table, and Caelith sat down at his right next to Ryon, the council’s scribe. Ryon kept his eyes carefully averted from her, but she stared at him outright like a child stares at a dying animal on a dissection table. He dabbed his bald forehead for sweat with a lace handkerchief.

“What is the meaning of this?” asked Thorys Falk, the council’s Titan member representing the Titan families without royal blood. He was a carbon copy of every other Old Blood Titan living in Opelucid for generations—tall, blond, blue-eyed, and a pretty face hidden from the world while it was so far shoved up his own ass. “I was in the middle of something when this son of a nidding barged in and scared off my lady companions. I’ll have you know they were green-eyed and about ready to fight each other for the first go with me.”

The woman across from him, Rayanna Regnbage, was a fair-skinned beauty with haunting violet eyes, thick braided tresses that could have hanged a man, and a smile that cut through solid rock. She rolled a gold coin between her limber fingers. “Oh, please. The only jealousy in your bed is the one your left hand feels for your right.”

Thorys glared at Rayanna, but Caelith’s gaze settled over him, and he averted his eyes.

“Unrequited love is such a tragedy,” Caelith said humorlessly.

Rayanna tapped the gold coin to her lips over a growing smirk, and Ryon coughed hard to stifle a chortle.
The oldest man at the table, a silver fox twenty years Drayden’s senior, cleared his throat. His grey hair was brushed smoothly back and oiled, and his goatee was neatly trimmed. He wore boiled leather and studs, and a sword hung at his hip. “Now that we’ve dispensed with fond greetings, perhaps we can get to the business at hand. Your Grace, I imagine there’s a good reason you’ve convened us so urgently?”

Drayden surveyed his small council, listening as they bantered and watching them carefully. He’d known them all for years, and yet every meeting with them felt as if he was watching them for the first time. A habit he’d picked up over the years. Approach people as if it’s the first impression they’ve ever made and you let go of your internalized bias or preconceptions about them. All the better to peel back their layers and look inside their hearts like a scientist with a scalpel and a wriggling lab Rattata.

Rayanna Regnbage, the council treasurer, was a pleb in her mid thirties from one of the oldest and wealthiest families in Opelucid barring the Fafnir Dynasty itself. Regnbage men and woman had married into the royal family for generations, including the late King Cadmus’s wife, Aedith. Their fortune was in Opelucid opals, the rainbow stones mined north of the city that filled the Dragons’ coffers and funded their wars for centuries. Like her kin, Rayanna was a shrewd woman of short height and shorter temper. She had little patience for most Titans and their egos, including her fellow councilman, Thorys.

Thorys was a Titan born and bred from the upstanding Falk family that had lived here in Opelucid since the founders first descended from Sinnoh thousands of years ago to discover this great land. He was young, just twenty-seven with a head full of dreams, but his family had given him the best education money and birthright could afford. Thorys was no military man or accountant, but he was a brilliant young mind with as much talent for business and leadership as he had for bedding women. His voice was the voice of the other Titan families, the Dragon Riders.

The silver fox was Mydros, the head of the Order of the Knights of Ridder in Opelucid. A skuff the same as his army knights, Mydros had served Cadmus before Drayden, and their mother, Iridia, before Cadmus. He was a quiet man, logical and prudent to a fault, sensible. Drayden often appreciated his opinion on domestic matters as the fruit of age and wisdom, a scarcity in a country ravaged by a disease that had cut the population nearly in half fifteen years ago. But Mydros was a skuff with power, a combination that seldom yielded lasting desirable effects. Like all skuffs, Mydros craved a life that was more than a bridge between plebs and Tamers burning at both ends. Ryon had implored Drayden time and again to dismiss old Mydros, replace him with a younger Ridder Knight, someone fresh and amenable to the changing times and the crown’s position. Drayden had refused. There was a use for old, tattered things, if only as a reminder not to repeat their mistakes.

Caelith was not a member of Drayden’s council, but he had brought her along to almost every meeting for the past fifteen years, ever since he took her in when she had no one left alive to look out for her. Now, she was his highest-ranking general in charge of the Dragon Riders, a military force of Titans and fortynbloids that fought from the backs of Dragons and attacked from the skies. They were far smaller than the Ridder Knights’ infantry forces, but no less effective.

Caelith scratched the back of her hand, irritating the reddened veins and inflaming the skin. Mydros stared, stony-faced but silent, as she raked her nails over her reddened skin. Drayden sat surveying his council for a few moments, taking them in and assessing their moods, watching them watch each other. “Of course, Mydros.” He leaned back in his chair and steepled his hands, taking his time. “Ryon tells me Gym Leader Burgh of Castelia is gravely ill.”
He said nothing further, waiting for them to come to him. A grand misconception about being king was the idea that only your ideas mattered. Drayden had always preferred to listen to others first, let them make their missteps or stumble onto brilliance, before following the best path out of the woods. Cadmus had always been content to stay deep in the forest listening to the sounds of his own voice. Drayden’s lip twitched at the fleeting thought of his late older brother and former king, but his hands hid the slip.

“An attack on Castelia now could cripple them,” Mydros pondered aloud. “With their Gym Leader in crisis, morale will be low. It could be the perfect moment to strike.”

“Castelia has the largest ground military on the Trident,” Caelith said. “The Red Plague claimed more than half our battling trainers. A Dragon is worth ten men, but until the new generation is old enough to fight, we’re no match for Castelia’s numbers.”

“Bees without a queen to direct them do nothing but buzz.”

She leaned forward over the long table with her arms crossed. Blood seeped through her sleeves in small blotches, and Mydros’s eyes were drawn to the fruits of her spiritual fervor. “We’re not dealing with mere bees, Syr. And as for their queen, Burgh may be ill, but he’ll most certainly outlive you. You underestimate the Volucris at your peril.”

Mydros set his jaw, but he held his tongue.

“Forget Castelia,” Thorys said, gaze distant as he drummed his fingers lightly on the table. “Our opportunity is in Nimbasa.”

“Nimbasa,” Mydros said. “It’s Burgh we’re concerned with, not that frigid Fulmen, Elesa.”

“That frigid Fulmen is also the Nimbasa Gym Leader. And isn’t it true that Nimbasa has no love for Castelia?”

Mydros watched him like a hawk. “Aye, they’re not like to share a pint or break bread. But that’s not a strong enough reason to sway Nimbasa to our cause. Nimbasa’s had no love for Opelucid since before you were a boy sucking on your mother’s teat.”

Thorys chuckled. “I’ve sucked many teats over the years and I’m sure any mother would be pleased with how my technique’s improved. But you know something that hasn’t improved? Castelia’s trade agreement with Nacrene. From the most recent reports I’ve heard, things have gotten, well, quite touchy. But that’s old news now, isn’t that so, Ryon?”

Ryon wrung his fingers, thick and slippery as pale Bug larvae. “Oh? Yes, well, if you mean the matter about Pinwheel Forest. The, eh, so-called Neo Team Plasma has executed Gym Leader Lenora and the Striaton Princes. They control the lower East Tine, and word is they’ve ceased all timber and crop trade with Castelia.”

Thorys spread his arms. “There you have it.”

Rayanna set her gold coin on the table. The sound of metal on lacquered wood echoed in the spacious room. “The Lostlorn Forest.”

“Huh, look at that. You have more than just a sharp tongue behind that pretty face,” Thorys said.

“Shall I give you lick and spill some of that precious Old Blood of yours?”

Mydros muttered something under his breath, but Thorys leaned forward across the table with a
“You’re speaking of Nimbasa timber,” Caelith said.

Rayanna tapped her coin. “Yes. Without Nacrene timber or access to Pinwheel Forest’s harvest, Castelia will have nowhere else to turn. They’re a paradise built in the middle of a desert. They have no resources other than what the sea can offer, and there they face steep competition with Virbank and Driftveil with multiples of those cities’ populations to support.” She picked up her coin and flipped it. “All the coin in the world means nothing without resources to spend it on.”

“What an uncharacteristic thing for a Regnbage to say,” Thorys said.

Rayanna fixed him with a confident grin. “I spread my legs for gold the same as any other man, woman, and child that’s ever walked this earth. But gold alone won’t feed a starving man.”

“I imagine our sickly queen bee in Castelia has never agreed with that sentiment more,” Caelith said.

“So we join forces with Nimbasa to squeeze Castelia dry,” Mydros said. “Aye, a fine plan save for the part when Nimbasa doesn’t agree to send their young men and women to war across a wasteland.”

No one said anything, but Drayden rose. “You’ve given me much to think about.”

Everyone else rose respectfully, and Drayden scanned their faces, read the questioning and the doubt in their eyes.

“You’re all dismissed. Thank you for your wise counsel.”

He swiftly exited the council chambers, and Caelith’s light steps were right on his heel following him out. As the doors swung shut behind them, Drayden could hear the council’s bewildered whispers, but none dared question him or try to follow.

Caelith kept her tongue as she followed behind Drayden. He led her in silence through the castle. They passed the inner courtyard and walked under the ramparts. Men and women relaxing under the sun stopped what they were doing and bowed to Drayden as he passed. Some had Pokémon, from tiny Swablu to regal Nidoqueen. They averted their gazes and pretended not to see Caelith as she passed after him. Drayden paid them no mind, and he knew Caelith would not, either, no matter her true feelings on their repulsion at the sight of her.

The walk across the castle took nearly ten minutes, and they remained silent the entire trek. Fellow Titans living at the castle, Gym trainers and Dragon Riders, greeted Drayden as he passed. Two-man patrols of Ridder Knights lowered their eyes when they saw the King. Not one so much as glanced at Caelith, and some whispered in hushed tones as she left them behind.

Drayden said nothing. He had the power to mete out punishment as he saw fit, and his word was all but the law of the land. It had been so ever since the Red Plague and he was left as the only man left standing to pick up the broken pieces of his brother’s shattered crown. But he was Caelith’s king, not her father. He was father to no one now.

Finally, they arrived at Drayden’s private wing of the castle in the North Tower. It was the northernmost part of Dragonsong Castle and the first line of defense separating Opelucid City from the Darkwood, the vast forest to the north of Opelucid. The land was untamed and wild save for the opal mines outside the city. Feral Pokémon of frightening power prowled its haunted depths, and only Opelucid—only Drayden—stood in between them and the entire Heart Tine. It was why
Nimbasa and Castelia had thrived virtually undisturbed for centuries. The Dragons stood watch to the north while the southerners filled their bellies and emptied their cocks day after day without a care in the world.

The North Tower had a large private garden and courtyard, and it was there that Drayden led Caelith. She was Drayden’s only guest in this sanctuary ever since he’d found himself living alone in this stone tower, the king’s tower. The seat of the protector. Braeia and their boys had fallen ill and left this world without ever properly enjoying the lavish setup and privacy.

When they entered the garden, eyes found them. From a shaded knoll under a weeping willow, a sleeping Haxorus opened its liquid red eyes. The golden scales around its neck were cracked and scarred from an old wound that nearly killed it, but as with its master, death had thus far rejected the seasoned Dragon.

Drayden walked to the lily pad pond in the middle of the garden and stood at the shore. Tulips in reds, oranges, yellows, and purples were in full bloom and smiled up at the sky, catching sunlight in their vibrant petals. Haxorus lumbered to its feet and slowly made its way to the water’s edge to drink. It was nearly seven feet tall, and its guillotine tusks were as long as swords.

Caelith stood off to the side. The small blotches of blood in her linens and her scraggly blanched hair gave her the appearance of a war refugee. The veins in her face pulsed lightly just beneath her skin as she watched Drayden, waiting.

“Well?” he asked.

“I think it’s a sound plan enlisting Nimbasa, but I agree with Mydros. We will have a difficult time convincing Nimbasa to aid us. Money will not sway them.”

Drayden listened to her words carefully. No, money would not mean a thing to Nimbasa, an old city that needed nothing but the Lostlorn Forest to sustain itself, small as it was. The Fulmen running Nimbasa were from an old family that had earned their wealth in the timber business and turned it into Nimbasa’s heart and soul. The current Gym Leader, Elesa, was as renowned for her bewitching beauty as for her aversion to outsiders.

“Castelia can,” Drayden said.

Caelith frowned. “Nimbasa won’t go to war with Castelia merely because their Gym Leader is dying.”

“No, not without help.”

Caelith fell silent as she read his meaning. “...You mean to offer them assistance, not ask for theirs.”

Drayden looked at her pointedly and kneeled down to rinse his hands in the water.

“The problem doesn’t change, though. What makes you think Elesa will see things your way?”

“She won’t. She’ll see them her way.” He shook out his hands and rose. “I would have it no other way.”

Caelith was a smart woman, Drayden would give her that. Anyone could learn tactics and strategy, but only the born clever could put them to good use. All the training in the world was a poor substitute to honed instinct and insight. He’d seen that in Caelith fifteen years ago when he came upon her begging on the streets as the Red Plague’s tumult had begun to taper and its spread was
finally contained. She was such a frail small thing then, skinny as a sapling without an ounce of muscle or fat on her emaciated body. She was pale as a corpse, then and now, and her hair, like all the others, had turned stark white. Not snowy and soft like a grandmother’s, but thin and brittle as though a terror had passed through her and sucked all the color out.

He remembered how she looked, sitting there by the gutter huddled in a moth-eaten blanket stolen from the cremation clinics men in thick rubber suits used to cover the dead while they awaited destruction. It was dark and crusty in places with dried blood, infected blood, but she huddled under it for meager protection against Opelucid’s bitter winter chill. Others hurried by her, turning their heads or even crossing the street, fearful of infection, either from the disease or from what had made her pitiful sitting there alone in the cold. The little tin can she had in front of her had a couple coins in it, enough for a hot bowl of onion stew at the soup kitchen, but they wouldn’t welcome a blyte, one touched by the crimson death and foul enough to be rejected by it.

Drayden watched her that grey afternoon as the winds out of the north howled and brought with them a frost that would freeze the stone streets and anything lingering in them. Too thin himself from the harrowing past few weeks in which he watched his young sons depart this world and his wife follow them not long after, his cheeks were sunken and sallow and he felt half a corpse wandering the streets like a drifter in disguise, having needed to get out, just get away from it all because if he stayed in that castle where his family had slipped through his fingers and left him behind a moment longer, he would surely go mad.

So he stopped and stared at the little stick girl clutching her infected blanket in those bloodless fingers rocking back and forth on the pavement over an old tin can waiting for money no one would take from her. He didn’t think of his dead sons, now nothing but ashes in the frozen ground when he saw her. He didn’t pity her or lament her situation, for she had lived when they had not. She was nothing, and they had been everything.

In truth, he didn’t know why he approached her that day. Some might say there was a sliver of light left in his black heart, bruised and bled for his wife and sons, for his brother Cadmus, that damned son of a nidding, and for the late queen Aedith whose death in many ways had been the most crippling of all. Some might even call it a divine intervention—Caelith did, having turned to her great Dragon gods in the years following that fateful day with no one and nothing else to turn to. Drayden never bothered correcting the misinterpretations. To let the ignorant go on believing what they will was to keep them pliant. The well informed were notoriously more rigid.

Instinct had guided his hand that day. The same instinct that had told him to run his sword through the heart of Aedith, the woman he’d loved like none other, after she’d married Cadmus instead of him and later poisoned Cadmus for his philandering ways. The same instinct that told him to run out the halfling bastard girl Cadmus had sired on that Adriati whore. Instinct had made Drayden a king, and it told him to offer his hand to Caelith that cold winter day because like him, she had survived. She was the only one left. Death rejected her, as it had rejected him. And to fulfill Braeia’s dying wish, a wish to make this world a place where their boys could have grown up safe and happy with a life they deserved, Drayden would need the help of those beyond death’s reach. His instinct had not let him down yet.

Caelith nodded. “I understand. Shall I prepare the Dragon Riders?”

“Yes. I want to leave as soon as possible.”

She patted her hand over her heart three times and bowed her head. “May the Trinity bless your vision.”

Caelith retrieved a Pokéball from her pocket and released her Flygon, a sleek sand Dragon as tall as
Haxorus with the strength to carry ten times its weight in its claws. The Dragon’s thick translucent wings could whip up vicious sand tornados and fly as fast as a Talonflame. Caelith wasted no time in climbing onto the beast’s saddled back. With a gentle kick to its side, Flygon’s wings became a blur of buzzing and it leaped into the air. The pair disappeared over the North Tower.

Alone at last, Drayden let his stiff shoulders slump and walked around the pond past Haxorus, who gave him a mere cursory glance. Deeper in the garden hidden from view, he heard the crunching of bones and the wet ripping of flesh. An acrid stench tickled his nose, and he sniffled. He stopped just before a thicket of brambles near the garden wall.

Behind the bushes, a creature with scales so deeply blue they were nearly black was hunched over an animal carcass too ripped and bloody to be recognizable. The creature, a Druddigon that towered almost fourteen feet tall, had its head buried in the carcass’s ribcage. When it heard Drayden’s approach, it lifted its head and pulled out a mouthful of heart and flesh. Blood covered its muzzle and most of its head. The scales on its head were naturally a shade of dark wine, but old Fafnir stories claimed Druddigon had bathed its head in the blood of so many fallen prey that it had absorbed their power and taken on a part of every kill it made. The Dragon chewed unabashedly. The animal’s heart squelched in between its teeth and spilled coagulated blood over its sharp teeth and down its chin. The bone growths in its back twitched like tiny wings, but it could not fly.

Druddigon growled low in its belly as it leveled its dark gaze with Drayden. Its jaws were big enough to rip his head off and swallow it whole if it wanted, but this Druddigon would not dare to move against him. He reached out a hand and touched Druddigon’s snout, drenching his fingers in warm blood. Druddigon growled again but lowered its head to allow the contact. He thought of Caelith’s fingers, how they were greased with her blyted blood in the chapel in offering to the gods she believed had sent him to save her that winter day so many years ago. But Drayden answered to a different trinity, different Dragons he’d held in his arms as the red death took them and left him alone as its witness.

“I’ll make this world one where we Dragons can thrive.” Drayden rubbed the blood between his fingers, remembering the feel of Braeia’s infected blood growing cold in his hand as he held hers. “If it’s blood the gods want, then I’ll give them as much as they can swallow.”
The Lostlorn Forest was quiet and shadowy this afternoon. Not a soul stirred in the trees, and the air was damp and stagnant for lack of a breeze. Sunlight diffused through the canopy in pale bars such that when the women in the clearing moved, they danced from light to shadow and back to the light again. There were two of them, Nimbas Rain Warriors dressed identically in cream linen and studded leather armor. Of average height and slim but muscular build, they moved like sunlight on a rushing river, fluid and lightning fast and everywhere at once.

The first wielded a naginata, a deadly pole weapon with a wicked scythe extending from one end as long as a man’s arm. She swung it around her to cover her front and back, above and below, as the second woman slashed and thrust with a katana. Razor-sharp steel clanged like thunder as they brushed against each other’s blades, parrying and feinting in a whorl of color and sound, as if they shared one mind and one spirit, divided only by the columns of light in between them.

The katana caught the naginata in the thigh after a slow evade, a graze as fleeting and soft as a lover’s whisper. It sliced the leather gauntlet and shaved off a couple of bronze studs, but did not bite the flesh. The naginata grunted and stretched back at an obtuse angle, hyperextended, but she brought her blade around and slashed at the katana’s legs. The katana jumped into the air just as the naginata fell back into a roll, and the naginata sliced through shadows beneath her.

Parting, the women lowered their blades and panted hard under the strobe lit canopy. They had been here since the sun was at its zenith, pausing only for a drink of water every half hour. The other pairs were elsewhere in the forest, close enough to arrive in minutes, far enough away to preserve the quiet and solitude of this dark wood. No pair ever strayed too far. Those who did were like to be swallowed by the thickets no matter how well they knew the forest. It was a labyrinth, constantly changing and moving at its heart, or so the stories warned. To wander too deep into the bewildering woods was to wander forever.

This clearing’s entrance was marked with a string of bells and bones that rattled pleasantly when anyone passed beneath. They were charms to ward off shadows and the spirits of those lost to this wood doomed to wander eternally in search of the living to keep them company. They also marked the way back to Nimbas City at the edge of the forest. The two women catching their breaths knew better than to stray too far from the marker.

“You were slow,” the katana said. “I told you not to finish that flagon last night. You always do as you please.”

The naginata wiped her brow and leaned some of her weight on her weapon. “We’ve been out here for hours. We’re both slow.”

“You were slower.” The katana sheathed her weapon and pulled out her tight bun to let loose her long hair, dyed like all the women’s in their troupe as part of a long-standing tradition. The colors they chose were colors beyond the conventional, just as the Rain Warriors were women beyond their humble beginnings. Hers was a brilliant ocean blue, the color of the sea at first light, and it brought out the silver in her thin heavy lidded eyes. Her skin was tawny and tanned, warm with jeweled undertones that reflected the bars of sunlight like polished gold.

“You always have to have the last word, Gozen,” the naginata said. “At least I’m happy to give it to you.”

The naginata’s heart-shaped face beamed in a grin born to be shared with the world. Though not
related, she was of a look with Gozen and every other Nimbasa local going back generations, except for the eyes—hers were a stormier gray with veins of dark obsidian and always bright with the hint of a laugh where Gozen’s were dreary and solemn like a cold winter’s day. Her dyed bubblegum pink hair, swept into a messy side ponytail that had come loose and let her bangs fall into her face as she sparred, brought out the rose flush of exertion from her workout.

“Right, Yancy,” Gozen said, dusting off her greaves. “As you try to get in the last word, anyway.”

Unlike Yancy, Gozen’s mouth was not made for smiling or laughing, and her narrow eyes were made narrower by the frown she wore like a badge of honor. She had always been a poker face, and those who did not know her would call her sullen and even recalcitrant. But Yancy had grown up with her, trained with her since they were just five. And for the next nineteen years, she had come to know Gozen as a young woman of caustic wit and blunt veracity. Gozen was not everyone’s cup of tea, but she had been Yancy’s sister in all but blood since they embarked on this path fated for them. There was no one Yancy would rather have to point out her shortcomings before the mistake could be repeated on the battlefield.

Yancy bit her lower lip to hide her smile. “I would never.”

Gozen shot her a look, and Yancy clipped her naginata to the holster across her back. She made to loop her arm through Gozen’s and head back to Nimbasa, but a voice stopped them both.

“If you two have time for bantering, then you have time to train some more.”

A stocky man in his mid thirties with rich umber skin in rough spun breeches and a scarred jerkin emerged from the trees, almost silent. His face and figure were chiseled and sharp, as if carved from granite and polished to a shine. Broad-shouldered and straight-backed, he was as unmovable as a mountain where he stood and spoke with all the severity of a lonely frozen peak.

Yancy and Gozen moved swiftly as they reached for the Pokéballs at their hips. Gozen’s Roserade coalesced in a flash of light brandishing its flowering fists at the intruder. A jet-black Ninjask the size of a bowling ball buzzed just next to it, its wings moving too fast for the naked eye to discern, ready to move like the wind and attack at a moment’s notice.

Yancy’s Mienshao stood in front of her, of a height with its trainer, and held a wide limber stance. Its white and lilac fur stood on end and tapered in long whiplashes over its fisted front paws. The large stoat Pokémon held its head high and twitched its yellowed whiskers, testing the air for any hint of provocation by the opponent.

But Yancy’s Emolga squeaked on her shoulder and leaped into the air directly at the intruder. It landed against his chest and fell into his cradled arms, no bigger than a frisbee with its black furry skin flaps drawn taut between its front and back paws to catch the air currents. Emolga squeaked again, happily, and scampered up the intruder’s chest to his shoulder, cheeks sparking lightly in its excitement.

Yancy sighed. “Marshal, you startled us.”

“You’re not supposed to be here, Bellator,” Gozen said coldly. “This is Rain Warrior territory, no exceptions.”

Marshal approached the two young women. His bleached buzzed hair seemed to uncurl and stand higher on his perspiring head as Emolga’s static snapped the air around him, but he didn’t mind. Marshal was not a big man, average in height and build save for his rippling muscles that made his jerkin bulge. A Bellator by nature, Marshal had arrived in Nimbasa about a year ago and stayed by
request of the Rain Warriors, a league of female pleb fighters pledged to the Gym Leader of which both Yancy and Gozen had been a part for the last nineteen years, just like all first-born daughters of the pleb families living in the fiefdom.

Marshal stopped just short of Mienshao and bowed to the Pokémon. Mienshao were a proud species, like most Fighters, but the stoat Pokémon was especially sensitive to slights against its honor. Gozen thought Mienshao nothing more than a priss, but Yancy had seen what happened when anyone approached it carelessly. Mienshao bowed back to Marshal, and only then did he pass it by to address Yancy and Gozen directly.

“If I startled you, you definitely need more training,” Marshal said. He plucked Emolga from his shoulder and cupped the small flying rodent in his calloused palm to offer to Yancy. “She at least can tell friend from foe.”

Yancy scooped up Emogla and nuzzled its nose. She got a happy squeak in return and a slight shock that tickled. “One of her many talents.”

“I’m surprised you snuck up on us at all after last night,” Gozen deadpanned. “The last I saw of you, you were passed out on the table. It took three barmaids to carry you out.”

“Two plus me,” Yancy corrected. “And Mienshao, of course,” she added when Mienshao glared back at her. “He carried you back to your room.”

Marshal scowled. “That was last night. Today is today. And you were slow. So were you, Gozen.”

Gozen fixed him with a venomous stare that could have cut through solid rock. Marshal ignored her and headed for the clearing’s entrance under the bells and bone charms. Ninjask buzzed next to Gozen’s head in question, its red compound eyes catching the sunlight like two blood rubies.

“All right, all right,” Gozen muttered as she swatted Ninjask away.

“I wonder what he’s got planned for today?” Yancy wondered as the two women followed Marshal toward the city.

“As long as it doesn’t involve standing on my head for an hour, I don’t care. A headache has nothing to do with strength.”

“It has to do with perseverance,” Yancy said.

“Shut up.”

“Both of you be quiet. You’re giving me a headache,” Marshal grumbled.

Gozen lowered her voice conspiratorially. “Remind me why a troupe of women warriors agreed to take lessons from this meathead ronin wannabe?”

“Because Marshal’s the greatest Bellator in the Trident and we can learn something from him?” Yancy whispered back.

Gozen rolled her eyes. “Oh, is that it? And here I thought it was because of his glittering personality.”

Yancy shoved her lightly, and Gozen shoved her back.

“I can hear you,” Marshal said. “Like, every word. Everything you just said. Heard it all.”
“You’re welcome,” Gozen said, cracking a rare ghost of a smile.

Yancy stifled a giggle. Emolga chittered on her shoulder enthusiastically and swayed with her steps. They soon arrived at the Blue River that passed just west of Nimbasa and curled around it to the south before emptying out into the strait that separated the Heart Tine from the East. Nimbasa proper rose just to the east. It was a small city, just a fraction of grand Castelia’s or even Virbank’s size, but a proud city nonetheless. The Lostlorn Forest stretched as far as the eye could see to the north, and to the south the vast wasteland that was the Relic Desert went on for miles before culminating in Castelia City. To look out across the desert was to gaze over the edge of the earth, the dead and dry no man’s land where life ran out and nothing but the sand could survive. But here in Nimbasa, the grass was lush and green and the Blue River ran fierce and full to bursting, icy cold from the runoff in Opelucid and the Darkwood far to the north. The Rain Warriors had protected this oasis of a city and its Gym Leader for centuries.

The warriors, about sixty women in total ranging from fighting ages fifteen to seventy, had no official leader, preferring to work in pairs or sometimes groups of four. They each had assigned duties to either the night watch, desert border patrol, or Gym guard. Yancy and Gozen were Gym guards, the least envious of all the positions since they had to stay indoors for most of their shifts and put up with the Gym Leader and her Gym trainers. Marshal’s training included all the Rain Warriors, but at different times and different days depending on who was idle and who needed work. This day at this hour was Yancy and Gozen’s turn.

Marshal removed his leather jerkin and boots, and Gozen’s Ninjask buzzed around him too fast to catch as if to examine him from every angle. Marshal swatted the large Bug, but it easily evaded him.

“Damn Bug. Gozen, do something about this,” he barked.

Gozen crossed her arms. “I can’t. Ninjask is trained to annoy men who strip in front of me until they leave.”

“Oh give him a break,” Yancy said.

With a deep sigh, Gozen called to Ninjask, and the buzzing Bug returned to buzzing around her personal space instead of Marshal’s. Roserade was busy at the river’s edge wetting its leafy feet and dropping roots in the sand to soak up the cool water.

“Bugs and overgrown flowers,” Marshal said, shaking his head. “I don’t know how you feel confident walking into a fight with such fragile Pokémon.”

“Don’t underestimate my self-confidence.”

Marshal grunted. “Whatever you don’t want getting wet, take it off.”

Gozen’s blank look warped with a flash of annoyance. “Excuse me?”

Marshal waded into the water and barely flinched at the temperature. He waded to a depth just below his chest and breathed deeply.

“That looks cold,” Yancy lamented as she unbuckled her leather armor.

“You can’t be serious,” Gozen hissed.

Mienshao watched Marshal silently from the water’s edge but didn’t get in. Marshal brought his arms together and focused on breathing.
“Hey, at least we can stay on our feet. No hand stands this time.”

Gozen looked at her like she was debating whether or not she could get away with violent murder, but Yancy forced a smile and waded into the river near Marshal in her linen undergarments. The water was freezing, and after a few seconds of shock, the tingling pain in her toes began to numb and take the edge off the feeling of tiny knives digging under her nails. She made a face like she’d just bitten into a lemon and hissed through her teeth. Emolga squeaked and climbed to the top of her head to balance precariously and stare down at its rippling reflection. Gozen climbed in after her, swearing under breath all the while.

“Who’s the s-slow one now?” Yancy said as she tried to control her shivering.

“When I was young, younger than you two, I believed power was a measure of man’s and Pokémon’s physical abilities,” Marshal said evenly, as though he did not feel the cold at all. “But my muscles alone don’t make me strong.”

“Yveltal can t-take your m-muscles,” Gozen managed through chattering teeth.

Marshal ignored her jibe. “Power is about who has the better right hook. But strength comes from the soul. That’s what we Bellators have to struggle to master. But you plebs have it worse. You’re not born powerful like the Bellators, or strong like the Mediums. You have to work for both.”

“S-So freezing my toes off w-will make me strong and p-powerful?” Yancy said.

Marshal looked at her like she’d grown a second head. “No, it’ll just make you cold.”

“You can’t b-be serious,” Gozen hissed.

The sun was warm, hot even, but it didn’t warm Yancy’s wet arms even as she held them above the water clasped in front of her like Marshal did. The water rushed past her, insistent as if to sweep her away to the ends of the earth. It was crystal clear, and she could see her bare feet on the smooth green and blue and black rocks at the bottom. Silver Tynamo swam against the current and seemed frozen in place. Their beady black eyes swiveled in their sockets as they remained perfectly still, letting their prey come to them. When she was a girl, she would wait in the shallows and try to catch the elusive little eels. They didn’t give much of a shock, not like their larger evolutions. One jolt in the water from an Eelektrik could kill a child easily. But Tynamo were small fries, basically harmless, and children bobbed for them like they would for Leppa berries at the carnival. This was no carnival, and a part of Yancy wished the Tynamo would shock her and put her out of her misery.

“But learning to persevere through the cold,” Marshal went on. “That’ll help. Don’t think about the cold, think about the water flowing past you. Think about the rocks on the bottom, and the blue sky. If you can learn to look past pain and discomfort, you can do more tomorrow than you did today. Most Tamers... We only think about what we can do now. We don’t think about everything else because we think we don’t have to. We have our abilities for that. But abilities aren’t always enough.”

Yancy gritted her teeth so hard she thought they might shatter. Gozen had closed her eyes and was trying to do as Marshal instructed, to let go of physical pain and discomfort. Easier said than done. Mienshao bent down to drink from the river, its sleepy eyes watchful as ever as it observed her shaking. One cry for help, and she knew the Fighter would jump into the rushing river and pull her out without hesitation or care for the cold.

Yancy distracted herself by thinking about Marshal’s words instead of the cold, but it was hard to think about anything when she couldn’t feel her butt anymore. How could she possibly think of
anything but the cold? Splashing to her right drew her out of her thoughts, and she saw Marshal getting out. Gozen was right behind him, and Emolga leaped from Yancy’s head to glide back to shore after them. Oblivious to boundaries as ever, Ninjask flitted about as Gozen scrambled to wrap herself in her leather armor warmed and softened by the setting sun.

Yancy blinked, a little dazed, as she stared at the sun once she’d dragged herself out of the water. It was late. How long had they been in the water?

“Your hour’s up,” Marshal said. “Work up by ten minute intervals starting tomorrow.”

“We were in there for a whole hour?” Yancy said, incredulous as she scooped up her leather armor and nearly melted as it warmed her cold skin.

Marshal’s mouth was a thin line of displeasure. “Did you pass out and lose track of time?”

_I lost more than the time in that ice box_, she thought, rubbing her arms for warmth through her soaked linens.

“Lady Elesa’s expecting us, and we have to clean up,” Gozen said.

“What, you mean that didn’t count as my bath?” Yancy said as she shivered.

“Hardly.”

“Marshal? You'll come to the Gym, too, right?”

Marshal had finished dressing and looked back at her over his shoulder. “I’ll have to make an appearance.”

There was no warmth in his tone as he said it, and Yancy’s shoulders sagged a bit. It was no secret that Marshal had come here uninvited and stayed only for the Rain Warriors’ benefit. He had no ties to the Gym and no loyalties to its Leader. But to snub a Gym Leader was to invite trouble of the bloody sort, and even rock-headed Marshal knew better than to deny this particular Gym Leader a dose of humble gratitude for her city’s hospitality.

“I’ll look for you after the Town Hall,” Yancy called after him cheerfully as he stalked off like a bear retreating to the woods in search of a good place to shit.

“You’re too familiar with him,” Gozen scolded. “He’s not one of us. Don’t forget that.”

Yancy furrowed her brow. “I know, but he’s been helping us a lot. I think he’s earned our trust by now, don’t you?”

“I think a Bellator who spent seven years training alone in the Twist Mountains doesn’t trust anybody else, so I don’t see any reason to do him the favor.”

Yancy sighed but kept her mouth shut. Nimbasans tended toward an innate aversion to outsiders. With the impregnable Lostlorn Forest to the north and the Relic Desert to the south, they didn’t get many outsiders, anyway. At least, not with the Rain Warriors patrolling the desert border for Castelian rogues and bandits.

Nimbasa had once been the seat of the great sorceress Elysanna three thousand years ago. She was a Fulmen of incredible power and could even infuse inanimate objects, rocks and jewels and stones, with the power of reanimation, so it was told. Yancy neither believed nor disbelieved the stories, and in any case, her opinion didn’t matter. The stories continued to be told.
There was wonder and magic in this world, to be sure. There were men like Marshal who could fight toe-to-toe with mighty Fighting-type Pokémon and even win. There were Fulmen like Elesa who could hold a thunderstorm in the palm of her hand. Who was Yancy to say whether or not a sorceress three thousand years ago could breathe life into stone? Elysanna’s descendants became the Gym Leaders of this city, Elesa being the most recent in the line. It may have been just a story, but it had survived the centuries, and that meant something.

They recalled Mienshao and Roserade and headed back toward Nimbasa proper together, dripping wet as they crossed the bridge over the Blue River. Ninjask buzzed about, curious about every little thing, even the people they passed, while Emolga perched on Yancy’s damp head to feel tall. The city was a maze of stone and steel and glass buildings, and so many lights of all different colors that at night, the city shone like a Sun Stone in the darkness. The Power Plant was the brightest building of them all, where a multitude of Electric-type Pokémon lent their electricity to Thunder Stone shards, strange minerals found naturally buried in the Relic Desert sands that conducted and even stored megawatts of electricity. The stones could then be exported to buyers from Adria to Opelucid and everywhere in between. One grapefruit-sized Thunder Stone could provide an entire square mile with power for a month—for a hefty price. It was those Thunder Stones that powered all of Nimbasa, a more efficient, safer, and sustainable source of power than to employ Electric-type Pokémon directly.

Yancy spotted the slowly spinning Rondez-View Ferris Wheel in the distance as she turned east in the direction of the Gym. Like most young girls, she had once dreamed about riding the Ferris wheel with a boy she liked, hoping the magic of the floating lights at night and view from the top of the world might win her a sweet kiss. In the end, she’d gone with Gozen and a few other young Rain Warriors, smuggled an exorbitant amount of cotton candy into the car that they raced to finish in the ten minute ride, and laughed so hard her sides were sore the next day. Not quite the dream she’d envisioned as a child, but a memory she treasured to this day.

The Ferris wheel was the star attraction of the enormous Nimbasa Theme Park, located east of the city away from the local residents. Tourists came from all over the Trident to partake of the park’s attractions and rides, and it was far enough removed from Nimbasa proper to segregate the tourists from the locals who wished to avoid them.

“Remember that time we rode the Rondez-View a few years back?” Yancy said as they made their way into town.

Gozen snorted. “You mean, you were sober enough to remember?”

“I remember you ate, like, a pound of cotton candy. In three bites.”

“Only because you force fed me. You were so scared we’d be kicked out if we had any left when we got to the bottom.”

Yancy laughed. “Your teeth were as blue as your hair! Oh my god, that was so much fun.”

“Fun? I don’t remember it like that. I got two cavities from that night.”

Gozen’s lips were firmly dour in their usual frown, but there was mirth in her eyes and a lightness in her step that wasn’t usually there. Yancy looped her arm through Gozen’s, and their weapons clinked together as they walked side by side.

“Well, I woke up with the worst hangover of my life, so we both paid our dues,” Yancy said.

“Why’d you bring that up all of a sudden?”
They were passing through downtown Nimbasa, where the locals were bustling about on their way home from work or off to dinner. Men were dressed smartly in suits and sports jackets, and women wore bright, happy colors to match the pretty lights of the city. A street hawker waved around a handful of silk scarves at any passing women, promising fine quality, direct from Laverre City in Kalos, you won’t find a better price. He bowed briefly to Yancy and Gozen as they passed him, and Yancy graced him with a polite smile. The locals always paused to show their respect for a Rain Warrior, the women who protected this great city and its Gym Leader. Emolga squeaked and battie her head, mesmerized by the pretty colors of the scarves.

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “I guess... I just saw it and wished I could go back to that night. We were so happy back then.”

“We’re happy now,” Gozen snapped.

“Don’t sound so ecstatic.”

“You know what I mean.”

The Rondez-View Ferris Wheel’s lights were still washed out in the late afternoon sun; it would be another hour or two before the night darkened enough for them to really shine. Yancy gazed at it like a child gazes at an old but loved toy she’d grown out of and must pass off to another younger child. She squeezed Gozen’s arm and forced herself to look away.

“Yeah, I know,” she said.

Ninjask zipped about, pausing to peer through the windows at shops and restaurants, and Emolga chittered loudly as if to shout after it. Yancy reached a hand up to pet the little flying rodent, jumping when it shocked her lightly with its natural static electricity.

They reached the Gym not long after, still dripping water but considerably warmer having huddled together on the walk. Emolga leaped from Yancy’s head and glided toward the open door, happy to be home. Ninjask hovered in front of Gozen as if it had no idea where it was. She waved a hand in front of her face to shoo it away a couple feet.

“Cut that out,” Gozen grumbled at the eager Bug.

Yancy smiled. “Come on, the Town Hall should be starting soon. We better get ready fast.”

They followed Emolga inside. The Nimbasa Gym was a large building with futuristic décor and stark white coloring. Everything was clean as a whistle, from the snowy leather couches in the reception area to the painted walls and hardwood floors. The main arena, where Elesa exercised her Pokémon and her Gym trainers, was an indoor grassy field under a wide skylight open during thunderstorms. Behind the closed doors surrounding the arena were offices, conference rooms, a large cafeteria, and a receiving room where the Town Hall would be held.

Yancy and Gozen bypassed all this and headed for the third floor, where their modest rooms were. As Gym guards, they lived and worked at the Gym and left only for training purposes. This had been as much of a home as Yancy had known ever since she was plucked from her family’s farm in a distant western village so long ago. She could hardly remember the look of that place, what color the front door was, the pictures on the walls, the feel of chest-high glass grass against her bare legs as she ran around all day with her older brother. The Rain Warriors were her family now. The Gym was her home.

In a short twenty minutes, the two women were showered and changed and headed back
downstairs. They wore their customary leather armor and carried their weapons and their Pokéballs. The Gym was safe, but the Rain Warriors never took chances. Town Halls could turn violent at the drop of a hat, as locals aired their grievances to the Gym Leader and begged for recompense.

Today, the receiving room was only moderately packed. The long spacious room was free of most furnishings to allow the aggrieved to line up and take their turns addressing the Gym Leader. The room’s entire left wall was glass that was currently opened to the outside gardens, where various Electric-type Pokémon lounged, indolent as they slept and lazed among the tulips and brush. A plump Raichu yawned and rolled against an Ampharos standing amidst a bunch of wildflowers, still as a meditating monk as it recharged its electricity after a long day spent training. Tiny Plusle and Minun scampered about, chasing each other in a game. They disturbed a pair of snoozing Electrike, who got up to chase them down with the threat of Thunder Fangs until they ran into a small herd of grazing Blitzle and were cowed into submission back to their side of the garden.

Yancy and Gozen discreetly made their way to the far end of the room, where the Gym Leader and a few of her Gym Trainers were gathered. The two Rain Warriors positioned themselves on either side of Elesa, while a Gym trainer, an older man bald as a cue ball in flowing yellow silks and satins, addressed the gathered locals and begged for order.

“You’re late,” Elesa said in that whiplash whisper she was known for. She didn’t even look at either Yancy or Gozen as she addressed them from her hand-carved wooden throne, big enough to hold a man more than twice her size.

Elesa was devastatingly beautiful to behold no matter one’s taste. Just thirty and in her prime, she had jet black hair, brushed smooth to shine like polished ebony, and it fell past her waist in straight lashes that framed her face and hugged her curves. Her narrow eyes were full and double-lidded, but black to match her midnight hair. She was fair of skin, fairer than either Yancy or Gozen, like a doll in a highborn girl’s collection. A stole of snowy Flaafy wool draped her regal shoulders and tapered into her lap over her dress. She was the picture of grace and privilege, and she wore it well.

“We were training with Marshal, my lady,” Yancy said. “Apologies.”

“I don’t want apologies, I want punctuality.”

Gozen shot Yancy a look, and they said nothing more on the subject. For all Elesa’s renowned beauty, she suffered no fools and never gave second chances. Her smile was a wicked charm and her voice could reach honeyed octaves to resonate with anyone’s frequency if she wished it. At Town Hall, she wished it.

“My lady,” the old Gym trainer, a Fulmen skuff called Barton, said. “I present the first aggrieved.”

An old woman with three young children, all under the age of ten, hobbled forward on a walking stick. She was followed by a younger woman, likely the children’s mother, who kept her head down. Her eyes were puffy and red from crying, and she hugged herself tightly like she might float away at any moment.

“M’lady,” the old woman said as she struggled to curtsy. “I humbly ask your consideration on m’ daughter’s behalf.”

Elesa rose suddenly and went to the old crone. Her stiletto heels clicked and clacked on the hardwood floor, and her long pigtails trailed behind her in a way most girls would envy. Elesa was a tall woman, about five feet ten inches, but she grasped the old woman’s sun-wrinkled hand in her own and leaned down. “Speak, and I shall listen. Tell me what ails you.”
Gone was the icy annoyance from just moments ago, replaced with a sweet tenderness made real by Elesa’s gentle smile and gentler hands, hands that could catch lightning and toss it back to the heavens to defy whatever gods had dared cast it down. The old woman shuddered and kissed Elesa’s hands with her chapped lips, on the verge of tears herself.

“It’s m’ son-in-law, y’see,” the old woman began. “He, well, he’s been frequentin’ the brothels o’ late. I told Liree here, m’ daughter, that is, to set ‘im straight, and she did last night. But he didn’t take too kindly to her speakin’ up, y’see, and he beat her to the floor and raped her till she bled, he did. Y’ can see the proof just here.” She bade her daughter come forward.

The woman, not much older than Yancy herself, had a garish purple bruise over her left eye and walked with a limp. Her rough spun dress was soiled with blotches of blood, unwashed since her attack. She kept her eyes down and shivered a little. Her hair was stringy, like she hadn’t bothered to wash at all since the attack, perhaps too shaken to do much else than be dragged here in search of some justice or vengeance, whichever was offered. She sniffled and hugged herself harder as she tried to hide her soft sobbing.

Elesa took the woman’s chin in her hand. Her flat face was plain, her eyes wide set and grey, and her dark hair short and mussed. But her mouth was shapely and pink, and Yancy thought she would have had a dazzling smile if only she could find a reason to. Yancy shifted uncomfortably, a silent rage bubbling within her at the sight of this poor woman reduced to such a state.

“Tell me the truth,” Elesa said gently. “Did your husband beat you and force himself onto you after you confronted him about his infidelity last night?”

She spoke as a mother to a broken child, soothing and soft down to her gentle touch. The woman, forced to look up at Elesa, burst into tears and shook.

“Y-Yes. He was a g-good man when we m-married, but last night h-he was... He was s-something else,” she sobbed. “I n-never saw it before. How could I b-be so stupid?”

“He’s run off now, the craven,” the old crone said.

“What do you ask of me?” Elesa said not unkindly.

“My children,” the mother said hoarsely.

“We want the children with us,” the crone said. “Dunno where the bastard tottered off to, but if he’s a-come back, I don’t want ‘im anywhere near the children.”

Elesa smiled. “A humble request, and simple to grant. But I ask you something in return.” She looked pointedly between the two women. “When he comes back, come to me again. I’ll want to speak with him. While I have no quarrel with a man seeking out his pleasure where it suits him, it seems he’s forgotten that Nimbasa does not tolerate rapers and abusers. It would be my pleasure to remind him.”

The old woman took her daughter around the waist and held her close, while the children huddled at her skirts. “Yes, m’lady. As you wish.”

The women and children shuffled toward the back of the room, and Elesa stood to her full height and returned to her chair. She crossed her long legs and tapped her painted nails on the wood, gaze steady ahead. “Next,” she commanded.

Barton ushered in the next aggrieved persons, a pair of rancher brothers squabbling over their inheritance after their mother had died of a stroke just days ago. They were of a height with noses
so small they seemed to melt into their tanned faces and large mouths with too many teeth. Elesa listened to their grievances—a dispute considering a lack of a will, seniority, the mother’s alleged wishes never recorded in writing—and remained seated.

“You want me to settle this land dispute for you?” Elesa asked coyly.

“Yes, my lady, that’s why we’ve come,” one of the brothers said. “My brother and I can’t seem to agree on much of anything these days.” He shot his brother a pointed look.

Elesa uncrossed her legs and slowly leaned forward in her chair so they could see every movement she made. Her black-painted nails gripped the edges of the armrests hard enough to drain the blood from her knuckles. When she spoke, there was no trace of the sweet understanding with which she’d assured the old crone’s family not long before.

“I am a Gym Leader. I have many talents and powers.” She smiled as though abashed, and the brothers returned her smile. “But I cannot divine a dead woman’s wishes. It seems to me that two sons so worried about money just days after their beloved mother’s death don’t much care for her wishes, either.” She was speaking coquettishly, raising her voice at the ends of her sentences and enticing the two men to read what they would from her seeming ignorance. But she knew exactly what she was doing. Yancy had seen her do it a thousand times before. “I propose an equal division. Of course, I’ll claim a portion of your land’s income for Nimbasa as your inheritance tax.”

One of the brothers made to question her proclamation, all smiles and placating gestures, soft for a woman’s ears. She spoke over him. “If you need assistance with the valuation, Barton will be happy to set up a meeting with the Gym’s accountant. I don’t know much about these things, you know.” She graced them with a cloyingly sweet smirk that both begged forgiveness and condemned them to her will unilaterally.

“But my lady, our mother’s dying wish was that I would have the land, all of it.”

“And yet, your poor mother’s not here to verify that,” Elesa boomed over him. “If you still disagree, then I will appropriate your land in the name of the city and develop it as low-income housing for families more concerned with staying together than bleeding the dead. Now, what would you like to do?”

The brothers glared at each other, but neither raised his voice in protest to Elesa’s declaration. In the end, they accepted her deal and Barton showed them out. It continued in this fashion for the better part of an hour. For each aggrieved person before her, Elesa read them instantly and reacted in the manner which would most efficiently ensure a quick and bloodless resolution to the problem. For some she was honey and smiles, a lady of perfect grace and poise. For others she was lightning incarnate, merciless and sharp-tonged with a hand on the Pokéballs at her hip. Yancy had seen her like this more times than she could count. Like a Kecleon, Elesa changed to suit her audience. More often than not, she achieved her desired result. If it wouldn’t have ended with a sharp reprimand, Yancy would have laughed at the spectacle of it all. People could truly believe anything put in front of them.

Marshal made his appearance about halfway through the Town Hall and haunted a shadowed corner away from the Gym trainers with his arms crossed. Yancy caught his eye and he nodded brusquely to her, but that was the extent of their interaction.

The Town Hall was wrapping up, and the sun had sunk below the horizon. Nimbasa’s city lights would be flashing in a kaleidoscope of color by now, and Yancy had the inexplicable desire to see the Rondez-View Ferris Wheel from her window tonight. She hoped this would end soon so she
would be dismissed.

Elesa was finishing up with the last few aggrieved citizens when a ruckus outside in the garden startled everyone in the receiving room. The Electric-type Pokémon spooked and hid, some bounding back into the Gym toward their trainers while others holed up in the garden’s many caches hidden from sight.

“What the...?” Yancy muttered to herself as she instinctively reached for Mienshao’s Pokéball. The smaller Electric rodents were one thing, but the likes of Amfharos and Manectric did not spook easily.

Gozen moved faster than her and rushed to Elesa’s side. “My lady, stay back,” she said, drawing her katana in one hand and releasing Roserade in the other. The Bouquet Pokémon brandished its flowering fists and commanded thorny poisoned whips that grew from its leafy back.

The source of the commotion soon became apparent. Great shadows, two then six then ten, descended from above and landed unceremoniously in the garden. When Yancy made out their shapes, she ran to Elesa’s side and released both Mienshao and Emolga and drew her naginata. A ripple of fear lanced down her spine. She’d only ever seen a Dragon once before, and then only a single specimen. Now, she faced down near a dozen. Multiple Flyon, Salamence, Charizard, and Altaria carried riders on their backs and deposited them in the grass. The Nimbasa Gym trainers leaped into action. Shouts rang out as they coordinated among themselves to hurry the remaining townsfolk to safety back in the main arena of the Gym and to cut off the intruders.

A strapping man with snow-white hair and a neatly trimmed beard raised his hand in silent command, and the other Dragon Riders recalled their mounts. The only one remaining was his Salamence, a beastly creature two stories tall with scales as blue as the sky and wings that looked like they’d been dipped in blood. The immense Dragon rumbled with a low snarl that gave new meaning to the term ‘death rattle’. Its great clawed feet were as big around as a man’s head. A bed of orange and yellow tulips was crushed carelessly beneath one great foot. Yancy could scarcely remember how to breathe as she stared at the monstrous Dragon.

“Lady Elesa,” the man said. His deep baritone carried through the receiving room, though he did not raise his voice above a conversational volume. Yancy was sure all of Nimbasa must have heard him address their Gym Leader. He bowed respectfully, but his eyes were like ancient amber, frozen and lifeless. A longsword hung at his hip. Its hilt was embellished with gold in the shape of a roaring Haxorus head with two blood rubies inlaid for its eyes. “It’s been a long time. I see the tales of your exquisite beauty are not just tales.”

He stepped forward, but the Gym trainers tensed and reached for their Pokéballs in warning. Yancy composed herself and gripped the hilt of her naginata tighter to keep her hands from shaking. Emolga, perched on Mienshao’s head, squeaked tentatively as its beady eyes took in the sight of the mighty Salamence dwarfing the intruder. Mienshao, however, remained cool as a Tentacool next to Gozen’s Roserade and poised to attack, like the Dragon could not have swallowed it whole in one bite of its massive jaws.

Elesa put a hand each on Yancy’s and Gozen’s shoulders and squeezed lightly, a silent command. Gozen glared at her like she’d just cursed her family, but Elesa did not even spare her a glance. “Lord Drayden,” she said, this time adopting a smooth cool tone closer to her true nature. Yancy shivered.

“That’s Your Grace to you,” a woman next to Drayden snapped.

Hushed mutterings bubbled up from the surrounding Gym trainers, and Yancy almost forgot about
Salamence as she took in the woman’s appearance. She was ghastly pale, even her straw-thin hair, except for the hideous veins visible all over her body. They were fat and angry like leeches engorged with blood. Yancy recognized her as a blyte, a survivor of the horrific Red Plague that had struck Opelucid and its surrounding towns many years ago, but she’d never seen a blyte with her own eyes.

“‘Your Grace’? We have no king here,” Elesa said as she sauntered closer. Her nimble fingers brushed the Pokéballs at her hip.

“You will forgive General Caelith,” Drayden said harshly. “She keeps the company of Dragons, not a lady of your grace and manners. There is no need for formalities. Please call me Drayden.”

“Well then, Drayden, a Gym Leader of your grace and manners would do me the courtesy of explaining why you have come here unannounced and uninvited with a host of Dragon Riders. Or is that monster merely a decoration?”

Drayden chuckled, but there was no humor in his laugh. “I had heard that your cunning wit was the only thing that outmatched your beauty.”

Elesa tossed out a Pokéball, and her Zebstrika materialized in a flash of light. An immense stallion, it stood as tall as a Rapidash at nineteen hands. The two horns on its head sparked with violet lightning that jumped down its spiky white mane and popped about its stomping front hoof. Elesa ran a soft hand over its black and white striped coat, drawing violet static to her touch and materializing it in her other hand. “How unfortunate. Now they’re spreading spurious rumors about me. I assure you, my battling skills far outclass my feminine wiles.”

The air in the receiving room grew tense and brittle as Zebstrika’s latent static buzzed and popped. Emolga squeaked, emboldened by its fellow Electric-type Pokémon’s presence and fisted its little paws. Yancy’s throat clenched, the electrified air stinging her lungs, but she stood her ground just next to Mienshao. Gym Leader or not, if Drayden and his Salamence decided to attack, she and Gozen would do everything in their power to protect Elesa. The Rain Warriors were the deluge that precipitated the storm, and if necessary they would give Elesa and the Gym trainers an opening to unleash a maelstrom on the intruders.

Drayden appeared unmoved by Elesa’s thinly veiled threat, but he recalled Salamence to its Pokéball nonetheless. The garden where it and its fellow Dragons had stood was trampled, the tulips crushed and the ponds muddy and destroyed. As soon as Salamence disappeared into its Pokéball, Elesa let her hand fall from Zebstrika and the sting in the air dissipated. Purple sparks continued to dance in between her fingers, but she made a fist and snuffed them out.

“I came here on business,” Drayden continued.

“What kind of business?” Elesa said.

Drayden gestured to one of his Dragon Riders, a young man with windswept sandy hair, and he unshouldered the pack he was carrying. He opened up the top flap, approached Elesa, and tossed it down on the floor. Yancy stared wide-eyed at the precious stones that tumbled out from the leather satchel onto the hardwood floor. Opals in every color of the rainbow, some rough and some smooth, some as small as golf balls and others as large as cantaloupes, glittered under the artificial Gym lighting. Yancy didn’t know much about gems and precious stones, but she had an inkling that a bag full of them had to be worth more than she would ever see in her lifetime.

Elesa glanced at the opals with seeming disinterest. One the size of an apple had rolled close to her foot, and she bent down to pick it up. It glittered a milky lilac in her fingers, dappled with veins of
faint orange as though it possessed a hidden sun inside.

“All right,” she said. “I’m listening.”

The next thing Yancy knew, she and Gozen were escorting Elesa to a cozy conference room in the Gym while the Gym trainers took charge of showing Drayden’s Dragon Riders to a nearby inn to spend the night. Only Caelith, Drayden’s blyted general, remained at his side as he took his seat opposite Elesa. The room was just large enough for ten people to sit around a long glass-top table. Windows opened up toward the Nimbasa Theme Park and all its pretty lights. The view could have put anyone at ease, but Drayden sat stiffly, like no matter what position he was in, he was perpetually uncomfortable. Yancy couldn’t place it, but something about him rattled her deeply, like everything he’d shown them up until this point was just a mask. There were depths to this man, this Titan who could command beasts of myth and legend, but unlike with most people, Yancy had no desire to discover them. The sooner she was out of sight of this man, the better she would feel.

“It’s not every day I’m graced with a presence such as yours,” Elesa said as a Gym worker brought a flagon of red wine so dark it was nearly black and rich as chocolate. Elesa had a taste for the drink, but she drank it more sparingly than Yancy was used to seeing. Her tastes tonight were for something else. “Tell me, what brings you here?”

Caelith refused any wine, but Drayden thanked the serving boy and took his time tasting it. He nodded with approval, but Elesa remained placid as she awaited an answer to her question.

“Business,” Drayden said after savoring a sip of the drink. “All things considered, I want to expand Opelucid’s trade agreement. I’ve already brought you the first advance payment.”

“I can see that. It’s far too much for your usual order. What did you have in mind?”

Drayden said nothing, and Caelith leaned forward as if taking some silent cue from him. “We want to double our Thunder Stone imports starting tomorrow, if you’re able.”

Elesa raised her eyebrows. “Is that so? That’s no small expansion.” She looked between Caelith and Drayden, and Yancy could only wonder as to her thoughts. “I take it you’re working on something big to need enough energy to power Opelucid for a year without interruption.”

“That’s not your concern.”

Elesa smiled like Caelith had just said the magic words. “You said you were a general, yes?”

“I lead His Grace’s Dragon Riders,” Caelith answered readily.

“That must require a significant bond of trust between the two of you. I suppose we all must have someone we trust to fight out wars for us. At least, until we start to lose. Curiously, it’s always the ones closest to us who we want to blame first when things go south.” She sipped her wine and kept her gaze trained on Caelith.

Caelith kept her veiny hands folded neatly on the table in front of her. Her sunken eyes were like two craters ringed in ash, smoldering against her etiolated skin and the veins that crisscrossed her face like thorns. She felt Yancy’s gaze and turned to meet it, and Yancy hastily looked away.

“All things considered,” Elesa said, setting down her wine goblet. “What did you mean by that?”

Drayden swirled his wine. He also was not indulging much. “Castelia. Of course, you already know Burgh’s situation.”
Elesa yawned and crossed her legs under the table, a disarming tactic Yancy recognized all too well.

What’s going on?

“His...situation?”

“His heart condition,” Caelith said. “With Neo Team Plasma cutting off Castelia’s trade with Nacrene and Striaton and Gym Leader Burgh’s terminal illness, Castelia is weaker than ever and growing desperate. His Grace knew this would be the perfect time to bolster our relationship with Nimbasa. When can we expect the extra Thunder Stone shipments?”

Yancy’s mind was racing. Burgh was ill? Terminally? This was news to her, and Elesa’s nonchalance as she ran her finger over the rim of her wine goblet suggested she was reeling as much as Yancy was. How could Opelucid have known of this before Nimbasa? Suddenly, this conversation smelled like a hell of a lot more than trade agreements.

“Castelia’s a rich city,” Elesa said. “Their casinos alone bring in more income than all of Adria in a year. It must be difficult to have so much money and nothing to spend it on.”

“Castelia is nothing but a city of bones,” Drayden said. “It was always just a matter of time for them. It’s unfortunate, but the rest of the Heart Tine need not suffer their fate. What do you say to my terms?”

Elesa smiled coyly. “Come now, you should know never to ask a woman for her decision before she gets her beauty sleep.” She rose, and Yancy and Gozen both stood to attention. “Let’s reconvene in the morning. I’m sure you’ve both had a long day flying here.”

Drayden rose as well, and Caelith was quick to follow. “Of course. Caelith and I will retire to the inn. We’ll speak again in the morning.”

Elesa dipped her head in a polite bow and escorted them out. Yancy caught the glint of Drayden’s Pokéballs at his belt—five in total. Despite herself, she shivered. They soon arrived at the Gym’s main entrance, and Elesa paused.

“Yancy, see that Gym Leader Drayden and his general arrive at their rooms safely,” Elesa commanded.

Gozen shot Yancy a look that brooked no sympathy, and Yancy could have collapsed right there. Why her?

“Yes, my lady,” she said automatically.

Elesa and Gozen headed back into the Gym, and Yancy found herself alone with Drayden and Caelith, the latter of whom was already out the door with Drayden not far behind. Flustered, Yancy dashed after them and walked a few feet behind, one hand on Mienshao’s Pokéball just in case. The city lights were dazzling at night and put the starscape to shame with their myriad colors. The Rondez-View Ferris Wheel whirled slowly, the darkness giving it the appearance of a thousand floating lights moving magically in sequence with each other. But Drayden and Caelith seemed dead set on ignoring the view.

“It’s just around the corner ahead,” Yancy said, hoping she sounded stronger than she felt being alone with two Titans. That Salamence had not yet left her memory and likely would not for a long time yet.
Neither Drayden nor Caelith responded, and Yancy decided just to get this over with as quickly as possible. Something moved in the corner of her vision just as they arrived at the inn, but when she turned to look, there was nothing there. Still, her instincts had rarely let her down. She was no Reaper gifted with night vision, but she was a Rain Warrior of Nimbasa, and she could smell ill intent. She drew her naginata.

“You’re in the way,” Caelith said.

Yancy turned and saw the source of Caelith’s annoyance. Marshal was leaning casually against the wall of the inn smoking a cigarette. He wore baggy street clothes that hid most of his physique, but even in the dim lighting Yancy could see the smolder in his eyes. He had not come here for small talk.

“Is that what I am?” Marshal said, throwing his cigarette on the ground and grinding it with the heel of his sneaker. “Just an impediment you gotta get rid of?”

Drayden was a few inches taller than Marshal and seemed completely at ease. After a moment’s tense silence, Drayden’s lips twitched in what could have passed as a smile if it didn’t look so cruel. The ends of sharp incisors peeked out under the mat of white beard “...You’re a Bellator. That explains your impudence.”

Movement again to Yancy’s left, behind her. She whirled. “Marshal,” she said, her previous discomfort all but gone as she slipped into her warrior’s skin. “Call them off.”

Caelith spun and reached for the Pokéballs at her hip, but she was too late. From the shadows, four pairs of eyes glowed blue and red and black in the glare of the city lights. Sawk and Throh stood together, their leathery bodies wrapped up in rough spun gi like dojo masters. Their three-fingered hands cracked as they flexed their fists, fists that could crush a man’s skull as easily as they could crush brick and stone.

Towering at more than a head taller than the other two, Conkeldurr growled menacingly like a bear woken early from its hibernation. In its meaty fists, it dragged a pair of freshly uprooted trees with their leafy branches still attached. If angered, Conkeldurr were known to rip out of the ground anything from trees to building foundations to enormous boulders the size of a Snorlax and hurl them at their enemies with the force of a freight train. Mere knives and swords could not cut their chapped leathery skin, and when it was cut they barely felt pain. Purple strength veins pulsed over Conkeldurr’s bowling ball-sized arm muscles, and there was a hunger in its gaze Yancy rarely saw in other Fighters.

But Yancy’s blade was turned on the last of Marshal’s Fighters and his best. The creature was no taller than her, even a little shorter, and skinny as a scarecrow. It levitated just off the ground and its hands were clasped as if in prayer. Ribbon-like feelers floated behind it and reacted to the slightest disturbances in the air, effectively granting it 360-degree sight. Shiny coins and shards of pretty stones it collected tinkled faintly from their fastenings around its waist like warding charms. Icy blue eyes stared through Yancy as though into another dimension. From experience, she knew that this Fighter could send her flying with a swift punch to the air in her direction—from as far as fifty feet away.

“What is that thing?” Caelith demanded, the barest hint of fear in her tone.

“Mega Medicham,” Marshal said in that grainy harsh way he had. “She’s not a fan of Titans, either.”

If Marshal meant to start a fight, Yancy was sure someone would die here tonight, perhaps more
than one considering their proximity to the inn. Mienshao was strong, but it was little better than an ant trading blows with a boot compared to Mega Medicham’s and Marshal’s full power. All her years serving Elesa had taught her the staggering might of a Gym Leader; a year training under Marshal had taught her that Gym Leaders could be beaten.

“Marshal, please,” Yancy pleaded with him as she held her weapon steady and trained on Mega Medicham, little good it would do if the telekinetic Fighter decided to attack her to get to Drayden and Caelith. “Gym Leader Drayden and General Caelith are Lady Elesa’s guests. If you start a fight now, it’s her who will bear the cost, not you.”

“The pleb speaks the truth,” Caelith said. “Mega Evolution or no, you can’t hope to match my liege, let alone the two of us together.”

Marshal laughed darkly. “You don’t recognize me, do you, woman?”

“I know you quite well, Marshal, former apprentice to Champion Alder,” Drayden said with cool indifference. “Although, I never understood the comfort of an empty title.”

Marshal got in his face, and Drayden had to have balls of steel not to flinch at the threat of a Bellator’s raging fists so close. “My first master was Bruno, formerly of the Kanto Elite Four. You might have heard of him. One of yours murdered him.”

Yancy’s breath was coming in short nervous gasps. She had heard the story before, and now this bizarre and potentially lethal confrontation made sense. Bruno was a great Bellator of Kanto. He had trained Marshal when the latter was just a teenager and traveled to Kanto. Marshal rarely spoke of his past, but he’d spoken fondly, if sparingly, of Bruno. This from a man who never spoke fondly of anyone.

But Bruno had faced a terrible end at the hands of Kanto’s former Champion, Lance the Dragon Master, just before he showed his true colors as a would-be terrorist in league with the now disbanded Team Rocket. The stories were always a little different, but they said Lance had somehow summoned the legendary king of the nine oceans, Lugia, from its eternal slumber with plans to loose its wrath on the world. Hailed as perhaps the most powerful Titan of the last century, Lance’s untimely demise came at the hands of another Titan, a girl of low birth and diluted blood.

Many versions of the story swore the Triumvirate, Articuno, Zapdos, and Moltres, had also risen from the bowels of the earth to aid her. Others said the legendary birds weren’t the girl Titan’s doing at all, but the work of three other youths either crazy or brave enough to dare to command them. Whether the youths had lived or died or even existed at all was anyone’s guess. There were versions in which the Triumvirate partook of Lugia’s flesh, devouring it alive and casting its bones to the bottom of the sea. Some claimed Lugia swallowed Lance whole before it returned to its watery grave. A few swore he still lived, ruling in darkness at the bottom of the sea biding his time before he would rise again, some spectral drowned Dragon. Yancy found that version especially dubious. Most powerful Titan in a century or no, no one could survive at the bottom of the ocean.

For every version of the tale that had passed through Nimbasa and the rest of the Trident from far overseas, there were naysayers and unbelievers and those who even claimed to know someone who knew someone who knew someone who’d been there, and their version was the true one. They would charge a few coins for their tales, dazzling the common folk with talk of myths and legends and magic, and no one would give a lick as to the truth of this version or that one. One element of the stories escaped any hearsay and doubt, and that was Bruno’s blood on Lance’s hands, a Titan’s hands.

Drayden took his time responding, as though making a valiant effort to recall the truth of Marshal’s
words. “Surely you don’t hold me accountable for the actions of a terrorist who died half a world away.”

Marshal leaned in so their noses were only inches apart. Still, Drayden did not flinch or waver. “I hold you and every other Titan accountable for creating a world where monsters wear crowns and good men are shamed for trying to stand up to them.”

Yancy had forgotten some of her fear as she listened to their cryptic conversation. Caelith had also fallen silent, but her eyes were focused on the angry Fighters.

“You would have these good men wear crowns in place of monsters, then,” Drayden said coldly. “But it’s a pipe dream. It always has been. A king is a man beyond men, the one with the power and courage and ambition to take the crown from simpering milquetoasts too craven to take it for themselves, these so-called good men you speak so highly of.

“No, Bellator. We Titans did not create a world where monsters wear crowns. It’s the crown that forges the man into a monster, or else he would be the same as the rest of you. If you don’t like it, then try to take it for yourself.” He paused as he regarded Marshal. The dim inn lighting reflected over his unusually angular cheekbones, rippling with the illusion of scales just beneath the surface. “...Though if you do try, I caution you not to end up like your late mentor. Rest his soul.” The last bit was merely an afterthought, a forgotten courtesy uttered a moment too late to be sincere.

As the seconds ticked by, Yancy felt a particularly fat bead of sweat run down her neck under her leather armor, sticky and hot. It was muggy and dark out here, the tense atmosphere asphyxiating as she wondered whether she or someone else might die here tonight.

It was Drayden who soon backed off. “Let’s go, Caelith. I’ve had my fill of conversation for the day.”

Without even a glance at Marshal’s Pokémon or the very real threat they posed, he let himself into the inn. The bell over the door rang, and inside a receptionist greeted him politely. Caelith lingered a moment longer, those cinder-burned eyes casting between Marshal, his Pokémon, and Yancy, and then she too left without another word.

Only once both Titans were safely inside did Yancy lower her naginata and back away from Mega Medicham. She confronted Marshal with thunder in her veins. “What the hell was what?” she hissed. “Do you know what kind of position you just put me in?”

Marshal’s expression betrayed nothing but his usual sullen solemnity. Quietly, he recalled all his Pokémon. “I wouldn’t have fought him here. He knew that, too.”

“Well, I certainly didn’t. I don’t think Caelith did, either. Oh my god, if Lady Elesa found out she’d have both our heads. I mean, if Opelucid didn’t break our peace treaty and march on Nimbasa first.”

“That’s enough,” he snapped.

Yancy gaped in shock at his harsh tone. In the year that she’d known him, Marshal had only ever raised his voice in drunken song to amuse giggling barmaids. But never in anger. Not to her or to any of the Rain Warriors she knew he respected despite their very different stations in life.

“Forget what you heard tonight,” Marshal said, showing her his back. “For your own good.”

He stalked off into the oily darkness swimming under the streetlights, and she soon lost him to the shadows and the other pedestrians on the main road. Yancy raised a hand to her heart and felt it
pounding. Her sword hand trembled slightly, the naginata suddenly heavy in her grasp.

The only thought on her mind as she stood there alone in the dark like a stalker before the inn was that she had to get back to the Gym, to Elesa, and report that Drayden and Caelith had made it to the inn without incident. Even as her feet carried her in a brisk walk and then a jog back to the Gym, she knew she would not mention Marshal’s confrontation to Elesa or Gozen. There was no internal debate, she just knew she would not speak of it to anyone. But she would not forget it.

Once back at the Gym with the grey wood iron-studded double doors closed behind her, she heaved a shaky sigh. Her hands were still trembling, so she released Emolga. The flying rodent always cheered her even when she was at her gloomiest. Emolga crawled up to her shoulder and gave her a jolt when it nuzzled her cheek. Willing herself to calm down, she scratched Emolga behind the ear and reveled in its static softness.

A thought occurred to her then. Drayden ended the conversation. Not Marshal, but Drayden, who commanded a Dragon as tall as a house like it was no different than a Lilipup. Yancy clutched a hand over her heart as she headed for the stairs and swallowed hard. She banished the thought from her mind and what it might mean.

Elesa’s private quarters took up most of the second floor. Her rooms were a lavish apartment complete with a private kitchen, balcony overlooking the now desecrated Gym garden, and all the comforts a highborn lady could want. When Yancy slid open the shoji screen to admit herself, she found Elesa dining on a handsome spread with a fresh flagon of sweet Pomeg berry wine. She had changed into a night robe and slippers and let her hair down, which gleamed like the night sky on a starry night. Elesa’s Emolga was seated on the far end of the table nibbling on cheese and bread from its own little bowl. Gozen shared her table, but she rose when Yancy made herself known.

“That took a while,” Elesa said, peering at Yancy over her wine goblet. “No trouble, I trust?”

Yancy shook her head. “No, my lady.”

Yancy’s Emolga squeaked excitedly and glided swiftly toward the table, where it crawled between the plates toward Elesa for a pet. It soon joined its kin, where they fought over a choice nibble of hard cheese and made a mess of crumbs.

Yancy was no aggrieved citizen or would-be royal Elesa needed to read and work to her advantage, but a long-time guardian and even friend, if people like Elesa could entertain such a notion. Even so, Yancy stood to attention until Elesa gave her leave to share the table with a nod.

Yancy set her weapons by the door next to Gozen’s, removed her boots and armor, and joined the other women at the table. Gozen finished piling a plate for her, and as soon as Yancy smelled the spices she realized just how hungry she was. She heartily dug in, and the three of them passed the next few moments in comfortable silence. Elesa poured Yancy a goblet of wine without asking, and Yancy thanked her with a smile before sipping it down. It was tart with a sweet aftertaste, pungent and ripe. Elesa may have been many things, but she was no slouch when it came to picking a good vintage.

“Now then,” Elesa said, leaning back in her chair almost lethargically, something she would never do in the presence of others. “It seems I have a very delicate decision to make.” She looked between them as if to make sure they were keeping up. “It appears that Drayden is prepared to go to war with Castelia.”

Gozen coughed when she swallowed some wine the wrong way. “What?”
“Keep up, Gozen. You don’t honestly think he came here himself with a legion of Dragon Riders to do a job his treasurer could have done with a small escort.”

Yancy frowned. “He came with a huge payment. I don’t think he was making that up.”

Elesa looked at her pointedly, a silent urge to go on.

“Well, I just mean that it’s fishy that he wants more Thunder Stones. He must know only Fulmen and Fulmen skuffs can use them for combat.”

“I thought the same thing,” Elesa said, her expression grim, “until he mentioned Burgh’s illness.” She paused a moment. “That reminds me. I need to fire my chief scribe in the morning.”

Yancy hid her face in her wine cup. It was the chief scribe’s job to keep up to date with any and all news and developments around the Trident, especially in the Heart Tine Nimbasa shared with Opelucid, Castelia, and the countless small towns and villages in between them.

Gozen gestured aimlessly. “So he wants to go to war with Castelia and this trade agreement business was all a ruse. So what? He’ll just lose. Opelucid’s no match for Castelia’s size, nobody is.”

Elesa thought about that a moment. “He would lose...if he went in alone. Is that your plan? Bait me with news of Castelia’s weakness and goad me into fighting your battles for you? You couldn’t possibly think I’d fall for that...”

“What if he’s not trying to trick you?” Yancy offered.

Elesa gave her a withering look. “He’s a Titan. You know they would sell out their own mothers if they thought it would benefit them.”

“Well, whatever he’s doing, I think you should stay out of it,” Gozen drawled. “Castelia’s got enough problems with Neo Team Plasma squeezing them. Plus there was that news about Castelia pirating Virbank’s fishing waters, so you know Virbank’s going to retaliate one of these days. If you ask me, that’s one pile of shit you don’t want to step on. So not worth it.”

“Perhaps now is the only time it’ll be worth it,” Elesa said. “Castelia is the richest city in the Trident, and they have a target on my back. They’re untouchable surrounded by that desert, and they have the largest standing military outside of Adria. Now they’re weak and desperate, and their Gym Leader is ailing... It’s the perfect time to strike.”

Yancy’s heart pounded in her chest. “My lady, you can’t mean to go to war with Castelia. They outnumber us five to one on a good day.”

Elesa’s dark eyes flashed with anger. Hers was a harsh beauty, the seductress who slit her lovers’ throats without fail and without remorse. Woe to anyone who ignited her wrath. “That never stopped them from raiding villages in my fiefdom and putting my people to the sword.”

Yancy’s gaze fell. There was nothing she could say to that. Castelia was rich, to be sure, but it sat in the middle of a sere and desolate wasteland without access to fresh water, food, timber, and other resources necessary to sustain life. The people depended on trade with more fertile cities, such as Nacrene and Striaton and Virbank. Once, many years ago, Nimbasa had also been a lucrative trading partner of Castelia’s. Until the city’s population exploded and Castelia found itself with too many mouths to feed. The rich grew opulent thanks to the burgeoning gambling industry, while the poor descended into squalor. Adept at surviving in the desert’s harsh conditions, Castelian desert dwellers targeted Nimbasa’s outlying villages to assuage their hunger, greed, and sheer numbers.
Elya, Nimbasa’s previous Gym Leader and Elesa’s grandmother, had made the decision to cease all trade with Castelia and evacuated most of the merchant villages bordering the Relic Desert, the edge of Nimbasa’s fiefdom, relocating villagers to the city and to the Lostlorn Forest’s border. She stationed garrisons of Rain Warriors to patrol the borders day and night with orders to turn away any and all Castelians no matter their reasons for venturing north and authorized lethal force in the case of resistance. Under Gym Leader Burgh, Castelia found new trade partners in Aspertia and even the isolationist upper West Tine cities, but Neo Team Plasma’s recent involvement in Nacrene and Striaton had cut them off from their biggest and most reliable suppliers. The reports of piracy in Virbank’s waters had also alienated the desert metropolis from yet another crucial trading partner.

“Whatever Drayden’s true motives, this is the best and only time to move on Castelia. They’re nothing but leeches, and Drayden knows that, too. This could be my chance to permanently show them their terrorism against my people will no longer be tolerated.”

Yancy stared in shock. “You’re serious. You really want to do this even if Drayden has some ulterior motive?”

“We could be walking straight into a trap,” Gozen agreed. “I don’t like it, and the others won’t, either.”

Elesa glared at Gozen. “I consider you a friend, and you know I have scant few of those. But do not presume to lecture me on how I should command my Rain Warriors. Is that understood?”

Gozen didn’t give her an inch, but she averted her gaze. “Yes, my lady.”

“And as for Drayden,” Elesa said, turning on Yancy, “I can handle him. If he means to bait me into going to war, then two can play at that game.”

Yancy knew very little of the intricacies of war tactics and political maneuvering. She was a warrior. Her wars were with her own physical and mental limitations, and her politics were whatever her Gym Leader told her they were. But she had known Elesa for nearly fifteen years, when the elder Rain Warriors presented her to Elesa and her ailing grandmother, Elya, as the next generation of Rain Warriors. Elesa had been a girl herself then, just fourteen and happier playing with her two Emolga pups than examining girl-soldiers trained to give their lives for her should she wish it. She was more interested in getting to know the youngest Rain Warriors as fellow girls than inspecting them as soldiers fit for battle.

She’d picked Yancy and Gozen to serve as her Gym guards personally after Elya died and left her with the title Gym Leader and an entire fiefdom to run alone. Yancy remembered that day, the day Elesa became a woman and shed her girlish smiles. There was no more skipping training to explore the edges of Lostlorn Forest, no more wading knee-deep in the shallows of the Blue River trying to catch silver-quick Tynamo with their bare hands. She was Gym Leader Elesa, a Fulmen in her right and heiress to a long line of proud, strong women whose legacy weighed entirely on her shoulders.

Elesa gifted Yancy one of her two Emolga on her first day as Gym Leader as a token of her trust and friendship. Yancy was no Fulmen, but she and Gozen both vowed to protect Elesa with their lives to the best of their ability. They were the rains that preceded the thunderstorm, the ones she depended on the most, and the only two in all the world who knew the woman behind the titles and the masks. And they had a responsibility to counsel and support her to the best of their abilities.

“Then I’ll support you,” Yancy said. “If you think we have a chance to put an end to Castelia’s dominance in the Heart Tine, then you have my sword to help you.”
Gozen sighed and lifted her wine glass. “Yeah, I’m in, too, I guess. But I still don’t like that Dragon Tamer.”

“We don’t have to like him,” Elesa allowed. “Nor should we trust him. For this endeavor, we’ll need something much stronger than trust.”

“What’s that?” Yancy asked.

Elesa refilled her wine goblet and raised it to the center of the table. “Loyalty.”

Gozen clinked her glass to Elesa’s. “Well, we got plenty of that.”

Yancy joined her glass with the others. “Definitely.”

Elesa’s gaze was faraway plotting as they shared a drink, and Yancy smiled to hide her trepidation.

The next morning, Yancy and Gozen joined Elesa to deliver her decision to Drayden. He was with Caelith again, ever the inseparable pair, Yancy noted. There was no sign of Marshal at the Gym this morning, and she wondered what that meant. Perhaps last night had been nothing more than a whim acted out in the heat of the moment. But she couldn’t forget the look in his eyes when he told her to forget what she’d heard. There was pain there, an abyssal grief carved deeply upon the soul that perhaps would never mend.

Drayden, for his part, looked every bit the Gym Leader in his pressed slacks, polished shoes, and crisp white shirt. His gaze roved over Yancy in passing, but nothing suggested last night having ever transpired. She remembered what Elesa had said about Titans, how they would betray the ones closest to them if there was profit to be had, and tried to ignore the clammy warmth in her palms as she looked at Drayden.

“So, Lady Elesa,” Drayden said as amiably as if he were made of hard granite. “Have you thought about my offer?”

“I have.” Elesa was dressed in a pastel yellow sundress with her hair made up to frame her elegant face. “And I decline.”

“You decline?” Drayden repeated, betraying no hint of his true thoughts.

Elesa smiled enigmatically. “You don’t sound very distressed. Perhaps that’s because you were never here to discuss our trade agreement, or you never would have mentioned Gym Leader Burgh.” She leaned forward over the conference table in the same room they’d met yesterday. “Surely you didn’t think me a halfwit who couldn’t recognize the bread crumbs you clearly meant for me to follow.”

Drayden remained implacable. “I’ve never thought as much. I confess I did believe you would be interested in Castelia’s...changed situation.”

“No, you thought you could goad me into a war of your own design. What was this about, really? You send me to soften Castelia ahead of you, pass the heaviest losses onto my warriors while you swoop in after to finish the job and take the glory?”

Drayden’s lips twitched in his version of a smirk that revealed the tip of his sharp incisor. “You have an active imagination.”
“You have no idea,” Elesa challenged. “In fact, I’ve come up with a much more creative solution that will solve both our problems...and ensure you keep your end of the bargain you really came here to make, Titan.”

Caelith fumed where she sat at the use of such an informal and rude address, but Drayden silenced her with a wave of his hand as if she were a gnat that needed swatting.

“I’m listening.”

So Elesa was right, Yancy marveled. He really did come here looking for a fight with Castelia.

Elesa rose and went to the window. It was early morning and puffy clouds dappled the warm summer sky. The Rondez-View Ferris Wheel spun in the distance, but its lights were hardly visible against the light of day. “I don’t trust you.”

“A wise choice,” Drayden allowed.

“But if Castelia is to fall, I need you and your Dragons.” She turned to face him, not as a highborn lady of an old city, but as the Fulmen Gym Leader and protector of Nimbasa. Yancy shivered at the callous hardness in her expression. “And you need me and my soldiers, too. Otherwise, you would not have come here.”

“It would appear we’re at an impasse,” Drayden said. “Allies must trust each other if they are to achieve a mutually beneficial goal.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. Trust is cheap, and words cheaper still. I want your loyalty, just as I’m prepared to give you mine.”

“What are you saying?” Caelith demanded.

“It’s simple. I propose that we forge an alliance even you won’t be tempted to break.”

For the first time, Drayden’s expression shifted with the shadow of surprise. “...You propose a marriage.”

Yancy stared, aghast. No...

Gozen caught her eye, equally shocked but unable to protest. It was not their place.

“I propose an unbreakable alliance between our cities,” Elesa clarified. “Call it what you like. I know you Titans love your traditions.”

Caelith was beside herself. “Marriage? You’re touched in the head if you think my liege would ever—”

“I accept,” Drayden interrupted. He rose from his chair and walked to the window, stopping just an arm’s length away. Then he took Elesa’s long-fingered hand in his to kiss her knuckles mechanically. She stared down at him like a hawk looks down on its struggling prey. “An unbreakable alliance.”

Yancy wanted to run to Elesa’s side and shake her until she came to her senses. Marriage was one thing, and even a political marriage was not unheard of in this day and age. But to Drayden? He was almost twenty years her senior and a Titan, besides. She’d said so herself, he could not be trusted. And after what Yancy had seen last night, she wondered if even marriage could ensure any sort of loyalty from him. Marrying Drayden would make Elesa a queen with power over both
Opelucid and Nimbasa, the combined power of which could even stand against the united free cities of the upper West Tine, let alone Castelia. But at what price?

“It’s the crown that forges the man into the monster,” Drayden had warned Marshal last night.

Yancy watched them standing there by the window together. The Rondez-View Ferris Wheel spun behind them, the magic of floating lights carrying riders high above the city a distant fantasy washed out in the harsh sunlight that exposed the mechanical gears and metal rods holding the contraption together. And she wondered if she should have warned Elesa about crowns and the monsters they spawned.
Benga was an overnight hit with Nymo’s crew and Iris’s guards. Almost from the moment he set foot on the Oculus, he involved himself wherever and whenever he could, be it schlepping boxes of food and supplies for the next long dive or helping the crew with last minute adjustments to the sub itself. Without fail, he had his audiences sharing a sleazy chuckle at some lewd joke or other, exchanging good-natured back pats, or commiserating the nomadic sailor’s lifestyle. Young and old, man and woman, Adriati or otherwise, he drew eyes and exuded gregariousness like body odor. Soriel threw her head back and guffawed like a drunk old man when he whispered something undoubtedly disgusting and gestured suspiciously with his right hand at Moros’s backside when the prim lieutenant wasn’t looking.

Iris feigned disinterest.

“It’s not for a princess to concern herself with the likes of such social chicanery,” Belaron said as they watched Moros confront Benga and Soriel and go red in the face when they both burst out laughing. The old Ridder Knight had not said more than a perfunctory greeting to Benga since he’d not so subtly suggested that Iris have Benga killed back in Perry Town.

Benga felt her gaze from the mouth of the mess hall, which he and Soriel and Moros occupied along with a few other crewmembers, and caught her eye. Iris averted her gaze and pushed off from the wall to head back toward the control room. Despite her earlier unease when embarking from Humilau, the thought of staring into stygian nothingness pressing down on all sides now beckoned.

Belaron followed her retreat, his step light as he harrumphed for good measure. Cottonee wriggled in Iris’s arms, and she let it hop to her head to look around and stretch out. She said nothing to Belaron, unsure what to say. Perhaps he had a point. Something about Benga made her uncomfortable. She couldn’t place it. Sometimes it was the lilt of his voice, other times it was his toothy smile and grainy baritone when he was coming out of a deep-chested laugh. Sometimes it was simply the way he carried himself, at times slouched for comfort, not out of a bad habit, and at other times erect and attentive, even commanding. She couldn’t put her finger on it even after watching him closely in the short time since he’d joined the crew, but it bugged her like a needle in her side.

“Shall we talk about our approach to Castelia?” Belaron suggested as they neared the control room. The Oculus’s eponymous glass eye stretched over the entire bow of the ship and came into view around a corner through an open door, black as pitch this deep underwater.

“Fine,” Iris said, only half listening as she went down some steps into the viewing room just to the right of and below the control room.

“Excellent. I’ll go and speak with Captain Nymo. He mentioned he had a vast library of nautical maps here onboard, and I’ve a mind to find one of Castelia’s waters.”

“Castelia? You don’t wanna go there.”

Iris didn’t have to turn to know Benga had followed them in here. She could picture him leaning against the doorway at the top of the stairs in those stupid sandals that gave him a ridiculous tan on his feet and those ratty shorts that looked older than he was. Even his tone oozed casual but
confident, the ne’er do well prodigal son returned to tell those he left behind of their great follies whether they wanted to hear it or not. Iris bit back a wince at the sound of him.

“We’re not going there,” Belaron snapped. “For your information, we’re trying to avoid detection.” He gave Benga a cursory once-over. “Clearly, we need to do a better job of it.”

“Clearly.” Benga grinned and skipped down the stairs, unperturbed by Belaron’s obvious disdain or at least indifferent to it. “Anyway, like I was saying, you don’t wanna go to Castelia. There’s a war coming to that place.”

The viewing room was encased on three sides and above by thick glass. A pressurized dive door, currently closed off, took up three feet by three feet of the floor and opened up directly into the water, one of several in the sub. Around it, diving equipment was packed into lockers and shelves, and a scant few steel benches were nailed to the floor directly in front of the glass. Above, the control room protruded into the wide room like a metal boil ready to burst.

“A war?” Iris said, regarding him skeptically.

Benga sauntered past her and leaned back against the cold glass. The ocean was inky black behind him, far darker than the night sky. Oily, the darkness undulated like some great slithering beast just out of sight, but Benga seemed not to care and clasped his hands behind his head. Cottonee whistled and leaned forward on Iris’s head to see him better.

“You don’t know?” he said, like it was the most obvious thing in the world. “Team Plasma’s got ‘em by the balls.”

Iris frowned. Team Plasma. Marlon had warned her about them. Benga misunderstood her silence for ignorance.

“Oh come on, you know, it’s not just bad, it’s Plasbad? No?”

Iris stared at him blankly, bristling a little at the thought that he was making a joke out of her. As though sensing her suspicion, he let his hands fall and showed her his palms.

“Those guys in the uniforms back in Perry Town. You were scared shitless and I had to shut ‘em down.”

Iris clenched her fists. “I was not scared,” she snapped. “For your information, I was about to intervene.”

He grinned and leaned back against the glass again. “Okay, settle down, I believe you. Those Plasma goons were just small fries. They’ve been occupying Perry Town for a few months now. They keep moving north now that they have Striaton pretty much colonized. You don’t know any of this?”

Belaron stepped forward and made to position himself in between Iris and Benga. “This team of miscreants is not Princess Iris’s concern, nor should it be yours if you plan on serving her and this ship like you promised to do.”

Benga frowned. “So’re you like a full-service Ridder Knight? Back in Opelucid, they’ve been known to shovel Dragon shit wherever it falls. Sometimes they even clean up after the Pokémon if they have time.”

Belaron’s ears burned red with rage. “I don’t like what you’re insinuating. I am an ordained Ridder Knight. I live to serve my mistress with sword and shield, not to flatter her with simpering palaver.”
“I wasn’t insinuating; I was stating it outright.”

Iris stepped around Belaron before he could draw his sword and start something everyone would regret later. “What do you mean Castelia’s going to war?” she demanded.

Belaron sputtered next to her, but Benga switched gears as though the old knight was not even there. “I know you’ve been out of the loop for a long time, Iris,” he said not unkindly, “but there’s some things you should really be aware of if you’re here to stay. Team Plasma took over Nacrene and Striaton recently, and they cut off all trade to Castelia.”

He explained briefly about Castelia’s geographic location in the middle of a desert, its wealth raised from a lucrative gambling industry, and its precarious situation vis-à-vis its neighbors. “Without their bread and butter, Castelia can only really turn to the Triumvirs. Not like Nimbasa’ll swoop in and save the day. Those two’ve been nasty with each other for years.”

“The Triumvirs?” Iris said.

Benga blinked at her. “Yeah, you know, the Big Three. The Father, the Son, and the Super Nerd. ...You have no idea what I’m talking about, do you?”

Iris’s lip twitched.

Okay... Well. The Triumvirs, or the Big Three if you want, they’re the upper West Tine Gym Leaders. Driftveil’s Clay, Icirrus’s Brycen, and Mistralton’s Skyla. I mean, Clay’s not actually Brycen’s dad, at least I’m pretty sure. Or if he is, Brycen definitely got his mom’s looks and he probably thanks whatever gods were in a good mood that day. But Skyla’s like that nerd who makes other nerds look cool by comparison. Never met her, but she’s supposed to be a real babe. The irony, right?”

Iris swatted at him like an annoying Bug. “Get to the point, I don't care about any of that.”

Benga paused and regarded her. “Yeah, I can see you really don’t...Well, anyway, after the civil wars thirty years ago, they pretty much seceded from the Trident after the, uh, the Champion sort of gave up the siege. It’s a long story. What I mean is, Castelia can’t really go to them for help. So when you’re squeezed between a rock and hard place with nowhere to go, you learn how to blast through the rock. Like, literally. That wasn’t a metaphor. They’re gonna seriously wreck some shit —”

“I get your meaning,” Iris interrupted. “So you think Castelia is going to war. With who? Team Plasma?”

“Yeah, them and anybody else who doesn’t help them. So, like, everyone.”

Belaron exhaled sharply. “And we’re supposed to take your word for it? Who are you to speak of such matters, a diplomat? Perhaps an Opelucidian spy?”

Benga regarded him askance, like Belaron wasn’t even worth his full attention. “Apparently, I’m the only guy here who keeps up with the news.”

“And this hypothetical war,” Iris said. “I assume whatever you were doing in that backwater town was in the spirit of fighting back in the name of the oppressed?”

Something flashed in Benga’s eyes, too fast to read, and he looked away. “Nah, I’m a Titan, remember? Out for myself and all that.”
Iris got in his face. They were just inches apart. The orange of his hair matched his eyebrows and short lashes, and a million constellations of freckles covered his nose and cheeks and blended into his suntanned skin. Faint stubble dusted his chin and jaw, patchy like a teenager’s despite his twenty-four years. “And you chose a remote location in the heart of the White Forest to be out for yourself. What were you really doing there?”

There were veins of red in his dark eyes, deep and burgundy and impossible to see from a distance. Iris had a sudden vision of a memory she had as a girl as she looked into those eyes. Champion Lance, Gym Leader Clair, and the Blackthorn Elder had gathered their three Dragonite together out to sea while she watched from the rocky shores with her mother. The Elder, silent, had raised his hand as if to take hold of the sky in his spindly fingers, and his Dragonite let out a terrible cry. The sky fell that day in the form of a thousand meteors that crashed into the sea and slashed the night sky with bloody burgundy streaks that lingered, Dragonfire sustained on darkness alone. That feeling of conquest, like even the great night could not stand against a true Dragon, came alive again as she glared up at Benga.

“That’s a secret,” he said, lowering his voice and leaning towards her, unafraid of her challenge. “Are you sure you wanna know?”

Iris’s anger flared, along with that annoying but increasingly familiar smolder of intrigue that had piqued her interest in this self-proclaimed vander. But before she could act on it, something in the darkness moved over Benga’s shoulder and drew her attention. For a second she was sure she’d imagined it, but something slithered out of the darkness and brushed the glass. Iris gasped and stumbled back away from the glass. Cottonee noticed it too and squealed in fright.

Benga whirled just as the thing slithered by again. Its body glowed pale and pearly as thick as a tree trunk, but the sub’s dimmed headlights only caught a fleeting glimpse of it in the watery depths.

“Whoa!” Benga hissed, retreating from the glass as though it burned.

Belaron had also seen the creature and gripped the pommel of his sword, hand shaking and face drained of blood. He swallowed hard. “What was that?”

Static from the control room’s speaker rattled overhead, and Nymo’s voice barked out some rough commands in harsh Adriati.

“What’s happening?” Belaron said.

“Please tell me he’s putting us into hyper drive and getting the hell out of here,” Benga said, his fingers clutched around the Pokéballs attached to his leather sash.

The sub’s floodlights flashed on, illuminating a fair distance in front. Below, the ocean floor was barely visible. Denizens of the deep erupted in bioluminescence and scattered at the foreign disturbance—Chinchou and Lantor and snoozing Clamperl. But Iris was focused on the slithering thing she’d caught ghastly glimpses of before. Now, it swam into view under the floodlights and she found herself wishing for darkness once again.

Its body was pale as a corpse and winding like a Serperior’s, but it was as long as any Gyarados and more serpentine than draconian. Nevertheless, Iris recognized the species as a Gorebyss, having learned all the Dragon descendants growing up in case she ever came face to face with one, no matter how unlikely. Gorebyss’s long mouth concealed tiny razor-sharp teeth and a long tongue bladed and sharp enough to pierce scales and flesh.
Another light flashed behind Gorebyss and revealed a person in the water. Belaron gasped. “That’s the Syreni woman!”

Iris stared openly as Nuria, clad in a thick wetsuit, goggles, and a headlamp, floated into view. She held onto Gorebyss’s tapering dorsal fin with one hand, and in the other she carried a portable blowtorch. Nymo shouted over the PA system again, and Nuria waved.

“Son of a bitch,” Benga mumbled as he gaped at Nuria somehow withstanding deep-sea water pressure, chilling temperatures, and all while holding her breath for who knew how long.

Iris swallowed, her eyes fixed on the pale Gorebyss. She had never seen one up close in real life before. Like its cousin, Huntail, it was a deep-sea dweller rarely seen at the surface unless under the care of a trainer skilled enough to evolve a Clamperl, which required cultivation in a highly-pressurized, pitch-black environment similar to the bottom of the ocean. The deep-sea Pokémon pair were said to be just as lethal as any Gyarados, but they lacked the Atrocious Pokémon’s apoplectic temperament.

Tell that to this monster, Iris thought as the light passed over Gorebyss’s abyssal eye as large around as her head. It dived smoothly, taking Nuria with it, and Benga went to the glass and pressed his face against it to see where they went. A few moments later, the dive door in the viewing room unhinged and opened up. Nuria emerged shivering from the water, supported by Gorebyss’s head to get a leg up into the sub. Iris lent her a hand without thinking about it, flinching at the icy cold of Nuria’s thick gloves.

“That water’s freezing!” Nuria complained as she removed her goggles and set down the blowtorch. “This Seleo skin wetsuit’s supposed to be good for Kingler fishing in Sinnoh’s Ice Bay, but it’s total bullshit. I couldn’t stand being down there for more than...” She checked her dive watch as she removed her hood and shook out her cropped hair. “Ugh, only eighty-seven minutes. Well, at least I fixed the hole.”

“Hole?” Belaron said, paling further. “There was a hole in the ship’s hull?”

Nuria reached behind her back and tugged at the zipper of her wetsuit. “Not anymore. Patched it all up. Remember when we accidentally cruised by that Lanturn and Chinchou breeding ground? They got us with some Sparks that did just enough to weaken the hull when we dived deep. But problem solved, no need to worry. Pass me that towel.”

Over the PA system, Nymo spoke tersely to his daughter about the welding she’d done. She shouted back up to him in Adriati that the leak was fixed and should hold until they resurfaced to give it another check. Benga brought over three different enormous towels in his arms.

“One is this enough? Dude, how did you not freeze out there? Or get crushed?” He spoke rapidly and piled towels on top of Nuria in his flustered state.

Nuria shoved the extra towels back at him impatiently and wrapped one around her shoulders. She wore nothing more than a swimsuit under her thick Sealeo skin suit and shivered lightly. “What, don’t tell me you’ve never seen a Syreni do free-dive welding work seven hundred meters underwater?”

“This is where you go,” Iris said, remembering the times Nymo had sent her off to work on the sub’s maintenance. “You free dive with that Gorebyss so we don’t have to surface.”

“Yeah. Amazing how much goes on here without you ever bothering to take notice of it, huh?”
She reached out and patted Cottonee on the head, which earned her a pleased whistle.

“Young lady, you’re either very brave or very foolish,” Belaron said, having collected himself a bit. “Syreni or no, these deep waters are dangerous.”

“You make it sound like I’m not the dangerous one in these waters.”

Belaron frowned deeply, and Benga shoved the extra towels at him to take.

“Here, be a good Syr and go take these to laundry or something,” Benga said.

Belaron began to fume again, but Nuria smiled brightly. “Oh, wait just a second, Syr Belaron.” She shimmied out of her sopping wetsuit and shoved it at the old knight. “If you could take this, too, that’d be a big help. Thanks!”

Belaron looked to be at a loss, but he turned to Iris. “Princess, perhaps you would like to accompany me? Then we can get to discussing Castelia after.”

“I’ll stay,” Iris said dismissively. “That will be all, Syr Bel. I’ll find you later.”

Benga grinned at the old knight, but Iris had spoken and there was not much he could do to contest her will. Red in the face, he shot Benga a dirty look and stalked off to the stern, where the laundry room was stationed.

“I don’t get what you see in that guy,” Benga said. “He’s a slingshot. Men like that? They wind up tighter and tighter until one day they snap.” He snapped his fingers hard, and the sound echoed eerily in the viewing room. “I’ve seen it before. It’s ugly.”

“Syr Bel is loyal to me. That’s all I’ll hear on the subject,” Iris said.

Benga put up his hands. “Okay, okay, I get the message. I’m just saying.”

Nuria was busy toweling off and pulling on some clean dry clothes from one of the many lockers in the room. Gorebyss slithered past the still-open dive door, but the hatch slowly closed automatically from the control room, beeping and blinking to warn anyone lingering too close.

“So, you came to see the view?” Nuria said once they were alone.

“What view? It’s pitch black out there,” Benga said, crossing his arms.

The floodlights had dimmed and the sea beyond was once again plunged into inky blackness. Gorebyss was still out there, but there was no sign of the enormous beast. Iris wasn’t sure how she felt about that.

“Here, sure, but we’re coming up on the Abyssal Ruins,” Nuria said, toweling off her hair. “We’ll have to ascend a little. The volcano’s still active, and the sub can’t take the superheated waters around it.”

“Abyssal Ruins?” Benga said.

Iris snorted. “Something you don’t know about? I’m shocked.”

Nuria looked between the two of them suspiciously. “Wow. I thought one of you was handful enough. No wonder everybody’s got a problem with Titans.”

Benga slung an arm around Iris’s shoulders before she could escape, and Cottonee jumped in
surprise from her head. “Nah, us Titans gotta stick together, right Iris?”

Her face twisted in disgust as she tried to pry him off, but he was heavy for such a lean guy and taller. His knuckles were inches from her face, and she noticed the network of old scars zigzagging across them, a little paler than his tanned skin tone.

“Get off,” she snapped, wriggling free. “Is everything a joke to you?”

“Is nothing a joke to you?” he countered, but there was no fight in his tone as he smiled.

Cottonee fluttered on its stunted leafy wings, struggling to stay aloft and return to Iris’s head.

“Seriously, when’s the last time you even smiled?” Benga leaned down so he was looking up at Iris as if to catch the hint of a smile. “I bet you’d look good in a smile.”

Iris was tempted to take him by the nose and shove him to the ground the way little kids did to be mischievous. He was practically asking for retaliation. But that stupid sly smirk he wore broadened, like he could divine her thoughts. Iris huffed and distracted herself with snatching Cottonee from the air and placing it back on her head. She tried to ignore the uncomfortable tingle on her skin like he’d seen her naked, exposed.

“I’ll look better in a crown,” she said.

He watched her thoughtfully, the mischief gone from his expression.

“Hah, well, send me a picture,” Nuria said. “In the meantime, if you guys’re going to stay, then you might as well learn something.” She looked pointedly at Iris. “I’m talking to you, in case you missed the hint.”

Nuria went to the glass and peered into the darkness. She called out to the control room in clipped Adriati, asking for the searchlights. Iris joined her by the glass.

“I’ve told you, both of you,” she shot Benga a meaningful look. “I’m here for Opelucid. The rest of Unova isn’t my concern.”

Nuria sighed. “And I’ve told you, you’re making a big mistake with that attitude. Tell her.” She gestured to Benga.

He shrugged. “I mean, you didn’t even know about the Big Three,” he muttered.

“The Triumvirs?” Nuria said.

“The West Tine is not my concern,” Iris protested, but her voice sounded hollow even to her ears.

“Yeah, well, with the shit that’s going down in Castelia and with Team Plasma, it’s gonna be your concern. You want to take over Opelucid, right? All the fiefdoms are pretty much autonomous, but they have a lotta blood, good and bad, between them. Drayden knows that as well as anybody.”

“Do not mention that name in my presence,” Iris spat.

“Drayden, Drayden, Drayden!” Benga spat right back. “You’re gonna let a name put you off? How’re you gonna face him in person if you can’t even say his name?” He grabbed her hands. “I said I’d help you. And you brought me onboard because somewhere under all that frizzy hair, you believed me, right? So let me help you.”

She yanked her hands away, frowning at the pang of embarrassment that colored her ears.
“For what it’s worth, the Abyssal Ruins’re sort of right up your alley,” Nuria said. “Both of you.”

Grateful for the distraction, Iris gave Nuria her full attention. She wrung her hands to get the tingle of Benga’s warmth out of them. “What do you mean?”

Nuria grinned. “Have a seat. Enjoy the show.”

The searchlights flickered on and cut through the blue-black sea. Iris and Benga sat down on the curved bench next to Nuria and watched. At first, the ground rose in a sloping barren hill of sediment, shapeless. As the sub rose in a lazy ascent, there were cut stones sunk into the sediment and sand, too perfect to be natural. The searchlights swept up and around, and all of a sudden the darkness came to life.

Iris stared at what looked like the remains of a sunken city beyond the glass. The edges of it were almost unidentifiable and corroded, but as the Oculus soared just over it and past the higher reaches of an acropolis, the buildings and stonemasonry became more and more recognizable. It went on seemingly forever. Blanched stone buildings with window carvings, towers and ramparts, bridges and thousands upon thousands of steps winding among them like gilded snakes. There were courtyards overrun with deep-sea kelp and bones from Pokémon sunk from the surface to their watery graves. Relicanth as big as Rhyperior, blind to the sub’s searchlights, swam by lazily in search of food. Shellder and Cloyster clamped their massive shells shut at the sub’s approach.

“It’s a sunken city,” Benga said, awed. “A huge one. What is this place?”

Nuria shrugged. “It doesn’t have a name, not for many years. My people call it the Abyssal Ruins. It used to be the capital of old Unova three thousand years ago.”

A huge pale Jellicent drifted near the sub, its blue-white stinging tentacles like tinsel glittering under the sub’s searchlights. Cottonee squealed in fright and huddled into Iris’s ponytail, but a pair of shadows jetted toward the jellyfish lightning fast. Iris recognized Nuria’s Gorebyss blasting the giant jellyfish with a Water Pulse attack, buffeting it back. But another enormous eel Crunched at Jellicent’s puffy head, oblivious to its death touch. The Huntail was even bigger than Gorebyss, and its jaws were more than three times the size of its head. Iris was sure it could have swallowed one of those fat Relicanth whole if it wanted to.

“It’s okay, that’s Father’s Huntail,” Nuria said before Iris and Benga could freak out. “He and Gorebyss follow the Oculus and keep us safe.”

The Jellicent jettisoned away from the sub riding a self-propelling Ominous Wind. Iris was sure she felt a chill in its wake and shivered before she could stop herself. Gorebyss and Huntail passed each other languidly, soon disappearing from sight once again.

“Safe, huh,” Benga said. “Nothing says safe like two sea monsters watching your back.”

Iris said nothing, but she silently echoed his trepidation. This was not her element or Benga’s, and she felt it for the first time now.

“You said this was relevant to me,” Iris said, searching for any distraction from the thought of Huntail and Gorebyss stalking them in the darkness.

“I said it was relevant to both of you,” Nuria corrected. “This place was once the jewel of the Trident until the Cataclysm plunged it into the sea.”

“What happened?” Benga asked.
“No one really knows. If you ask me, probably volcanic activity and huge hurricanes. But the old storytellers in Humilau think three weather spirits grew jealous of the ancient people’s prosperity and turned land, sea, and wind against them. Those’re just stories, though.

“What isn’t just a story is everything that happened before the city sank. Three thousand years ago, this place was home to twin siblings, a brother king and a sister queen. It’s said they were born to a living mother and dead father. They brought the first light to the Overworld, our world, and shared it with everyone.”

“A dead father? Sounds like a story to me,” Iris said.

Nuria waved her off. “It’s a metaphor, you know, for the duality in all of us. People aren’t just black or white, there are shades of grey and blurred lines, that kind of thing. Are you going to let me finish or what?”

“So what happened to the twins?” Benga said, leaning forward and eating up the view of the blanched ruins under the blue-white searchlights.

“Well, they first used their light to fight in the Great Kalosian War three thousand years ago,” Nuria said. “That was where they learned to harness its power. When they made their way here to Unova, they ruled together for a long time. They built wondrous castles as big as an entire city. Their lands reached as far west as Castelia. The Relic Desert? Archeologists say there’s a whole city buried under the sands that used to be part of their kingdom.”

“I don’t see why any of this matters,” Iris said impatiently.

“You know, if you keep worrying about things like you do, your hair will all fall out.”

Benga snorted, and Iris shot him a dirty look. “As far as I’m concerned, any opinion you have on hair should be ignored.” She eyed the uneven half-finished buzz cut over his left ear and the wild orange rat’s nest dwarfing it.

“Oh, this?” He smoothed a hand over his buzzed hair and flashed the two women a dapper grin. “This is street cred.”

“Street what?” Nuria asked.


Nuria frowned, confused, but she continued her tale. “Right, anyway... The siblings, they became known as the Hero Twins. They filled their castles with untold treasures, most of which were lost during the Cataclysm.”

“Hey, check it out,” Benga said, pointing to a weathered statue beyond the glass. It was enormous and bestial, but it resembled no Pokémon Iris could name. The salt water and pressure had badly eroded its contours and shape, leaving only the remains of a thick conical tail, a long neck, wings broken at the joints, and a snarling face. The eyes and nose and teeth had all smoothed and decayed, but Iris guessed why it had attracted Benga’s attention.

“A Dragon,” Nuria said, the pride evident in her tone.

“Looks like... I think that’s a—”

“A Dragon,” Iris finished, eyes tracing the statue’s contours as the sub glided past it. “But I can’t
make it out.”

“You wouldn’t,” Nuria said matter-of-factly.

“Okay, genius,” Benga said, “I’ll bite.”

“It’s hard to tell from the erosion, but that Dragon is either Reshiram or Zekrom.” Nuria grinned like knowing this information was some great accomplishment.

“Reshiram and Zekrom?” Iris did not recognize the names.

“Wait wait wait.” Benga put up his hands. “Reshiram and Zekrom’re the Fafnir Dynasty’s crest. Why would they be all the way out here?”

“You know this story?” Iris said.

Benga gave her a weird look. “You don’t? They’re your family crest. When the Fafnir Dynasty’s originators came here from Sinnoh about three thousand years ago, they took a coat of arms. The white Dragon, Reshiram, and the black Dragon, Zekrom. It’s on all the royal tombstones and banners and stuff all over Opelucid. You didn’t know?”

Iris shook her head. She could not remember. “I...”

“No, that’s not the story,” Nuria argued. “You Titans came to this land and took what didn’t belong to you. The Dragons belong to Unova. They belonged to the Hero Twins who created them.”

“Created them?” Benga looked at her like she was crazy.

“That’s right. Well, some say the Hero Twins actually were Reshiram and Zekrom, but I don’t believe that version. It just makes it more, how do you say it?” She made spreading motion with her hands.

“Ludicrous?” Iris said flatly.

“Yes, perhaps. Like I was saying, the Hero Twins created Reshiram and Zekrom when they began to fight over how to use the light they had brought to the Overworld. The girl, who wanted to use the light to help guide others toward a better life than what they had, created the first fire to share her warmth with them. The boy, who wanted to use the light to control others and force them to do things differently, the right way in his mind, created the first lightning to shock them into submission. This represented the split between Truth and Ideals. It was from this split that Reshiram and Zekrom were born. They could not remain as one with the Hero Twins so at odds.”

“As one? You mean they were one Dragon before?” Iris said, incredulous.

Nuria shrugged. “Many think so. But not many can make it down here to study the ruins to confirm it. It is the same with the Relic Desert. Many have perished trying to uncover its secrets.”

“So you’re telling me Reshiram and Zekrom were real?” Benga said. “I never heard such a thing.”

“You are a Titan. Perhaps the problem is that you never listened,” Nuria retorted.

Did my father know this? Iris wondered. There was so much she didn’t know, about her history, about her father, about Opelucid. Maybe Benga had a point. Maybe she needed to learn, at least enough to give her the advantage over Drayden. Did he know these things?
“Okay, Super Syreni,” Benga said. “So, what happened to the Hero Twins and their Dragons? Like, assuming all this is true for a hot second, they would’ve been pretty much indestructible.”

Nuria shook her head. “They fought for many years, but in the end neither was able to defeat the other. And then...no one knows. Everything about them, even their names, faded to myth.”

“And the Dragons?” Iris said, surprised at how hard her heart was pounding.

“After three thousand years, I assume they eventually wasted away and died. But...”

“What?” Iris pressed.

Nuria cleared her throat and spoke in flowing Adriati very different from her usual speech. Iris listened to the words, archaic and formal as though they were gilded in gold and seeing the light of day for the first time in eons. But she recognized them intimately; Sonora had recited them to her before bed every night when she was a girl.

She translated for Benga’s benefit. “‘If it’s light you desire, ascend to the highest of the high. But if it’s night you wish to cleave, dive to the deepest of the deep.’”

Nuria looked genuinely impressed. “I’m surprised you understood that. That was Old Adriati. It’s not spoken much anymore.”

“My mother used to recite that to me,” Iris said without thinking, her mind misty with old memories she had not revisited in years. She could still hear the sing-song cadence of Sonora’s raspy voice in that strange tongue. Her heart ached, and she swallowed hard.

Benga watched her closely. “What is that, a poem?”

“Sort of. Parents tell it to their children like a bedtime story,” Nuria said. “My mother used to recite it to me, too.”

“What does it mean?”

“It’s a warning,” Iris said. “To keep you humble. If you try to reach the highest of the high, you’ll fall. Same with the deep.” She eyed the base of a tall tower that spiraled up out of the acropolis, still largely intact. Its windows were dark, concealing secrets long buried and forgotten. “Well, maybe not anymore.”

“No, it’s a warning,” Nuria agreed. “This is why we do not explore these ruins, even with the sub. It’s forbidden.”

Benga looked thoughtful. “Seems like kind of a waste. You could be the first to find out what’s really down here, if your people’s stories are more than just stories. That doesn’t tempt you even a little?”

“Knowledge is power,” Nuria allowed. “But power corrupts. Some secrets are best left buried.”

Iris recognized that tone, having used it a thousand times herself. Nuria rose and slung her damp towel over her shoulder. This conversation was over.

Cottonee whistled at Nuria’s imminent departure, having always liked the Adriati girl’s presence even if Iris did not usually care for it.

Alone with Benga, the viewing room fell quiet. He was gazing out the window at the remnants of
the ancient civilization lost to the deep and darkness, its bone-white edifices and chapels and
courtyards silent. She joined him, close enough to feel the warmth he radiated but not touching.

“Do you agree?” he said, barely above a whisper. Even so, his voice seemed to carry in this empty
chamber and echoed across the vast sunken city beneath them. If the dead lived here, she wondered
if they could hear him. “That these secrets should stay buried?”

“The Dragon is thrice blind,” Caitlin’s prophecy resonated in her head.

Zekrom and Reshiram. Myth, memory, or both—could the answer lie with them, somehow,
somewhere?

“No,” she said softly. “In this case, I mean to dig up every last one.”

Iris gazed out over the dead city lost to time and relegated to legend. A city without a name ruled
by a king and queen long forgotten. Caitlin’s demonic eyes burned bright in her memory, branded
to her soul.

“You cannot be a queen so long as your father’s ghost sits the throne you seek.”

Only ghosts visited this place and the Dragons that had once protected it. Ghosts, and now Iris had
found it.

“Not even ghosts will stop me,” she said to herself.

Benga watched her askance with that meteoric gaze that had seen death and destruction as she had.
His hand drifted to hers, just shy of contact, and pulled into a tight fist.

“Good,” he said. “They never stopped me before, either.”

Belaron found them like that gazing into the dark ocean side by side, their noses pressed against
the glass, the edges of the pale city passing them by as the sub slowly descended once more into
the abyss.

The better part of a week passed before the Oculus made its next resurfacing. Benga was going
stir-crazy and made sure Iris knew it.

“It’s not me, okay, it’s my Pokémon. They can’t be down here for this long, it’s completely
inhumane,” he reasoned in the most serious tone he could manage.

She tried to close her door in his face, but he caught it on his foot. “You keep your Pokémon in
Pokéballs the same as everyone else. As long as they’re in there, it’s all the same where you go.”

“Pokéballs are also a little inhumane, to be honest.”

“Then by all means, release your Pokémon. Just do it where you won’t drag me into it.” She tried
to smash his foot in the door, but he caught the edge with his hands and pushed back before she
could get any ideas.

“Nah, Volcarona would burn a hole in this sub and I’m pretty sure Nuria wouldn’t be able to patch
it up this time.”

Iris resisted the urge to roll her eyes. “Then leave them be and get out of my face.”
He yanked his foot free and she slammed the door with a huff, grumbling curses under her breath as she went back to her bed and picked up the book she’d been reading. It was the history text Nuria had forced her to borrow, and she was three-quarters of the way through it. Not because she particularly cared about useless information like the scandalous affair a Driftveil merchant had pursued with a highborn lady of Nimbasa three hundred years ago that led to his castration and some running gag about Twist Mountain Cloysters Iris did not care to dwell on. It was just that there was nothing else to read, and she’d been over Nymo’s nautical maps dozens of times. Benga took one look at them his second day aboard and deemed them completely useless.

Benga knocked on her door in case she’d forgotten he was still outside. “You wanna learn how to use Mega Evolution?”

She set down the book and saved her place in the chapter on Icirrus City. “I’m not opening the door.”

“I could teach you.”

“You can’t let Sceptile out on the sub.”

“Iris...”

“What?” she snapped.

No answer.

“Good riddance,” she grumbled, picking up her book again.

But try as she might, the passage describing how the Icirrans crafted swords and staves from pure diamond could not hold her interest. Cursing herself, she sat up in bed, disturbing the snoozing Cottonee from its slumber. The cotton puff Pokémon yawned and rolled to the edge of her bed. Iris yanked open the door, but Benga was nowhere to be found.

“I bet he can’t even teach me Mega Evolution,” she said bitterly, lamenting the little effort it had taken to get out of bed.

Footsteps echoed in the hall, and Soriel rounded the corner. “Oi, Princess! You coming ashore?” Iris frowned. “We’ve surfaced?”

“All that complaining and he doesn’t even bother to tell me we finally surfaced? She was going to let him have a piece of her mind. He was going to show her this Mega Evolution business for sure now.

Iris pulled on her boots, checked her reflection, and scooped up Cottonee. It would be good to get some fresh air after so long cooped up in this metal box. She returned Nuria’s book to her desk drawer for safekeeping, then headed with Soriel to the control room where the ladder to the deck was located.

“Well, look at that,” Soriel said when she and Iris climbed on deck. “That looks like a strapping forest with good hunting. Not like that bone yard where we picked up Benga last time.”
Iris squinted against the afternoon sunlight and held onto Cottonee with one hand. “That’s the Dreamyard, I think,” she said.

“Oh?” Soriel looked mildly surprised.

Iris waved her off. “I read about it. It’s the next largest forest down the coast from the White Forest. We must be close to Striaton City.”

Soriel looked grim. “Isn’t that where those Team Plasma guys’re holed up?”

Yes, it is.

She remembered Marlon’s warning and Benga’s, those men in uniform that had harassed the woman and her children in Perry Town. “We’ll have nothing to do with them. Let’s stick close to shore.”

Soriel released Charizard right there on the deck, and a few of the crew members still prepping inflatable rafts balked at the orange pseudo-Dragon’s sudden appearance. Charizard stretched out and flexed its wings, happy to be out of its Pokéball.

Cottonee’s shrill screeching was Iris’s only warning, and she ducked instinctively just as a shadow nearly slammed into her from above. A Flyer swooped by and made a hissing clicking sound like a machine gone haywire. Iris covered her ears to the grating racket, and Cottonee huddled into her thick hair.

Charizard, however, was not impressed. It roared menacingly and snapped with its powerful jaws at the Flyer that had landed on the railing. The thing screeched and spit, wings spread for balance and a feeble attempt at intimidation by comparison. The creature was an enormous bat a little smaller than a Golbat. It could not have carried a human on its back, but it could have easily taken off a man’s head with an aerial attack. Iris recognized the creature and held out a hand to it.

“Be silent,” she commanded.

The bat fell still and twitched its fleshy ears. Wicked fangs bared at Iris in defiance as it clicked its long talons against the metal railing. Charizard snarled, and the bat snarled right back, unafraid.

“Noivern, to me!” Benga shouted from somewhere above.

Iris looked up as Noivern hissed and leaped from the railing. It flew to Benga, who hovered above on Volcarona. Iris wiped her brow against the heat wave the firefly Pokémon emitted naturally and squinted up at Benga through the harsh sunlight.

“Where do you get all these random Pokémon?” she said.

He flashed her one of his hundred watt grins. “I get around!” he called down to her.

She rolled her eyes. “I bet you do.”

“Hey, you wanna ride to the coast?”

Iris was about to refuse when Soriel mounted Charizard. “I bet that overgrown Bug can’t even keep up with a Pelipper.”

“Wanna find out?” Benga challenged. He turned Volcarona back to the sub and landed on deck. “Come on.” He reached out a hand to Iris.
She eyed him skeptically. “I have Gyarados to ferry me.”

“And I got a Bug that can light up a whole forest. Don’t tell me you’re not a little curious about him?”

Volcarona was a thickset animal with an abdomen as thick around as a small Redwood tree. Its magnificent snowy fur coated it like frosting on a wedding cake, thick and rich and soft as a cloud. Its legs were short and stubby, and its sunburst wings—six in all—folded elegantly out of the base of its thorax and dusted the deck. Volcarona wore no saddle or blanket to accommodate a rider, and Iris was pretty sure it was shedding embers from its mane.

“That thing’s a roasting marshmallow ready to burst into flames,” Iris said warily.

Cottonee was even less enthusiastic about the prospect of existing in the same vicinity as Volcarona. Iris sighed and tossed out Gyarados’s and Dragonair’s Pokéballs. The two Dragons materialized in the water, the former towering over the Oculus with its oversized maw hanging open. Cottonee whistled in delight and leaped from Iris’s hair toward Gyarados’s gaping jaws, as though it would fare better odds with the abominable water Dragon over Volcarona. Gyarados all but ignored the little cotton ball, tolerating its presence as it floated around its head to settle at the base of Gyarados’s horns.

Benga looked at her very seriously and put a hand on her forehead before she could stop him. “Doth mine ears deceive me? Did you just make a joke?”

She swatted his hand away. “I’m vaguely familiar with the concept of humor,” she spat.

“Uh-oh, don’t tell me I’m rubbing off on you.”

He got that ridiculously devious smirk that made her want to turn up her nose and tell him to go jump in a lake, but she settled for scowling deeply. That spark of challenge that had intrigued her on the beach in Perry Town had only grown in the last few days when he wasn’t being a pain in the ass.

“Hah!” Soriel guffawed. “You watch it, kid. Princess here’s not one you wanna mess with. You better watch that skinny ass if you wanna make it on this ship.”

Benga turned to Soriel, and before Iris’s very eyes, his expression warped into something decidedly more crass. He slumped his shoulders and jutted out with his hands and elbows, all angles and edges, and sniffled wet and curdling. “It’s more’n my ass I gotta watch around here.”

Soriel laughed from her gut, manly and bawdy and endearingly familiar. Charizard remained stoic and wary of Volcarona, having all but lost interest in the twitchy Noivern still perched on the sub’s railing making erratic clicking sounds like it was looking out for some monstrous predator that would materialize out of the sky and attack at any moment.

Iris’s mood soured as she watched Benga joking around with Soriel, that same inexplicable irritation flaring in the pit of her stomach. It bothered her that she couldn’t quite put a name to what she was feeling, it was on the tip of her tongue. Before she had time to turn him down firmly on his offer of a ride to shore, he suddenly grabbed her wrist and dragged her to Volcarona’s side.

“Hey—!” she protested.

Benga scooped her up under the knees and all but dropped her on Volcarona’s back at the base of its wings. The white fur was warm to the touch, a little uncomfortable in the summer heat, but surprisingly tolerable against her bare legs. Cottonee shrieked in alarm and bounced nervously on
Gyarados’s head, but it dared not approach Volcarona.

_Traitor_, Iris thought as she glared at the little cotton puff Pokémon.

Benga swung a leg over Volcarona and sat himself right in front of Iris. He made a clucking sound to Noivern, and the big bat jumped like it had been scared shitless. “Hold on,” he warned Iris.

“Wait a minute—”

Volcarona lurched under her, and instinctively Iris grabbed onto Benga so as not to fall. The firefly spread its orange wings and rose gracefully into the air, straight up, and took off over Gyarados’s head. Dragonair called after Iris with its mournful cry, but Volcarona sailed on ahead toward land after the various rafts that had already set off earlier.

The wind whipped Iris’s long ponytail like a lash behind her, and she squinted against the sting. Her eyes watered, and she lowered her head near Benga’s shoulder to shield herself a bit. She pinched him hard in the sides.

“What the hell!” she shouted over the wind.

“Just think happy thoughts!” he shouted back, a playful laugh in his voice even as he suffered the wrath of her fingers. “They lift you into the air!”

_My life is in the hands of a delusional child_, she thought.

Iris had flown a few times before in her life, but none of her Pokémon were capable of flight in the traditional sense. Gyarados could jump thirty feet in the air, and that was better than any roller coaster. Dragonair could glide on air currents, but his pace was lethargic and tranquil. Volcarona, on the other hand, zipped and buzzed like any true Bug. The sea winds buffeted it lightly, making Iris squeeze Benga’s middle so hard she was sure he’d piss himself, but he didn’t, and as soon as she had the thought she wisely kept it to herself so as not to give him any ideas.

“Alas, I forgot my happy thoughts back at the sub,” she bit out, playing along to spite him.

He was not spited at all. Instead, he turned to see her sideways, brushing his nose against her cheek by accident. “Then I’ll have to find you some Fairy dust.”

For a brief second, she forgot her vertigo and the heat on her bare legs and even her irritation over his trickery. That moment, that voice, that look in his eyes right there was so nostalgic that she nearly lost her breath. His stupid hair tickled her forehead, and his stupid smugness hid right below the surface like it usually did. But in that moment, she felt closer to him than she’d felt to anyone in a very long time, like a thousand words could pass between them in a single look, a fleeting touch, like he’d known her and all her secrets for lifetimes, just as she had known him.

When she would reflect on that moment and so many more like it later, she would wonder if this was the real magic of their world. Not incredible beasts that could breathe fire or read minds or pass through solid rock, nor people who could do much the same. It was this connection, this recognition in another person—another Titan—of something familiar, something that told her she wasn’t really alone, she didn’t have to do this alone, and she didn’t want to anymore.

“That big Bug’s as loud as a leaf blower!” Soriel shouted over the whipping winds. She lined up with Volcarona, riding Charizard as smoothly as if she’d been born flying.

Benga grinned and turned to face her. “Bet he’s faster than your lizard!”
“Hah! You got a big mouth, Titan! Someone’s like to shove a foot in it!”

Iris blinked and leaned back, loosening her grip. It was gone, over, just like that. He was gone, that moment was gone, like it had happened to someone else. She knew what it was that had bothered her about Benga now, and it surprised her that she hadn’t put her finger on it until now. He was everyone and anyone whenever it suited him, never settling on one personality. She had no idea who Benga really was, and he seemed to have no intention of letting her. He put his hand over hers as he laughed at something Soriel said, but Iris wasn’t listening. She was more preoccupied with the shoreline, which was coming up fast. He squeezed her wrist reassuringly.

“Hang on!”

Volcarona zoomed forward, but Iris barely felt the wind as she focused on the approaching shoreline and counted the seconds before she could get off this Bug and walk on solid ground again. She wished Cottonee had not elected to ride with Gyarados. Without the little cotton puff, she felt strangely exposed and vulnerable. Benga landed Volcarona in the damp sand on the coast at the edge of the Dreamyard just behind Soriel and Charizard, who had beaten them to the landing.

“Hey hey, I’ll let this one slide since I had some cargo with me,” Benga said to Soriel. “But the next one we’ll leave you in our ashes.”


Iris slipped off Volcarona’s back and splashed into the shallows without a word, ignoring them. Gyarados approached at a leisurely pace, oblivious to the crashing waves and the currents. She lowered her head and slithered just over the surface when she got to the shallows and drew near Iris. Cottonee whistled loudly to be heard over the wind and jumped off Gyarados’s head into Iris’s waiting arms. Dragonair blended in with the blue waters and poked his head through the surf, dark eyes glistening and pensive. Iris patted his nose and eyed the pulsing pearl at his throat.

“Hey, Iris,” Benga called.

Noivern had joined them on the beach and crawled on its folded wings, baffled by the sand that sank under its weight. Charizard snarled when it wandered too close, spooking it.

“What,” Iris said flatly as she placed Cottonee on her head and bade Gyarados and Dragonair enjoy the open water while they were here.

He jogged to catch up with her as she made her way inland after Nymo’s crew. He and Iris had agreed that they would spend a night on dry land to give everyone a rest from the close quarters. The crew would be setting up camp by now.

“Wait up, will you?”

“I’m going to see the camp,” she said, not waiting.

He sped up and caught up to her. “Okay, you’re pissed.”

“No, but I will be if you keep pestering me.”

He cut her off and walked backwards in front of her. “Look, I’m sorry for the surprise flight, I guess I should’ve warned you. But come on, it was fun, right?”

They were nearing the edge of the trees and she didn’t slow down.
“Iris?”

“Well, it was fun, if you want to use that word. And now it’s over, so you might want to turn around.”

He didn’t listen, frowning. “Hey, what’s going on—”

They passed through the edge of the trees and, predictably, Benga tripped over a root and landed on his ass. Hissing in pain, he was covered in sand and looked up at her sheepishly as she blew past him.

“I did warn you,” she said, not slowing down.

Cottonee cooed curiously and looked back at Benga as Iris left him behind. She felt his eyes on her back, but didn’t stop to help him up or look back. Hugging herself once she was deeper in the forest along the sandy path, she breathed shakily, hating that it bothered her on some level, no matter how small.

_Titans lie, she told herself. It’s in his nature._

Perhaps it was small wonder that her Titan father pursued her pleb mother instead of remaining faithful to his wife and his family’s honor. In the end, Titans were their own worst enemies. Best to take what you need from them and keep them always at arm’s length.

The camp was coming along nicely. Nymo’s crew had set up fire pits and erected tarps with mosquito nets for sleeping. Nuria was among them talking to one of the navigation specialists, but her conversation was too soft to make out. Nymo saw Iris and spread his arms.

“Iris Lady! We are making the camp this night. Is going to be a warm night, no rains, but I am suggesting you make like the stick and be here always, yes?”

Iris nodded politely. “Yes, I’ll stick close to camp, Captain.”

He leaned in conspiratorially, his bald head shining like a polished crystal ball that might reveal premonitions of the future. “This place is strange,” he said in his cutting Adriati rumble. “In Adria we say these woods show you visions that lead you astray. Men chase beautiful visions deep into the forest and never return. You tell your people the same. The dreams here are not the happy kind.”

Iris nodded. “Thank you for the warning,” she replied in Adriati just as Moros joined them.

“Ah, Princess, I’ve scouted the perimeter with a few of the crew,” he said stiffly. “We’re several miles out of Striaton, and from what I can tell, no one patrols this close to the coast. The crew was saying something about sleeping death, I couldn’t understand much of it. Silly superstitions, I’m sure. Nothing to worry yourself about.”

“It’s not superstition I worry about, it’s Team Plasma,” Iris said. “Apparently, they own Striaton. After what I saw in Perry Town, I don’t want to bother with them any more than I have to. See that we have a round the clock watch tonight. I want you, Soriel, and Syr Bel each on a shift.”

Moros blinked but nodded stiffly. “As you wish. If this Team Plasma comes sniffing around, Nidoking will find them before they find us.”

Iris nodded and turned to leave.
“Princess, forgive me, but what about Benga? If he took a shift, we would all be fresher splitting up the time with the crew. He’s got strong Pokémon that could be of assistance.”

Iris stiffened. “No. Just the three of you and whatever crewmembers you divide up between you.”

“Of course, as you say.”

Moros released his Nidoking and Kangaskhan, and the brutish Pokémon stomped after him into the forest to scout out some choice places for the watch tonight. The Dreamyard was a lush forest and cool under the canopy, not at all like the ghastly White Forest that still haunted Iris’s memories. It would do for the night to help everyone stretch their legs and breathe some fresh air for once before getting back to their close quarters.

Benga arrived with Soriel and some more crewmembers and pitched in with the rest of the camp setup. His Sceptile took to lazing about in the tallest tree it could find, keeping an eye on the entire camp as it feigned sleep. It would be a perfect Pokémon to help keep the watch, but Iris put the thought out of her mind. Benga would not take a watch shift, and that was that. She would leave that responsibility with her trusted guards and the crew that had proven loyal and hardworking up until this point.

Benga caught her eye across the camp and smiled, waving. Iris frowned and waved back before hastily turning away, regretting acknowledging him. She needed to do something to keep herself busy. So she did the one thing she knew would work.

“I need something to do,” she blurted out to Nuria, who was busy stringing up a tarp line to a tree trunk.

Nuria paused and looked at her blankly for a moment, then narrowed her eyes suspiciously. “Why?”

“I don’t need a reason to help when there’s clearly so much to do.”

Nuria dropped the tarp line and crossed her arms. “Says the high and mighty Princess who’s been happy to sit by and watch as my crew laid out the red carpet for her.”

“There hasn’t been a red carpet. I sent that back to Blackthorn with the Johto crew.”

A sparkle of mirth lit up Nuria’s dark eyes. “Look at that. She’s come down to earth finally. Okay, not-Princess Iris. You can help me get this tarp set up. You take that corner over there.”

Iris bristled at the jibe, but she obediently took up the tarp’s drooping corner and hiked the rope up a tree as high as she could reach it.

“Higher,” Nuria called.

“I can’t go any higher, I’m five-three.”

“Well I need it higher.”

“‘Well I need it higher,’” Iris mocked her under her breath. She couldn’t just grow two feet, obviously.

“Iris,” Nuria pressed. “Any day now!”

“All right, give me a minute!”
Something snapped overhead, and Cottonee whistled excitedly. Benga’s Sceptile was in the tree Iris was trying to wrangle for this tarp, its torpid yellow eyes half lidded as it leaned its head on its clawed hand like a sunbather on the beach. Iris made a face up at it.

“Hey,” she called up to the giant reptile. “Get down here and help me.”

Sceptile eyed her askance and blinked its double lids. Cottonee echoed Iris’s vehemence and whistled up at Sceptile. Iris held out the tarp rope for Sceptile.

“You heard me, Sceptile,” she said more forcefully. “Take this and tie it around that branch up there.”

Sceptile tasted the air with its forked tongue and let its bushy spiked tail drape over the branch it was on. Slowly as sap trickling down bark, it slithered toward Iris and dug its nails into the tree trunk. Cocking its head, it snatched the tarp rope from Iris’s hand, nearly taking a finger with it.

“Watch it,” she snapped.

Cottonee whistled, completely smitten with Sceptile’s sleek power. Iris had to grab Cottonee before it could float off and join the pseudo-Dragon in the tree and possibly become lunch. Sceptile made short work of the rope and wrapped it around a higher branch. It dropped the slack and nearly sent the tarp falling again, but Iris jumped and caught the end to pull it taut before it could fall apart. She made a face at Sceptile since no one was around to see it, but the placid tree lizard had already lost interest and leaped to another tree about ten feet away to get some peace and quiet.

“Great! That should do it!” Nuria called from across the way. The tarp went up without a hitch, and Nuria came by to tie off the rope. “Careful, if you help any more you’ll get callouses on those royal hands.”

“My life isn’t as luxurious as you seem to think,” Iris said a little sullenly.

Nuria studied her a moment. “No, I don’t believe it is. But you rise to the bait so easily that I can’t help it. Neither can he.”

Iris turned to where Nuria was looking. Benga was helping set up a campfire and disagreeing with one of the crewmen on the best way to stack the kindling. They were waving their hands about and raising their voices as each tried to convince the other that his way was the best way. Zweilous ended the disagreement by shoving its two heads into the conical pyre Benga had built up in search of food and knocking it down. The crewmember let out a string of curses in Adriati, and Benga tried to wrench a choice stick from Zweilous’s left mouth.

“Everyone rises to Benga’s bait,” Iris said.

“What does that mean?”

Iris looked away. “Nothing, never mind.”

Nuria was not convinced. “You’re angry with him?”

“I’m not angry. You haven’t seen me angry.”

Behind them, Benga had burst out laughing about something. The stick he was trying to wrangle from Zweilous had snapped in two and Nymo had made some kind of joke about the disgruntled crewmember helping Benga.

“No, it’s not.”

“But even so, if you ask me—”

“I’m not asking you,” Iris interjected.

Nuria ignored her. “If I were you, I would be happy to have someone like me around.

“Even if he’s just another lying Titan?” Iris said caustically.

“Sure. He has the ‘street cred’. This is a redeeming quality, I think.” She winked at Iris and headed off to help elsewhere.

Iris found herself standing alone under the tarp with her thoughts. Cottonee jumped down from her head and hovered in front of her expectantly. Sighing, she held out her hands to catch it.

“Maybe I’m being too harsh,” she whispered to the little Pokémon. “We all have our secrets, that’s not a crime...”

*But it could be dangerous.*

There was still so little she knew about Benga even after almost a week spent in confined quarters together.

“Maybe I should ask him?” she said tentatively.

Cottonee cooed up at her and wiggled its stubby wings. She frowned at the fluffy Fairy.

“But don’t look at me like that. I *will* ask him, but there’s no guarantee he’ll tell me the truth.”

Cottonee squirmed and she let it float on its own. It didn’t land on her head again, instead preferring to float ahead by itself. Iris crossed her arms.

“I’m just saying, it’s in our nature,” she defended.

Cottonee caught a light breeze and began to drift, so Iris trudged after it. The rest of the afternoon was spent finishing the camp setup, collecting food for dinner, and cooking it over the open fire pits. Some of the crew had caught wild Basculin in the rivers that fed into the sea, and others came back from deeper in the forest with armfuls of Pinap berries. Iris had Belaron bring a couple barrels of the Liechi berry wine she and her Blackthorn crew had harvested from Mirage Island and fermented. It was thick and fruity with a pleasantly citrus tang, and it was an instant hit with the Oculus crew.

Iris had had her fill of roasted fish and was enjoying her second cup of wine when Belaron stopped by to let her know he would be taking the first night watch shift with a stalwart group of crewmembers. Iris nodded and bid him goodnight, but he lingered a moment to watch her.

“Is there something else?” she asked.

He hesitated. “It’s just...” He looked around, searching for something or someone. “Never mind, Princess. Please get some rest. I mislike these woods.”

Iris waved him off and leaned back against Haxorus’s belly. The Dragon was napping peacefully and would no doubt be up and about later that night to stalk the woods for a meal. For now, it was
content to act the part of backrest. Cottonee was very curious about the Liechi berry wine Iris was drinking and inched along Haxorus’s flank close enough to smell the saccharine liquid.

“What, you want some?” Iris offered the cup to Cottonee.

Delighted, Cottonee hovered over the cup, the cotton over its nose and mouth trembling as it tried to smell its contents, but all of a sudden it sneezed and went flying backwards about three feet smack into Haxorus’s face. The Dragon grumbled in its sleep, having barely felt Cottonee’s impact. Iris bit her cheek to keep from laughing at the poor thing.

“Well, more for me.” She drank down what remained of the wine and set down her cup.

Beyond, people were laughing and chatting around the fires. Soriel had gotten a group of crewmen together to play charades, and she was trying to drag Moros into the fun. Her Charizard was ripping into a particularly fat Basculin not far off, and its shadow cast eerie flickers against the dark trees as though they were alive and haunting the edge of the merriment. Iris sat back against Haxorus, admiring the scene but having no desire to partake.

“Psst! Iris!”

Cottonee jumped and cooed happily, and Iris sat up to look around. There was no one there.

“Over here!” the voice whispered.

In the gloomy trees behind Haxorus, a figure was crouched among the leafy underbrush and beckoning her forth.

“Benga?” she said. “What’re you doing skulking around in the dark?”

“Shh!” He held a finger to his lips in case she didn’t get the message. Then he beckoned her to follow again. “Come on, be quick about it!”

A now familiar irritation flared, and she got up. Cottonee jumped on her head before she could stalk off. “What the hell is going on?” she whispered.

He disappeared into the forest without another word, leaving her no choice but to follow or stay and wonder what all the fuss was about. She had a thought that maybe he’d found something, or that something was wrong. Haxorus was still snoozing and Gyarados had remained at sea, but Dragonair was back in its Pokéball resting. Iris ran her fingers over the Pokéball, satisfied that she would have protection if something was wrong, and slipped into the woods after Benga.

“Benga!” she hissed. “Why am I even whispering?”

He startled her by grabbing her hand and putting the other over her mouth. “Be quiet, or you’ll scare them off,” he said softly.

She glared at him and yanked his hand away, resisting the urge to spit. He probably hadn’t washed it since she met him. “Scare who off?” she whispered.

He gave her a weird look somewhere between a smile and a shrug, and grabbed her hand again to lead her deeper into the forest. “Just come on.”

“Benga, I don’t—”

“I promise you won’t regret it. Just trust me, okay?”
He didn’t wait for her answer and tugged her along. Her feet moved and she didn’t pull away. Cottonee huddled into her hair, always excited for a new adventure so long as Iris was there.

*What am I doing?*

Once they were far enough away from the camp, the glow of the fires faded and left only the light of the stars and a silver moon through the fleshy canopy above. It was a full moon, pale and opulent like some great pearl sewn into a dark cushion of velvet. It was quiet out here away from the soft din of human laughter and the crackle of fire. Moss and leaves squished underfoot, Kricketot and Kricketune played their music somewhere in the trees, and the air was thick with the night. Benga led her by the hand, gently pushing the giant leafy plants aside so they could pass as quietly as possible.

“What are we going?” she tried again.

“You’ll see.”

Nuria’s words echoed in her head, and she thought about the flight on Volcarona, that fleeting moment when he’d seemed to her anything but a stranger. His hand was cool in hers in contrast with the warm night air, and she realized she hadn’t yet tried to pull away. Cottonee whistled all of a sudden and leaped from Iris’s head, disappearing through a thick bunch of leaves just ahead.

“Oh!” Iris exclaimed.

Benga pulled her down to a crouching position, startling her, and bade her be quiet. She started to tell him that Cottonee had just run off when he pulled back the wall of fleshy leaves. Iris’s words died in her throat as the lights ahead consumed her every attention.

Tiny Joltik crawled along the wide leaves and up tree trunk, drinking sap and glowing a soft golden yellow. There were hundreds of them lighting up the hidden grotto like so many lanterns. Petilil and Lilligant swayed in their soft light, dropping roots to soak up nutrients from the rich soil. The flowers on the many Lilligant’s heads bloomed in pinks and blues and oranges, and Beautifly and Butterfree perched on the petals and drank the flowers’ nectar.

A cloud of Cottonee floated near the canopy, leaving faint pink dust in their wake that glittered as it fell. Iris searched their ranks for her own Cottonee but could not tell them all apart. They floated about each other in a kind of dance, cooing and whistling and flitting about the glowing Joltik in their webbed nests. Volbeat buzzed about on high and flashed their lights in a rhythm Iris couldn’t decipher. Illumise nestled in the grass among pale moonflowers and orange tiger lilies answered the flashes with their own cadence, each searching for the perfect mate.

“Oh my god,” Iris breathed. “What...?”

Benga grinned. “I said I’d find you some Fairy dust.”

A grunting sound drew their attention ahead. A Musharna floated through the air half asleep and leaving Dream Mist in its wake. Three tiny Munna tottered along after it, bobbing as though trying to stay afloat in water while they struggled to master their Psychic abilities. Musharna was drawn to a particularly sappy tree and began to lick up the sweet honey.

Benga stifled a laugh. “Kinda derpy, isn’t it?”

Iris wasn’t sure how to respond. Never before had she seen such a gathering of wild Pokémon in the midst of...of...
“It’s like they’re dancing,” she said. “All of them.”

Benga tugged gently on her hand. “This way, it’s the best part.”

Slowly, they edged their way around the outskirts of the grotto, careful not to disturb the Ingrained Liligant and Petilil or the signaling Illumise. Iris’s eyes were wide with wonder at all the pretty lights. It was like a carnival just for Benga and herself. They passed by the lethargic Musharna, and Iris got an earful of its snorting as it lurched to find more sap.

Benga led her to the edge of an enormous tree hollow. It was the biggest trunk Iris had ever seen and long dead. Decayed holes split the bark large enough for a human child to pass through, and moss and creeping ivy had overtaken the soft wood to make homes for tiny Oddish and Paras. Benga pulled her down into a crouch again so they could peer through the slit in the tree hollow. Beyond, Pansage and Whimsicott nibbled on overripe Nanab berries and Bellossom swayed in pairs under the light of the flickering Volbeat. A Serperior and her brood of Snivy had claimed a corner of the tree hollow to rest, the mother Serperior watchful as her young stumbled about on their stubby legs and tried to catch the glowing Joltik higher up the trunk.

But what arrested Iris and Benga’s attention was the pair of Pokémon deep in the tree hollow floating just above the mossy ground. A Gallade and a Gardevoir were entwined in what Iris could only describe as a kind of elegant dance. Gardevoir’s flowing skirts rustled in unseen winds and shed rosy dust over the moss that made the moonflowers bloom brighter. The Gallade handled its bladed arms deftly, holding Gardevoir’s tapering arm and spinning her around like a pair of waltzing ballroom dancers. Iris had no words.

“It’s a courting dance,” Benga whispered so close she could feel his breath on the shell of her ear. “Beautiful, right?”

“Right,” she said, suddenly almost on the verge of tears. A tightness knotted her chest, like something locked up inside was now bursting at the seams and it hurt to breathe.

Gallade dipped Gardevoir and bowed low to her, but she spun around him, carried entirely on the telekinesis that suspended them. They moved in perfect sync, every move as much a test of the other’s conviction as it was a show of trust. Iris watched them, enraptured by their almost human elegance, a smile playing at her lips.

Something bumped into her from behind, and she hit her head on the trunk. One of the Munna had been buffeted back by its sibling’s erratic Confusion and now snorted as it wagged its stubby feet to stay aloft. The little dream elephant was making such an effort that when Iris gave it a little push with her hands, it grunted in surprise and shot straight up like a buoy in the water.

It was so ridiculous, the last thing Iris had ever expected to find in this place that the Adriati sailors feared was cursed, that the knot in her chest finally burst and she could not hold back her laughter anymore. It tickled as it flowed out of her and followed the young Munna as surprised by its burst of energy as she was. The cloud of Cottonee above echoed her laughter with whistles, and her own Cottonee swooped down and bumped her in the chest happily, shedding cotton everywhere and a little pink Fairy dust.

“Iris,” Benga said.

He was watching her, but he didn’t share her laughter. She didn’t care.

“Did you see that?” she said between giggles as she hugged Cottonee. “That Munna...oh...!”
She was tearing up from laughing so long and had to wipe her eyes. Benga didn’t share her laughter, but he was smiling softly like he never had before.

“You like it?” he asked.

“This is incredible,” she said without thinking. “How did you? This place, it’s...”

“Oh, the cleverness of me.”

Iris laughed again and leaned against the tree hollow. Above, Joltik and Volbeat continued to light up the night and cast warm glows on the grotto. A few Oddish poked their heads out of the soil and moss to peer at Benga and Iris curiously. Cottonee cooed at them and tried to bounce on top of them, but they shied away and burrowed underground again.

“If you’re Peter Pan then I guess that makes me Captain Hook,” Iris said as she followed the lights above with her eyes, still smiling.

“Aw, come on, give yourself some credit. You’re definitely more of a Tigerlily.”

“Oh, yeah? Why’s that?”

“Because you’re a princess who doesn’t take Peter Pan’s bullshit.”

“Wouldn’t that be Wendy?”

Benga shrugged. “I always preferred Tigerlily. She could probably kick my ass.”

They sat in silence just listening to the Kricketune’s songs and watching the lights. Cottonee grew drowsy in Iris’s lap, and she contented herself with petting its soft wool.

“I knew I was right about you,” Benga said finally. He had that half smile again, not the mocking one or the cocky I-have-a-secret one, but something especially for this soft lighting and the heady air where no one could see them.

“Hm?”

“Your smile. It looks good on you. The laugh was even better.”

Iris smiled again without really thinking about it. Funny how easy it was when it came naturally. “I guess... But I don’t really have much reason to smile.”

“Everybody’s got a reason to smile.”

“Except I can’t figure out what yours is.”

“Mine? I’ve got lotsa reasons.”

“Like what?”

Benga laughed a little. “What is this, an interrogation? Not that I’d be opposed if you wanted to tie me up.”

Iris sat up and her smile fell. “Like what?” she pressed.

“Whoa, hey, I thought we were having a good time?”
“We were until you decided to pull this crap again.”

The nearby Petilil and Liligant began to shy away from Iris’s rising voice, and the Illumise among the flowers fell dark.

“Iris, what’re you talking about?” Benga tried to keep his voice down.

“I’m talking about you. I don’t even know who you are. You show up out of the blue, a vander of all things, and you make these crazy promises about Opelucid.”

“Hey, come on, it’s been like a week. It’s not like I know everything about you.”

“You know who I am and why I’m here. I don’t even know where you’re from.”

“Oh, well, you coulda just asked. I’m originally from Floccesy Town.”

“That’s not the point! What are you really doing here? How did you know about this place? What were you doing in the White Forest? Who are you?”

Musharna and her young Munna brood had spooked as Iris raised her voice and Teleported to safety out of sight. The Kricketune ceased their singing, and the tiny Joltik fell dark and hid in their webbed nests. Benga stared at Iris like he didn’t even know her, and when he reached for her hands, it was the push that tipped her over the edge.

“You don’t even know, do you?” she said.

“What? Iris, I don’t—”

“I’m not stupid, you know. I didn’t get this far by batting my eyelashes and waiting for things to just happen. I see how you are with the crew, with my guards. I’ve watched you so often and I still can’t figure you out. You’re everything to everyone. You’re exactly what they want to see and nothing else.

“You know what the worst part is? That day on the beach in Perry Town I wanted to trust you. A vander! A Titan even other Titans won’t tolerate.”

“Iris, I meant what I said,” Benga tried. “I can help you. I wanna help you, so please—”

“If I wanted a mirror to admire myself, I would carry a compact. I need people I can trust, and you... I don’t even know who you are.”

The Pokémon had hidden away from the grotto and their absence plunged the place into darkness. Only the moon lighted the clearing. Cottonee whimpered softly and huddled into Iris’s hair. She got up, disgusted with how she’d let the night get away from her, with how she’d let him charm her again, and for what? What was he really after? Who was he?

She tried to leave, but Benga got up and grabbed her wrist to hold her back. “You don’t know who I am? You know something? That doesn’t surprise me even a little bit. You don’t know who anybody is.”

Iris tried to pull away, but he held firm. His grip was cold on her skin, scaly.

“You go around like everybody owes you something, but I got news for you: Opelucid doesn’t care about you. The people aren’t waiting for you, they don’t even remember you exist. And Drayden? He’s been the only thing keeping the city going after the Red Plague took everyone away.
“You think you’re something great because King Cadmus was your father? Do you even know *anything* about Cadmus? They called him the Dragonsbane for the way he butchered the common folk in the civil wars thirty years ago. Women, children, plebs, the elderly, didn’t matter. He *dissected* them. Even the carrion birds didn’t want what was left of ‘em.”

Iris tried to pry her wrist free again to no avail. “Let go!”

Benga squeezed her tighter. “You know what your problem is?” he went on like he hadn’t heard her. “You’re so focused on the past that you can’t even see what’s going on right in front of you. It’s not even the past you’re living in, it’s worse. It’s a kid’s delusion. Maybe you’re the one stuck in Neverland, not me.”

Iris was seized by an insidious venom that ignited her veins and gave her the strength to wrench her limb free of his grasp and confront him. “Stuck in Neverland? Says the guy who doesn’t even have a past or a future, so you have to piggyback on mine. You can’t even decide who you are or who you want to be.”

“Better I lie to everybody else than to myself,” Benga said bitterly through his teeth.

The twisting in her chest was back and building again, but this time Iris was sure it wouldn’t burst into elated laughter. “Right, you keep telling yourself that. You know what the saddest part is? I believed you when you said you wanted to help me. And I hate that I still want to believe that because Nuria’s right, we’re the same and what the hell am I doing if I can’t trust even one goddamned person?”

Benga’s short breaths filled the ensuing silence thick with tension and sticky summer heat. They were completely alone in the hidden grotto, and the dark hid the tears Iris was fighting hard to hold back.

“Thought so,” she said, turning away. “Can’t trust a Titan, after all.”

He said nothing, and she felt his eyes on her back as she hastily made her way back the way they’d come. Leaves smacked her in the face and she slipped on the damp moss underfoot. Cottonee cooed timidly on her head, but she didn’t have the energy to comfort it. Tears streamed down her face and she wiped at them furiously, only half seeing where she was headed. No footsteps followed her, and the camp was asleep and quiet when she found it again. Haxorus was gone, off to hunt for its dinner somewhere. Maybe it had caught that fat Musharna and torn its belly asunder.

Iris tripped and stumbled, falling on the sand and shaking as the sobs racked her body. She crawled to her sleeping mat under the tarp she and Nuria had set up earlier with Sceptile’s unwilling help and curled up with her knees to her chest. The nearby fire had died down to embers. The night watch was scattered around the perimeter mostly to the west facing the direction of Striaton in the distance. No one stirred as Iris sobbed for the first time since her mother had passed away. She squeezed her eyes shut and clutched Cottonee close and wished for this awful night to end.

Chapter End Notes

Okay but what about a Benga/Iris Peter Pan AU...
Rosa

Pinwheel Forest was no more welcoming or forgiving even with the two Volucris Rosa had picked up at the abandoned sawmill. The trees were so thick that hardly any diffuse light filtered through the canopy above, and the sensation of walls closing in on all sides had Rosa especially on edge. It seemed to her that they were moving after her, following, and when she would look over her shoulder and point her bow and arrow, there was nothing but the glimmer of shadows in her periphery. Tricks of the light? Or Bugs that scuttled faster than she could follow and knew this place and its traps better than she did?

Leafeon trotted alongside her and kept close, its tapering ears swiveling at every sound, even the ones Rosa didn’t hear. Every few minutes it would hiss at something unseen, and Rosa had to catch her breath and force herself not to jump. Paranoia stalked her like a jungle cat breathing down her neck, but Jack and Louis appeared calm and at ease in this dank maze, vigilant but controlled. They didn’t speak. Rosa did not initiate conversation, knowing they were both still raw and reeling from the deaths of their compatriots, whom they had been forced to leave behind for practical reasons—they would never be able to explain to Team Plasma why they had dragged two dead bodies out of the forest with them. Rosa suspected that another reason to have looted the bodies and left them for the carnivorous Bugs was to throw the beasts off their own scent, but as they walked on eggshells through this death trap, she began to wonder if it was a lost cause. Something was watching her, she could feel it, but there was nothing in the trees but shadows and silence. And every time she closed her eyes, the lifelines burst like a supernova behind her eyelids, blinding her. If she lingered in this place for much longer, she was sure she would go mad.

Jack and Accelgor led the march, while Louis brought up the rear with Vivian’s Heracross, who crawled over the branches above silent as a wraith but making an awful clicking sound every so often. Leafeon hissed whenever it caught sight of the Fighter Bug, unsure whether it was a friend or foe. Rosa walked in the middle with her bow. Her wounded arm stank of copper and overripe citrus, and if she could smell it so pungently, she wondered what else out here could, too.

Jack led the group through a rotting tree hollow, and Rosa was forced to crouch as she ducked to avoid the dewy mushrooms and moss clinging to the roof of the fallen trunk. She briefly remembered the Foongus she had encountered the other day in a similar situation and shivered. There were no Foongus in this tree hollow.

The irascible Jack and his equally irascible Accelgor waited on the other side at the edge of a lagoon fed by a small but turgid creek that wound through the thick trees. The lagoon was deep and blue. A couple Surskit skated along the water, spooked by the presence of humans, but otherwise the lagoon was still and placid.

Jack released Pinsir and his two Bugs took to drinking from the lagoon. When Jack moved to do the same, Rosa set down her bow and kneeled by the edge of the water. She cupped the cool water in her dirty hands and drank deeply. It had an earthy taste, but she was thirsty enough not to take much notice. She filled her water skin and splashed water on her face, then she retrieved the Plasma uniform tied to her pack and rinsed out the bloody mask. She did this all in silence as Leafeon tentatively drank from the pool. Louis watched her as he and his Bugs took their drinks from the lagoon and caught her sniffing the bandaged wound on her arm.

“Better change the bandage,” he said. “Here, let me help.”

Rosa held out her arm and let him unravel the soiled bandage. He handed the bandage to Jack, who
pulled out a lighter from his pants pocket and burned it.

“Best not to leave it behind and give anything a trail to follow us,” Louis said with a small smile as he cleaned and dressed Rosa’s wound. It was no longer bleeding and had dulled to a weak ache.

Rosa said nothing, not wanting to know about what might be out there to follow the smell of blood and hurt. Louis worked quickly. His fingers were long and thin and very precise. Rosa watched him work carefully.

“You have a surgeon’s touch,” she said.

Louis fumbled slightly, but he recovered quickly and finished tending to her fresh bandage. “Yes, well, I should hope so, seeing as I used to practice.”

“Used to?”

Louis withdrew and busied his talented hands with the thong securing his water skin. “I, um, I don’t do that anymore.”

“And Jack?”

Jack took a drink from a small flask that Rosa suspected wasn’t water. “None o’ your damn business, Sylvan.”

Rosa pursed her lips in a thin line but decided to drop it. Men like that were never worth it. And for the job she needed them to do, she didn’t need to know their life’s story. Louis had the decency to look a little abashed at his brother’s callousness.

“Don’t mind him. It’s been a trying day.”

“No need to explain, I get it.” Rosa stood up and tested her arm. “Thanks for this.”

Leafeon had drunk its fill and was standing by, tail erect and almond eyes trained on the Surskit floating on the water’s surface on the other side of the lagoon. Rosa selected a Pokéball from her belt and thumbed the scratch on the red top half.

“What’s that?” Louis asked.

“I’m not really sure yet,” she admitted.

*What was I thinking catching this thing?*

She pressed the release button and Deerling coalesced in the light at the water’s edge. Spooked and in unfamiliar surroundings, the fawn flattened its ears and backed up by the water, dark eyes wide with fear. Louis backpedaled to get out of its way, and Escavalier buzzed near his head, jousting stingers poised. Deerling got a whiff of the strong Bug and made a grunting noise in distress.

“Whoa, shhh, it’s okay,” Rosa said, showing Deerling her palms. “I’m not gonna hurt you, boy.”

Leafeon hissed, and Rosa waved it off before it could do more damage. Jack stopped to watch, but his posture was tense and poised. Pinsir watched Deerling like it hadn’t eaten a good meal in weeks.

“It’s okay, Deerling,” Rosa said again.

“You brought dinner?” Jack said.
“No,” Rosa snapped. “I found him in the woods. His mother was dead, so I took him.”

Deerling pounded the ground in warning. Its fear was palpable, and it let its mouth open and close. A light layer of foam gathered at its lips. She could smell its fear and worried that at any moment it might try for another Energy Ball attack. Rosa swallowed hard and reached out a hand to Deerling.

“It’s okay,” she said again, letting it smell her.

Deerling bucked its head, but Rosa approached with her head down. Male Sawsbuck were known to be proud Pokémon, and only the strongest with the largest antlers could lead herds of fellow Sawsbuck and Stantler. This Deerling was not yet evolved, but Rosa suspected it was close to it, and it had proven its defiant nature before.

“Rosa,” Louis warned, the trepidation evident in his voice.

Rosa closed her eyes and Deerling’s lifelines came alive in her mind. They pulsed with emotion—fear, stress, grief. She kneeled on the damp ground and held out her hand for it. Deerling watched her with no small degree of suspicion, nostrils flaring, but after a moment it ceased its violent stomping and took to watching her warily. Emboldened, Rosa opened her eyes and looked up.

“It’s okay,” she said again. “You’re okay.”

There was much debate in the scientific community about how much human speech Pokémon could understand. Juniper had always said Pokémon understood human emotions quite well and could read them to glean a person’s meaning. Whatever the case, Rosa got the sense that Deerling could read her feelings now. But whether it would trust her intentions was anyone’s guess.

Gingerly, Rosa got to her feet and kept her hand out. The thin layer of froth around Deerling’s mouth drew her eye. “You must be thirsty.”

Leafeon had lost interest in Deerling and took to cleaning its fur. Pinsir had also given up its hungry staring contest and gone back to drinking from the pool. Deerling eyed the water covetously, and Rosa took that as her cue to back up and give it some space. With one eye on the others, Deerling cautiously lowered its head to drink from the lagoon. After a couple seconds, it stood erect again to assess the area, then lowered it again. The fawn repeated this bobbing twice more before it finally relaxed enough to fill its belly with water.

Rosa let out a breath she didn’t know she’d been holding and approached again. Deerling didn’t right itself as it drank, but its wide eye never left her. Slowly so it could see her every movement, she touched a hand to its lichen- and moss-dusted coat. Deerling twitched under her touch but allowed the fleeting contact. Despite herself, she smiled a little.

“You have a gentle touch yourself,” Louis said softly as he watched from a safe distance.

Rosa caught his eye and nodded politely. It was getting dark, and the thick forest only accelerated the descent of shadows. The Surskit retreated to their homes among the tall grasses by the water’s edge.

“We’ll break here for the night,” Jack said. “Best to move during the day.”

“I’ll take the first watch,” Rosa said.

“Uh-uh, me ‘n Louis’ll keep the watch. You can’t see shit in this forest.”

Rosa’s anger flared. “I’ve made it this far on my own.”
“And now you reek o’ blood’n fear.” Jack sniffled, a wet and curdling sound. “I can smell you from here.”

Rosa considered herself a level-headed person by most rights, but she was sorely tempted to give into petty anger and put this Volucris in his place. Louis intervened before she could give into that childish urge.

“It’s okay, Rosa,” he said, diffusing the situation. “Jack has a point. You’re having trouble navigating, right? We’re in a better position to keep a lookout for now. You get some rest. We should be out of the forest tomorrow, and you’ll need your strength.”

Deerling ripped up some sweetgrass growing on the water’s edge and chewed like the food might get up and run away. The little fawn could not fill its belly fast enough. Rosa picked up her bow and winced at the ache in her arm.

“Okay,” she relented.

She debated recalling Deerling to its Pokéball, but figured she would instead let Ferroseed and Leafeon keep an eye on it. The pinecone Pokémon was delighted to be out and about and quickly made a mess spinning around a small section of the lagoon’s shoreline where Deerling had been grazing. The fawn pawed the ground in an effort to ward off Ferroseed, but to little avail. Not much could get Ferroseed down. Rosa settled at the base of a tree on a bed of grass with her bow across her lap and a hand on the serrated hunting knife at her hip. Leafeon curled up next to her but remained vigilant. The feline would not likely get much sleep tonight.

Rosa snacked on a bit of dried Nanab berry she had brought with her from Nuvema, which attracted Ferroseed. The barbed Pokémon bumped her padded leg, and Rosa tore off a piece of fruit for it. Delighted, Ferroseed whirred and dug a little hole in the dirt as it quickly devoured its meal. Deerling watched them with wide eyes but did not approach.

Nearby, Louis settled under another tree. Escavalier and Heracross were up in the canopy doing who knew what. Rosa decided not to dwell on it. She’d never particularly had a grudge against Bugs, but she’d never cared for the things. As for Volucris, they were hit or miss in her experience. The rarest Tamers after the extinct Magi and the generational Mediums, Volucris kept to themselves and valued familial bonds over all others. They were a frail bunch, prone to physical weakness and the elements, but their constitutions were extraordinary. Strong of will and spirit, Volucris were rumored to be able to fend off even the most insidious diseases and ailments. They were survivors, much like the Bugs they tamed.

Rosa had once heard of a Volucris in distant Johto, a young boy from Azalea Town, who had been the unfortunate victim of Veleno poisoning as a child. There was no cure for Veleno poison, but this boy had survived the venom and had reportedly become Azalea’s Gym Leader for his hardy spirit. He was only fifteen, or so the story went. Rosa wondered how long he would live through a fatal poisoning. Long enough, she supposed, if the town had named him their chief protector. Anybody else would have succumbed within days of infection, and he was still going strong.

Burgh of Castelia, too, was a Volucris and tough of spirit and constitution by reputation. Castelia was the richest city in the Trident, welcoming all manner of tourists and businesspeople and trainers from around the world. And yet, Castelia was an insular city, that is, the true Castelia. Burgh was known to keep his privacy, never giving interviews to local news agencies or traveling outside the city or even going outside much. Where other Gym Leaders were often topics of conversation among Tamers and plebs alike for their accomplishments, pedigrees, and controversies, Burgh was something of a mystery. Gym Leader Lenora had apparently known Burgh well, but Gym Leader Lenora was dead with her head on a pike feeding flies in Striaton.
Rosa’s gaze flickered to Jack, who had taken the first watch. He had climbed up a tree overlooking the lagoon. Pinsir remained on the ground, but Accelgor was nowhere to be seen. Rosa swallowed the sensation of eyes on her, watching from the shadows. She was blind in here, she admitted to herself. Hopefully these Volucris and their Bugs were not.

Sleep came easily with Leafeon curled up beside her and Ferroseed Ingrained in the damp soil by the water’s edge, but it was fraught with dreams. Rosa saw Lenora bent over, the sword that came down on her head. Except it wasn’t Cress who slew her but N himself. He was a young man with pale skin, almost sickly, and the saddest grey eyes you ever saw. He smiled that enigmatic smile he had when he addressed crowds of Plasma recruits and preached his philosophy to them, the smile Rosa remembered so well from the day she’d first laid eyes on him. Blood splattered his face and he reached out a hand to her. She tried to reach back, but in her hands was the sword that had severed Lenora’s head.

Blood coated her fingers and palms, Lenora’s blood, and Rosa dropped the weapon with a clatter, tears blurring her eyes. She shook her head, willing herself to wake up. On the ground, Lenora’s severed head stared up at her with glassy eyes half-eaten by wild Murkrow and a cheek rotted and inflamed red with pus. Her lips moved as if to form words, but all that came out was a rattling whisper, an unholy sound that Rosa understood nonetheless. It was her fault, her fault that this had happened. The blood was on her hands, hands that N took in his soft ones and smiled that slight smile, a little pitying and a little sad and a little lost.

This isn’t right, Rosa screamed in her head, but all that came out were hiccups and a pathetic sob. This isn’t how it’s supposed to be!

N’s hands tightened around hers, squeezing until they hurt, tightening until she bled—her blood and Lenora’s mixing, and Rosa looked up but N wasn’t there, he was never there, and it was Ghetsis grinning down at her and making that death rattle between crooked yellow teeth that seemed to grow longer and sharper before her eyes, his eyes, two black pits that burned like black fire and sucked all the light away, no lifelines, no light, and this was true blindness, she realized, not the brightness of the forest that seemed a million miles away but this abyssal night darker than any night before it, thousands upon thousands of nights like he’d taken them all into himself, more nights and more darkness than any one man should ever see, much less possess, and he squeezed her hands in his claws and reached for the pendant around her neck and Rosa screamed, anything to get away, to keep him away, he would not take this from her, he would not crush this last little ray of light that was left and plunge it into darkness, too, because it wasn’t his, it didn’t belong to him, this wasn’t right, this wasn’t how it was supposed to be, and N wasn’t gone, he couldn’t be, he couldn’t be—

“Rosa!”

Her body was moving before her mind pulled free of the nightmare, her hand reaching for the hunting knife at her hip and slashing out in front of her on instinct. The death rattling from her dream had not abated, in fact it grew louder now, and her knife’s jagged edge scraped something hard. An angry wind buffeted her back and the rattling filled her head—not rattling, buzzing.

Rosa scrambled to her feet just as Leafeon leaped into the air and rammed the source of the buzzing that had gotten so close. A Beedrill about five feet tall with twin stingers that would put even Escavalier to shame was blown back by Leafeon’s reckless Take Down attack. Ferroseed whirred and lifted the roots it had planted out of the ground to slash about like whipping lashes.

“Rosa!” Louis shouted from somewhere nearby.

Rosa whirled and squinted through the darkness. Moonlight filtered through the treetops and
offered meager light, enough to catch the shadows buzzing about. The Bugs were swarming the clearing—a few angry Beedrill out for blood and Combee followers, slower but no less deadly if they managed to sting you. Rosa didn’t have time to be afraid when she saw Escavalier cut through four Combee and plunge its stingers into a Beedrill with a powerful X-Scissor attack. She caught a glimpse of Jack and Pinsir across the lagoon, but they were little more than a blur as they circled the pond to get to Louis and Rosa.

Another Beedrill came after Rosa to join the one Leafeon had rebuffed, and Rosa noticed despairingly that they seemed to be converging on her while they ignored Louis a short distance away.

“Thorny!” she shouted.

Ferroseed launched its roots into the air and Power Whipped one of the charging Beedrill, catching it by its right stinger and throwing it off-course. Rosa ran at it and plunged her knife into its striped abdomen, wrenched the blade, and spilled green guts and blood all over her arms. The other Beedrill attacked with Twineedle just as Rosa was pulling out her knife. Desperate, she let the wounded Beedrill fall on top of her to shield herself just as the other Beedrill descended on her.

Leafeon hissed somewhere to her left, and a bright green light flashed through the darkness all of a sudden. Something heavy rammed her, pushing the dead Beedrill carcass down over her and crushing her into the earth. She couldn’t breathe for a moment, terrified that her ribs had been crushed, but breath soon returned. The weight on top of her shifted, and the dead Beedrill’s stinger scraped her animal hide shirt, sparing her skin protected underneath it. A splash of poison trailed in the stinger’s weight as she tried to wriggle free with all her might.

The sounds of battle continued as Louis and Jack presumably attacked the rabid Bugs. Rosa concentrated on extricating herself before another bee could descend on her in her helpless state. Something smashed into the weight on top of her—Leafeon’s Headbutt jostled the dead Beedrill enough for Rosa to crawl out from under the carcass. Panting and shaking to catch her breath, Rosa scrambled away from the poisonous Bug. Leafeon stood in front of her, alert to danger, while Ferroseed whirred and withdrew its vines like retractable tentacles. Deerling stood over the second Beedrill, its hooves coated in dark ooze and its nose and mouth glowing with the aftereffects of an Energy Ball. Louis’s Heracross yanked its massive horn from the dead Beedrill’s carcass with a disgusting squelch, severing the Bug clean in half. Rosa swallowed the dryness in her throat painfully as she stared at Deerling and marveled at its interference on her behalf.

Jack and Pinsir had taken out a Vespiquen, an enormous bee with a tail stinger as long as a man’s arm and easily larger than any of the Beedrill. Rosa squinted through the darkness as they tackled the queen bee to the ground and Accelgor descended to Water Shuriken her head off and pummel it to a pulp. The Combee buzzed about in fright and chaos, unsure what to do with their queen eliminated, and retreated to the forest as though released from some spell to fight to their deaths. Five Beedrill carcasses littered the ground, one floated in the lagoon, and the lone Vespiquen lay motionless in a heap.

“Everybody alive?” Jack said, spitting.

“Yes,” Louis called back. “What the hell was that?”

“Fuck if I know.”

Deerling remained alert for the smallest of sounds but didn’t flinch when Rosa walked around the Beedrill carcasses toward it. Now that her eyes had adjusted to the darkness a little and the adrenaline rush had dulled to a steady throb in her head, she got a look at her attackers. The two
Beedrill were lying on top of each other, and much of their blood was on her arms. Violet venom mingled with their green entrails on the ground and on their bristly bodies. Aghast, Rosa kneeled down and got a better look at the bodies.


“Yeah, over here...” she trailed off as she tried to make sense of what she was seeing. “Oh my god.”

“Hey,” Louis said, joining her. “They really came after you. Are you sure you’re okay? They didn’t sting you?”

When she didn’t respond, he looked down at the carcasses.

“What... What is that?”

“Oi, Louis,” Jack said across the way where he crouched by the Vespiquen carcass. “You better take a look at this.”

“I think you better look at this,” Louis said, kneeling beside Rosa to get a better look at the Beedrill. “What on earth... This looks like...almost like Nidoking quills.” He ran a gloved hand over one of the long sharp quills growing from Beedrill’s mutilated abdomen, and his finger came away streaked with purple venom. “Beedrill venom is clear, and it produces very little of the stuff in highly concentrated doses. This is...”

“It’s Chimera,” Rosa said, dreading the word even as she said it. “Someone experimented on these Pokémon and brainwashed them to attack us deliberately.”

“What’d you just say, Sylvan?” Jack demanded. He’d joined them since they wouldn’t check out the Vespiquen carcass. “Shit, that’s the same as Vespiquen over there, those barbs.”

“Wait a moment,” Louis said as he gingerly examined the barbs protruding from Beedrill. “These aren’t grafted on; they’re growing naturally out of its carapace. But that’s impossible. Beedrill cross breed with Vespiquen, but never with the Nidoran lines. It’s impossible.”

“There’s nothing natural about this,” Rosa said. “Humans did this. It’s a project code named Chimera. I encountered it in Kanto, where Team Rocket was experimenting with it as a way to biologically mutate Pokémon and control them. But I think it originated here in Unova.”

“Biological mutation?” Louis said, horrified. “That’s... That would require years of research, precision research to get it right. Even one small flaw could end in failure. Not to mention the funding. If what you’re saying is true, then it would mean there are some very smart people with a lot of time and resources behind this.”

“You mean demented people,” Jack spat. “This ain’t right. I don’t like the smell o’ those bodies.”

Rosa’s skin was cold and clammy from the fright of her nightmare and the shock of this sudden attack so soon after. She held a hand over her wounded arm. “It’s Team Plasma,” she said, feeling the sting of betrayal on her tongue as she said the words. “Ghetsis... He’s behind this.”

“You mean those Neo freaks,” Jack said as though the words cut. “I knew they were bad news, but this is another level o’ fucked up.”

“How do you know all this?” Louis asked.
Rosa averted her gaze. She could not look them in the eye. “I work with Professor Aurea Juniper. She had her suspicions, and then after what happened in Striaton and Nacrene, the evidence against them was too much to ignore.”

Louis’s eyes were heavy on the side of her face, accusatory. “What else do you know that you haven’t told us?”

She shook her head. “Nothing. That’s why I have to get to Castelia. I need answers.”

“Hey, uh-uh, we ain’t involved in whatever the hell this is.” Jack gestured disgustedly at the fallen Beedrill aberrations. “Those Neos were never welcome in Castelia, Burgh made sure o’ that.”

“But N’s followers were always welcomed in Castelia, right?” Rosa countered.

Jack and Louis exchanged a look, and Rosa knew she had them.

“They’re still there, aren’t they?” Rosa’s heart raced at the prospect of reuniting with Team Plasma, the true Team Plasma. “N’s followers are still welcome in Castelia.”

“It’s not what you think,” Louis said.

Rosa looked between the brothers, her confidence riding a wave of hope. “I’m one of them,” she insisted. “I’m N’s true follower.”

Jack looked even more suspicious of her than he had all day. “You’re Team Plasma.”

“N’s Team Plasma,” Rosa clarified. “The Neos are as much my enemy as yours, you saw that yourself. Please, I just want to find out what happened to N and the rest of his true followers.”

“Why?” Louis asked.

“Because this Neo Team Plasma is out of control! They have to be stopped and Team Plasma’s good name has to be restored before Ghetsis can spread his influence any farther. Please, I just want to find N. He can make this right.”

There was a short silence as the Volucris brothers regarded her. It was Jack who spoke first.

“Don’t know ‘bout N,” he said gruffly. “But if you’re really serious, then you should talk with old man Rood.”

“Rood?” Rosa said incredulously. She’d heard that he was the only one of N’s original Seven Sages who had escaped before Ghetsis’s purge, but there had been no news on his whereabouts or even if he was still alive. Her mind raced at what this could mean. If Rood was still alive and well, then surely N... “Rood’s alive? And he’s in Castelia?”

“Jack,” Louis warned.

“He’s alive,” Jack confirmed. “He’n the other couple hundred’re so true believers left.”

A couple hundred...

Rosa’s spirits fell, almost shattering at that realization. Team Plasma used to be so popular, its message—N’s message—prevalent from Aspertia to Humilau. To think that his vision for a better world had all but vanished, surviving only in the hearts of a couple hundred people, was almost a harder blow than the cancerous proliferation of Ghetsis’s Neo Team Plasma.
“Jack, I’m not sure this is the right time for this conversation,” Louis said.

It was as if the brothers had temporarily switched their roles as Louis’s suspicions of Rosa snowballed.

“My promise still stands,” Rosa said. “I’ll get you to Castelia if you get me out of this forest. Please, I’m on your side. You have to believe me.”

Jack crossed his arms and looked pointedly at his brother. Louis rubbed his eyes tiredly.

“Trust’s not an easy thing to come by these days,” Louis said. “I’d like to trust you, Rosa, truly. But this...” He gestured at the fallen Pokémon. “I don’t know what to make of this. I can’t bring this to Castelia. There’s too much at stake.”

“Then help me put a stop to it,” she pleaded with him. “I can’t do it alone.”

After a few moments’ hesitation he nodded, and Jack whistled for his Bugs. Accelgor hovered perfectly in midair, its arms crossed and its red hood spotted with Vespiquen’s green blood.

“Hope you got your beauty sleep, Sylvan,” Jack said. “We gotta move ‘fore something bigger’n meaner comes sniffing around.”

Still a little shaken but feeling markedly more energized at the thought of being reunited with former Team Plasma comrades, Rosa scooped up Ferroseed in her good arm while Louis called to his Pokémon. It was still dark, a couple hours until dawn. Leafeon shook out its fur and rubbed against Rosa’s leg. She owed her Pokémon her life, a humbling realization when it was usually the much larger Serperior and Swanna who got her out of most sticky situations.

Most humbling of all, however, was Deerling’s intervention. The fawn still kept its distance, but it didn’t balk when Rosa reached out her hand for it. Dark eyes alert and ears standing on end, Deerling nonetheless allowed her to run a hand down its long neck.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

When she slowly showed it its Pokéball, Deerling didn’t flinch away. Rosa recalled it for safekeeping and sighed. If it hadn’t been for Deerling, she would be full of Beedrill poison and dying a painful death on the ground. Louis handed her the folded Team Plasma uniform she’d left out to dry for the night, and after recalling Ferroseed, Rosa stuffed it in her pack.

“You’re not making it all up, right?” he asked. “You really do want to help?”

Rosa held his gaze. “I do. I’m not making it up, I swear. N can fix everything. I just have to find him.”

He nodded. “All right. Then I guess all that’s left is to get to the ship.” He held out his hand for her, and Rosa accepted his help after a moment’s consideration.

“Hurry it up,” Jack called from across the lagoon.

Louis gestured for Rosa to go ahead of him, so she hiked her pack over her shoulders, steadied her bow, and started after Jack with Leafeon at her side. She followed Jack down to his footsteps, not trusting her washed out vision and the shadows, but took comfort in the knowledge that each step would bring her closer to the edge of the forest. Closer to N and the truth.

She glanced back at the dead Beedrill and Vespiquen briefly, happy to be leaving them behind.
even if it meant compounding her exhaustion. Their mutated quills glistened with poison under the little moonlight that penetrated the canopy like a thousand bloody needles, and she wondered fleetingly how they had found her—and who, if anyone, had sent them.

They disappeared from view as she slipped back into the thick of the forest after Jack, and she was left to puzzle over the eerie confrontation.

It was early afternoon by the time Rosa and the Volucris brothers reached the edge of Pinwheel Forest and the coast. It was a foggy day and impossible to see too far out to sea, but somewhere to the northwest lay Castelia City with its many skyscrapers. Rosa crouched in the foliage between Jack and Louis as the three of them scoped out the coast and Plasma Agents occupying it.

“That’s our ship,” Louis said, indicating the barge moored in the bay.

It was a small ship built for transport and capable of accommodating ten or so people, by Rosa’s estimate. A team of Plasma Agents in the same black and grey uniforms as the one Rosa had taken from the dead agent in the forest stood around. Two were on the beach sharing a cigarette. Another moved around in the control room reading through a newspaper.

“I count three on the ship,” Jack said. “Could be more below deck.”

“One more,” Rosa said, her hand pressed to the sand and her closed eyes following the Plasma Agents’ lifelines in the barge. It was strange being able to pick them out so distinctly after the long days and nights stumbling through Pinwheel Forest blind. “Are you guys ready to go ahead with the plan?”

Jack snorted. “Buncha Snubbull shit if y’ask me.”

“I think it’s our only option right now,” Louis said, the dread evident in his tone. “They already outnumber us, and that’s not counting whatever Pokémon they have.”

Okay.” Rosa receded to the woods a bit and shrugged off her pack. “Gimme a second.”

She quickly changed out of her animal skins and leather and tugged on the Plasma uniform. It was a little snug, but it would do. The mask smelled damp when she pulled it over the lower half of her face, and she tried not to think about how that Plasma Agent’s congealed eye had seeped into the fabric. She rolled up her other clothes and clipped them to her pack. When she rose, Jack and Louis stared blankly.

“Well?” she asked.

“This is never gonna work,” Jack said.

“I don’t know, I think she looks just like them,” Louis said.

“It doesn’t matter what she looks like, they’ll see right through her the minute she opens that mouth.”

“Let me worry about my mouth,” Rosa interrupted before they could get into an argument. “You held up your end of the bargain, so now it’s my turn. Just...stay quiet and look pissed off. Shouldn’t be too hard for you.”
Rosa retrieved some rope from her pack and loosely tied Louis’s hands behind his back. She placed his two Pokéballs in his hands and told him to keep them fisted so he wouldn’t be found out.

“No way,” Jack said when she turned on him.

“We have to look the part,” Louis said.

“I won’t tie them tight. You should have no problem getting free,” Rosa reassured him.

Jack scowled. “I’m tellin’ you, this ain’t never gonna work.” But he looped his hands behind his back and let Rosa wrap the cord around them just tight enough to look convincing. She placed his Pokéballs in his hands just as she did with Louis when she was done and looked the brothers over.

“Oh,” she said more to herself than to them. “Let’s get this over with.”

She nodded to them to go ahead of her and followed them out of the forest. The Plasma Agents smoking on shore noticed them not long after as they approached the barge and ceased their conversation. Rosa pushed Jack and Louis each between their shoulder blades roughly without warning, sending Jack stumbling. Louis shot her a look over his shoulder, and she glared back, willing him to stay in character. The two Plasma Agents on the shore walked to meet her and her ‘prisoners’.

“You, that’s close enough,” the one on the left said. He had black eyes and blacker skin, and he was quite tall and muscular under his uniform. His partner, a slightly overweight pasty man who was sweating rather profusely, remained silent.

Rosa marched right up to the pair but addressed only the first agent. “Liber esse,” she said with confidence as she saluted him.

The agents seemed a bit caught off guard by her formality, but true to form, they saluted back. Tall, Dark, and In Charge responded, “Liber sum.”

Rosa studied both agents quickly. Their uniforms were indeed identical, but the pasty one wore a small inconspicuous badge over his left breast inlaid in silver. It was nothing special, just a button, but Rosa recognized it instantly from her days with the former Team Plasma. She shifted her attention away from the first agent and focused on his shorter companion.

“Captain,” she said confidently. “I’ve come to report that the team dispatched from Castelia has been eradicated. These two are all that’s left.” She pushed Jack and Louis again, and Jack coughed. She hoped he wouldn’t lose his temper and blow this for them all.

The sweaty man blinked up at Rosa, eyes narrowed with a touch of suspicion. “...Good work, Grunt.”

Rosa fought to maintain her composure. So Neo Team Plasma had not changed the marks of leadership or their mantra. It was a lucky break, she allowed, and one that had probably saved her life just now.

“Eradicated, you say?” the taller Grunt said. “Why are these two still alive?”

“They’re Volucris,” Rosa said automatically. “Gym trainers who work directly with Gym Leader Burgh. I thought the captain here would want to question them. Castelia is our next target, isn’t it?”

The pasty captain watched her, unblinking. He dabbed his forehead with a damp handkerchief that did little more than smear his sweat around.
“Epsilon Team’s orders were to kill the entire party after they revealed the location of the sawmill,” the Grunt pressed. “I radioed the boys in Nacrene myself.”

“That was before I discovered that these two were Gym trainers,” Rosa countered. “Their information is invaluable, and their connection to Burgh could be useful. They’re his cousins.”

“I don’t give a fuck who they are,” the Grunt snapped. “Your orders were to get rid of them. All of them.”

“Well I don’t give a fuck what the orders were,” Rosa snapped right back. “One of their party was Burgh’s sister, but she’s dead because somebody got sloppy. Dead Volucris are useless to us. These two could still provide some leverage.”

“That’s quite enough, Tariq,” the pasty captain said. “Orders are meant to be followed, but not at the expense of the greater goal.”

“But sir,” Tariq protested.

By now, more of the Plasma Agents occupying the Castelian barge had come out to the deck when they heard voices. Rosa counted four onboard, three women and one man. They all had weapons—dirks and daggers and clubs—and one of the women had a female Unfezant out perched on the railing. The bird glared down at Rosa snobbishly.

“You’ve discovered quite a lot about these two,” the captain said. “Tell me, how did you get them to talk?”

“By offering not to kill them. You know how craven Volucris are.”

A couple of the women on the ship shared a chuckle at Rosa’s coldness.

“Bitch,” Jack spat.

Rosa kicked him in the back of the leg, and he crashed to his knees in the sand. He shot her a nasty look over his shoulder but said nothing more. Maybe it was easier than she’d thought for him to keep up the character of hating her. The thought made her frown.

Keep it together.

“You made the right call,” the captain said. “Keeping them alive for questioning, that is. But tell me, how did you manage to get them back here by yourself? Pinwheel Forest is notoriously difficult to navigate. Some might even say impossible.”

Rosa didn’t have a lie for him, so instead she released Serperior from its Pokéball. The regal basilisk towered several feet over even Tariq at its full height and tasted the air with its forked tongue. Tariq swore in surprise and backed up a few steps. The captain also backed up and dropped his soiled handkerchief in the sand.

“I see,” the captain said. “Naira, radio Nacrene,” he called to one of the women on the Castelian barge. “Tell them we have two hostages.” He paused and eyed Rosa. “Grunt, your name and
identification number?"

Rosa bit the inside of her cheek. This was something she could not talk her way out of. As soon as Naira got through to Nacrene and told them her credentials, they would out her as an imposter.

“I’m Rosa, identification number five-oh-seven-nine-six,” she said, using her old ID number from Team Plasma’s early days.

The captain nodded, but his eyes lingered on her just a little too long.

_He suspects me_, Rosa thought, swallowing the urge to panic. But he wouldn’t be able to confirm anything until Nacrene did it for him. Naira disappeared into the ship’s hull to radio Nacrene then, and Rosa guessed she had a couple minutes tops before her cover was blown. She needed to make sure the agents aboard the ship were neutralized.

Rosa grabbed Jack and Louis by the collars and yanked hard to get them both to their feet, then marched them toward the ship. “You got somewhere to chain these two up?” she called out to the Plasma Agents still on deck.

The lone man of their group, an older guy with salt and pepper hair sticking out from under his beret, pushed off the railing and lowered the ramp for Rosa. “Below deck,” he said. “This way.”

Rosa squeezed Jack’s and Louis’s shoulders, a silent message, and sent them up the ramp in single file. She was about to follow when the captain called her back.

“I’m curious, Rosa,” he said. “Your Serperior’s quite the specimen, but even so, to subdue two Volucris on your own and force them to lead you out of the forest seems like quite a lot for a woman by herself. What happened to the rest of Epsilon Team?”

Rosa brushed her hand over Swanna’s Pokéball tucked into the hem of her skirt and turned back to the beach. Serperior slithered behind her and blinked its double eyelids. “They went in search of the sawmill. The one we intercepted the Volucris at was abandoned.”

_The best lie is the truth_, she told herself. _Keep it simple._

Tariq grabbed a Pokéball from his belt but didn’t release it. “Captain’s right. It’s weird that you’re alone. We always travel in teams of two. Who’s your partner?”

Rosa forced herself to breathe, for once thankful for the musty mask that shielded half her face. “I don’t have a partner. We were attacked by wild Beedrill in the forest. He didn’t make it.”

“But you did.” Tariq gave her a scornful once-over as he fingered the Pokéball in his left hand.

Back on the Castelian barge, the male Plasma Agent had disappeared below deck with both Jack and Louis. There was no sign of them. What the hell were they doing?

“What’s the name of Epsilon’s team captain?” the portly captain asked.

Serperior lowered its head and hissed as Rosa took a discreet step back.

“Captain!” Naira shouted from the open window in the control room. “Epsilon Team never made it back to Nacrene!” She held the radio to her ear as she reported in real time the news out of Nacrene.

The next few seconds went by in a blur. Rosa tore Swanna’s Pokéball from her belt and tossed it
just as Tariq put the pieces together and released his own Pokémon, a spiky Nidorino. The sweaty captain’s jowls jiggled under his damp mask and he threw up his hands to retreat behind Tariq. Rosa went for an arrow from her quiver, and Serperior let out a screaming hiss as it struck and slammed into Nidorino with its powerful tail. The Plasma Agents on deck shouted and went for their Pokéballs.

“Air Slash!” Rosa commanded as she nocked and loosed an arrow.

Swanna honked and beat its powerful wings. Blades of wind cut through the air like chakrams and descended on the shoreline, kicking up whirlwinds of sand and seawater and separating Tariq from the captain. Tariq cried out as a blade of wind slashed his leg, severing it at the knee.

Rosa’s arrow missed the Plasma Captain by pure luck. He lurched and rolled in the sand under the force of Swanna’s attack, and Rosa’s arrow went awry, lost to the swirling sands. On deck, Unfezant took to the skies to chase the much larger Swanna, while the other agents released more Pokemon—a Flaafy, a Simipour, and a hulking Probopass—onto the deck and the beach. Sand filled the air in the wake of Swanna’s attack and gave Rosa some cover while she drew another arrow.

A Thunderbolt from Flaafy cut through the wind and sand and struck the beach not three feet from Rosa, sending her stumbling backwards to avoid the shock out of pure luck. Fulgurite bloomed like a geyser rising from the sand where the lightning crystallized the sand. Tariq’s wailing pierced the air and made Rosa cringe.

“Kill her!” the captain shouted somewhere to Rosa’s left.

She followed the sound of his voice and squinted through the settling sand to level an arrow at him. But before she could take her aim, a commotion from the barge preceded more screams and a bloodcurdling ripping sound.

“Son of a—!”

Rosa looked up just in time to see Heracross Mega Horn Simipour over the railing and into the sea. Jack and Louis had gotten free and released their Bugs below deck and now took the rest of the Plasma Agents by surprise. Naira in the control room had locked the door and was shouting incoherently into the radio, while Pinsir rammed the door to no avail. Accelgor was small and fast enough to slip in through the window Naira had opened previously and viciously attacked her from behind. Blood splattered one of the windshields in the control room, and her screaming ceased.

Rosa had her own problems on the shore. Even with Tariq and his Nidorino down for the count, the captain was still sloshing about in the water trying to get away. Rosa was not about to let him and loosed her arrow. This time it struck its mark in his left ass cheek, sending him face planting into the water with a grunt. Simipour rose out of the waves riding a tumescent whirlpool, but Louis shouted for Escavalier to ram it with Iron Head. The two Pokémon collided in a flurry of sea spray, and Simipour’s neck snapped with a sickening crack as Escavalier’s steely armor hit it at full force. They fell together into the water, while Jack and Louis focused on the Plasma Agents themselves.

Swanna was zipping through the air and having trouble with the smaller and faster Unfezant. She honked in distress as Unfezant grazed her over and over with Wing Attacks, and Flaafy let loose another Thunderbolt that nearly fried both birds. Probopass moved slowly but was gaining momentum and making a beeline for Rosa and Serperior.

“Serperior! Solar Beam!” she shouted.
Serperior threw back its head and opened its mouth, revealing fangs as long as butcher knives. Harsh golden light gathered in the depths of its throat and swirled together. Probopass’s natural electromagnetic radiation reacted to the churned sands and flurried them together in a giant wave as it charged. The Earth Power wave it generated reared up in front of it like a tsunami.

Rosa aimed her bow at the sky as she backed up from the incoming Earth Power attack, eyes darting between the immediate danger to her own life and Unfezant threatening Swanna’s. “Any day now!”

Probopass charged alongside its attack and Serperior finally released Solar Beam just as the deluge swept over it. For a split second the world went dark as Rosa stumbled and got a mouthful of sand. Then all of a sudden, a searing bright light penetrated the darkness and brought with it a stifling wave of heat. Solar Beam obliterated the sand debris, reducing it to ashes, and rammed Probopass hard in the left flank. Rosa got a window of clear blue sky for just a breath and a half, and she let loose her arrow. Unfezant screamed in pain as the steel arrowhead pierced its belly, and unable to fly, it tumbled out of the sky and landed in the sea with a heavy splash.

Probopass was thrown back to the shallows. Its left side was warped and half melted from the nearly point-blank Solar Beam it had taken. Serperior shook sand out of its collar, but its tough scales and natural resistance had protected it from the worst of the Earth Power attack.

On deck, the remaining female Plasma Agent shouted for Flaafy to roast Rosa and Serperior with another Thunderbolt while she vaulted over the railing into the shallows. But Jack was right behind her and crashed into her from above, pummeling her into the sand and holding her head under the water as she thrashed. Flaafy squealed in distress over its trainer’s predicament, but Pinsir fell upon the electric sheep from above and tackled it to the ground. The pincers on its head whirred as it powered up a Horn Drill attack and gouged Flaafy’s unprotected stomach. Sparks jumped in between the Pokémon, but Pinsir hardly seemed to notice as it churned Flaafy’s innards to a pulp and began to feast. Flaafy squealed in shock and pain as it was eaten alive by the giant Bug, but eventually fell silent and stopped twitching.

Rosa lowered her bow and let her head fall back, exhausted. After days of living blind and in constant paranoia that something would eat her alive, it was finally over. She was out of the woods and safe again.

Escavalier had washed up on shore, dazed and waterlogged but still breathing. Louis vaulted over the side of the barge and dragged the heavy Bug to dry land to inspect it for damage. He opened up his pack and retrieved a glowing Potion in a round bottle to feed to Escavalier. Heracross kept an eye out from the barge’s railing, its massive horn glistening with Simipour’s blood.

“Everybody okay?” Rosa called.

“Peachy,” Jack said. He splashed to shore, leaving the Plasma Agent floating facedown and motionless in the shallows behind him.

Tariq had bled out on the beach and was half buried in sand from Probopass’s earlier attack. Probopass itself remained struggling in the shallows, and Rosa gave it a wide berth. Swanna landed in the damp sand nearby. Her feathers were streaked with red from Unfezant’s merciless attacks, and Rosa immediately went to her side to try and soothe her.

“It’s okay, Swanna. We’ll get you fixed up good as new, I promise,” she said softly as she ran her hands over the swan’s blue chest feathers. She recalled the large Flyer, hoping Swanna would be okay until they reached Castelia and Rosa could check her into a Pokémon Center for treatment. The wounds didn’t look bad, but the thought of letting her Pokémon suffer any longer than
absolutely necessary weighed heavily on her heart.

Serperior poked experimentally at Nidorino’s unconscious body, but decided against swallowing it whole. The poison would be too much of a hassle to deal with. Unfezant’s carcass had washed up on shore along with the arrow still protruding from its belly. Rosa fished the fat bird from the water, retrieved her arrow, and tossed its carcass toward Serperior. The huge serpent hissed as it spread its maw impossibly wide, dislocating the jaw, and then bit down on Unfezant feet first. Slowly, it inched the bird down its throat past those wicked fangs.

“Oh,” Louis said, looking away in disgust.

“We coulda eaten that ourselves,” Jack reprimanded.

“If you want to fight Serperior for it, be my guest,” Rosa said.

Accelgor emerged from the control room looking like it had bathed in Naira’s blood, though it appeared calm and collected as ever as it buzzed close to Jack.

“That didn’t go exactly as I imagined it would,” Louis said after he recalled Escavalier and washed the blood from his face.


Jack chuckled humorlessly. “You’re a crazy bitch, you know that?”

Rosa sheathed her bow. “I’m not crazy. And you’re welcome, by the way.”

“Agghh...”

Moaning drew their attentions to the fat captain bleeding in the water. The arrow Rosa had shot into his buttocks remained firmly lodged, and he was very pale from loss of blood.

“That one’s still alive,” Louis said worriedly.

“Leave him. He’ll be dead soon enough,” Rosa said, heading for the barge and eager to get out of this uniform. Serperior slithered onto the ship after her.

“You,” the captain rasped. “You’ll pay for this!”

Jack marched right up to him and shoved him on his ass in the water, which snapped the arrow still stuck in him in two and had him howling in pain as the steel head dug its way in deeper. “Not fuckin’ likely.”

Louis followed Rosa onto the ship and helped her lob the other bodies over the railing. They fell into the water with sad splashes and floated, bobbing in the waves like inflatable dolls. Clouds of red spread under them. Carvanha and Sharpedo would be on this place within the hour, and Rosa did not want to be around to greet them.

Jack climbed on board the ship and kicked down the ramp, while Louis busied himself in the control room. The radio was buzzing with Team Plasma voices from Nacrene asking for updates and status reports. He cut the signal, started up the boat’s engine, and took a rag to the blood-spattered windshield Accelgor had left behind.

“Team Plasma will prevail!” the captain shouted pitifully up at them. “You’ll never live to see our glory come to fruition!”
Rosa leaned over the railing and glared down at him. “Team Plasma will prevail. N will prevail. And you’ll never live to see his glory.”

The captain stared up at her with a mixture of delirium and fury, sputtering as the waves buffeted him like a beached Wailord washed up on shore. Rosa could not stand the sight of him.

“Louis, are we ready to sail?” she asked through the open window to the control room.

“Yes,” he said. “We’ll reach Castelia in about four hours.”

“Good.”

Rosa recalled Serperior and headed to the ship’s bow to gaze into the foggy distance. Once they were out to sea, the view would open up and she would be able to see Castelia’s famed skyline in the distance. She leaned over the metal railing, breathing deeply.

Jack joined her at the prow. Blood speckled his patchy blond beard and his clothes were damp. “How’s that for craven?”

Rosa cracked a smirk in spite of herself. “I doubt I’ll ever say a bad word about Volucris ever again.” She side-eyed him. “Even if it was to save your skin.”

Jack snorted. “I’ll hold you to that, Rosa.”

Louis turned the ship out of the bay in a gentle arc and sped up once they were clear of the shoals. Bodies tumbled over each other in their wake in a sea of red, but Rosa did not look back. Soon she would have the answers she sought, she was sure of it. N was waiting.

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Castelia City was a city in every sense of the word. From its vast port packed with ships of all shapes and sizes to the bustling financial district and long avenues peppered with glitzy hotels and casinos, Castelia was like a different planet compared to pastoral Nuvema Town. Rosa had never set foot in Castelia before, and she found herself awed by the sheer height of the city. The tallest skyscrapers were more than a hundred stories tall, steel and glass monoliths that seemed to her like dominoes arranged in a row waiting for something to send them all crashing down. The notion that mere humans could build such a place with their own hands was beyond her.

Electric trams buzzed by in the four lane streets, and Skiddo pulled carriages at a trot to transport people wherever they desired to go. Billboards flashed in neon colors not of this world, advertising everything from the newest sports drink to handbags to destination vacations in distant Undella Town. A woman with a megaphone on a street corner near the docks was going on about some kind of protest happening later at Central Park and advising people to bring camping gear to stake out the place. People wore headscarves and flowing clothes suitable for life in the dry desert often prone to unexpected storms. They rushed by without seeing anything around them but the path ahead. This was the kind of place where nobody said hi to strangers, everyone was perpetually in a hurry, and money was the only language anyone listened to.

No longer in the offending Neo Team Plasma uniform, Rosa followed Jack and Louis through the streets and hopped on an electric tram that took them deeper into downtown. No one paid them any mind, more concerned with their own destinations and problems. It was an unlikeable place, so different from Nuvema, but something about the anonymity of such a large city appealed to Rosa’s sense of self-preservation. She could get lost in a place like this and love every second of it. She got a few looks for her lack of a headscarf, but that was quickly remedied when she and the
Volucris brothers got off the tram and passed a street stand selling pashminas and scarves and dyed silks in all colors. Jack and Louis purchased wraps to shield their faces from the sand constantly floating about in the air and the heat, and Rosa picked a dark green scarf for herself. She handed the vendor a few coins and hastily followed the brothers, who had hardly stopped on their march to destinations unknown.

Rosa fumbled with the scarf, trying to tie it elegantly the way she saw the fashionable Castelian women doing, but ultimately gave up and simply wrapped it around her hair and neck without much grace. Beyond the city to the north lay the vast Relic Desert and many outlying villages and towns that lived off the harsh desert land. Rosa wondered how they did it, surviving in a place so dry and devoid of natural life. Her Pokémon would have hated it, and she too felt the need to get off the streets and indoors as soon as possible to get out of this scorching sunlight.

She thought of Nate all of a sudden, unbidden, and wondered what he would think of this dry desolate place. He would probably balk at its size and density, having been a small town boy all his life and a homebody besides. But he was Ignifer and born to bask in the sun’s fire. Her heart twisted as she thought of him. If none of this had happened, they would be in Nuvema Town together enjoying their summer. She would tell him all that had transpired during her time in Kanto, and they would roast marshmallows over a bonfire and would lie under the stars telling stories and sharing secrets and dreams like they always did. This whole time Rosa had been so focused on the mission, on stopping Ghetsis and finding N, that she had completely forgotten about how life was supposed to be. She had forgotten Nate, and remembering him now hurt more than she could say.

Louis noticed her lagging behind a little and stopped to wait. “Are you all right?” he asked.

“I’m fine,” Rosa said a little too quickly.

“Are you?”

They fell into step together, and she bit her lip wondering if she could trust him.

He got me this far.

“I guess I just didn’t realize what I left behind when I started all this. It’s all happening so fast, I feel like I’ve been running without a break.”

Louis walked briskly but didn’t leave her behind. “I know what you mean. Everything that’s happened... It’s a bit surreal, like it happened to somebody else. But it’s happening to me, to us, and we can’t escape that.”

Rosa thought about Vivian, realizing he must be thinking about her and Rick, the other member of their party slaughtered before his eyes. “No, but we can face it together,” she said with confidence she wasn’t quite sure she felt.

Louis spared her a wan smile, but his gaze was kind and a little sad. “Yes, that’s true. I... Well, I’m glad you’re here, Rosa. I’m sorry I doubted you before. You kept your word.”

“I don’t blame you,” she said without thinking about it. “And I’m glad I’m here, too.”

Jack led the way down a side street past a dumpster that was full to bursting. A small family of Trubbish peeked out from behind it where they were hoarding cans and plastic bags and feasting on rotten food. A Purrloin meowed as they passed but scurried into an alley when they got too close. Jack’s destination was a plain metal door, reinforced and dead-bolted with a spotty lamp
overhead that needed a new bulb. He checked both sides of the narrow street, but there was no one around but them. He knocked and someone pulled back the eye slit, checked him out, and unlocked the door. Rosa followed Louis and him inside to a dimly lit hallway and a long set of stairs that descended into the gloom. The burly man at the door gave her a once over.

“Who’s the girl?”

“She’s with us,” Jack said. “Unfortunately.”

The big guy sniffled, wet like he hadn’t blown his nose in days, and nodded stiffly. “He’s at the Gym.”

Jack and Louis exchanged a look but proceeded without another word. Rosa had little choice but to follow them. At the bottom of the concrete stairs, there was another long hallway that branched into three separate subterranean tunnels, all lit with lamps embedded in the ceiling. Jack and Louis headed down the leftmost path, again without a word.

The farther they went, the more Rosa wondered about these tunnels. They seemed to go on and on.

“How far do these tunnels go?”

“All over the city,” Louis said. “There’s a whole network underground. You could get wherever you want without ever having to set foot above ground.”

“That’s not very comforting.”

“We got subways, too,” Jack said. “They go all over the city quick as a tram, but no traffic. These tunnels’re for walkin’, though.”

“There doesn’t seem to be anyone else down here avoiding traffic,” Rosa said.

“Not a lot of people know about these specific tunnels,” Louis said. “We try to keep it that way.”

The tunnels were not exactly snug, but they were narrow enough to notice. Rosa recalled her time in Pinwheel Forest and the asphyxiating sensation of being squeezed between those shadowy trees. She rubbed her arms for warmth to fight off a shiver despite the heat. Eventually, they came upon another door, the same steel reinforced getup as the door that had admitted them to this subterranean labyrinth. It was unmarked and unremarkable and thick enough to block out any sound from the other side. Jack punched in a code in the dusty keypad next to the door and the deadbolt unlocked with a deep click. He swung the door open and it whined on its hinges. The room Rosa walked into looked like the basement of a warehouse with concrete walls and floor. Louis deadbolted the door behind them and entered in the code locking mechanism, while Jack headed across the small room to another door. Behind this one was a set of stairs that wound around a corner and disappeared above. Rosa climbed them in silence, wondering where the hell these Volucris were taking her.

When they got to the top, muffled voices filtered through the wooden door. Jack pushed it open, revealing bright natural light from above. Rosa heard running water and smelled something boggy, reminiscent of the forest. The ground was grass and earth paved with a narrow cobblestone path. She looked around, awed at what appeared to be a well-maintain terrarium in the middle of the desert. The skylight in the ceiling was not a skylight at all, but an enormous mirror that caught the sunlight reflected off a smaller mirror in the wall, and so on down the line to a chute that presumably opened up to the open sky somewhere far above. This room was still far underground, and yet the trees and grass flourished in the thick humidity and mist.
They were large trees with thick trunks and spread out, but their branches grew in leafy and bushy and blotted out the ceiling almost completely. Concrete tubes as tall as a man were hand painted with images of Pokémon, landscapes of all kinds from beaches to forests to mountains, and a few abstract bursts of color. They were overrun with ground creeping plants, moss, and mushrooms. Eyes peeked out as Rosa and the others passed, hiding in the dark. A rustling overhead drew Rosa’s attention to a zipping Ninjask speeding across the canopy, where it disturbed a horde of Vivillon that took flight like a living rainbow, blues and pinks and greens and silvers and every color and pattern imaginable.

“Watch your step.” Louis caught her arm before she could step on a Paras scuttling across the way. A whole line of six Paras walked in single file to get to the other side of the terrarium.

“What is this place?” Rosa asked as she watched the little crustaceans click and clack their way over the cobblestones to one of the graffiti-painted concrete tubes.

“Castelia Gym, of course.”

It looked like no Gym Rosa had ever seen. There was no arena to train in, no rhyme or reason to the layout, nothing to indicate it was anything more than a homegrown science project. The voices Rosa had heard before were coming from deeper in the underground garden, and Jack led the way to them. A group of people in street clothes and headscarves were gathered around a wide table covered in documents. At first Rosa was not sure if they were speaking the common tongue. She understood little of what they were discussing. A man in khaki with sandy hair streaked with grey and thick eyebrows was talking about some kind of new tests, but the words were over Rosa’s head, and she guessed he must be some sort of scientist meeting with his fellow researchers. When the researchers noticed Rosa and the others approaching, they stopped their conversation.

“Ah, it’s Louis! Welcome back!”

“Professor Juniper,” Louis said politely. “I’m afraid we’ve got some terrible news to report. Is Burgh around?”

“Professor Juniper?” Rosa said more to herself than to the others.

The man in question squinted at her and took in her roughed up appearance. She was back in her old clothes, but they were splotchy with Beedrill blood and venom.

“Yes?” he said. “I’m the only Professor Juniper here, I think.”

Rosa quickly put the pieces together. “Wait a minute, you’re Cedric Juniper, Aurea’s father?”

“I’ve been known to have such a daughter. And you are?”

“I-I’m Rosa. Aurea took me in when I was a kid. Oh my god, I had no idea you were in Castelia. Aurea didn’t mention anything.”

Cedric’s gaze lit up at the mention of his daughter. “Oh, Rosa? Uh...oh! Rosa! That Rosa! You must be that Rosa and not any other to know that daughter of mine!”

Rosa frowned at his odd manner of speaking. “I’m, um, yes?”

“Listen, Professor,” Jack said. “We gotta talk to Burgh. It’s important.”

“Oh, yes, he’s not feeling well today, I’m afraid. He’s painting somewhere in that direction. You know how he gets on days like this.” Cedric pointed behind him, then swept his hand around to the
left, paused like he was thinking, then shrugged.

“I can take you to the Gym Leader,” one of Cedric’s fellow researchers said.

“Thank you, Hal,” Louis said to the young researcher.

Hal was a skinny man who kept his hands folded in front of his chest like they might fall off if he didn’t hold onto them. His glasses were a size too big for his face and so thick it was a wonder he could see anything at all. He had a large nose that dwarfed his small thin mouth and a rather large white-topped zit over his left eyebrow. Despite the heat, he wore a cardigan over a striped polo shirt that had a suspicious yellow grease stain on the collar, leftovers from the day’s lunch.

Rosa had no choice but to follow Jack and Louis and Hal, and Cedric went back to his work with the other researchers like she’d never been there at all. She jogged to catch up to them—Hal walked surprisingly fast.

“Hey, wait a minute,” she said. “You never said anything about Cedric Juniper being here.”

“You didn’t ask,” Jack said gruffly.

“Yeah, but I mentioned his daughter a couple times. You didn’t think that was a relevant piece of information?”

Jack shrugged. “You were Team Plasma, right? Figured you’d know who your colleagues are.”

Rosa stopped dead in her tracks. “Wait, what?”

Louis gave her an odd look. “You didn’t know?”

“Of course I didn’t know! Aurea’s never been a supporter. She never once mentioned that her own father was a member.”

“Oh, how interesting,” Jack said snidely. “Sounds t’m me like a good ol’ case of ‘I don’t give a Beautiflyin’ fuck’.”

Rosa ignored his vulgarity as she thought about what she’d just learned. Cedric Juniper...a member of Team Plasma? And Aurea didn’t know? What was going on?

“We’re all Team Plasma,” Hal said.

Rosa jumped to find him standing right next to her and peering at her over the rims of his thick glasses. “What?”

“Not the Neo group. The originals.” He fished something from under the neck of his polo and held it out for Rosa to see. It was a pendant, an exact replica of the one she wore. In it was a faded picture of N. “See?”

“I...”

“There’s always a place for us here in Castelia.” He smiled awkwardly.

“Oi! This ain’t a social call,” Jack barked. “Where’s Burgh at?”

Hal turned to leave abruptly without a word of parting and resumed leading Jack and Louis deeper into the terrarium. Rosa touched a hand to her own pendant nestled under her shirt. They were here. They were really here!
Towards the back of the Gym where the trees were thicker and the mists gathered over the ground like fog, a person in a smock sat on a craggy boulder in front of a half-painted concrete tube. He was painting what looked like an enormous tree, but his brush strokes were unsteady and he was hunched over like an old man. His hair looked like it hadn’t been brushed in days and stood out at odd angles. Paint covered his smock in all different colors, making him look a bit like a circus clown. When Rosa and the others approached, he was in the midst of throwing down his brush angrily and kicking over a can of green paint. It spilled onto the grass, and he immediately regretted his outburst as he sank to his knees and began to futilely gather it up in his bare hands, smearing his fingers green.

“Such a mess, such a mess,” he lamented to himself.

Rosa could not place it, but somehow seeing that moment of unguarded vulnerability made her feel embarrassed, and a little sad. Jack and Louis both took a knee a few feet away from him.

“Burgh,” Louis said. “We’ve returned from Pinwheel Forest with news you need to hear.”

Burgh rubbed his fingers together and stared at them, as if he was surprised they had turned green when they touched the spilled paint. He turned to look at his kneeling cousins, and Rosa gasped at his appearance. His face was gaunt and drawn, dark eyes hollow and ringed with shadows like he hadn’t slept in days. His frame was skeletal, emaciated like a teenager with an eating disorder. His smock hung on him a couple sizes too big. But there was a sharpness in his gaze, a severe lucidity that was deeply unsettling, though Rosa could not place it.

“Jack, Louis,” he said calmly, all traces of his earlier private distress and anger gone. He held himself straighter and taller and wiped his fingers on his smock, adding to the bullet holes of color long dried. His gaze briefly shifted to Rosa, but it didn’t linger. “Where’s Vivian?”

For the first time since she’d met him, Jack looked to be at a loss for words as a look of anguish colored his face. Rosa forgot her earlier whirlwind of emotions upon meeting Cedric Juniper and discovering that there were other former Team Plasma sympathizers here as a pang of sympathy and pity took hold of her heart.

“She’s...” Jack rasped.

“We were ambushed,” Louis said, head down. “The Neos caught us by surprise. Rick and...and Vivian, she... They didn’t make it.”

Burgh looked at them like he had no idea what they were doing in his Gym. “Come again?”

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“Neo Team Plasma murdered your sister,” Rosa found herself saying.

Jack and Louis looked back at her like they’d forgotten she was there. Burgh shifted his sunken gaze to her as though it pained him to look upon her. Paint dripped from his fingers, and Rosa thought about the Beedrill blood she’d plunged her sword hand into when she stabbed that mutated Beedrill in the woods just the other night. She swallowed her mounting unease and took a step forward.

“I was there. I...” She averted her gaze. “I tried to stop it, but I wasn’t fast enough.”

“Why does this Sylvan know these things?” Burgh asked Jack and Louis, though he did not take his gaze from Rosa. He sniffled harshly, like the scent of Rosa offended him.

“We ran into Rosa in the forest,” Louis explained. “She saved our lives and helped us get back here.”
Burgh set his jaw and clenched his bony fists. Paint oozed from between his fingers and fell in fat, slow drops to the ground. He nodded softly more to himself than to the others.

“Vivian is dead,” he said, barely audible. “And you bring me a Sylvan in exchange?”

The hairs on the back of Rosa’s neck stood on end as a familiar buzzing drummed the air from somewhere above. Her heart leaped into her throat as she looked up and saw an enormous Beedrill hanging from the canopy. Its compound eyes reflected the mirrored sunlight and its huge stingers glistened with sticky clear venom. Beedrill’s translucent wings buzzed as though it was irritated by something. The buzzing seemed to alert other Bugs hiding in the canopy and in the cement tubes that Rosa hadn’t noticed before.

From a nearby tree hollow, a Galvantula poked its hairy yellow legs out and climbed up on a bed of webbing it had laid over the rotted tree. It was big enough to carry a man and almost silent, save for the soft rattle of static electricity that jumped up and down its eight legs. Tiny Joltik no bigger around than baseballs scurried about it, glowing yellow and flustered that their much larger protector had emerged to observe what was happening.

The sandstone boulder Burgh had been sitting on before moved, and a Crustle poked its eye stalks out from beneath it. A pair of large pincers followed, and impossibly, the hardy crustacean lifted the boulder it had burrowed its way into and crawled over the grass closer to Burgh. Rosa could hear moving feet and rustling leaves all around her, feel hundreds of eyes on her, but she couldn’t see the other Bugs she knew were hiding in the trees watching her.

*There must be hundreds of them in here,* she realized with no small amount of fear at the thought of being assaulted by Bugs so soon after the last harrowing experience. Something told her that if she got in trouble now, she wouldn’t be getting away this time.

“It’s not what you think,” Louis said. “She’s got information you need to hear. That’s why we brought her—”

“Then what should I think?” Burgh interrupted venomously. “That my sister isn’t dead? That this is some kind of sick joke?”

For such a frail man, he knew how to inspire fear in his subordinates. Even Jack appeared wary of pushing Burgh too far.

“I don’t mean you any harm,” Rosa tried. “I came here to get help after what happened in the lower East Tine.” She fished N’s pendant out from under her collar, broke the magnetic clasp, and held it out for Burgh to see. “I came here to find N’s true followers so we could put a stop to Ghetsis and his madness.”

“Well, young lady, you’ve found them.”

An old man in flowing robes of raw burgundy silk and a generous scarf to shield him from the elements was slowly making his way to the group with the assistance to two women. They were comely to look upon, tall and blonde and dressed fashionably in pastel silks and headscarves. They were flanked by a Kirlia and a Gothorita. The humanoid Psychics floated using telekinesis, their soulless eyes unblinking even surrounded by so many Bugs. Burgh’s Crustle snapped its meaty orange pincers at the Psychics’ approach in warning.

Rosa’s jaw dropped as she recognized the newcomers instantly. “Master Rood,” she said, shocked. “Lady Anthea and Lady Concordia.”
She bowed low to them, trembling in disbelief at the sight of them. If Anthea and Concordia, Ghetsis’s adoptive daughters and sisters to N, were here, then surely N himself...

“Oh my, rise child,” Rood said. “No need to be so formal. We’re among friends here.”

Rosa stood up straight only to find Rood standing directly in front of her. He was a very old man, and in her days with Team Plasma, the Grunts would always speculate as to how old he truly was. Ninety? A hundred? Perhaps decades more than that? Rood was a mere pleb, but he had lived a long life and seen much. N had relied on his wisdom and named him a Sage, and in Rood’s great wisdom, he broke from Ghetsis’s faction before the rift separated Team Plasma into two distinct organizations and had been in hiding ever since. His blue eyes were cloudy around the edges but kind like a grandfather’s. Brown age splotches marred his head, but his headscarf and hat hid the worst of them. His neck sagged like rumpled laundry, but he had a mouth made for smiling and a gentle disposition.

He reached for the hand Rosa had clasped to her chest and gently pulled it toward him. Locked in her fingers was N’s pendant jostled open in the commotion and bared for him to see. He smiled tiredly and closed his hand around hers. “Welcome, Miss...?”

“Rosa,” Rosa said quickly. “It’s an honor to meet you in person, sir.”

Anthea and Concordia smiled politely. “Any friend of N’s is a friend to us all,” Anthea said.

Hal stared openly at Anthea and Concordia and had begun to sweat in his cardigan and polo shirt. “Friends, you say?” Burgh said hollowly.

“She wears N’s pendant even after all this time,” Rood said. “Only a true believer would never lose faith.”

“No. I suppose we only must lose the ones we love most.”

Burgh leaned against Crustle for support and rummaged around in his smock pocket. He popped a couple pills in his mouth and dry swallowed them. “Burgh, we all knew this war would touch us all,” Rood said gently. “You have my deepest condolences.”

Burgh glared a hole in Rood’s face but said nothing. “I’m afraid the bad news doesn’t end there,” Louis said. “Rosa, please tell Burgh about Lenora.”

All eyes turned to Rosa, and she felt naked under their accusatory stares. She swallowed hard. “I don’t know if you’ve heard already, but Ghetsis’s Team Plasma has razed Accumula Town to the ground. There’s nothing left.”

Concordia gasped and Anthea put a hand on her shoulder. “Gym Leader Lenora’s gone,” Rosa said numbly. “I was there, I saw it happen.”

“You saw what happen, exactly?” Burgh said, finding some of his quiet anger from earlier.

Rosa forced herself to look him in the eye. “Ghetsis had her beheaded in Striaton City in front of a cheering crowd of hundreds of Striaton citizens. His Shadow Triad then killed the Striaton Princes right after. Aurea Juniper and I witnessed the entire thing.”
Burgh looked at her like he didn’t see her at all. The seconds ticked by, each longer than the last, and when he opened his mouth to speak, he broke out into a terrible coughing fit that had him doubling over and sagging against Crustle. He covered his mouth as his knees gave out. From somewhere in the foliage above, a perfectly camouflaged Leavanny scuttled down the nearest tree trunk and hurried to his side. The four-foot tall mantis made a skin-crawling clicking sound and twitched its long antennae as it watched Burgh struggle helplessly with whatever ailed him. Tiny Venonat and Wurmple poked their heads out from behind the leaves above, and Nincada hidden from view took up a raucous singing that filled the Gym and made the air buzz. Jack was instantly at Burgh’s side and gave him a shoulder to lean on, while Louis checked his pulse and felt his forehead.

“He’s pulse is racing. The fever’s back,” Louis said, shrugging off his pack and searching for something in it. “Hal, please get Professor Juniper!”

“R-Right away!” Hal said, jumping in surprise when he heard his name and scuttling off not unlike a Bug himself.

Oh my god, I gave him a heart attack, Rosa panicked.

“What’s wrong with him?” Rosa asked no one in particular.

No one answered as Louis produced a vial of Super Potion from his pack, uncorked it, and tried to coax it down Burgh’s throat. About half got down before Burgh knocked it out of Louis’s hand and spilled the rest on the grass. His coughing died down and he wiped his mouth, leaning his weight on Jack. It took Rosa a moment to notice that he was weeping.

“Why would you say such things?” Burgh said desperately.

Rosa had no words for him as he looked to her for answers like a child who has just had his entire world shattered before his eyes. She’d thought him quite old when she’d first laid eyes on him, but now she saw that illness had ravaged his body and warped him beyond his years. He was a young man, perhaps not more than thirty or so, and he had one foot in the grave. Whatever ailed him, Rosa knew in her bones that it would have long ago killed anybody else who didn’t have his Volucris blood. Rosa covered her mouth, the urge to cry too strong to ignore, and her vision began to blur.

“I’ll take him,” Jack said. “Go make sure Juniper’s not fuckin’ around.”

“Right,” Louis said, taking off after Hal. He didn’t even spare Rosa a glance as he rushed past, his mind fixated on Burgh.

Jack all but carried Burgh’s frail body after Louis at a more sedate pace. Crustle, Leavanny, and Galvantula followed, and the other Bugs around receded to their hiding holes.

A hand on her shoulder startled Rosa. Rood hunched next to her, his kind eyes drooped in sadness and pity as he watched Jack take Burgh back toward where Cedric and the other researchers were set up. “You’ve seen many horrors, Rosa. I know your burden well, and I do not envy it.”

She gathered her bearings a bit and wiped away the few tears that had traitorously escaped. “Sir, it’s imperative that we gather all of Lord N’s followers and mount a resistance against Ghetsis’s Team Plasma. Castelia’s their next destination. I’ve seen what he’s done in the lower East Tine. He won’t stop. Where is Lord N?” She looked at Anthea and Concordia. “Is he here with you?”

Anthea’s and Concordia’s matching gazes fell. “Brother isn’t here,” Concordia said demurely.
“Then where is he?” Rosa demanded. “Sir?”

Rood sighed like he carried the weight of the world on his ancient shoulders. “My dear, you came all this way not knowing?”

“Know what?”

“Lord N, he’s...”

“Brother’s gone,” Anthea said coldly.

“Gone where?” Rosa said, clutching her pendant tighter.

“To a place no one can came back from,” Rood said sadly. “He perished in Vertress City months ago.”

Rosa stilled. Juniper had speculated as much, but that was just rumors and hearsay. There was never a body, and this was N they were talking about. He was not the kind of man to die so easily. All those nights in Pinwheel Forest reliving Lenora’s death, seeing the atrocities committed in Team Plasma’s name, N’s legacy tarnished and spit on and burned to ash. All of this...was for nothing?

“No,” Rosa said. “No, he can’t be. He can’t be dead, I can’t accept that.”

“You must, child. I was there, I witnessed the storm myself. No one could have survived it. I’m afraid we’re all that’s left,” Rood said, truly crestfallen. “I am so sorry you had to hear it from me.”

It wasn’t supposed to be this way. She was supposed to come here for help. N was supposed to fix this, to oust Ghetsis and restore Team Plasma’s ideals to make the world a better place. Everything she had done, every hour that she’d held on and kept it together had been for this moment. And all that was waiting in Castelia was an ailing Gym Leader, a dwindling pool of N’s followers, and no one at the helm to guard this great city from Ghetsis’s inevitable encroachment. If N was truly gone, then what was she doing here? What was the point?

“What am I supposed to do?” she said, the tears falling anew without her consent.

*What can I do without N here to show me the way?*

She didn’t know. After the weeks of pushing ahead and never looking back, she didn’t know anymore. Juniper was back in Nuvema—was she safe? Had Neo Team Plasma razed Nuvema to the ground by now, too? Were they making their way to Aspertia, where Nate lived peacefully? Would they descend here and burn this city to ashes with no one to defend it? Rosa slumped, her shoulders heavy with the exhaustion of her mad flight from Nacrene and all that had happened in between.

“Whatever we can do, my dear,” Rood said in his tinny voice.

Burgh’s Beedrill watched Rosa with its ruby compound eyes above, one among the hundreds of hidden Bugs watching and waiting for her to move, to do something, whatever she could do. But all she could do was stand there, petrified, and wonder how they had fallen so far.
The Virbank Gym’s armory was well stocked with the latest Brigandine brand armor and underclothes. Hugh had his pick of gauntlets and greaves, vests and gloves, even a great helm with a wicked horn protruding from the forehead. He bypassed them all, however, for a lightweight thermal wetsuit built for agility and flexibility both on land and in the water. He ran the scaled fabric between his fingers, marveling at the silky-steely feel of it.

“Good eye there, Hugh,” Harrison said with a laugh on the back of his tongue. “Thought ya might prefer this over the others.”

“What is it?” Hugh asked. “The material feels like... Almost like scales.”

“That’s ‘cause it is. That’s a Sealeo suit. Here, feel that?” He grabbed the collar of the black suit and turned it inside out. “Smooth as pie. That’ll keep you warm even down deep. But this here,” he ran his hands over the outside of the suit, where the plated scale texture gleamed glossy under the light, “is Relicanth scales. Had these babies custom made back in Slateport City years ago. Team Aqua’s Archie might be bat shit, but he knew a regular unarmored Sealeo suit ain’t worth a hill o’ beans in underwater battle.”

Hugh ran the sleek reinforced fabric through his hands. “It’s so light.”

“Aye, that it is. Built for Syreni. Now, that won’t protect you much from a Sharpedo’s bite, but you’ll be glad you got one in a rip tide, let me tell ya. That one looks to be about your size.”

“For real?” Hugh felt strangely giddy, like a child on a birthday morning.

“Go on. I don’t much like to get my feet wet if I don’t hafta. Not too many Syreni in these parts, so you go on’n take it or it’ll stay here collecting dust, it will.”

“Thanks, this is awesome.” Hugh held up the suit before him. It was scrunched up a little, but he figured it would stretch when he slipped it on under his clothes.

Nate and Cheren were browsing the other selections of armor along with a number of Harrison’s Gym trainers. Despite Hugh’s excitement over his new toy, the atmosphere in the room was somber with an air of trepidation. Harrison had declared that the Gym trainers would set out along with a fleet of Virbank navy ships toward Castelia, where a war awaited them. A war with Team Plasma. Finally, those bastards would get what was long coming to them, Hugh thought. This was what he’d been waiting for.

Nate was especially quiet as he tried on a utility vest, tested out the give by moving his arms around, and then replaced it on the rack.

“It’s not Nimbasa Fashion Week, Nate,” Hugh said. “Just pick one.”

“Huh? Oh, yeah, I know. It all just feels weird,” Nate said detachedly, like he forgot what he was talking about halfway through.

Hugh crossed his arms and frowned. “What’s the matter?”

Nate side-eyed him, then discreetly looked around. There was no one in the immediate vicinity, but he lowered his voice anyway. “I just can’t stop thinking about Gym Leader Lenora. Cheren’s really broken up about it. I mean, obviously, but it’s Cheren. A Graveler would crack before he ever
does.”

Hugh blinked. Cheren was quietly outfitting Stoutland with a plated blanket and fastening it to the large canine’s four legs for added protection in battle. He seemed singularly focused on the task and ignored everyone around him, even Stoutland’s happy panting.

“Oh, right,” Hugh said. “But we’ll get Team Plasma for Lenora, too. They’ll pay.”

Nate looked at him a moment like he was looking at someone else, a stranger. “It doesn’t change what’s happened.”

Hugh’s steady scowl twisted in a flash of rage. “Hey, I know that better than anybody. What’s with you, man?”

Nate looked away unfazed. “I know you do. Never mind, forget I said anything.”

Hugh wanted to argue, but Nate showed him his back and went back to examining the various pieces of armor on the racks. Angry and with no real outlet on hand, Hugh slung his new suit over his shoulder and stormed toward the door. He would have continued back to the Gym proper, but someone was blocking the door.

“Hey, I’m walking here,” Hugh said.

Roxie looked at him sullenly like he was a pest that had gotten inside and wanted killing. “Nice to see you, too, jerk.”

She still didn’t move from the doorway, and Hugh was about ready to explode. “Look, are you gonna go in or what?”

She shifted her weight. “None of your goddamned business what I do.”

He rolled his eyes. “Fine, whatever, just get outta the way. If you’re gonna be here, at least be useful.”

Hugh shoved past her, and she grabbed his arm in her gloved right hand. Temper at its limits, Hugh whirled on her and got in her face.

“What?” he demanded.

She met his gaze defiantly, squeezing with her venomous hand in warning. “You can’t talk to me like that. I’m not an enemy you want.”

Oh, fuck this.

Hugh yanked his arm free, feeling her poisonous nails through her thick glove raking against his red jacket, and he wasn’t afraid—just pissed off. “Enemy? You’re not even on my radar, kid.”

Roxie looked like she wanted to protest, but Hugh plowed on.

“Lemme tell you something. You think you got it rough ‘cause you lost someone? Newsflash, you’re not the only one. And in the real world, nobody fucking cares. Veleno or teenager or sad Gym Leader’s kid, whatever the hell kinda excuse you wanna use doesn’t mean shit. You either do something or you move aside and let someone who’s willing do it.” He gave her a contemptuous once-over. “In your case, you better move.”

She let him pass this time, stunned into silence. Hugh stormed off, suddenly itching to blow off
some real steam. He reached for Milotic’s Pokéball and fisted the new suit Harrison had gifted him, ready to see just how much it could handle.

In his wake, Roxie watched him buzz off like an angry Beedrill and cast a look into the armory, where she spied Nate trying on a pair of boots. She bit her lower lip and hovered in the doorway as she let the flush of anger brought on by Hugh’s outburst dissipate, but finally moved to approach Nate. She cleared her throat a little too loudly when she was right behind him.

“Um, can I help?” she asked.

Nate looked up, a little startled, but managed a kind smile. “Sure, that’d be great, thanks.”

The suit was more than Hugh could have asked for. It barely slowed him down in the water and fit like a glove. Milotic fired off a Water Pulse directly at him, and Hugh tucked into a ball just like his Syreni parents had taught him to do underwater. The attack hit him in the chest and buffeted him backward against the current. He reached out a hand, grasping, and felt Eelektrik’s slimy-sleek body slip by under his fingertips. The suit’s gloves caught on the Electric eel’s scales, and Eelektrik pulled him along at a sharp angle. Lowering his head to the sudden shift in the current, Hugh latched onto Eelektrik and held on for the ride.

Eelektrik zipped through the water like a Talonflame through the sky, sleek and graceful and extremely precise in its movements. They came upon Milotic across the bay powering up something a lot stronger than a Water Pulse, and Hugh shot out his free hand in a practiced gesture he knew both Eelektrik and Milotic would understand. On cue, Eelektrik burst with light and fired off a charged Thunderbolt at Milotic. The bolt zigzagged through the water, sparks branching off and boiling the water around it, and headed straight for Milotic. The suit’s natural rubbery texture protected Hugh from the worst of the lightning.

Milotic’s Waterfall attack whipped up the electrified waters and sent them sky high in a wall of water and light. The geyser burst through the water’s surface and shot up twenty feet in the air, where it sent the worst of Eelektrik’s Thunderbolt to the heavens. Though Hugh and his Pokémon were far enough from the bay where the many recreational and commercial barges were anchored, the inverted cataract generated swells that rocked the boats and flooded the nearest pier.

Hugh swam to the surface and shook out his wild hair. Grinning, he checked his dive watch—nearly eighty-seven minutes. It was nothing compared to his stamina training back in Aspertia, but the constant swimming and stress of Pokémon battling more than made up for the time deficiency.

Eelektrik surfaced next to him, its jawless mouth full of teeth and dark eyes large and filmy as they swiveled to see him better. Hugh treaded water, panting from his exertion, and ran a hand down Eelektrik’s slimy body appreciatively. Milotic glided toward the pair, sharp eyes glued to Eelektrik. None of Hugh’s Water-type Pokémon had ever quite trusted Eelektrik as much as Hugh did. But Hugh was feeling pretty damn good about himself and his Pokémon, so he splashed Milotic as she lowered her large head toward him.

Startled, Milotic shook out her head and sprayed Hugh and Eelektrik with a harmless Bubble blast, soaking them both all over again. Hugh laughed and reached for Milotic, apologizing for splashing her and reassuring her of a job well done. Soon Milotic was ferrying him on her back toward the pier nearest to the hotel where he was staying with Nate and Cheren, and Hugh was at the door to his shared room with Nate dripping all over the hallway carpet. Nate was sitting on the bed with Larvesta when Hugh arrived. He took one look at the little firefly and felt his mood sour again.
“I’m not sharing my bed if that Bug burns a hole through yours.”

“This is your bed, not mine,” Nate quipped.

Hugh flipped him off. “Hilarious.”

Nate got up off the bed—he was in his comfortable street clothes—and crossed the room to the bathroom where Hugh was peeling off his new suit. Larvesta made a clicking sound and waddled to the edge of the bed, where it debated jumping down to the floor far below. Its thick orange feelers wobbled, gauging the distance, and its eerie blue eyes were wide with trepidation at the thought of falling too far. Woefully, it looked around for Nate, but he was focused on Hugh on the other side of the room and didn’t hear it clicking for attention. To jump or not? Small plumes of heat leaked from its feelers as it grew more concerned over its predicament.

The suit peeled off Hugh like a second skin, porous and wet but not uncomfortable. He grabbed a spare towel from the rack and tossed it on the floor to keep the floor dry underfoot.

“So where were you?” Nate asked, crossing his arms and leaning against the doorway.

Hugh gave him a weird look. “Okay, Mom. I was training.”

“I mean, why didn’t you say anything?”

Stripped down to his swim trunks, Hugh hung the suit over the shower curtain bar and started up the water. “Didn’t think I needed to check in with you.”

Nate frowned. “I didn’t mean it like that. It’s just that you left kind of in a bad mood. Roxie was worried about you.”

Hugh nearly choked on his tongue. “That Veleno kid? You gotta be kidding me.”

“Is that hard to believe? She came in a bit after you left and helped me pick out the right armor. She’s not a bad person. Remember what Cheren said?”

Hugh pulled back the shower curtain and tested the water. It was not hot enough. “Doesn’t mean she gets a free pass to be a pain in the ass.”

“Hey.” Nate snatched the shower curtain from Hugh and forced him to pay attention. “You don’t get a free pass, either, dude.”

A moment of silence passed between them, and Hugh scrunched up his face, unsure what to say. “You know, I was in a good mood up until you ruined it. Thanks for that, by the way.” He snatched the shower curtain back and stepped into the shower, blocking Nate out.

“Well, I’m sorry for ruining your good mood. Everyone else has been having a hard time finding a bright side with a war coming.”

Hugh heard Nate’s footsteps receding from the bathroom over the roar of the spigot.

What a bleeding heart.

He frowned under the blasting water, feeling the rivulets run down his bare skin. Nate had always been a bleeding heart, now that he thought about it. Even a brat like Roxie could wheedle her way under his skin, but it was always Hugh that got the angry confrontations when a stranger’s feelings got hurt. War was coming, and the sooner everybody wised up and accepted that, the better off
everyone would be. Didn't Nate get that? Didn’t Cheren and all the others? If Hugh lost his resolve whenever someone he cared about got hurt, he’d never get revenge for Hayley, and Cheren wouldn’t get revenge for Lenora. Somebody hurts you, and you hurt them back. Tit for tat. An eye for an eye. That was the way this world worked and the only thing that got through to people. Nate and Cheren and all the others would have to accept that if they wanted any chance at wiping out Team Plasma for good.

After a short shower mostly spent brooding instead of washing, Hugh stepped out fresh and clean and changed into comfortable jeans and a T-shirt. His wild hair suffered through a towel drying but refused to stay calm, as usual, so he let it be, indifferent. When he got back into the main room, he stopped to stare in disbelief at the sight in front of him.

Nate, shirtless, had a small fire extinguisher from the hall in hand and had sprayed a fluffy white flame retardant foam over a spot on the carpet that was charred black and smoking beyond recognition. Tiny black spots wound away from the char mark like footprints and ended near where Nate was standing. Larvesta was attempting to crawl up his back to his head, smoking faintly against his bare skin.

“It’s not as bad as it looks,” Nate said with a look like a Deerling in the headlights.

The door opened just then and Cheren let himself in.

“We’ve got an early morning tomorrow, so I was thinking something light for dinner...” He trailed off when he saw Nate’s predicament and Hugh standing there still damp from the shower. “…I can come back if you two need some privacy?”

Hugh lost his composure then and threw the towel around his neck at Cheren. “Oh fuck off! It’s not what you think!”

Cheren dodged the towel, and it smacked against the door with a wet slap. He cracked a smile and tried not to laugh as he gracefully backed out to the hallway. “I didn’t say anything,” he said. “And I don’t want to interrupt.”

“Son of a—” Hugh slammed the door behind him, fuming, and whirled on Nate. “Are you happy?!”

“Actually—” Nate began.

Hugh put up a hand. “No, don’t answer that. Put a shirt on, for fuck’s sake. What’re you lookin’ at?” He glared at Larvesta.

“...So, she burned my shirt,” Nate said, indicating the stinking mess on the ground.

Hugh hung his head in his hands. “I was having a pretty decent night, too.”

“Cheer up, you made mine a little better. Both of you.” Nate scratched Larvesta on her hairy white head.

“Don’t fucking coddle that Bug, Nate, I swear to god. This is how shit happens.”

Nate grabbed a fresh shirt from his pack and set Larvesta on the floor to crawl about. She immediately tried to crawl back up his leg.

“Look, I’m sorry about getting upset before,” Nate said. “It’s just with all that’s happening so fast, I guess I don’t really know how to be. And Roxie’s just...I don’t know.”
Hugh made a face. “Why do you keep talking about Roxie? What’s she got to do with anything?”
“I think she wants to help. Fight, I mean, but she won’t admit it.”
Hugh grunted. “Fat chance of that. She’s sixteen and a spoiled pain in the ass. Besides, no way in hell Harrison’ll let her anywhere near a war galley.”
Nate looked pensive. “Sure, but all the same... Well, forget I said anything.”
Hugh shoved his hands in his pockets, suddenly cold with his damp hair. “I guess I’m sorry, too.”
“For what?”
“What do you mean, ‘for what’?”
“I mean, ‘for what’?”
“It’s just what you say when somebody apologizes first!”
“That’s not a real apology.”
“Oh, fuck you. I tried.”
“Hey, let’s get burgers,” Nate said suddenly.
“Huh?”
“I want something really good our last night here.”
“Sure, but—”
“I’ll get Cheren. You slammed the door on him earlier, you know. You should apologize for that.”
Hugh threw up his hands. “Oh my god.”
Nate left to find Cheren, and Hugh was alone with Larvesta, who stared up at him but dared not come close. Larvesta’s blue compound eyes reflected the light as it twitched its head and wiggled its stunted orange feelers.
Hugh shot Larvesta a dirty look. “I knew him first, Bug. So don’t get any ideas.”
“Hugh, come on!” Nate called from the hallway. “Burgers!”
Hugh turned to leave and tried to ignore the sound of Larvesta scuttling along after him.

The dawn of battle had arrived, and Hugh once again found himself dressed in the sleek Sealeo skin suit Harrison had given him. Nate and Cheren were also outfitted in light armor. Studded leather shoulder pads and a chest plate made Nate look bigger than he really was, and the simple hand axe he’d brought from Aspertia was upgraded to a lightweight steel model. Cheren was lightly armored in a sensible utility vest and Ponyta hair greaves. His Stoutland was up and about with its own studded leather armor to protect its flanks and back.

They were on one of the many war galleys Harrison had commanded to set sail for Castelia waters. Most were small and built for speed, with only a few cannons aboard, but the Gym trainers and
sailors carried Pokémon with them for extra firepower. Hugh could not wait to set sail, but Nate had gone to the Gym to pick up some supplies at the request of one of the ship’s crew and they had to wait for him. He was sure taking his sweet time. The sun was rising in the east and cast a pale yellow glow over the placid ocean. There were few clouds in the sky.

“It’ll be choppy today,” Harrison said, drawing up beside him. He wore his captain’s coat despite the heat, his usual purple bandana, and a long saber at his waist. He stood taller than any man aboard, and Hugh had to shield his eyes from the sun looking up at him.

“It looks calm to me,” Hugh said.

“That’s ‘cause ya can’t see it.” Harrison rested his hands on the railing and leaned over as if to take in a good whiff of the sea. “The worst o’ storms come after a calm, when you can’t see past the horizon and you think you’re in for smooth sailing all the way home. That’s when they sneak up on you, and before you know it, you’re on a one-way voyage to hell with nothin’ but bodies in your wake.”

Hugh thought about Hayley the way she used to be. Every time he tried to picture her, it became a little harder to remember her smile, the crinkle around her eyes when she laughed, the splash of freckles on her little nose, the slight whistle through her missing front teeth when she talked.

“You think that’s the kind of storm we’re heading into now?” he asked.

Harrison stared off into the horizon, far away somewhere in a memory. “I know it.”

What would Hayley think if she could see Hugh now, ready to set off to fight the true enemy and avenge her? Would she be proud? Happy? Afraid for him?

She’d be right here with me, he decided. She’d fight, too.

“You’re a good egg, Hugh,” Harrison said suddenly. “You got a good life in Aspertia and people who care about you. You don’t deserve what’s waitin’ for us. I’m sorry you young people gotta get mixed up in all this nonsense.”

Hugh frowned and his temper flared. “Hey, I got a right to be here. I deserve to be fighting as much as any of you. I lost someone, and I’m not stopping until I make it right.”

“I know, son.” Harrison cast him a glance, weary and a little sad. “But that’s the mistake you young people always make. You fight to avenge the people you lost before all this, but the next thing you know, you’ve lost so much more on the way. Makes you wonder if it was all worth it.”

Harrison’s eyes were unfocused and misty with memory, but Hugh bristled at the stench of condescension. What did he think, that Hugh was doing all this for nothing? That Hayley’s death had meant nothing? He’d never fought in any wars or killed a man with his own hands, and maybe he didn’t know exactly what was in store. Fine. But he’d seen true horror in his young life and carried the scars to this day. He was here because of them, wearing them close to his heart so he would never forget that toothless smile.

Cheren calling out to Nate interrupted Hugh’s thoughts before he could respond to Harrison. Nate was making his way back on deck with Lucario in tow, the latter of which Stoutland was very excited to see. Stoutland yipped happily, and Lucario eyed the larger canine with only mild interest.

“Ready to sail, Nathaniel?” Cheren asked, doomier and gloomier than usual in Hugh’s opinion.

“Uh, yeah, sorry about the wait. I got held up...”
“Well, get settled and try to rest, both of you.” He nodded to Hugh. “This is no drill.”

Cheren called for Stoutland and went to speak with one of the crewmembers, leaving the two friends alone.

Hugh lost his train of thought as he noticed that Nate seemed to be a little out of breath and flushed. “Hey, you okay? You look winded.”

Nate’s flush worsened and he shoved his hands in his pockets. “I’m fine, just a little caught off guard.” He paused to look around, then lowered his voice to say, “Roxie just confessed to me.”

“Confessed what?” Hugh said blankly.

Nate rubbed his temples and groaned, and Hugh put two and two together pretty fast.

“Wait, you mean she likes you?”

“What other kind of confession is there?”

“Hold up, Nate, she’s like thirteen—”

“Sixteen...”

“—and I’m pretty sure even if it’s not illegal, which it definitely is, then Harrison’ll make you wish it was. Dude, since when do you have the hots for a kid? You’re not into that shit, are you?”

Nate shoved him. “Shut up!” he hissed. “Of course not, fucking hell, Hugh. She just has a crush and wanted me to stay back in Virbank with her, that’s all. I don’t even think it was really about me, now that I think about it. She seemed pretty worked up about something.”

Hugh gave him a withering look. “Please don’t tell me you’re about to psycho-analyze a thirteen-year-old girl’s love confession.”

“She’s sixteen!” Nate shouted.

The crewmembers shuffling about their duties nearby paused to stare, and Nate flushed harder at the unwanted scrutiny.

“Geez, Nate, announce it to the whole goddamned crew, why don’t you,” Hugh said.

Nate swallowed whatever anger he was feeling and tried to compose himself. “No, listen to me, forget all that. I’m trying to tell you that she was really upset. She’s been upset since we got here.”

“Yeah, I noticed.”

“Did you notice she’s not even here? She said she’d be right behind me to see off the ships, but she’s not here.”

“Huh?” Hugh looked around, but there was no sign of Harrison’s rebellious daughter among the Gym trainers and sailors and soldiers.

“Look,” Nate said, directing Hugh’s attention toward the opposite railing where Harrison stood. He was talking to a crewman, but he was only half listening as he scanned the docks near the Gym. “He’s looking for her, but she’s not here. She’s not coming.”

Hugh did find that strange considering the circumstances. “Okay, but so what? I got the pretty
obvious impression that she’s got daddy issues.”

“Even so, you’d think she’d wanna say goodbye.”

Hugh remembered his brief confrontation with Roxie the other day at the armory when he’d told her to stay out of things if she wasn’t prepared to fight. Could he be the reason she wasn’t here now to wish her father farewell? He averted his gaze from Harrison, suddenly feeling flustered and a little guilty. What kind of girl, even a hormonal teenaged one, would let something a stranger said get to her like that? But he did have a tendency to come off pretty harsh...

“I...mighta said something to her,” Hugh admitted.

Nate was about to respond, but the ships began to disembark and they got yelled at to quit dawdling and make themselves useful. Violet and white sails caught the wind and billowed out like a flurry of storm clouds. They bloomed in droves on every barge, and the wind carried them like a rolling fog over the dawn seascape northeast. Wild Wingull and Pelipper and Swanna squawked and honked as they took to the skies over the procession. Water-type Pokémon—from Wailmer to Basculin and everything in the between—swam in between and beneath the ships, checking the depths and scouting ahead for aquatic threats to the fleet.

Hugh leaned over the railing and breathed in the morning salt air. He took in the magnificent sails full of wind that, with a little imagination, he fancied could have lifted the ships clean off the water. For a blissful moment, he forgot where those sails were taking him and relished in the feel of the wind in his hair and the sun rising straight ahead.

Harrison stood near the prow like some pirate king of lore in his great overcoat, but his bright blue eyes were fixed on Virbank dwindling behind them. There was a wistfulness in his gaze that reminded Hugh of Nate the day they left Aspertia, how he’d looked back wanting to remember it as it was and take that with him. But Harrison scanned the horizon, squinting as Virbank faded slowly behind them, looking for something that wasn’t there.

Hugh ground his teeth, his high spirits abandoning him, and he glared back at Virbank. What kind of daughter didn’t see off her father going to fight for her safety? So what if she was mad at him? It was probably a dumb and unjustifiable reason only a teenager could hold onto, anyway. Not that he could be surprised. A girl who cared more about a crush on a guy who was way out of her league than her own father sailing off to war was a waste of space.

Mood thoroughly soured by his dour thoughts, Hugh pushed off the railing and looked around for something to do to distract him. He didn’t have to look long. There was always work to be found aboard a war galley large enough to carry a small herd of Donphan on its deck. One of the sailors put Hugh to work taking inventory of harpoons, spear guns, and other weaponry that would be used in the fighting.

He was in the midst of carrying a crate with two enormous spearheads packed inside below deck when he heard a strange hissing noise. Before his body could catch up to his brain, Hugh dropped the crate on his toe, swore as vehemently as any seasoned sailor, and fell on his ass in a fright. A large black snake slithered out of the shadows from behind a stack of crates and tasted the air with its tongue before baring its venomous red fangs at Hugh.

“Seviper, down!” a familiar voice whispered.

“Oh, you gotta be kidding me,” Hugh said, holding his abused foot in his hands.

Roxie emerged from the shadows behind Seviper outfitted in light battle armor made from studded
leather and a scalloped undergarment made from thick scales. Her long gloves were in place as usual, but this pair was plated with the same scalloped scale armor as her mail. She wore four Pokéballs at her belt that Hugh had absolutely no interest in getting to know better.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing hiding down here like a stowaway?” Hugh demanded.
“And seriously, the snake charmer act is getting really old.”

Roxie calmed Seviper down and it slithered around behind her. Its bloody eyes never left Hugh. He hated that snake, he decided. There was something unnatural and malevolent about it.

“You’ll live. And keep it down,” Roxie whispered.

Hugh could have groaned. “Oh my god, you actually are stowing away, aren’t you?”

“So what? No skin off your back.”

Hugh curled his lip in disgust at her tone. “Well, it definitely won’t be once I tell your dad you’re down here.”

He got to his feet, ignoring the throbbing in his toes. For the first time since he’d had the misfortune of meeting her, Roxie had the grace to look scared.

“No, you can’t,” she hissed, making a grab at him.

He’d expected that from their last encounter and preemptively moved to dodge her swipe. “Watch me.”

Seviper slithered around and blocked Hugh’s way to the staircase. Its glossy black scales gleamed in the wan lighting from a flickering overhead bulb, but those bloody eyes seemed to taunt him, dare him to take another step. Hugh grabbed Samurott’s Pokéball from his belt.

“I won’t let you,” Roxie said defiantly.

“You’re making me mad, kid,” Hugh warned, brandishing Samurott’s Pokéball at her. “Believe me, you don’t wanna see me unleash my rage. We’re on my turf out here.”

That fear was still there, though of him or of her father, Hugh couldn’t say. Roxie swallowed as she tried to think. “Okay, okay just calm down. Seviper, to me.”

The snake tasted the air with its long forked tongue, eyes ever trained on Hugh, and it was slow to follow Roxie’s command. Venom dribbled from its long fangs and smoked on the wooden floor where it landed, eating through the wood. Hugh imagined that same venom rolling off Carracosta’s super hardened shell like water as the ancient turtle Rapid Spun that snake to a pulp. Roxie’s voice pulled him from that gruesome fantasy.

“Please, Hugh,” she pleaded with him, still keeping her voice down so as not to be heard. “You can’t tell my dad.”

“Oh, really? Give me one good reason.” When she just looked at him with that same pained expression, he rolled his eyes. “Thought so.”

He attempted to leave again, but she stopped him again. “Wait! You told me to do something or get out of the way, so I’m doing something,” she said desperately, forgetting her volume. “I came here to fight.”
Hugh blinked, a little surprised that his words had actually struck a chord with her. But something still smelled very off about all this. “That so? Then why didn’t you come out and say goodbye to you dad? Why’re you sneaking around like a thief in the night?”

She flushed. “It’s complicated. And it’s private.”

“You know what’s not private? You being here as soon as I tell Harrison.”

This time, Roxie put herself in front of Hugh and spread her arms. There were angry tears in her eyes, and he stopped short. “Please,” she pleaded with him, the anger still there but muffled under layers of emotion Hugh used to recognize when he was her age and he’d lost something precious, too. “I don’t want to lose him, too.”

They stared at each other for moments that seemed like hours. In the dim stale lighting of the flickering bulb and the uneven ground over the water, she looked both very young and very afraid, like her whole world rested on Hugh’s whim. He knew that look, that desperate pleading, had lived it intimately. But no matter how much he’d pleaded, Hayley would remain lost to him, as would the ones responsible for taking her away. He faltered.

“Okay, slow down,” he said, feeling very uncomfortable. What would Nate do in this situation? He was no good with this sort of thing. Maybe Nate would actually know what to do. “Look, I’m just gonna get Nate. He’ll know what to do.”

Roxie flushed at the mention of Nate, but before either of them could say another word, footsteps descended down the stairs.

“Hugh, are you down there? We’re coming into Castelia waters and we have to go over the plan...” Cheren trailed off when he caught sight of Hugh and Roxie in the corner and Seviper coiled to strike. “What on earth? Roxie? What’re you doing here?”

Roxie froze at the sight of Cheren, and it was left to Hugh to salvage the situation.

“She’s here to help,” he said quickly. As soon as he said it, he knew it was not what Cheren wanted to hear.

“Help? We’re going to war,” Cheren said curtly. “Roxie, you can’t be here. How did you even get on the ship? You know what, that’s not important. I’m getting your father.”

“No!” Roxie cried out. “Cheren, wait!”

But he was gone. Hugh swore.

“Shit,” Roxie groaned. “What am I gonna do?” she said to no one in particular.

Hugh set his jaw. He didn’t really know what was going on, but his gut told him this kid needed someone on her side right now. He’d never liked Roxie from the start, but the brat and the frightened girl he’d seen just now seemed like two completely different people. As he was wont to do, Hugh followed his gut feeling and grabbed her gloved left hand, the one that healed. “C’mon.” He dragged her to the staircase.

She stumbled to keep up with him. “What’re you doing? They’ll see me!”

“Yeah, well, that ship’s sailed. You’re not gonna face all of them hiding like a Dunsparce in the shadows. You face ‘em head on. You have something to tell your dad, right?”
“I...” She faltered.

“I don’t get it, but it’s obviously about him. So get your ass up there and do something. You don’t want that wet blanket Cheren to steal your thunder, do you?”

She read the challenge in his glare, and like last time, she didn’t balk at it. “...No, hell no.”

“Then c’mon.”

They emerged on deck, first Hugh then Roxie and her Seviper. Everyone was going about their business in a hurry as the fleet crossed into Castelia waters. Nate spotted them first and jogged toward them with Lucario in tow, the puzzlement clear on his face. Cheren was across the way speaking to Harrison with a grim expression on his face.

“Hey,” Nate said, joining Hugh. “Where you been? Wait, Roxie?”

She blushed again but gritted her teeth and held her head high. “Hi, Nate.”

“What’re you doing here? I thought you weren’t coming.”

“Change of plans. You got a problem?”

It was Nate’s turn to turn red. “Um, I mean, not really...”

“Hey, focus,” Hugh snapped, swatting Roxie on the back of the head. “Here he comes.”

Harrison stormed across the deck like the executioner marching to the gallows to collect his blood payment. The thick saber at his hip didn’t help matters, nor did the anger in his expression.

“Roxie!” he bellowed. “I see Cheren was telling it true about you stowing away on board. What is the meaning of this?”

Nate yanked Hugh out of the way as Harrison drew up in front of Roxie like a mountain. Seviper hissed in warning, but the older Gym Leader didn’t even spare the overgrown worm a glance. The sailors had slowed their activity to watch, and some even abandoned their posts outright to gawk at the sight of their irate captain and Gym Leader confronting his saucy teenaged daughter.

“Dad, I can explain,” Roxie started, trying to keep her composure.

“Explain why you’re here on a ship bound for battle?” Harrison gestured with his hands.

“I’m here to fight!” Roxie said defiantly.

“Fight? Oh, there’ll be plenty o’ that when I get back to Virbank to deal with you. But I don’t have the time right now. Harley!”

A tall lean woman in salt-stained leather and linen Hugh recognized as the ship’s first mate approached dutifully. Her wild red hair streamed behind her in long curls, and her dark eyes were narrowed and mean. She was all angles and sharpened edges, hardened by the sea and tempered by storms. But when she spoke, it was softly and controlled and betrayed an inner poise and intellect lost on most of the other sailors.

“Captain,” Harley said. “How can I help?”

“Flag down the Maiden’s Hand. It’s the fastest in my fleet. Tell ‘em to take my daughter back to Virbank ASAP.”
“What? No!” Roxie protested. “I’m not going back!”

Harley tried to approach, but Roxie called to Seviper. The large snake opened its maw and hissed menacingly, dripping venom on the deck and flexing its bladed tail in warning. Harley backed off, wary.

“Roxie, please,” she said in that gentle understanding voice she had. “I’m just trying to help you. We all want you to be safe.”

“But that’s why I’m here.” Roxie turned on Harrison. “If you’d just listen—”

Nate leaned over to Hugh and whispered, “What’s going on? Did you smuggle Roxie on board?”

“Shit no,” Hugh said as Roxie and Harrison continued to argue. “She came on her own, I just found her. But I think she’s got something to say to the old man.”

“She shouldn’t be here,” Nate said, uncertain.

“Says who? She’s a Tamer, same as me ‘n you.”

“She’s sixteen.”

Hugh scowled. “Yeah, well, I wanna hear her out.”

Nate looked at him like he didn’t even know him, but Hugh ignored it.

“That’s enough!” Harrison bellowed. “We’ll talk about this later. Harley, the Maiden’s Hand. Now.”

Harley hesitated when Roxie bellowed right back, “No, not later! You always say later, but later never comes! I’m done waiting for you to listen, so now there’s nowhere to go. You’re gonna listen to me for once.”

Harrison looked pained. “Roxie, stop this.” He tried to control his temper a little. “If it can’t wait, then fine, but let’s do this somewhere else.”

Almost all the eyes on board were trained on them, watching. Hugh watched Roxie, and she stole a glance at him. It was brief and ended all too soon, but he’d decided to be on her side right now, and he hoped she got the message. Whether she did or not, she pressed on anyway.

“No,” Roxie said, reaching a hand out for Seviper, perhaps for confidence or as a threat, Hugh couldn’t say. “I want them all to hear. I want them to know the truth. I want you to tell everyone the truth.”

“The truth?” Nate wondered aloud.

Hugh got a chill and shivered, and he clenched his fists.

“Truth?” Harrison asked. “I don’t know—”

“About Mom,” Roxie interrupted. “About what really happened to her.”

A tense silence ensued, the only sound that of the waves breaking against the ship’s hull. The fleet surrounded them, sails full of wind and all hands preparing for war, and yet here a teenaged girl held the captain at her mercy.
“Roxie,” Harrison began. “Your mother’s gone. Where is this coming from?”

“You’re lying,” she hissed. “I know she’s gone, but not like you mean.”

At this, something in Harrison’s hardened expression changed. The scar on his face crinkled as he frowned in consternation and a little fear.

“Roxie...”

“How many people know?” Roxie looked around the crew and settled on Harley first. “Did you know?” She looked around again to the other sailors and Gym trainers. “You? What about you? Was I the only one kept in the dark? Did you all get a good laugh at what a fucking idiot I was to believe it?”

The crew began to look around and whisper among themselves. Hugh was left to wonder what on earth she was talking about. Cheren looked equally puzzled at Roxie’s cryptic accusations. Harrison showed her his palms.

“Please, let’s do this below deck,” he pleaded with his headstrong daughter.

Roxie shook with fury. “No, I’m done with this ridiculous charade. Just admit it. You lied to me about Mom. You said she died when I was little, but the truth is she left. She left us! She left me, and everybody but me knew it!”

Nate’s jaw dropped and Hugh’s mind raced. Cheren had told them Roxie’s mother, Gina, had died when she was a girl and left her without a Tamer parent to learn from. Why would anyone lie about that?

Harrison looked like a man defeated. “Darling, it’s not what you think. No one is laughing at you. God, how did you even find out?”

“Find out?” Roxie’s voice cracked with emotion, but she held it together. “That’s what you’re concerned about? That I’d figure it out? Did you think I was stupid? Hah, dumb question. Obviously you did if you fed me this bullshit. By the way, I’ve known for weeks. I’ve been waiting for you to come clean, but I guess I was hoping for too much.”

Harrison hung his head. “I’ve never once thought you were anything but my brilliant baby girl. It’s true, your mother didn’t die. She did leave. But you have to understand, I only told you that story to protect you.”

“Protect me? From what? What could possibly justify lying to me for sixteen years? And everyone knew it!”

“Not everyone,” Harrison said dejectedly. “Most didn’t know. It was a story I made up to make things easier.”

“Easier,” Roxie repeated. “Right. Because it’s so much easier to think my mom abandoned me by choice.”

At this, Harrison regained a bit of his backbone. “No, that’s not what happened.” He grabbed her hands. “Roxie, she didn’t abandon you. It was me she left, not you. It had nothing to do with you, okay?”

Roxie’s eyes watered with unshed tears and she yanked her hands free. “How can you say that? She left and didn’t take me with her. What does that look like to you? Answer me!”
Harrison looked hurt, but he hid it well. “...I don’t have much of an answer for you. It seems you already know everything. I’m sorry, Darling. I s’pose... I shouldn’t’ve kept it from you. I just... Ya have to understand, I thought I was protecting you. I can admit it was a mistake, clearly.” He gestured to her to emphasize his point. “But I thought... If you knew the truth, you’d blame yourself. I didn’t want that for you.”

Roxie blinked rapidly, trying to hold back tears. “You can’t make it right just by admitting it.”

“Then what can I do?” Harrison was at his wits’ end. “Honey, we’ve had some hard times lately, and I just wanted to do right by you.”

Something in Roxie snapped. “Right by me? Then you shoulda stayed!”

“What?”

“You shouldna left me!”

Harrison was at a loss, and so was Hugh looking on. “Left you? Darling, I’m sure I don’t know what ya mean.” Harrison tried to go to her again, but Roxie shrugged him off.

“No, I won’t be carted away like chattel! I’m not leaving, not until you promise.”

“Promise what? Roxie, just tell me what the matter is.”

She looked like she was on her last rope. Desperately, she glanced askance at Nate, who stared back wide-eyed and uncertain. Squeezing her eyes shut, Roxie stubbornly wiped at her tears. “This war... I don’t want you to leave me, too.” She took in a shaky breath, but by now the tears were falling freely despite her best efforts. “I don’t want you to go away.”

Harrison, for all his strapping leadership and confidence, fell to pieces at the sight of his only daughter’s tears and earnest entreaty. This time, when he hugged her close in a fierce bear hug, she didn’t resist. “I’m not going anywhere. I’m here, I’m right here. I’ll always be here for you. Always.”

Roxie buried her face in his massive shoulder. She was like a doll in his thick arms. “I don’t want to be alone,” she sobbed.

“Oh my darling, you’re not alone,” Harrison said, nearly on the verge of tears himself.

Harley cleared her throat and discreetly began ordering everyone to get back to work preparing for the imminent attack. The sailors and Gym trainers scurried to their posts and got back to work, giving Harrison and Roxie a little privacy.

“So that’s it,” Nate said.

“What’s it?” Hugh asked.

“She confessed to me because she didn’t want to be alone.”

“What?”

Nate smiled that sad smile he had and shook his head. “Never mind. I think she’s got what she really needs now.”

Hugh wasn’t sure what that meant, but from where he was standing, it looked like Roxie had said what she needed to say to her father. A part of him, a very small part, regretted his earlier opinions...
about her being a spoiled rebellious teenager like all the rest. He stuffed his hands deep into his pants pockets and frowned.

“Whatever, I’m just glad it’s over,” he grumbled.

Roxie and Harrison exchanged a few words too hushed to hear, and Cheren made his way over to Nate and Hugh with Stoutland in tow.

“Well, that was unexpected,” he said.

“You got a real way with words, Mr. Genius,” Hugh snapped.

Cheren gave him a look. “In any case, we really need to get to work preparing. We’re in Castelia waters now, and we could encounter hostiles at any moment. Are you guys ready?”

“To fight Team Plasma? I was born ready,” Hugh said, smacking a fist into his palm.

“I take your metaphor,” Cheren said, his gaze heavy. He wiped the sweat from his brow. “Needless to say, you’re both under my direct command, which makes me responsible for you. So try not to fuck up.”

“We’ll get them,” Nate said softly. “For Lenora.”

Cheren blinked and nodded slowly. “...Yes. She deserves better than what she got. I mean to make sure that happens.”

Things happened fast as the fleet approached Castelia to the north. Everyone was running around preparing for battle, bringing out cannons and harpoon launchers and Pokémon, and Hugh was in the middle of it with his gaze dead east. That was where the enemy lay in wait. That was where Team Plasma was. That was where his revenge was.

The sea was endless and blue, but in the distance Hugh could make out the Castelia City skyline with its towering skyscrapers that reached the clouds. And in the harbor floated dozens of ships, warships, flying grey and black and orange and yellow standards, all different. Squinting, he saw something strange.

“Oh shit,” he said aloud. “They’re already fighting!”

Ships were sailing from the east out of Nacrene, Plasma ships, but some had already reached Castelia and were bombing the harbor and engaging in aquatic combat with the local navy. Castelia’s yellow and orange standards appeared overwhelmed by the grey and black invaders from the east, and Hugh wondered where the hell the bulk of Castelia’s military could be.

Harley was barking orders, her gentle voice gone and replaced with something harsher and more commanding for the occasion. The other ships in the Virbank fleet were converging in formation, and trainers released their Pokémon on deck and into the water for support. Messenger Pidove flew from the ships to Castelia in hopes of contacting the Gym Leader or the Mayor or someone else in power. Hugh wondered how far they would get before Team Plasma shot them down.

“Ready the cannons!” Harrison shouted. He was back in captain mode and shouting orders. A X-Transceiver headset connected him to the other ships in the fleet to coordinate attack plans, and he spoke calmly into the mic.

Hugh looked around for Nate and Cheren, who had gathered on the deck with some of the Gym trainers aboard the ship and their Pokémon. Carnivine and Quagsire and Swoobat and some other
Pokémon flanked their trainers, ready for battle and awaiting commands once they docked. Hugh scanned them all, his mind racing. Would they make it to land before this fighting really broke out? There were so many enemy ships coming up...

“Hugh! Get over here!” Cheren shouted. “Everyone, listen up. Until we dock, we need aerial coverage. You, you have a pair of Swellow, right? Let’s get them going with my Unfezant. Nathaniel, we could use some on-deck coverage from your Fire-types. They’ve got the range we’ll need to deal with enemy ships.”

“Okay,” Nate said, releasing Emboar and Rapidash directly onto the deck. The two Pokémon balked at the uneven surface and the ocean surrounding them. Rapidash whickered uneasily.

Hugh noticed Roxie still on the ship near the prow, her Seviper coiled about her feet protectively. She was busy looking toward the city at what awaited them, but he couldn’t make out her expression. He ran back to the railing and followed her gaze. The Plasma ships appeared to have noticed their approach and some were changing formation. He thought he spotted a few Water-type Pokémon among them, including a mean-looking Sharpedo and a Gyarados that towered over the ships with its mouth agape.

*I’ll give you somethin’ to be afraid of,* he thought to himself.

This was it. Team Plasma was just ahead, and the fighting had already begun. This was the beginning of his revenge. He looked back at Cheren directing the trainers on deck. They had begun to set up an aerial and aquatic perimeter around the ship to protect it. Not long after, Hugh heard the first cannon blast. The ship directly to the left of the one he was on took the blast and now sported a hole through her starboard hull. The crew and Gym trainers aboard her scrambled to regroup and pulled back in the formation.

“Not today, motherfuckers,” Hugh said, shrugging off his jacket and pants. He was clad only in the full body suit, a utility belt, his two hook swords, and his Pokéballs.

Nate noticed him stripping down and ran toward him. “Hugh! Hey, Hugh!”

Hugh released all his Pokémon into the sea below and cast Nate a glance over his shoulder as he leaped up onto the railing. “I’m going on ahead.”

Nate reached for him, intending to stop him, but Hugh pulled down his goggles and dove over the edge of the ship into the frothing sea below, where he knew Nate would never follow him. As soon as he landed underwater, Milotic and Eelektrik were there to flank him. Samurott remained at the surface and swam toward the distant shore propelled by its powerful tail. Carracosta swam just below on the deep-sea currents. Hugh latched onto Milotic and held on for the ride. With a gesture, he indicated the direction of Castelia’s shoreline and they took off at top speed.

This far underwater, Hugh had an excellent view of the enemy fleet’s hulls and the motors and oars that drove them forward. The first one he came to sent a flare of fury down his spine, knowing Team Plasma members were aboard and fighting against Virbank and the Castelia ships. He’d give them something to fight, all right.

Hugh signaled to his Pokémon, relaying Action Imitation commands that they’d been trained to understand without verbal communication underwater. Samurott dove and swam upside down as it powered up an Ice Beam intended for the enemy ship’s grey hull. The frigid bolt struck metal and
froze it on contact. Milotic swam fast and gave Samurott a wide berth as the waters chilled in the immediate vicinity, and Hugh shivered despite his thick wet suit’s protection. A jagged sheet of ice bloomed over the ship’s hull and the metal whined under the stress.

With another silent hand signal, Hugh directed Carracosta to Shell Smash the frozen metal hull. The ancient turtle moved swiftly in its natural aquatic habitat and raced to the ship’s hull. It ducked into its shell at the last minute and rammed the ship at full strength. The ice exploded under the force of impact and blew a gaping hole in the hull. Hugh felt the vacuum tug of water being sucked into the ship through the hull, but Milotic’s powerful strokes kept them both clear of the danger. Slowly, the ship began to sink deeper into the water, and Hugh imagined the Plasma Agents trapped on board scrambling to figure out what had happened.

But his victory was cut short when all of a sudden, Milotic jerked and fired off a Water Pulse on its own. Just as Milotic got the attack off, something rammed it in the side hard. Hugh lost his grip on the serpentine Pokémon and went tumbling through the water. The Sharpedo he’d seen earlier had found his team and launched an all-out attack on Milotic. But to Hugh’s surprise, a person was holding onto Sharpedo and directing its attacks. The guy wore all black and sleek goggles that hid his eyes, and he had no breathing apparatus. Which could mean only one thing—the man was Syreni, too.

Milotic was disoriented from the rough Double Edge attack it had suffered, but its tough milky scales had shielded it well enough. Hugh got a look at Sharpedo’s sharp teeth, three or four rows of razor-sharp blades as long as a man’s hand. One Crunch and he would be dinner. He had to take this Plasma Syreni out, and fast.

The Plasma Syreni had the same thought, apparently, and urged Sharpedo to go after Hugh directly. The enormous shark left a flurry of bubbles in its wake as its body jettisoned the water it inhaled out of its unusually long and large gills. It moved fast, faster than Hugh could hope to swim on his own. But Carracosta was just as fast and caught up to Hugh in a flash. Not wasting a moment, Hugh latched onto Carracosta’s large shell and let the turtle pull him. A look back showed the Sharpedo gaining on him, and he swore in his head. Carracosta was moving too fast and twisting and turning for Hugh to signal to one of his other Pokémon.

Carracosta dove abruptly and flipped around to blast Sharpedo with an Aqua Jet. Pain exploded in Hugh back as he hit a particularly large head of brain coral while holding onto Carracosta, and he nearly lost his held breath. Sharpedo opened its gaping maw in a silent roar, and swallowed the Aqua Jet whole before crashing into the reef just a breath too late to catch Carracosta and Hugh in its mighty Crunch attack. Brain coral exploded under the force of Sharpedo’s powerful jaws, and the destruction spooked smaller aquatic Pokémon—Clawncher and Finneon and Corphish—hiding in the reef. Hugh tried to ignore the pain in his back, hoping the Relicanth scales sewn into his suit had spared him any permanent damage, and looked back over his shoulder as Carracosta zoomed toward the surface away from Sharpedo. The Plasma Syreni glared up at him as Sharpedo shook itself out, dazed. A small crater of shattered coral and rock had formed where Sharpedo made impact.

If that thing lands even one hit, I’m dead, Hugh thought.

Whoever the Plasma Syreni was, he’d trained the beast well. Hugh tugged on Carracosta’s shell and urged it to turn into another dive as he thought about a potential strategy. But Carracosta spooked and veered sharply when a loud blast thundered overhead and something shot through the water at top speed. A cannonball zoomed to the ocean floor and exploded with a loud crack when it hit the reef. More blasts sounded at the surface, and Hugh imagined the Plasma ships firing on the Virbank fleet, on Nate and Cheren and the others. He had to get up there and stop whatever ships
he could. But this asshole was holding him up in the water.

The Plasma Syreni seemed to pick up on Hugh’s intentions and renewed his assault, commanding Sharpedo to swim at full speed and catch Carracosta. Hugh looked around and spotted his other Pokémon, also scattered in the confusion and the blast, swimming to catch up to him. He bent his arm at the elbow and thrust his hand up, spreading the fingers. Sharpedo was closing in, but Eelektrik slithered through the currents and followed Hugh’s silent command. Sharpedo and its trainer noticed the sparking eel at the last minute and tried to swerve their trajectory, but Eelektrik rammed Sharpedo in the gills with a Spark attack. The static electricity jumped and covered Sharpedo’s and its trainer’s bodies, stopping their mad dash and dazing them both. Hugh almost whooped, but remembered he was underwater and kept his breath.

Milotic and Samurott caught up to the group, and Milotic slammed into Sharpedo with a powerful Aqua Tail attack that sent the dazed shark back to the ocean floor with a crash. Hugh didn't stick around to see if the pair recovered, more concerned about the battle raging above the surface. He signaled to his Pokémon, and together they surfaced. It was worse than he could have imagined.

As soon as Hugh broke the surface, he was face to face with one of the Virbank ships riddled with cannon holes. It was sinking fast, and fires had broken out on deck that a couple trainers with Water Pokémon were trying to douse while crewmembers worked on lowering the lifeboats. A man completely on fire ran like a headless Torchic on deck, disoriented and in great pain as he wailed incoherently. He tripped over debris on deck and plummeted to his death in the sea below.

“Shit, Carracosta, get over there!” Hugh shouted as he sat up on the great turtle’s shell.

Carracosta took off at a smooth but fast Surf over the water, and Hugh balanced on its rocky shell on the balls of his feet as he went for the hook swords at his hips. Waves churned as the activity in the harbor became more intense, but Carracosta rode the waves like a professional surfer and helped Hugh keep his balance. As he approached the distressed Virbank ship, however, the fires spread and set off a devastating explosion from within the hull. The searing heat of the explosion hit Hugh like a tidal wave, and Carracosta swerved artfully away from the danger. At a safer distance, Hugh was crouched on Carracosta and looked back. The ship was unrecognizable as it sank under the weight of the flames. Steam rose from the sea where it sank deeper. There was no sign of anyone still trying to make it off the ship. They were all gone, just like that.

Before Hugh could really process what had happened, he saw two Plasma warships pulling up alongside a Castelian ship with the intent to board it. Plasma Agents swung to the Castelian ship’s deck on ropes affixed to the tall masts, and they tossed Pokéballs hiding Magneton, Simisear, and Zangoose, among others, to wreak havoc on the Castelian crew and soldiers. Before Hugh could get close with Carracosta, however, a Virbank ship unleashed cannon fire on one of the Plasma ships, and a familiar voice shouted, “Rapidash! Use Fire Spin!”

Nate’s Rapidash kicked up a flurry of embers that grew with the wind into a vicious flaming vortex that slammed into the Plasma ship and burned through the deck. Plasma Agents that had abandoned the ship to get to the Castelian destroyer panicked and tried to get back to their ship, but the Fire Spin was doing maximum damage fast.

“Stoutland, Hyper Beam!” Cheren shouted.

Cheren’s Stoutland unleashed a shocking orange bolt of energy that tore through the Plasma ship’s hull, tracing a line through the cannon holes like a game of connect the dots. The devastation to the ship’s frame proved fatal, and it began to sink fast. The remaining crew aboard abandoned ship and leaped into the sea, where Hugh was waiting.
“Now’s my chance. Samurott! Hydro Pump those fuckers! Don’t let them escape!”

Samurott dove and conjured up a great blast of water that moved the tides and blasted through the rest of the burning ship. The stragglers that had jumped ship were sucked underwater and disappeared as a great column of water burst through the surface at incredible pressure. The Virbank crew was attempting to board the Castelian ship now to fend off the rest of Team Plasma.

Hugh was so distracted by Samurott’s awesome devastation that he nearly lost his balance when Carracosta suddenly took off again, and just in time. The Gyarados Hugh had seen earlier had found him and smashed its huge jaws into the water where Hugh had been not seconds ago. A ten-foot patch of seawater where Gyarados connected froze over and shattered into hundreds of floating mini icebergs. Gyarados lifted its massive head and roared. Ice crystals and mist leaked between its jaws as the Ice Fang attack powered down. The Sharpedo and its Syreni trainer Hugh had knocked out earlier zoomed alongside Gyarados, a little worse for wear but still in the game. He looked pissed as he shouted for Gyarados to swallow Hugh whole.

“He’s got a Gyarados, too? You gotta be shitting me! Carracosta, move!” Hugh shouted.

The turtle took off and Hugh balanced on its shell, hook swords drawn. As long as this guy was in the water, he wouldn’t be able to help Nate and the others. But the Atrocious Pokémon lived up to its name as it began to glow red and sent up a colossal Dragon Rage wave that followed Hugh like a homing missile. Carracosta moved faster on the surface than underwater, and its powerful legs allowed it to move precision turns at top speed. Even so, Hugh looked over his shoulder where the enormous wave of draconian power was closing in on him.

“Milotic!” he shouted. “Stop that wave!”

Milotic leaped from the water, its creamy scales gleaming in the sunlight, and began to glow red as it faced the deadly Dragon Rage wave hurtling straight for it. Draconian wind whipped the water around it out of nowhere and generated a towering Twister attack that sped toward the rushing crimson wave. Hugh watched, wide-eyed and terrified, as the pseudo-Dragons clashed in an explosion of water and sinister light. The two forces collided and redirected their energy straight up and straight down in a brilliant scarlet geyser. Gyarados dove out of the way, and Milotic did the same as it retreated underwater to avoid the collateral damage. When the enchanted water crashed back to the sea, it generated more smaller waves that dispersed in all directions, sped on by the dissipated draconian energy, and slammed into the nearest surrounding ships, one of which was Harrison’s ship carrying Nate and the others.

It rocked as its hull took damage from the attack. The metal dented and peeled back in places as the red energy ate into it like a flame burning through paper. Harrison shouted something incoherent and tossed out a Pokéball into the water. A Sealeo poked its head out of the waves and breathed out a rainbow beam at the rips in the ship’s hull. The Aurora Beam quickly sealed the holes and the surrounding water as it flooded the hull, saving the ship before it could take on too much water. Hugh had his own problems to contend with, though, as Gyarados roared and came after him again.

“Sky Attack!” Cheren’s voice cut through the din of cannon fire and roaring waves.

His Unfezant squawked and dove for Gyarados like a silver bullet. A gold aura cloaked it, and it slammed into Gyarados’s face with enough force to send the great Water Dragon crashing back to the water. A chunk of Gyarados’s trident horn broke off and washed away. Unfezant looped around and returned to Cheren, who was hanging from rope on the railing of the other enemy Plasma ship that had tried to box in the Castelian ship earlier. He caught Hugh’s gaze, hardened and cold as ever, but Carracosta took off Surfing again before Hugh could dwell on it.
Gotta take out that Gyarados, and fast, he thought.

The Plasma Syreni and his Sharpedo zoomed through the churning waves and circled Gyarados as it righted itself once more. The gold of Gyarados’s belly scales glittered brilliantly, and Hughes knew there was no way any of his Pokémon’s attacks would pierce them, not even Samurott’s Seamitars. Brute force wouldn’t bring this monster down.

“Eelektrik! Hit it with Zap Cannon!”

Eelektrik slithered quick as greased lightning just below the ocean’s surface and charged power. Hugh lost sight of it, though, when more cannon fire thundered all around as a fresh wave of attacks erupted between the feuding ships. Carracosta spooked when a cannon ball smashed into the water just feet away and threw Hugh as it dove. Hugh went flying and crash-landed in the water with a smack that knocked the wind out of him. Out of breath, he paddled desperately to the surface and gagged. Eelektrik fired off its Zap Cannon out of the corner of his eye, but the attack was slow and Gyarados kicked up a wall of water with Aqua Tail. The water conducted the electricity and Gyarados convulsed, but the water absorbed the brunt of Eelektrik’s attack and Gyarados dove to safety once more.

The sound of water frothing and churning like a motor cutting through it was Hugh’s only warning before the Plasma Syreni and his Sharpedo tried to run him over. Hugh sucked in a breath and dove with all his might, and he shoved his hook swords over him for protection. Sharpedo’s leathery belly hit the hook end of one of the swords and suffered an ugly but shallow gash. Blood darkened the water above Hugh’s head, which he’d barely held onto, and the current Sharpedo’s passage created sucked him deeper below the surface. Disoriented, Hugh twisted and tried to get his bearings. In the tumbling rip tide, it was impossible to tell which way was up and which way was down.

Samurott came to his rescue and wrapped its arms around his middle as its strong tail propelled them both through the water like a blue torpedo. Hugh held onto one of Samurott’s thick forelegs, his gloved fingers finding a grip around the shell armor that concealed the giant otter’s Seamitar. But no sooner had he gotten a good hold than something rammed into Samurott, and the otter dropped Hugh. Sharpedo’s long fins leaked a putrid black substance, the aftermath of a Night Slash attack that had hit Samurott in the back. The otter’s shell armor protected it from grievous injury, and Hugh once again escaped a brush with his own frail mortality. Sharpedo carried its trainer away on a jet of churning water, but Samurott fired off an Ice Beam after them, incensed as it tried to chase them down. Hugh swam back to the surface and looked around for his other Pokémon. What he found was Gyarados not thirty feet from his location surrounded by the ruins of a recently smashed Castelian ship. The beast had sunk a huge war galley with one swift Aqua Tail, and it looked ready to sink a few more.

“Oh fuck!” He backpedalled in the water, searching for Carracosta or Milotic or anyone. Only Eelektrik was close enough to have spotted him, and it swam as fast as it could to his location. Gyarados was faster.

“Eelektrik, the Gyarados!” he shouted.

Gyarados’s fangs smoked with mist as it got in reach to gobble Hugh up with another Ice Fang, and Hugh turned and swam as fast as he could away from the behemoth.

“Venoshock!” Roxie screamed as she threw a Pokéball with all her might through the air over Hugh’s head.

From within a burst of white light, a Whirlipede came out spinning like a top and spraying noxious
black poison. Gyarados reared to strike, but the plucky Whirlipede smashed into its left eye and continued to burrow. Black venom splattered on Gyarados’s face and dripped into the sea below. The Water Dragon screeched and began to Thrash as it tried to get the small Bug out of its eye.

Shocked, Hugh looked around and spotted Roxie flanked by her Seviper and a mean-looking Drapion on the deck of Harrison’s ship. She was leaning over the railing like she might jump at any minute, expression contorted in concentration as she watched her Whirlipede drill through Gyarados’s eye socket. But the water Dragon’s thrashing proved too much for the Bug to hold on, and it was flung sky high. When it landed with a splash in the water, her Drapion leaped up on the railing and spat out a sticky web to fish it out and drag it back to the ship.

“Hugh!” Roxie shouted down at him. “Move your ass!”

She didn’t need to tell him twice. Eelektrik’s sparking was becoming more violent as it charged power. Gyarados was convulsing with the effects of the severe poisoning it had suffered in one of the only vulnerable parts of its armored body. There was nothing of its left eye remaining but a smoking black pit leaking tar and blood. Out of control, its Thrashing grew worse. If it kept it up, it would smash into the nearest ship, which was Harrison’s.

“Now, Eelektrik! Zap Cannon!”

The slimy eel poked its head out of the water and belched out a super-concentrated ball of lightning that took off straight for Gyarados. Unlike before, Gyarados was too disoriented to defend and too close to dodge. The ball lightning hit it in the belly, normally impenetrable, but the electricity jumped all over its body and found a way inside through its eyes, its gills, its gaping mouth. The concentrated attack lit Gyarados up like a firework, and the great water Dragon roared in pain as it fell one last time. The concussive wave Gyarados made when it hit the water shook the nearest boats and swept both Hugh and Eelektrik away. Roxie shouted something to him as he was sucked under again and Harrison ran to her side at the railing just as Hugh disappeared underwater.

Pushed around like a punching bag, Hugh’s body ached as he tumbled head over heels through the water and hit the reef again. The back of his head split open and his blood filled the water. He grasped for a handhold to right himself in the crazy currents and grabbed onto a swaying sea fan that ripped out of the ocean floor under his weight. Fire coral scraped at his suit, but the suit protected him from a severe stinging burn. His feet dragged through the sandy ocean floor and he crouched and dug his hands into the mucky sea floor, at last slowing down. The back of his head stung, but he didn’t feel dizzy or nauseous. With any luck, it was just a cut.

But the smell of his blood attracted Sharpedo and its Plasma trainer like Combee to honey. They found him on the ocean floor getting his bearings, but mysteriously did not rush in to attack. The Plasma Syreni glared at Hugh through his dark goggles and pulled a small knife from a strap on his thigh. To Hugh’s bewilderment, the guy sliced his hand open with the knife and touched his bleeding hand to Sharpedo’s head. Before Hugh could make sense of what he was seeing, the guy’s blood swirled around Sharpedo like living tentacles. Sharpedo’s rough blue hide darkened, and the wandering blood tendrils painted yellow markings all over its body like warpaint. The shark’s already impressive snout grew longer and its jaws opened wider. The teeth sharpened and elongated further until the beast’s maw was nearly as large as the rest of its body. Wicked horns protruded form its prominent snout, as sharp as its jagged teeth. Hugh could only stare in shock at the incomprehensible transformation. It was like Sharpedo had evolved, but as far as Hugh knew, Sharpedo could not evolve further.

The Plasma Syreni clearly sensed his mounting fear and confusion and grinned as he pushed off from Sharpedo to let it swim alone. With a wave of his hand, he sent the monstrous transformed
shark after Hugh, and all Hugh could think was that he had to swim, get the fuck away from whatever the hell this thing was. He kicked off from the sea floor and swam with all his might, leaving the contents of his bladder behind as the fear propelled him nowhere near as fast as he needed to be going to outrun that monster.

Sharpedo, silent as death, opened its impossibly huge mouth and made to bite down on Hugh’s kicking feet, when all of a sudden, Carracosta rammed it from the side with its shell and knocked Sharpedo off trajectory. Hugh didn’t have time to admire the turtle’s timing when Milotic swooped in and curled around him. He scrambled to hang onto her sleek hide, finding a familiar handhold in her dorsal fin, and ducked his head as she took off through the churning waters.

But the respite ended all too soon as the supersized Sharpedo recovered and shot after them faster than any Water Pokémon Hugh had ever seen. He watched over his shoulder as it jetted after Milotic, easily out-speeding her, and attempted to Crunch down on Milotic’s shimmering tailfin. But Hugh was ready for that and gave Milotic a crude hand signal just as Sharpedo opened its mouth wide. She swerved hard and brought her glowing red tailfin around with a hard smack. The Dragon Tail attack hit Sharpedo in the side of the face, the same place Carracosta had smashed into it before, and knocked it away. But Sharpedo crunched down and managed to take a chunk out of Milotic’s tail all the same, and the serpentine Pokémon wailed. Blood formed a dark cloud around the bite mark where Sharpedo had taken a small but deep chunk out of her. Milotic swam away, but noticeably slower as she continued to bleed from her wound. Swearing internally, Hugh let go and recalled her to the Pokéball before she could lose too much blood.

But now he was floating alone in open water as the war raged on above, flashes of light that lit up the dark ocean below then plunged it into shadow as ships passed by overhead. Hugh looked around for his other Pokémon, but he only found the Plasma Syreni as the guy punched him hard in the gut. Hugh saw stars and nearly gagged, but he held onto his breath barely and kicked at the Plasma Syreni to put some distance between them.

Hugh tore through the water, his training and natural affinity directing his body through the motions it knew on instinct, but the Plasma Syreni was just as well-trained for underwater combat and pulled a knife. Hugh kicked and the Plasma Syreni followed, and soon they were caught up in another game of chase as Hugh dodged a knife thrust and grabbed the guy’s wrist. He tried to punch the guy in the face, but something shifted the currents and forced them apart. The aberrant Sharpedo came crashing through them with Samurott and Eelektrik giving chase, though neither of Hugh’s Pokémon could hope to match the predator for speed. If they couldn’t catch it, they’d never bring it down. Samurott tried an Ice Beam, but Sharpedo was so fast that it outswam the bolt completely.

What the fuck did he do to Sharpedo?!

Hugh had no answers right now and no time to contemplate them as the Plasma Syreni came at him again. Hugh pulled his hook swords from their holsters and swung. The enemy was well trained in knife fighting and deflected as he tried to close the distance between them. The blade scraped Hugh’s shin, but Harrison’s suit protected him from injury. Hugh’s chest ached from the punch to the gut he’d taken earlier, and it was getting hard to maintain his breath under the severe strain. He needed to finish this.

An image of Hayley’s smiling face, hazy in his memory but still recognizable, like a faded photograph, popped up in Hugh’s head. Anger and vengeance flooded his veins as the Plasma Syreni kept after him like some unfeeling machine. The guy would just move onto the next victim after Hugh without a second thought, as Hugh was sure Hayley’s attackers had done. But not today. It ended today. This asshole wouldn’t get away, just as the rest would also soon feel his
Hugh kicked his legs hard and shot straight up, surprising the Plasma Syreni at the sudden shift in altitude. As predicted, the guy shot up after him, and Hugh brought down his hooked swords. The currents shifted again all of a sudden and buffeted him forward, head over heel. Sharpedo sped by once again, leaking dark energy as it prepared to attack Samurott directly. But the sudden shift made it impossible for the Plasma Syreni dodge Hugh’s swords in time, and the hooks found a hold in the guy’s soft stomach through his wetsuit. Hugh hovered over him, upside-down and behind, and felt the tug on the ends of his swords. All he could think of was Hayley and how they’d ripped her apart like an animal.

So Hugh ripped as hard as he could. He pulled his hands apart with all his might, and hooks came away bloody with chunks of flesh stuck to the ends. The force of the lethal attack flipped the Plasma Syreni, and Hugh came face to face with him. Face contorted in agony and mouth opened wide in a scream that released the bubbles of his held breath, the Plasma Syreni seized. His middle was a chewed up mess where the sharp hooks had torn him asunder, and his goggles had come loose in the commotion. Wide, dark eyes stared back at Hugh in shock and pure terror and pain, still alive but with the realization that death had arrived.

Hugh stared at what he’d done just inches from his face. Blood flowed around them, in his hair and around his arms and seeped into his wetsuit. He tasted it on his tongue when he gagged involuntarily at that look in the Plasma Syreni’s eyes, the sheer terror of darkness descending. Hugh’s throat spasmed and he tried to kick the dying man away.

A flash of blue caught his eye and he saw the mutated Sharpedo tense, as though assaulted by invisible forces. Lacerations opened up in its belly all of a sudden, as though by magic, in the exact same place as its trainer’s. Sharpedo convulsed in shock and pain, and it was enough time for Samurott to finally catch up and ram the thing. Samurott’s wicked horn pierced Sharpedo’s rough skin through the gills and plunged in to the hilt. But Samurott kept going and spun in the water for momentum. It tossed Sharpeedo like a sack of potatoes with a powerful Mega Horn attack, and Sharpedo went sailing through the shallows to breach the surface, trailing a thick cloud of dark blood.

The Plasma Syreni’s weakening body contorted in front of Hugh, drawing his attention once more. A gaping hole opened up in the guy’s neck, as though he, too, had been impaled, and his spine snapped. Hugh cried out in fright and pulled his swords free. The Plasma Syreni sank like a rock, leaving a trail of dark blood in his wake.

Out of air, Hugh could feel his body starting to spasm and shut down. He saw dark spots and curled in on himself, knowing he had to swim to the surface but too weak from the events and his own emotional turmoil to do it. A shadow passed over him just then, and something soft and gelatinous buffeted him from behind. Unable to fight back against whatever new threat this was, he fell against it as it rushed him to the surface. When he broke the water, Hugh gagged and vomited up seawater tinged pink with his blood. Coughing violently, he rolled onto his side and suffered as his body’s aches and injuries caught up to him tenfold.

“Hugh! Hey, Hugh!”

He recognized that voice, but his head was swimming and his vision was doubled. The hook swords strapped to his wrists had bits of flesh stuck in their curved blades, and he was sick all over again at the sight.

“Pull him up, Drapion!”
Roxie’s voice cut through the haze just as Hugh felt something sticky fall on him and hold fast. All of a sudden he was rising through the air. The hook swords hung down from the straps around his wrists as he rose higher, and he got a look at the ocean’s surface just below. A Tentacruel floated where he’d been, its inflated head nearly translucent save for the ruby red markings that resembled large eyes. Before he could make sense of it, he was on his back on a hard surface and shadows hovered over him.

“Hugh! Hey man, you in there?”

It was Nate looking down at him in concern.

“He’s bleeding,” Cheren said. “Let me see.”

Hands roved over Hugh’s body and gently turned him on his side. Hugh coughed up more seawater as Cheren examined the back of his head.

“Roxie, hand me that Super Potion,” Cheren said.

Something stung the back of his head as a spray hit him, but it was soon followed by meager relief and a coolness that had a soothing effect.

“I thought Syreni were supposed to be able to hold their breaths for hours,” Roxie said as Hugh started to come to.

“Not if they suffer injuries to the chest area, as I suspect Hugh did,” Cheren explained.

Hugh coughed again. “Party’s over, everyone.”

Nate helped him sit up. “What the hell was that?” he asked.

“Huh?”

“Mega Sharpedo,” Cheren said solemnly. “Hugh, you fought a Mega Pokémon underwater, didn’t you? We saw Samurott toss it just a moment ago. It’s a miracle you’re alive.”

*Mega Pokémon?* Hugh’s head was still too waterlogged to process what that meant.

“My head,” he grumbled, pulling down his goggles and rubbing his face.

“What happened down there?” Nate asked.

“Yeah, after we took out that Gyarados, you disappeared,” Roxie said.

Hugh remembered how her Whirlipede had attacked Gyarados like it was nothing. “Seviper’s got nothing on that Whirlipede, fuck.”

She smiled, the pride evident on her face.


Images of the Plasma Syreni Hugh had gutted like a fish flashed in his memory, and fresh bile rose to his throat. Before he realized what was happening, Nate laid a hand on his shoulder. He was trembling.

“Hugh,” Nate said firmly. “Are you okay?”
“I’m... I killed him,” Hugh said, voice shaky.

Nate peered at him like he’d seen something he shouldn’t have. The sounds of battle continued to rage beyond them, and Cheren stood up.

“If the Tamer’s dead, then that’s all that matters. Nathaniel, let’s go. Hugh, you rest.”

Hugh didn’t even protest as he shook, unable to put the image of the man he’d murdered with his own two hands out of his mind.

“I’m going, too,” Roxie said.

Her Drapion’s web had pulled Hugh out of the water, but it was dissolving now as the overgrown scorpion withdrew and snapped its pincers, ready to do Roxie’s bidding.

“Absolutely not,” Cheren said. “Harrison ordered you to stay out of harm’s way. I’m not about to go against his word.”

“You’re not the boss of me!” Roxie shouted. “I can fight!”

“Fire!” Harrison shouted across the deck.

The cannons on the ship blasted another round into a nearby Plasma ship and peppered its hull with bullet holes. Hugh followed their trajectory and beyond to Castelia’s shoreline. Infantry troops were fighting on the shore already with Pokémon to help them. He could pick out the vibrant violet of Virbank’s soldiers among the fighters. Some of the fleet had made it ashore.

“This isn’t a discussion,” Cheren snapped. “Stay put. You too, Hugh. Nathaniel, with me.”

Nate got up. His Lucario and Emboar were standing behind him. “Take care of him,” he said gently to Roxie.

She blinked after him, some of the anger gone from her face, and Hugh pushed up onto his knees.

“I have to get to shore,” he said, voice shaking.

Roxie glared at him. “You look like you’ve seen a Ghost. You’re not going anywhere.”

_A Ghost, huh..._

His hands wouldn’t stop shaking as he relived the Plasma Syreni’s murder again in his mind. Why was this happening? Why did it affect him so much? He didn’t know the guy, and he was with Team Plasma, of all the things. This was what Hugh had wanted, to cut down every last one of them. It wasn’t supposed to be like this. Hugh had never killed anyone before, but these weren’t people, they were vermin. Murderers.

_I’m one now, too._

The thought came to him unbidden, and he got up and went to the railing, squeezing his eyes shut to blot it out.

Samurott, Eelektrik, and Carracosta swam to the edge of the ship and peered up at Hugh. Harrison’s Tentacruel, the same one that had brought him back to the surface, was farther out poisoning the water around the ship Harrison had just bombed to ensure none of the Plasma crew escaped with their lives. Everywhere Hugh looked, ships were going up in flames or firing cannons or hosting battles on deck where people and Pokémon clashed in a flurry of swords, fire, thunder,
and brute strength. An errant Thunderbolt arced toward the ship Hugh was on and struck the deck. Roxie cried out, and Hugh whirled.

“Look out!” he shouted.

Fire burst to life on the deck where the bolt had struck and opened up a hole in the floor. A Gym trainer and his Prinplup got to work dousing the fire, and a hefty Crawdunt crawled over the deck to help them out. Harrison was right behind it.

“I told you to get out of the way!” he bellowed at Roxie.

“I’m fine, Dad! And I can fight!” she bellowed right back.

“This isn’t a game! This is war, Darling, and I’m not going to lose you.”

He tried to manhandle her to the door that led to the captain’s quarters below deck, but she pulled away stubbornly.

“You’re not gonna lose me! I’m Veleno, and I’m strong. You’re just a pleb! Even if you are a Gym Leader, you’re still weaker than a Tamer!”

Harrison looked hurt by her harsh tone, and she slipped out of his grip. “I’m your father,” he said a little more calmly. “And I don’t want to see you hurt.”

Roxie was overcome with anger, an anger Hugh recognized all too well having said many things he didn’t mean in the throes of that same apoplectic anger in the past.

“Hammer Arm!” Nate shouted.

Emboar charged across the deck and leaped to the Plasma ship drawing up beside the ship intending to attack. The great boar landed on the deck and smashed through the metal floor with its mighty fists, taking a few Plasma Agents and their Pokémon with it. More Plasma Agents swarmed Emboar with their Pokémon—Hariyama and Liepard and Palpitoad. Nate swung on a rope to the enemy deck, Lucario close behind, and landed with a roll. Cheren was not far behind with a couple Virbank Gym trainers.

“Flare Blitz!” Nate commanded.

Emboar rammed the Hariyama as it powered up a Dynamic Punch, and the two Fighters clashed with a thunderous clap. But Emboar was larger and stronger and cloaked in flame, and it beat back Hariyama into the mast. The Fighter’s face was smashed in and caught fire, dead on impact. Nate didn’t even flinch as he swept around and commanded Lucario to use Aura Sphere. He drew the steel axe at his hip and went after Hariyama’s trainer without warning. Cheren released Bouffalant, and the wild buffalo took off in a mad charge around the deck.

Some of the Plasma Agents had a similar idea and crossed on ropes to the Virbank ship’s deck, where they put the nearest crewmembers to the sword without a word and released their Pokémon. Seviper hissed and snapped at a Zangoose that coalesced in the light and charged at it without warning, abandoning Roxie.

“Seviper!” she shouted.

Harrison drew his sword and fended off a charging Plasma Agent. Their steel clashed with a sparking clang, and he shouted at Hugh over his shoulder.
“Get her out of here!”

Hugh came to his senses and grabbed Roxie’s hand roughly. “Come on!”

“No, Dad!” she yelled.

Drapion scuttled after them, but a Plasma Agent and his Vigoroth cut off their escape. Hugh had no Pokémon on deck with him except Milotic, and she was down for the count. So instead, he drew the hook swords at his hips and brandished them at the Plasma Agent, a young woman with a mask over the lower half of her face.

“Ooh, playing hero, are we?” she taunted.

“Fuck you,” Hugh spat, hands trembling.

She noticed. “You look a little scared for a hero. How about I kiss you goodnight!”

She came at him with her sword, and all Hugh could do was defend. Her Vigoroth screeched and flew at him, claws poised to gut him from navel to nose, but Roxie interfered.

“Night Slash!” she shouted.

Drapion slammed into the Vigoroth with snapping pincers laced in malignant darkness and buffeted the sloth back. The Plasma Agent was good, and all Hugh could do was parry her attacks. His body ached and his breathing was labored after the ordeal underwater, and he felt like he was moving sluggishly. Her sword sliced him in the arm between two Relicanth scales and drew blood. He hissed and faltered, and she moved to strike.

“No!” Roxie yelled.

She tackled the Plasma Agent from the side and knocked her down. Dazed, the Plasma Agent was slow to react on her back, and Roxie had enough time to rip off the glove on her right hand.

“Go to hell,” Roxie hissed before plunging her rotted nails into the Plasma Agent’s neck and squeezing.

The Plasma Agent choked and convulsed as the deadly poison entered her bloodstream and worked instantaneously. Her eyes bled black and foam leaked from the sides of her mouth as she seized. It was over in a matter of seconds. A foul smell filled the air, indicating she’d defecated under the poison’s insidious influence. Roxie pulled her bloody hand away and stared at it, like she couldn’t believe what she’d just done had actually worked.

Drapion had Vigoroth on the floor, where it had opened up the sloth’s belly and was ripping out its kidneys to feast upon. Black poison oozed from Vigoroth’s open wound, but Drapion didn’t mind the noxious toxin as it dug into Vigoroth like it hadn’t eaten in weeks.

Hugh heard the clang of steel not far off, where Harrison was fending off more Plasma Agents. His Crawdaunt Crabhammered the one coming after him in the back, catching the Agent off guard and breaking his spine on contact. Hugh grabbed Roxie’s elbow and hauled her up, careful of her poisonous right hand.

“Move!” he said.

Harrison heard Hugh and looked back to check on them. “Get out of here!”
Another Plasma Agent and his Maractus descended on Hugh and Roxie, and he had to let go of her to fend them off. His hook swords caught the Agent by surprised and embedded in the guy’s shoulder, pulling him forward to smash his nose on the deck. Enraged and fueled by adrenaline, Hugh smashed his foot over the Agent’s head once, twice, three times, until a dark puddle of blood pooled out beneath him and stained Hugh’s water moccasins. The thought that it was easier the second time brought a stinging heat to his eyes, but then a vicious Vine Whip caught him by the wrists and dragged him down. Maractus pulled him away, leaving Roxie by herself as he contended with the Cactus Pokémon.

When he saw the Plasma Agent making a run at Roxie with a spear, he shouted, “Roxie! Look out!”

She whirled, and Drapion looked up from its feasting, but they were both too slow. The Agent was upon her as Drapion rushed with pinching claws to cut him down, and Roxie scrambled backwards. Harrison intervened at the last minute and plunged his sword into the Agent’s stomach. Hugh struggled against Maractus’s Vine Whip and kicked his feet over his head smack into the sentient plant’s face. The shock loosened the vines and gave him enough time to swing around with one of his hook blades, which tore into the cactus’s skin and ripped a prickly arm off. Maractus screeched in pain and attempted to retreat.

“Dad!” Roxie screamed.

When Hugh looked back, Harrison was clutching the knife in his abdomen and staggering. Roxie rushed to his side with Drapion and caught him as he lost his balance. His weight was too much for her, though, and they toppled to the deck. Harrison wheezed.

“Daddy,” Roxie said in a tinny voice that didn’t suit her at all.

Hugh rushed to help, but when he sank down next to Harrison, dread chilled him to the bone. The knife in his abdomen was embedded to the hilt and the wound was bleeding profusely. Harrison wheezed again, and his eyes dilated. Hugh recognized that look, the mad fight or flight response, having seen it on the Syreni he’d ripped apart underwater.

“Daddy,” Roxie said again. “Hold on, you’ll be okay.”

“Roxie...” he rasped. “My...little girl...”

He fell into a coughing fit that seemed to sap the last of his energy, and Roxie couldn’t hold back her tears.

“You promised,” she wept. “You promised you wouldn’t leave me alone.”

Harrison raised a shaky bloody hand to her, but didn’t have the strength to reach her face. Instead, he reached for her exposed poisonous hand and grasped it fiercely in his. “You are strong and...and so loved,” he managed. “You’re my greatest achievement, Roxie. Don’t...forget that.”

Hugh watched, stunned to silence, as Harrison slipped away just like the Plasma Syreni and the Agent Hugh had killed. It was all the same in the end, he thought. No glamour, no honor, just the slipping away, the darkness, the same for everyone. Hayley must have felt it, too, when she passed. And he felt small, so small and insignificant and no better than the vermin he’d loathed all his life.

“Daddy,” Roxie sobbed. “Please don’t go. I’m sorry, I’m sorry for everything. I promise I’ll be a good daughter from now on, so please don’t go.”

But he was gone, the light gone from his glazed eyes and the blood congealing on the deck. He
squeezed her poisoned hand in his dead fingers, and her infection would never reach him now. Roxie shuddered and screamed as she squeezed his cold hand in hers, leaking blood and poison, and all Hugh could do was watch helplessly.
Rosa

Burgh was terminally ill. A genetic defect he’d been born with, they said. It had manifested a few years ago and slowly deteriorated his body, attacked his heart, weakened his lungs. There was no cure.

“Yet,” Cedric clarified as he bent over a table piled with chemistry equipment—a centrifuge, a large microscope that looked like it was last century’s model, various test tubes and glass containers, a lit Bunsen burner. “There’s no cure yet, my dear.”

Rosa knew next to nothing about science despite her many years cohabitating with Aurea, but even she was skeptical having seen the effects of Burgh’s illness first hand. “Are you that confident?”

They were in a small room that appeared to be Cedric’s personal laboratory and hamper. There were various articles of clothing strewn about and some hastily rumpled in a pile on a cleared desk. Papers depicting colorful charts, figures, and scribbled notes with coffee stains were stacked on the floor and pinned to the corkboard walls in no semblance of order whatsoever. Rosa had no idea how he found anything in this closet of a lab. There was a lingering odor of something oily and pan-fried in the air, but she couldn’t see any food lying around. It was probably buried under something, and Cedric hadn’t bothered to clean up in ages.

“Bah! There’s no confidence when it comes to science,” he announced as he carefully poured some kind of powder into the blue liquid he’d been heating up and stirred. “There is only inevitability! Given time, all questions can be answered. Time, time, time, see what’s become of me...” He trailed off into song as he used a glass funnel to measure out exact doses of the concoction into gel pill capsules and set them aside on a silver tray.

Rosa decided not to argue. Something about Cedric struck her as eccentric, like he wouldn’t hear the reason of others once he’d convinced himself of something. Aurea rarely spoke of her father except to praise his brilliance in passing. But even if they were distanced, Rosa still found it hard to believe that Aurea had no idea her own father was a member of the original Team Plasma.

Cedric finished up his little project and diligently washed the used containers. “…Drinking my vodka and lime,” he continued his song tunelessly. Despite the mess in his lab, he was meticulous about his equipment and keeping it clean and in order. When he was finished, he carefully dumped the freshly brewed gel pills into a glass bottle and corked it.

“Well, that should do it. Now I really could enjoy an ice cold vodka and lime,” he said merrily.

Rosa didn’t really get it, but she followed him out of the lab anyway. It had been a full night and day since she’d arrived in Castelia with Jack and Louis and met Burgh only to break the news of Neo Team Plasma’s atrocities on the lower East Tine. Since then, she’d had a chance to get medical attention for her injured Pokémon, shower, sleep fourteen hours, and change into clean clothes. The room she’d been given at Castelia Gym was modest but comfortable, and one of the maids working in that wing had generously offered to procure her some clothes. Rosa wore loose pants and a long flowing shirt, both made of raw Silcoon silk and dyed a pale cream, as well as the jade headscarf she’d purchased earlier. The maid even helped her tie it properly so it wouldn’t blow off in the whipping winds that often plagued Castelia and brought with them freak sandstorms from the desert in the north. From the outside, she looked no different from any native Castelian woman.

Burgh had been whisked to the medical wing of the Gym, which was above ground along with the
rest of the living and communal quarters. Only the terrarium was underground and connected to the labyrinthine tunnels that traversed the entire city. From the street, there was very little to distinguish the Gym buildings from those around it save for an inconspicuous sign over the front double glass doors that led to the lobby. Security was top of the line, and Rosa had been given a temporary pass after the head security guard took her fingerprints. She could not get anywhere beyond the lobby and across the different wings without a two-factor fingerprint and badge identification, and even then she was only granted access to the wing where her room was located. She wondered if the only reason she hadn’t been assigned a guard to keep an eye on her was because people had more important jobs to see to with the threat of Neo Team Plasma on the horizon. Cedric, however, appeared to have clearance throughout the entire building and toted Rosa around like a pet Lillipup once he’d found her loitering in the hall and unable to get anywhere with her lack of clearance.

“So those pills,” Rosa said as they walked down a corridor with pastel yellow walls and tastefully arranged flower vases at every intersection. “They’ll help Burgh?”

“They’ll help alleviate his symptoms,” Cedric said very precisely. “No, no, the only things that will help Burgh are time and his Volucris blood.” Cedric suddenly stopped and lit up, the wrinkles around his eyes and forehead crinkling in a pleasing way. “Did you know, Rosa? Volucris blood has more antibodies than any other kind. They have their own special blood cell, a bit like a...a super cell that is much better at neutralizing viral and bacterial threats.”

“Well, no, I didn’t know that,” she said, a little stunned.

Cedric puffed up like he’d made the great discovery himself. “I discovered it myself.”

Rosa gaped at him. “Wait, what?”

“That daughter of mine, she was always more interested in dead things than living things. It’s the living that interest me, and Volucris are more alive than you or me.” He gave her a pitying look. “It pains me to let you down, my dear, but even you as a Sylvan couldn’t compare to a Volucris. Disease, poison, resource deprivation, extreme environments, these are things you would inevitably succumb to. But not the Volucris with their super cells.” He did a little pirouette as he turned on his heel and abruptly kept going down the hall purposefully.

Rosa thought about her time in Pinwheel Forest with Jack and Louis. If she hadn’t run into them, something told her she wouldn’t be here now. They had gotten her through the forest rather easily except for the freak bee attack. How would she have fared alone? She jogged to catch up to Cedric and swallowed the shiver down her spine. “So is that why you joined Team Plasma? To study that Volucris super cell?”

“A happy consequence of my research. But no, not the reason I joined. You must understand, having been a part of it yourself. The early days were when anything was possible. That was what N and Team Plasma offered me: possibility. If I could dream it, I could try to give it life. Oh, I was quite the legendary dreamer, all right.” He had a wistful expression on his face as he remembered the old days fondly. “Well, it was an exciting time despite my failures. But,” he jiggled the bottle with Burgh’s pills in them, “there can be no discovery without trial and error.”

Rosa did not quite follow his oddly cryptic and disjointed manner of speaking, but she was more interested in his successes than whatever failed projects he’d worked on years ago. “This super cell you keep talking about,” she pressed. “Can’t it fight off whatever disease Burgh has?”

Cedric hung his head and slowed down, like his feet were suddenly heavy. “The super cells eat away at the disease, but they can’t eradicate it. Keeps mutating, changing, like a Ditto, it reacts to
whatever attacks it and fights fire with fire. But no super cells means no fighting back at all. Zero. Zilch. Burgh will stay alive for now.”

For now.

How much longer could Burgh hang on? It seemed unfair somehow that he would suffer the effects of a debilitating disease indefinitely longer than a regular person just because of what he was. Theirs was a gift, Sylvan or Volucris or any other Tamer. But this disease had turned Burgh’s gift into a curse.

“When you put it like that, it almost makes it sound awful that he has to keep living through it,” Rosa said.

Cedric spared her a glance. “...Yes, it’s quite tragic, actually. Often our greatest gifts can so easily be turned against us if we are not careful. And even if we are. Such is the inevitable consequence of power, no matter what form it chooses to take.” He had that faraway look in his eyes again, misty and troubled with some dark memory buried deep. “Just a matter of time, like all things.”

A matter of time, Rosa wondered. Was that true? With enough time, could even the purest and best intentions sour and putrefy? Did power, be it of mind or body or soul, inborn or bestowed or happened upon by chance, inevitably corrupt its bearer over time? She thought of N, whom they’d told her had perished young and before his time, and of Ghetsis, who still lived and now controlled all of Neo Team Plasma. How could they have once been on the same side? Or was Cedric right, after all? Was Ghetsis with his Neo Team Plasma what N could have become had he lived?

She shook her head and tried to put the awful thought out of her mind. Just thinking about N made her heart ache, and she still had trouble accepting the fact that he was truly gone. And N was nothing like Ghetsis. If he were here now, he would know how to stop what was happening. But he wasn’t here, and Ghetsis was coming. This, too, was simply a matter of time, and time was fast running out.

Cedric led Rosa to a private wing of the Gym she hadn’t been in before. The pale green walls were adorned with framed paintings, most of them vibrant and colorful and reminiscent of the graffiti art on the cement tubes in the terrarium. The room they arrived at was well lit, and fresh flowers sat in hand-painted vases. The middle of the room had a large hole covered by a sleek metal lid. A skylight opened up to the blue sky above directly over the hole. A coffee table surrounded by sofas and comfortable chairs held covered dishes leaking steam, a dinner recently prepared and brought in from the kitchens. More paintings decorated the walls of the room, but they were much more subdued in color than the graffiti art in the halls. They depicted landscapes of all kinds, captured for a perfect moment in time. Voices drifted from an open door across the room, which was Cedric’s destination. As they approached, Rosa realized where they must be.

“Maybe I shouldn’t be here,” she said.

But Cedric didn’t seem to hear her and let himself into the adjoining bedroom. In the master bed, Burgh sat up against a pile of large pillows in fresh clothes. He looked a little better than the last time Rosa had seen him, like he’d washed and gotten a little rest. But the hollow pits of his eyes still gave her a chill when she looked upon them, heart wrenching at the thought that he must be in constant pain, suffering with no outlet. Louis was seated in a chair next to the bed and speaking about something Rosa couldn’t make out, though he looked very serious. A Meowth was curled up at the foot of the bed licking its front paw. It looked up when Rosa and Cedric entered, keen eyes narrowed in perpetual suspicion.

“Hello, hello!” Cedric greeted.
“Oh, Professor Juniper,” Louis said politely, standing. “Rosa, you’re looking better.”

Louis had also cleaned up and changed into loose-fitting clothing that matched the sandy desert atmosphere.

“What were you doing?” Burgh demanded softly. “I’ve been waiting.”

Cedric looked completely at ease as he fished the pills he’d concocted out of his pocket and handed the bottle to Burgh, who peered at them suspiciously. “Keeping you waiting, of course. You’ll feel better after you take two of these.”

“They look different from the last batch.”

“Ah, very observant! This is a new recipe. Experimental, yes, but it should alleviate the strain on your lungs and have you up and about in a matter of hours.”

Burgh popped two of the blue gel pills in his mouth and dry swallowed them. He pushed himself up against the pillows to sit up straighter, and only then did he acknowledge Rosa’s presence. “Sylvan,” he said curtly.

“I’m glad to see you’re feeling better,” Rosa said, guarded. She felt like she was walking on eggshells being in Burgh’s presence.

He studied her a moment, and she wondered what he could possibly be thinking. It had been her to deliver the awful news about Lenora and Vivian, to hurt him deeply with her words, never mind that she was just the messenger. What would she do in his position if some stranger came to tell her the people she loved most were gone, just like that? If it were Juniper or Bianca, or Nate...

“I’m not,” he said finally, still watching her. “But I’ve learned to live with the pain. A little more won’t break me.”

Suddenly ashamed, Rosa let her gaze fall and wished she could gracefully retreat from this place, give him some peace, anything to take back the terrible news she’d given him to add to his already considerable burden.

“Look at me,” he ordered in that soft but strong tone he’d used in the Gym earlier.

She looked up, hoping her flush wasn’t too obvious. If he noticed, he didn’t react to it.

“I’m not in the habit of shooting the messenger. You need not fear me. But I do expect your silence in return for my hospitality. I’m sure you understand.”

Rosa stared in disbelief as she read the threat in his words. Even sickly and weak, he managed to rattle her. “I—of course, I wouldn’t dream of repeating anything I’ve seen or heard here to anyone.”

“Then we won’t have any problems.”

Burgh nodded to Louis, who gave him a hand out of the bed. Burgh’s clothes were wrinkled from lying in bed, but he stood tall by himself despite appearances. “We’ll start with dinner. Sylvan, you’re excused.”

“Oh no, that won’t do,” Cedric said jovially. “With so much food and Rosa without clearance for the mess hall, we have a neat solution for everyone.”
Burgh glared at Cedric, but the old professor seemed not to notice.

“...Fine. Professor, I trust you’ll take care of her clearance access to the mess hall as soon as we’re finished here tonight.”

“Excellent. Where is the vodka?” Cedric didn’t wait to be told and went to the living room to search the small liquor cabinet.

“Take a breath,” Louis whispered to Rosa as they followed Cedric and Burgh to the living room. “You’re very tense.”

“He doesn’t want me here. I don’t know how to act around him after everything,” Rosa admitted.

Louis laid a hand on her shoulder and managed a smile for her. He had a kind look, a look his brother Jack did not share despite their identical likeness. “He doesn’t know you. Just be honest. Burgh likes a straightforward attitude. He always wants to know exactly what he’s dealing with.”

There was a low coffee table in the living room surrounded by comfortable sofas and chairs, and this was where Burgh settled the group down. Rosa took a seat on the largest sofa, while Louis took the loveseat across from them and Burgh settled into an armchair at the head of the table. Cedric returned with his vodka and lime spritzer and sat down next to Rosa.

Everyone began to eat, and Rosa did not realize how hungry she’d been until she smelled the food, a real hot meal after weeks without one. It was exactly what her empty stomach needed. Burgh ate sparingly and slowly, like he was forcing himself to partake of the food.

“That hits the spot,” Cedric said as he sipped his spritzer. “By which I mean, my appreciative gut.” He patted his belly.

Cedric began talking about the pill he’d given Burgh and describing his theories about how best to mitigate the disease’s symptoms, and Burgh and Louis listened attentively. Rosa’s attention drifted, drawn to the paintings that hung from the walls. One that captured her attention was of the Relic Desert. The brush strokes were coarse and harsh, like the desert itself. An ancient and crumbling castle rose from the sands in the center of the painting, and a young man with dark hair and his back to the observer stood before the ruins, perhaps debating whether to enter and explore.

“You like the painting,” Burgh said suddenly, interrupting something Cedric had been saying.

Rosa jumped at being addressed directly, and it took her a moment to process what he’d said. “Oh, yes, it’s beautiful. A little sad,” she added, eyeing the stormy purple and grey sky painted in those same angry passionate brush strokes.

Burgh’s mouth twitched. “Vivian painted it. She painted all of them.”

Rosa looked around the room at the dozen or so paintings that decorated the walls like an art gallery. That was what it was, she realized. A showcase of his beloved sister’s works where he could admire them whenever he wanted. Now that she took a moment, she noticed the same dark-haired man in nearly all of them. He was always in the midst of nature—a forest, looking across the sea, climbing the top of a grey solemn tower higher than the clouds.

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“They’re incredible, truly,” Rosa said, meaning it. “The man in the paintings...”

“Her muse, you could say,” Burgh said. “They hunted a fabled treasure all over the Trident together and saw many sights on the way. She captured their beauty and brought them back to me.”
Rosa smiled a little. “That’s a wonderful story. What happened to the man in the paintings?”

Burgh didn’t blink as his sunken eyes bored into hers. “He’s gone now, too.”

Rosa did not know what to say, so she returned her gaze to the painting of the mysterious man at the foot of the Relic Castle ruins. Those ruins were still here, as far as she knew, perpetually sinking deeper into the sands. It was a sad story, but a lovely one, too. To travel to so many places, see so many wonderful things, and at the end of it find a precious treasure... Vivian must have had many incredible experiences in her young life. Rosa set her jaw, thinking of how that life had been brutally cut short despite her best efforts.

I should have done more to stop them killing her.

“I know you don’t know me, Burgh,” Rosa said, stealing a glance at Louis. “But I’m here to help you and Castelia City however I can. As far as I’m concerned, it’s everyone against the Neos. I’m not asking for your trust or your friendship, and I don’t expect it. I’m only asking you to accept my help, as little as it might be.”

Burgh stood. Louis stood to help him, but the Gym Leader waved him off.

“I don’t need your assistance,” Burgh said not unkindly. "But I never turn down such offers."

He went to one of the cabinets and opened the drawer, rummaged around for something, and slowly returned to the table. He held out a small, green band to Rosa. It had a magnetic clasp and fit snugly over her wrist. A blue light blinked faintly through the rubbery shell, but otherwise there were no markings on the trinket.

Rosa accepted the bracelet and held it in front of her to examine. “What’s this?”

“Your lifeline,” Burgh said soberly.

Louis cleared his throat. “It’s for the Bugs,” he explained. “It emits a scent that tells them you’re not an enemy.”

Rosa frowned as she turned the trinket over in her fingers. Bugs could smell it? She didn’t smell anything.

“You won’t be able to detect the scent,” Burgh said, sensing her thoughts. “Only Bugs and Volucris can smell the odor.”

Rosa remembered how Jack and Louis had sniffed her out in Pinwheel Forest, immediately discerning her true Sylvan nature. Wordlessly, she slapped the bracelet over her wrist and it snapped closed. “Thank you.”

“Do not remove that,” Burgh said. “No matter what.”

The way he said it sent a shiver down her spine, but she nodded. “I won’t.”

They finished the slightly awkward dinner in relative silence, save for Cedric’s conversation. He told a story about some encounter he’d had in the park the other day with a group of old women practicing yoga, but Rosa didn’t really listen. When they finished eating, everyone stood and Louis nodded to her.

“Come on, I’ll take you back to your room.”
“Thanks,” Rosa said.

Cedric filed out first, saying something about getting back to work in his lab, then Louis. Burgh remained alone, his eyes on the desert painting Rosa had picked out earlier. She hesitated, and then faced him briefly.

“Burgh,” she called to him.

He didn’t look at her.

“I’m sorry for what happened. I didn’t know your sister, but I’ll do everything I can to help make sure she’s avenged.”

He regarded her then, like he’d forgotten she’d been there at all. He did that often, she noticed. Rosa wondered where he went, what pulled him away, but decided she didn’t want to know.

“Worry about the living, Sylvan,” he said. “The dead are beyond our help now.”

He went back to admiring Vivian’s paintings, so Rosa followed Louis to the door he was holding for her and slipped out. Burgh didn’t turn to watch them go.

“How do you deal with it?” she asked when they were alone and heading back toward her room together. “How do you not fall apart around him?”

Louis sighed. “Because he never falls apart when the rest of us are in pain. Burgh takes it all on his shoulders and helps us get back up and keep going forward. That’s why he’s the Gym Leader and no one else. Even though he’s the sick one, he takes care of us all.” He opened a secured door for Rosa and held it until she passed.

“That’s a lot for one man,” Rosa said.

“Well, there’s a lot one man can do, or one woman, for that matter. Take you. If it weren’t for you, I wouldn’t be here right now. I’m a little biased, but I like to think my life counts for something.”

Rosa smiled tiredly, appreciating his words even if she found them a little hard to believe given Burgh’s condition. There was a lot one person could do, but people were not invincible. Rosa had seen that first hand at Lenora’s execution. But she said nothing and merely nodded.

“Whatever happened, I’m sorry you quit being a doctor. I can tell you were very good at it,” she said.

Louis returned her smile as best he could, but he stepped away. “Well, I’ll leave you to rest. Try to sleep.”

With that, he excused himself and Rosa was once again confined to the wing she had no clearance to leave and wonder what tomorrow had in store Burgh and his hive of Bugs.
tried to tell them they had the wrong person, she wasn’t a traitor, she would never turn on the people she loved, but they wouldn’t listen.

“I’m one of you!” she pleaded with them.

“You’re Team Plasma,” Juniper hissed.

“You did this,” Bianca agreed.

She was no longer in Pinwheel Forest but in the remains of Accumula Town, nothing but smoking ruins and bodies covered in flies. The stench was so potent that Rosa could barely see straight.

“This is your fault,” Burgh said.

Rosa sank to her knees and covered her ears. “This isn’t right! This isn’t me, this isn’t N!”

“N’s dead,” Nate taunted her. “He can’t be your excuse anymore.”

“Just like me,” Vivian said. “You let me die.”

Vivian squeezed Rosa by the throat with her dead fingers, and the pain was so real that Rosa felt her windpipe collapse, the blood flow to her head cease, and her body give out. She tried to protest, to claw at the hands suffocating her, but they only squeezed harder. Her vision faded to dark, and she failed to draw in any breath. A pain in her chest burst, and suddenly the dream faded and she was back in the room at Castelia Gym they’d assigned her to.

Rosa jerked awake in a cold sweat and hyperventilated. Her pulse raced and her hands shook as she fisted the sheets covering her. The sun was just breaching the horizon through her window, and Leafeon, who’d slept at the foot of the bed, was hovering next to her in concern. She took a moment to calm down. The phantom pain in her neck felt so real, and it hurt to swallow. Leafeon meowed and climbed onto her stomach to look down on her.

“A dream,” Rosa gasped. She fell back against the pillow and ran shaking hands down Leafeon’s back as the feline kneaded her shirt. “Just a dream.”

Drenched in sweat from the nightmare and now wide-awake, Rosa got out of bed and headed to the small bathroom to take a shower and clear her head. Her hands continued to shake as she washed and tried to remind herself that dreams were just dreams, they meant nothing. It was just the guilt of not being able to help Lenora or Vivian or the countless others that had already fallen victim to Neo Team Plasma that ate at her, irrational and paranoid. But it felt so real, and her throat ached as the warm water ran down her neck and chest.

What’s wrong with me?

She wished there was someone she could talk to, but the three people she felt closest to were far away. Juniper wouldn’t sympathize, Rosa thought cynically, and Bianca wouldn’t understand. She wished Nate were here. He always knew what to say to make her feel at ease, and he always supported her.

Rosa shut off the spigot and finished in the bathroom. She dressed in the leather and skins she’d brought from Nuvema Town, wanting to feel more like herself in something familiar. They’d been cleaned and returned to her last night upon request, the Beedrill venom rinsed clean and the knife holes carefully stitched together, good as new. The only thing Rosa kept of her Castelia outfit was the jade headscarf, which she wrapped up her hair in just like she’d been taught the other day.
Rosa and Leafeon headed into the hall, where she ran into a maid tidying up. The maid directed Rosa to the mess hall, and Rosa was relieved to see that her key card let her leave the residential wing now. Gym trainers and soldiers and Team Plasma members up at this hour were having breakfast in the spacious cafeteria at long tables.

“Rosa,” Hal the Plasma researcher she’d been introduced to her first day here called to her. “Good morning.”

“Hal, good morning,” Rosa said. “You’re up early.”

“So are you,” he said with a shy smile. “You’re welcome to sit with us if you like. I mean, if you don’t have a table already.”

“Sure, thanks.”

Rosa got a plate of food and sat down with Hal and some of the other Plasma members already seated.

“Hey, you’re that Sylvan chick, right?” one of the men said—boy, rather, Rosa thought. He couldn’t have been older than seventeen or eighteen.

“It’s Rosa,” Rosa said, frowning.

“Rosa’s one of us,” Hal said, giving the younger man a pointed look.

“Okay, okay, chillax man,” the kid said. “I was just curious.” He extended his hand to Rosa. “I’m Youssef.”

Rosa shook his hand. He had a dark copper complexion and he dressed in the loose-fitting silks that characterized Castelia. “You’re pretty young. Did you join Team Plasma recently?”

Youssef wiped his mouth as he swallowed a bite of breakfast. “Few months ago,” he said a little defensively. “And there’s no such thing as too young.” He got up from the table with his plate to grab seconds.

When he was out of earshot, Hal said softly, “Youssef’s parents used to be members until the Neos got them. He joined when they died, says he’s going to finish what they started.”

Rosa covered her mouth in shock. “I... That’s awful. He’s so young...”

“Turned seventeen two weeks ago. We had a party and everything. Lady Concordia baked a cake. It was so delicious. I wish I could’ve had another piece. That was a good day...”

Leafeon hopped up onto the bench next to Rosa and sniffed the food on her plate. Rosa scratched him behind his leafy ears, lost in thought.

“You guys’ve really held together here,” she said.

“Like I said, Burgh made sure there’s always a place here in Castelia for us.” He managed a shy smile and pushed his thick glasses further up his shiny nose.

Rosa returned his smile. “Yeah.” She just hoped there would continue to be a place for them with the Neos coming.

*There will be, I’ll make sure of it.*
Rosa finished her breakfast and parted ways with Hal and Youssef as she headed back into the hallway and decided to explore a little now that she had more access to other parts of the building. The Gym felt strangely empty compared to yesterday, though she supposed it was still early. On her trek through the many hallways and corridors, she lost her sense of direction and got turned around. There were maps of the emergency exits at each of the intersections, and she stopped to try to orient herself.

As she traced the route she was pretty sure would lead back to her room, something on her wrist began to buzz. Surprised, Rosa pulled back her sleeve and found the plain green snap bracelet Burgh had given her. It was vibrating, and the blinking blue light had turned to a steady red one. Rosa touched the bracelet with her fingers, and the buzzing stopped, but the red light didn’t fade.

“What’s this?” she wondered aloud.

Leafeon meowed, and the sound seemed to reverberate in the empty hall. It felt like she was the only person around for miles, and she got a chill down her spine. She rolled her sleeve back down and continued down the hall. Footsteps jogged close, and she stepped aside as a pair of soldiers in fatigues passed her by.

“What’s going on?”

Eventually she came upon a familiar door and let herself into the small room she was using. More footsteps clattered in the halls, which seemed suddenly filled with people just around the corners heading somewhere in a rush. Paranoia began to eat at her thoughts, and she grabbed the bow and quiver full of arrows she set down next to the bed. Leafeon swished its bladed tail, on high alert as it watched people run by.

Rosa caught a couple words as a small group rushed past her room, something about an alarm, but she heard no alarm bells or anything of the sort. Still, something was going on, and she didn’t want to wait around here. Heading back into the hallway with Leafeon and her bow, Rosa jogged in the direction the voices had gone, encountering no one. Until she nearly ran into Burgh himself coming around a corner.

“Burgh,” Rosa said, surprised to find him up and about.

Leafeon hissed and bared its fine sharp teeth up at Burgh, who took a step back at the sight of the large feline. A woman in a pressed suit with a X-Transceiver pad was typing something onto the touchscreen as she tailed him like a second shadow.

“Sylvan,” Burgh greeted solemnly. He looked down at Leafeon with those creepy hollow eyes that reminded Rosa of a zombie in an old black and white horror flick. “What are you doing here?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I mean, everyone seems to be rushing off somewhere. Is something going on?”

“Sir,” the woman accompanying him said. “Time is of the essence now.”

“I know, Melissa,” Burgh said. “Please concentrate on the programming. I’ll worry about the time.” To Rosa he said, “Come with me.”

Rosa fell into step with him. For a sick man, he moved with purpose and an air of dignity, if not a little slowly. She noticed that he was dressed in flowing street clothes, a silk scarf around his neck, and bracers on his arms underneath his sleeves. Like her, he also had a green snap bracelet that blinked red. Before Rosa could ask him about what it meant, something cracked in the distance,
like thunder.

“What was that?” Rosa said, looking around.

Burgh looked grimly ahead. “They’ve come.”

“You mean the Neos... They were right behind us?” she said more to herself than to him.

“I’m guessing you and my cousins made some kind of impression in Pinwheel Forest.”

He led Rosa and Melissa to a large room with a metal door that spanned an entire wall. Multiple pneumatic tubes lined the wall to the left, and several computers sat opposite them on the right wall. Melissa immediately went to the large computer port and hooked up her X-Transceiver to the machine. Burgh, meanwhile, opened a small locker and pulled out a pair of Go-Goggles, which he tossed to Rosa.

“Thanks,” she said, slipping them over her head to hang at her neck. “Wait, are you going to fight? Isn’t that dangerous for you?”

Burgh slipped on another pair of goggles. “It’ll be dangerous for everyone. I don’t have time to explain everything to you. We’re being invaded on our southern coast, ships out of Nacrene. You said you wanted to help, not meddle in my personal health.”

Rosa swallowed hard, but held his sunken gaze. He had the look of a man determined, one who could not be convinced of anything but the path he’d decided to follow. Even so, Rosa could not believe he was going to fight on the front lines in his condition. Something told her Burgh would not forgive her worries, though, so she kept them to herself. “Yeah, however I can.”

Burgh eyed Leafeon. “Then I hope your Pokémon can do more than simply smell nice.”

Leafeon hissed at him as though sensing the slight.

“Sir, tube number seventeen,” Melissa said as she fiddled with something at the computer port.

Burgh walked to one of the pneumatic tubes and it opened up with a sucking noise. A canister had arrived from somewhere below, and inside were four Pokéballs, which he pocketed in his sleeves. Melissa approached him holding what looked like a wristwatch.

“The data’s been transferred. I’ve established a line of communication with the Hive leaders.” She handed him the watch, which Rosa recognized as another X-Transceiver device, and a wireless headset.

Burgh tested the device. “Spider, do we have a blockade in place?” he spoke into the headset.

A scratchy voice patched through the comm. “Negative, Q.B. Our ETA is approximately fifteen minutes. Civilians in the coastal district are clogging the streets evacuating to the northern tunnels.”

“Make it ten, Spider.”

“Q.B.?” Rosa asked.

“Queen Bee,” Melissa said, her voice and expression so devoid of emotion that Rosa wondered if invasion and war were just another day at the office for her. “Castelia’s military is split into five codenamed teams, each with a separate job. Gym Leader Burgh gives the commands.”
“Save the explanations. Please get this door open, Melissa,” Burgh said.

“Yes, sir.”

Melissa typed something into the computer and the enormous metal door that took up almost an entire wall whined as it opened from the middle like a shark opening its jaws wide. It opened up directly to a narrow street outside. Melissa retrieved her X-Transceiver pad and stared after them solemnly.

“You know what to do,” Burgh said to Melissa. “Once the coastal district has been evacuated, clear out the downtown. I don’t know how many we’re dealing with or what kind of firepower they’ll have, but I won’t have any avoidable civilian collateral.”

“Sir,” Melissa saluted him. “My Ants are checking every building, commercial and residential. Progress is currently at twenty-four percent of the coastal district.” She paused and touched the headpiece in her ear. “Make that twenty-six.”

Rosa hoped Burgh’s system for dealing with an invasion was as organized and effective in reality as it was in appearance. Melissa was one woman with a computer. How could she possibly oversee the evacuation of Unova’s largest and most populous city alone?

“Sylvan, let’s go. I have somewhere to be and I can’t wait around for you.”

Rosa hastily followed Burgh outside. The morning sun was bright in the clear blue sky above, and a light wind in from the north carried fine sand that Rosa’s headscarf kept out of her hair and mouth. In the distance, Rosa heard shouting and many footsteps. When she and Burgh reached the end of the side street they were on, Rosa watched, stunned, as Castelian soldiers ushered people of all shapes and sizes along a predetermined route north. They were shouting orders and manning the cross streets in case anyone tried to bolt.

Flyer Bugs, from small but tough Ledian to loudly buzzing Yanma, flew up and down the line of evacuating civilians. There was something unsettling about the scene, like cattle being ushered along to the slaughterhouse, but Rosa banished the thought. Ripped from their homes, schools, and workplaces though these people were, the Gym would make sure they got to safety.

Something exploded to the south, and Rosa saw black smoke rising in the distance. The people in the street screamed in a panic, and the guard Bugs overhead began to swarm in agitation as they were ordered by their trainers on the ground to cut off the side streets to anyone foolishly hoping to flee.

“Stay in line!” a soldier shouted. “This road leads to safety, so please remain calm!”

“My wife,” a middle-aged man in a roughspun tunic said to the nearest soldier. “I can’t find my wife! Please, I must go back and look for her!”

“I’m sorry, sir, I can’t allow that.”

“But she went to the store to buy fruit when the alarms began! The store where that bomb just went off! Please, I beg you, I have to find her!”

The soldier grabbed the man by the arm as he tried to struggle, and a Combee buzzed in warning just over the soldier’s head. Its small but sharp stinger glinted in the sunlight, drenched in poison.

“Sir, we’re in the process of evacuating the entire coastal district. I’m sure your wife is fine. Now move along.”
The soldier manhandled the frantic man back into the tide of the crowd, where his wails were drowned out by the mad footsteps and shouts of panic. Rosa thought about helping the poor man, but he was swept away so quickly and the sea of people didn’t slow down. Burgh was already headed down a parallel street without her, and she had to run to catch up.

The soldiers stationed at various points along the streets saw him passing but said nothing, and the civilians rushing to get north to safety didn’t take any notice of him. No one slowed him down.

_Huh_, Rosa thought. _They’re really prepared for this._

Castelia Gym was closer to the coast than to the desert in the north, and Rosa could already see the ocean up ahead beyond the harbor. When the road she and Burgh were on opened up into a large roundabout with a small recreational park in the center, she got a good view of the coast.

“Oh my god,” she said, horrified.

Ships coming in from the east flew black and grey standards and fired cannons at the ships docked in Castelia’s harbor. Many were commercial and private recreational boats, and they sank with no one aboard to defend them. But several war galleys, big metal and wood monsters flying yellow and orange, sailed to meet the invaders and had already begun the battle.

“It’s another few blocks to the harbor,” Burgh said. “But we’ll wait here.” Into the comm he said, “Spider, the blockade.”

Spider’s scratchy voice patched through the comm. “Nearly finished. We’ll be ready for them on the beach.”

“No, let them through onto South Apidae Avenue. Block the side roads. The Bees will be waiting.”

“Affirmative, Q.B. We’ll send them your way.”

Rosa listened to the exchange. “You’re letting them dock? We should attack them on the water before they can land.”

“There are too many of them, and I have a paltry navy. Better to greet them on my terms instead of theirs.

As they spoke, the naval battle waged like thunder. Predictably, for every Plasma ship the Castelian navy was able to impede, two more got through and made it to the shore.

“Butterfly, stand by,” Burgh spoke into the comm. “Mantis, converge to South Apidae Avenue.”

Rosa kneeled down and laid one hand on Leafeon, the other on the ground. She closed her eyes and the world came to life in veins of bright white light. She followed the lifelines the two miles to the coast and just out to sea, where a number of Plasma ships were pulling into the harbor to disembark. But she soon lost count of the people, Tamers and regular armed trainers, who landed on the shore.

When she opened her eyes, Burgh was peering down at her in question. “They’re landing in droves. I’d say the first wave is about a hundred strong, maybe two, but more are closing in.”

“Well, then,” Burgh said as he palmed the Pokéballs he’d hidden up his sleeves before. “I’ll be the first to welcome them to Castelia.”

Burgh released all his Pokémon, familiar faces Rosa had seen with him in the terrarium before.
Crustle hid under its craggy boulder, orange pincers snapping as its eyestalks peered around for any sign of a threat. Galvantula, outfitted with a simple leather saddle, sank low to allow Burgh to climb onto its hairy yellow back. Leavanny noticed Leafeon and hissed, the saber-like scythes on its front legs folded in front of it as if in prayer. Leafeon hissed right back and stayed close to Rosa. Burgh’s Beedrill buzzed in midair just overhead, those red compound eyes gleaming in the morning sunlight and its twin stingers slick with venom. Rosa tried not to think about it. This Beedrill was tame, but it looked no different from the monsters that had attacked her in Pinwheel Forest.

Serperior, Swanna, and Deerling flanked Rosa. Swanna honked at Leavanny as it taunted Leafeon, and the mantis brandished its bladed appendages in warning. Deerling looked around in agitation, its big dark eyes wide and wary as it noticed Beedrill hovering just above. Serperior did not share its comrades’ trepidation and held its head high, catching the sunlight in its regal collar. Rosa laid a hand on Serperior’s scaly body, taking comfort in the green basilisk’s imposing presence.

“Sir!”

Rosa and Burgh turned to see a group of people in armor and their Bugs approaching. Jack was among them with Accelgor buzzing along beside him.

“Jack, is Butterfly in position?” Burgh asked.

“Yeah, everythin’s a go,” Jack said. “The Bees’re also makin’ their way to South Apidae. The eastern and western Hives already dispatched. We’ll have near five hundred bodies here in minutes.” He nodded to Rosa in passing, but said nothing further.

Jack’s group, Mantis, was made up of Gym trainers and a few Plasma members. Rosa spotted young Youssef among them standing with a small Watchog and a mean-looking Krokorok with its jaws parted and salivating. He was whispering excitedly to the young man next to him. Altogether, the Mantis group was about forty strong.

“Swanna, scout the enemies’ approach,” Rosa said.

Swanna honked and jumped into the sky to soar down south toward the coast and circle. And then, they waited.

“All right, girls,” Jack barked. “This ain’t no drill! Hawker, Menendez, take point! You Plasma kids stay back and cover our asses till the Bees get here. Then you cover their asses, got that?”

Jack got his trainers into position, while Rosa peered down the large main street toward the coast. She could see others, soldiers in rugged uniforms and headscarves, running across the road. The Bees, Rosa guessed, all members of Castelia’s Hive military. They scurried about like busy Combee crawling out of Castelia’s nooks and crannies. And somewhere lurking out of sight were the Spiders, blocking off the side streets and herding the invaders down one path.

“Now, we wait,” Burgh said more to himself than to anyone else.

He coughed into his sleeve, drawing eyes, but he recovered and stared ahead like nothing had happened. Rosa stood among her Pokémon alongside Burgh, and it didn’t escape her notice that he seemed unconcerned with whatever formation or order Jack was laying out.

They didn’t have to wait very long. Soon, the Neos were storming up the street with their Pokémon with thunderous rancor, and Rosa blanched when she saw their approach.

“Shit, that’s a Steelix!”
She watched in horror as the forty-foot-long steel snake made its way down the street far to the south, Iron Tailing the surrounding buildings and opening up the side streets to the encroaching Neos. Burgh’s Bees and Spiders reacted accordingly, and soon the sounds of battle reached Rosa’s group.

Burgh looked on in consternation. Galvantula sparked and shifted its weight underneath him, eager to dart off and sink its fangs into something. The Steelix was toward the back of the advancing forces, but in Rosa’s mind, it was the biggest threat.

“Move out!” Jack yelled, and his men ran forward.

Bugs, from enormous Yanmega to silent Venomoth, accompanied the Gym trainers as they ran to meet the invaders. Burgh took off on Galvantula after them. Rosa followed.

“Come on, guys,” she said to her Pokémon.

Serperior and Leafeon were quick to join her, and Deerling, ever cautious, brought up the rear. Rosa didn’t get more than five steps when the Neos’ front line was blown back by a combined Signal Beam attack from the Gym trainers’ Pokémon. Eerie shafts of chartreuse light ripped up the asphalt and sliced through the enemies’ first line of troops. Legs were severed, bodies fell, and chunks of road popped and flew through the air under the Bugs’ assault. But it didn’t stop the invaders from stepping over their fallen comrades’ broken bodies and responding in kind. The battle had begun.

“Vine Whip!” Rosa shouted as she drew and nocked an arrow in her bow.

Serperior released multiple vines that latched onto enemy trainers and Pokémon and sent them flying sky-high. A Croconaw tried to snap at the vine that had ensnared it, succeeded, and fell thirty feet to its death. Meanwhile, Rosa let loose an arrow that hit an enemy Plasma Agent through the chest, forcing him to drop his dirk and abandon the assault on one of the Gym trainers’ slow-moving Forretress.

Rosa herself hung back, preferring to attack from a distance with her bow, but the Steelix was slowly making its way deeper into the city. If it got past her group, the populated central and northern districts would be in trouble. Already, shouts from civilians rushing north had erupted to the point of mayhem at the sight of the encroaching enemy invaders, and it was all the Ants could do to keep them in as orderly a line as possible.

An enemy Sigilyph took to the air and unleashed a devastating Psychic attack at its trainer’s behest. Fleeing Castelian citizens were flattened by the telekinetic energy and steamrolled to a bloody pulp, along with the soldiers ushering them along. Rosa was about to call out to Swanna, but Burgh was already ahead of her.

“Twineedle!” Burgh shouted.

Beedrill took off impossibly fast and hunted down Sigilyph. The odd bird fired off a Psybeam to defend itself, but Beedrill was far too quick for it and avoided the attack entirely. The big bee was upon Sigilyph in seconds and drove its twin stingers into the bird’s bloated body over and over and over. Blood rained down on the streets below, and soon Sigilyph’s wings gave out and it plummeted to the ground, dead.

“Stop them, Galvantula,” Burgh said, not even focusing on Beedrill anymore.

Galvantula spit out globules of electrified silk that expanded into net-like webs and stuck to the
ground and whatever happened to be on it. Plasma Agents and Pokémon who got stuck under one of the Electrowebs convulsed, electrocuted, and could not escape. Their flesh smoked as electric burns pebbled their flesh and static fried their eyeballs in their sockets. An Elgyem pulsed with Psychic energy, but the webs would not break. Its super-inflated head swelled as electricity ran up and down its small body, and soon it burst and cast bloody brain matter all over a five-foot radius.

Jack and the other Gym trainers were equally as ruthless. Accelgor zipped along the enemy lines, using Water Shuriken to cut down trainers by the legs so they tripped and fell, unable to walk, and the slower Bugs, like Pinsir and Scolipede, could trample or Steamroll them. But the Plasma Agents kept coming, landing on the shore as they got past Castelia’s dwindling naval resistance. Burgh shouted something into his comm, but it was impossible to hear over the cacophony of battle.

Rosa fired off another arrow and took out an enemy that was fighting Youssef and overpowering him. The kid looked around and spotted her, shocked at the last-minute rescue. He waved and she nodded just as his Watchog scampered around him and Superfanged the Simipour that was attempting to take revenge for its fallen trainer. The blue elemental monkey Scratched furiously at the small meerkat, but Watchog held onto Simipour’s shoulder, sinking its buckteeth in deeper the more the monkey struggled.

Castelian civilians had gotten mixed up in the fighting in the chaos. The soldiers keeping them in line had lost formation after the Sigilyph’s Psychic attack—those who still lived—and they were forced to fight in hand-to-hand combat as enemy and allied forces blended together on the city streets. Rosa ran alongside Leafeon and Deerling into the thick of battle, no longer able to remain at a distance with so many unarmed civilians caught up in the fray. She shoved into a Plasma Agent armed with a metal beater stick, knocking him over and taking his weapon. Without missing a beat, she swung her new weapon at an enemy Mienfoo hard, landing a hit across the small Fighter’s back. Leafeon leaped over the staggering Fighter, spun in mid-air, and came down with a deadly Leaf Blade attack that silenced Mienfoo for good. Rosa had barely slowed down, her sights set on Steelix as it Stone Edged a tall apartment building and razed it to the ground. Screams and shouts followed in the aftermath of the destruction.

“No!” Rosa screamed.

Serperior was making its way among the battling humans and Pokémon, Vine Whipping a path clear, but it was still a ways behind Rosa. All of a sudden, something rammed her hard in the side and she went flying. A lamppost broke her fall, and she hit her head and shoulder on the thick metal. Seeing double, Rosa began to panic and regain her motor skills. Sitting here disoriented would be the end of her if she didn’t get up.

A blur of black and grey appeared in front of her. The Plasma Agent who’d slammed into her was a big guy with an equally fat Grumpig at his side. “Time to die, girly,” he said, clenching his sausage fists for another punch.

Out of nowhere, Leafeon leaped at the two enemies and came down hard on Grumpig with another Leaf Blade. A weeping gash opened up in the pig’s back, and Grumpig squealed in pain. But the black pearls on its belly and forehead glowed blue with Confusion, and a sinister light enveloped Leafeon before it could get away.

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“No!” Rosa screamed.

Grumpig hurled Leafeon through the air with Confusion, sending the feline crashing into the brick wall of a restaurant behind Rosa. She rolled and tried to crawl after Leafeon, who’d fallen to the sidewalk and struggled to get up. The Plasma Agent lumbered after Rosa and grabbed her by the
neck, lifting her bodily in front of him. Rosa gasped for breath and clawed at his hairy wrist. Black spots popped up in her vision as he squeezed.

A bright flash of green light caught both their attentions, and the Energy Ball attack hit the Plasma Agent directly in the side. He grunted in pain and lost his grip, dropping Rosa on the ground. Deerling, its head down in a defensive stance, glowed green as it faced off against the injured Grumpig and the fallen Plasma Agent. He groaned and clutched his side in pain, where his uniform was burned and tattered and stuck to his bloodied skin and exposed muscles.

“Kitty?” a small voice said.

Gasping, Rosa whirled and saw a little boy, his clothes smudged with dirt and blood and missing a shoe, kneeling down over Leafeon. He petted Leafeon with his grubby hands and pulled off the debris that had covered it. Leafeon stood on shaking feet.

Grumpig began to emit a wispy silvery light as it powered up a Psychic attack. Rosa looked back at the unguarded child with Leafeon, then back at Deerling standing between Grumpig and her.

“Deerling!” she shouted, afraid for the young fawn. She backed up toward the child, positioning herself in front of him, though it would do little good against a full-blown Psychic attack. Her hands shook and her head swam.

“Bitch,” the Plasma Agent spat, pale from pain and blood loss. “Tear her apart, Grumpig!”

Serperior was slithering closer, having bested a stout Boldore that had set off a Magnitude attack and cracked open the road. Serperior hissed and took off toward Rosa, sensing the threat. The little boy picked up Leafeon and held it close.

“Kitty,” he said shakily.

“Deerling, get back!” Rosa shouted.

But the fawn would not back down even as Grumpig was ready to unleash its attack. Grumpig grunted as it pulsed, and Rosa spread her arms to block the child and Leafeon from the attack as best she could. The buzzing din of battle filled her ears—Serperior’s scales scraping against the asphalt as it raced to reach Rosa, the wings of Bugs zipping about on their trainers’ commands. But the pain never came, and Grumpig squealed in terror as something—many somethings—tore into it like a holiday dinner.

Scyther, more than Rosa could count, descended on the battlefield. They emerged from manholes in the streets and ripped apart anything that moved without abandon. Three of them had jumped on Grumpig just as it tried to unleash its Psychic powers. One was blown apart, half disintegrated on the spot, but the other two dug their wicked scythes into Grumpig’s belly and back, quartering it in seconds. Another caught the Plasma Agent in the back and impaled him from behind. He writhed on the ground under the big Bug, splashing the pool of blood that accumulated underneath him.

Rosa could not believe what she was seeing. Deerling finally turned tail and ran back to Rosa, afraid of the predatory Bugs, and Serperior finally caught up. Serperior coiled around Rosa, Deerling, Leafeon, and the child holding it, hissing as it watched the Scyther tear through the streets. Their wings buzzed, an awful beating sound that reminded Rosa of that dark night in Pinwheel Forest. The little boy released Leafeon as he succumbed to gasping sobs, and Rosa scooped him up in her arms to try to soothe him, a task made impossible due to her own rising panic and confusion.
The two Scyther that had taken care of the Grumpig turned their sights on her next, unafraid of Serperior’s imposing glare and fangs. They brandished their bloody scythes at Rosa and the child, who continued to wail in her arms. Their eyes were black, pupil less and compound, and reflected nothing. Rosa was so terrified in that moment reliving the attack in Pinwheel Forest that she could not find her voice. But as they got closer and Serperior hissed, ready to strike, something stopped them suddenly. Frozen for a moment, they peered at Rosa and the child in her arms, clicking in communication with each other. The confrontation lasted only a few seconds, and as if someone had flipped a switch, they completely lost interest in Rosa and flew off to attack another Plasma Agent flanked by a scrappy Dewott and an Ursaring. Her breath came in short gasps as her head pounded and her heart raced. Leafeon shook itself out, a little scuffed up and bloody, but otherwise fine.

*What the hell just happened?*

“I want Mommy,” the little boy wept.

Rosa rubbed his back and gently pried him off. She wiped his tears, and something green on her wrist caught her eye. It was the thin snap bracelet Burgh had given her.

*“Your lifeline,”* Burgh’s voice echoed in her head.

Rosa stared at the trinket, aghast. So this was what he’d meant when he said the Bugs could smell it and know not to attack her. She quickly pulled the boy’s sleeve up and saw that he wore an identical bracelet.

*Every person in Castelia must have one. Which means...*

The small army of Scyther that had emerged from Castelia’s underground was not some inimical scheme devised by the Neos, but Burgh’s backup against them.

In the distance a few blocks away, Steelix roared as a number of Scyther attempted to cut into it. But even their scythe-like appendages were no match for Steelix’s platinum hide. They were little more than a nuisance to the huge Pokémon.

“I have to get over there,” she said.

“Do you know where Mommy is?” the little boy asked.

“No, but we’ll find her real soon, okay? What’s your name?” Rosa tried to sound gentle and comforting.

“S-Sammy,” the boy said.

“How old are you, Sammy?”

“I’m four’n a half.”

*What am I going to do with him?*

Rosa got to her feet with Serperior’s help, thinking. Leafeon meowed, and Sammy tried to pet it again. Overhead, Swanna honked as she circled. “Sammy, you like Leafeon, right?”

“Kitty,” Sammy said tearfully, managing a smile as he reached for Leafeon.

“Okay, I want you to watch the kitty. Can you do that for me?”
Sammy nodded and sniffled. Rosa stowed her bow over her shoulder and scooped up Sammy. He wrapped his short arms around her neck and gazed over her shoulder at Leafeon.

“Keep your eyes on the kitty and don’t worry about anything else, okay? You promise, Sammy?”

He hugged her tighter. “I promise.”

“Okay.”

Now what?

She couldn’t fight while toting around a four-year-old boy. She had to find someone to pass him off to, someone who could take him to safety. She gazed toward the coast, where a host of new ships flying purple and white standards had joined the fray. A colossal Gyarados out at sea roared loud enough to wake the dead and convulsed under the force of an Electric attack before falling back on the water and disappearing below the surface. The fighting was raging just as wildly out there as it was here. She couldn’t help but marvel at the Neos’ strength. They just kept coming.

“Leafeon, Deerling, stay behind me,” Rosa ordered. “Serperior, clear the path.”

Serperior hissed and led the charge, sticking close to Rosa, while Swanna flew overhead. They got to the end of the block, and Rosa had to step carefully around the corpses strewn on the street, both human and Pokémon. She stepped on something crunchy—a chunk of Scyther carapace that looked like it had been torn asunder by something a hell of a lot bigger. Sammy squeezed her shoulders and sobbed.

“Keep watching the kitty, Sammy,” Rosa shushed him.

“Look out!”

Rosa rolled on instinct and landed against something soft—the body of a civilian in a suit with his head smashed to hell. Something landed just to her left, where she’d been not a moment ago, and a hulking Seismitoad croaked so loudly and deeply that it was closer to a roar than any amphibious call. Pale warts covered its blue body, vibrating as it began to power up an attack. It had landed in a crater in the street of its own creation. Sammy screamed and buried his face in Rosa’s headscarf, his tears hot against her neck. But Seismitoad wasn’t alone. A short but rugged Scrafty jumped down from the nearest building and landed artfully next to the fat toad.

“Seismitoad! Earthquake!” someone shouted.

Rosa turned and spotted a Neo Team Plasma Agent racing closer, a Darmanitan loping alongside her. Four more Neos armed to the teeth with blades trailed her.

“Goddamnit,” Rosa said, standing and nearly tripping over the corpse that had cushioned her fall. “Serperior! Hyper Beam!”

Serperior powered up the vibrant orange energy as Seismitoad slammed its fists into the earth and cracked the ground. The crag raced along the pavement north. A pair of Scyther that were beating back a group of Neos were sucked into the hole and crushed by the moving rocks along with a Gym trainer commanding them.

Serperior fired and hit Seismitoad, but Scrafty jumped impossibly high and avoided the attack. Seismitoad grunted in pain as it was blown back and curled in on itself. The Earthquake was cut short, but Seismitoad was still standing. Its tough hide was charred black and bleeding, but it was only angrier than it had been before. Out of nowhere, Accelgor smashed into Seismitoad in a
lightning-fast U-turn attack. The big toad struggled to stay on its feet.

“Rosa!” Jack caught up to her with Pinsir. “What the hell? Is that a kid?”

Rosa was relieved to see him, but they had bigger things to worry about. “Swanna!” she shouted.

Swanna swooped in and attempted to Wing Attack the Scrafty as it flew through the air, but Scrafty took only a glancing blow and rolled in mid-air as it came down for a High-Jump Kick on Jack’s and Rosa’s heads.

“Darmanitan! Flare Blitz!” the Neo Agent shouted.

Her Darmanitan curled into a ball and rolled, aflame, toward Serperior and Rosa.

“Shit!” Jack said, grabbing Rosa by the elbow and dragging her away.

Serperior hissed, too proud to back down, but Leafeon and Deerling both retreated.

“Toss it, Serperior!” Rosa said as she tried to run to safety.

Serperior bared its fangs and met Darmanitan head-on. It twisted its long body around as its tail emitted a sinister red glow, and in a bone-breaking smack the two Pokémon collided. Serperior’s Dragon Tail hit Darmanitan like a baseball bat and sent it careening into a dilapidated building nearby. The window it flew through shattered and Darmanitan landed inside. Smoke began to leak from the broken window as a fire broke out. Serperior’s tail smoked and smeared with black char from Darmanitan’s attack, but the draconian energy had saved it a direct hit.

But Scrafty hit the pavement hard, and Pinsir was too slow to avoid the attack entirely. Asphalt and concrete exploded under Scrafty’s might, and Pinsir’s carapace was crushed under the brute force as it protected Jack.

“Pinsir!” Jack shouted in vain.

Scrafty was not done yet, and it picked itself up and jumped again. Darmanitan had recovered, too, and ran back out to the street on its gorilla arms. The Neo Agents caught up, too, and ran at Rosa’s group, blades drawn. Sammy wailed, the loud noises and the smell of death too much for him to stand.

Angry buzzing flew in from the north, and all of a sudden, something slammed into Scrafty mid-jump and sent it crashing to the ground. It was so fast, just a blur of black and yellow, that Rosa wasn’t sure exactly what had happened. Then, Leavanny scuttled by at top speed and forced the nearest Neo to engage in a battle of scythes. The Neo exclaimed in shock as he parried, but the mantis was faster and stronger than him. Leavanny drove its bladed arm into the Neo’s shoulder at the neck and ripped across his body just as he tried to stab. The sword cut Leavanny, but the wound was only grazing. Remorselessly, Leavanny tore its limb free and nearly sliced the Neo in half with X-Scissor.

Electrified globs of sticky silk landed with wet plops between Rosa and the Neos, sparking. A Crustle charged in recklessly and crushed the struggling Seismitoad with a Rock Wrecker attack that buried the overgrown toad in the very crag its earlier Earthquake attack had opened up. Seismitoad croaked feebly as its flabby body was forced into the narrow space and its bones were crushed under Crustle’s might. Burgh, riding Galvantula, appeared on the scene looking pale. He was bleeding from his left hand, but seemed not to notice. Scrafty was pinned to the ground under not three, but five enormous stingers. Rosa stared at the monstrous Bug that had grounded Scrafty. It was familiar somehow, but more horrific than any Beedrill she’d seen before.
“Finish it,” Burgh commanded. “Fell Stinger.”

The warped Beedrill’s three sets of wings buzzed and lifted it just off the ground, and it rammed its many stingers into Scrafty too fast for the naked eye to see. Scrafty groaned as its muscled body was suddenly full of holes, as though it had been the target of some automatic machine weapon. It was over in seconds, and the monster Bug rose from its kill dripping venom and blood.

“Fuck this!” one of the Neos said, dropping his sword and retreating.

The others, however, moved to attack along with Darmanitan, who began to glow with embers as it readied another Flare Blitz. Jack was forced to recall Pinsir and draw the metal morning star strapped to his back to meet the Neos head on. But he never got the chance.

“Mega Beedrill,” Burgh called out. “Poison Jab.”

The thing that looked like it had once been a Beedrill zipped through the air in a blur, and before the Neos even knew what hit them, they were collapsed on the ground clutching their abdomens. Terrible weeping gashes had opened up under their uniforms, and the sweet garbage smell of rot filled the air. Rosa watched in horror as their faces swelled up like balloons, red and bulbous, and their necks strained against their armor. Only Darmanitan was left, and at the sight and smell of its human trainers putrefying before its very eyes, it turned tail and ran after the Neo who had already abandoned the group. Above, Swanna swooped in and Bubblebeamed the retreating Darmanitan and Neo Agent, ensuring they would not return. She then landed near Rosa and Serperior, sharp eyes alert for danger.

Burgh dismounted Galvantula and approached Jack and Rosa. He immediately zeroed in on the child trembling in Rosa’s arms, and he spoke into the comm. “This is Q.B. for Ant. I have a lost child, intersection of South Apidae and Seventh.”

Melissa’s voice on the other end replied, “Received. A retrieval team will be at your location in two minutes.”

Burgh then held out his spindly hand for Sammy and brushed his dirty bangs out of his teary eyes. “Hello there. Would you like to go be with your parents?”

Sammy sobbed and nodded. “Y-Yeah!”

Burgh caught Rosa’s eye, but he said nothing further. They took a moment to regroup, and Rosa let Sammy sit down with Leafeon to try to calm him down a bit. All the while, she kept her eyes on the Steelix still slowly but surely rampaging. It had met plenty of resistance, but it was still standing. The not-Beedrill hovered expertly next to Burgh, and Rosa was equal parts amazed and horrified that it was taller than him. It was bigger than any Beedrill she’d ever seen or heard of.

“Mega Beedrill,” Burgh said, reading her expression. “We can use Mega Evolution.”

Mega Evolution...

She’d heard of it, but only in passing. Juniper had talked about it, some paper she’d read by a professor over in distant Kalos, something about a next level of evolution for certain species of Pokémon trained by a skilled Tamer. But Rosa had never seen it in action with her own eyes.

“It’s...” she trailed off. “I’ve never seen a Bug move so fast.”

“Mega Beedrill is the fastest Bug in the world,” Burgh said. “But we’re not here for a science lesson. I assume you can both still fight?”
Jack nodded grimly. “Pinsir’s outta commission, but I got Accelgor and we still have the rest of Butterfly’s deployments waitin’.”

“Yes, the Scyther squadron will need reinforcements soon.”

A voice patched through the comm, and Burgh stepped away to take call, leaving Jack and Rosa with Sammy and the Pokémon.

“I can’t believe him,” she said. “He shouldn’t even be out of bed, let alone fighting.”

Mega Beedrill buzzed protectively around Burgh, never leaving his side, while Leavanny, Crustle, and Galvantula remained still and observant. They didn’t try to feed or run off, ever on high alert. Burgh had trained them very well.

“Yeah, well, he’s the Gym Leader, the best of us,” Jack said. “Been tryin’ to figure out Mega Evolution with Pinsir, but I guess it might be a no-go now. Fuckin’ Neos.”

Rosa pressed her lips together as she remembered how Pinsir had taken that Scrafty’s High-Jump Kick in Jack’s place. “Pinsir will be okay.”

A group of three uniformed soldiers accompanied by a Kriketune and a stocky Combusken approached, but Burgh’s Bugs didn’t seem agitated. Combusken’s feathers ruffled as it glowered up at Serperior, but the grass snake barely noticed the puny Fighter parrot.

“Sir,” one of the uniformed soldiers saluted Jack. “We were told there was a civilian child here?”

“Right here,” Rosa said, picking Sammy up and handing him to the soldier.

Sammy made a grab for her, but she smiled and closed her hands around his. “It’s okay, Sammy. You’re gonna go see your mommy now.”

He looked ready to burst into tears again, but the soldier pulled a two-way radio from his pocket and radioed his comrades, confirming that they had the boy. Rosa watched them go, hoping that his mother was still alive and not one of the many casualties littering the streets. Leafeon meowed, and she shook her head.

“That Steelix,” she said, drawing her bow. “We have to stop it.”

“Hate to break it to you, but Bugs and Steel don’t exactly mix,” Jack said.

“Then I’ll take it out myself.”

Jack snorted. “You are crazy.”

“You have a better idea? If we let it get any farther north, it’ll destroy the city.”

Burgh returned then and climbed onto Galvantula’s back once more.

“Burgh?” Jack said. Accelgor hovered next to him, arms crossed and looking ready to maul something.

“Apparently, help has arrived.” The way he said it made it sound like he wasn’t happy about it. “Virbank’s navy is fighting Neo Team Plasma in the harbor.”

Rosa remembered the ships she’d seen flying the violet sails. “Virbank? That’s great!”
“Maybe, but it remains to be seen who it’s great for. Galvantula, let’s go.”

If Virbank was here, then their naval power would crush Team Plasma for sure. It was no secret that Virbank had the largest and most respected navy outside of Humilau. But if they were here to take advantage of Castelia’s crisis... Rosa didn’t have time to dwell on the thought. She called to her Pokémon and sent Swanna flying again, warning it to stay out of sight of that Steelix for now. She and Jack jogged to keep up with Galvantula, and Burgh’s other Bugs scuttled along at their own paces. By now, the sun was high in the afternoon sky and hotter than hell. Rosa nocked an arrow and tried to ignore the ache in her head from her earlier intimate acquaintance with a lamppost. Steelix was just around the corner and making good progress considering everything standing in its way. Its trainer sat atop its head, another Neo. Rosa was not about to give the Neo, a woman in the same uniform as all her compatriots, even a second of forewarning.

“Swanna! Hurricane!” she yelled up at the circling swan.

Swanna began to circle Steelix faster and faster, and the air currents it dragged behind it whipped into a vicious vortex that picked up debris from the ground. Humans, both Neos and Castelian soldiers, shouted as the winds picked up and ran for cover. Burgh stopped Galvantula’s advance. Steelix growled, but the winds didn’t budge it. The trainer on its back, however, soon lost her grip and went flying. Just as Rosa thought she’d gained a small victory, Steelix’s trainer released another Pokémon—a Gliscor—and the flying scorpion flew her to safety. Burgh was not about to let her escape.

“X-Scissor,” Burgh commanded.

Mega Beedrill took off impossibly fast even against the Hurricane winds. It avoided large debris, swerving to dodge an uprooted tree and a jagged metal two-by-four. It was closing in on Gliscor and the Neo trainer, but at the last minute she jumped from Gliscor’s back and fell back toward Steelix. Gliscor was going after Swanna directly, but Mega Beedrill caught up quick and ripped into it. Gliscor screeched and lashed out with its crushing pincers, and it and Mega Beedrill began a dangerous mid-air grapple.

“Agh!” Burgh doubled over and clutched his shoulder.

“Burgh!” Jack said, rushing to his aid.

Burgh was mysteriously bleeding from his shoulder. “I’m fine. But the Gliscor—”

“Swanna! Help Mega Beedrill!” Rosa shouted.

Swanna swooped around and fired off an Air Cutter attack directly at Mega Beedrill and Gliscor. The two Pokémon parted to avoid the razor wind chakrams, and Rosa noticed that Mega Beedrill was bleeding.

Just like Burgh, she wondered, bewildered.

But she didn’t have time to dwell on it. Steelix had been buffeted harshly by the Hurricane winds and crashed into a building that broke its fall, but it wasn’t enough to deter the great platinum snake. Its trainer was back on its head and glaring down at Rosa and the others.

“Serperior! Leaf Storm!” Rosa commanded as she leveled her bow at the Neo on Steelix’s broad head.

Deerling, feeling left out, ran to stand by Serperior and powered up an Energy Ball attack, while Serperior took advantage of Swanna’s Hurricane winds to whip up a flurry of bladed leaves.
Together, Rosa’s Pokémon unleashed a powerful barrage against Steelix. Rosa steadied her arm and tried to calculate the best angle for her arrow considering the winds.

Suddenly, the Neo took a knife to her hand and slammed her bloody palm over Steelix’s head. The red veins of blood began to spread over Steelix’s silver body as though guided by invisible forces, searching for something. It was the last sight Rosa saw before the sheer multitude of leaves generated by Serperior’s Leaf Storm blocked the view and rushed Steelix all at once. Energy Ball and Leaf Storm swallowed Steelix in a blanket of green and light, and all Rosa heard was a rancorous roar from within the vortex.

There was a moment of calm as only the whipping leaves could be heard, but suddenly they were blown back and outwards as though a bomb had gone off in the middle of them all. Serperior glowed yellow and put up a wondrous wall of light just as the recoil rained down on Rosa and the others. The Light Screen rebuffed the ricocheting leaves, but it was an empty victory. When Rosa got back to her feet, she came face to face with yet another impossible thing.

“She Mega Evolved that Steelix!” Jack sputtered.

“This is not good,” Burgh said, his voice strained.

Steelix had grown even larger, now nearly fifty feet in length, and jagged growths of pure diamond erupted from its body from head to tail. The winds surrounding it ceased, and it opened its mouth in a devastating roar that sent Leafeon and Deerling running behind her in fear. Only Serperior remained bold in the face of this new nightmare, hissing and baring its fangs in defiance.

“Understatement,” Rosa said.

“Mega Steelix!” the Neo trainer shouted. “Iron Tail!”

Mega Steelix lurched and swung its diamond-plated tail around to smash through the remaining buildings and road in front of it. Rosa ran back the way she’d come, her Pokémon hot on her heels, while Burgh and Jack also scattered. The force of Mega Steelix’s impact was so great that the aftershock seemed to rock the entire coast and sent Rosa flying. She tumbled, scraped up her face, and hit her hip hard before Serperior coiled around her and saved her further abuse. Blood trickled from her cut up cheek and soiled her headscarf. She pulled the thing off so it wouldn’t weigh her down.

Jack was screaming into the two-way radio he carried, but Rosa knew they couldn’t wait for whatever backup he might be calling now. Mega Steelix roared again and slithered slowly through the devastation it had wrought. Bodies were crushed under the rubble around it, some still visible with a hand grasping the air, but most were probably completely buried. The coastal district had been transformed into a mass grave right under her feet. Rosa looked out on the scene and shivered. She’d seen plenty of death and calamity in her young life, but nothing quite like this. Mega Steelix was coming, and there was nothing anyone could do to stop it. But she had to try.

“Okay, Serperior,” she said as she nocked another arrow. “Give that Mega Steelix the nastiest Solar Beam you’ve got in you.”

Rosa backed up, Leafeon and Deerling beside her and keeping an eye on her surroundings, while she tried to level a shot at Mega Steelix’s trainer.

*Ground Adamantine,* Rosa thought. *I should’ve seen it before.*

She’d heard that only Tamers could induce Mega Evolution, like Burgh, but more than that she
remembered the odd injury Burgh had gotten.

*It was the same injury Mega Beedrill got. So if I kill this bitch, will that also kill Mega Steelix?*

There was only one way to test her theory.

Above, Swanna and Gliscor were chasing each other while Mega Beedrill annoyed Gliscor at every turn. Swanna was a faster Flyer than Gliscor, but Gliscor was rugged enough to absorb Mega Beedrill’s Poison attacks.

Serperior was almost done powering up, and Rosa pulled her bowstring taut. But the Neo Agent noticed what was about to happen and screamed for Gliscor. Gliscor abandoned its chase and swooped low just as Serperior unleashed Solar Beam. Rosa made a split-second decision and loosed her arrow just before the light became too blinding. Gliscor tried to intercept with Night Slash, but missed the projectile narrowly. As Solar Beam lit up the area, Rosa saw her arrow hit the Neo in the side of her abdomen and pass clean through. She clutched her side and slumped just as Gliscor, in an act of insanity, spread its wings and took the Solar Beam head-on for Mega Steelix. Rosa covered her eyes to the searing light and waited a couple seconds for her vision to return.

Gliscor was reduced to a smoking pile of meat on the chewed up street. It was bent out of shape, bones protruding at odd angles through its skin, and charred almost completely black. Its leathery wings had melted completely. Mega Steelix was still standing, but it groaned in pain and shuddered as its trainer got to her feet and clutched the gash in her side. She glared daggers down at Rosa and Serperior, pale with agony and ire. A diamond protrusion growing out of Mega Steelix’s side had cracked and pieces of it crumbled and fell off.

“They are connected,” Rosa said.

And all she had to do was take out the trainer to beat the monster.

“Swanna!” Rosa shouted up at the circling bird. “Air Cutter! Aim for her!” She pointed out the Neo Team Plasma Agent standing on Steelix’s head, and Swanna honked as it made a loop.

Mega Steelix swung its enormous tail around in an attempt to swat Swanna out of the sky, but Swanna was too fast to catch. Burgh understood what Rosa was attempting to do and sent Mega Beedrill after the woman, too. The killer bee darted around Mega Steelix’s deadly diamond-tipped tail and aimed a Twineedle attack at the woman, but she ducked in between the grooves in Mega Steelix’s impenetrable armor. Mega Beedrill buzzed angrily, unable to get to her directly.

“It’s no good,” Burgh said. “We have to attack Mega Steelix directly.” He slipped off of Galvantula’s back. “Bug Buzz!”

Galvantula vibrated and sparked with static electricity before unleashing an invisible spine-chilling wave up at Mega Steelix. It twisted the light in the air and passed through solid objects undeterred. When it hit Mega Steelix, the platinum snake growled and shied a little, but otherwise there was no effect. Burgh did not seem deterred.

“Leavanny, Leaf Blade!”

Leavanny ran at Mega Steelix next and slashed with its sharp pincers, but again, there was little effect. Still, Burgh did not give up and called out to his Bugs to attack and then pull back again, only to repeat the process. Mega Steelix tried to keep up with the flighty Bugs, but its girth made it sluggish and unable to smash any of them before they scampered out of the way.

“I see,” Rosa said as more Gym trainers, called to the area, took up the bait and switch tactic,
forcing Mega Steelix to try to focus on a hundred tiny annoyances at once. “Okay, you too, Leafeon! Deerling! Swanna, keep up the pressure!”

Rosa took off running, her Pokémon trailing as they got close for a hit, then pulled back before Mega Steelix could zero in on them. Rosa nocked another arrow and kept her eyes skyward, searching for an opening.

But the enemy was not about to fall for this strategy. “Forget the small fries! Smash the humans!” the Tamer commanded.

Mega Steelix brought its great tail down for another Iron Tail, and Burgh ran as quickly as he could to get away. His illness made him slow without Galvantula, though, and Rosa screamed.

“Vine Whip!”

Serperior heeded her call and lashed thick vines around Burgh’s middle, and then it threw him high into the air just as Iron Tail came crashing down. Rosa fell hard to her hands and knees under the concussive vibrations and looked around frantically. Burgh flew through the air, but Mega Beedrill swooped in and caught him before he could fall. Rosa didn’t have any time to celebrate, because Mega Steelix was on a rampage and coming for her next. The Gym trainers and Castelian soldiers still crazy enough to be in the area scattered as Mega Steelix razed an entire city block to rubble.

“Serperior!” Rosa shouted.

Serperior began to power up another Solar Beam as Rosa ran for her life, but Iron Tail crashed into the road just ahead of Rosa, and she was blown backwards. Debris and rubble fell on top of her, knocking the wind out and putting pressure on her ribcage. She hurt all over and prayed she hadn’t broken anything as she lay in the street half submerged in gravel and chunks of pavement. Serperior was quickly at her side and used its vines to pry off a particularly large slab of concrete. Rosa coughed violently and struggled to her feet. Above, Mega Steelix and its Neo trainer looked down on her like some demon god from another dimension ready to deliver hellish judgment.

But just when Rosa was sure it would go for another attack as she was trying to get back up, Mega Steelix roared and reared back, nearly knocking its trainer off its head. Orange flames burst around Mega Steelix and steadily climbed up the length of it in a whipping whirlwind of heat and light. Writhing in pain, Mega Steelix crashed into the remains of a toppled skyscraper and sent up a thick cloud of sand and dust as it thrashed. The Fire Spin engulfed its entire lower half.

Rosa got to her feet and hooked an arm around Serperior’s neck. The regal serpent took off at a surprisingly fast slither over the rubble, leaving Deerling and Leafeon to follow at their own pace. There was a commotion to the south where the deadly Fire Spin had originated and continued to roast Mega Steelix, and Rosa set her sights on the growing group of people and Pokémon making their way north.

More Neos, she thought, gritting her teeth.

“Get ready, Serperior,” she warned.

Serperior ducked its head, ready to attack, just as they pulled up at the end of what used to be the city block. But what Rosa saw nearly made her heart stop.

“That’s enough, Rapidash! Let’s go!” The face she’d thought of only in dreams for months was almost unrecognizable under the dirt and drear of battle, but she was sure it was him.

“Nate, wait up!” Another man ran after the Rapidash, a Samurott loping alongside him. He was
with Gym Leader Cheren, whom Rosa recognized instantly riding a stout Bouffalant that looked like it had dipped its fearsome horns in a river of blood.

Rosa covered her mouth with shaking hands. “Nate,” she said in a daze.

Nate sent Rapidash running and called out Emboar while he regrouped with Cheren and the man Rosa didn’t know. By then, Rapidash’s Fire Spin was fizzling out and Mega Steelix was starting to recover. To the men’s horror, it seemed almost perfectly fine save for a layer of soot and grime that streaked the lower half of its body. The Adamantine riding Mega Steelix was still standing.

“Kill them all!” she screamed.

“Nate!” Rosa shouted.

He heard her and turned in surprise. They locked gazes and for a moment the battle came to a silent standstill as they both tried to believe what they were seeing. Rosa blinked and the moment was gone, but Nate laid a hand on Emboar and turned back to his two companions.

“Together!” he shouted. “Emboar, Fire Pledge!”

The great fat boar hunkered down on all meaty fours and fired up its power. Flames gathered under its chin like a beard, and Emboar spat out a thick stream of dazzling fire up at Mega Steelix. The man with the Samurott was quick to follow Nate’s lead.

“Samurott, Water Pledge!”

Samurott barked and shot out a column of water that merged with Emboar’s fire and hit Mega Steelix with a searing scream. Rosa ran toward them with Serperior and skidded to a halt.

“Hit it with Grass Pledge!”

Serperior opened its mouth and fired a beam of searing green light that found its way to Emboar’s and Samurott’s merged steam attack and amplified it. The triple attack, a white-hot knife of raw energy, hit Mega Steelix in the belly and generated a thick cloud of scalding steam. Cheren was quick to follow with Stoutland’s Hyper Beam. The various Castelia Gym trainers still in the area commanded their Bugs to join the assault with Signal Beams and Silver Winds. Mega Steelix was assaulted on all sides, and it writhed and thrashed, about to fall.

The Neo Agent commanding it saw the danger of remaining in place and made a leap for it. But Rosa was ready for her and let loose an arrow as the woman fell through the air. This time the arrow hit its mark with a thud, and the woman tumbled head over heels to the hard pavement. Immediately, Mega Steelix roared in pain and lost all its energy to keep going. The platinum and diamond armor shielding it from harm cracked, and the combined Pledge attacks exploited the weakness until the great snake’s hide cracked and shattered. Blood spewed from between the cracks, and Mega Steelix keeled over and crashed to the earth, burying its trainer somewhere underneath it.

An eerie silence ensued in the wake of Mega Steelix’s demise. The sounds of battle continued, but they seemed far away at sea or several streets over. Rosa was breathing heavily, her bow hand shaking a little as she saw the shot she’d taken replay in her mind’s eye again. Nate’s voice brought her out of it and she turned to see him running toward her.

“Rosa!” he called.

Rosa let her hands fall to her sides as tears welled in her eyes. He was at her side in an instant and
threw his arms around her. He was solid and real, she realized. Not some dream or a figment of her imagination. He was here. She wrapped her arms around him and hugged him fiercely.

“Oh my god,” she said, trying to hold back the tears but failing.

He released her and she saw that he was crying, too. “Rosa,” he said in disbelief. “I thought... With Nacrene and Accumula and everything, I thought... I was afraid you were—”

“I’m not,” she said quickly. “I’m okay, I’m here.”

He sniffled and wiped his eyes, smiling like an idiot. Cheren and the other man joined them soon after.

“You know this chick?”

Nate laughed despite himself, and Rosa could have cried again at the sound after so many weeks spent alone in a dark place surrounded by strangers. “Yeah, I know her. This is Rosa.”

Nate’s companion blinked as he processed that, then a flash of recognition passed through his brilliant blue eyes. “Wait, that Rosa?”

“Rosa, this is Hugh, the one I’ve told you about,” Nate said.

“Hugh,” Rosa said, remembering Nate’s description of the friend from Aspertia, the Syreni he’d grown up with. Hugh’s hair was wild and spiky and stood on end despite his damp clothes and the obvious stress of battle that had taken its toll on him. “You’re just like Nate described.”

Hugh didn’t have time to respond to that when Jack, Burgh, and a few Gym trainers and soldiers came marching toward them in a hurry. Burgh was speaking on his comm, and he looked even paler and gaunter than he did five minutes ago.

“We’ll save the introductions and nostalgia for later,” Cheren said. “Although, I’m relieved to see that you’re alive, Rosa.”

“Cheren,” Rosa said. She suddenly remembered Lenora, and it must have showed on her face because Cheren looked away, almost ashamed. “Listen, there’s something you should know about Nacrene,” she began.

“I know everything,” he cut her off. “So please.”

The way he said it felt like she was watching Lenora’s beheading all over again.

“Gym Leader Burgh,” Cheren said, parting from the group and approaching Burgh himself. “I’m Cheren, Gym Leader of Aspertia. I came here with Gym Leader Harrison of Virbank City to assist you against Team Plasma.”

Rosa gasped. “You did?”

Hugh got very quiet and averted his gaze. Nate looked equally uncomfortable, but he nodded. “It’s a long story.”

“Cheren,” Burgh said not unkindly. “Whatever you came here to achieve, I warn you that Castelia is more than capable of defending itself in times of war...no matter the aggressor.”

Cheren balked at the suggestion. “No, you’re misunderstanding. Virbank and Aspertia are here to help. We’re not trying to take advantage of the situation, you have my word.”
“Words are pretty,” Burgh said. “As you can see, I have no time for pretty things.”

“Burgh,” Jack said. “We got a problem.”

Burgh’s Mega Beedrill landed next to Burgh just then, and Nate and Hugh both gaped and took a step back at the sight of it.

“What is it now?” Burgh asked.

“It’s more attacks coming in from the north,” Jack said.

“Excuse me? There’s nothing to the north but Relic Desert.”

“That’s just it. I got a message from Louis sayin’ there’s ground forces comin’ through the desert. People’re fleein’ south. The Sand Sleepers’re fighting, but they’re outnumbered and totally outgunned.”

Burgh looked incredulous. “Who could possibly be attacking from the desert on foot? It’s a death trap.” He spoke into the comm. “This is Q.B. Ant, give me a visual of the Relic Desert.”

There was static on the line before Melissa’s voice patched through. “Flyers approaching from the north. Live visual is incoming. I’ve already started a full-scale evacuation.”

Jack looked around. “Flyers? Who the hell could be batshit enough to send Flyers over miles of empty desert?”

Rosa and the others followed his gaze skyward, and sure enough she spotted a host of Flyers on the northern horizon. They were raining fire and light upon northern Castelia, where Rosa remembered everyone had evacuated to.

“No ordinary Flyers,” Cheren said gravely, a hint of fear in his usually unfaaltering tone.

Burgh began to shake, but not out of fear. “Dragons,” he spat.

Rosa watched as the Flyers, the Dragons, circled the city and traced a path of destruction in their wake.

Dragons...

“It’s Drayden,” Burgh said through gritted teeth. “Opelucid is invading my city.”
Iris

The moment Iris got back on the Oculus, she sequestered herself in her room and locked the door. She’d woken up under the tarp in the Dreamyard puffy-eyed and groggy from crying herself to sleep like a sniveling child, so she quickly gathered her things and was one of the first people back to the sub. She avoided the crew and her guards, and only Nuria gave her grief for not helping to take down the tarp they’d shared. Iris ignored her and hurried off toward the beach, where she felt safe only once she was nestled securely on Gyarados’s head swimming toward the rising sun.

She spent most of the day locked away. Belaron knocked on her door a couple times, insisting she come out to eat if nothing else, but Iris stayed quiet and in bed. Once, Nuria came by and said she’d brought Iris dinner. Was it so late already? Cottonee cooed at the foot of the bed upon hearing Nuria’s voice, but Iris buried her face in her pillow. Resigned, Nuria’s muffled voice through to door said she’d leave the tray, and soon her footsteps faded down the corridor.

Cottonee cooed and bounced on Iris’s hip where she lay on her side, and Iris hugged her pillow tighter. She spared the little cotton puff a glance askance and found it peering directly at her just inches away.

“What?” she whispered.

Cottonee blinked, but it didn’t jump away. This close, Iris’s nose tickled against Cottonee’s downy hide, and she sat up to rub it. Her vision was bleary and her limbs ached from being in the same position for too long. Her stomach was empty, but she didn’t feel the urge to eat. Cottonee rolled around on the bed, shedding cotton in its wake.

“I guess you’re hungry.” She glanced at the door and sighed. Even if she didn’t want to eat, it was stupid not to. Slowly, Iris got out of bed and winced at the cold metal under her bare feet. She unlocked the door and peered down the hall, but there was no one around. She could hear voices drifting in from the mess hall around the corner, laughter and energetic conversation. The tray Nuria had brought her sat on the floor at her doorstep, the plates of food thoughtfully covered to retain heat. Iris bent to retrieve the tray and locked the door again.

She ate at her desk, shoving aside various maps and books and other documents to make room. The food was tasteless, though not for the chef’s lack of culinary talent. It had been nearly twenty-four hours since her fight with Benga. A whole day and night since he brought her to that hidden grotto in the Dreamyard, a secret place full of magic and wonder and beauty beyond anything she could have imagined. She could still picture it clearly in her mind, all the pretty lights from the glowing Joltik and Volbeat, the dancing Gardevoir and Gallade, that sleepy Musharna and her brood of baby Munna that had made Iris laugh until her sides hurt, and Benga, smiling at her in a way that even now, even after everything that had transpired between them, made her toes curl and her insides flutter.

But it was just another mask he wore. Just another hand he played to please whatever audience he was charming at the moment. Just a lie. Iris cut through her fish harshly, scraping the plate with her knife and startling Cottonee, who was busy sucking the juice out of a succulent red Leppa berry. Cottonee squeaked in surprised and jumped. It landed on one of the books Iris had shoved aside to make room for the tray, a book Iris recognized very well. It was the Unova history text Nuria had lent her before. Iris stared at the spine, faded and frayed from years of perusal. She’d left off just before the chapter on Opelucid City and had not opened the book since. In its pages would be the true account of her birthplace and her father’s family.
“Do you even know anything about Cadmus?”

Benga’s question still rang in her memory loud and clear. She set her jaw and clenched her fists. All she’d wanted to do when he said that was scream that he was wrong, of course she knew, Cadmus was her father. She would know better than anyone.

“They called him the Dragonsbane.”

A butcher and a war criminal. That was the Cadmus Benga knew, not the kind and loving father who wanted nothing more than to shower his only daughter with gifts and sweets and smiles. Iris could not remember much of her father, but she remembered his smiles. She opened the drawer of the desk and retrieved the photographs she had of Cadmus and Sonora when they were young, Sonora holding baby Iris in her arms and Cadmus tall and proud with his ancient sword and armored for battle. He didn’t smile in that faded picture, but she knew he could once.

Cottonee whistled nervously, sensing Iris’s emotional turmoil. It was still perched atop the history text, bookmarked at the chapter on Opelucid City and its dynasty of Dragon Kings and Queens. Cadmus would be in those pages, the side of him history remembered. Who was he, really? The loving father Iris remembered? Or the ruthless warmonger Benga remembered? Iris reached for the book and touched her fingers to the leather spine. The contact had an enervating effect, so she imagined, and she froze, shaking.

“It’s just a book, Iris,” she said aloud. “It can’t change what I know.”

“You don’t know who anybody is,” Benga’s voice taunted her, accusatory.

She winced as though burned and immediately felt ashamed.

“I am Iris Fafnir,” she hissed at the book, as though it were at fault. “I’m a Titan for true.”

I’m not afraid.

Gritting her teeth, Iris got up from her chair and grabbed the heavy book to take back to the bed. Cottonee jumped into the air and zipped after her as she curled up against the wall under the covers and cracked open the book.

“Chapter Eight: The Dragon Tamers of Opelucid City,” she read aloud.

Determined as hell to come out of this on top, Iris got comfortable and began to read.

Iris remained in her room reading well into the night and passed out with the book. When she woke the next morning, she had a killer ache in her neck and badly needed to pee. The leftover food Nuria had brought her last night had long grown cold on her desk, and Cottonee had settled in her hair for the night, filling it with tangles and cotton tufts. Groaning, she got up and headed to the bathroom to clean up. Half an hour later, Iris was changed and making up her room. The lone window in her cabin reflected nothing but darkness, though she knew by now that whatever she did not see lurking out there most certainly could see her.

The book lay open on her bed, and Iris stared down at it. It had taken her a while to get through the chapter on Opelucid, unable to read the words on the page at times as she was tempted to fling it across the room to the trash can. But each time she set it down, she inevitably picked it back up and pressed on. Years and years of history, bloodshed, conquest, and power ended with Drayden’s
ascension to the throne and the slow rebuilding and reconstruction of the last fifteen years. His section was fairly short, but Cadmus’s before him was robust and soaked with blood. Iris’s fingers shook as she gently closed the book and returned it to the desk. She moved like a somnambulist, dead on her feet and drained to the bone after everything she’d absorbed, but somehow still going through the motions without really being aware. Cottonee fluttered to land on the desk and looked up at her, a little shy. Iris stared down at the small Fairy, too weary even to take some small comfort in its loyal presence by her side.

“I can’t hide in here much longer,” she said softly.

Benga had not once come to seek her out, and she was mostly glad of that. But now, after having gained some new knowledge about Opelucid, about her own father, she wondered what he must think of her. Was he holed up alone now licking his wounds, too? Iris gripped the food tray Nuria had brought her as she ventured out of her room for the first time since diving, Cottonee atop her damp loose hair, and hoped he was so she wouldn’t run into him somewhere.

Iris headed for the mess hall to drop off her tray with the kitchen. There were some crewmembers having a late breakfast or early lunch at the large communal table, whom she greeted politely, but none of them went out of their way to engage her at length. Just as she was leaving, though, all three of her guards entered the mess hall arguing about something.

“I’m just saying, it’s weird even for her,” Soriel said.

“And I’m just saying, maybe she needs some extra space right now,” Moros said, exasperated like he’d been trying to get the point through Soriel’s thick skull for some time now.

“Not like this,” Soriel said. “Somethin’s wrong, I can smell it.”

“Oh, really? What does it smell like, exactly? That’s right, nothing, because that’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard,” Moros said.

“I’ve had just about enough of you two,” Belaron said. He cut himself off as soon as he saw Iris standing there like a Deerling caught in the headlights and instinctively moved his body to block her from Soriel and Moros’s path. “Princess.”

“Hey, there she is!” Soriel said, barreling past Belaron like a Granbull on a mission. “Where you been, anyway?”

“It’s good to see you up and about,” Moros agreed. “We noticed you’d been keeping to yourself since we left the Dreamyard.”

Leave it to Moros to gracefully tiptoe around the issue. Right now, Iris appreciated it. She had no intentions of telling them about what had happened with Benga and everything thereafter. Belaron, a knight through and through, came to her rescue.

“That’s enough of your prodding, both of you,” he snapped. “Now, get a move on. I believe the captain asked you to retrieve something for him?”

Soriel made a sour face that made her already uncomely face even less attractive. Moros just looked like he’d swallowed soap, as usual.

“Right, we’ll be going,” Moros said. “Come on, Soriel.”

Soriel held Iris’s gaze. “Yeah, whatever, if you’re sure.”
Iris said nothing, and Soriel nodded, resigned.

“All right,” she said, sniffing loudly and rubbing her fleshy nose. “But you follow up with Nymo. I gotta track down that shithead Benga. He owes me my winnings from last night’s card game.”

Moros and Soriel headed off, and they did not see the way Iris’s expression fell at the mention of Benga.

So he’s playing games and having a great time even after what happened.

She should have figured. But still, the thought that he could brush it off like it hadn’t happened...

Belaron remained, and he saw every crack in Iris’s armor as she withdrew into herself.

“All right,” she said. “Why don’t you join me for a late breakfast?” he said. “The library is small, but it’s quiet and usually deserted at this time of day.”

Iris looked up at the old Ridder Knight, feeling half a child in that moment as he looked down at her in his freshly pressed slacks and shirt, that perfectly oiled hair, clean and confident and so sure of his place. She had the overwhelming urge then to hug him, to hold onto him because she felt like she might float away, fade to nothing, and no one would even remember she had been there at all.

But she refrained. Instead she merely said, “Yes, I’d like that.”

Belaron smiled awkwardly, like he’d never quite learned how, and led Iris to the kitchen counter, where they procured their food and headed for the library. As promised, it was empty and secluded. Some might call it claustrophobic, especially given the floor-to-ceiling crammed bookshelves and the windows that reflected nothing but the inky black deep, but the soft lighting and the smell of old parchment gave the room a cozy feel, if a bit cramped. Iris took a seat at the only table in the room, and Belaron sat across from her.

They ate in silence for a bit. Iris fed Cottonee some sliced Razz berry from her plate, and it cooed happily. The books overflowing from the shelves seemed ready to spill over at any moment, like they might bury Iris beneath their pages. She shivered.

“Iris,” Belaron said. He hardly ever called her by just her name, always deferring to formalities despite their years of acquaintance. “Why don’t you tell me what happened?”

Iris remained silent as she recalled Benga’s harsh words to her. I said some nasty things to him, too.

“Did something happen at the Dreamyard?” Belaron pressed.

“Maybe you’re the one stuck in Neverland, not me.”

Did he really think she was so far gone?

“Please, Princess,” Belaron tried again. “I know things between us lately have been...strained ever since we arrived in this place, but I want to help you. It’s why I’m here.” He paused, studying her. “Ever since that knave Benga arrived, I feel as though things have deteriorated considerably. He has everyone under his spell, the crew, Soriel and Moros...”

He trailed off, watching Iris, and she couldn’t help but meet his gaze. Her throat knotted, and she could not find her voice. Belaron must have picked up on something in her expression, because he froze over like a winter’s morning and leaned forward over the small table. “It’s Benga, isn’t it?”

Iris didn’t even try to protest. He knew her too well, after all. She rubbed her eyes, suddenly tired...
all over again.

“I knew he was bad news the moment I laid eyes on him.” Belaron rose from his chair abruptly. “I’ll have him ejected from this submersible immediately. We’ll see how confident he is facing the abyss.”

“No, Syr Bel, that’s not necessary,” she said. “Please, sit back down.”

“But Princess—”

“It’s not as if I want him dead or something.”

Belaron studied her a moment, but he sat back down and clasped his hands together. “Then what is it? What did he do?”

“Why do you think he did anything?”

“I’ve known you for more than half your life, and I’ve hardly ever seen you so upset than you are now. The Iris I know could walk over hot coals and never once flinch. Right now you look ready to fall back into the fire.”

She smiled sadly and leaned her weight on an elbow. “You know me well, Syr Bel.”

“I should hope so,” he said, again trying to smile to lighten the mood. “I am your knight, after all.”

Iris thought about that. “Why did you come here with me?”

He seemed taken aback by the question and leaned back in his chair. “I’m sorry?”

“Why did you come on this fool’s errand half a world away?” Iris pressed.

“Well, because you asked me to,” Belaron said guilelessly. “As I said, I am your knight, your sworn sword and shield. Where you go, I will always follow. And if I may, Princess, this is no fool’s errand.”

Iris swallowed a bite of food. “You don’t think sailing around the world to a land neither of us knows much about in pursuit of a crown that belongs to another is a fool’s errand?”

“That crown belongs to you,” Belaron said rather forcefully. “It’s why we came here to Unova and why we’re traveling in secret deep under the sea like stowaways. I believe it will all come together as it should in the end.”

“Such faith. But you forget, my uncle wears the crown. He has for the last fifteen years.”

“He is not the rightful king. He’s a usurper.”

Iris averted her gaze. “Many will call me a usurper when we arrive in Opelucid.”

“Let them. I’ll cut them all down. It would be my honor as your sworn Ridder Knight.”

Iris’s throat ran dry as she watched this old knight declare his unwavering loyalty to her even after all they had endured up until now. For Iris, there was no other path. Her place was here in Unova, no matter how out of place she felt. This was her destiny to forge, she had always known that. But Belaron had no ties to this land, only to her.

“I’m afraid I’ve treated you poorly lately, Syr Bel,” Iris said shakily. “Since Undella Town, I
haven’t treated you with the respect you deserve."

Belaron blinked rapidly like he hadn’t quite heard her. “Oh, not at all. I... I understand perfectly well how much stress you’re under. Certainly the likes of Benga lurking about doesn’t help matters.”

Iris bit back a wince. “No, I’m serious. You’ve always been good to me, and I don’t always show my gratitude. I’m truly sorry for that.”

Belaron let his eyes fall, a little flustered, and seemed not to know what to do with his hands as he fidgeted. “Well, thank you, Princess. I appreciate that, even though it’s not necessary.”

Iris smiled a little, and Cottonee fluttered to her side wanting a pet. She obliged it.

“In any case,” Belaron said, collecting himself, “I meant what I said. This is no fool’s errand. The crown is rightfully yours, and you will take it back.”

“Bastards can’t wear crowns,” Iris said, watching him carefully. “Opelucid is no different from Blackthorn in that respect. Who’s to say the people would accept me? They probably don’t even remember I exist.”

Belaron steeled his expression and leaned forward. He took Iris’s hand in his. “Because you are Iris Fafnir, the rightful queen. You are your father’s daughter.”

Iris tensed and squeezed his hand in hers, which he mistook for gratitude from the way his usually severe expression softened. But Iris was thirty years and a thousand miles away in the pages of the history text she’d read last night about how Cadmus had fought in the civil wars playing both sides. There was one account among the many grisly stories that stood out to her about Cadmus laying siege to a key supply route between Driftveil and Mistralton. Opelucid’s Dragon Riders were supposed to be contracted with the Lower West Tine forces to prevent the Upper West Tine from invading Virbank City. The plan of attack was designed as a subtle siege on a key trade route that would cripple Driftveil by cutting off all food imports from fertile Mistralton, but Cadmus ordered a full-scale decimation of the town and everything surrounding it for fifty miles in every direction. The Dragon Riders burned down soldiers and civilians, women and children, from both sides of the fighting without a care for who they were attacking. More than fifteen thousand people died that day, burned alive by Dragonfire without any idea of why.

The Burning, as it became known, was a turning point in the war that convinced then-Gym Leader Alder of Virbank City to cut all ties with Opelucid. He instead made the risky and ultimately masterful decision to enlist help from the Lower East Tine’s Nacrene and Striaton Cities to launch a deadly siege against Driftveil itself and eventually end the Civil Wars. No one could have predicted such an alliance between Virbank and Nacrene would actually hold. The Upper West Tine seceded from the Trident, beaten, and Alder became the Champion of Unova for his bravery and brilliant tactics that brought a swift end to a war that likely would have dragged on for another ten years otherwise. Cadmus returned to Opelucid a king, and he earned his terrible moniker, Dragonsbane, for the thousands he slaughtered in cold blood purely for the sport of it.

But Iris said nothing of any of this. “My father’s daughter,” she said.

Was she? Could she bring herself to kill thousands of innocent people just for a taste of that crown she’d been dreaming of her whole life? Was that what it would take? Either way, Drayden would not back down without a fight. There was no avoiding the bloodshed if she continued down this path. But what choice did she have?
“You cannot be a queen so long as your father’s ghost sits the throne you seek.”

What did Caitlin mean by that? Cadmus was dead, but if Iris was her father’s daughter, then a part of him lived on in her. She could not escape that.

Belaron patted her hand politely and retracted his hands to a respectable position across the table. “Yes. You will prevail.”

“I don’t even know who you are,” she’d accused Benga.

Do I even know who I am? Am I my father’s daughter? Or am I somebody else? Can I even be somebody else?

“And...in regards to your original question, why I came here with you, well, you know that. But as to why I’ve stayed with you...” He paused and wrung his hands, uncomfortable as he searched for the right words. “I suppose I believe you can make a difference here. When you’re queen, you’ll create a world that’s better than what these people have now. I want to be a part of that.”

Iris was speechless as she stared openly at this old man who could have retired to a nice life in Blackthorn but who had instead made the journey to a foreign land with her.

“And, well, I can only assume there will be a promotion for me at the end of this,” he said with a laugh.

Iris did not laugh, but she also resisted the urge to cry as she wrung her hands hard enough to hurt. “Yeah,” she said.

“Now, in regards to Benga,” Belaron went on without pause, “I think it best that we keep him at arm’s length. I know you think he can be useful, and I would not dream of defying you, but I only mean that perhaps you were a bit hasty in letting him join the crew...”

Iris barely heard him prattling on as she receded to her muddled thoughts. She could not get her confrontation with Benga in the Dreamyard out of her head. The history text sat on her desk back in her room, the long chapter on Opelucid City and its dynasty of Dragon Kings and Queens like a shadow hovering at the periphery. Iris rubbed her eyes hard, but the feeling of something dark and cold creeping in around her would not abate.

Was I so wrong about it all?

“Princess?” Belaron said. “Are you all right? You’ve been awfully quiet.”

Iris blinked and forced herself to look up. “No, I’m not feeling well. I think I’ll go lie down for a bit.” She rose to stand, and Belaron rose with her out of respect. “I’m sorry for ducking out like this.”

“Of course not. Allow me to escort you back.”

Iris nodded numbly and scooped up Cottonee. They left their trays of food, Belaron promising he would see to them once he saw Iris back to her room to rest. She barely registered the journey as her head swam with memories of the confrontation with Benga and all the information she’d absorbed reading last night. She barely even noticed that they’d arrived at her door, and Belaron had to hold it open for her.

“I’ll be back to check on you later,” Belaron said kindly, a gentle hand on her back to guide her inside. “Is there anything I can do for you in the meantime?”
Iris paused and ran her fingers over Cottonee’s fluffy head, earning herself a pleasant coo. “Nuria,” she said. “She brought me dinner last night. I meant to thank her...”

“Oh, she was just doing her job,” Belaron said. “No need to dwell on trivialities.”

Iris frowned, but he was already ushering her inside and sliding the door closed.

“Get some rest, Princess. I’ll be here if you require anything at all.”

He was gone, and Iris was alone again save for Cottonee. The history text still sat on her desk, along with the photographs of her parents. She ran her fingers over the old photos.

“What am I supposed to do?” she asked her parents.

The black and white photos were faded at the edges even encased in glass and creased from so many years of folding and unfolding. But they were the only pictures she had. Neither of them responded, of course. They had both been dead for many years, and there was no such thing as Neverland, where children can remain young forever and never worry about the ills of the world, the bloody past or the unknown future. And yet, she gripped the photos and searched them for the answers she knew they could never give.

“What am I supposed to do?” she asked again.

The silence was deafening in her small room with the window looking out into darkness.

For the next three days, Iris spent most of her time in her room alone. Belaron checked on her regularly, but she did not admit him, asking to be left alone. He respected her wishes, and every time he left, she wished she could find the energy to tell him to wait, to thank him for his loyalty and trust in her. She’d told Benga she could not trust anyone, but Belaron had remained by her side through the years through thick and thin. Perhaps if she did trust anyone, it was him.

And yet, she could not bring herself to let him in.

She said nothing to Belaron or anyone else of what she’d read in the history text, nor of what Benga and she had argued about back in the Dreamyard. She said nothing about Caitlin’s prophecy, nor of Marlon’s warning to her that she did not know who she really was. All of it, every secret, remained bottled up. Titans, after all, were excellent liars. Iris was no exception.

Nuria had stopped by with her dinner again every night, and Iris took the opportunity to thank her properly. “I appreciate it,” she said as she accepted the tray. “You don’t have to do this, so thanks.”

“Listen, Iris,” Nuria said in hushed Adriati, a little uncomfortable. “I don’t know what’s going on with you, but the crew is wondering if you’ve lost your resolve or something. You’re never around. That’s not good for morale. You know they’re sticking their necks out for you like this, right? My father, too. And me.”

“I’m not going to sugarcoat it for you. They’re starting to wonder if you’ve lost your resolve or something. You’re never around. That’s not good for morale. You know they’re sticking their necks out for you like this, right? My father, too. And me.”

Iris did not know what to say. “I... I just want some time alone. Nothing’s changed.”

Nuria studied her. “Well, we’ll be surfacing tomorrow morning, so you better wrap it up. Benga’s
been keeping everyone distracted whenever somebody asks about you, but even he can’t keep it up forever.”

Iris tensed. “Benga?”

“Yeah. I wasn’t sure about him when we first picked him up. You know, I was surprised you were so willing to let him come aboard knowing how stuck up and secretive you can be.” She put up her hand when Iris tried to protest and kept going. “I just meant it was good instinct. He’s been good for the crew. Can’t believe I just said that about a Titan...”

“Benga knows how to be good for anyone. He can’t help it,” Iris said.

Nuria frowned. “Hey... Did something happen between you? Back in the Dreamyard, when we were talking about him—”

“It’s nothing,” Iris interrupted, glaring.

Nuria did not look convinced, but for once, she relented. “Right, if you say so.” She turned to leave. “He’s been spending a lot of time in the viewing room, you know. He goes there alone and just stares out into the deep.”

“I don’t care what Benga does in his spare time,” Iris snapped.

“Great, then you won’t care that he’s usually there after dinner every night. Nobody ever disturbs him there.”

Nuria stalked off down the hall before Iris could respond to that, and she was left standing in her doorway with the dinner tray like a Corphish out of water. She angrily slammed the door and retreated to her room to eat even though she wasn’t particularly hungry. Cottonee cooed, sensing her foul mood.

“Why should I care what Benga does?” Iris asked the little cotton puff Pokémon. “He’s a grown man who can do what he wants. I don’t have time for these games.”

*Alone every night, just staring into darkness...*

The thought sent a shiver down her spine as she swirled her soup to cool it. Cottonee sniffed at the small green Wepear berry Nuria had brought for it and prodded it with its leafy wings. Iris ate in silence and passed the time afterwards polishing her sword on the bed. It was sharp and well cared for, a lightweight but sturdy specimen she’d procured in Blackthorn for this voyage. It had not seen any battles yet, but she knew it would before this quest was finished. Cottonee whistled at her and bounced on the bed, restless.

“What is it?” Iris said as she ran an oiled rag over the blade.

Cottonee fluttered to her head and bounced about some more, and Iris snatched it up.

“Hey, what’s gotten into you?”

Cottonee wriggled in her hands and, when she wouldn’t let go, exploded in a flurry of cotton tufts that stuck to her sword and fell all over the bed.

“Ugh, Cottonee! Why’d you do that?”

Cottonee finally struggled free and whistled anxiously as it fluttered about the room. Iris wiped
down her sword and did her best to gather up the shed cotton to dispose of in the waste bin. But she could not stay angry with Cottonee. Being in the sub for so long did have a suffocating effect. Surfacing tomorrow morning would be a welcome respite.

“The crew is starting to doubt me,” Iris said more to herself than to Cottonee. “What am I supposed to do about that?”

Cottonee settled on the desk and peered up at her, fluttering its little wings and shedding Fairy dust on the floor. It shimmered rosy pink in the stale artificial lighting before dissolving into nothing. A pleasant smell like freshly cut flowers suddenly filled the room, heady. Iris wiped her nose.

“Then I’ll have to find you some Fairy dust.”

Iris hugged herself as she remembered those few moments with Benga, that feeling of trust and wonderment, almost child-like in its innocence and easy acceptance. For just those few seconds of flying, he’d made her believe she wasn’t alone. For all the years she’d spent with Belaron and his steadfast loyalty to her, she’d never once felt that around him.

“Maybe I was wrong,” she said, barely a whisper. “I shouldn’t have...”

Cottonee cooed again, shy, and Iris scooped it up and placed it on her head. She sneezed as she inhaled a bit of Fairy dust. It tickled her lungs and made her stomach flutter, like she might just lift off the ground and fly for real if she could just believe. Clenching her fists, she headed for the door and stalked off down the hall, determined. Enough was enough. She was a princess of Opelucid, bastard-born or not. The blood did not lie. She was better than all this sulking, and she would prove it.

She found Benga in the viewing room, just as Nuria had said. The last time she’d been in here, it was to observe the Abyssal Ruins buried and forgotten under leagues of dark water and time. Benga had been here, too, and he’d asked her if those secrets should remain buried. They had both agreed that no, they should not. Ghosts would not stop them. He looked half a Ghost himself now, standing alone in front of the enormous glass bulb that made up the sub’s nose and offered a view of the vast darkness beyond, as though it were a portal to another world and he lingered on the precipice, tempted to cross. He heard her footsteps and turned to look.

There was no smile, no mischievous smirk or twinkle of trickery in his eyes, and as soon as he’d satisfied his curiosity as to who had disturbed him, he returned to his solitary viewing. “If you came for a show, you’ll be disappointed. Nothing out there but darkness.”

Iris forced herself to breathe normally and slowly moved to stand next to him overlooking the inky blackness. “There’s plenty out there. We can’t see them, but they can see us.”

He snorted in amusement. “Imagine that. Buncha sea monsters spying on a pair of Titans. I wonder what they see in us.”

Cottonee huddled into Iris’s ponytail, a little uneasy surrounded by so much darkness. Or perhaps it could see what Iris and Benga could not.

“We’re blind down here,” Iris said. “Whatever’s out there, we wouldn’t see it coming until it’s too late.”

Benga spared her a glance askance, but Iris continued to search the dark ocean.

“I’ve been blind for a long time,” she said softly. “Sometimes I wonder if...if maybe it’s already too late for me.”
They stood there in silence for a moment, mere humans venturing where they could not naturally go, the darkness closing in on all sides. Iris shivered.

“Iris,” Benga said finally, turning to face her. “About what I said.”

“You were right,” she said, returning his gaze. “Everything you said about me, about how I was living in a past that wasn’t even real, it was all true.”

He was taken aback by her admission, and it showed. “I didn’t... I mean, what I said...”

“Nuria lent me a book,” Iris went on. “A history book about Unova. I read the chapter on Opelucid a few nights ago. There was... a lot about my father in it. About the things he did...” She averted her gaze. “It was so weird, reading these things about my father, things I’ve never known about him. Like an out of body experience. Did you know he skinned five children alive and hanged them over the Opelucid City gates? The village they were from was harboring insurgents trying to take down the monarchy. Five of them. A warning for each.”

Benga paled. “Iris,” he said, voice strained.

“I read about The Burning, too. How he got that name you called him, Dragonsbane.” Iris went on like she was watching and listening to someone else talk with her voice. “Syr Bel doesn’t know about any of that, either. I tried to tell him, but I guess I just couldn’t. He said I would take back Opelucid just like I came here to do because I’m my father’s daughter. It’s in my blood.”

“Hey, stop that,” Benga said. “That’s not what I meant when I said those things. You’re not like that.”

“It’s what I came here to do. I’m going to war with Drayden and Opelucid until one of us kills the other. And I’m dragging Marlon and Humilau into it, too. Just like I’m dragging everyone on this sub into it.”

Benga grabbed her by the arms and shook her lightly. “Shut up already. That’s not who you are.”

“I read about The Burning, too. How he got that name you called him, Dragonsbane.” Iris went on like she was watching and listening to someone else talk with her voice. “Syr Bel doesn’t know about any of that, either. I tried to tell him, but I guess I just couldn’t. He said I would take back Opelucid just like I came here to do because I’m my father’s daughter. It’s in my blood.”

“Hey, stop that,” Benga said. “That’s not what I meant when I said those things. You’re not like that.”

“It’s what I came here to do. I’m going to war with Drayden and Opelucid until one of us kills the other. And I’m dragging Marlon and Humilau into it, too. Just like I’m dragging everyone on this sub into it.”

Benga grabbed her by the arms and shook her lightly. “Shut up already. That’s not who you are.”

“You don’t know me,” Iris shot back.

He tightened his grip. “Yes, I do. I know you, Iris. I know you were gonna help that woman and her boys back in Perry Town even though you knew it would blow your cover. Just like I know you care a lot about Nuria and the crew even though you feel like you can’t always show it in front of that classist asshole Belaron.” He let his head fall, and she could feel his hands shaking where they gripped her. “You’re nothing like Cadmus was. Trust me.”

Iris swallowed the burn in her throat at the threat of tears. They did not fall. “Trust you.”

Benga let her go, at a loss for words after his little tirade.

“My father,” Iris said. “I do remember him, you know. Not much, but there are some things that’re so clear to me even now, like they happened yesterday. He once spent an entire day with me when I was five.” She smiled a little. “We had snow cones that turned our lips green, and he pretended to be a Politoed and ribbitted and hopped around. I laughed so hard I cried. And he let me ride on his shoulders. He had such broad shoulders, and I felt like I was on top of the world on those shoulders, like I was safe and nothing would ever hurt me as long as he was there.”

She paused and rubbed her eyes. “He had the most beautiful laugh, a little gravelly and rich, like a crackling fire on a cold night. And I remember... he didn’t care who saw us together. Even though I was a bastard and Adriati and stuck out around the other pureblood Titans and they all knew the
truth, he never thought of me as anything other than his little princess. But that’s... That’s not who he really was, is it? It’s a delusion, like you said. I’m his daughter, there’s no changing that. I guess...now I just know exactly what that means. No matter how much you think you know them, Titans lie. How can I possibly trust another after all that?”

Benga was silent as he listened, his gaze cloudy with emotion Iris could not read. “I don’t know,” he said finally. “I think that’s the risk you take when you decide to put your faith in somebody else. You never know if they’re telling you the truth, but you hope they care enough not to lie.” He pursed his lips and scratched the back of his neck. “I never felt that way about anybody, actually. Kind of ironic, huh?”

She said nothing, and he let his hand fall.

“But I know I can trust you.”

Iris shook her head, incredulous. “Why?”

“Because you’ve never lied to me. Everything you said before in the Dreamyard, it was all true. The only other person who’s ever been straight with me like you were is my Gramps, and he’s... I fucked up with him. But you... I think I can take that risk with you.”

Cottonee sensed some tension between Iris and Benga and gingerly poked its head out from the nest it had made in her hair, shy and diffident. Iris could only stare.

“What’re you saying?” she asked, a fight or flight response tingling in her fingertips and twisting in her stomach.

“I’m saying I’m sorry,” he said. “I shouldn’t have said what I said even if it was true. It was a dick move. And I’m saying you can ask me anything, if that’s what it takes. I’ll answer, whatever you wanna know. No lies.”

Iris swallowed hard. “Because you want to help me.”

Just like Belaron wanted to help her, and yet she couldn’t even tell him about what she’d read about Cadmus’s violent past.

“Because you don’t have to do this alone.” Benga held out his hand. “What do you say?”

Iris eyed his offered hand, rough with callouses and weathered from so much time spent under the sun. Scaly, if you looked at it just so, a trick of the light that betrayed his true nature. The same as her. Iris clasped their hands and felt his swallow hers as they shook. “I say start at the beginning.”

Benga held her hand in his, thinking. “Well, in the beginning there was light.”

Despite herself, Iris rolled her eyes. “Hilarious.”

He grinned and tugged her along behind him, never breaking the contact. “Come on. It’s gonna be a long night if you want me to start at the beginning, and I know where Nymo keeps his rainy day stash.”

As though a weight had been lifted from her shoulders, Iris felt the tension between them begin to evaporate as she bit back a smirk. “You’re stealing his liquor?”

“Borrowing with absolutely no intention of returning,” he corrected. “Come on, to drink expensive gin will be an awfully big adventure.”
He winked at her over his shoulder as he led her down the corridor, and Iris suddenly recalled those precious moments flying on Volcarona, that feeling of connection. She felt it now with the dark ocean pressing down on them from all sides, abyssal and abysmal, and his hand in hers holding on, reminding her that she was not alone, after all.

“Oh, the cleverness of you,” she played along.

Benga’s smile widened, and his sharp incisor poked out over his lower lip. Iris had to look away to keep herself from smiling back like some corny cliché, but he didn’t seem to mind.

“By the way,” he said when they’d made their way into the storage closet just off the kitchen, “I make a mean dirty martini. I’m talking filthy, okay.”

“Well, that explains basically everything.”

Wagged a toothpick with a fat green olive stuck to the end at her face. “Rude.”

Three martinis that got progressively dirtier later, Iris and Benga were sitting together on a leather couch in the viewing room with a half-empty bottle of gin on the table in front of them, a plate piled high with olive pits, and a well-used shaker. Iris had her legs up and folded under her, and Benga casually laid his arm over the back of the couch behind her to stretch out comfortably as they talked. He could not abide silences for long, even when the topic was one that had rarely, if ever, seen the light and the words were dusty and dry with cobwebs as he struggled to get them out at first. But he relaxed and told her what she wanted to know, as promised. The alcohol helped a bit, but still, Iris could not help the small thrill she felt at being made privy to a well-guarded secret no number of martinis would have ever gotten out of him any other day. She wondered if this was what it was like for Soriel and the others talking to him, watching him morph into whatever they expected him to be.

“My parents died in the Red Plague,” he explained. “Like so many others.”

“Where were you?” Iris asked.

“In Hoenn for two years by then, with my Gramps. He liked to travel, and my mom insisted I get outta Opelucid and learn about raising Pokémon away from the clan. She was a Titan, too, from the Falk family in Opelucid, but my dad was an Ignifer skuff, believe it or not. She wasn’t, uh, very traditional in a lotta her choices. She didn’t want that life for me, either. So Gramps offered to take me on his next adventure. I was just six, and he caught me my first Pokémon.” Benga showed Iris an old scratched Pokéball clipped to the leather thong around his shoulder. “Sceptile. Well, Treecko, back then.”

“I’m sorry about your parents,” Iris said, contrite. “I can sympathize.”

Benga sipped his drink slowly and let the silence drag out. “That’s life.”

“Your mother sounds like a brave woman. It’s not easy to escape the clan.” Iris knew that well enough. Sonora had spirited her away from the Fafnir Dynasty only to end up in the hands of another Dragon clan in Blackthorn City. Benga had escaped that rigid upbringing.

“Yeah, well, even the douchebags in Opelucid couldn’t say no to her. She married my dad, after all.”
“The Titans were afraid of an Ignifer skuff? That doesn’t make any sense.”

Benga ate an olive soaked through with gin and chewed thoughtfully. Iris waited, her impatience growing as she recognized his casual dodge tactic.

“Benga,” she pressed.

“Hey, you grew up in Blackthorn, right? What was that like? I hear Gym Leader Clair’s a real piece of work.” The second olive he’d eaten bulged in his cheek as he talked. “And by that I mean she’s s’posed to be a real bitch.”

Iris frowned, not liking how he’d changed the subject on her. But she decided to play along for now. “She is. You have to be to succeed in her position. But...” Iris trailed off, remembering. “Clair’s probably the closest I’ve ever come to having a friend. And before you start laughing at how pathetic that is, remember that I could kick your ass.”

Benga blinked guilelessly. “I don’t think having a real friend is pathetic. It’s not like I ever had any.”

Iris nearly choked on her drink. “Excuse me?”

He shrugged. “You know what I mean.”

He was everything to everybody, but how close can you get to a person who constantly changes their colors to suit his environment?

“I don’t even know who you are.”

How can anyone get close to a person who doesn’t really exist?

Iris shifted uncomfortably, disturbing Cottonee who sat happily between the two of them. Cottonee coed in its sleep and fluffed out, shedding tufts of cotton on the sofa.

“Hey, did you meet that Titan girl who took out Champion Lance a while back? I heard she and a few other Tamers actually summoned the Legendary Birds to take him out. Wonder how they pulled that off,” Benga said.

Iris shook her head. “No, but I did know Lance a little. He was... I don’t know how to describe it. He was like a different species sometimes. He was so far away all the time, in here I mean.” She placed a hand over her heart. “Clair sometimes talked about him. I think they were close once, but then he became the Champion, and he just...drifted away, I guess.”

Benga topped off his drink with a splash of martini from the shaker and swirled it around. “Yeah, Champions. They’re all a little fucked up.”

“What do you know about Champions, anyway? What, did you meet Steven Stone in Hoenn when you were there or something?”

“Hell no. Everybody knows that guy hates most Titans. But I’m pretty familiar with Champion Alder.”

Iris sat up a little. “The Unova Champion? How do you know him? I read that he wandered the Trident for years after the civil wars ended and then sort of fell off the radar.”

“He did, to most people. But since he’s my Gramps and all, I guess I’m one of the few people who
still keeps tabs on him.”

Iris stared in shock for a moment, no quite processing that. “Wait, what? You’re Champion Alder’s grandson?”

“Um, yeah, I guess. It's not a big deal.”

Iris’s mind was reeling. “Wait, so when you said your mom marrying your dad had to do with you leaving Opelucid...”

“Even King Cadmus couldn’t exactly say no to the Champion when he came around wanting to take his only grandson on a trip to the sandy beaches of Hoenn,” Benga said dryly. “Kinda wish I woulda been old enough to appreciate that conversation. Imagine, the big scary Dragon King himself having to bend the knee to a lowly skuff just ‘cause he was the Champion’s son.”

Iris smacked him on the head.

“Ow! Hey, what the hell?” he whined.

“Benga, this is a really big deal. Why didn’t you say you were related to the Champion? Did you forget I’m trying to gather support against Drayden?” Iris said, exasperated.

He rubbed his head and made a sour face. “No, I didn’t forget, obviously. But you’re barkin’ up the wrong tree, believe me.”

Iris could have strangled him. “Are you even listening to yourself? This is the Champion of Unova, your flesh and blood. With him on our side, we could probably convince all the Lower West Tine Gym Leaders to join us, too. Maybe even Castelia, I don’t know.” Iris’s mind raced with the possibilities.

But Benga pressed a finger to her lips as she prattled on. He tasted salty, a hint of olive juice on his fingertip. “The only thing Gramps is champion of now is the world record on units of vodka consumed in a twenty-four-hour period. So drop it, he’s useless to us.”

He pulled away before Iris could yank his hand away, but she was once again thrown for a loop. “What?”

Benga seemed to retreat into himself a little as he set down his empty drink and crossed his arms. “Do I hafta spell it out for you? He’s a drunk. The really bad kind, not the quirky uncle at the family reunion who gets just a little too tipsy and gives you shitty life advice. He’s been making himself sick for the last fifteen years, like he’s the only one who lost my dad when he died.”

Iris bit her lip, at a loss. This was the real Benga, she realized. This was the person he hid under all the layers of glitz and glitter on display for everyone to see. Iris gently touched a hand to his shoulder and peered at his profile. His jaw was set and his dark eyes were far away somewhere she could not follow.

“Hey, don’t go,” she said.

He blinked and shot her a look.

“You said you’d stay with me to help. So stay here.”

He started to relax a little as whatever memories that haunted him receded and brought him back to this moment. “You said ‘us’,” he said.
“Huh?”

“When you were talking about getting the Gym Leaders to join us. You said ‘us’, not ‘me’.”

Iris frowned. “So what?”

He spread out on the couch again, much to Iris’s annoyance. Cottonée squeaked and cuddled up between their bent knees as Benga invaded Iris’s personal space like he owned the place. She pulled back, but there was not far to go unless she wanted to fall off the couch. He put his feet up on the table, and Iris glowered at them as though they offended her.

“I stayed with Gramps in Floccessy Town till I was fifteen. By then, I couldn’t take it anymore. So I went back to Opelucid, thought I’d do somethin’ important like join the Dragon Riders. They didn’t accept Volcarona as a proper Dragon Flyer, big surprise. So I trained with the Ridder Knights instead. That was...interesting. Not a lotta Titans or grandsons of Champions willing to stand shoulder to shoulder with a buncha skuffs, but you know me, I like being cool and mysterious.”

“I’m sure that helped with your street cred,” Iris deadpanned.

He snorted and cracked a smile. “Yeah, got a shitty tat to prove it.”

“You said you wouldn’t lie to me.”

He laughed. “Okay, you got me. No soldier ink on me. Missed my chance, clearly.”

“Clearly.”

His fingers had somehow found their way to her thick ponytail draped over the back of the couch and began tugging lightly. Iris was too focused on the conversation to care.

“They were okay with me, though. The Ridder Knights, I mean. My dad was a skuff, too, so that made me okay somehow, I dunno. But I’ll take those skuff soldiers over the holier-than-thou purebloods any day.”

“From the way you talk to Syr Bel, I thought you hated Ridder Knights.”

“Nah,” Benga said. “They made Opelucid seem like a halfway decent place to be when I was there. Belaron’s just a pompous ass.”

Iris frowned deeply, but he waved her off.

“Anyway, I spent almost two years in Opelucid, then I was outta there. They tried to stop me, the Titans, I mean. But I was rolling with the Ridder Knights, and let me tell you, nobody knows that city better than the skuffs that patrol it. I guess I made a good impression on ‘em, believe it or not. They helped me get out, and I hopped the first boat I could find outta Castelia to Cyllage City.”

“You went all the way to Kalos?” Iris said.

“Yup. Spent a lotta time in Laverre City and Coumarine City. Caught Noivern just outside of Laverre, then I got a job with Gym Leader Ramos gardening for some huge public works project he was sponsoring. The old man’s in to plants, and I needed the money, whatever. That was about, what, two years total. Obviously, Opelucid declared me a deserter. I’ve been a vander ever since just wandering the Trident.”
“You were a gardener?”

He looked at her funny. “Seriously, is that what stood out to you the most just now? For your information, I have a pretty green thumb.”

The idea of Benga fussing over flowers was so ridiculous to her that Iris couldn’t help but laugh a little. The couple of drinks she’d had helped, and she wiped her eyes. His fingers closed in her hair, an insistent tug, and Iris tried her best to pull herself together.

“Sorry, funny mental image,” she said.

He said nothing, and Iris cleared her throat as the last of her giggles died down. He was looking at her intently and rubbing thick strands of her hair between his fingers. The sensation was pleasant and soporific, and her eyelids drooped as she leaned into his touch without really thinking about it.

“You really do look good in a smile,” he said softly.

He slowly moved his searching fingers from her ponytail to her long bangs and traced her temple. His fingers were pleasingly rough to the touch as they traced the line of her cheekbone, then her jaw. Out of the corner of her eye, Iris could see the endless black ocean, oppressive and omnipresent, all around them, asphyxiating, but she could not be bothered to focus on it as she concentrated, hyper-aware in her alcohol-induced lethargy, on the feel of his fingers delicately tracing her jawline.

“You’re not alone, either, you know,” she said.

Benga searched her eyes for something, no longer joking and no longer that sad and lonely young man he’d let her glimpse if only briefly when he told her about Alder. She was once again reminded of falling fire, stars crashing to the earth and plunging into the dark ocean, a lonely power that was as beautiful as it was devastating, meteoric. And all she could do was wonder how she had arrived here, alone together with a man she’d met by chance who had already shaken the foundations of everything she once thought to be true and precious.

Cottonee suddenly jumped, spooked by something, and not a moment later footsteps echoed on the metal grating fast approaching. Iris immediately pulled away and got to her feet to smooth out the skirt of her dress. It was Nymo and one of his engineers who had arrived, apparently having had the same idea as Iris and Benga toting a bottle of something and a silver cigar case. When they saw Iris and Benga, Nymo broke out into a wide smile and spread his arms.

“Ah, my little flying lizards! It is being good to look at you both!” Nymo bellowed in his trademark broken common tongue.

“Captain,” Iris greeted politely. “I was just heading to bed.”

“Oh no,” Nymo said, slumping a little as he and his engineer drew up to the sofa. “Iris Lady, the night is young.”

“The night’s always young at the bottom of the sea where it’s pitch black,” Benga quipped.

Nymo thought this was downright hilarious and guffawed loudly. “Is true! Night is always young in the deep, this is a good one!”

“Well, I’ll be going then,” Iris said. “Goodnight,” she said to Benga.

He watched her but said nothing.
“Is a shame,” Nymo lamented. “Iris Lady, I am missing your beautiful face already.”

Iris smirked. “And I yours, Captain.” She nodded at the engineer politely and bade them both goodnight. “I’ll see you tomorrow when we surface.”

Cottonee whistled and fluttered through the air to land in her arms.

“Benga, you will stay and, how do you say? With the shit?” Nymo said.

“Shoot the shit?” Benga said. “If my captain commands it.”

Nymo laughed again. “You see, Ernesto? He is making funny! I have told you.”

“Yes, Captain,” Ernesto the engineer agreed.

Iris did not stick around to hear the rest of their conversation as they broke out the cigars and the tequila. She quietly headed back to her room, pausing only to look back as Nymo pulled up a chair across the table and began pouring out fingers of tequila. He had a pleasant laugh, deep and throaty, and Iris remembered another laugh from so many years ago that had stayed with her in her darkest times, a reminder of what she was fighting for. Was it awful to want to hold onto the good while trying to accept the bad? She wondered as Benga made some crass toast that rhymed, delighting Nymo and Ernesto as they drank merrily.

Maybe holding on was the only thing that kept her going, fighting for what she knew in her bones was the right path. Maybe it was what had kept Benga going, too, all those years spent alone, wandering, searching for something his family and his home could not provide.

He caught her lingering and held her gaze while the others were busy refilling glasses and talking, and she smiled, unguarded, just a few precious moments that connected them, gone in an instant. She could feel his eyes on her back as she turned the corner and headed back to her room.
Yancy

It was a beautiful late summer day, blue skies and bright flowers and vibrant music. Nimbasan girls in pastel dresses pulled ribbons around a tall pole in a dancing game while starry-eyed boys chased them, laughing. The garden outside the Gym had been rebuilt and replanted, and now it flourished with vivid greens and blues and yellows and pinks in celebration. A white-painted pagoda had been set up and adorned with ribbons and picked flowers. The guests stood and watched, smiling and whispering about how beautiful Elesa looked in her lace gown, wishing their own weddings could one day be as gorgeous as hers.

But Yancy and Gozen watched the ceremony without smiling. Dressed as ever in her armor and weaponry, Yancy was one of the few faces present who looked on in dour solemnity as the officiator recited the covenants of marriage to Elesa and Drayden in his sandpaper drawl.

“This is insane,” Gozen whispered to her from their spot on the perimeter of the audience. “She can’t go through with this.”

“I know, but she is,” Yancy whispered back. “There’s nothing we can do.”

“I now pronounce you husband and wife,” the officiator announced. “You may kiss the bride.”

Yancy gritted her teeth as Drayden took Elesa’s delicate hand in his and pecked her chastely on the lips. The guests clapped for them, so drunk on the ostentatious show and the beautiful day and Elesa’s stunning dress to notice much else. Drayden walked Elesa down the aisle on his arm, stolid and severe like he’d been constipated most of his adult life. But Yancy was not laughing even as her bitter thoughts wandered. This was real, and there was no going back now.

Drayden’s Dragon Riders were also among the cheering guests. Only Caelith, Drayden’s prickly right hand, appeared just as troubled as Yancy felt. Caelith stared at Drayden and Elesa as they waved to the guests and smiled politely, her frown a deep crag on her veiny face and her moribund eyes like two burned charcoal pits, unblinking. Yancy drew no comfort from her unsympathetic reaction to the nuptials.

Lively music and dancing characterized the reception that followed, and the many guests enjoyed the rare festivities to the fullest extent. The more they sang and danced and drank, the worse Yancy’s stomach twisted, threatening to empty into her throat in front of everyone. She remained on duty and turned down any offers of champagne from the Gym staff tending to the guests. Her eyes were ever on Elesa, her Gym Leader and mistress, her childhood friend, and the way she carried on smiling and laughing and lightly clutching Drayden’s offered arm. She spoke to the guests, wealthy citizens and politicians and businesspeople, all flattery and poise and grace, while Drayden remained politely standoffish unless prompted, letting Elesa do the talking. They made a formidable pair, Yancy thought to herself. Her stomach rumbled at the thought and threatened to wretch, and she grabbed a seltzer water from a passing server. Gozen watched her with visible concern as she downed the bubbly drink, hoping the nausea would pass without incident.

“Get it together, Yancy,” Gozen hissed.

Yancy nodded numbly, hot and sticky in her studded leather under the bright sun, the weight of her naginata heavy on her shoulders. She wished she could release Emolga and Mienshao, anything to feel some semblance of familiarity, of normalcy, in this abnormal new reality slowly sinking in.

But the nausea lingered all day in the pit of her stomach like a growing rash, and by the evening
feast in honor of the newlyweds and, more importantly, the sealed blood alliance between Nimbasa and Opelucid, Yancy could not stomach her dinner and opted for a walk outside.

“Where’re you going?” Gozen said. “I know this is all crazy, but this is probably the best meal we’ll eat for the rest of our lives.”

Yancy didn’t have the energy to banter and just nodded. “I just need some air. I’ll be back in a bit.”

Gozen could not go with her. One of them always had to stay by Elesa’s side when she was in the presence of anyone other than her Gym trainers. Right now, Yancy was grateful for the chance to escape the oppressive atmosphere of the Gym-turned-feasting hall and get outside. The night was dark, but the stars sparkled above, and the amusement park lights dazzled. The Rondez-View Ferris Wheel spun lazily, floating lights from another world, somewhere far away from here, a dream. Yancy leaned back against a tree trunk in the garden and gazed longingly at the many lights.

Other guests were enjoying the garden, though most still feasted inside. Yancy took a deep breath and began to traverse the grounds. She passed by a few of her fellow Rain Warriors, who nodded silently at her passage, as well as several members of the Nimbasa military on duty tonight. With so many of Nimbasa’s elite gathered under one roof, security was tighter than it usually was day to day. But no one hassled Yancy as she walked, recognizing her by appearance.

She got farther out, near where the Blue River passed by the southermost reaches of the Gym lands to the west and around to empty out into the sea to the east. There was no path back here and no people. No one ever came out here, least of all at night. It was too dark to see now, but she knew that far to the east lay the Reversal Mountains across the sea in the upper East Tine. Beyond them would be places like Lacunosa, a mountain town that was once a prosperous city in the Golden Age of Unova three thousand years ago. There was Undella farther east on the coast at the southern edge of Adria, the Ancient Land, a place the stories said had once belonged to the sea but rose at the command of a sea god to make a place for the Syreni to live, who had once belonged to the sea themselves. And north, farther north than even Opelucid, lay Humilau City, the heart of Adria.

Yancy had never been outside of Nimbasa, though, and in the darkness of this night she could not even see the great purple mountains that separated her from these wondrous lands. Did they even exist? Sometimes she wondered if there was nothing beyond Nimbasa, with the labyrinthine Lostlorn Forest to the north and the sere Relic Desert to the south, both seemingly endless in their expanse. Yancy stood at the edge of a bend in the Blue River, where it snaked around the Gym lands and curved slightly north toward the amusement park. Just a half mile due east, she could see the dark waters of the narrow sea separating Nimbasa from the upper East Tine far in the distance. Like standing on the edge of the world, she wondered if there was even anything there through the darkness, if it was all an illusion, and if she wandered too close, would she fall off the edge? Was this all there was in all the world, all there would ever be?

Would Drayden change all that?

Away from all the people, Yancy gave in to her earlier longing for something familiar and released Emolga. The little Electric rodent squeaked and crawled to sit upon her head and grasped her side ponytail to help balance. In the darkness, it would be able to see little better than Yancy, but Emolga’s natural glow cast a wan, warm halo of light around them both that warded off the darkness of the night. Distantly, Yancy heard the sounds of the festivities at the Gym and wondered if it was really okay for her to have left. Gozen was there alone among them, that wasn’t fair. Yancy hugged herself and repressed a shiver.

“Not in the mood to celebrate?”
Yancy whirled at the voice so close to her, and Emolga jumped on her head, equally startled. She drew a short dagger on instinct and slashed with it, but she caught only the air. Her would-be assailant pulled back just in time to avoid her deadly swipe.

“Marshal?” Yancy said, breathing through the spike of adrenaline that banished the queasiness she’d been nursing for hours. “What’re you doing out here?” She paused as she got a look at him through the gloom, only the stars and Emolga’s soft glow aiding her sight. “Why’re you dressed like that?”

Marshal’s traveling clothes were well-worn and sturdy, and his pack was large enough for an extended camping trip in the wilderness. He carried only a simple hunting knife at his hip and no other weapons. Other than his fists, that is. Bellators did not need much else. His Medicham stood next to him, short and emaciated and glowing with a faint magenta light. The Psychic had masked Marshal’s presence completely, even from the usually vigilant Emolga.

“Is this an interrogation?” he asked, eyeing the knife.

Yancy sheathed her knife, though she knew it was an empty gesture. If Marshal wanted to subdue her, he could do it. She might be able to rough him up a bit, but she was no Bellatrix. She was just Yancy.

“No, sorry, you startled me,” Yancy said. “You didn’t answer my question, by the way.”

“Ah, right. I’m leaving Nimbasa. For good.”

Yancy gaped openly. “Wha... What? What do you mean ‘for good’? We’re in the middle of a wedding!”

“And tomorrow you’ll be in the middle of something else entirely,” Marshal said. “I don’t want to be anywhere near it.”

Emolga squeaked, sensing Yancy’s distress. Medicham stared at the tiny flying squirrel, unblinking as though it was hollow inside. Yancy was too surprised to be creeped out.

“What about me?” she said. “I mean, the Rain Warriors. You’re in the middle of training us.”

“I’ve spent a year with you, and I know you and the others will be fine. You’ve lasted this long on your own without me.” He took a few steps closer, but remained out of arm’s reach. “I saw you out here, and I wanted to say goodbye.”

“But Gozen, and the others. You weren’t at the ceremony today.” Her anger was building, and her fists shook. Emolga chittered restlessly on her head. “What am I supposed to do? Make excuses for you? What am I supposed to tell them? What am I supposed to tell Elesa?”

Marshal was unmoved and unabashed, and his lack of reaction only fueled Yancy’s rising ire. “Tell them I left. I was always just passing through, you know that.”

A million and one thoughts raced through Yancy’s mind at the speed of light. He was leaving? Just like that? In the middle of the night like a bandit? Why? But as soon as she paused to consider this, she remembered the strange and admittedly terrifying confrontation between Marshal and Drayden just days ago. She had been sure they would kill each other at the time.

“This is about Drayden,” she said numbly.

Marshal studied her for a moment. “It’s bigger than Drayden, Yancy. You know it, too.”
That awful seasick feeling in her gut all day had subsided thanks to the rush of the moment, but Yancy laid a hand over her stomach anyway. Emolga crawled down to her shoulder and butted her cheek, squeaking for attention amidst the tense atmosphere. Of course this was bigger than Drayden. It was bigger than anything she’d ever come up against, she knew it in her gut.

Against?

That was a strange way to think of it. They were all on the same side now, the marriage ensured it. Elesa would ensure it. And yet, this feeling...

Marshal took her hesitation for agreement. “If you were smart, you’d get the hell outta here, too,” he said. “Drayden and Elesa’ll only bring ruin to this place.”

Any hesitation Yancy had been feeling evaporated forcefully, and she glared at Marshal. “Elesa knows what she’s doing.”

“She’s one woman.”

“She’s Nimbasa.”

Marshal shook his head like he was so tired of this conversation already. “What did I tell you about Tamers? Elesa’s strong, but she has the same problem all of us do. Until we learn our lesson the hard way.” He hoisted his pack higher on his shoulders, and Yancy marveled at how he could carry such an enormous load all by himself. “You’re all right, Yancy. Which is why I won’t lie to you. There’s a war coming, and in war no one wins. Take care of yourself.”

Marshal started to retreat, and Yancy realized this was really the end, he was really leaving, and there was nothing she could do to stop him. “Marshal,” she called out, hating the hitch in her voice that betrayed her compounding distress after this wearisome day.

He cast her a look over his shoulder. “Maybe we’ll meet again someday,” he said, smiling just a little like he almost never did. “I’ll look forward to it.”

She had no words for him, no way to stop him. He could not be stopped. He was a force of nature, like all Tamers, these people who were in many ways hardly people at all, but beyond. Beyond possible, beyond imaginable. Medicham’s magenta glow intensified, and suddenly both Marshal and his number one Fighter vanished from sight. Emolga squeaked anxiously and jumped from Yancy’s shoulder, gliding after them, but it landed amidst the tall grass. Marshal and Medicham were gone.

Alone again in the darkness at the edge of the world with only the floating carnival lights to orient her, Yancy hugged herself and tried to swallow the inexplicable sense of dread building in her bones. Emolga scampered back to her and squeaked forlornly. It did not understand where Marshal had disappeared to. She kneeled down and scooped the little Pokémon up in her hands and held it close to her chest.

“It’s okay, Emolga,” Yancy whispered to her Pokémon. “It’ll all be okay. Elesa knows what she’s doing. I trust her.”

Marshal had a personal grudge against Titans. His reaction to Drayden had been colored by past prejudice and a bloody history. It had nothing to do with Yancy, nothing to do with Nimbasa. She might not trust Drayden fully, but she trusted Elesa with her life and with the welfare of this great city. Elesa was a powerful Fulmen, the latest in a long line of them stretching back three thousand years. History and blood were on her side, and Nimbasa would rise with her.
“Most Tamers... We only think about what we can do now. We don't think about everything else because we think we don't have to. We have our abilities for that. But abilities aren't always enough.”

Marshal’s words reverberated in Yancy’s memory and coiled in the pit of her stomach like a venomous snake poised to strike, and she felt nauseous all over again now that the adrenaline had worn off.

 Abilities aren’t always enough.

Well, Drayden was a Tamer, too. He was no different from Elesa. And yet, Yancy could not forget that feeling of abject horror, almost mystical in its scale, at the sight of Drayden’s Salamence, a beast that belonged in a myth rather than in the Nimbasa Gym gardens. Were they truly the same?

“I trust Elesa,” Yancy repeated her mantra. She stroked Emolga’s black fur, ignoring the slight sting of static electricity. “She’ll protect Nimbasa. That’s why she did this.”

Drayden would have no choice but to honor the marriage alliance. Elesa knew what she was doing. Yancy reassured herself of this as she walked back toward the Gym and the festivities therein. The feast was still going strong, but a small band had begun playing music and people were dancing more than eating. The night was winding down, and soon the bride and groom would take their leave for the evening.

*She can control him,* Yancy told herself as she reentered the Gym with Emolga clutched to her chest and her eyes found Gozen’s. Elesa sat at the head of the room with Drayden by her side. She was bent over talking to someone, her delicate hands clasped around theirs and talking animatedly in that chameleon way she had, molding to suit her newest target. And Drayden sat straight-backed and tall, his wine hardly touched, with one hand resting absently at his hip where his five Pokéballs sat. The picture of calm and collected, controlled.

How do you control someone who has only ever known how to control others?

“Yancy!” Gozen called from a dais near where Elesa sat. She waved her over.

Yancy headed to rejoin Gozen and let Emolga climb onto her shoulder once more. She passed by many guests, both Nimbasan and a few of the Dragon Riders Drayden had brought with him. Among them sat Caelith, Drayden’s stony general who had been just as frightened as Yancy had been when Drayden and Marshal clashed. Caelith caught Yancy’s eye as she passed, just for a split second, but Yancy could not help the shiver that passed down her spine.

“Are you okay?” Gozen asked as Yancy took a seat and set Emolga down in between them to nibble at a plate of food Gozen had abandoned. “You look spooked.”

Caelith had gone back to her meal. While her fellow Dragon Riders celebrated around her, she remained mostly quiet. No one addressed her. Yancy forced herself to look away, an inexplicable feeling of shame washing over her at the sight, like she’d seen something she shouldn’t have.

“I’m fine. What’d I miss?”

Gozen frowned. “Just booze and food.”

They both let their gazes drift to Elesa, who had stood and rested a hand on Drayden’s arm like she might topple over if it wasn’t for him. An act, one Yancy recognized. Tonight, Elesa was the demure maiden, the perfect hostess. She was whatever she needed to be to get the job done. Who she would be behind closed doors with Drayden remained to be seen. But Yancy had faith.
“Well,” Gozen said. “Looks like we’re done for the night.”

“Yeah,” Yancy said. “Elesa’ll be okay.”

Gozen squeezed her hand, but the gesture felt hollow and clammy. Yancy looked up again, but Elesa and Drayden were already gone.

The next couple days dragged on slowly with little to do, and yet Yancy felt restless, like the lassitude was merely the calm before a terrible storm. She prowled the Gym halls with Gozen or with her Pokémon, and her footsteps echoed against the white painted walls, lonely. Elesa had sequestered herself with Drayden and Caelith to discuss the impending invasion of Castelia that Nimbasa and Opelucid would pursue together thanks to the newly fortified alliance. Elesa’s military general, a young man named Curtis who had skyrocketed through the ranks despite his relative youth, and the leader of the Rain Warriors, a middle-aged woman called Nikola who Yancy feared as much as she respected, accompanied Elesa in her meetings to plan the invasion. Yancy and Gozen were not welcome at these meetings, having neither the rank nor the experience necessary to contribute.

Thus, Yancy only saw Elesa sparingly, usually in the evenings, and often accompanied by Drayden. They did not share a room since their wedding night. Drayden returned to his room at the inn nearby, while Elesa occupied her usual quarters. But she was exhausted after the long hours of plotting and planning, and often she would dismiss Yancy and Gozen in favor of resting. It didn’t stop Yancy and Gozen from keeping close and engaging Elesa whenever they could. She was their only concern, their sole duty as Rain Warriors tasked with protecting the Gym Leader.

It was on the second day of the secret war talks that Yancy noticed a man hanging around. She’d seen plenty of Drayden’s Dragon Riders around the Gym since they’d arrived, and more of Drayden’s infantry forces, the Ridder Knights, had arrived from the north in anticipation of the coming battle. But this particular Ridder Knight seemed to pop up more often, and always close by. He was nothing to write home about, just a regular Titan skuff, blond and blue-eyed like so many others, dressed up in boiled leather and a sword, standard issue for Opelucid’s Ridder Knights. But the fact that Yancy noticed him made her worry. Was he following her? Why? Had Drayden told him to keep an eye on her? Surely he didn’t think Yancy would ever turn against Elesa. She tried to ignore the crawling sensation on the back of her neck whenever she caught a glimpse of her new shadow at dinner, on a walk to town in the mornings, during the precious little downtime with Elesa. He seemed to be there all the time, though he never approached Yancy or made himself known. And the one time she tried to approach him, he disappeared among the people and slipped out of sight. Gozen, of course, thought she was being a little paranoid.

“You’re being a little paranoid,” Gozen said in her usual monotone deadpan as she towel-dried her long, blue hair after a shower.

“You haven’t noticed anybody tailing you?” Yancy pressed. “Really?”

“I noticed there’s a lot more of those Ridder Knights hanging around. But it’s not like they have anywhere else to be until His Royal Highness calls one of them to wipe his ass for him.”

Yancy rolled her eyes as she leaned against the wall and watched Gozen finger comb her hair to work out the bigger tangles.

“Maybe you’re just craving some attention. Elesa’s been pretty tied up, and I guess my company’s
not enough these days,” Gozen said.

“Of course it is,” Yancy said. “And I’m not craving anything. Except maybe for all this to be a bad
dream and I’ll wake up any minute now...”

Gozen stopped what she was doing and paused to study her sister Rain Warrior. Her blue hair,
darkened and damp, dripped water on the tile of their shared bathroom at the Gym, and she
brandished her comb at Yancy. “Stop that. I don’t like it any more than you do, but this is the new
normal. We have to get used to it. And above all, we have to have Elesa’s back. So quit bitching.
That’s my job.”

“I wasn’t bitching,” Yancy defended, but she winced, knowing her words fell upon deaf ears.
“Maybe a little. But Gozen, come on, you can’t seriously stand there and be okay with all of this,
right?”

Gozen returned her attention to the small mirror and resumed her furious detangling. “It doesn’t
matter what I think, or what any of us thinks. Elesa made her choice, and we just have to trust her
with it.” She paused and eyed Yancy askance. “Unless you mean you don’t trust her?”

“Of course I trust her.” Yancy thought of Marshal, how she’d said the same thing to him when he
left the other night. “I just... I don’t know, I’m just worried. She’s a queen now, I guess...”

Gozen continued to work through the knots in her long hair. “Frowning doesn’t suit you. You’re
making me look bad.”

Yancy cracked a smile. “I’m sorry, I guess I do sound kinda paranoid.”

“Kinda.”

Yancy bit her lip and stared at her feet.

“Hey. I get it, you know. This is all a little fucked up.” Gozen was frowning deeply at her
reflection as she struggled with a particularly pesky tangle. “But all we can do is make sure Elesa’s
safe. The rest is up to her. She’s the Gym Leader. Er, Queen, I guess.”

“It’s the crown that forges the man into a monster.”

Yancy hugged herself as Drayden’s cold warning to Marshal returned to her. *Elesa’s not a monster.
She could never be.*

The Elesa Yancy knew was many things, but above all she was a beloved friend. And like she’d
told Marshal on the night of his departure, Yancy trusted Elesa implicitly.

“Goddamnit, this is taking way longer than I thought,” Gozen said. “Yancy, you gotta go to the
meeting without me.”

“What? No way! I went last time without you, too,” Yancy protested, her muddled thoughts
forgotten.

Gozen was unfazed. “Yeah, and you gotta go this time, too. I can’t go like this. It’s just a check-in
meeting, anyway, no big deal. Besides, you have to tell Nikola and the others about Marshal
leaving.”

Yancy made an exasperated sound in the back of her throat and reluctantly pushed off the wall.
“Fine, but you’re going to the next *three* by yourself, got it?”
“Uh-huh, whatever.”

“And don’t drink all the wine without me like you did last time.”

“Just go already, you’ll be late.”

Grumbling, Yancy left Gozen to finish cleaning herself up and headed toward the city center. The meeting would not be long, just a routine debrief with a few other Rain Warriors to exchange progress reports and divulge any pertinent information or new developments, if any. They were a large group tasked with keeping Nimbasa safe, and communication was their best weapon against bandits or other unsavory types who might try to cause trouble.

After the meeting, during which Nikola was not surprised to hear about Marshal’s departure even if it was somewhat disappointing and abrupt, Yancy did not want to return to the Gym right away. All was quiet on the southern and northern borders, and there was no sign of her alleged tail. Perhaps he knew better than to try to follow her to a Rain Warriors meeting. Or maybe she really was just being paranoid.

It was just another summer night in Nimbasa City. The sun had set and the moon had risen. The amusement park lights sparkled to life, lighting up the inky darkness like some floating parade. Emolga, who had accompanied Yancy on the walk back and rode on her head, squeaked happily at the sight of the pretty lights in the distance. Like her, the Electric rodent liked them, too.

“A quick detour won’t make a difference,” Yancy reasoned as she deviated from the path and walked around the southern edge of the Gym toward the river. It wasn’t as if Elesa would be freed up from her long war planning meetings yet, anyway, so there would be little to do back at the Gym.

Young military men and women had begun to gather in Nimbasa proper from the outlying villages and farms. Their training and drills normally took place in the hinterlands, but with the upcoming invasion on the horizon, Elesa had summoned the infantry forces to the city to be ready to march. It felt as though the population had tripled overnight with all the fresh faces milling down the streets and jogging around the city’s outskirts where the military barracks were located, now overflowing with soldiers brought in from the suburbs.

But the stretch of abandoned, grassy fields along the Blue River to the south of the Gym remained empty and dark, as always, and it was there that Yancy ventured for a few moments of peace to think and admire the carnival lights. The air out here was warm and dry, courtesy of the arid desert farther south across the river, and the sounds of rushing water had a soothing and soporific effect on Yancy as she walked along the water’s edge. It would be freezing if she dipped her toe in, she thought. She would know, having waded in it almost every day since Marshal’s endurance exercise.

All of a sudden, Emolga dug its tiny claws into Yancy’s scalp and sparked. Yancy jerked and jumped as the static electrified her limbs and broke her out of her nostalgic daze. Blinking the stars from her eyes and ducking instinctively, Yancy snatched Emolga from her head.

“Emolga, what was that?” she hissed.

But the little rodent was too agitated and squirmed out of her grip. It scrambled back up her arm to her shoulder and chittered, spooked. Yancy knew better than to question her Pokémon’s instincts, so she took a moment to calm down and listen for whatever had alarmed Emolga. Up ahead, over the sound of rushing water near the place she liked to go to admire the carnival lights, she heard voices. Someone was out here in the dark, way out past the Gym and civilization, away from the
many people that filled Nimbasa. They carried no lights.

Swallowing hard and drawing her dagger, Yancy crept forward light as a feather, letting the long grass hide her figure and cushion her steps to minimize the noise. Emolga twitched on her shoulder, its cheeks sparking in anticipation. When she was close enough to make out the voices, Yancy froze in her spot.

*I know that voice.*

“...ready to fly any time. And the Ridder Knights have another garrison scheduled to arrive tomorrow,”

*Caelith,* Yancy thought. She squinted through the darkness and could just make out Caelith’s silhouette. She could picture the stringy, white hair and the engorged, red veins that covered her face like leeches fat with blood. That woman troubled her deeply. Not because of her physical deformations, but because of how they seemed to empower her. Caelith was not alone.

“And I can send them back at any time,” came Drayden’s cold baritone. He sounded angry, as angry as a man whom Yancy almost seriously believed had been carved of marble rather than born to a human woman could sound. “A march across the Relic Desert is a madness few will indulge in. I’m no madman.”

Drayden stood next to Caelith, and two more men Yancy vaguely recognized as some of the Dragon Riders that had first appeared with Drayden flanked them. They scanned the surrounding area searching for something—probably eavesdroppers like Yancy, but she stayed low to the ground, and the grass was tall enough to hide her small frame. They had Pokémon, a stout Shelgon Yancy almost mistook for a large boulder until it lurched and pawed the ground, and a sleek Altaria that stood a head taller than Drayden himself and was busy cleaning its magnificent snowy wings.

The man Drayden had addressed was not familiar to Yancy at all. He was tall but slender, wiry, like he was used to staying indoors under artificial light instead of natural. His short blond hair was slicked back, and his rimless glasses flashed bright white when he tilted his head and caught the moonlight. He was dressed in street clothes, but he had the air of a man who took his time with his looks and had cultivated a refined taste. Rich, educated, foreign. His accent sounded vaguely eastern, possibly from Striaton or Nacrene, Yancy could not be sure.

“No, of course not,” the classy man said. “You’re a man of vision and planning. Otherwise, you wouldn’t have agreed to meet with me in person this time.” He held out his hand in invitation. “We can help each other.”

“I’ve never known Team Plasma to help anyone other than themselves. Tell me, Colress. Why should your Neo Team Plasma be any different?” Drayden said.

*Team Plasma?* Yancy knew the name as well as anyone. They had recruited in Nimbasa the same as they had all over the Trident, but Elesa had made it clear that they were not welcome here after it came to light that Castelia was sympathetic to their cause and had financed a number of the group’s missions over the years. Yancy had heard that their leader, the mysterious man known only as N, had tragically died in a terrible storm far to the north in Vertress City. Now, the group had a new leader, Ghetsis, and it was virtually undisputed that Neo Team Plasma was either solely responsible for or at least had a hand in the political crises plaguing the lower East Tine. Gym Leader Lenora’s assassination was news that was not well met. Despite alliances or enmity, the killing of a Gym Leader was not to be taken lightly.
The man called Colress chuckled, as if he hadn’t heard the chilling threat underlying Drayden’s words that seemed to ooze from him like a miasma. “Because like I said, we can help each other. Castelia’s a big place, you know. Attack a hive from all sides, and even a swarm of bees will have nothing to sting but each other.”

“Speak plainly,” Caelith snapped. “We have no time for your riddles.”

“It’s simple, really,” Colress said, unfazed. “Five days from now, Castelia’s southern coast will welcome a host of our ships out of Nacrene. While Burgh and his busy bees scramble to evacuate the southern districts and fend off our navy, their northern border will be a sitting Psyduck.”

“That still leaves me the problem of crossing the Relic Desert,” Drayden said. “Elesa won’t send her soldiers on a death march to a losing battle while my men remain safely here. And there’s the fact that I don’t trust you or that cannibal you speak for. If Ghetsis wants to deal with me, he should come to me himself. Unless, of course, the years have taken their toll.”

If Colress was offended by Drayden’s thinly veiled slights, he hid it well. He was much better at dealing with Drayden than Marshal had been, if nothing else. Yancy had no idea what Drayden was talking about, but she felt her heart race at the mention of Elesa.

“Lord Ghetsis is a very busy man, you understand,” Colress said smoothly, oily, like a snake. “But I assure you, I speak with his voice when I say that Team Plasma will be in Castelia waiting when you arrive. As for crossing the Relic Desert, well…” He glanced at Altaria, who had finished cleaning itself and was now shifting its weight and staring, unblinking, at a spot over its Dragon Rider’s head, like it could see into another dimension. “I’ve heard your Dragon Riders are quite reliable. However, I would like your, ah, assurance that your blushing bride will cooperate. Fulmen have such volatile tempers, as they say.”

“I’ll handle Elesa,” Drayden said.

Yancy balled her fists hard enough to puncture the skin with her nails. Emolga nuzzled her neck, scared of Altaria and Shelgon not far away. He’d handle Elesa? What did that mean? Yancy suddenly felt sick to her stomach.

“Excellent,” Colress said cheerfully. “Then I’ll look forward to seeing you both in Castelia City in a five days’ time. I’m sure it’ll be quite the show to see.”

“I can understand the enemy of my enemy play,” Drayden said. “But I have to say, I’m still surprised Ghetsis reached out like this. I wonder, has he gone three-hundred years never knowing what they say about Titans?”

“On the contrary, I would say three-hundred years on this earth have taught my lord the only truth that has ever been.”

Caelith bare her teeth. “And what’s that?”

Colress gestured with a hand at the air, like it was obvious. “That trust is just another way to control others. What better way to build trust than through mutually assured destruction?”

Caelith did not like his answer, and she advanced, a Pokéball in hand, with blood in her eyes. Colress stumbled back, startled, but Drayden yanked her back roughly by the shoulder. She whisked and bared her teeth at him like an animal, unafraid of him, and Yancy bit her tongue hard to keep from whimpering instinctively. He subdued her with a single look, bloodless, but she defiantly stood her ground and did not return to his side.
“Destruction?” Drayden addressed Colress in that venomous whisper like the thunder that signaled an oncoming tempest. “You don’t yet know the meaning of the word.” He let Caelith go, and Colress seemed to relax a little. “But you will,” Drayden continued. “I am not an enemy you want.”

“I believe you,” Colress said, voice shaking just a little. He gathered what was left of his dignity and smoothed out his slacks. “So, we have a deal, then?”

Drayden said nothing. Instead, he turned to leave and his Dragon Rider guards followed. Caelith was the last to go, much to Colress’s chagrin, but she, too, left without another word.

“Pleasure doing business with you,” Colress muttered to himself. He slumped and fumbled with something in his pocket—a X-Transceiver. He spoke into the small radio, requesting a pick-up, and headed in the opposite direction toward the Blue River, away from Nimbasa.

Yancy did not move. She hardly even breathed as she huddled in the grass and willed herself to be still and count, something mundane to keep her heart from bursting out of her chest. Emolga squeaked feebly as it quaked among her hair, Altaria’s scent still fresh in its little nose. Yancy must have waited out there for at least a half hour before she deemed it safe to rise. She was shivering, her clothes soaked with dew and the night air chilly after sitting dormant for so long. Emolga chittered loudly, anxious.

Her feet were moving before she could think straight, and they carried her back to the Gym through a back way she knew that was not visible from the street or the inn Drayden and Caelith were staying at. Had they seen her? No, she didn’t think so. If they had, she’d probably be dead right now.

Oh my god, what’s going on?

Her thoughts muddled together in a jumbled mess as she climbed the stairs to the living quarters. She bypassed her own room and went straight to Elesa’s chambers and banged on the door.

“Lady Elesa,” she said, trying to keep her voice down and calm and not really succeeding. “Please, it’s urgent. Open up.”

Elesa opened the door after a moment. She was dressed in her day clothes, as though she’d only just retired after the long day, and looked a bit haggard. The icy frown on her face spelled out her irritation at being disturbed right now, but for Yancy she would make some time. Yancy pushed through the door before Elesa could change her mind, uncaring if her actions further agitated Elesa. This was too important.

Elesa closed the door behind them and marched across the room to stand directly in front of Yancy. She was a good few inches taller than Yancy, and right now it showed in the most belittling way possible. Yancy had to physically force herself not to shrink away under that piercing glare.

“What is it?” she said, the careful second or two of thoughtful pause before speaking in public gone now that it was just the two of them, just the trusted inner circle.

Yancy began to tell Elesa everything she’d just overheard. It came out a jumbled mess, more word vomit than coherent sentences. Elesa said nothing and listened, but her glare intensified as Yancy stumbled along, and her shoulders grew stiff.

“Team Plasma,” Elesa said when Yancy had finished.

Yancy nodded. “Yes, but that’s beside the point. Drayden talked like he was in charge, like he
never meant to go through with this alliance the right way.”

“Drayden is my husband. The laws of this land say husband and wife are equal and retain control over their individual assets even in matrimony. That was the entire point of this, or did you forget? With this marriage, Drayden is bound to me, to Nimbasa. He cannot do anything contrary to my interests.”

“And I’m telling you, he practically told that Colress person he didn’t care about any of that!”

Elesa’s beautiful dark eyes flashed with emotion, and Yancy took an involuntary step back. She knew that look. “That’s enough, Yancy. I love you dearly, you know that. But I will not be questioned about my decisions for Nimbasa, especially not by you. I am the Gym Leader. I will protect Nimbasa from all threats, foreign and domestic. And I will not be doubted by one of the few people in this world I actually trust.”

“Then trust me when I tell you something is really, really wrong! Please, Elesa, I have a really bad feeling about this,” Yancy pleaded with her.

Elesa had heard enough. She turned on her heel and retreated to the living area, where a hot cup of tea was steaming on the table. Yancy’s Emolga squeaked nervously, sensing Elesa’s dour mood. Even Yancy thought she could feel the air in the room popping with tension—or was it static electricity? Emolga began to spark on her shoulder, and Yancy’s hair began to frizz.

“Drayden has no reason to betray me,” Elesa said. “He cannot move on Castelia without my help, just as I cannot move without his help. You were against this marriage from the beginning, and I understand why. But it’s done, and I expect you to fall in line.” She shot Yancy a glance over her shoulder. “Know your place. I am the Gym Leader. I can handle Drayden.”

Yancy’s heart sank. “That’s exactly what he told Colress about you.”

Elesa sipped her tea. “No one controls me but me. In two days’ time, we march on Castelia. That’s the last I’ll hear of it, Yancy. Leave me.”

Yancy felt tears of frustration and betrayal threatening to fall, and she turned so that Elesa would not see them. “Yes, my lady.”

She all but ran out of the room, nearly dropping poor Emolga as she threw the door open, and retreated to her room, shaking. Gozen saw her like that, white as a sheet, and tried to ask what was wrong, but Yancy set down Emolga on the couch and locked herself in the bathroom. The sound of water plipped on the porcelain sink as she stared at her reflection in the mirror. Her tears were fat and hot, her face red with shame and anger, and she hardly recognized herself.

“Yancy, what’s the matter? Was the meeting that bad? Don’t tell me Nikola cried when she heard that emo meathead left,” Gozen said through the door.

“I’m fine,” Yancy said quickly. “Just a little nauseous. I think I’m coming down with something.”

“Oh, in that case, stay in your room. I don’t want to catch whatever you’ve got.”

Yancy found no joy in Gozen’s typically sardonic humor, and she said nothing.

“Okay, well, goodnight,” Gozen said a little more gently.

Yancy listened as Gozen retreated back to her room, and then turned on the shower. She stripped and stepped under the blasting water, biting her lip at the cold and forcing herself to begin
counting. Soon, her tears blended in with the water, and there was no telling them apart. She stayed under the spigot, flaying the night from her skin, until she was numb and she lost count, the pain and discomfort a distant memory.

The next morning, Yancy woke feeling a little under the weather. The freezing shower probably had not helped, but Gozen took pity on her after last night and brought her a hot breakfast in bed. It helped, but Gozen’s efforts to cheer her up were better.

“I still can’t believe Marshal’s gone,” Gozen said as Yancy chewed on some oatmeal. “I thought that guy would be here pester us with his weird training techniques for the rest of our lives. I was half expecting the next one to be something like stick our heads in a Combee hive and see how long we can last. Every sting’s a measure of our Pure Pleb Pride, or some shit.”

Yancy laughed despite herself, and Gozen cracked a smile. “Oh come on, he wouldn’t do that. He’d make us try to cohabitate with them. Be one with the bees. Only then will you know true strength.”

Gozen snorted. “Yeah, that sounds like him. What did Nikola say when you told her at the meeting last night?”

Yancy shook her head. “She said it was a shame to lose his talent, but that the Rain Warriors needed no man to do our duty.”

“Ever the fearless leader. I bet Elesa was happy to see him go.”

Yancy set down her spoon and crossed her legs on the bed. “I haven’t actually told Elesa yet. I mean, I meant to, but things just... It was a weird night.”

Gozen frowned. “Oh. Well, whatever. It's not like Marshal was at the top of her radar. But we should tell her, anyway.”

“Yeah,” Yancy said, averting her gaze.

“You feeling up for work today?”

Yancy swung her legs over the edge of the bed. “Yeah, I’ll just clean up. Gimme ten minutes.”

Yancy dressed quickly and grabbed Mienshao’s and Emolga’s Pokéballs from the drawer in her nightstand. Then, she headed down to the Gym proper with Gozen, where they would report for duty to Elesa whenever she decided to emerge from her chambers. As it turned out, she was already in a meeting with Drayden and the rest of the new war council. Gozen had seen her briefly earlier in the morning while Yancy slept fitfully, but Elesa locked herself in the meeting room, and Gozen could not attend to her there. Now, they waited in the training arena with a few of the Gym trainers, and Yancy decided to make herself useful and train a bit with Mienshao.

Her workout with the graceful Fighter lasted well into the afternoon, and she broke for lunch with Gozen and a few of the Gym trainers. Her second shadow, the Ridder Knight from Opelucid, was also hanging around the Gym with a few others under the guise of guard duty. Yancy tried to ignore him, wishing he’d just go away. Emolga was ecstatic to be spending so much time among its fellow Electric-type Pokémon and had taken up residence on the back of a Mareep, nestled among its static wool and happy as a Clamperl. Halfway through lunch, Elesa and Drayden emerged from the meeting room, also intent on having some lunch before getting back to work.
When Elesa spotted Yancy and Gozen, she made a beeline for them.

“I’ll be making the rounds at the barracks this afternoon,” she said crisply without a hint of what had transpired last night. “Finish up your lunch, and we’ll be going.”

“Yes, my lady,” Yancy and Gozen said at the same time.

Drayden’s gaze lingered on them, and Yancy tried to ignore the uncomfortable tingling in the back of her neck like his gaze was a laser slowly roasting her flesh. Once they were all finished and heading outside to the fresh air, Yancy felt herself relax a little bit as she breathed deeply. If Elesa was not going to listen to her, then she would have to swallow her concerns and shape up. Elesa was her primary focus, and she could not afford to let her down no matter what.

Elesa walked lithely next to Drayden, her yellow skirt swishing at her heels and revealing flashes of leg with each step, her glossy black hair long and loose today. Drayden was in his usual slacks and suspenders, no jacket, shirt rolled up to the elbows. Looking at them from behind, Yancy had to admit that they complemented each other. Both had an air regality about them, something noble and old, but in the sense of the well-bred and cultured, not aged. Despite their significant age difference, Elesa seemed to shine next to the paler, snowier Drayden, and the rippling muscle moving under his fitted shirt spoke of physical strength and vitality that could keep up with Elesa’s advantage of youth. If she didn’t know them, she might have admired what could only have been true love keeping two vastly different people together.

Caelith walked on Drayden’s other side, stiff and frail, like every step she took was an exercise in remembering how to walk like a normal person. She was twitchy, shifty, like a Rattata eyeing the sky for a bird of prey that would swoop down to scoop her up for its next meal. Fat red veins pulsed on her hands and curled around her fingers like so many rings. Yancy discreetly averted her gaze, ashamed at the involuntary tendency to stare and afraid Caelith might catch her and smile at her discomfort.

Curtis and Nikola had gone on ahead to the barracks to prepare the soldiers and the Rain Warriors for the coming inspection and, Yancy assumed, orders. By the time Yancy’s group arrived at the barracks on the western outskirts of Nimbasa, Curtis had a number of uniformed soldiers lined up. Some were in sweaty trainers, having being pulled from exercises. Others were crisp and fresh in their new uniforms. General Curtis, a man not much older than Elesa herself, was also in uniform and spoke clearly and slowly about the design, how it would protect foot soldiers in the harsh desert environment that was sweltering during the day and could reach freezing temperatures at night. He told Drayden that there were enough for Opelucid’s Ridder Knights, who would be marching with the Nimbasa infantry, and Drayden listened intently.

Yancy barely heard a word as her mind swam. She was still reeling from the conversation she was never meant to overhear. Drayden had been a different person then, not the polite, reserved man she saw standing next to Elesa now. But what could she do? She was just a pleb, nobody. Even as a Rain Warrior, her place was beside Elesa, to support her in any way she could. She had no business questioning Elesa, a Gym Leader and a Fulmen. Then why did she still feel so sick about it all?

Gozen elbowed her lightly in the side all of a sudden, and Yancy jerked to attention. Nikola, the leader of the Rain Warriors and Yancy and Gozen’s superior, had brought in a few of the older women among their ranks for Caelith and Drayden to observe. She explained the Rain Warriors’ purpose, a bit of their long history protecting the Nimbasa Gym Leaders before Elesa, their role today. They would be joining the military for the upcoming invasion, at least, some of them.

“An elite group of women warriors,” Drayden said. “Plebs, all of them. It’s...fascinating.”
“My Rain Warriors are among the strongest soldiers on the Trident,” Elesa said, the pride evident in her tone. “Men or women.”

“I’m sure,” Drayden said tightly.

“In fact, they’ve been training with a very skilled Bellator this past year,” Elesa went on. “Nikola, where is Marshal today? I’d like to introduce him to Drayden.”

Nikola faltered. Her normally severe expression fell, and her narrow eyes widened a bit in surprise as she tried to come up with an explanation. “My lady, a thousand pardons. I thought you knew. Marshal recently left Nimbasa. Just a couple nights ago, in fact. Yancy didn’t tell you?”

All eyes turned to Yancy, who suddenly wished she could be anywhere but here.

“Marshal’s gone?” Elesa asked Yancy this time, her tone smooth as honey but the look in her eyes one of controlled anger Yancy recognized very well. She should have told Elesa sooner. Damnit.

“Yes, my lady,” Yancy said, swallowing.

“Why?”

Gozen discreetly touched her hand to the small of Yancy’s back, a silent bid of support. Yancy nodded slightly, and before she could help herself, her gaze settled on Drayden, who was watching her with mild curiosity.

“He didn’t say much,” Yancy said evasively. “Only... Only that he didn’t want to get involved with monsters and their crowns.”

Drayden narrowed his eyes at her, but Yancy could not look away. It was as if those amber eyes sucked her in like gravity pulling her to her doom at the bottom of some pit. She remembered the ice in his voice as he flippantly told Colress he could handle Elesa, and she bit the inside of her cheek so hard it began to bleed.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” Elesa demanded.

“I suppose it means this Bellator didn’t have the courage to stay and fight for the city that fed and clothed him this past year,” Drayden said suddenly. “Let’s not worry about it.”

Elesa was not about to let it go so easily. “Excuse me? Marshal was heavily involved in training with my Rain Warriors. He could be on his way to Castelia for all I know, so I think—”

Drayden grabbed her wrist firmly in his large hand and squeezed. Not hard enough to hurt, but hard enough to make a point. “Don’t worry about him, Elesa. He’s just one man, a broken man at that. We have a city to conquer. So drop it.”

Yancy watched the exchange in tense silence. But it was Elesa who seemed most stunned of all at Drayden’s sudden insistence, demand that she let it go. She recovered quickly and, with all the grace and delicacy of a highborn lady, gently pried Drayden’s fingers from her wrist like his touch didn’t bother her at all.

“Yes, we do,” she said neutrally. “General Curtis, let’s continue. I will want to address your soldiers myself to brief them on the advance tomorrow morning.”

Curtis kept his expression carefully schooled, rugged for a man of his youth, and adjusted his hat like he didn’t know what else to do with his hands. “Yes, my lady. This way.”
Yancy was frozen to her spot as she stared after Drayden and Elesa following Curtis. Caelith was watching her now, those hollow eyes as intense and unnerving as ever, and Yancy wondered what she was thinking. It was Gozen who came to the rescue and tugged on Yancy’s hand to get her to move.

When they were out of earshot, Gozen whispered, “What the fuck just happened?”

“I... I’m not sure,” Yancy said.

Elesa carried on like nothing was amiss, and Yancy could hardly believe this was not a dream. Everything felt topsy turvy, out of balance, like she was floating deep underwater in a trance. She listened to Elesa speak confidently and proudly to the Nimbasan soldiers who would be marching across the Relic Desert tomorrow morning. The three-day march to Castelia would be a tough one, but they could persist together. They were the greatest military on the Trident, she reminded them, and they had the power of the skies on their side. The soldiers cheered their Gym Leader and now queen, fervent in their loyalty and confidence in her leadership as they’d always been. But Drayden’s imposing presence next to Elesa, and Caelith in the shadows behind him, drew Yancy’s wandering eye. They were like the aberrant brush stroke, the ill-measured depth perception, the part of the picture that told her something was off, something was wrong, this was not how it was supposed to look.

Later that night, the Gym was abuzz with activity. Drayden and Caelith were out with the Opelucid forces that had arrived late that afternoon, more Ridder Knights set to march with the Nimbasan infantry tomorrow. From her bedroom window, Yancy saw great shadows, the glint of teeth as large as her head, dark wings that touched the heavens and blotted out the floating lights of the Rondez-View Ferris Wheel she loved so much. The Dragon Riders and their beasts were preparing for the long flight over the desert, though they would not leave for another couple of days. It was said that Dragons could fly without rest for days, never needed to touch down or sleep during a journey. And a little thing like sandstorms could not stop a creature as big as a house.

Yancy tried to sleep, but she was restless. Mienshao sat on the foot of her bed, curled up but not sleeping with all her tossing and turning. Its presence was a comfort, but it could not assuage her growing trepidation. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw Drayden’s Salamence, those jaws that could crush stone, those wings bathed in blood, a crown on its head made of bones and sparkling Thunder Stones. It was chasing her now, a behemoth hunting an ant, a girl with no abilities and no name but the naginata on her back. Except she didn’t even have that as she ran, barefoot and small, from the beast with breath that reeked of spoiled meat and death.

She pounded on the Gym doors, but no one answered. It was dark, abandoned, and lightning cracked overhead. Yancy was soaked to the bone with the torrential rain, and she pressed her back to the chained Gym doors that no one opened for her. She sank, shivering, to the ground, as the great Salamence cornered her and lowered its massive head to her eye-level. The crown it wore toppled off its head and shattered at Yancy’s feet, sparking, the Thunder Stones cracked and broken and their power and light fading. The Dragon roared, and the trees were pulled up at the roots, houses fell to pieces, and the Gym behind her cracked and broke.

Yancy screamed, but she couldn’t hear herself over the terrible roar. Salamence bit down on her arm and yanked her about like a rag doll, and she fought to get free, to scratch at it, gouge out an eye, anything she could do. She could not do a thing. Thunder cracked again, and a glittering bolt of lightning split the sky and struck her in the shoulder, zapping her from head to toe and making her eyes roll back in their sockets. The world went dark, and suddenly Yancy could hardly breathe. Something was covering her mouth, and the pain in her arm where Salamence had bitten her was nothing but a dull ache. Her hair stood on end, and she was drenched in a cold sweat in her bed.
A nightmare, she thought.

But when she saw someone towering over her, she thought for a horrifying moment that it was real, that Drayden was here for her, or that he’d sent one of his goons to slit her throat in the night. Surely, a mere pleb girl was so far beneath him that he would never bother offing her himself. But it was not Drayden who hovered over her and clamped a hand over her mouth. The pain in her arm where she’d dreamed Salamence had bitten her was a familiar one. She would know—Emolga had shocked her countless times in the past. But this was not Emolga.

“Yancy, calm down,” Elesa whispered over her. “It’s just me. You were having a nightmare.”

Yancy blinked, and a few stray tears escaped her eyes. She was shaking, she realized, and her free hand was crushing Elesa’s arm. Alarmed, Yancy immediately withdrew and scrambled to sit up in bed. Elesa released her, and in the gloom Yancy could make out faint purple sparks dancing along the hairs on her arm where Elesa had restrained her. Mienshao was awake and standing at the foot of the bed, but it had not moved to intercept Elesa. It knew her.

Taking a few steadying breaths, Yancy slowly regained her sanity. Just a dream. She was safe, and Elesa was here. Why was Elesa here?

“What are you doing here?” Yancy asked, her words still a bit shaky from the panic attack.

“I don’t have much time. Drayden has someone watching me,” Elesa said quickly in hushed tones. “You’re leaving, Yancy.”

Yancy could not understand what was going on. “What? I’m leaving?”

“You and Gozen were supposed to join me tomorrow to see off the soldiers, but you’ll be leaving instead. You’re the only one I can trust to get help in my place.”

“Wait, what? Elesa, what’s going on?”

She was frazzled, Yancy realized. Her normally sleek black hair was tousled, and there were bags under her eyes. Perhaps she’d had difficulty sleeping tonight, too. “Today, at the barracks, with Drayden.” She clutched her wrist where Drayden had grabbed her. “I think he has another agenda, one that doesn’t include me. You might be right about him. I think he could betray me.”

Yancy gaped and her mind raced. “You believe me? I mean, I know it sounds crazy when he went through with the marriage and everything, but—”

“No need to explain. I was...arrogant. I thought I could control him if I put this constraint on us.” She sneered through the gloom, an ugly look on her otherwise beautiful face. “Not even Titans can control other Titans. I should’ve been more careful. But what’s done is done. I won’t let Nimbasa pay for my hubris. And I won’t let Drayden take control of my city.”

Yancy could hardly believe her ears. This was what she’d wanted, so why did she still feel the dread creeping in her veins? “So now what? What’re you going to do?”

“I’ll play my part, for now,” Elesa said. “I’m going through with the invasion, and I’ll make sure Drayden plays his part in it, too. I won’t be played a fool. That’s why I need you to leave, Yancy. You won’t be missed, and you can get help.”

“Help from where?”

“Gym Leader Skyla of Mistralton is an old friend of mine. We... Let’s just say she was once to me
like Gozen is to you. She’ll help, and when she does, Icirrus and Driftveil will follow.”

“The Triumvirs,” Yancy said, astonished. “But they seceded after the civil wars ended thirty years ago. Why would they help?”

“That’s what you’ll have to convince them of,” Elesa said, a little exasperated. She looked over her shoulder at Yancy’s open door. Time was running out. “I’ve secured you passage on a trade barge to Driftveil, the Whistling Wind. It leaves just after dawn. You must be on it. This is our only chance. Once my soldiers and Gym trainers leave tomorrow, only the Rain Warriors will be here to protect me. As strong as they are, they’re no match for Dragons.”

Yancy felt a headache coming on as she digested this information. “You’re asking a lot from me. What if... What if I...”

“You can do this. I trust you with my life, and I love you dearly,” Elesa said. She reached behind her neck and unclasped the necklace she always wore—a small, round, white pearl as big as an Apricorn and banded in gold, beautiful in its simplicity. “This was only recently returned to me. It belonged to the sorceress Elysanna, the founder of my clan, and remained in my family until about eight hundred years ago, when my ancestor Elerya hid it away. It’s precious to me, and I don’t want it falling into the wrong hands. Take it as a sign of my faith in you. Don’t let it out of your sight. Promise me.”

“Trust is just another way to control others.”

Yancy set her jaw. Colress was wrong. She would prove it to him, to Elesa, to all of Nimbasa. She had to do this. “I won’t fail you. I promise.”

Elesa searched her grey eyes and nodded, as though to reassure herself more than Yancy. “I know you won’t. I have to get back before Drayden’s spy notices I’m gone.”

She got up to leave, but Yancy tugged her back and pulled her into a fierce hug. It had been years since she’d hugged Elesa, not since they were children, before Elesa had become the Gym Leader. She was surprised at first, but soon hugged Yancy back, conveying more in that single gesture than words ever could.

“You’re not a monster,” Yancy whispered. “Don’t let him turn you into one.”

Elesa pulled away and spared her a small smile. “Be safe, Yancy.”

She left without a sound, and Mienshao stalked after her to watch her go. Yancy was wide awake now and chilled in her damp clothes. The window was open and let in a cool breeze that didn’t help matters. She checked the clock on her nightstand—just a couple hours until dawn. She needed to get moving.

Yancy showered quickly and packed a bag, light so as not to slow her down. She had never been to Driftveil City, nor anywhere outside of Nimbasa and its surrounding territories due to her status as a Rain Warrior sworn to defend the Gym Leader. There was no telling what kinds of people she would meet or how things would end up, if she would even survive this. But she was determined as hell not to let Elesa down. She was just a pleb, nobody important and no one worth remembering, but she was now Nimbasa’s best chance at weathering the war Marshal had warned her was coming.

_I should have listened to him_, she thought bitterly. But as soon as she had the thought, she pushed it out of her mind and focused on the task at hand. Helping Elesa and Nimbasa were all that mattered.
Yancy slipped out of her room with her pack and her Pokémon safely in their Pokéballs just an hour before dawn. She retrieved her naginata from the weapons cache in the shared living space, quiet as a mouse, and crept toward Gozen’s room. The door was open just a little, and Yancy peeked through the crack at her closest friend and confidante. She wanted so badly to wake her, to say goodbye, to tell her how afraid she was. But Gozen had her own job to do. She would be alone protecting Elesa now, and she would need all the rest she could get.

“I’ll see you again soon,” Yancy whispered to the shadows. Gozen didn’t stir from her place on the bed among the sheets.

Lingering just another precious moment, Yancy forced herself to retreat and headed for the window. She and Gozen had come and gone through this window countless times, sometimes preferring it to the front door. It was quicker. Even with her cumbersome naginata strapped to her back, Yancy knew all the footfalls blindfolded and made a quick descent to the ground level. She landed lightly on her feet and strained her hearing to listen for signs that her movement had alerted anyone. She heard nothing, so she headed west toward the docks. They were a good five miles outside the city, and she would have to catch the electric tram to get there on time. She all but ran toward the city center and jumped on the first tram that passed. She had time. It would be okay.

The city was already waking up. Soldiers in uniform with headscarves, Go-goggles, and knee-high boots to protect them from the harsh desert conditions marched southeast toward the Gym, where they would gather before deploying due south in a matter of hours. There were only two other people on the electric tram with Yancy, civilians, and neither of them paid her any mind.

The docks soon came into view to the west, and unlike the tram and the city, it was prime time here. Sailors, fishermen, and workers bustled about like busy Bugs loading and unloading ships, hammering on construction projects, and going through their days. The fishing trawlers had just returned from the night at sea with the day’s haul, and restaurant employees from Nimbasa City were gathered for the auction that would sell off most of the wares and end up in the bellies of wealthy Nimbasans at dinner tonight. It smelled of fish and that briny, wet wood smell characteristic of any dock. The air here was thick with humidity, and Yancy’s boiled leather armor felt like it was sticking to her skin over her white linens.

She got off at the designated stop where a number of trams from all over Nimbasa and its outlying territories stopped, but the docks themselves were still a walk away. The coast was home to a small port town, and its winding streets were too narrow for the city trams to navigate. Yancy walked briskly between the houses toward the pier. She was so focused on getting to the boat on time that she hardly checked to see whether she was being followed. But now that she was on foot, old habits kicked in and she was careful to weave through the side streets and double back, just in case.

There appeared to be no one around, so Yancy breathed a sigh of relief and decided to grab something to eat to take on the boat. The restaurants were open to accommodate the fishermen’s nocturnal schedules, so she had little trouble finding a fast place on the way to the pier. Brown paper to-go bag in hand, Yancy reached in and took a bite of freshly baked bread, savoring the heat. She continued on her way, passing few people. Most were at the docks, still a few blocks away. She had to take a left into a winding alley around some construction happening on the main road. An old woman walked toward her out of the alley and bade her good morning. Yancy began to relax a little.

But just as she turned the corner, she thought she saw something out of the corner of her eye. Pausing, she turned back the way she’d come. There was no sign of the old woman she’d passed,
and no sign of anyone else in the alley. Dismissing the feeling to heightened paranoia thanks to her situation, she turned around and continued toward the harbor, but footsteps behind her startled her. Too close, no time to reach for her naginata, so Yancy grabbed the dagger at her hip and spun, but she was too late. A booted foot came crashing into her back and sent her staggering against a brick wall, where she smacked her head hard and the world spun. Pure instinct honed by years of training guided her movements through the daze, and Yancy flipped over a large dumpster before her attacker could gut her against the wall. She drew her naginata this time and blinked through the throbbing pain in her head, back to the wall so she wouldn’t be caught off guard again. But her recovery lasted only a split second when her assailant came at her again, relentless. She recognized him—the Ridder Knight that had been following her lately, observing her from afar. He wasn’t observing passively now.

A Croconaw spat out a mouthful of bricks and narrowed its dark eyes to slits. A chunk of the wall where Yancy had been just moments ago was missing, like someone had taken a sledge hammer to it. Fear reared its ugly head in the pit of Yancy’s stomach as she understood beyond the shadow of a doubt that this man was here to kill her. Perhaps her little act of defiance yesterday had struck a nerve for Drayden. Or maybe he saw her as a greater threat now than he had before. Either way, he clearly had decided she was not allowed to live any longer and sent his knight after her.

The man moved with the fluidity and confidence of someone highly trained in hand-to-hand combat, and his Croconaw followed his lead without question despite the croc’s naturally savage nature when it was on the hunt. The man wielded a sword, standard issue for a knight of his rank and station, and he wore a bandana around the lower half of his face to conceal his identity from any passersby who might get it into their heads to pursue him for murder. In plainclothes and masked, he could have been anyone. But Yancy knew that face, those suspicious blue eyes that lingered lasciviously, a gaze that was something other than professional. He watched her with that gaze now, the kill on his mind, and she could almost taste the hatred coming off of him. Maybe he’d begged Drayden to let him kill her days ago.

But these thoughts all faded to grey as he lunged again, and this time Yancy struck back. Her naginata was an extension of herself, as natural as fighting with her bare hands, and it cut him off as he swung with his sword. Metal clashed, cringing and loud in the alley, and Croconaw growled as it lowered its head for a deadly Skull Bash. Yancy switched hands to parry another sword slash and quickly ripped her Pokéballs from her belt. Emolga screeched in angry surprise at the hostile situation, but Mienshao was silent as the grave and crashed into Croconaw mid-rampage. Using the croc’s own momentum against it, Mienshao twirled like a prima ballerina and Force Palmed Croconaw in the back of the head as it grazed past. Croconaw let out a strangled growl and crashed headlong into another dumpster, blasting a hole clean through the dark metal and knocking the big container over. A pair of Trubbish that had been living among the refuse were brutally awakened and released a foul cloud of Clear Smog as they waddled away in escape. Croconaw coughed violently, but struggled out of the bent metal dumpster. It was awkward on its feet a moment after that direct hit from Force Palm, but its head was like hard steel in the midst of Skull Bash, and it came out relatively okay. Ripped trash bags emptied their contents onto the street through the hole Croconaw had made, rotten food and soiled papers and a rancid brown liquid that pooled in the cracks between the cobblestones. The blue croc, now in a Rage, ran at Mienshao again, this time completely ignoring Yancy.

Yancy, however, had her own problems to contend with. The assailant was an excellent swordsman, to be expected of one of the famed Ridder Knights of Opelucid, but not really helping her cause against him. Emolga sat on her head, sparking, but if it shocked the man, his sword could conduct the electricity through Yancy’s naginata blade and shock her in turn. The knight seemed to know this intuitively and made every effort to keep up the pressure and attack at close range. Their crossing blades rang out in symphonic harmony in the cramped alley, and Yancy’s headache began
to pound in her head at each ear-splitting *clang*.

A blast of pressurized water suddenly shot in between them, forcing them to part momentarily. Croconaw had hit Mienshao with a nearly point-blank Hydro Pump, and Mienshao leaped into the air, soaking wet and favoring its left side. Lightning fast, the sleek stoat flipped in the air and came crashing down for a High Jump Kick directly on top of Croconaw’s hard head.

“Protect!” the knight bit out as he followed Mienshao’s trajectory.

Croconaw curled up in a ball and protected its vulnerable neck and head just as Mienshao landed with a *crack*. But Yancy did not stop to watch the outcome as she slashed at her assailant. He danced away, quick on his feet, and she growled in frustration. She could not land a hit on this guy!

Water splashed underfoot as she moved around him in their dance of death. He was fast, so fast, and bigger than her. Only the length of her naginata kept her a safe distance from his blade, but he was getting bold and jabbing more, finding the kinks in her armor, the blind spots in her sweeps and slashes. If he cut her even once, he could win this. Emolga screeched again, sparking on Yancy’s head and sending tiny shocks down her spine. She shuddered at what she would have to do.

The knight jumped suddenly, sword raised, and Yancy was mid-spin and unable to block him directly. So she moved without thinking and rolled with her weapon, slashing behind and rolling on her shoulder. The hard pavement sent lancing pain through her abused shoulder, but she swallowed it and kept moving, afraid for her life. Another spout of water soaked the alley and knocked her off course forcefully. She heard a man cry out, the knight, and the end of her naginata connected with something. A few seconds later, she scrambled to her feet, crouched, and saw that she’d cut the knight in the shins as she flew over her. A few strands of pink hair floated in the shallow puddles on the ground where he’d nearly decapitated her. His blood ran rosy in the dirty water.

Croconaw let out a terrible roar and spat out another Hydro Pump, but Mienshao barreled right through it and hit it with a lightning-fast Reversal. The hit was fast and true, and Croconaw went crashing into the opposite wall of the alley propelled by its own Hydro Pump attack, while Mienshao jumped back to safety. Yancy decided to take a page out of Mienshao’s book and ran at the Ridder Knight without warning. With a battle cry, she feinted left before slashing him once more in the shins while he tried to defend, feeling her blade strike bone. He cried out and fell to his knees. His sword clattered to the ground, and he was already going for a small dirk concealed at his thigh. Yancy was not about to give him the chance.

“Volt Switch!” she shouted.

Emolga took off quick as a bullet before she could even finish the command, sparkling with electricity, and rammed the knight in the chest just as he drew his knife. He made an awful croaking sound as electricity erupted all around him, amplified by the water on the ground. Yancy jammed the blunt end of her naginata in a groove on the ground and used it to balance her weight while she placed her feet against the chewed up wall, saving her the residual zap. Emolga bounced right back almost as soon as it made contact, like a yo-yo, and ran in to Mienshao perched on the ruined dumpster, its tiny claws clinging to the Fighter stoat’s wet fur.

Yancy’s labored breathing filled the space after the knight’s body slumped over, convulsed erratically, and finally fell still. Before her eyes, his skin began to pebble with growing welts, electric burns that bubbled upon his temples and forehead, every visible surface. His bandana came loose and fluttered to the ground, and blood dripped from his mouth. She let her gaze fall. She’d seen death before, by her own hand and those of others, but every time she took no joy from it.
Slowly, Yancy lowered herself to the ground and collapsed against the wall. The adrenaline still pumped through her veins, dulling the pain in her head and shoulder. But when she touched the side of her head that had smashed against the wall, her fingers came away bloody. It wasn’t bleeding too badly, but her head pounded like someone had taken a jackhammer to it. She had a small medical kit in her pack with painkillers, but she didn't have time to waste here. She needed to get on that boat and get to Driftveil. Elesa was counting on her.

Croconaw was slumped against the wall, its super-hardened skull crushed like a smashed pot, a few teeth broken and fallen to the ground around it like warding talismans. Yancy’s throat clenched at the sight, the poor thing. It was only obeying its master. Mienshao hopped down from the dumpster, its long fur lashes heavy with water and dripping. Emolga had crawled onto its head and shook out its fur, also wet. Yancy laid a hand on Mienshao’s shoulder.

“Thank you,” she said. “Both of you.”

Emolga squeaked petulantly, wanting to be picked up, while Mienshao twitched its whiskers and leaned in to Yancy’s touch. She recalled Mienshao to its Pokéball to rest, and she set Emolga on her good shoulder to appease it. Her breakfast, dropped at the start of the fight, was smashed and soggy on the ground, spoiled.

“Let’s hurry, before more of them show up.”

She ran the rest of the way to the dock, an awkward sight with the long naginata on her back and the side of her head red with blood. But she made it to the docks and scanned the boats for the one she wanted. The Whistling Wind was docked and loading when she arrived. Men and bulky Pokémon, Machop and Gurdurr and even a lone, mean-looking Pangoro, carried crates twice their size on deck to store them in the hull. This was a trade barge not meant to ferry passengers, and it looked the part with its no-nonsense grey metal hull, faded paint job, and unshaven crew. Yancy jogged toward the ramp and spoke to a man with a clipboard taking inventory.

“Sorry, little lady, this ain’t no place fer the likes o’ ye,” he said before Yancy could even get a word in.

“No, I’m here for passage,” she explained. Lowering her voice, she added, “Gym Leader Elesa sent me. I’m bound for Driftveil.”

The man, a burly sailor with an ample beard, leathery skin tanned from too many days at sea, and a gut that spoke of many nights spent drinking and singing sea shanties, regarded her shrewdly.

“Nancy?” he asked.

So Elesa had used her pseudonym for whenever Yancy and Gozen accompanied her to formal events. Never too careful. She nodded. “Yes, that’s me.”

The sailor looked around as though searching for spies, but apparently found none and waved her aboard. “Yer below deck with the crew. Ask fer Jimenez. He’s expectin’ ye.”

“Thank you,” Yancy said quickly.

She tried to ignore how the sailor’s gaze lingered on her wounded head. She needed to get that fixed asap, she decided. The sun was up, nearly six in the morning, and already the world was waking up. Yancy made her way on deck and followed the sailors loading the wares down below. A muscled Machop barked at her when she bumped into it accidentally, and she flattened herself against the wall in surprise, not wanting to anger it.
“Jimenez?” she asked the men who passed by, noticing the depressing reality that she was very likely the only woman on board. “Are you Jimenez?”

They passed her and shook their heads, the ones who bothered to answer her, and after a few minutes she was ready to give up.

“I’m Jimenez,” a man said, approaching.

He had rich, copper skin, a full head of black hair, and a handsome smile. A spool of rope was slung over his shoulder, and his hands were weathered and calloused, a working man’s hands, strong.

“I’m... I’m Nancy,” Yancy said, keeping her cover. “I was told to ask for you?”

He lost the glimmer of suspicion at seeing a woman in armor on board and relaxed visibly, though his eyes lingered on Emolga perched on Yancy’s shoulder. “Oh, right. I was wondering when you would show up. Your room’s this way, if you want to follow me?”

She followed, and Jimenez showed her to a cramped room with no windows that looked like a converted broom closet. The bed was barely five feet long, though neatly made, and a lidless metal toilet and sink were crammed in the opposite corner. A scratched mirror hung over the sink, useless.

“It’s not much. We don’t get passengers much. But you’ll have some privacy,” Jimenez explained. “We don’t get women much.”

Yancy smiled for him. “Thank you, it’s perfectly fine.”

Jimenez nodded. “Right. Meals’re twice a day in the galley, eight and six. You can help yourself to the pantry, but you got to sign out anything you take. We ration equally on the Whistling Wind. Stay out of the crew’s way, and we’ll be in Driftveil in no time.”

“I understand,” Yancy said.

“Okay, well, I’ll leave you to it.”

Jimenez excused himself to get back to work, and Yancy closed the door behind him. It was no palace, but she hadn’t been expecting her own room, so it was a pleasant surprise. The first thing she did was set Emolga on the bed, and then she retrieved the medical kit from her small pack and got to work cleaning and bandaging the wound on her head. She popped a few pain killers, not wanting to doze off so soon when she might be able to make herself useful to the crew with their chores somehow. It felt wrong not to do her part somehow, though she was sure Elesa had paid her passage in full and then some for the crew’s discretion.

When she was finished, Yancy wandered back on deck. The sailors had finished loading, and the barge was getting underway. She’d made it just in time. Breakfast was not for another couple of hours at eight, but Yancy had no appetite after the freak encounter in the alley not an hour past. Emolga nuzzled her cheek, and Yancy almost teared up thinking of the day Elesa had given her the tiny Electric rodent as a sign of trust and affection. She would be dead or at least seriously injured now if not for Emolga.

Nimbasa city glittered in the distance as the Whistling Wind slipped out of the harbor. The crew shouted orders to each other and ran around the deck completing various chores to ensure a smooth
sail to Driftveil to the southwest. For the first time in her life, Yancy was leaving Nimbasa. It was a strange feeling, not feeling solid earth underfoot. Like the floor might disappear and she would plunge into the water and sink forever.

The carnival lights of the Nimbasa Amusement Park were just blinking out with the onset of day. Yancy could barely make out the towering Rondez-View Ferris Wheel far to the east, its rainbow lights floating and twinkling in the coming dawn. They, too, snuffed out as the sun lit up the morning. Yancy fumbled under her collar and pulled out the pendant Elesa had given her. She held it up towards the rising sun the barge left behind, admiring the pearly sheen it reflected as it caught the light, as though devouring the sun’s light.

“I won’t fail you, Elesa. I swear I won’t.”

The Relic Desert, a beige and blistering expanse of sand, stretched on seemingly forever as Yancy left Nimbasa behind. She imagined Elesa leading her troops, Gozen at her side, shouting words of encouragement. And she imagined Drayden and his Salamence taking to the skies, death on dark wings, to rain Dragonfire down on the unsuspecting Castelia.

“In war, no one wins,” Marshal had warned her.

“I hope you’re wrong,” Yancy whispered, the winds drowning out her voice. The rising sun washed out the last glimpses of Nimbasa City, home, on the eastern horizon, so bright, and she turned away, unable to look upon it any longer.
Nate

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It was uncanny how quickly the mood shifted the moment Cheren had uttered that word: *Dragons*. Cheren, who was as immovable as a mountain, the strongest Tamer in Aspertia City, was afraid. Even the normally incorrigible Hugh was stunned into silence, eyes skyward in awe of the mythical power descending upon the largest city in the Trident. But Burgh, the rail-thin Gym Leader who looked like he had a foot in death’s door, was not afraid. He was furious.

“This is Q.B.,” he hissed into the X-Transceiver connecting him to his people working all over the city to quell the insurgency. “I need Butterfly to deploy all ground units north to the desert... Yes, all. Reroute them if you have to, I don't care. And get me aerial support. I’ll lead the charge against the Dragons myself...”

Nate could only make out one side of the conversation, and there were other things to worry about. Rosa was breathing hard next to him, still recovering from the fight with Mega Steelix and whatever she’d been doing before. From the blood on her hunting skins and the sweat and dirt smears on her face, he guessed she’d been very busy. God, how he wanted to stay by her side and pretend like none of this was happening. For so long he’d feared the worst, that she was long dead due to the fighting that had broken out on the lower East Tine. And now, here she was showing up just in time to help bring down that monstrous Mega Steelix. There was so much lost time, so much to say, and not a moment to spare.

“So, Dragons,” Hugh said, his ever-present scowl deepening. “What the hell’re we supposed to do against them, Genius?”

But Cheren had lost his words as he followed the Dragons circling the northern part of the city and raining chaos and death upon Castelia. Nate suddenly felt sick to his stomach.

“Whatever we do, we can’t let those fuckers just do whatever they want,” said Jack, whose Accelgor hovered perfectly over his shoulder like a demonic shade ready to rip into whoever so much as looked at Jack the wrong way.

“All those people,” Rosa said, her voice strained. Her Pokémon flanked her protectively—Serperior and Leafeon, whom Nate recognized well, and a scrappy summer Deerling he did not remember her having the last time he’d seen her. Its mossy coat was burned in places and smeared with dirt, but its dark eyes were alert and ready for the next challenge.

Rapidash whinnied as it nudged Nate’s shoulder, ears flat against its head in distress at the destruction and the putrid smell of death and fear in the air.

*We can’t just stand here,* Nate thought to himself. *We have to do something.*

But what? He was no Gym Leader. He’d never fought in a real war before. The blood under his nails and in his hair and under the collar of his shirt was drying and sticky, foreign. He hadn’t thought about the people and Pokémon he’d killed, instead just focusing on moving his feet, breathing, the rhythm of his heart. If he thought about it, he wouldn’t be able to stop thinking about it, and then he would be the one who ended up dead. So, he didn’t think about it. Perhaps later there would be time for whatever post-traumatic stress he was surely racking up. Time to mourn their side’s losses, time to grieve the loss of something he was never getting back, just like the
people he’d killed would never get their lives back. Hugh, however, looked up at the circling
Dragons with a haunted look in his normally cold and clear blue eyes, as though he wasn’t in his
own body anymore. Nate had never seen him look like that before. He was not sure what had
happened when they’d pulled Hugh out of the water after his fight against that Mega Sharpedo, but
the devastating news of Harrison’s death on top of everything was not easy for anyone to accept.

So, Nate could not think about it. He couldn’t think about Roxie, who had held her father’s
bleeding body in her small arms, an experience no child should ever have to have. He couldn’t
think about whatever was seriously wrong with Hugh now, about what was seriously wrong with
everyone who was still here fighting, surviving, killing the enemy just to stay alive themselves.
Instead, he thought about what would happen next.

“We have to help them,” he said to Rosa. “We have to help the people they’re attacking.”

Hugh looked at him like he’d just suggested they commit ritual suicide right there. Rosa looked
like she wanted to say something, but she clenched her teeth to keep whatever emotions had almost
spilled out bottled up.

“Yeah,” she said. “The people of Castelia helped me when I needed it the most. Their fight is my
fight now. Neo Team Plasma, Opelucid, whoever it is, we have to stop them from taking the city.”

“Are you even *seeing* that?” Hugh said, pointing to the swarm of Dragons. “Unless your Grassilisk
there can magically grow wings and not die against an army of goddamned Dragons, then my
money’s on them to take whatever the hell they want.”

Serperior hissed at Hugh’s raised voice and lowered its broad head close to Rosa protectively.

“Hugh’s right, I’m afraid,” Cheren said, finding his voice. “Even with the few Flyers we have, we
can’t hope to stand a chance against the Dragon Riders.”

“Dragon Riders?” Nate asked.

“Yes. Opelucid is the seat of the Dragon King, Drayden, the latest in a very old family of Titans
going back three thousand years. Their most powerful military force is the Dragon Riders, a
squadron of Titans who fight from the backs of winged Dragons in formation. One Dragon Flyer
can be a nuisance for any Gym Leader, but a small army of them is almost impossible to defeat
without an equally well-trained team of offensive Flyers that can match their numbers and
firepower. Attacking from the ground puts us at a laughable disadvantage.”

“You’re a real fuckin’ ray of sunshine, Cheren, has anybody ever told you that?” Hugh said sourly.

“There must be something we can do,” Rosa insisted. “This Drayden guy is just a man, and his
Dragons are just Pokémon. They’re not invincible.”

“There’s nothing you can do,” Burgh said grimly, having finally finished relaying orders to his
people. “I’ll handle the Dragon Riders. Jack, you and the rest of Mantis are with me.”

Jack was a big man, a man who had clearly seen hardship and battle in his day. Even so, Jack
hesitated at the thought of facing an army of winged Dragons with only Bugs, as any sane person
would. But he nodded and looked sharp, trusting his Gym Leader implicitly.

Burgh turned sunken eyes on Cheren. “Gym Leader Cheren, it looks like I’m in no position to pick
and choose my friends now. If you truly want to help, then have the Virbank fleet sink the Neos
before they can finish docking.”
Burgh’s Beedrill—what Nate suspected was another of these Mega Pokémon he’d already seen more of than he really cared to—was as tall as he was and truly a nightmarish sight to behold, like something from a Lovecraftian parallel dimension. He tried not to stare, feeling the Bug’s ghastly compound eyes on him as though it was imagining how to skewer him with its five enormous stingers.

Cheren nodded. “It’s already being taken care of. Harley Dufrene has taken over as acting captain of the Seaspear after... That is, Gym Leader Harrison passed away, and I’ve heard Captain Harley’s promise to continue the campaign as intended for as long as the fleet is able.”

Rosa gasped at the news of the Virbank Gym Leader’s demise, and Nate found it hard to swallow upon hearing it spoken out loud. Hugh remained eerily silent as he averted his gaze.

Burgh masked his emotions better than the rest. “Unfortunate news at a time like this, but there is no time to waste.” He paused to consider something, and then he spared Rosa a glance.

“Sylvan...Rosa. If you still have the strength to help, then head to the Relic Desert. I can’t spare my Spider and Bee teams with this new invasion, but the Sand Sleepers are few in number and will need all the assistance they can get. Find Louis at the Gym and join his group. He’ll explain the rest.”

Rosa looked about ready to swallow her own heart. “O-Of course! We’ll go north and stop whoever’s coming.”

“Hey, wait a minute,” Hugh said. “We’re with Virbank, and we came to fight Team Plasma.”

“And now we’re going north,” Cheren said in a tone that brooked no argument. “Rosa, lead the way.”

Rosa shared a significant look with Burgh, who gave nothing away. A silent understanding passed between them, something Nate could not name, and he had to wonder at what exactly Rosa had been through up until now to have earned her the confidence of such a prickly man.

When she looked back at Nate and the others, her expression was hard and unafraid, and Nate drew a quiet strength from it. “This way,” she said.

She recalled her Pokémon, and Nate, Hugh, and Cheren did the same so they could run freely as a small group. They rounded a city block, and Nate nearly ran smack into a pair of Scyther fighting fiercely against a Hitmonchan and its Neo Team Plasma trainer. The Scyther hissed and spat, and Rosa grabbed him by the wrist and yanked him away. It happened so fast, but Scyther lost all interest in Nate as soon as Rosa put herself in between them and resumed its bloody fight, almost like it knew they were on its side.

Hugh slowed and went for his hooked swords, but Cheren reprimanded him. “Hugh, we have to keep moving! Castelia’s military will handle things here!”

Hugh looked torn, and the deep-seated fear he’d been nursing ever since they pulled him out of the water clouded his eyes like a disease. He debated for a moment, but not wanting to be left behind, he ran after the group.

Something roared overhead, and they all slowed to gape at a sight that would have made Nate soil himself were he not too horrified even for that. A Hydreigon, huge and scaled black with three sets of tattered black wings and three snapping heads, let loose a Dragon Pulse attack from all three mouths that hit the building just across the street. The sinister red light caused a catastrophic explosion of sound, glass, and concrete, and Nate ducked to cover his head just as the debris hit
him like a thousand bullets and he went flying. The building was completely leveled and collapsed
with a thunderous crash. It smashed the surrounding buildings, and in a matter of moments, almost
an entire city block was reduced to rubble and dust.

Nate’s ears rang, and it took him a moment to register the stinging pain in his shoulder. A twisted
piece of jagged metal had lodged into his shoulder through his armor, having hit him with such
force that it pierced through the material. If not for the armor, it may have passed clean through
him and possibly severed his right arm. Immediately, his thoughts were of Hugh and Rosa and
Cheren.

“Nate!” Hugh shouted.

Shuffling, then hands on his arms pulling him up. Nate gasped in pain as the metal twisted deeper
into his flesh, and Hugh swore.

“Shit, that looks bad,” he said.

Someone coughed, and Nate thought he heard Rosa calling for Cheren. Nate rubbed his eyes,
staggered to his feet, and clutched his throbbing right arm. Hugh’s face was bleeding from a deep
gash under his left eye, and his Sealeo suit and clothes over it were dirty, but he seemed no more
worse for wear.

“Rosa,” Nate said, more a statement than a question.

“She’s okay, she’s helping Cheren,” Hugh said. “Here, lemme get that.”

Nate thought his teeth would shatter with how hard he was clenching them against the pain of
Hugh pulling out the metal shard from his shoulder. When it was out, he could feel his blood
flowing hot down his arm, but he felt a little better.

“Damnit, we gotta stop the bleeding,” Hugh said.

Nate shook his head. “No time. We have to find cover.”

He was already searching the skies for that monstrous black Dragon. It had made a loop and was
heading back. Nate could hardly believe his eyes. That Hydreigon had to be as big as a house,
maybe bigger. How did Pokémon get so big? And how the hell could anything hope to beat it?

Cheren and Rosa joined them. Cheren was limping, but he was sucking it up like it wasn’t as bad
as it was. Knowing him and what he was, Nate wondered if he could have been hit by a truck and
still walked away afterwards. An Atlas’s physical prowess and Cheren’s unique brand of
intransigence were an almost unbeatable combination.

“Nate, your shoulder,” Rosa said, paling as she noticed him bleeding.

“I’m okay,” he said, forcing a smile to mollify her. “Let’s get inside first.”

She nodded. “It’s not far, we just have to—”

Another ominous roar drowned her out. Hydreigon was back, and it had backup in a Charizard.
Both Pokémon carried riders—the Dragon Riders, Nate guessed.

*How can someone even command that thing?*

“You gotta be shitting me!” Hugh said, reaching for Samurott’s Pokéball.
Rosa, too, looked ready to fight. But just as the Dragons and their riders were upon them, something very strange happened. At first, Nate had not really heard it over the din of battle and bedlam, but now he was sure. Something big was making that droning noise, and it was nearly upon them. He searched the skies, and like a yellow and black bullet and just as quick, Burgh’s Mega Beedrill shot through the sky between the huge Dragons, almost too fast to see. Charizard bellowed and took off and off it, blowing Flamethrowers, but Mega Beedrill was fast. Nate had never seen anything move quite so fast, not even Rapidash.

“Burgh,” Rosa said. “Oh my god!”

Nate saw what had captured her attention. As Mega Beedrill flitted about and annoyed Hydreigon and Charizard, a huge swarm of Butterfree and Beedrill descended on the Dragons. The Beedrill flanked their silent allies, strangely hanging back, but the reason soon became apparent. As a single unit, the Butterfree unleashed the largest cloud of Stun Spore Nate had ever seen. The golden powder clogged an entire city block’s worth of airspace and floated on the backs of Whirlwinds like golden snakes striking to kill.

Hydreigon’s Titan rider noticed what was happening and shouted a command. The three-headed Dragon powered up a Hyper Beam that would easily incinerate the delicate Bugs, but the Stun Spore was too thick and too potent to escape. Charizard spat fire through the cloud as Mega Beedrill expertly eluded it, burning up spores, but more and more filled the gaps, unending, until it was nearly impossible to see the two Dragons anymore through the haze. Hydreigon’s Hyper Beam sputtered out as its body was petrified in midair and Charizard along with it. Nate just stared as the seemingly unbeatable Dragons and their trainers fell from the sky, paralyzed, and the swarm of Beedrill descended like a ravenous biblical plague. Venomous stingers jabbed and slashed as the Dragons fell, lightning fast, with Burgh’s Mega Beedrill leading the charge. In the seconds it took for Hydreigon and Charizard to crash to the ground, they had been stung and slashed to ribbons, death by a thousand cuts. Their trainers had not escaped the brutality and were hardly recognizable as their broken paralyzed bodies swelled with infection and oozed poisoned blood and pus from every orifice. The ground shook when they landed in a heap, dead before they hit the ground.

“What the fuck!” Cheren said in an uncharacteristic lapse in decorum.

The Butterfree and Beedrill resumed their formation and proceeded north to face more Dragon Riders, presumably.

*A bunch of Bugs just took out a Hydreigon in one shot.* Nate was shaking, he could not believe it.

“Well...I guess size really doesn’t matter,” Hugh said.

“It’ll matter if we just keep standing here,” Rosa said. “Come on, we have to keep moving.”

And so, they kept moving, and Nate tried not to think about the blood he was losing, about that Hydreigon carcass dead in the streets, about the terrible battle that still lay ahead. He just ran and hoped Burgh knew what the hell he was doing.

“In here!” Rosa said at last. She led the group into an alley away from the carnage and banged on a metal door. “Open up! Burgh sent us!”

But no one answered, and before Nate knew it, there was a flash of light and Cheren’s Bouffalant appeared. Old blood had dried on its horns from the battle on the beach when they’d just landed on Castelia’s shores and had to fight their way through Neo Team Plasma.

“Stand aside,” Cheren said. “Bouffalant, Head Charge that door.”
Bouffalant pawed the ground and snorted, lowered its head, and dashed at the reinforced metal door. The crash was earsplitting, and the steel-reinforced door snapped clean off its hinges on impact.

“Subtle,” Rosa said just before she headed through the new hole in the wall.

Cheren recalled Bouffalant, and the men followed her down a flight of stairs to what appeared to be a network of subterranean tunnels. Their footsteps echoed off the metal and stone walls, a lonely sound, but down here it was like the war outside was far away and happening to someone else. Save for the ominous booming somewhere to the north. Nate wondered just how much damage the Dragon Riders were doing and if a swarm of Butterfree and Beedrill would really be able to stand up to them all.

Rosa seemed to know where she was going, and soon they arrived at another door, another flight of stairs, and an enormous space that looked like an underground terrarium and must have been the Castelia City Gym. Jack was there—wait, how did he get here so fast?

“Louis!” Rosa shouted as she jogged to meet the man who looked uncannily like Jack.

Louis, who Nate presumed must be Jack’s twin, was flanked by a truly fearsome Escavalier and a Heracross. He was with a group of people. Some were clearly Gym trainers by their armor, while others were dressed in flowing robes, among them a very old man engaged in hushed conversation with two very beautiful blonde women.

“Oh, Rosa, thank god you’re here,” Louis said. “Burgh radioed that you’d be coming. These must be your friends?”

“Yes, this is Nate, Hugh, and Cheren, the Aspertia City Gym Leader,” Rosa said.

Louis did not smile. “A Gym Leader, that’s a relief. I’m sorry we don’t have much time for further introductions, but time is of the essence. Thank you all for helping us.”

“Nate’s been injured,” Rosa said. “He needs some emergency medical attention before we head out.”

Louis seemed to become a different person as he quickly assessed Nate and took his arm without asking. “Hm, yes, this will need disinfecting and wrapping. What caused it?”

“Shard of metal,” Nate said.

Louis’s gaze darkened. “Follow me. The rest of you, please don’t get too comfortable. We’re about to head out.”

Louis’s touch was practiced and gentle, the mark of a tradesman. He was very efficient in disinfecting and dressing Nate’s shoulder.

“You know,” Louis said as he worked, “I’m surprised to see an Ignifer helping us out, of all people. Oh, don’t worry, it isn’t obvious, it’s just that we Volucris can distinguish between Tamers by scent. Ignifers have a very distinct scent, one our kind typically avoids.”

Nate was not sure what to say to that. “Oh, um, well, I actually don’t mind Bugs. I mean, I have a Bug of my own, and she’s pretty great. I don’t have anything against Volucris. I never even met one before today.”

Louis smiled a little. “No, I suppose not. You’re a friend of Rosa’s, after all.”
“You know Rosa pretty well?” Nate asked.

“She saved my life. She’s... She’s a strong person.”

Nate smiled a little and looked back at where Rosa was speaking with the ancient man Nate had noticed earlier. She seemed to know a lot of people here. What had he missed while they were separated?

Louis finished treating Nate’s shoulder and taped a thick bandage over it under Nate’s shirt. It still ached terribly, but it wasn’t bleeding anymore, and he could move his arm without too much trouble.

“Be careful not to move that arm much, or you’ll open it back up. Unfortunately, we have no Potions on hand. They’re all with the Bees on the front line,” Louis said.

“It’s fine, thanks for the help,” Nate said.

“We should get going,” Louis said. “The Sand Sleepers will need all the assistance they can get.”

They rejoined the group, and Rosa broke from the old man and the two young blonde women that hovered around him protectively. Nate watched them a moment, wondering who they might be and why Rosa knew them—they looked quite out of place in a Gym—but there were more important things to think about right now.

“I’m sorry for the haste, but we need to move. Is everyone ready?” Louis asked. His Escavalier buzzed behind him and glared at everything in sight.

“Yes,” Cheren said, stretching his leg. It was freshly wrapped up in bindings. “Can you tell us what exactly we’re getting into?”

“On the way, if you don’t mind. Follow me.”

The four of them followed Louis, along with the few Gym trainers Nate had picked out earlier. Their armor bore the Castelia City crest—a golden honeycomb on a black background—emblazoned on their breasts. A train was waiting for the group, and Nate had to marvel at the ingenuity. All of Castelia must be lying on top of an intricate web of tunnels that spanned the entire city. It was incredible to think about the engineering and the construction power that had gone into building this network. To move freely without risking the Dragon Riders’ attacks above was a blessing Nate had not been expecting.

The train was an unpainted metal tube, built for utility rather than comfort, that filled the tunnel where it sat, and there was just enough room for a small platform at the bottom of the stairs from the terrarium-Gym for the group to board. It was only two cars with metal bars to hold on to but no seats, and Louis quickly fiddled with the controls at the front to get them moving. Electricity sparked above as the train powered up and began to move. Nate took hold of a metal bar to hang on and watched through the window as the metal and concrete tunnel walls sped by.

“The civilians are also down here,” Rosa said as they went, picking up on his intrigue. “This is where they evacuated everyone. Apparently, they have an entire subway system down here to get anywhere in the city fast.”

“Amazing,” Nate said.

Rosa got that look again like she wanted to say something but couldn’t, and Nate took her hand and squeezed.
“I wish I had time to tell you how happy I am to see you,” he said.

She smiled. “Yeah, I know. Back at you. We’ll have time after we kick these invaders out. There’s a lot I have to tell you.”

“Me, too.”

“So, we’ll be assisting the Sand Sleepers,” Louis announced from the front of the car. It lurched around a bend, and Nate squeezed the bar for support. “Butterfly also dispatched our main ground force to the desert, so we should have an army at our backs.”

“Sand Sleepers?” Hugh asked.

“They’re a Bedouin tribe that’s lived in the Relic Desert for thousands of years, long before even the Heart Tine of the Trident was settled by the families who would eventually found Opelucid, Nimbasa, and Castelia Cities. They’re loyal to Castelia, and they’re our first line of defense against invaders from the north.”

“I thought it was hard for invaders to come in from the north,” Nate said.

“That’s true,” Louis said. “The Relic Desert is a harsh environment, but we have to be prepared for Nimbasa’s hostility.”

“Nimbasa?” Hugh said. “Wait, I thought we were fighting Opelucid now.”

Louis looked uncomfortable. “Yes, but the latest intelligence is that Nimbasan infantry has marched south and is now engaging the Sand Sleepers. We have the home turf advantage, but Electric Pokémon in a desert can wreak havoc like you wouldn’t believe...”

“We’ll stop them,” Rosa said. “All of us together.”

Louis said nothing to that as he focused on steering the train, and Nate got that sick feeling in his stomach again. What if we can’t stop them?

Cheren looked grim where he stood towards the back of the train car. He had been curiously quiet since they set off again. Nate carefully maneuvered past the few other people in the car to stand next to him.

“Cheren?” Nate said. “Are you okay?”

His color was better and his leg was wrapped up expertly, though it looked like he was favoring it as he stood and leaned on a support bar. “You don’t find it odd?” he said, keeping his voice down so that Louis and the other Gym trainers would not hear. “Why would Nimbasa be working with Opelucid? And why would their invasion be happening on the same day as Team Plasma’s invasion?”

Nate frowned. “Yeah, that’s a weird coincidence.”

“Or, it’s not a coincidence at all.”

Just how far was Team Plasma’s reach? Nate did not know, but he was pretty sure Team Plasma had not reached as far north as Opelucid City back in its heyday. And even if they were working together, it did not explain the teamwork between Opelucid and Nimbasa. Nate was not much of a history buff, but he knew enough to know that the Heart Tine’s three great cities had no great love for each other beyond the impersonal trade relationships they shared. This place was not like
Aspertia, which could rely on a positive relationship with the larger Virbank, or even Nuvema, which had always fallen under Nacrene’s protection. Even the upper West Tine had maintained an alliance between its three major cities after seceding from the Trident at the end of the civil wars. But out here, it was every man for himself, or so Nate had learned in his early education. Beyond that, he had no idea about what could possibly be happening in Nimbasa or Opelucid or what had brought them here today. But Cheren was right, it smelled too fishy to be mere coincidence.

*How is Castelia gonna beat back Team Plasma, Opelucid, and Nimbasa all in one shot?*

The coil of nausea in the pit of his stomach sank like a stone at the grim thought, and he winced.

The low booming of the sky battle raging above ground sent tremors through the tunnels even over the roar of the metal train wheels on the track, and Nate could not shake the image of that terrible Hydreigon from his memory. He knew Dragons existed, of course, but to see one of the largest and most fearsome species in the world up close, flesh and blood and fury incarnate, and to watch helplessly as it unleashed its elemental power was not something any amount of forewarning could have prepared him for. He could not help but think of the wild Braviary that lived high in the mountains north of Aspertia and would swoop down to catch fish in the many lakes outside the city. They had been huge, the largest birds known to man, and their talons could rip a man to ribbons easily. But they were nothing compared to that Hydreigon. And there were more Dragons where it had come from, too.

Louis eventually announced that they had arrived at the exit, and the train slowed to a stop. Everyone filed out onto another platform that led to a wider tunnel clearly meant for foot traffic. It was one of several interconnected tunnels branching out from this space that all rose to the surface, a bit like being inside a honeycomb with a hundred exit points to release an army of killer bees. Nate heard something in one of the other tunnels—scuttling? No, it was too heavy, too clang-y against the grated metal floor.

“Ready for this?” Hugh asked as he cracked his neck and reached for Samurott’s Pokéball.

“All right?” Nate asked.

Hugh suddenly looked like he’d been caught stealing. He did his best to scowl and look angry. “It might not be Team Plasma, but these guys’re invaders all the same. They gotta be in league with those Plasma bastards, I bet you. Why else would they be here?”

Nate was about to respond to that when he caught Rosa staring at them, her mouth slightly ajar, but she looked away and followed Louis up the steep stairs to the surface without a word. Nate could have kicked himself. Of course, he hadn’t even thought about that once the fighting started. Rosa was once a member of Team Plasma. How did she feel about what was happening? Nate was suddenly very worried about fighting alongside both Hugh and Rosa. If Hugh ever found out about her history, after everything that had happened...

“Nathaniel,” Cheren said. “Get moving, we don’t have all day.”

“Oh, right, sorry.”

Nate’s hands shook as he gripped the metal railing and climbed the stairs up and up. *Don’t think about it,* he told himself. *Don’t think about anything.* Not Team Plasma, not Hydreigon, and not the queasy feeling in his stomach that he now recognized as an acute sense of dread that only intensified with each step he took.

Once he got outside, it became quite easy not to think about it. The manhole he’d climbed up
opened directly into the Relic Desert, where a strong wind was whipping up lashes of sand that
smacked him up and down. His hair was soon filled with sand, and he could feel tiny grains
rubbing against his skin where it had seeped into the collar of his grey Henley. The sky was blue
with no sign of something truly nasty, like an oncoming sandstorm, but something was causing this
uproar.

Nate did not bother with the sand in his hair, too distracted by the view all around him. The source
of the scuttling-clanging sound he’d heard earlier became apparent as he and the others surfaced in
the sand surrounded by hundreds of Durant.

“Holy...” Hugh said, squinting as he shielded his eyes from the sandy winds.

The Durant were spilling out of more holes in the ground, the other tunnels, Nate guessed. They
marched in straight lines, orderly and organized, and communicated with a range of clicks
undecipherable to the human ear. They were each about the size of Rosa’s Leafeon, and their silver
and black bodies were covered in iron-plated carapaces that could survive being crushed by a
boulder. Serrated pincers around their mouths were responsible for the skin-crawling clicking
sounds they made. They moved around the group as though indifferent to them. The Gym trainers
spread out among their ranks to direct them.

One of the Gym trainers in Nate’s group was walking around passing out Go-goggles, and Nate
gratefully accepted a pair and donned it. He only wished he had a headscarf, like the other
Castelians better prepared for the harsh desert environment. His only consolation was that under
the searing summer sun, the nauseous feeling in his stomach abated and even the pain in his
shoulder eased, as though the heat itself was a panacea for all his bodily hurts.

“Take these,” Louis said, shoving something each at Nate, Hugh, and Cheren. “Wear them. They’ll
protect you from the Durant.”

It was a plain green bracelet that snapped easily over Nate’s wrist. Rosa already wore one, he saw
as she pulled on a pair of Go-goggles to shield her eyes from the sand.

“The Sand Sleepers are already fighting over that dune,” Louis said, pointing. “We’ll follow the
Durant. Everyone stay together.”

The desert was a vast and sprawling wasteland of golden sand and craggy rock. Some of the dunes
were as tall as the foothills to the north of Aspertia, and they stretched like winding serpents for as
far as the eye could see. Weathered rock formations peppered the landscape like pockmarks, large
as houses. Some looked like inverted bottles, bulbous at the heads and balancing on queerly skinny
necks, the consequences of thousands of years of wind erosion. Far to the south, Castelia’s
skyscrapers rose in defiance of the laws of nature, and above them circled the Dragons and their
Riders. Nate wondered about those Butterfree and Beedrill that had saved them earlier and hoped
they were still alive and fighting. There were so many Dragons swarming like flies over carrion...

“Move out,” Louis said, and they moved.

The Durant were a sea of silver as their little feet churned the sand and carried them as one
continuous wave over the slope of a tall dune dead ahead. Gusting winds shaved golden sand off
the top of the dune, and Nate could not help but admire the raw beauty of this place, so desolate but
so pristine, untouched. The elements ruled here, and even the pinnacle of modern technology had
not encroached upon this place. The Durant undulated like a true ocean as they slipped against the
tide of the wind, sturdy but flexible as they sought the path of least resistance up the slope.

On either side of Nate, Hugh and Rosa were silent as they trudged uphill, their feet sinking into the
hot sand. Rosa wiped her brow, which was slick with sweat. Hugh was drinking from his water skin. It wasn’t that hot, was it? Nate recalled Cheren’s playful warning about if Nate and Hugh ever found themselves in a desert, Nate would get the last laugh. He hoped for Hugh’s sake that it was just a joke.

“Sand Sleepers!” one of the Castelia trainers shouted.

Nate tore three Pokéballs from his belt and crested the peak of the sand dune. At his feet, the sea of Durant was already scuttling down the other side and straight into the thick of a battle to which they were already late. The Sand Sleepers were men and women covered from head to foot in handmade woolen clothing folded in such a way as to keep out the swirling desert sands. They moved quickly, most with the aid of a desert-dwelling Pokémon or two—Cacturne and Maractus, Krokorok and Krookodile, Onix, Mandibuzz, even a pair of hefty Claydol that were spinning like tops and brewing the Sandstorm winds for miles. The Onix, five that Nate could see from his high vantage, dove and traveled underground before bursting in random locations and wreaking havoc upon whoever was unfortunate enough to be in range of their Sand Tombs.

But as impressive as the Bedouin battlers and their scrappy Pokémon were, the enemy outnumbered—and outgunned—them. As the Durant flooded the battlefield, horrific thunderbolts zigzagged through their ranks and barbecued any ants in range. Fulgurite burst from the electrified sand like grasping fingers that grew through the Durant unlucky enough to be struck. The bolts flew wildly, but they managed to strike the Durant fast and true. Nate’s throat stung with the overdose of ozone in the air, pungent and acrid.

“Their steel bodies are drawing the bolts,” Cheren said through gritted teeth. “They’re like moving lightning rods down there!”

The Nimbasan soldiers commanding the thunderbolts stood mostly stationary in the distance. They were hard to make out from this distance, but Nate could easily tell some of their Pokémon at just a glance. He counted among them Blitzle and Zebstrika, Raichu and Manectric, Heliolisk and Stunfisk. They worked together to conjure great Thunderbolts that blended together into huge mega volts of lightning. One struck a particularly robust rock formation and split it in two. The blast was deafening even over the roar of the Sandstorm.

But the Nimbasan forces were not entirely alone. Though they were the bulk of the enemy fighters, Nate noticed a few different uniforms among them, the Opelucid Titans whose Pokémon could not fly. They wove between their Nimbasan allies, careful of the Thunder attacks, and engaged the Sand Sleepers together. The churning sands were dappled with red where many had already fallen. A Hippowdon’s swollen leathery carcass lay stinking and roasting under the merciless sun, its bowels spilling out of it like a burst melon, while a fearsome creature with blue scales and a head soaked with blood gorged itself. It looked up at its trainer’s whistle, revealing a mean set of razor-sharp teeth and claws with six-inch talons. A Druddigon, Nate recognized it. The Dragons were here, too.

“We Volucris will worry about the Durant,” Louis said, releasing his Escavalier and Heracross to aid him. “You focus on helping the Sand Sleepers!”

The Durant were drawing the lightning, but there were so many of them that the Thunderbolts hardly made a dent in their numbers. They swept through the battlefield, ignoring the Sand Sleepers entirely as though they knew who their allies were—did they all wear deterrent bracelets? —and charged for the enemy lines. Manectric, Blitzle, and Zebstrika took off at their trainers’ behest, blurs of black and blue and yellow light, and dashed around and among the Durant. They left trails of bursting fulgurite in their lightning-fast wake, a kind of molten fly paper that trapped
any Durant too slow to get out of the way.

But the Durant had numbers on their side. A horde of them rose as one great silver wave and crashed into a Wild Charging Zebstrika with a hundred Iron Head attacks. Zebstrika whickered in distress for a split second before the sturdy ants crushed every bone in its body and beat it to a bloody pulp beneath their combined weight. The sands ran red with the zebra’s blood, and the Durant trampled its remains to continue the advance.

Rosa was the first to take off. She released Serperior and hooked an arm around its leafy neck, and the regal basilisk quickly slithered down the sand like it had done this a thousand times before.

“Hey, wait up!” Hugh skidded down the dune, a fast trip given how steep it was, and released Samurott at the bottom.

The horned otter barked in angry surprise at its harsh surroundings and the popping of static electricity in the air. Hugh ran after Rosa, who had released her tiny Ferroseed to help Serperior face down that Druddigon. The hulking Dragon roared in challenge when it spotted Serperior and charged, its bloody claws glowing red with Dragon Claw. Ferroseed flung itself into the air with its vines and spun rapidly, releasing steel Spikes that pummeled Druddigon and slowed its charge long enough for Serperior to power up a Leaf Storm attack.

Nate tossed out Rapidash’s Pokéball and climbed atop the fiery steed’s bare back. With an encouraging tap to its sides, Rapidash took off down the slope in a blaze of fire and sand. Nate was thankful for the Go-goggles that shielded his eyes from the Sandstorm winds the two Claydol had conjured as he threw himself directly into the heat.

“Flame Charge!” Nate shouted over the whipping winds.

Rapidash snorted and lowered its horned head as the fire it kicked up grew into a swirling cloak all around it. It practically flew over the sand as it made a beeline for an enemy Electabuzz dead ahead. Electabuzz’s trainer noticed Rapidash and Nate closing in on them and screamed an order to retreat. Electabuzz roared and smashed its huge paws together as it began to generate electricity, but Rapidash was faster. Nate lowered himself over Rapidash’s bare back as low as he could go and ducked his head. The impact with Electabuzz nearly threw him off, but he held onto Rapidash’s fiery mane like a lifeline and tugged to steer the huge mare. Rapidash looped around, and when Nate looked up, he saw Electabuzz’s remains burning in the sand, trampled under Rapidash’s diamond-hard hooves. Its trainer was making a hasty retreat towards his allies and tossed out another Pokéball—this time, a fearsome Luxray with glossy blue and black fur that stood on end as it emanated pent-up static electricity. Luxray snarled in challenge as it spotted Rapidash and Nate, revealing a row of long white teeth.

“Freeze!” Hugh shouted.

A blue ice bolt zigzagged through the air and struck the sand at Luxray’s feet. The big cat leaped in surprise, its fur frosting where the Ice Beam grazed it. Hugh and Samurott ran to help Nate, and Samurott barked at Luxray, unafraid in the face of a severe type disadvantage. Luxray was joined by its trainer, a Nimbasa Gym trainer, and another Nimbasan soldier who released a terrifying Eelektrix to back up Luxray. Eelektrix was as large as Samurott and hovered just above the ground in the style of Magnemite. Its fin-like appendages propelled it forward as though it swam through water, but unlike its prior evolutionary forms, Eelektrix was not bound to water to survive. Its jawless mouth, as big around as a man’s head, dripped saliva, and a long slathering tongue lolled in between its jagged teeth.

Nate slipped off Rapidash’s back and was quick to send out Emboar and Lucario just as Luxray
and Eelektriss combined their power in a massive Thunder attack aimed at Hugh and Samurott. But just then, the ground rumbled and a thirty-foot Onix burst from the sand. It absorbed the brunt of the combined Thunder attack as though it were nothing, soared over Hugh and Nate and their Pokémon, and opened its mouth to Crunch down on Luxray and Eelektriss. The Electric duo move fast, though, and quickly darted out of harm’s way as Onix crashed into the sand like a Gyarados diving to the depths of the ocean.

“Holy shit!” Hugh said as he scrambled to get clear of the huge sinkhole Onix’s dive created in its wake.

Lucario yipped in alarm, its narrow red eyes scanning the battlefield and not at all liking what it saw. Emboar grunted, and its fiery beard flared to life as it stood protectively close to Nate. Hugh and Samurott gave the sinking sands a wide berth as they met up with Nate and his Pokémon.

“There better be a goddamned Pendant of Power in it for me if I survive this,” Hugh grumbled as he drew his hook swords. He was sweating profusely and breathing hard. The water skin he carried with him at all times looked flaccid and empty.

“Just don’t get sucked underground,” Nate said.

“Get out of the way!”

Cheren’s warning came just in time, and Nate and Hugh dove to avoid a wave of sentient sand carrying three Krookodile and a Krokorok headed straight for the Nimbasa trainers. Nate scrambled to the nearest shelter he could find—a weathered rock formation. The huge Earth Power wave swept over the line of Nimbasa trainers and their Pokémon, forcing them to scatter.

“Lucario!” Nate shouted to be heard. “Help the Krookodile!”

Lucario took off, comfortable in the Sandstorm and the shifting desert sands as it sprinted after the Sand Sleepers’ Pokémon. It leaped into the air, powered up a glowing Aura Sphere, and dive-bombed the Luxray from before. The two Pokémon disappeared in a cloud of sand.

Rapidash’s frightened whicker was Nate’s only warning when something hard slammed into him from behind, followed by a loud explosion. He rolled through the sand, disoriented and hurting, and struggled to his hands and knees, coughing. The rock he’d been sheltering under was blown to smithereens, the remains of a Voltorb’s Self-Destruct, and something wet and sticky dripped onto his cheek.

“Stoutland?” he managed.

Cheren was not far behind on Bouffalant and slipped off to give Nate a hand up. Stoutland barked excitedly and continued to drool as it panted. “You okay, Nathaniel? Stoutland almost didn’t get to you in time.”

“Y-Yeah, I think.” He looked around. “My Pokémon...”

But Emboar and Rapidash were all right. Rapidash had run off from the blast and escaped unscathed, though Emboar lumbered towards Nate bleeding from its haunches were rock shrapnel had wounded it. It was not as fast as Rapidash and had not escaped the blast unharmed.

“Emboar!” Nate stumbled towards it, afraid it was seriously injured.

“He looks okay,” Cheren said. “Just some shrapnel, nothing a visit to the Pokémon Center can’t fix.”
There was no Pokémon Center here, though, and there may not be one left if the Dragon Riders razed all of Castelia to the ground. But Emboar was standing fine and did not look to be in too much pain. Nate patted its broad shoulder, and Rapidash trotted to his side once more.

The Durant were turning the tide of battle as they attacked in droves, overwhelming the enemy with sheer numbers and brute force. Nate spotted Louis among their ranks with Escavalier and Heracross as he directed Durant and sent the faster Heracross to take advantage of holes in the silver deluge, Mega Hornwing anything that tried to get past. The Sand Sleepers seemed to be pushing back the Nimbasan forces with their unpredictable Onix that hid in the sand and burst out at random intervals to rearranged the face of the earth. Even the combined Electric attacks of the Nimbasan Pokémon could not slow the huge rock snakes down, immune as they were to all forms of Electric attacks. Rosa, too, had managed to slay the Druddigon she’d been fighting earlier and was among the Durant, firing arrows and surrounded by leaves as Serperior whipped up a fresh Leaf Storm cyclone.

But the tides of war were fickle, and soon enough this one turned. Nate almost did not understand it was happening until it was already too late. An Onix burst out of the ground, twisted in the air, and prepared to land amidst a group of Nimbasan soldiers and their Pokémon, but something else emerged from the sand in a burst of red light and collided with Onix. The creature was a fraction of Onix’s size but much bigger than a man, and nonetheless it knocked the huge rock snake off course. Onix roared in pain as it crashed on its side and sent up a huge tidal wave of golden sand and dust. Before Onix could settle on the ground, another identical creature emerged from the sand in a burst of red light and collided with Onix. This creature was a fraction of Onix’s size but much bigger than a man, and nonetheless it knocked the huge rock snake off course. Onix roared in pain as it crashed on its side and sent up a huge tidal wave of golden sand and dust.

“Are those...” Nate trailed off, shaking.

“Garchomp,” Cheren said, the fear audible in his normally confident voice. “This is really bad. Those were two, but there could be more.”

“More Dragons,” Nate said. “How do we fight them underground?”

Cheren looked very grim even for him. “I have no idea.”

The Onix that had previously had free rein of the desert sands now came under siege from the land sharks lurking in the shifting sands. Nate could not let the Garchomp kill all the Onix and have command of the sands, so he took off running after a wandering dorsal fin with Emboar in tow. Cheren shouted for him to come back, but he kept going and drew the steel axe at his hip.

Just gotta wait until it shows itself...

An Onix burst through the sand, and its Sand Sleeper trainer, an old but spritely man riding a huge sorrel Mudsdale twenty-three hands tall, shouted for Onix to attack the circling sharks. Onix roared and swung around its bladed tail in a terrible Stone Edge attack. But the two Garchomp were as fast under the sand as a Sharpedo in the water and jumped like flying fish. Their powerful hind legs slammed into the ground and summoned sandy geysers that closed in on Onix, who was much too slow above land to elude them. The double Earthquake split the desert sands beneath Onix and buried it in a deluge of gold and buried rock debris, but the Garchomp were not finished. They took off running over the loose sand, their abominable claws glowing red with Dragon Claw as they
descended on the half-submerged rock snake like raptors. Onix’s hide was plated with shale, but the Garchomp were used to ripping through the toughest stone and shattered its rough hide with every vicious slash. The Onix’s trainer shouted at his Pokémon, desperate, and urged Mudsdale to gallop faster.

“Emboar, Blast Burn! Take out that Garchomp!” Nate commanded.

Emboar ran on all fours and its coarse hairs began to shimmer and vibrate as its pores secreted raw heat. The heat soon engulfed it, and tendrils of fire licked at its rough orange and black hide like a thousand tongues. Emboar’s fiery beard grew to cover its ample belly and melted the sand beneath it as it charged wildly. The Garchomp closest to it did not even see it coming until it was too late. Like a fat flaming cannonball, Emboar crashed into one of the Garchomp and sent it flying. Flames bloomed on the land shark’s arms and back where Emboar had made contact, and it howled in pain as it rolled in the sand and dove under again in a desperate attempt to put out the flames incinerating its scaly hide. A grisly pool of red marked its point of disappearance, burning blood congealing in the sand.

Onix roared in pain from its many wounds, and its trainer was finally close enough to recall it. Nate caught his eyes, the only visible part of the man’s face under his head wrap, and the old man nodded to him before taking off. His Onix was alive because of Nate and Emboar.

Emboar grunted and shook the embers from its hide as it powered down its ultimate attack. The other Garchomp, spooked, dove underground again and disappeared along with its comrade. But they were still there somewhere, lurking like predators in the deep, and any moment they could spring again. Unfortunately, Emboar could not attack them while they were underground.

The rest of the Sand Sleepers recalled their Onix, unwilling to risk them with the Garchomp on the loose. Castelia had lost its advantage, and now the Nimbasan soldiers were pushing back the line of defense. Durant fried and melted under the thunderous onslaught, and it seemed to Nate that the ants’ numbers had visibly fallen since he’d been out here.

“You!” a voice shouted at Nate. “So you think you can defeat a Dragon? Think again!”

Nate barely had time to register the young Opelucid Titan who had addressed him when the Garchomp Emboar had wounded before burst out of the ground and slashed at Nate directly with a Dragon Claw attack. There was no time to react, and all Nate could do was try to shield himself with his hand axe, pathetic against the might of a monster like Garchomp.

But Garchomp shied at the last minute and twisted away from Nate, as though frightened. Then, a frigid bolt of ice struck like lightning just inches in front of Nate and froze the sand and Nate’s boots. One moment he was fine, and the next his internal temperature had plummeted and frost bloomed upon his skin. Rapidash was at Nate’s side in a flash, having sensed the danger to her trainer, and her fire was an instant balm against the unwelcome cold snap that probably could have killed or knocked out anybody else who didn’t run as hot as Nate naturally did. Samurott barked, its whiskers frosty with the aftereffects of Ice Beam as it bounded after Garchomp, though the wounded land shark had disappeared below the sand yet again.

“Nate!” Hugh shouted, running towards him.

Nate put a shaking hand on Rapidash’s flank and gratefully absorbed her warmth. “I’m okay,” he said, barely audible. Garchomp’s Dragon Claw had been just a couple feet from his face.

“What the hell? Garchomp? This is fucking ridiculous!” Hugh complained.
“I know,” Nate said. “We can’t attack them underground...” He had a thought then. “But we can attack the Titan controlling them. Hugh, we gotta take out that guy!”

He pointed to the Titan soldier keeping his distance behind a wall of Electric Pokémon and Nimbasa Gym trainers. Hugh snorted.

“You can’t be serious,” Hugh said. “Samurott’ll fry in that minefield.”

“I’ll give you an opening,” Rosa said from behind them.

Her Serperior was coiled around her with his head held high. Ferroseed sat in the sand at her feet, a little scuffed up but very hardy and full of energy as it spun its segmented body and dug a little hole.

“Oh, yeah? How?” Hugh snapped. “‘Cause from where I’m standing, we’ve got fucking Sharknado times two to deal with first.”

Rosa laid a hand on Serperior’s scaly back and kneeled. She buried her fingers in the sand, and when she looked up at them, her stormy green eyes had faded to a ghastly white. “Serperior, Frenzy Plant!”

Serperior hissed, and its red eyes also bled to white. The sand began to shake underfoot, and suddenly, dozens of thick brown roots burst from the earth as though with a mind of their own. Hugh swore and nearly tripped as he backpedaled away from the nearest one, but the roots did not come for him or Nate. Instead, they plunged into the sand and swam like snakes in search of prey. The sands came alive like the churning sea, and the Garchomp were on the run now as Serperior’s wrath hunted them.

“Are you seeing this?!” Hugh said as he stared in awe at Rosa and Serperior and the manifestation of their combined power.

“I’m standing right here, Hugh,” Nate said.

Cheren, Bouffalant, and Stoutland caught up to them just then. Stoutland had blood on its muzzle and its cream and navy fur was charred with electric burns in places, but it was still on its feet.

“Hugh, Nathaniel,” Cheren said. “Still alive, I see.”

“Come on,” Nate said. “We have to take out that Titan!”

He mounted Rapidash and ran right into the midst of Serperior’s Frenzy Plant, calling for Emboar and Lucario to help him. Cheren was close behind, and Hugh brought up the rear on foot alongside Samurott. The wall of Fulmen separated them from the Titan controlling the two Garchomp, but Nate was ready.

“Let’s go! Flare Blitz!”

Emboar lowered its head and charged, all raw power and muscle. Lucario took off after it, a black blur as it ran. But it was the Sand Sleeper Nate had helped earlier that ended up breaking the line for them. His Mudsdale, now free to run without a rider, galloped fearlessly and conjured a vicious cloud of roiling sand as it High Horsepowered through a pair of Raichu and a shrieking Heliolisk. The Durant army was not far behind as it charged the Nimbasan front line, snapping and trampling anything in its path.

The Titan was well-guarded, however. Emboar met resistance in the Luxray Nate had faced earlier,
as well as a particularly plucky Togedemaru that used the sand as cover while it puffed up and launched a hail of Spikes at Emboar. The metal barbs melted on contact with Emboar’s superheated skin.

Meanwhile, Rosa and Serperior were rearranging the very landscape with Frenzy Plant as they cornered the two Garchomp, only to miss them by mere inches. The Garchomp were quite at home in the desert environment and able to outrun Serperior’s sentient roots. For now.

Stoutland fired off a Hyper Beam at the Nimbasan soldiers, and two of them were buffeted back under the force of the attack. A Manectric, alone now that its trainer was dead, conjured a wicked Thunder attack that raced over the sand and left a path of molten fulgurite in its path. Nate watched, helpless, as the lightning struck Cheren and Bouffalant in place of Stoutland, who they dashed in front of to protect. Bouffalant screamed in agony and reared. Cheren fell off its back, sparking and convulsing in the sand. Tears blurred Nate’s vision as he feared the worst.

“Cheren!” he shouted.

One of the Sand Sleepers, a young girl with a Baltoy guarding her, rushed to help Cheren and dragged him away to safety. Cheren was too far for Nate to check on, and there were other threats he could not ignore. A crossbow bolt whizzed past him and grazed his good shoulder. The serrated steel tip ripped into his armor but did not pierce the skin. Nonetheless, he ducked to the ground in a crouch, and Lucario was at his side in an instant with a Protect shield encompassing them both. Emboar was just ahead, still aflame as its Flare Blitz powered down. It stood over the smoking carcass of a Flaafy and two humans, Nimbasan soldiers, probably.

Garchomp, the one Emboar had not injured, suddenly burst from the sand and opened its maw wide. It prepared to fire off a Hyper Beam at point blank range directly at Emboar, and all Nate could do was scream.

“Emboar!”

Just then, a huge Frenzy Plant root shot out of the sand and impaled the cresting Garchomp through the middle. The split second of distraction was enough for Emboar to roll out of the way, and no sooner had Garchomp choked on its own attack than another root emerged and stabbed it through the gut. Another grew from the sand and wrapped around Garchomp’s left leg, then another and another. The land shark, once fearsome and seemingly unbeatable in the desert environment, let out an ear-splitting death rattle and shuddered as the sentient roots ripped it apart like string cheese. Blood splattered on the golden sand and over the roots, though they did not care. They converged over Garchomp’s broken body, smothering it until there was nothing left of the beast at all.

Nate did not even realize he was moving until he was already running. His palm was sweaty where it held the hand axe Gym Leader Harrison had given him, but he held on tight. Lucario ran alongside him, sharp eyes alert for danger. But Nate was only focused on his goal. The Titan soldier was stunned stupid, having witnessed Garchomp’s gruesome demise just as Nate had, and he was a second too slow to see Nate coming. Nate grunted and brought the hand axe down hard with all his might. It landed in the juncture between the Titan’s neck and shoulder, and hot blood spurted from the wound as though it could not wait to be free. Blue eyes widened in shock and met Nate’s gaze as he fell to his knees. Blood dribbled on the man’s pink lips, red like anybody else’s. Nate fell with him.

The Titan could not form words, and he gurgled incoherently as his pupils dilated. His rattling breath sent a shiver down Nate’s spine. It was over in seconds. Nate had severed a crucial artery, and the blood flowed like a waterfall from the man’s neck. It covered Nate’s hands and speckled
his face and goggles. The Titan slumped, lifeless, and fell to the ground. The only sound Nate could hear was his own labored breathing.

But in war, death begets more death, and no one is safe. The other Garchomp had felt its trainer’s death, that loss of connection, and retaliated the only way it knew how. It came out of nowhere, and Emboar was a slow Pokémon, big and bulky. It was not fast enough to avoid Garchomp’s vengeful Dragon Rush. The land shark erupted from the sand and rammed Emboar in its fatty gut, ordinarily a futile effort, but Garchomp was no ordinary Pokémon. Its flat head was bathed in bloody light, and it pierced like a knife through butter. Emboar did not even know what had hit it as it flew backwards ten, twenty yards.

It lasted just a few moments, this void where thought escaped Nate and there was only the visceral feeling of impossibility, of incredulity, because this could not happen to him. This was not how it was supposed to be. The hero was not supposed to lose.

A gaping wound bloomed in Emboar’s ample belly, smoking with its natural heat and bleeding a river under it. Nate screamed.

“Emboar!”

The pig bleated feebly and tried to get to its feet, but it slumped, exhausted and in agony. It was losing too much blood. The world seemed to slow down as Nate’s mind went blank. Don’t think about anything, he’d told himself in a sort of mantra all day. Don’t think about it, don’t think... But he could not wipe the image of Garchomp ruthlessly tearing into Emboar from his mind, could not tear his eyes away from his oldest Pokémon as it lay dying in the sand, one of hundreds of bodies already growing cold around it. Nate’s hand, slick with the dead Titan’s blood, slipped from the hand axe as he sank to his knees.

“Samurott, now!” Hugh’s voice shouted somewhere far, far away.

The Garchomp screamed in pain as two wickedly sharp Seamitar saws found their way into its belly now that it had foolishly surfaced and exposed itself. Samurott barked angrily as it gutted Garchomp like a fish, ripping it open and spilling its entrails with his shell swords. Garchomp collapsed under the massive otter’s weight, and Samurott fired an Ice Beam in its face at point-blank range. Garchomp’s jaw froze in an open scream, and its purple scales flaked off, unable to withstand the cold. Slippery guts froze over as they spilled onto the hot sand, and Samurott withdrew its blades and rose off Garchomp, nothing but a frozen bloody pulp now.

“Nate!” Hugh shouted as he ran to help him.

Lucario and Rapidash had caught up to Nate. Rapidash pawed the ground fretfully, no doubt smelling Emboar’s death in the air. Nate could not take his eyes from the sight of Emboar’s bleeding carcass, and tears blurred his vision as he hunched over in the sand.

“Hey, Nate!” Hugh was nearly upon him.

Rosa had released Serperior’s Frenzy Plant now that both Garchomp were dealt with, and she took a knee, exhausted. The Nimbasan soldiers had retreated to regroup, but their numbers seemed to have barely taken a hit in the aggregate. Their Electric Pokémon continued to pummel the Durant with Thunderbolts that jumped between ten ants at once and fried them all where they stood.

Nate squeezed his eyes shut and ripped off his goggles. They were misting with his tears, and he rubbed his eyes angrily. Emboar was gone. Emboar was gone. He couldn’t breathe. Lucario nudged him with its cold nose and whined, but he barely felt it as he caved in on himself.
“I c-can’t...” he sobbed.

But it seemed that there would be little time to mourn Emboar when the sands began to churn again, and Lucario yipped in alarm. Nate was forced to stand and scramble back to safety. Hugh was not so lucky.

“Ahh!” he screamed as he lost his footing trying to get to Nate.

Nate blinked rapidly and got to his feet. “Hugh!”

But the sand had turned quick, and Hugh was soon sucked under. It happened so fast that Nate could hardly believe his eyes. One minute Hugh was there, and the next he was gone. The sands sank at a deep locus in the center of the sinkhole, swirling like a whirlpool, and Nate was careful to stay out of range. More similar sinkholes collapsed around the battlefield and sucked down the bleeding carcasses of the slain like whirlpools. Durant clicked and clattered as they scrambled to escape the sinkholes’ gravity. Some did not make it. Whatever was causing them had awakened from somewhere far below ground, perhaps drawn to the smell of blood.

“But...” Nate shouted, desperate. Lucario and Rapidash flanked him as he paced the edge of the sinkhole. “Hugh, where are you!”

Oh shit, oh shit! Emboar was dead, his oldest Pokémon and his best. But now Hugh was gone, his oldest friend and the toughest person he knew. Nate could not take it. His whole body shook, frail as a leaf, and tears streamed down his cheeks. “Lucario, help him!”

But Lucario was afraid of the sinking sands. It would not dive in after Hugh. It paced the edge of the swirling sinkhole, whining with its tail between its legs. Nate dug at the sands in vain, his tears turning the golden grains an ugly brown as his scooped handfuls of sand away.

“No, Hugh! You can’t die!” he screamed through his tears.

A shadow loomed over him just then. “He won’t. I’ll go get him.”

Rosa stood over him and adjusted the jade scarf around her neck to cover her mouth and nose. She tied it tight and gestured for Serperior.

“Rosa?” Nate said, hardly recognizing his own voice.

“Serperior, help me out,” she said with eerie calm.

Serperior released a few vines from within its leafy collar that wrapped around Rosa’s middle. No sooner were they secure than Rosa dove into the sinking sands as though they were water and she was a professional diver. Except this sand was deadly, and this was war, and she was goddamn crazy for jumping in there not knowing what the hell was down there.

“Rosa!” Nate shouted. He was on the verge of hysteria.

The vines holding her sank deeper into the sand, a fishing line trailing bait. Another shadow appeared next to Nate, and Cheren took a knee.

“What the... What’s going on?” he demanded. “These sinkholes are popping up everywhere.”

Nate could hardly contain his panic and desperation. “It’s Hugh! He got caught in the sinkhole, and Rosa dove in after him!”
“What? What the hell is she thinking?” Cheren said, pale with fear.

Stoutland barked in concern, but there was nothing anyone could do now. Nate watched Serperior’s vines sinking ever deeper into the sand and counted the seconds.

“Pull her back up,” he demanded of the haughty serpent. “Now!”

Serperior looked down on him like a king regards his nameless subjects and ignored him. Lucario glared up at Serperior, a silent threat.

“No, Serperior,” Nate said, raising a hand to it in warning.

But still Serperior did not listen, not even with the threat of a burning touch.

First Emboar, and now both Hugh and Rosa. Nate shook with grief. He could not handle this. All his life he had tried to do right by others, to help in whatever way he could. He even came on this crazy journey with Cheren and Hugh because it was the right thing to do, a way to help the people of Aspertia with the abilities he’d been born with. But this… This was too high a price to pay. He could not imagine a world without Hugh and Rosa. He could not go on living knowing that they, who had suffered so much already, would never find the happiness they so deserved after everything they had been through.

“Please,” he wept. “God, just please…”

Lucario whined and Rapidash nudged his shoulder. Emboar’s body lay decomposing just behind them, but Nate could not bear to look at it. He was doing what he thought was right. There was no way the death and suffering of the ones he loved most was his reward or theirs. This was not how it was supposed to be.

Suddenly, Serperior hissed and yanked its head back. The sands in the center of the sinkhole bubbled and burst, and Rosa’s head emerged. The vines hauled her slowly out of the danger zone, and she had something in her arms. Nate choked on a sob as he recognized Hugh’s crazy hair. He was clinging to Rosa’s shoulder, half-conscious but alive.

“Hugh! Rosa!” Nate’s voice cracked with relief and tears as he reached for them.

Serperior dragged them out of the sinkhole. As they emerged from the deadly trap, Nate noticed something dragging behind Hugh. A squat Pokémon had attached itself to Hugh’s arm with powerful jaws almost as big as the rest of its small body. Rosa collapsed on the edge of the sinkhole once she was clear of the danger, gasping for breath. Hugh coughed up a lung, and every inch of him was covered in sand. Samurott barked nervously as it paced the edge of the sinkhole, unwilling to get too close.

Hugh soon remembered himself and the pain in his arm where the odd Pokémon had decided to take a bite out of him. “What the—! Hey, get off!”

He shook his arm, but the plucky Pokémon would not budge. Now that Nate had a better view of it, he recognized the species. “Trapinch?” he said.

The Trapinch held fast, its dark beady eyes wide with fear. Samurott barked angrily at it, but it only clamped down harder.

“Motherfucker, it’s gonna eat my arm!” Hugh said.

Rosa turned around and tried to pry the Trapinch’s jaws open, but this only seemed to aggravate it
more. Hugh gasped in pain.

“Ahh!” he wailed, perspiring as his body tried to fight off the pain grinding his bones.

“It won’t come off,” Rosa said unhelpfully. She fished around in a pocket of her leather pants. “Here, use this.”

She handed Hugh a Pokéball.

“I don’t want this stupid Pokémon!” he shouted at her.

“Ugh, fine! I’ll do it!” Rosa said. She tapped the Pokéball against Trapinch’s wide mandible, and the creature disappeared in a flash of red light. When it was securely inside the Pokéball, she shoved it in Hugh’s chest. “Here. You’re welcome for saving your life, by the way. No big deal.”

Hugh just stared at her, stunned beyond speech, and had no choice but to accept the Pokéball. His arm was bleeding, and he cradled the abused appendage in his lap. “No big deal? I almost got my arm chewed off!”

“That’s not my fault!” Rosa said, exasperated.

“I thought you guys were goners!” Nate said as he tackled them both in a tearful hug.

“Nate,” Rosa said gently.

Nate pulled back, uncaring if they saw the tears in his eyes.

“Hey,” Hugh said, his earlier rancor receding to a low simmer as he took in Nate’s haunted look and the tears in his eyes. “Whoa, Nate...”

“I’m glad you all are okay,” Cheren interrupted, “but unfortunately, we’re losing this battle.”

The Nimbasaan forces were overwhelming the Durant and the Sand Sleepers. One of the Claydol that had been powering the Sandstorm this whole time had been ruthlessly torn apart by a pair of Fraxure. Their ample tusks were sharp and strong enough to cut through Claydol’s tough hide. Countless Durant lay sparking and melting, fused with fulgurite. The Gym trainer that had given Nate his Go-goggles lay lifeless in the sand covered in electric burns and boils and half buried under sand as he was slowly pulled into a sinkhole hiding more Trapinch deep underground. And back in Castelia proper, the winged Dragons continued to rain fire and draconian light on the city. They had not been stopped, not fully at least.

That sinking feeling in Nate’s stomach returned tenfold as he accepted the truth he’d known all along. We can’t win this battle.

Emboar’s lifeless body lay roasting under the harsh desert sun, and Nate felt all his energy leave him just at the sight of it. His original Pokémon, his constant companion. The others were just as dear to him, but Emboar had been his first. He longed to go to it, to touch it one last time, but the Nimbasa Gym trainers had other plans. Thunderbolts rained down on Nate’s group, and it was all Cheren’s Stoutland could do to Protect everyone. The massive force field evaporated as the Thunderbolts fizzled out, and Stoutland did not have the energy to continue. It was so spent that it could barely remain standing, and Cheren was forced to recall it.

“We can’t win this,” Rosa said, understanding dawning.

“What about Team Plasma?” Hugh demanded, cradling his wounded arm where Trapinch had
bitten him.

“We have to retreat,” Nate said. “If we stay here, we’ll die. There’s too many of them.”

It was a hard truth to accept, but one Nate had feared ever since the Dragon Riders had arrived. And why? Where they working with Neo Team Plasma? Nothing made any sense. All he knew was that Emboar was gone, and if he didn’t get them out of here now, two of the people he loved most in the world might be next. He could not bear to lose anyone else today. So, he recalled Lucario and climbed onto Rapidash’s back.

“Hugh, get on. We have to retreat,” he said.

“We’re just giving up?” Hugh said, shocked and upset.

“Nathaniel’s right. We’ll live to fight another day,” Cheren said. “We gave it our best shot,” he continued, staring at the ground. “We can’t do anything more.”

“So what, we just run away?” Rosa said angrily. “No way.”

“Rosa,” Nate said, his eyes glistening with tears. “Please.”

She searched his eyes, and she must have found something there because she swallowed hard and nodded. Swanna appeared in a swath of light, and she climbed onto its back. Hugh recalled Samurott and climbed onto Rapidash’s back behind Nate. Cheren mounted Bouffalant once again.

“Let’s go,” Cheren said.

“Where? We can’t go back to Castelia with all those Dragons,” Hugh said.

“There’s a small port to the west,” Rosa said. “There should be a ship there. They said they’d wait as long as they could...”

“Good enough,” Cheren said.

And they retreated. Lightning snapped at their heels, and the sand bled red under their feet. The Garchomp were dead, and many more besides, but still the Nimbasan forces and the Opelucid Titans outnumbered and outgunned them. Emboar’s smoking carcass shrank behind them as they fled, to be buried under the sands like so many others, forgotten. Nate blinked his tears away, reasoning that Emboar would have wanted him to live.

Emboar would have wanted to live, too.

He gritted his teeth and held onto Rapidash because there was nothing else he could do. Castelia was done for, but where could they go now? The Durant parted for them, the few that remained, and Nate wondered if Louis, the Volucris who’d patched him up, was still alive.

Hugh held onto Nate’s waist as best he could, unused to Rapidash’s gallop, and Nate tried to ignore how his arm was bleeding all over the place. He needed medical attention, badly. Rapidash cleared a huge sand dune, and on the other side, the sea was in view. And in the sea was a ship, a plain wooden barge probably used for commerce. It was nothing spectacular, but it was a way off the Heart Tine, just as Rosa had said.

The group soon arrived at the docked barge, and Rosa landed swiftly.

“Rosa!” A young man, brown of skin and very young, greeted Rosa. “I was afraid you wouldn’t
make it, but Master Rood wanted to wait as long as we could.”

“Thanks, Yussef,” Rosa said. “I’m glad you’re okay, too. But Castelia—”

“—is doomed,” an old man said from the quayside. He was ancient and swathed in burgundy silk, and Nate recognized him from the Gym earlier. “I’m afraid...it’s a hopeless cause at this point. We must depart at once. We cannot delay another moment.”

“Thank you for your help,” Cheren spoke for the group. “Let’s go.”

“Nate, go,” Hugh said, nudging him from behind.

“Oh, right,” Nate said.

They both dismounted. Rosa lingered in the sand and stared back at Castelia.

“Rosa?” Nate said as he paused at the bottom of the gangplank.

“This isn’t right,” she said in a voice he did not recognize. “Castelia... Burgh can’t lose like this.”

Nate took her hand in his, and he nearly lost his composure at the sight of her tears. “I’m sorry,” he said. Because there was nothing else to say.

Rosa pulled him close in a hug and shuddered against him. “I failed him, Nate.”

“No,” Nate said, unsure where he’d found the strength to comfort her when he felt like he’d failed Emboar, failed himself. Emboar was gone... But he couldn’t abide the sight of Rosa so broken, so fragile. She had always been tougher than Nate, she and Hugh both. Maybe it was what had drawn him to them, a lonely child with no one else in his life he could really lean on. “It’s not your fault,” he said. “This... This was impossible.”

She fist his shirt at the back of his neck. “I can’t accept that,” she sobbed.

“I know... But we have to.”

“Nate, Rosa,” Hugh called from the deck.

“Come on,” Nate said. “Burgh would want you to be okay no matter what, right?”

Rosa said nothing as she pushed past him to climb up the gangplank. Hugh just watched him with a heavy gaze, like he knew something Nate did not.

The old man Rosa had been talking to at the Gym, Rood, was on deck with the beautiful blonde women, and he greeted Rosa amiably with hands on her shoulders.

“Thank you for waiting,” Rosa said.

Nate trudged up the gangplank, and the pain of his injuries seemed to catch up with him suddenly. He felt weak and lethargic, like all he wanted to do was lie down and sleep. But how could he sleep with Emboar gone? With Castelia in peril?

_We lost_, he thought. _I knew we would..._

He had known this was a lost cause, and yet, he’d fought to do what he could. What was the point?

_I saved that Sand Sleeper, the old man with the Mudsdale._
Cheren had saved him, so had Hugh. And Rosa had saved Hugh. Many others had avoided death thanks to Nate and his Pokémon taking out some of the enemy’s ranks. But it wasn’t enough. With Castelia fallen, Nate wondered how much longer they would avoid death.

“Hey,” Hugh said as Nate joined him on deck. “You did what you could.”

*What I could do wasn’t enough*, he wanted to scream, but his throat was tight and swollen with despair.

“I... I’m sorry about Blazed Ham—er, Emboar. Fuck, I’m so sorry, Nate.”

“What?” Rosa said as she joined them. “What happened to Emboar?”

But as soon as Nate met her gaze, he saw her confusion warp into a mask of horror and pity as she covered her mouth, understanding.

“Oh, Nate,” she gasped.

Behind them, the sounds of a one-sided battle raged on. The remaining Sand Sleepers had been forced to retreat, disappearing underground through secret tunnels only they knew. Lightning bolts ripped the skies like bursting veins as the invaders overpowered the last of the resistance and sent them into hiding like so many scuttling Bugs. Smoke rose from Castelia proper as the Dragons continued to circle. Nate could not tell how many remained, but they still flew over the city unbeaten. The heavy stone of dread he’d been carrying in the pit of his stomach seemed to crack and fill his extremities, a heavy and soporific venom that made his body feel bloated and sick and his head ache with the reel of trauma and destruction he’d just witnessed.

*Castelia is doomed*, he thought. *We failed.*

And Emboar had died for no reason other than Nate’s incompetence. He didn’t even realize his wound, aggravated by the fighting and in good company with the others he’d acquired in the desert, had opened up and was bleeding everywhere until a gentle hand cupped his cheek and drew him out of the nightmare.

“It’s time to rest,” the beautiful blonde woman said in a wispy voice. Her hand was warm on his cheek, and she took his hand in hers.

Nate’s hands were caked with the blood of the Titan he’d killed, the Garchomp’s trainer. The woman closed her fingers over his shaking hand in a comforting gesture, but she did not smile.

“Come and rest, now,” she said. “I’m Concordia, and I’ll watch over you.”

Nate looked back at the Relic Desert where some of the enemy had followed their flight and now met with resistance from Pokémon attacks, fire and water and telekinesis, on the deck of the ship. They tried to give chase, but someone fired a cannon out of the hull that exploded in the sand near the pursuers and scattered the ones who were not blown to bits. The ship was hastily sailing away. The gangplank had not been brought up, and it splintered as it fell away into the water, dashed in the ship’s wake.

People and Pokémon ran around the deck in a panic as the sailors tried to get the ship ready for the journey over the sea to wherever they were going that might be safe, but what was safe anymore? Team Plasma had taken over the lower East Tine, and now the Heart Tine had fallen to invasion from all sides. Even Burgh’s extraordinarily resourceful army of Bugs was not enough to save Castelia and all the innocent people and Pokémon who had undoubtedly perished today. And for what? What was the point of all this? What had Emboar died for?
“Come,” Concordia said gently, leading him by the hand below deck so he could not see Castelia burning behind him.

Nate went. There was nowhere else to go.

Chapter End Notes

I meant to upload this earlier, but as of the original posting of this chapter, Sun and Moon has been out for like ten days or so and I could not put it down. I loved Pokémon Moon, and I am definitely going to be writing Alola fic in the Realistic Pokémon Tamerverse someday. Also, to anyone who has not done so already, I encourage you to check out Elephant Graveyard. It will tie in to this fic down the line, so give it a read if you like!
Iris was up early the next morning, unable to sleep. It was not a restless night, but one visited by many dreams, mostly of Benga. She spoke with him in her dreams so extensively that upon waking, she was convinced for a while that their conversation last night had been just that, a dream. But it wasn’t a dream, and she woke up feeling lighter than she had in days, iridescent and teeming with energy. She could not explain it, but she did not want this warm effervescent feeling to end. After finishing her morning ritual, she headed for the control room. Cottonee was content to sleep longer, so she left it on her bed to snooze. She grabbed a Nanab berry from the kitchen on her way, unable to stomach sitting still in the dining room for even a moment. Today they would surface for the first time since the Dreamyard, and she could not wait to see the sun.

“Look, a wild Iris appeared!” Nuria said when Iris entered the control room. “Nobody move or she might spook.”

Nuria, Captain Nymo, Ernesto the engineer, and Soriel were among the crew and passengers in the control room, and Soriel guffawed loudly at Nuria’s joke.

“Spook? You don’t know the princess very well if you think she’s afraid of anything,” Soriel said.

Iris smirked. “Not with the finest crew out of Humilau watching my back.”

“Hah! It is right, Iris Lady. Nymo’s crew is being the best in Humilau, and the best looking,” Nymo said.

The other crewmembers working together to drive the Oculus murmured among themselves, smiling and laughing at their captain’s good mood. Iris peeled her Nanab berry and took a bite before joining Soriel to observe the crew’s work.

“You’re up early,” Iris said.

“To tell it true, I’m missing the sun,” Soriel said. “We should be surfacing soon, and I need to stretch Charizard’s wings.”

“I know what you mean. It feels like we’ve been down here for ages.”

“Hey, don’t let Soriel fool you. She was a big help to me earlier this morning,” Nuria said, glancing up from a PokéNav system she was operating. “I discovered some structural breaches in the hull’s lining, and Soriel lent us Charizard’s fire to do some emergency welding.”

Iris blinked at her. “...I wasn’t aware we had structural problems compromising the sub.”

Nuria rolled her eyes. “Don’t worry your enormous hair over it. It could’ve waited until we surfaced, but it just would’ve been more work for me and slowed us down. Anyway, Iris, I was actually going to head to your room, but now that you’re here, that makes things easier.”

Iris did her best not to wince. She’d been holed up in her room almost this entire dive since the Dreamyard, and from the way Soriel was looking at her concerned—and having a six-foot-tall hardened Cinnabarean soldier concerned about her meant Iris really must have had everyone worried—she could not help the gnawing sense of shame and guilt. What Nuria had said to her
about the crew’s morale slipping as Iris sequestered herself in her room had not been baseless paranoia; it had even affected some of the people closest to her.

“I’ve been really self-absorbed these past few days,” Iris said softly so only the two of them would hear. “I apologize for ignoring you and the crew. That isn’t the kind of leader...the kind of person I want to be. I don’t have any good excuse, but it won’t happen again.”

Soriel’s meaty hand was like a lead brick on her shoulder, but the gesture was meant to comfort. “It’s good to have you back,” she said sincerely.

“Yeah, it is,” Nuria said, grinning. “Now get over here and do your job, Just Iris.”

Feeling especially magnanimous this morning, Iris decided to let Nuria have the last word and joined her at the PokéNav. It was a high-speed navigational computer that translated the sub’s sonar and radar data into a real-time map of the sea bed and the surrounding area. Nuria punched in some commands, and the black-and-white picture output zoomed out.

“See that?” She pointed to a dark point at the top of the screen that jutted at a point. “That’s Cape Cloud. We’re at the southernmost part of the Lower East Tine.”

“You can tell all that from that grainy picture?” Soriel asked. “Looks like a bunch of static to me.”

“We’re here,” Nuria explained, pointing to the blinking dot in the center of the map, “and this is Cape Cloud. Nuvema Town is a few miles inland of the shoreline.”

“So we’re almost to Castelia,” Iris said, envisioning the topographical maps of the Trident she had in her room. “How far?”

“Another day, depending on how long we stay surfaced. That’s what I need to ask you.” Nuria handed the PokéNav back to one of the navigation officers. “We have reports that Team Plasma’s attacks on this land didn’t reach Nuvema Town, but everything to the north should be considered colonized.”

“Colonized?” Soriel said, aghast. “Just who are these assholes and why hasn’t anybody put an end to them? I fought Team Rocket in the Battle of Cinnabar, and we wiped them all out. That’s how you deal with an infestation.”

“This isn’t Kanto, and we don’t have the resources to deal with Team Plasma,” Iris said. “I don’t like their methods, and I’m disinclined to trust any kind of organized ideologists. More often than not, they resort to violence and fearmongering to impose their beliefs on others. It seems that Team Plasma’s already gotten a good start.”

“We have to surface for air,” Nuria said. “We have enough supplies to make it to Castelia, but we’ll need to restock soon.”

“You want to dock in Nuvema,” Iris said.

“We have nothing to do with Team Plasma. There’s no reason they should interfere with us even if they have a presence in Nuvema.”

“I don’t like it,” Soriel said, curling her lip. “Listen, Princess, I know these Team Plasma types. If they’re anything like Team Rocket, and I’d bet Moros’s left nut they are, then they got their teeth in everything around them. Even if Nuvema’s still standing, you can believe Team Plasma’s got ‘em under their thumb.”
“Let’s leave Lieutenant Moros’s manhood out of it when he’s not here to outbid you,” Iris said. “But I agree. The more places we visit and people see this ship and who it’s transporting, the greater the risk that Opelucid will discover us. Nuria, I don’t want us stopping in Nuvema, and I want to get to Castelia as fast as possible. Can we manage that?”

“Yeah, but are you sure?” Nuria said. “Stopping in Nuvema could be dangerous, but it would also give us a chance to learn any news we might have missed since we last surfaced. We could risk missing something important.”

Iris took a moment to consider this. “I take your point, but it’s a risk we’ll have to take. I don’t want to put the crew in harm’s way if we surface and the wrong people discover us.”

Nuria nodded. “Okay, then that’s settled. We’ll surface now and be underway again in a couple of hours. That puts us on schedule to arrive in Castelian waters by lunchtime tomorrow. Oh, and Iris?”

“What is it?”

“Thanks for apologizing. I knew you’d learn to like me. Everybody does in time.” Nuria winked cheekily.

Iris was tempted to argue, but thought better of it. Maybe it wasn’t worth putting up a fight with someone who’d stuck around long enough to see her shortcomings and still wanted to stay. “Don’t push it, Syreni.”

Nuria smiled devilishly and shooed Soriel and her out so the crew could get to work bringing the sub topside.

Iris decided to accompany Soriel to go wake up Moros, wanting to show him that she was present once again in their little team. Moros had proven nothing but gallant and loyal to Iris for as long as she’d known him; he deserved more respect from her than what she’d shown him and the rest of the crew in the last few days.

They had to pass by the mess hall to get to the living quarters, and Iris was pleasantly surprised to see Moros awake and breaking his fast across the table from Benga and a couple crewmen. Moros look tired as he stared at a fast-cooling bowl of oatmeal and breathed deeply through his nose. Across from him, Benga looked even worse clutching his head and his wild orange hair that Iris was convinced had never once been acquainted with a comb.

“Good morning!” Soriel said jovially.

She slapped Benga on the back and he nearly face-planted in his bowl of cereal. “Hnguuuh,” he made a strangled whiny sound no grown man should ever make.

“For the love of all that is sacred and good on this green earth,” Moros said in his droll way, “not today, Soriel.”

Soriel made a face. “What’s wrong with you limp dicks this morning? We’re surfacing today, be happy.”

“I’m seasick. Again,” Moros complained, rubbing his temples. “I think I threw up half my body weight this morning. What’s your excuse, Benga?”

Benga groaned unintelligibly and hung his head.

“Hangover,” Iris supplied. “He doesn’t have a legitimate excuse.”
Benga looked at her with the most pathetic kicked Lillipup eyes Iris had ever seen, and she almost felt sorry for him. “It wasn’t my fault, Nymo forced me, I swear.”

“Cap’n’s not the one feeling sorry for himself over sad cereal,” said one of the crewmembers seated next to Benga. The man, an engineer everybody called Pepito, elbowed Benga in the ribs playfully, and Benga cringed.

“I’m never drinking again,” he muttered.

“Lieutenant,” Iris addressed Moros. “We’ll be surfacing soon. Maybe some fresh air will do you good.”

“Oh, yes, that sounds like a splendid idea,” Moros said.

Iris touched a hand to his shoulder gently. “I’m sorry all this sea travel has been so difficult for you. We’ll soon be in Castelia City.”

Moros stared up at her like he forgot who she was. He managed a queasy smile. “Yes, ah, very good, Princess. Thank you for your concern.”

“As for you,” Iris said to Benga.

“Sleep it off,” Soriel said. “You better be back to normal for cards tonight. I’m cleaning you out.”

“Ugh, kill me now,” Benga said.

The PA system dinged, an indication that the sub was gaining altitude. It would soon reach the surface, and the other crewmembers in the mess hall took that as their cue to get back to their stations.

“Come on,” Soriel said. “I’ll carry you up if you promise not to blow chunks on me. This is my favorite shirt.”

“What? I’ve never seen you wear that shirt before,” Moros said.

“That’s because you never notice a beautiful thing when it’s standing right in front of you, dumbass.”

She hauled him out of his chair and half carried him down the hall. They made a strange sight, Moros skinny and listless in his sickness, and Soriel as big and strong as a Bouffalant supporting his weight effortlessly. Moros grumbled about something, and Soriel burst out laughing, but they disappeared down the hall and the sound of them died down, leaving Iris and Benga alone in the mess hall. He looked up at her sheepishly, like somehow her pity might absolve him of his splitting headache.

“Still flying high in Neverland, I see,” Iris said.

“I wish. Came crashing down a few hours ago and haven’t stopped falling,” Benga lamented.

Iris debated a moment: should she leave him here and ascend to the surface and the warm sun, or stay? She’d been wondering if they’d get some time alone today after everything he’d told her last night. It seemed somehow wrong not to mention it, not to make sure it had really transpired. Yesterday, she was in self-imposed exile in her room, and today it was as if the fight in the Dreamyard had never happened. Except that now she knew something more about Benga, the real Benga, and she had no idea what to do with that newfound knowledge.
“Stay there,” Iris said, leaving him as she headed for the kitchen. “Don’t eat that cereal, it tastes like crap.”

“Iris,” Benga whined. “Why’re you hating on my cereal? It didn’t do anything to you.”

He hung his head in his hands and quieted down as he nursed his migraine, and Iris rummaged about in the kitchen. Finding what she needed, she began mixing ingredients in a bowl and warmed up the stove. Ten minutes later, she returned to the mess hall and set down a plate piled high with food in front of Benga.

He blinked bleary eyes at the spread and slowly came back to life. “Pancakes?” he said, perking up as much as one can after a long night of heavy drinking. “For me?”

“Just stop whining and eat,” Iris said.

He didn’t need to be told twice and heartily dug in. Soon, the plate was a mess of pancake and syrup and butter. Benga was not the neatest eater in the world, but he managed not to throw everything back up. Progress.

“You know all the shit they say about sailors and drinking and, like, sea shanties?” Benga said. “It’s all true. Like there’s this one Nymo loves called For the Love of the Sea, but I guess everybody just calls it Calypso’s Cunt. I know all six verses after last night.” He paused and stared at a piece of pancake like the sight of it impaled on his fork offended him. “Oh my god, I said that out loud, didn’t I?”

“Yes, you did. Anyway, it’s your own fault for drinking too much,” Iris said. She stole a bit of pancake from his plate and chewed thoughtfully.

Benga brandished his fork at her. “Hey now,” he warned through a mouthful of possibly three whole pancakes from the way his cheeks bulged. “The truth hurts.”

Iris bit back a smile.

“Fuck, this is just what I needed. How’d you know I love pancakes?” Benga said.

“Everyone loves pancakes.”

“Ah, the great unifier. Pancakes will bring us all together, Tamers and plebs and everybody in between. Why didn’t anybody think of it until now? Oh, right, ‘cause I’m a genius, duh.”

“I feel like you’re still drunk.”

Benga looked wounded and clutched his heart. “My lady, I would never debase myself in your presence.”

“Too late. Also, less talking, more eating. And you need a haircut.”

“What’s wrong with my hair?”

Iris gave him a withering look.

“Oh, I get it,” he said, not getting it at all. “You’re jealous of my luscious locks.”

Iris snorted. “My locks are plenty luscious without any interference from yours.”

Benga got up. “Oh, yeah? Lemme feel.”
He made a grab for her hair, and Iris shot out of her chair to avoid his syrupy fingers.

“What— Don’t touch it!” she said.

Benga leaned across the table and watched her. “You didn’t mind when I touched your hair last night.”

“That was different.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah. You didn’t have sticky fingers last night.”

“Oh, is that all?” He licked his fingers clean and waggled them at her. “How ‘bout now?”

Iris rolled her eyes. “You’re obviously feeling better, so come on. I want to breathe air that hasn’t been recycled before we dive again.”

“Hey, wait up!”

Benga wolfed down another four bites of pancake in one forkful and chased after her. Iris made a quick stop at her room to retrieve Cottonee, who had woken up a little while ago and made a mess of the room shedding cotton as it tried to find a way out. It was overjoyed to see Iris and head butted her in the chest as soon as she opened the door. Back at the control room, the hatch to the roof of the submarine was open and blue skies beckoned above. Iris climbed up first, and Benga followed. It was a beautiful sunny day. The sea off the southern coast of Nuvema Town was calm and placid, blue as a gemstone, and the sun was hot and bright. Cottonee cooed and fluttered its leafy wings, excited to be outside in the fresh air.

Others were on deck soaking up the sun and taking a breather, including Moros, who leaned over the railing but did not seem to be retching, thankfully. Soriel was nowhere to be seen, perhaps flying on Charizard somewhere. More aquatic Pokémon bobbed in the water, and Iris decided to let her own Pokémon join them. Haxorus had no desire to do anything but sit in the sun, and Cottonee was more than happy to join it. They made an odd sight, to be sure, with Haxorus lounging on its side and Cottonee tucked snugly in the groove of its right tusk.

Gyarados and Dragonair landed in the water, the former leaning its massive head toward Iris for a pat before swimming off in search of food and a chance to stretch out. Dragonair, however, lingered by the sub, lethargic as it floated in the gentle waves. Benga let his own Pokémon out, too, and Sceptile took a cue from Haxorus and soaked up the sun on deck, but at a respectable distance. Volcarona and Noivern took to the skies and disappeared in the direction of land to the north. Only Zweilous seemed interested in hanging out with Benga as it nibbled his shorts and nearly pantsed him demanding attention.

“Looks like he’s gonna evolve pretty soon now,” Benga said as he observed Dragonair lazing in the water below.

“He’s been like that for a while now,” Iris said. “Dragonite take forever to evolve in the wild. With a Titan it’s even harder, you know that.”

“Experience and a truly selfless bond,” Benga said. “You believe that?”

Iris thought about Clair and her Dragonite. It had taken years for Dragonite to evolve even under her expert tutelage. The Blackthorn Elder said the mark of a truly perfect Titan was the ability to raise a Pokémon of the Dratini line to maturity. Unlike with most other Pokémon capable of
evolution, with the Dratini line it took something more than training the body, something beyond the reach of any one living being alone. In the wild, Dratini and its ilk had each other. As a domesticated Pokémon, it only had its trainer, and their bond had to be one of true selfless devotion for Dratini to grow fully into Dragonite, one of the four colossal king Dragon species. The other three were Hydreigon, Salamence, and Goodra, each capable of reaching sizes larger than any other Pokémon alive today.

“I’ve seen it,” Iris said. “But who knows how much longer it’ll really be? There’s a reason Dragonite are so rare, especially trained ones.”

Benga shrugged. “Maybe, maybe not. And maybe you’re totally off the mark and all this time, Dragonair just had gas.”

Iris frowned deeply at him, and Benga laughed. Zweilous nipped at Iris’s skirt because goddamnit, somebody was going to pay attention to it.

“Zweilous, on the other hand,” Benga said, patting each of Zweilous’s shaggy heads. “Who really knows?”

“Hydreigon is one of the four king Dragons, so you should know. You really don’t have any idea about when Zweilous might evolve even though you’re its trainer?” Iris asked.

Benga shrugged. “This one’s grown at least four inches since I met you, which is faster than normal, I guess.” He measured Zweilous’s height against his shoulder. “Yup. I mean, I know I’m on the right track, but it’s not like the Deino I caught way back when came with an instruction manual.”

“Well, he can have the leftover pancakes so he’ll grow up big and strong,” Iris said, scratching Zweilous’s left head.

“She,” Benga corrected. “Can’t you see her sultry long eyelashes?”

Iris rolled her eyes, and Benga laughed.

“Hey, you were right about coming out here,” Benga said as he leaned his weight on the railing and stared out to sea. “Feels like I haven’t seen the sky in months.”

“It’s been a few days,” Iris said. But she leaned on the railing next to him and relished the taste of the fresh ocean air.

To the north, she could see the tops of buildings and a few outlying houses that made up Nuvema Town, but the Oculus was floating too far away from the shore to see any people or Pokémon that might be out and about. All for the better, Iris decided. The fewer people who knew about her, the more of an advantage she would have when she finally made herself known to Drayden, and she would need all the advantage she could get.

Thinking about the future inevitably drew her focus back to the past, to everything her father had done that ended up with her spirited away to distant Blackthorn in hiding and everything she’d done to make it back here in pursuit of a crown she’d been born to wear. Cadmus was king before her, and it was his blood that passed the crown rightfully to her. But if Cadmus was her connection to the crown, what else did he connect her to? Those atrocities he had committed, the people and Pokémon he had hurt, were those things her legacy, too?

“You cannot be a queen so long as your father’s ghost sits the throne you seek,” Caitlin had warned her.
When people looked at Iris, would they see only Cadmus?

“Ow! Hey, you cut that out,” Benga said.

Zweilous’s litigious heads were squabbling about something, and when he tried to break it up, the left one bit his hand. Sceptile opened its eyes and hissed at Zweilous, but any threat from the gargantuan reptile was lost on Zweilous. Cottonee perked up and watched, transfixed, as Zweilous’s two heads continued to snap at each other, and Haxorus seemed to have fallen asleep. Iris watched, bemused, as Benga tried to tempt the heads with a game of Pick a Hand. The right head guessed correctly, and Benga rewarded it with a small treat. This only made the left head jealous and it bit the right head’s long neck in retribution.

“You’re making it worse,” Iris said.

“Nah, she’s just trying to get attention,” Benga said. He produced another treat from his pocket and waggled it in front of the left head, who immediately abandoned its assault on its other half and gobbled up the treat. “See? The way to a two-headed Dragon’s heart is through her shared stomach.”

Cottonee had grown curious and floated toward Benga, wanting a treat of its own. Its Fairy dust made Benga sneeze violently and send Cottonee flying back. Iris had to jump to catch the weightless Fairy. Below, Iris’s Dragonair reared up and poked its head over the railing, drawn to the commotion.

“Oh, gimme a break,” Benga said, rubbing his nose. “Everybody wants a piece of me!”

Iris set Cottonee on Dragonair’s head. “You’re the one with the food.”

Dragonair hummed as Iris petted its snout. Its large dark eyes watching her had a soothing effect, like simply being in Dragonair’s presence could make her feel warm and at ease. Cottonee bounced around on Dragonair’s head and whistled, wanting to be petted, too. It was uncanny how much they trusted her, how loyal they were to her. What did they see in her? A Titan whose will cannot be defied? A princess, like what Belaron and the others of her crew saw? Or something else entirely?

“Benga,” Iris said, “what do you see in me?”

Benga had extricated himself from Zweilous temporarily and slumped against the railing, exhausted from having wrestled the two-headed Dragon off him before it could eat his shirt.

“Huh?” he said. “What do I see in you?”

“That’s what I asked.”

Benga stood up straight and took a moment to look Iris up and down, then down and up. No one but Benga could make a simple glance look so seedy.

“Where should I start?” he said, grinning.

Iris bristled. “Not like that, you idiot. Why would I ever ask you that?”

Benga shrugged. “Why wouldn’t you? Everybody likes to be told they’re beautiful once in a while. Nothin’ wrong with that.”

Iris crossed her arms and felt her stomach do a weird flippy thing it did not often do, least of all
around Benga. He noticed her flush and smiled wider.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Iris snapped, but it came out sounding more like a question than a command.

“What, like you’re beautiful?” Benga teased, unable to hold back his laughter. “What’s so bad about that?”

“I’m trying to be serious here,” Iris protested. It sounded whiny even to her ears. What the hell was wrong with her?

“So what you mean is that you think you’re beautiful?” Benga calmed down and regarded her a moment. “What’re you really asking?”

Iris shifted her weight and looked out to sea, hoping its endless expanse would lend her a bit of strength. “Just what I said. What do you see in me? Like... Who am I?”

“You’re Iris,” he said at length as he did his best to take her question seriously.

“And?”

“And, what?”

“Isn’t there anything else?”

“Is there s’posed to be?”

Iris was starting to regret asking him.

“You’re just Iris,” Benga insisted. “Like Nuria says all the time.”

“Just Iris,” Iris repeated.

Benga was silent for a bit, and they stood there with Dragonair and Cottonee in between them, the latter cooing in question.

“You’re the same as when I first saw you,” he said. “A girl and her Dragons.”

“Right,” Iris said. “A Titan. You suspected it when we first met.”

“Iris.” Benga scooted closer to her, and she could feel the warmth he radiated. “I can’t help you if you don’t talk to me. Why don’t you tell me what’s really on your mind?”

What could Benga know of her demons? Of the past that haunted her as much as she haunted it? What did he know of being alone, of living every day as an outcast?

Everything, she thought. He told me everything.

Of course he would know. After everything he’d revealed to her last night, he would know best of all. He even knew the real Cadmus, the one Iris had only read about. All she had were memories of a man no one ever even knew existed.

“How do you do it?” she asked. “How can you smile and make friends with everyone and go on when you lost so much?”

Benga’s expression fell as a shadow passed over him. Perhaps he was recalling their conversation last night. Did he regret telling her those things? Iris suddenly felt the inexplicable urge to
apologize for knowing those things about him.

“'Cause I keep hoping one day I’ll get it all back,” he said. “Everything I lost, everything I gave up, I keep thinking I’ll find it out there, somewhere, with someone else. I’ve been all over the world,” he said as if in a dream, lost in the foggy plains of memory. “I’ve seen so many places, met so many people, and every time, I changed. I became someone else, anyone else. I just wanted to live in that moment, to forget what I’d left behind and to put off whatever was waiting for me the next day because if I could just stay there, then maybe...maybe it could be real for just a moment.”

Iris felt her throat clench painfully as she listened to the words pour out, the truth he hadn’t shared with anybody else, and she was doing it again, taking this from him. Her hand found his shoulder, and he leaned into her touch without thinking.

“I just wanna linger in that moment, to feel...to feel timeless, like I can be whoever I want right now, forever, and nothing that ever happened before or might happen later exists. Haven’t you ever felt that?”

His fingers closed around her arm and followed it to the hand she’d rested on his shoulder. His dark eyes searched hers, looking for something, anything that might validate his feelings because somehow, he needed to hear it from her.

“A timeless present,” Iris said, those words ringing in her head like they’d been there before.

“Yeah,” Benga said. “I know it sounds kinda cheesy, but I don’t know how else to describe it.”

“No,” Iris shushed him, thinking. “No, I mean, I’ve heard that before.”

“What do you mean?”

She hesitated for a moment, wondering if she should say more. She had not spoken a word of this to anyone. Did she dare to put her trust in Benga? He had done so for her when he revealed his own secrets, after all. And this secret was not just hers if that woman could be believed.

“Iris, what?” Benga pressed, his curiosity piqued.

“Before we picked you up, we stopped in Undella Town. I had business there with a woman—a Clairvoyant called Caitlin,” Iris said, keeping her voice down so the other crewmembers taking in the fresh air nearby would not overhear. “She, um... She gave me a prophecy.”

She was sure he would laugh at her, but Benga was the picture of calm and sobriety, no traces of his hangover left as he processed her words.

“Seriously?” he said. “A real prophecy?”

“I don’t know, it’s not like I’ve ever gotten one before.”

“Some Clairvoyants can see the future,” Benga said more to himself than to Iris. “I met one in Kalos—Olympia, the Anistar City Gym Leader. I asked her to tell my fortune, and she told me to go home.”

Iris frowned. “That was her incredible insight?”

“Well, I’m home, and since I met you, it looks like my fortune’s changed a lot, so...?”

“This... It was different. It felt real. That sounds so stupid.” Iris repressed a shiver at the memory of
Caitlin’s filmy blind eyes come to life in dazzling gold and visions untold. It felt *real*.

“Try me,” Benga said. “I’ve got a high tolerance for the impossible.”

Iris nodded reluctantly and recited Caitlin’s cryptic prophecy for him. “The Dragon is thrice blind: one eye is fixated on the nebulous past, one is trapped in a timeless present, and one looks to a future that can never be. When all three eyes see as one, the Crown will shatter, and a Truthseeker will appear to fill the Void left behind.”

A protracted silence stretched as the weight of those words seemed to conjure a chill on this hot summer day. Dragonair, who continued to hover over Iris and Benga, nudged Iris with its snout and hummed low in its throat.


“You believe me?” Iris said.

“Uh, yeah. I doubt you coulda made that whole thing up on your own, no offense.”

Offense was the least of Iris’s worries right now. “I never told anyone that,” she admitted, averting her gaze to focus on stroking Dragonair’s neck. “Not even Syr Bel, and he accompanied me to visit Caitlin.”

Benga shifted and turned his body to face her. “Smart move. I bet he woulda told you to forget about it, knowing him. Talk about blind.”

Iris let that one slide as the mystery of Caitlin’s prophecy arrested her fascination again after weeks of keeping it to herself and getting nowhere. “I’ve been over everything I could think of. A Dragon with three eyes, or three heads, I even considered the legendary Dragons.”

“Zekrom and Reshiram,” Benga said. “Except there’s only two of them, and they sorta don’t exist.”

“I know. But what you said before, about living in the present, this is where I heard it before: one eye is trapped in a timeless present. The prophecy talks about exactly that.”

“Oh... Oh! Wait, you think that could be me?” Benga said.

“What? Oh, no, I didn’t mean—”

“Wait, *wait!* That makes so much sense,” Benga prattled on. “It’s a Dragon!”

Iris knocked him in the shoulder. “Keep your voice down!”

Benga took her face in his hands and brought her close enough for her to count the freckles on his nose. His dark eyes were full of mirth and wonder as he grinned down at her. “Iris, it’s us!”

Iris was so taken aback by how close he was all of a sudden that it took her a moment to react. His hands were rough but warm on her cheeks. He played with her hair with a thumb, twirling the violet lock around his finger. “Us?” she said, wondering when the hell she’d gotten out of breath.

“Yeah! The Dragon is thrice blind, right?”

Iris considered this. “The Dragon, as in, Exhibit A.” She indicated Dragonair.

“No.” Benga took her hands in his, excited like a child celebrating his birthday and made all the more ridiculous with Cottonee happily burrowing in his hair. “We’re Dragons, too.”
“Titans,” Iris said. “But then, the thrice blind bit is—”

“Three Titans,” Benga said, that mischievous glow in his eyes lending him the perfect air of knavery to his forever young and carefree demeanor. “One’s fixated on the past, one’s living in the present, and the last one’s expecting some kind of impossible future.”

“And you think you’re the one referred to in the present,” Iris said. “Assuming for a second that you’re on to something, what makes you think you’re in my prophecy? There must be hundreds of Titans scattered all around the world.”

“Yeah, but none of ‘em’s here with you.”

“...Okay, I’ll humor you. If you’re the present, then which am I? Past or future?”

“That’s easy. You’re the one who’s too focused on the past,” Benga said. His hands were still holding hers, and his thumbs tickled as they ran over her knuckles.

*I’m fixated on the past?*

She supposed it was true. All this time, all her life she’d fretted over things past, old wrongs and injustices, how she would right them as soon as she took back the crown. The truth about Cadmus and his past was a constant source of anxiety and fear and shame for her these past few days to the point that she had been unable even to leave her room and confide in Belaron, her sworn knight and protector and the one who knew her the longest of anyone here. She’d met Benga just weeks ago, a fellow Titan in exile, and already she’d placed a trust in him she’d never afforded her loyal knight. Since meeting Benga, her fortune seemed to have changed, too.

*Clairvoyants... Can they truly glimpse the future?*

Did Caitlin know she would meet Benga? Did she foresee them having this conversation? And if so, what else did she see?

“So, if I’m the past and you’re the present, then who’s the future?” Iris asked.

“I have no idea!” Benga said. “But c’mon, this is definitely about us, it’s the only thing that makes sense.”

“‘When all three eyes see as one, the Crown will shatter’,” Iris said. “The rest of it doesn’t make any sense if it’s about us. I mean to take the crown, not shatter it.”

“Huh, yeah, I guess you’re right... And I don’t really get that Truthseeker bit. Titans aren’t exactly known for being paragons of truth. But! I’m telling you, Iris, that first part’s gotta be about us. What’re the odds that we ran into each other? Out of all the exile princesses traveling around in submarines, how’d I end up with you?”

He was smiling again, toothy and bright in that charmingly fiendish way he had, and Iris wanted to believe him. Yes, it was about them, it connected them. She wanted to believe it so much.

“You make everything seem so easy,” Iris said.

Benga’s smile fell. “Why can’t it be? Just this once?”

They were not speaking of Caitlin’s prophecy anymore, and Iris did not have much of an answer for him when she hardly knew herself. He touched her temple lightly, his fingers barely brushing her bangs, and for just a moment there was only the two of them here floating in the ocean, the
same as when they’d flown for the first time or when they found the hidden grotto in the Dreamyard. She laid her hand over his.

“Benga,” she said.

“All aboard!” a crewmember announced. “We dive!”

The people on deck began to recall whatever Pokémon they had released for some fresh air and descend below deck. Soriel and Charizard landed with a thud, and Haxorus woke up from its nap and snarled viciously at the orange pseudo-Dragon. Charizard snapped and smoked as it held its ground.

“Oh, quit it you goddamned prima donnas,” Soriel said. She recalled Charizard just as Moros worked up the strength to leave the railing. He looked a little better than he had earlier this morning.

Dragonair slithered on deck, and Cottonee flew into Iris’s arms, whistling excitedly. She and Benga parted.

“Look, my two favorite Titans,” Nuria said. She climbed over the railing dripping water. Her Gorebyss gave her a leg up.

“Look, my favorite corpse-pink sea monster,” Benga said.

Gorebyss had no eyelids, and its long mouth made a sucking sound that Iris did not care to dwell on. It followed the submarine along with Nymo’s Huntail, but there was no denying that it looked like more of an undead monster than any kind of protector. Nuria patted Gorebyss’s long snout, and it dove back underwater out of sight.

“You two look friendly,” Nuria said. “Something I should know about?” She grinned wolfishly.

“No,” Iris said, setting Cottonee on her head. “Let’s just get underway.”

Gyarados returned shortly thereafter with bits of some unidentified fish stuck in between its teeth. Benga’s Sceptile took one look at Gyarados and hissed, its bushy tail puffed out like an angry Delcatty’s.

Benga put two fingers in his mouth and whistled so loudly that Cottonee jumped in fright. A couple minutes later, Volcarona and Noivern returned and landed on deck. Noivern, jittery and excitable like it had had too much caffeine, hopped to Benga’s side and tried to climb on top of him. Zweilous took immediate offense at this and, with both heads united, growled and snapped at Noivern.

“Oh, guys, break it up,” Benga said, recalling all his Pokémon before they could cause any damage.

“Do your Dragons always try to fight over you?” Nuria said.

“Hey, I can’t help it if everybody loves me.”

Iris recalled all her Pokémon save for Cottonee, and the three of them followed the other crewmembers down the hatch.

“Next stop is Castelia,” Nuria said, peeling off her wetsuit as he led Iris and Benga to the control room. “And perhaps some new allies in the Bug Tamers.”
“Gym Leader Burgh?” Benga said. “Never met him, but I hear he’s not the friendliest to outsiders. Volucris never are.”

“I don’t need friends, I need allies,” Iris said.

The ride to Castelia went by quickly as Iris revisited every bit of history and information she had about Castelia City, including speaking to some of the Oculus crewmembers who had visited it before. She did not learn anything new that she did not already know, which gave her confidence. A battle loomed ahead, but not a battle of swords and fire. She needed Castelia to stand with her when she challenged Opelucid. As a wealthy port city with the largest standing infantry on the Trident, Castelia could offer a threatening check to Opelucid’s superior military forces as well as a strategic location so close to Opelucid itself. This battle would be one of words, each thrust and slash a give and take across the negotiating table. And to win a negotiation, exhaustive preparation was essential. Burgh might not like outsiders, but Iris was confident that some of their goals aligned. If she could convince him that Castelia’s best interest was in backing her over Drayden, she could walk away with an almost ironclad prospect of victory in her pocket.

It was to this end that she addressed the Oculus crew the next morning just before they surfaced in Castelia’s harbor. They were all gathered in the viewing room, their backs to the dark ocean beyond the Oculus’s bow window. Iris gazed into the endless black as she explained her position and her intentions for Castelia, as though whatever lay beyond in the dark deep was watching her, judging her readiness to lead.

“I owe each and every one of you my deepest gratitude for getting me and my people here,” Iris said in flowing Adriati. “If not for the dedicated efforts and loyalty of every single crewmember and officer on the Oculus, none of this would have been possible. I have not had the honor of working with a finer crew than this one. I can see why Gym Leader Marlon has so much faith in you and this ship.

“We are here in Castelia to parlay with Gym Leader Burgh. Just as your Gym Leader stands with me, I mean to convince Burgh to join my cause—our cause. However, if negotiations fail and we find ourselves facing swords instead of words,” Iris went on, her eyes scanning the faces of the Adriati men and women standing before her, “then I want you to make haste and leave this place as soon as you can. I won’t subject you to the risk of harm for my sake. You have done what you promised to do in bringing me this far.”

Iris’s eyes were drawn to the black abyss beyond the glass once more. There was nothing out there but the interminable dark and cold, and if she let it, she knew it would suck her in until there was nothing left. It would be easy to escape it, to turn away and run from here before it could swallow her, but she did not come to Unova to run away from it again. Maybe Benga was right, maybe she was fixated on the past as the prophecy warned. But even so, she was ready to face it. The time to run and hide was over.

“But today is where the true battle begins, and I ask for help from those who would willingly give it. I would like five volunteers to accompany me and my people to the city to parlay with Gym Leader Burgh. Understand that there is a risk we may be engaged in battle should negotiations deteriorate past a certain point. I will go regardless, but I won’t make that decision for anyone else. Of the rest of you, I ask only that you remain here at your posts ready to set sail again at a moment’s notice.”

*With or without me,* echoed the unspoken words so loudly in Iris’s head she was almost sure she’d
Benga stood behind her next to Soriel, Moros, and Belaron. She could feel his presence and see the bright orange mop he called hair out of the corner of her eye, a loud contrast to the inky blackness weighing down on all sides. He had been the first one to insist on going with her to meet with Burgh aside from Belaron and the other Blackthorn soldiers, who Iris knew would follow her into this and any other danger no matter the situation. Perhaps that was enough. Even if no one else wanted to volunteer, at least he had. If she could convince one person to believe in her, then she surely couldn’t be chasing her own tail down the rabbit hole. Or if she was, then at least she wasn’t alone. The Oculus crew had already done enough, and they seemed to share that sentiment as no one spoke for the longest time.

Iris nodded stiffly and kept her head high. “I understand,” she said. “Then, as soon as we surface, I’ll be off—”

“I’ll volunteer,” Nuria interrupted her. She pushed her way past some of the crewmembers standing in front of her. “I don’t mind Bugs. And I don’t mind squashing them if they become a nuisance.”

“Nuria,” Iris said, almost losing her composure. She swallowed hard. “You don’t have to.”

“And you never learn, Just Iris.” In the common tongue she said loudly, “I hear Dragonsblood flows fiercely, but we Adriati know the sea is fiercer still. The sea is in your blood as much as it’s in ours. If I learned anything over these past few weeks with you, then without a doubt it’s that.”

Iris did not know what to say, and before she could think of anything, Ernesto the engineer who had spent the other night drinking merrily with Benga came forward.

“I will go,” he announced. “The sea shares its bounty with all of us. I am proud to share what little I have, too, with one of our own.”

“I’ll go,” said an older woman who worked with the navigation team.

“I volunteer!”

“Allow me to accompany you.”

“I will go, too!”

More of them added their voices to the call to arms, and soon Iris had nearly every crewmember clamoring to accompany her to Castelia and defend her if need be. But more than that, they wanted to be seen with her, the exiled bastard of a disgraced former king they did not answer to. Iris had always been on the margins of life growing up in Blackthorn, from her origins to her controversial birth to the color of her skin; now, for the first time perhaps in all her life, she was at the center of it, a daughter of the sea the same as them. There was no duty or obligation here, but a higher sense loyalty, something older and more powerful than anything a last name could ever confer. Iris had never felt such fierce pride directed at her from anyone, let alone from an entire crew of people.

Could this be what it was like to be a queen?

“Oi, you lot, quiet down!” Nuria shouted to be heard. “She asked for five, not fifty! Who volunteered after Ernesto? Was it you, Esmeralda?”

“I dunno what the hell you said to them,” Benga said, “but whatever it was, you kinda did look like royalty just now. I’m a little star-struck!”
His hand was warm on the small of her back, and she was flushed from the exhilaration of it all.

“Well...good, you should be,” Iris said.

Cottonee, who had been with Benga while Iris addressed the crew of the Oculus, whistled and fluttered around in between them shedding Fairy dust as it sensed the good mood in the room. Benga wrinkled his nose, about to sneeze, and his face contorted in such a way that Iris couldn’t help but laugh at him. He ended up keeling over sneezing.

“Well! It is no time for making a-choo!” Nymo said as he joined them.

Benga wiped his face and sniffled. He gave Nymo the okay sign.

“Iris Lady, I am having the eager for joining you in Castelia, but my Eye is blind without the captain, which is being me,” Nymo said. “You know this.”

“Yes, I know. I appreciate your offer, but I agree that you should stay with the Oculus.” In Adriati so that Benga and Belaron, who drew up beside them, would not overhear she added, “And I meant what I said before. At the first sign of any trouble, I want you gone. Don’t wait for me.”

Nymo looked grave, a queer look on a man whose natural state was a jovial smile and a full-bellied laugh. “The sub will be ready to leave in a rush, but only once you’re back on it. I promised Marlon I would keep both my eyes on you.” He pointed to his only remaining eye. “This one, and the Oculus.”

Iris set her jaw and nodded. “Then I’ll do everything I can not to keep you waiting.”

“Good! I’ll be missing your lovely face very much the longer you’re away.” He winked at her and headed back to the control room, barking orders for his crew to get back to work if they were staying.

“What was that about?” Belaron asked.

“Just making sure we’re all aware of the plan,” Iris said.

“We have our five,” Nuria said. “Time to suit up. Oh, I’ve always wanted to say that.”

“Yeah, it’s like we’re the X-Men or something,” Benga agreed.

“X what?” Moros said.

“Wow, must be miserable to have a stick up your ass and be living under a rock,” Soriel said.

“Princess, we should prepare,” Belaron cut in. “All this frivolity will only shift our focus from what’s actually important.”

Iris did not miss the way Benga’s mood visibly soured at the interruption, but she wanted to get going, too, before she lost her nerve or began to second-guess herself. Negotiating with Marlon was one thing, but she had no connection to Burgh and Castelia and no reason to deserve their help, unless she could give them one.

“Let’s be ready to depart in half an hour. That should give everyone enough time to change and make any other preparations,” Iris said.

Satisfied, Belaron took his leave, followed by Soriel and Moros.
“Tamer and proud, guys,” Iris said to Nuria and Benga as she headed out next.

Cottonee zoomed after her, and Nuria laughed.

Half an hour later, Iris was dressed in a suit of leather and Kommo-o scale armor that Clair had gifted her at the start of this journey and Surfing on Gyarados toward the shore. The Oculus floated just below the surface a couple miles offshore to remain inconspicuous. It was a cloudy day, and the closer Iris got to shore, she began to notice sand particles floating in the wind and shielded her eyes. There was a vast wasteland north of Castelia, the Relic Desert, and its storms were known to be infrequent but ruinous.

Yet in spite of nature’s brutality, Castelia thrived. It was the richest and most populous city in Unova, and Iris was in awe of the sight of it. She had visited major cities in Johto, including such sprawling metropolises as Goldenrod, but even that had not prepared her for this. Castelia’s many skyscrapers were a metal mountain range looming as tall as giants over the vast commercial harbor that was the gateway to all maritime trade in the country. This place was undoubtedly the pinnacle of human creation, a metal mecca of wealth, scientific achievement, and opportunity. Iris had never seen anything quite like it.

“What a sight, right?” Benga said.

He was standing next to Iris holding on to Gyarados’s trident horn and shielding his eyes from the sun. Iris thought Surfing in on Gyarados would be ostentatious enough without Volcarona’s added presence. All around them, the rest of Iris’s party flanked them on their own seafaring Pokémon, except for Soriel, who opted to Fly on Charizard. Nuria and her Sharpedo were leading the charge up ahead.

“Yeah,” Iris said, august as she took in the cityscape.

“Hard to believe, but Castelia can’t even hold a candle to Lumiose City,” Benga said. “The City of Light, they call it, and for good reason.”

Iris could hardly imagine anything grander than Castelia, but she supposed Benga would know better than her given his extensive travels. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say you were making that up.”

He laughed. “One day, I’ll take you to see it. There, and anywhere else we wanna go.”

He was grinning with the wind in his hair and the sun on his face as he faced forward, and Iris could practically taste his sense of adventure and wonder. For all the hardship and tragedy he had seen in his young life, she could only marvel at where he found the energy to live like he would be forever young. She could never be like that, not with all the responsibilities and duties and promises she had to uphold, but more and more, she found herself admiring that about Benga, envying it even. Except that he seemed to want to include her, take her with him, share his vision of the world. What did he see in her that made him behave that way?

“Yeah,” she said. “One day. I’d really like that.” It was a beautiful dream, if nothing else.

Cottonee liked that, too, and whistled excitedly as it flapped its little leafy wings, happy to be surrounded by people on both sides. Gyarados growled all of a sudden as they approached the shore, and Iris ran a hand over its head fin.

“What is it?” she asked.

Gyarados had slowed, and Iris saw that up ahead, Nuria and the other Oculus crewmembers had
stopped altogether.

“Why have they stopped?” Belaron called from below where he was Surfing on his Feraligatr’s back.

Iris was about to respond when she saw something white curling through the sky in the distance. At first she’d thought it was just a large and low-hanging cloud, but now she realized it was a thick smokestack, the remains of a doused fire. From the size of it, the fire must have spread over several city blocks.

“Iris, look,” Benga said, pointing. “I thought that building was just short, but it’s totally wrecked.”

Iris followed his line of sight to a shorter skyscraper that had once been much taller. Jagged metal columns were warped and bent where they’d been torn clean off, and broken glass reflected the sun’s rays. Nearer to shore, debris floated in the harbor that looked like it had come from a number of capsized ships, large ones.

“Iris!” shouted Ernesto. He was soaking wet from a recent dive and hung onto a Lanturn. “There are multiple ships wrecked on the seafloor. They’re very recent, maybe just days old at the most.”

Iris got a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. Castelia seemed to have suffered some major damage, and a number of ships had scuttled in the harbor? Something was not right.

“They have any recognizable standards?” Iris asked Ernesto.

“None that I could tell. They are in very bad shape.”

“What the hell happened here?” Benga said.

“I don’t know, but I have a very bad feeling about it.”

Iris was beginning to regret not stopping in Nuvema Town to inquire after any news and recent events. Whatever had happened here would have been news even in the sleepy seaside town. But what was done was done. It did not change the fact that she needed to try to get Gym Leader Burgh to back her claim to Opelucid’s throne.

“We proceed as planned,” Iris announced to the rest of the party. “I want to know what’s happened here before we approach Gym Leader Burgh.”

“I hate to say it, but it looks like Castelia was in the middle of a war and we just missed it,” Benga said. “Team Plasma did restrict their trade agreements when they took over Nacrene.”

“I wonder if we really missed it or if it’s still going on,” Iris said. “We should be ready for anything, but we have to find out what happened here.”

Gyarados ferried them to the docks, where Iris and Benga dismounted and joined the others.

“Stay here,” she told Gyarados. “I’ll be back soon.”

Gyarados sank into the water and only its prominent dorsal fin breached the surface as it slithered below the surface like a shark on the hunt.

“Everyone, leave your Surfing Pokémon in the harbor,” Iris said. “I want us ready to leave at a moment’s notice.”

Everyone obliged, and soon they were all heading together toward the city proper. And as they
went, Iris began to grow increasingly fearful of whatever they had stumbled upon here. The destruction grew exponentially worse as they left the harbor. The roads were smashed as though a bulldozer had come through here. Entire buildings were razed to rubble, and under their remains Iris could see glimpses of the death she could smell in the air. A dusty arm caked in blood poked out from a pile of crumbled cement as though beckoning for help. Belaron took a knee beside it.

“This is a couple days old,” he said as he examined it. “Whoever this man was, he died recently.”

*What the hell happened here?* Iris thought to herself, not sure she really wanted to know.

“I don’t like this,” Nuria said. “If we go much farther inland, most of our Pokémon won’t be able to fight. They can’t walk on land.”

“Nidoking and Kangaskhan have no problem fighting on dry land,” Moros said, releasing both of his Pokémon.

Nidoking and Kangaskhan each towered taller than Soriel, the tallest and largest of their party, but even with their ferocious presence standing guard, Iris felt vulnerable and exposed at the site of what she could only assume was the consequence of a bloody and pyrrhic victory, but for whom? She did not want to think about how many bodies had been buried beneath her feet under the rubble.

Nuria drew a curved blade from a sheath at her hip. “Thanks, but I like to be prepared.”

Iris placed a hand on the pommel of her own sword, drawing what strength from it that she could. “Let’s go.”

They went, and as they left the harbor and its immediate surroundings behind and entered what had once been the downtown area, Arsenio, an older crewman with a nose bent from many past breaks and a clean-cut black beard that matched his intense eyes, was the first to spot the presence of others. His Araquanid, a nightmarish spider big enough for a grown man to mount and known to drown its prey in the water bubble around its head for faster and more efficient consumption, made an awful gurgling sound that sent chills down Iris’s spine when it spotted a Turtonator at the end of the destroyed block.

The Dragon turtle was as big as Arsenio’s Araquanid and moved around on all fours to protect its vulnerable belly. Its shell was an impenetrable shield of bone spikes reinforced with Dragonglass. The spikes were hollow and could spew highly combustible gas capable of creating massive explosions in high quantities. A lethal Pokémon perhaps more suited to life alone and away from civilization, few people trained them. Turtonator spied Araquanid and then the rest of Iris’s party and hissed. The black spikes on its shell glistened with heat as Turtonator began to leak a foul-smelling flammable gas from them. Its trainer, a tall blond man with a handsome face, looked at Iris’s party like he couldn’t quite believe they were standing there.

“Oh,” he said, “I thought we cleared the southern district of survivors already. Where have you lot been hiding?” He took a moment to look them over. “...Or maybe you weren’t hiding at all.”

Benga suddenly grabbed Iris’s wrist in a painful grip.

“What— Let go, what’s wrong with you?” Iris hissed.

“I know that guy,” Benga said, baffled.

“What?”
“We’re not hiding,” Belaron said, stepping forward to speak for the group. “We’re here to speak with the Gym Leader. Who are you?”

“The Gym Leader, you say?” the blond man repeated.

Iris did not like his look. He seemed to be thinking constantly as he surveyed her party, his courtesies merely a stalling tactic for him to calculate. His eyes were constantly moving, plotting something, though she could not guess what. Whoever this person was, Iris had the feeling he was much more than he seemed.

“That’s right,” Belaron said. He placed a hand on the pommel of his longsword. Dressed in his full armor, he was a sight to behold despite his years. “Why don’t you stand aside, boy. I’m not here for idle chatter.”

“Now that’s a shame because I delight in all things idle, especially chatter. I do so love getting to know people. So, Syr Knight, why don’t you do what you do best and stand aside so I may idle here a bit longer with whomever you serve.”

Belaron was taken aback at this man’s audacity, but Iris was more concerned with the fact that he had recognized Belaron as a Ridder Knight. She was about to say something when Benga let her go with a silent warning to stay quiet and pushed his way past the Oculus crew and Belaron.

“Thorys Falk,” he said with booming joviality. “It’s been years.” Benga bowed so flamboyantly that it was impossible not to look at him.

Indeed, Thorys’s attention was suddenly fixated on Benga, and Iris slipped closer to Moros and his Kangaskhan. She had only ever seen Benga make such a flourish when he wanted to be the center of attention, and if he wanted this man’s eyes on him now, he did not want them on her.

Thorys was visibly surprised to see Benga, and Turtonator snapped its toothless beak menacingly. “Benga... Now this is twist. It’s been, what...seven years?”

“You’ve been counting. I’m flattered,” Benga said.

“Of course, dear cousin. How could I forget the day you left? It was like the cleaners washing away the night’s piss from the streets. They never looked so brand new.”

“Sorry to hear that. I guess it must be a lot harder for you now to divert attention from your, uh, habits. Then again, it’s not really a sin if you stick to pleb women, right?” Benga whistled. “Seven years later, I don’t even wanna know how deep in the hole you are. And yeah, I fully intended that pun.”

Thorys’s smile had thinned, and the veneer of suave charm began to crack. “Always such a funny man, Benga. Tell me, is that a prerequisite for all vanithers, or just something you pick up on the run?”

Moros made a sound of disgust at Thorys’s use of that filthy curse. Vanither was not a word spoken lightly in the Titan community and reserved for the worst traitors and deserters, for there was no crime more heinous than to turn one’s back on one’s family. Iris had seen men try to kill each other over less egregious an insult.

If Benga was bothered by the slur, he hid it well enough. He changed the subject, however. “I’m here to talk to Burgh. Any idea where I can find him?”
Thorys laughed, mirthful and rich, the kind of laugh that might melt a girl’s heart if not for the ugliness it was meant to hide, from what Benga had implied. “I have an idea.”

“This is a waste of time,” Belaron said. “You have no authority here, Benga, and I can see that your acquaintance with this riff raff will only get in our way. Stand aside.”

Iris was taken aback at her faithful knight’s interference, but before she could do anything about it, more strangers approached and joined Thorys. There was a group of eight men and women of all ages, the oldest well past Belaron’s age but dressed in gleaming armor all the same. They had Pokémon with them, too—Gabite and Gastrodon and Fraxure, among others—and Moros’s Nidoking and Kangaskhan growled in warning. A woman who Iris could only describe as ghastly spoke for them.

“Thorys, you were supposed to report in,” she said. “What’s going on here?”

Her skin was so pale white that she looked more corpse than human, and her dark eyes were sunken and ringed with shadows as though they had been hollowed out with charcoal. Stringy white hair as brittle as straw hung limp around her gaunt cheeks and shoulders. Worst of all, however, were the inflamed veins that crisscrossed every visible surface of skin—her hands and arms, chest, even her face, like a disease. Some of the crew whispered amongst themselves in superstitious fright at such a gruesome sight, though Iris could not blame them. This woman looked like the malignant spawn of some demon. Soriel drew her sword and moved in front of Iris instinctively.

“Just catching up with an old friend,” Thorys said. “You might remember him.”

She shifted her sunken eyes to Benga, who was glaring openly now.

“Caelith,” he said, the resentment in his tone plain to hear.

“That’s ‘General’ to you, vanither,” Caelith said coldly.

Iris had had enough. Clearly, these people were from Benga’s past, Titans, and that could mean only one thing: Opelucid was here, and she was not prepared for this. There would be no meeting Burgh today, if he was even still alive after whatever had happened here. The situation was deteriorating rapidly, and there was no stopping it unless she intervened now before any violence could break out and impede her party’s safe retreat from this place. Their lives mattered more than these Opelucidian soldiers’ deaths. Soriel was too slow to stop Iris as she shoved past everyone.

“Princess!” Belaron sputtered.

“Silence,” Iris spat. “You’ve said more than enough today, Syr Bel.” She did not wait to see his reaction and moved to stand next to Benga. “We’re done here.”

Caelith’s gaze fell upon Iris, and Iris repressed a shiver despite herself. How was this woman even alive? What had happened to her? She looked to be in monumental pain.

“Don’t,” Benga hissed, grabbing her wrist. “She’s Drayden’s creature.”

Iris’s trepidation morphed to anger at the sound of that name. “You did what you could, but it’s time to leave. There’s nothing for us here.”

“Princess?” Caelith said, having heard Belaron’s outburst. “Who are you? Do you lead these men?”
Cottonee bounced on Iris’s head and whistled a dainty war cry as it shed Fairy dust, sensing a fight in the air.

“I’m not your concern. We’ll be leaving now,” Iris said.

“Princess,” the old man in armor said. “No, it couldn’t be...”

“You know her, Syr Mydros?” Caelith said.

Damn you, Syr Bel, Iris thought. If they figured it out, her escape might be made all the more difficult.

“Nuria, back to the harbor,” Iris said, backing up. There was no way she would risk everyone’s lives in a fight she had not come here prepared to wage.

What the hell is Opelucid doing here? Did they have something to do with the destruction?

“It was many years ago,” Mydros the old knight said as he stared in fascination at Iris like he was seeing a Ghost. “I remember it vividly. Cadmus sired a bastard girl on the queen’s Adriati handmaid, and His Grace King Drayden ordered them both brought to justice the night he assumed the throne. But they escaped my knights, the woman and her child. I had heard that they landed in Blackthorn City, but it was only a rumor...”

“What is this, another of your senile tales?” Thorys said. “Cadmus’s bastard died in the Red Plague. Everyone knows that.”

“No,” Mydros said. “The Adriati woman fled before the Red Plague ever struck. His Grace forbade me speak of it. A child of Cadmus, bastard or not, could have posed a threat to his accession. Son of a nidding, you are her,” he addressed Iris directly. “You are Iris Fafnir.”

“Iris...Fafnir,” Caelith said, producing a Pokéball from up her sleeve.

“You are in the presence of the rightful Dragon Queen,” Belaron said, brandishing his sword. “Tread lightly.”

Iris could have screamed. In a chance encounter she had not been prepared for, all her hard work put in to maintaining secrecy and the element of surprise went up in flames. Why was Opelucid here? Could it be a coincidence that they were here the moment she arrived in search of support? Something bigger was happening, but she did not know what. And now, she was out of time.

Caelith moved like a shadow and made a grab at Iris’s throat in a reckless attack fueled by some inner inexplicable rage. But Benga somehow saw her coming and tackled her hard. They landed in a heap, and Caelith shoved him off.

“Kill them!” she ordered. “They are enemies of the crown! Traitors!”

In a matter of seconds, the air was filled with the sounds of Pokémon roaring and slashing at each other, swords singing, and people shouting. One of the armored knights Caelith had arrived with, clearly one of Opelucid’s Ridder Knights, came at Iris directly with sword flailing, and she drew her own sword and caught him before he could cut her down. He was lithe and agile and well-trained, but so was Iris as she parried his slashes and used her small stature to her advantage. He over reached as she feinted left, and she caught him in the back of the knee with a swift kick that made him stumble. It was just enough time to bring her sword around and plunge the blade deep in between two ribs through a segment in his armor. He was bleeding out and dead before he hit the ground.
White lights flashed as the Opelucidian forces called out their Pokémon, a small army of Dragons and their descendants that viciously attacked the Oculus crew. Ernesto’s Araquanid Lunged at an enemy Fraxure and knocked it over, at which point it proceeded to draw Fraxure’s head into its water bubble and drown it while firing off Spider Webs to hold Fraxure down. An enemy Gabite Dragon Clawed Nuria, who took the hit in her shoulder and screamed. She swung around with her curved blade and grazed the Gabite’s belly, but it wasn’t enough to deter the land shark.

“Haxorus!” Iris shouted, throwing a Pokéball. “Guillotine!”

Haxorus materialized in a blinding flash of light and landed hard on Gabite. It drove its powerful tusks into Gabite’s belly and neck, lopping its broad head clean off. It threw back its head and roared, jaws snapping as it looked around for its next target.

Benga had released Sceptile to deal with Thorys and Turtonator, but the latter made excellent use of its shell armor and fired the spikes on its back like homing missiles. Sceptile’s speed gave it an edge, but one hit from the explosive burning spikes could be fatal. Belaron’s Arbok was squeezing the life out of one of the enemy Ridder Knights.

“Release him!” Caelith bellowed.

Arbok shuddered and did her bidding against its will, and Belaron roared his anger.

“How dare you!”

He slashed at Caelith, but Arbok slithered in between them and caught him unawares. Soon, it was Belaron trapped in his own Pokémon’s Constrict and slowly suffocating.

“N-No,” he wheezed. “Arbok, s-stop!”

But a Dragon descendant cannot defy a fully-realized Titan, and Caelith knew this well. She tossed out her own Pokéball, and a magnificent Flygon appeared. Its filmy wings flapped too fast for the eye to see and churned up the dust and sand on the ground into a great Sandstorm tornado that tore through the Oculus crew and disrupted their fighting to give the Opelucidian fighters a crucial advantage.

Benga had gotten Iris’s Haxorus’s attention and used it to attack Turtonator directly, impervious as it was to a little heat. Haxorus took an explosive Shell Trap at point-blank range, but its reinforced scales protected it from major damage beyond a bad burn, and Haxorus lifted Turtonator up off the ground by the shell.

“Dual Chop!” Benga shouted.

Sceptile rushed around Turtonator, a blur of green and draconian red, and slashed Turtonator’s exposed belly with bladed fists. Turtonator hissed and snapped, blind with pain and fury, and Thorys shouted curses. He released a Druddigon, a vicious Dragon with unnaturally long claws and a poisonous temper, to help Turtonator, and Sceptile was forced to dash away or be sliced to ribbons.

Nidoking and Kangaskhan worked together to set off an Earthquake that disrupted the entire battlefield. Iris lost her balance as the ground shifted underfoot, and the disturbance unearthed buried bodies that had been crushed in whatever battle had ensued before she landed here. She tripped over the bloody leg of a man in black armor bearing the blue and white Team Plasma crest. His face was smashed and hardly recognizable, and Iris stared in horror.

*Team Plasma was here?*
Were they responsible for the ruin? But where did Opelucid fit into this?

“No!” Nuria screamed in despair. She was dragging a limp Ernesto out of the rubble, but he was bleeding profusely from what looked like a stab wound in his gut.

*They’ll all die if this continues,* Iris thought, the dread filling her like ice in her veins.

As though hearing her troubled thoughts, all of a sudden Flyers appeared in the sky swooping toward the skirmish, alerted perhaps by Flygon’s Sandstorm and the sounds of battle. Dragon Flyers, all of them. They easily outnumbered Iris’s party ten to one.

**Opelucid.**

She had to get everyone out. They had all volunteered to accompany her to Castelia, and they were her responsibility. What kind of leader led her soldiers to the slaughter? She could not let anyone else fall.

Nearby, Belaron was still being Constricted by his Arbok and had lost consciousness. Iris ran to help him first.

“Arbok, release him!” she commanded.

Arbok hissed as its will was ripped from Caelith’s latent control to Iris’s, and it slackened until Belaron fell to the ground. Iris felt for a pulse and was relieved to find him still breathing. Having regained its senses, Arbok slithered around Belaron, unable to comprehend what it had done against its own master.

“Benga!” Iris shouted over the din of battle. “Nuria! Back to the Oculus!”

Nuria looked around, the desperation clear on her face as everything fell apart. But she managed to get up. Ernesto’s blood soaked her arms and shirtfront. “Retreat!” she shouted in Adriati at the other three crewmembers who remained still fighting.

Benga was supporting Soriel, who had taken a bloody wound to the leg and could not walk on her own, while Sceptile still tangoed with Thorys’s Druddigon. Haxorus ran toward Iris at the sound of her shouting but was impeded by an enemy Rhydon. Haxorus charged in a fury, its bladed tusks drawing deep gashes in Rhydon’s armored flesh, but Rhydon was bigger and physically stronger as it wrestled Haxorus to the ground.

“So, you mean to challenge King Drayden,” Caelith said, her lip split and her shortsword bloodied.

“There’s no challenge. Drayden was never the true king,” Iris said, brandishing her sword and remaining Pokéball.

“But you are? I thought bastards could not wear crowns.”

Iris’s temper flared at that familiar curse, old but no less effective now than it had been all her life. It had always been a gutting tactic to undermine both her claim to the throne and her very existence, but now, surrounded by the Oculus crew fighting in her name, her mother’s people, it rang different.

“My mother was the strongest woman I have ever known,” Iris said. “It’s because I’m her daughter as much as I am my father’s that I’ll take back what’s rightfully mine! Dragonair!”

She tossed out her last Pokéball, and Dragonair coalesced in a flash of blinding light. The
serpentine Dragon coiled about her, upwards of twenty feet in length, and the enormous pearl at its throat pulsed with power. Caelith’s Flygon screeched and took to the skies for an aerial attack. It opened its mouth and powered up a deadly Dragon Pulse attack.

Dragonair sang a battle hymn and shot into the air to meet the attack head-on. A crimson shade enveloped its body as it Dragon Rushed as quickly as it could. Caelith ran at Iris, bloody blade glistening. But when Dragonair collided with Flygon’s Dragon Pulse, the ensuing concussive explosion knocked both of them down. Cottonee whistled in fright as it somersaulted through the air. Iris’s left arm was badly cut up and bleeding profusely, and Caelith clutched her side where she’d landed among the broken cement sidewalk’s remains.

“Dragonair!” Iris shouted, horrified.

Dragonair had fallen back to the ground and was bleeding in between its lustrous scales where Flygon’s attack had hit it. The Dragon Rush cloak had protected it from death, but the direct hit had taken its toll. Flygon remained unharmed and swooped low for the killing blow, and Iris lunged, sword in hand, to intercept it. Flygon screeched and slammed into Iris’s sword, and Iris pushed back against it with all her might. Her desperate intervention on Dragonair’s behalf worked, and Flygon was forced to abandon its assault prematurely, sparing Dragonair further injury. But Iris’s clash with the much larger Flygon knocked her sword out of her hand, and she fell hard to the ground where she landed on her already wounded left arm. The bone snapped, and she screamed. Somewhere, she heard someone call her name. There was a scraping sound, and then Dragonair’s long hum, still alive thanks to her.

“Your courage is admirable, I’ll say that much,” Caelith said, staggering to her feet. “But it won’t save you from me, Pretender.”

Pain made Iris’s vision double, but she struggled to stand regardless. Flygon was looping around again at Caelith’s command and began to glow red with Outrage.

“Iris could only stare, petrified with pain and fear, as Flygon closed the distance to Dragonair and her, and without her sword to defend, she could not protect either of them. Tears stained her dirty cheeks and her left arm hung useless at her side, but she had to stand up. She would not die on her knees, never. Flygon would have to go through her standing tall to get to Dragonair.

All of a sudden, a brilliant blue light shone behind her, and Iris turned to look. Where Dragonair had been just a moment ago, there was only a pool of light, warm and bright, and it grew like a living thing to Iris’s height, then twice as tall, then as large as a house. Flygon shot toward her like a red bullet, and the amorphous mass of light descended over Iris to catch it. Iris shielded her eyes with her good right arm, and like magic, she could feel her fear and pain and fury fading away, indescribably pacified in a way she had never felt since her mother had died so long ago. For a moment, she heard nothing and felt only a sense of serenity, invisible arms wrapping her in warmth and love that made her want to cry and laugh all at the same time.

The moment was over in a heartbeat, and reality came crashing back down along with Flygon, who skidded through the rubble like it had taken a swift punch to the gut. When Iris regained her vision, she realized it had. Above, sleek scales shone like a thousand suns, razor sharp and incandescent. Crimson draconian energy dripped in between them, too much to contain even in such a large body. Magnificent blue wings spread far and wide and cast a shadow over Iris and the stretch of ruined city street she’d fallen on, and a long tail slashed the air like a sledgehammer.

“Oh,” Iris said, for there were no other words. After months of waiting as Dragonair grew thicker
and more lethargic under the influence of its accumulated draconian power that had nowhere to go, its body had finally given in and evolved to accommodate it just in time to save both their lives.

Caelith’s Flygon, bloody and bruised, dug itself out of the rubble with Earth Power and let out a piercing shriek. Dragonite opened its huge maw, revealing rows of serrated teeth, and roared like a freight train in answer, drowning out the comparatively puny Flygon. The reinforcements and their many Dragons took a moment to pause their advance and cower at the gargantuan king Dragon challenging them.

“Iris!” Benga shouted as he ran to help her. “Holy shit!”

He had broken from the Oculus crew to rush to her aid alongside Haxorus and Sceptile. The others were regrouping as Moros fended off two of the enemy Ridder Knights with his Pokémon, but with the reinforcements he stood no chance. Iris was not about to let him or the brave Oculus crewmembers perish for their loyalty.

“Dragonite!” Iris shouted up at the behemoth Dragon that towered over her. “Hyper Beam! Push them all back!”

Dragonite reared up on its thick hind legs, opened its mouth, and unleashed a devastating Hyper Beam even Gyarados could not have matched in breadth and power. The orange energy beam cut through the chewed up street and chased after the enemy. Caelith was forced to run and flee, and Flygon almost did not make it in time to scoop her up and Fly her to safety. Others were not so lucky. Ridder Knights and Titans fighting on the ground alongside their Pokémon were burned and blasted if they could not escape the Hyper Beam’s blazing reach fast enough. The chaos and confusion that followed scattered the Opelucidians, and Moros took the opportunity to recall his tired Pokémon and make a run for it. Iris was the last one remaining between them and the enemy.

“Iris!”

Benga caught up to her, Cottonee under his arm. It was dusty from the battle but otherwise unharmed, and it flew to Iris, shedding cotton in its stress and panic. Haxorus seemed not to notice Dragonite, concerned only for Iris and snarling at the smell of her blood. Sceptile, however, was down on all fours and very much aware of Dragonite as it hissed and spat, perhaps concerned for Benga getting so close to it.

“Benga,” she said, hating how relieved she sounded at the sight of him. “I told you to get everyone out of here! Why can’t you just listen?”

He grabbed her good hand. “You’re part of ‘everyone,’ you idiot. So shut up and let’s get outta here!”

The Opelucidian forces were already regrouping, and if she didn’t get everyone back to the Oculus soon, they would be followed and likely killed.

“Can you walk?” he asked.

“My arm is broken, not my legs,” Iris snapped. “Go, I’m right behind you. Dragonite! We can’t be followed!”

Dragonite spread its mighty wings and leaped into the sky. The gale force winds its wings created would have knocked Iris and Benga over had he not had her by the hand, and Cottonee shuddered against Iris’s chest where it huddled close.

Benga pulled her along after him, and soon they were sprinting as fast as they could back toward
the shore. Haxorus and Sceptile flanked them, and Dragonite’s Outrage kept pursuers at bay as it wreaked havoc on downtown Castelia. The harbor was in sight, as was Gyarados towering high above the water. Its red eyes were watching Dragonite and the battle raging to the north. Its jaw hung open and it thrashed restlessly in the water, the smell of blood and death igniting a natural hunger for battle common to all Gyarados. When it spotted Iris and Benga rushing toward it, Gyarados roared and smacked its tail against the water.

Iris and Benga recalled Haxorus and Sceptile and scrambled as fast as they could to climb onto Gyarados’s head.

“Back to the sub!” Iris commanded.

The others had already taken to the water or the air to make the return journey. Behind, Dragonite roared again and crashed into the remains of a ruined skyscraper in its Outrage, taking a couple Dragon Riders with it. The impact hardly fazed it, and it pulled itself out of the rubble still thrumming with bloodlust.

“Dragonite, to me!” Iris shouted to be heard.

The enormous Dragon turned its head to see her and took to the skies once again. The Oculus was just ahead, its deck the only visible part of it. Iris saw Nuria helping Soriel down the hatch, among the last to get inside. Benga practically dragged her off of Gyarados as soon as he was sure they could make the jump to the deck, and Iris recalled Gyarados to its Pokéball. Dragonite was fast approaching, a couple stubborn Altaria and Charizard on its tail like mosquitos.

“Iris, let’s go!” Benga said.

“They’re still coming,” Iris said. “I have to stop them!”

“Yveltal can take you both,” Nuria said. “They’re on my home field now. I’ll stop them!”

Iris barely had time to recall Dragonite as it came within the range of her Pokéball’s laser, and Nuria dove into the water.

“Nuria!” Iris screamed.

Nuria disappeared below the water’s surface, and her Gorebyss emerged like a pale demon rising from the depths of some black abyss to Hydro Pump a dive-bombing Altaria out of nowhere. Altaria squawked and landed in the sea, its wing broken and useless to save it, where Nuria’s Sharpedo was waiting to Crunch it to death. Two Charizard had followed Altaria, both bearing riders, and they unleashed twin Flamethrowers at Sharpedo wrestling with Altaria to drag it below the water.

But the flames bounced off the water’s surface as though reflected back, and they took on a sinister violet hue as they turned back and attacked the two Charizard. The riders screamed and tried to guide their mounts to safety, the flames hot on their tails. A pale pink Jellicent, Nuria’s third Pokémon, floated still as the grave, its bloated head emitting an eerie purple smoke that guided the Ominous Wind manipulating the Flamethrowers.

“Iris, come on, we have to get inside,” Benga said as he reached for the hatch.

Iris ducked down and struggled to climb down the ladder one-handed. Her heart was pounding so hard it might burst at any moment, thunderous in the metal hatch as she climbed down on shaking legs. Benga was right above her, and below, strong arms caught her by the waist and gently lowered her to the grated floor. Cottonee, having burrowed into her ponytail, refused to let go when
one of the Oculus crewmembers tried to gently pry it off Iris’s head.

“You’re hurt!” someone was saying in Adriati.

Then, Nymo: “Get them both to the medical ward with the others. We’ve just begun our deep dive.”

Multiple voices spoke at once, and she and Benga were swept away in a sea of hands, but all Iris could think about was Nuria still out there. The sea beyond the nearest bulbous window was darkening as the Oculus dove, and she wrenched free of her caretakers and ran to it.

“Nuria!” she said, searching around for Nymo. “She’s still out there fighting!”

Someone tried to take her by the shoulders out of concern, and Iris flinched away. Her adrenaline high was finally wearing off, and the jerky movements shot a lancing pain down her left arm. She cried out and slumped against the window, smearing blood on the glass. Her scaled armor clinked pleasantly, intact and having protected her from injury to anything vital.

“You’re hurt,” Nymo said in Adriati, surprisingly calm. “The others are, too. You must get treatment.”

“I have to help her!” Iris shouted. With her good hand, she clutched Dragonite’s Pokéball, smeared red with her blood.

“Iris.” Benga approached her warily, palms first, and Iris paled at the sight of him covered in blood.

“Benga,” she said, feeling her strength evanesce at the sight of him so torn apart. “That blood...”

“It’s not mine,” he said. “It’s over for now, okay? C’mon, lemme help you.”

He slowly closed his hand around Iris’s and loosened her fingers clutched tightly around Dragonite’s Pokéball. Cottonee dared to peek out from its nesting spot.

“Nuria’s okay,” he went on. “She’s Syreni, remember?”

“Nuria Lady,” Nymo said in his broken common tongue. “You are red everywhere.”

It was true, she was still bleeding and shaking from the loss of it. She could not feel the fingers in her left hand at all. But what the hell did that matter? Ernesto was dead. Belaron had been close, and Soriel, too. All because Iris needed to go to Castelia to further her cause, her cause. No one else’s, not truly, no matter what they said or pledged or promised.

“What have I done?” she said, searching Benga’s face for the answer.

But all she found there was a kind of hard strength he rarely showed. “You gave us our best chance at getting out of there alive.” He held up Dragonite’s Pokéball for her to see. “This proves it.”

Iris stared up at him, wishing in a moment of weakness that she could just believe him, such a beautiful pretend.

“Benga’s right,” Nuria said, approaching through the small crowd of gathered sailors. She was dripping wet and clutching her shoulder, but otherwise she was okay. “So stop feeling sorry for yourself.”

“Nuria,” Iris said, on the verge of tears. “You’re okay.”
Nuria set her jaw. Her eyes were red and puffy like she’d been crying—she was crying for Ernesto, I saw her—but she stood tall. “We volunteered to go to Castelia, even Ernesto.” Her voice hitched as she said his name. “So you don’t get to make his death all about you. This was about us, our choice. We all chose to stand with you, and you did your best to get us out of there.”

Iris did not know what to say. Beyond the throbbing pain, beyond the shock of what had just happened, she was moved beyond words and could not think of a single intelligent thing to say except the only thing that was appropriate. “I’m sorry.”

“Yeah,” Nuria said. “We all are.”

Nymo took charge then and barked orders for his crew to get back to their stations, they had to get out of Castelian waters in case of pursuit, which was unlikely at this depth but not worth risking with a swarm of Dragon Riders out for blood.

“What’s happening?” Benga said, guiding Iris by the small of her back.

“I’ll go,” she said.

“Oh, well, uh...I don’t mind carrying you. I’m just saying.”

“Wait,” Nymo called to them. “Iris Lady, I am being glad of your return. Ernesto... He is not wanting for your, eh, regrets, yes?”

Iris shook her head. “I’m so sorry, Captain.”

Nymo nodded stiffly. “Is war now, like you said in Humilau. We must be standing all together.”

“Team Plasma,” Iris said suddenly. “I saw a dead Team Plasma Agent buried in the rubble. They had something to do with whatever happened to Castelia.”

“Team Plasma and Opelucid are working together?” Benga said. “But that’s... Are you sure?”

“I know what I saw.”

“Whatever is happening,” Nuria said, “we can’t stay here. Iris, Castelia’s lost. We have to go somewhere else and fast.”

“Driftveil,” Benga said.

“I was going to suggest Virbank,” Nuria said.

“No, Driftveil is better. Team Plasma’s obviously way more involved and spread out than we thought. We can’t assume anywhere’s safe.”

“But you think Driftveil is?”

“It’s not a part of the Trident anymore,” Iris said, understanding Benga’s meaning. “There’s no way Team Plasma would be welcomed there. They never were before, right?”

“Right,” Benga said. “And Gym Leader Clay’s no friend to Opelucid after everything that happened in the civil wars. He was a young man back then, but a guy like him would never forget.”

“Isn’t that bad for you?” Nuria asked. “Your father fought in those wars.”
Iris looked between Nuria and the others. “I’m my father’s daughter, but I’m not my father. I’ll make Clay see that if I have to.”

“You’ll have to,” Benga said. “Clay’s a Ground Adamantine, the worst kind of Adamantine. Long memories, sins of the father, eye for an eye, they believe in that whole shebang.”

Cottonee, calmer now that the fighting was behind them and it was among familiar faces, cooed shyly and poked at Iris’s bangs from its perch on her head.

“I am hearing the yes, yes?” Nymo said. “Then, to Driftveil we are off. But Iris Lady, you will be knowing the sea ends at Driftveil. My Eye cannot see any farther.”

Iris shook her head. “You should return to Humilau. You’ve done enough. Without a sea to navigate, there’s no use for a sub.”

“Then the next time we are seeing each other, I am bringing the sea with me.” Nymo smacked a fist into his open palm and grinned.

“Damn right we will. Opelucid won’t stand a chance against a whole army of Syreni,” Nuria said.

“Thank you, both of you,” Iris said to Nymo and Nuria, meaning it. “I don’t know...what I would have done...”

The loss of blood was making her woozy, and the pain in her arm was making it hard to think straight. Benga supported her weight.

“Okay there, let’s get you fixed up before you pass out,” he said.

She let him drag her to the infirmary, where the two medical staff had their hands full with the others wounded in Castelia. Soriel was passed out on a cot, her leg wrapped from ankle to thigh in red-stained bandages, while Moros dabbed her forehead with a wet towel. Belaron was hooked up to a respirator and still unconscious. Benga helped Iris into one of the gurneys and shouted at one of the staff to get his ass over here and help her. Iris did not fight the process and barely felt the pinprick of an IV that would feed her Hyper Potion through a tube to speed up the healing process. Benga took Cottonee and placed it on Iris’s stomach so she could lie back properly. He smoothed her dirty bangs and wiped the sticky tear tracks from her cheeks.

“Iris,” Iris said, the Hyper Potion already starting to dull her senses and make her sleepy as it nullified the pain in her arm.

“Yeah?”

“The truth... I’m glad I found you.”

His fingers were warm on her temple, and he looked like he was struggling to form his words for a moment.

“Me too. Somebody’s gotta keep your royal ass alive.”

She smiled at his attempt to lighten the mood, and he returned it.

“Yes, I can’t... I don’t want to do this alone anymore.”

He took her good hand and squeezed. “You don’t have to. You have me, and I’ll be with you every step of the way, I swear it. That’s the truth.”
“Good,” she said, her words beginning to slur. “Good...”

Cottonee was warm and light as a feather on Iris’s stomach as it watched over her. When she woke up, this would be behind her and she would be in Driftveil. Castelia was lost, but she would start again in Driftveil. She would not give up, and she was not alone.

She felt soft lips kiss her knuckles, and soon she was asleep and dreaming of Dragons.

Chapter End Notes

Apologies for the wait on this update! And thank you so much to everyone’s continued support and interest. This story is entering the second half and will take on a very different tone as multiple storylines will finally converge.

Also, I sort of always liked the idea of Dragonite being a very special evolution. It was the only Dragon in Gen I and had an almost magical quality to it in the games and in the manga that gave Dragons and their trainers in the original series a very special place. The idea of it only evolving due to a strong bond with its trainer on top of some given amount of experience/age is something I really like that separates it from other strong third-stage Pokémon. Clair in the games not being considered “worthy” yet by the Elder when the Player defeats her sort of feeds into that, too. Anyway, just a thought.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Rosa

After the chaos of war in Castelia City and the Relic Desert, the quiet and calm aboard Rood’s personal ship, *Carmine*, was eerie and uncomfortable. The adrenaline high had long ago worn off, but still Rosa was antsy and unable to relax. Anthea and Concordia were making the rounds to the injured, doing what they could between themselves and their companion Pokémon, Gothorita and Kirlia, to disinfect, stitch, and bandage everyone’s wounds considering the dearth of Potions on board. Rosa was lucky: none of her injuries were serious enough to warrant more than basic treatment. Others, like Youssef’s friend Sana who had suffered irreparable damage to her leg and would need it amputated, were not so lucky. Sana was one of several severely injured Plasma Agents directly under Rood’s command who were holed up below deck, their intermittent wailing a haunting reminder of the cost paid for the safety and health of those above deck. Rosa hated to think of them languishing down there, but until they reached a proper hospital, there was little anyone could do except try to keep them as comfortable as possible.

And then there were the ones who suffered another kind of injury, one that stitches and Super Potions could not mitigate. Nate had been kept below deck for the first couple hours of the voyage on account of a shoulder injury that had lost him a lot of blood and was in danger of becoming infected. It was bad but not life-threatening, but even so, Nate was pale and groggy like he was closer to death than he ought to be. It was his friend Hugh who told Rosa about Emboar’s sudden death, and that was all the explanation needed.

“Can’t imagine what I’d do if it was Samurott,” Hugh said while the two of them waited for Nate to return to the deck. “It was that Garchomp that got him. Damnit, if I’d just gotten there faster, Blazed Ham would... Emboar could still be alive.”

Nate had often spoken fondly of Hugh to Rosa in the past, though she’d never met Hugh in person until now. Hell of a way to finally meet, she thought.

“I don’t think there’s anything anyone could’ve done,” Rosa said. They leaned over the port railing together, close enough to converse but not close enough to feel like she was really standing next to anyone. She shivered. Her fingers itched. “A lot of people and Pokémon died today.”

“That doesn’t make it okay,” Hugh said through gritted teeth. He was staring out to sea and wringing his hands. “Opelucid and Nimbasa... Fucking Team Plasma. Nobody woulda had to die if it wasn’t for them.”

Rosa said nothing. There was nothing she could say to that. He was right. Hugh mistook her silence for discomfort.

“Ugh, sorry,” he muttered. “I’m just so angry. I hate that there’s nothing I can do about what happened.”

“We’re all angry. This loss... It wasn’t supposed to be this way. I still can’t believe it.”

“Right? It’s completely messed up.” Hugh ran a hand through his prickly hair. “Hell of a way to finally meet you.”

Rosa smiled wryly. “You know, I was thinking the same thing. I wish it could’ve been under
happier circumstances.”

Hugh’s scowl seemed to be a permanent fixture on his face, but it suited him, all hard angles and sharp ends that he was. Rosa was not acquainted with many Syreni, but Hugh had to be just about everything she’d never imagined one to be.

“Well, I’m glad you showed up when you did,” he said, those intense blue eyes trained on her face like they might ignite whatever they saw. “You know, when you saved my life. I sorta forgot to thank you for that back there, so...thanks.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m sure you would return the favor if it ever came down to it.”

“Absolutely,” he said readily. “I owe you one.”

Rosa had the strangest urge to laugh at his earnestness. Did he have to take everything so literally and personally? “Relax, I’m not holding you to it or anything like that. I just meant it as an expression.”

Hugh’s hand on her shoulder startled her and she almost did laugh at him, but the way he was watching her so intently gave her pause. Maybe it is personal.

“No, seriously,” he said. “I’d be Trapinch food if it wasn’t for you.”

She did her best to take him seriously, feeling a little bad about her earlier nonchalance. “Yeah, um, okay.”

Satisfied, Hugh released her.

“Hey, speaking of Trapinch,” Rosa said, wanting to change the subject from something as intimate as saving his life, “how’s she doing?”

Hugh made a face. “Hell if I know. She’ll be some poor nurse’s problem for a while soon as we find a Pokémon Center. But my arm’s not gonna fall off, apparently. That’s what Concordia said.”

His arm was heavily bandaged to the shoulder but okay now that he had a Potion circulating in his system. It would take a little time and more healing once they got to Driftveil City, their intended destination, but Hugh would be good as new.

“You’re Syreni, right?” Rosa said. “Trapinch might come in handy if we’re ever fighting on land again. I’m guessing Samurott’s your only Pokémon that can really fight on land?”

“We?”

“Yeah, we. I don’t mind being on my own, but now that I found you guys, it’s not like I’d just leave.”

Hugh considered this and nodded gravely. “Then good. I dunno what’s going on, but whatever it is, the more people we can trust on our side, the better.”

And I thought I was pretty serious.

Hugh was still fidgeting like he was paranoid about something, and Rosa wondered. “Hey, Hugh?”

“Hm?”

“Are you okay?”
“Yeah, my injuries weren’t as bad as some of the others.”

“No, I mean, are you okay? Back there, it was a lot.”

“Huh?”

Rosa hesitated. She got the distinct impression that Hugh was the kind of prickly guy who had trouble when anyone pointed out a possible weakness or shortcoming. “I’ve been in a few large-scale battles before,” she said carefully. “All that violence, the blood, death, it gets easier to cope the more I see it, but it’s still pretty traumatic. It stays with you.”

Hugh showed her his shoulder and jutted out his lower lip, but he didn’t try to refute her. “What’re you, my therapist all of a sudden?”

“I’m not making fun of you, if that’s what you think.”

“Then what?”

Rosa leaned on the railing. She barely knew Hugh, though in some ways she felt like she knew him intimately from what Nate had told her of him. Hugh’s temper was one of the things Nate had warned her about. His brutal honesty was another. Maybe some honesty would do her good now.

“I just...felt like talking to you, I guess. This might sound weird, but back there, the fighting, I knew exactly what I had to do, point A to point B. Even if we were losing, what I had to do made sense. Now, it’s over and I feel like it shouldn’t be. I feel like...” She stared at her hands and fisted them. “I feel like I left the fight, but it didn’t leave me. I can’t stand leaving things like that for Burgh and the others. I don’t even know if they’re still alive while I’m here running away.”

Hugh was quiet as she blurted out this stream of conscious nonsense she did not know how to express any other way.

“Anyway,” Rosa continued, “what I mean is if I’m feeling like that, then it must be even worse for you and Nate. The first time always is.”

Castelia was nothing but a blip on the horizon as they sailed west. The going was slow, but in these treacherous waters, they dared not raise sails to catch the wind. Surrounded on all sides by endless blue, Rosa nonetheless felt claustrophobic with nowhere to go, no one to fight, no one blame.

“Yeah,” Hugh said at length. “I think you’re right. I, um... I never imagined it would be like this.”

He was staring at his hands like he did not recognize them, and Rosa had all the answer she needed. “It’s never what you imagine it’ll be the first time you see death.”

“I’ve seen death before,” he snapped.

Rosa had the strangest feeling that whatever he was thinking about, or whomever, it had nothing to do with her or even with what had happened in Castelia. This rage, this despair, it was branded on his bones, immortal and powerful. One day, no matter how bloody, could conjure that kind of visceral reaction.

“Yeah,” Rosa said, “but seeing isn’t the same as dealing it yourself.”

As though drawn out of a trance, Hugh looked up and seemed to forget where he was. That look, sightless fear, almost childlike in its uncertainty, she knew it well. Rosa laid her hand on his.
“You’ll never be the same,” she said as gently as she could, “but you’ll learn to accept yourself in
time. I promise.”

“How can you promise that?” he asked in a small voice that did not suit him.

“Because I’ll accept you. So will Nate.”

“You don’t even know me.”

“Not yet,” she allowed. “But Nate cares about you, and I care about him. That’s good enough for me.”

She withdrew her hand and leaned over the railing again.

“Then it’s good enough for me, too,” he said at length. He leaned on the railing next to her, their
shoulders barely touching.

Night fell, and with the more seriously injured housed below deck, everyone else was left to find a
corner of the deck to camp out under the stars. They would reach Driftveil the next morning. Nate
was patched up and looking a little better. He’d insisted on helping Anthea and Concordia however
he could, from keeping track of inventory to washing used bandages. He’d needed something to
keep him busy and not mourning Emboar, Rosa figured. Nate was the type to dwell and worry
himself into an emotional black hole without any distractions, so she left him to indulge in
whatever menial distraction he could find. Hugh also did not try to interfere, though Rosa got the
feeling that he really wanted to from the way he glowered at Nate whenever he passed by.

Now, with the injured mostly sleeping under the soporific effects of Potions, the ship was quiet and
the sea was placid. There was only a balmy night wind that filled the newly raised sails, unlikely to
be spotted in the darkness. Rosa sat on an old woolen blanket spread out next to a couple bedrolls
and a sack of flour she and her group had been given to make the wooden deck more comfortable
for sleeping. She sat in a four-person circle between Hugh and Cheren, and Nate sat across from
her with his Larvesta napping in his lap. Rosa was in the midst of recounting her harrowing
misadventures up until this point after hearing theirs.

“When the attacks on Castelia began, I went with Gym Leader Burgh to the harbor to meet the
invaders, and, well, you know the rest. We didn’t know about Opelucid and Nimbasa at that point.
I wonder if it would’ve even made a difference,” she said.

“I know this isn’t what you want to hear, but I seriously doubt it,” Cheren said. His brow was
furrowed in thought. “The way things turned out, there was no way even a military powerhouse
like Castelia could’ve ever won.”

“What I don’t understand,” Nate said, “is why Opelucid and Nimbasa were working together. It
was like this whole thing was coordinated with Neo Team Plasma. There’s no way it could’ve been
just a coincidence.”

“Exactly,” Hugh said. “I’m telling you, those Plasma assholes’re everywhere. It’s not just Nacrene
and Striaton. We got screwed because we underestimated them.”

“Hugh’s right, I’m afraid,” Cheren said. “We seriously underestimated Neo Team Plasma’s reach
and influence. Everyone did.”
“What about Driftveil?” Nate asked. “Are they going to be there when we get there?”

“I doubt it,” Rosa said. “Neo Team Plasma’s only made themselves known in the east, and since they invaded Castelia, I think it’s safe to assume this was their first foray into the Heart Tine.”

“Yes, I agree,” Cheren said. “It was rumored that the old Team Plasma under N had ties to Driftveil, but there’s no indication that the Neos have made it that far west.”

Hugh scowled. “I don’t like it. If Team Plasma’s in Driftveil, then or now, we shouldn’t be going there.”

“I’m sure it’s fine,” Nate said quickly. “Anyway, it’s the Neos that’re the problem, and they’re all back in Castelia now.”

Nate and Hugh exchanged a look, and Rosa wondered what that meant. There was more to this than either of them was saying. It wasn’t like Nate to keep secrets. She’d never known him to be anything but open with her in the past.

“Driftveil is the gateway to the upper West Tine. There’s no other way to access Mistralton and Icirrus except to go through Driftveil, so we don’t exactly have a choice. In any case, Rosa,” Cheren said, “I’m very relieved to see that you’re okay and that Professor Juniper made it back to Nuvema Town safely. But to cross through Pinwheel Forest alone isn’t something even a Gym Leader like me would do. You’re very lucky you ran into the Volucris.”

“So did you really impersonate a Plasma Agent and shoot some commander in the ass?” Hugh said.

Rosa made a face as she remembered that pasty Neo captain. “Yeah, we needed Jack and Louis’s boat back from the Neos. That guy didn’t deserve a clean death.”

“Heh,” Hugh said, smirking.

“Nate, that Larvesta,” Rosa said. “You really got her from Champion Alder?”

Nate petted Larvesta’s furry head. She was asleep in his lap and twitching ever so slightly, dreaming. “Yeah, he was raising a bunch at his house because they’re endangered. She sleeps a lot and doesn’t really do much, but he said she’ll evolve one day soon and become pretty strong.”

“If that Bug doesn’t burn through every pair of pants you own first,” Hugh grumbled.

Larvesta was indeed burning tiny holes in Nate’s jeans where her orange feelers brushed against them leaking tiny cinders. Nate simply swept them away without a care.

“Still, I can’t believe you guys got to meet Champion Alder,” Rosa said. “What was he like?”

“He was a drunken pity party,” Hugh said. “Cheren tried to get him to help us, but the old man would rather get sloshed and start bar fights. It was beyond pathetic.”

“Alder was troubled,” Nate said, an edge to his voice that had not been there before. “I don’t think he was ready to help us back then.”

“Unfortunately, I don’t think he’ll be ready to help us anytime soon, either,” Cheren said softly.

That was disappointing. Like all children growing up in Unova, Rosa had also been told bedtime stories of Champion Alder, the strongest Ignifer to have ever lived, it was said, and how he smashed the late Opelucidian King Cadmus’s forces just north of Driftveil, among other great
victories. It was widely agreed among historians that Alder’s intervention in the civil wars had been the deciding factor against the upper West Tine’s rebellion and signaled an imminent end to the hostilities. He was renowned far and wide even beyond Unova for his military and political leadership, as well as his strength as a Tamer. It had been a dream of Nate’s to meet him one day, a fellow Ignifer who had done tremendous things. They had often talked about it as children. Rosa could not begin to imagine the depths of his disappointment if what Hugh and Cheren said was true.

“Nate, I’m really sorry,” Rosa said.

“Yeah,” he said, stroking Larvesta gently. “Me, too.”

“Anyway,” Cheren said, “let’s hope Gym Leader Clay will be more willing and able to lend his support. I’m afraid the upper West Tine might be our last hope against Neo Team Plasma if they truly are in league with Opelucid and Nimbasa.”

“Wait, what about Virbank? You came from there, right?” Rosa said.

“Yes, but Gym Leader Harrison perished in the fighting, and his teenaged daughter, Roxie, is too young and inexperienced to lead the Gym and its military forces,” Cheren said. “My understanding is that Harley Dufrene, who was Harrison’s first mate, is now acting Gym Leader, but she’ll have her hands full after the losses Virbank’s fleet took in Castelia. I don’t think we can rely on them for the time being.”

“Roxie’ll be fine,” Hugh said bit forcefully. “She’s young, but she’s tough.”

“Yeah she’s tough, but she lost her father,” Nate said. “It doesn’t matter how strong you are when something like that happens.”

“I know that,” Hugh said, his anger spiking. “But she won’t quit. Believe me, I know it.”

Once again, Rosa got the feeling she was missing something in Nate and Hugh’s protracted silence.

“In any case,” Cheren said, “I suggest we all get some sleep. We have a big day tomorrow. It’s going to be a huge bother, but I’ll be doing all the talking to give us our best shot with Gym Leader Clay. All the talking,” he added, looking pointedly at Hugh.

Hugh scoffed. “Every day I’m surprised you haven’t been bothered to death yet, Cheren.”

Cheren let that one slide, and the four of them tried to get comfortable on the hard wooden deck. Rosa claimed the sack of flour for herself, letting Hugh and Nate each take a bedroll considering their injuries, and checked her Pokéballs. All were accounted for, but Leafeon and Deerling especially needed a Pokémon Center as soon as they docked in Driftveil. She would see to that as soon as they arrived.

Around the deck, other passengers could be heard snoring softly or talking in hushed tones. Rood was below deck with Anthea and Concordia, and Rosa hoped he was getting some rest. After learning of N’s apparent demise, if anything were to happen to Rood, too, she did not know what she would do. Thinking of N, she fished his pendant from the folds of her clothes and ran her fingers over the grainy black and white picture. It was difficult to see in the dark, and the sliver of a moon offered very little light. She could just make out his outline in the gloom, and his talisman afforded her a small but sure measure of comfort. She clutched the pendant to her chest and wished to be strong for the trials she knew still lay ahead, whatever they may be.

The stars above were as brilliant as they were numerous, and hazy rivers of clouds flowed among
and around them. Maybe N was up there somewhere looking down on her, like some religions would have people believe. Or even if he wasn’t, then maybe wherever he was, he heard her wish. Rosa had never been particularly spiritual or superstitious, but everyone had to believe in something, right? Why could she not believe in N? In her memories he was everything strong and noble and compassionate, the kind of person anyone might strive to emulate as Rosa endeavored to do every day. Even if he truly was gone, at least she could hold on to his memory in the darkness, keep him alive in whatever small way she could. N was not here, but if the thought of him could give her the strength to get up tomorrow and face whatever awaited in Driftveil and beyond, then that had to count for something.

A fitful but deep sleep found her eventually, and Rosa dreamed she could fly along those foggy rivers and touch the stars, a place far from here where N and the idyllic world of harmony he had shared with her and countless others so many years ago still existed.

Rosa had the vaguest sense that she was adrift when all of a sudden the floor seized and she was violently jerked awake. Alert but disoriented, Rosa was on her side and momentarily confused about where she was. The sun was up, but the morning air was chilly. It was quite early, and nearby Nate was still asleep, curled up with Larvesta. Rosa’s breaths were shallow, and she rubbed her eyes as she tried to calm herself. She was on a boat, Rood’s boat, that was it. They were bound for Driftveil, yes, she remembered. And the seizing that had woken her was the boat going over a wave. She sat up. Waves meant they had to be approaching shallower waters. There was no sign of Hugh or Cheren; they must have woken earlier and left Nate and her to sleep a bit longer.

Rosa got to her feet and winced at the crick in her neck from sleeping against a lumpy sack of flour all night. She yawned and stretched out. One of the crew was shouting something about land, and sure enough, Rosa could see the coast of Driftveil just ahead. A white stone lighthouse shone with a violet light, a bright beacon even in the morning daylight. The Twist Mountains, whose foothills began far to the south in Aspertia, loomed in all their majesty and ran far to the north all the way to Icirrus City. Despite all that had happened, Rosa felt herself smile at the sight. It was a new day, and she was still here. She could continue to fight as long as she was still here.

She reached for N’s pendant around her neck out of habit, but it was not there. Frowning, she felt about her neck and the collar of her shirt, but there was no sign of it. Impossible, it was there last night; she’d fallen asleep holding on to it. A shudder of worry crept up the back of her neck, but the rational part of her deduced that it must have come loose in the night. It could not have gone far, surely. She got on her hands and knees and began to check around the sleeping area, behind the sack of flour, under the bed rolls and blankets. There was no sign of it. Could it have fallen through a crack in the wood? No, it was too big for that. Damnit, where did it go?

Larvesta heard her scavenging and woke up, which woke up Nate, too. He blinked bleary eyes at Rosa and sat up. “Hey, morning. Are we there yet?”

“Nate, good, you’re awake. Help me look for my pendant,” Rosa said, checking behind a nearby barrel.

“Pendant?” he said, still half asleep. He made a face as he disturbed his wounded shoulder.

“You know, N’s pendant. I hardly ever take it off.”

Nate sobered. “The one with his picture in it?”
“Yeah, the only one I have,” she said, distracted as she searched under the blanket for the second time, hoping she might have missed it.

Nate got to his feet. “You lost your pendant with the picture of Team Plasma’s leader in it? On this boat?”

Exasperated, Rosa ceased her searching to say, “Yeah, was that not clear or something?”

Nate looked a little pale. “Rosa, Hugh and Cheren don’t know about your past. I meant to tell you before, but everything’s been crazy.”

“So? Everyone on this boat is Team Plasma. N’s true followers, I mean, not the Neos that attacked Castelia. I’m sure they probably know by now.”

Nate looked at her like she was speaking a foreign language. “…What? Are you serious? Why didn’t you say anything?”

“What? Why does that matter? It’s the Neos that’re the enemy, not Master Rood and the others.”

“Rood? Wait, as in... Oh my god,” Nate trailed off. “We have to find your pendant.”

“Yeah, that’s what I was just saying—”

“Check over there. It could’ve rolled away or something. Did you lose it last night or this morning?”

“Last night, I think,” Rosa said. “I’m not sure, I just woke up and it wasn’t here. What’s up with you? You’re acting really weird.”

Nate was busy scanning the deck and checking the cracks in the wood for signs of the pendant. Larvesta sat on his head smoking faintly, blue eyes wide as it took in the surroundings. “I told you, Hugh and Cheren don’t know about your past.”

“What does that matter?”

“With Cheren, not much. But Hugh’s another story.”

Rosa was about to respond to that when Rood himself approached her with Youssef in tow.

“Good morning, my dear,” Rood greeted amiably.

“Sir.” Rosa stood to attention. “Good morning. I’m glad to see you in good health. You too, Youssef.”

“Please, there’s no need for formalities,” Rood said, smiling kindly like a grandfather. “I wanted to extend an invitation to you and your party. As you know, our Team Plasma a safe house in Driftveil City. I have not visited it myself for quite some time, but it is available for my use. There is plenty of room if you and your party should you require safe lodgings in Driftveil. The battle in Castelia cost us all dearly, and I imagine we must all take time to recuperate.”

“Wow, that’s... Thank you so much,” Rosa said, humbled by his unexpected generosity.

“This young man is a friend of yours, is that right?” Rood asked. “Anthea was grateful for his help tending to the wounded yesterday.”

“Oh, yes of course, please forgive my rudeness,” Rosa said. She grabbed Nate’s hand, and he
dropped the netting he’d been looking under for Rosa’s lost pendant. “This is Nate. He’s my childhood friend from Aspertia City.”

“I’m very pleased to meet you, Nate,” Rood said. “Anthea and Concordia told me how you helped them tend to the wounded yesterday despite your own injuries. You have a compassionate heart.”

Nate looked a bit flustered. “Um, yeah, sorry, it’s an honor, sir. I mean, thank you so much for helping us back in the Relic Desert.”

Rood smiled sadly. “Yes, I’m glad I could help at least in such a small way. Would that I could have done more.”

“Sir, I don’t mean to be brusque, but I think I dropped my pendant somewhere, and I really need to find it. Nate was helping me search for it,” Rosa said.

Rood’s smile fell. “Lord N’s pendant? That’s a shame. I’m sure it must be around here somewhere. I’ll be happy to inquire after it. Perhaps someone picked it up.”

“I’ll help you look, Rosa,” Youssef said. “It’s gotta be here somewhere, you probably just dropped it on deck by accident.”

“That’d be great, thanks,” Rosa said, relieved. With more people looking, she was sure to find it.

“I’ll leave you to it, then,” Rood said. “And Rosa, please think on my offer. It’s no trouble at all to help one of our own.”

“Rosa, we really need to find that pendant,” Nate said when Rood was gone.

“Right, yeah. Youssef, could you check over on the starboard side? I doubt it could’ve gotten that far, but just in case,” Rosa said.

“No problem. I’ll spread the word.” Youssef ran off to do just that.

With other Plasma Agents helping to search thanks to Youssef, Rosa and Nate had all the help they could ask for as they combed the deck.

“Hey, somebody lose something?” Hugh asked, looking around. He’d just emerged from below deck. “Brought you guys some breakfast, here.”

He tossed Rosa and Nate each a salted rice cake.

“I found it!” someone shouted from the other side of the deck.

A young woman Rosa recognized as one of the Plasma Agents from Castelia Gym handed something to Youssef, who smiled brightly and thanked her for her help. He then jogged toward Rosa waving the found pendant.

“Found what?” Hugh asked. “What was everybody looking for?”

Youssef held out the item for Rosa to see. Sure enough, it was her missing pendant. She smiled, overwhelmed with relief knowing it hadn’t fallen overboard, and reached for it. Hugh snatched it from Youssef before she could take it.

“What the hell is this?” Hugh demanded as he studied N’s picture framed in the pendant.

“Hugh,” Nate said, the warning clear in his tone.
“Hey, guys,” Cheren called. He’d been conversing with the captain at the bow of the ship and waved as he rejoined the group. “We’re pulling in to Driftveil waters unannounced. I think it’d be a good idea for me to head to shore first before we dock so we don’t ruffle any coast guard feathers. Hugh, are any of your Water Pokémon okay to ferry me?”

Cheren’s question fell upon deaf ears as Hugh visibly grew enraged and Rosa was too surprised to react in time.

“I know this face,” Hugh said, eyes narrowed and hand shaking as he clutched the pendant. “This is that N guy, Team Plasma’s leader. What the hell is it doing here?”

“Hugh, cool it,” Nate hissed, reaching for Hugh and doing his best to defuse the situation. “This isn’t what you think.”

“What’s going on?” Cheren asked, confused.

“You.” Hugh turned on Youssef. “Why’d you have this? Is it yours?”

Youssef was wide-eyed with confusion and a little fear in the face of Hugh’s obvious anger. “No, it’s not mine. I was just helping look for it.”

“If it’s not yours, then whose is it?” Hugh demanded.

“What is that?” Cheren said. “A locket?”

“It’s a picture of that N guy,” Hugh said, showing Cheren. “And I wanna know whose it is.”

Rosa snatched the pendant from Hugh. “It’s mine,” she said, feeling her muscles shake with a sudden adrenaline infusion. Instinct told her something was very wrong. “Thanks for your help finding it, Youssef.”

Youssef also sensed that something was off and merely nodded.

Hugh was looking at Rosa like she’d just pulled a knife on him. “Yours? But that’s... Why the hell d’you have a picture of that psycho, anyway?” he demanded.

“Excuse me?” Rosa said. “What did you just call Lord N?”

Incredibly, Hugh managed to look even more aghast. “What did you just call him?”

Nate stepped in between them and physically blocked them from each other’s sight. “Okay, everybody calm down. Hugh, take it down a notch.”

“Did you fucking hear what she just said?!” Hugh sputtered.

Rosa was suddenly furious and she could not quite figure out why. All she knew was that Hugh was the cause of it, and she grabbed Nate by his good shoulder to try to shove him aside and get to the bottom of this.

“What the hell is your problem with Lord N?” she said to Hugh. “What did he ever do to you?”

“Stop calling him that!” Hugh practically shouted. “What the hell is your problem?”

“I don’t have a problem. From where I’m standing, it looks like you’re the one with a problem!” Rosa shouted back.
There was a split second of tense confusion, and suddenly Cheren had his hands on Hugh holding him back. Nate was once again in Rosa’s way like he was ready to physically restrain her if necessary.

“You’re one of them,” Hugh said, struggling against Cheren’s strong grip. “You’re one of them! Cheren, get offa me!”

“Not until you get yourself under control,” Cheren said, but he was also looking back at Rosa like he did not recognize her.

Rosa had no idea why Hugh was so angry. It was not as if N was the enemy.

“Rosa,” Nate said. He took her elbow, and his touch was uncomfortably warm. “I’m sorry, please don’t do anything stupid.”

Rosa wrenched free of his searing grip. Her sleeve smoked where his hand had been, and she glared. “Don’t touch me like that, Nate. I’m not the bad guy here.”

“Oh, that’s fucking rich,” Hugh said. “You’re Team Plasma!”

“I’m N’s true follower,” Rosa shot back. “What’re you... You think I’m the same as those Neos? Is that it? Are you out of your goddamned mind?!”

Hugh struggled against Cheren, but there was no way he was overpowering an Atlas in a match of brute strength. All the commotion drew the other people on deck to their corner of the ship, and Rood approached warily.

“What seems to be the problem here?” he asked gently.

“Oh, I’m outta my mind?” Hugh said. “You’re the one hero-worshipping a murderer.”

“Take that back,” Rosa said. “Take it back or I’ll make you.” She brandished her bow to make her point.

“Whoa, Rosa,” Cheren said, reaching for Stoutland’s Pokéball.

“Lord N never murdered anyone,” Rosa persisted, her blood boiling. “He would never condone something so evil.”

“Team Plasma murdered my little sister!” Hugh said. His bright blue eyes glistened with angry unshed tears. “My ten-year-old sister. They murdered her and left her body in a ditch just so they could take her Purrloin! That was years ago when N was in charge! Not the Neos, N. So don’t you fucking stand there and defend him. You have no right!”

Rosa shook with the force of her anger, unable to believe what she was hearing even as Hugh’s tears and pain were so raw and plain to see. There was no way. Whatever his problem was, this was a lie. There was no way N would ever condone such evil, not ever.

“Nate,” Hugh said through gritted teeth. “Damnit, Cheren, let me go!”

Nate went to Hugh, and for one horrifying moment, Rosa thought they would join forces and turn on her. But Nate gripped Hugh’s shoulder and stared him down.

“Hugh, please,” he said. “Please, stop.”

Hugh blinked to keep his tears at bay and looked between Nate and Rosa and back again. As
comprehension dawned, Rosa almost forgot her own anger and pain over Hugh’s venomous accusations. “You knew?” Hugh asked, his voice fragile and shaky. “You knew she was Team Plasma?”

“I knew,” Nate said. “And I kept it from you, just like I kept what happened to Hailey from Rosa.”

Rosa lowered her bow, too stunned to hold on to her anger. “Nate, is what he said about his sister true? Did you... Did you know?”

_Nate lied to me?_

“You lied to me?” Hugh asked. “You _lied_ to me all these years?” His anger was building again, tremendous and seismic in its force.

“Hugh, was it?” Rood said. “Son, why don’t you come and sit? I can see that you’re in pain, and I’d like to help—”

“Answer me,” Hugh spat, ignoring Rood. Nate’s hand began to steam where he touched Hugh, and Hugh grabbed him by the wrist. “Answer me!”

Nate winced. Whatever Hugh was doing was causing Nate pain, like he was immune to Nate’s fiery touch somehow and turning it against him.

“I didn’t lie,” Nate managed. He was beginning to sweat visibly. “I didn’t want either of you to find out like this.”

“Oh, right, so you just kept it a secret. That’s the same goddamned thing!”

Nate released Hugh, but Hugh did not let go of his wrist.

“Hugh, let go,” Cheren warned.

“Damnit, Hugh, Rosa’s not the enemy!” Nate said.

“She’s Team Plasma! Of course she’s the enemy!”

Rosa moved without thinking and was on Hugh faster than anyone could react. She grabbed his hand and yanked hard. He released Nate in surprise and swore as she twisted his wrist in her grip. The veins in his bare hand bulged unnaturally, as though the skin on his hand was shrinking and shriveling up like an old man’s. He made a strangled sound as he tried to break her hold on him.

“I’m not the enemy!” she shouted at Hugh, careless of the pain she was causing him. “I saved your life, and Master Rood saved us all! Look around, Hugh. Everyone here is Team Plasma, the true Team Plasma, not the extremists we fought in Castelia!”

Hugh gasped in pain, and Cheren had to pry Rosa from Hugh before she could cause any serious damage. He shoved her bodily aside like she weighed nothing at all, and soon the four of them were facing off in a tense stalemate.

“That’s _enough_,” Cheren boomed. “Yveltal take you all, _that is enough_! No one here is anyone’s enemy, but we may soon encounter one if we land in Driftveil divided and at each other’s throats! Hugh, Rosa, this is so much bigger than your personal issues. You’ll get us all killed like this, and any old grudges or alliances won’t mean a damn thing.”

“Cheren,” Nate started.
But Cheren was not having any of it. “Lenora is dead!” His voice cracked, and he had to pause a moment to catch his breath. “Harrison is dead. Hundreds of our allies and their Pokémon are dead back in Castelia. So no, Nate, you don’t get the right to talk. I don’t give a damn about whatever’s going on with you three. I only care about making sure nobody else I care about dies in this war with Neo Team Plasma. We’re at war and we’re losing in case you forgot on today’s episode of My Life Is So Hard. How dare you, all of you. This is not about you, so don’t you dare try to make it so. Don’t you fucking dare.” To Hugh he said, “Hugh, I’ll be borrowing Carracosta. Now.”

Hugh glared at Cheren, but he wordlessly handed Carracosta’s Pokéball over.

Rood cleared his throat and said, “Cheren, I’ll send a small escort to shore with you. Gym Leader Clay always received me well when Lord N was still alive. I’m sure our envoy could help with a smooth announcement of our presence here.”

“Thank you, I appreciate it. I’ll set off now,” Cheren said, giving Rosa and the boys one final reproachful look.

She’d never seen him so angry before, and it scared her. How had Cheren kept this pain hidden for so long? She’d been devastated and horrified upon seeing Lenora’s execution, but she had not been close to Lenora as Cheren had been. It took everything he had just to say those three words: Lenora is dead. She felt so ashamed, and she could barely look him in the eye.

“As for you,” Rood said to Rosa and the boys. “As I explained to Rosa, you are all welcome to share our safe house in Driftveil. The hostilities are behind us for now, and I would very much like to keep it that way.” He let his gaze linger on Hugh. “Whatever the wrongs of the past, I believe there is always hope to be found in the future if we can only learn to work together. That was Lord N’s true belief, and I will gladly do whatever I can to help you in any way I can, Hugh.”

Hugh seethed, but he miraculously kept his mouth shut, perhaps as floored by Cheren’s outburst as Rosa had been. Rood nodded to Rosa and excused himself.

“Hugh, listen to me,” Nate said. “I didn’t mean—”

Nate never finished his sentence because Hugh punched him hard in the face without warning. He fell to the deck on his side, and Larvesta tumbled down after him shedding cinders and clicking and hissing in distress. Rosa gasped and fell to her knees to help Nate. Above, Hugh glared down at them both, broken and hollow with betrayal and tears in his eyes that he made no effort to conceal.

“Fuck you both,” he said, barely a whisper, and stalked off to the other side of the deck.

Rosa watched him go, trying to find the energy to be as angry as he was but failing. All she felt was shame and a cold emptiness where Hugh had been standing before. Even N’s pendant felt clunky in her hand as she held it close to her chest.

Nate rubbed his cheek where Hugh had slugged him and sat up. “Ow,” he said. “Damnit, Hugh.”

Rosa looked down on Nate, the one person with whom she had always shared everything growing up, even her deepest secrets and wishes. She had never lied to him, and after that performance, she suspected Hugh never had, either. She stood up. “No, Nate,” she said. “Damn you.”

She turned on her heel and stalked off to the boat’s stern as far away from both Nate and Hugh as possible.
Driftveil City was nothing so grand as Castelia, but it was a beautiful port city at the base of the Twist Mountains that had no trouble molding to the natural environment. Buildings made of stone and steel rose and fell with the hills, giving the place a domino effect that made Rosa dizzy to look upon for too long. Wingull and Pelipper honked as they rode the air currents around the harbor and kept their keen eyes open for oblivious Magikarp and schooling Wishiwashi in the shallows, while in the background the Twist Mountains touched the heavens with their snowy peaks. The lighthouse stood alone on a thin peninsula flashing a hypnotic violet that Rosa found difficult to ignore.

Cheren and the two Plasma Agents that had Surfed to shore ahead of the Carmine had done their job, apparently, because Driftveil’s coast guard cleared the harbor for mooring, and soon Rosa was headed down the quay to solid earth beneath her feet. She had been keeping her distance from both Nate and Hugh since their fight, and they appeared to be just as happy to remain separated. That was fine with Rosa, she was used to being on her own, thank you very much.

But as the group entered Driftveil proper together, she could not help but catch glimpses of Nate walking alone with Larvesta on his head. He’d been so destroyed after Emboar’s sudden death and the rest of the battle, and she hated to keep her distance after just being reunited. Still, he’d kept something from her that had led to a near disaster, and that was not how they did things. They were supposed to trust each other, and Rosa had taken that for granted. How could he not prepare her for Hugh? He’d had years to do it, and he’d deliberately chosen not to. And speaking of Hugh, Rosa watched him, too, as he walked along with the group on autopilot, not really here at all.

If he said his sister was murdered by Team Plasma and Rood did not refute it outright, then it had to be true. But how? How could N condone such an act of terrible violence on a child, no less? N’s mission to liberate Pokémon from those who were unworthy was well-known and well-founded. Some people, Rosa had seen for herself, were not suited to raising Pokémon, just as some people were not suited to raising children or caring for the sick and helpless. Some people were cruel, callous, maybe even evil. It was evil men who had besieged Castelia for no reason. The N Rosa remembered would never have approved.

Then why did Hugh’s sister have to die?

It didn’t make any sense. The N she knew was not that man, and yet facts were facts. There had to be some misunderstanding. Surely one man, no matter how great or how respected, could not account for every single member of an organization as large as Team Plasma. Mistakes were bound to happen. And yet, Rosa had heard tales similar to Hugh’s before, tales of people who had lost more than their Pokémon when confronted by Team Plasma Agents. It hurt her head and her heart to think about it, but what had happened to Hugh was not so outlandish as to be outside the realm of possibility. There was a deep rot in this world that made its home in the hearts of the weak and the cowardly, and there was not a person who had ever lived who never felt weak or cowardly sometimes.

It didn’t change the fact that Hugh clearly held Hailey’s death against all of Team Plasma, even Rosa, who had saved his life not twenty-four hours ago. It didn’t change the fact that Nate had lied to her about it all these years.

I didn’t kill Hugh’s sister, she thought angrily.

No, but someone had. Someone who once probably wore the same pendant she clung to now.

Rosa was so wrapped up in her own thoughts that she almost ran into Concordia.

“Lady Concordia!” she exclaimed. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to bump into you.”
Concordia smiled at Rosa and tucked her perfect blonde bangs behind her ear. Even after a long voyage and a bloody losing battle, she shined. She had that ethereal glow some women who are exquisitely beautiful have. “It’s all right, Rosa. We’re all a bit preoccupied.”

Rosa nodded. “Yeah, I guess so.”

Concordia’s blue eyes were kind and soft, but they were also observant. “I saw the altercation on deck with Nate and that other young man. They’re your friends, right?”

“Yeah,” Rosa said without thinking. “Actually, I don’t really know how to answer that right now.”

Concordia smiled. “N and Anthea and I would often argue when we lived together,” she said. “Usually my brother would take my side or my sister’s, and it was two against one. Siblings often quarrel.”

“They’re not my siblings,” Rosa said.

“No, though N and Anthea are not truly my siblings, either. I suppose the distinction doesn’t matter when you grow close enough. Even the most bitter of fights can see resolution when the bonds between people are strong enough to weather them.”

This was no argument over who used the last of the toilet paper or who forgot to pay the electric bill; this was an ideological rift between two opposing forces. Rosa did not see much of a resolution for this kind of fight anytime soon, but she did not tell Concordia that.

“Brother was a bit of an ideologue, I suppose. He always had his mind set on what he believed was right, and anyone who disagreed was wrong. I’m sure you can imagine how that led to many fights,” she said, smiling at the memories only she could see.

“Right, but even if it was coming from some personal belief or vision, N’s words were objectively true about a lot of things,” Rosa said.

“I don’t like that word, ‘truth’. What is one man’s truth but another’s lie? The one with the strongest ideals makes his or her own truth. That’s what Brother believed, and he made it so...until he died. Now, another truth prevails.”

“Ghetsis’s truth,” Rosa said.

Concordia was no longer smiling. “Yes. That’s the way the world works, I’m afraid. And I have only Sister to fight with now.”

Rosa wanted to say something to comfort Concordia. There was a deep sadness in her eyes, a tranquil sort of loneliness that is tacitly accepted but rarely acknowledged. Rosa had no words for the older woman, though. All she could think of was the shame she’d felt when Cheren had chastised her and the boys.

“Look, we’ve arrived,” Concordia said. “Driftveil’s Gym.”

Driftveil City Gym was a somber stone edifice on the northern outskirts of the city. Its high-vaulted arches and tinted windows gave it the air of a gothic castle, but visible steel reinforcements and the fact that it was built directly into the mountain foothills behind it suggested a more rugged and modern atmosphere, more functional than aesthetic in its appeal. Rood was saying something about the safe house and asked Youssef to lead the majority of the group there. As a result, most of those who had arrived on the Carmine, including the severely injured, split from the rest and headed east. Rosa, Nate, Hugh, and Cheren were left, along with Rood, Anthea, Concordia, and a
three-man personal guard that traveled with Rood everywhere he went.

Good, Rosa thought. The sooner they could talk to Gym Leader Clay and get this over with, the sooner she could drop her Pokémon off at the Pokémon Center in town. She owed them that much and more after the amazing fight they’d put up back in Castelia.

Cheren took charge of the situation and banged on the double doors of the Gym shouting for someone to open up, he was here on official Gym Leader business. Someone did open up after a few minutes, but it was not Clay judging from Cheren’s reaction.

“What do you mean, he’s not here?” Cheren demanded of the receptionist on duty.

The man was young and skinny, and not in a good way. He shied away from Cheren and clung to the door like Cheren might lash out and attack him at any moment. “He’s at the trials, sir,” the receptionist said. “He’ll be away all day, I reckon.”


“Down yonder.” The receptionist gestured in a vaguely southerly direction. “Tournament’s been goin’ on since morning. That’s where everybody’s at. Except me, o’ course. Somebody’s got to stay here’n look after this here Gym.”

In his thick twangy accent, the receptionist pronounced ‘Gym’ with two syllables. Rosa wondered about these so-called trials and why they were so important as to take a Gym Leader away from his official business for an entire day. It seemed excessive.

Cheren got directions from the receptionist, and together the group marched south once more. This time, however, they passed by the Pokémon Center and stopped briefly to drop off their injured Pokémon. The on-call nurse had the same twangy accent as the Gym’s receptionist and a snow blind-bright smile. But the staff promised Rosa that they would heal Leafeon, Deerling, and Serperior good as new, and they seemed friendly enough. Nate and Hugh dropped their injured Pokémon at the center, too, and soon everyone was headed south once more over cobblestone streets and past the most colorful open-air market Rosa had ever seen. There were stalls selling everything from Pokémon-shaped plushies, to organic Tamato and Kasib berries flown in direct from Mistralton City this morning, to precious jewelry mined and set far to the north in Icirrus. It was almost a shame there were more pressing concerns that prevented Rosa and the others from perusing the many stalls.

But there were more pressing concerns indeed, and Rosa felt their urgency even more as she walked alone without anyone to talk to because she was certainly not talking to Nate or Hugh after what had transpired. Feeling exposed, she released Ferroseed and hugged the spiky pinecone Pokémon to her chest, thankful that she was wearing her hunting skins that protected her from Ferroseed’s iron barbs.

“Welcome to Driftveil City, Thorny,” she whispered.

Ferroseed clucked excitedly, always happy and curious about new places and people. Rosa tried to distract herself by admiring the sublime mountain scenery. Eventually, the group arrived at what Rosa could only imagine must be the place where the trials were held. She was standing at the mouth of an enormous arena whose walls were as tall as a small skyscraper and supported by Doric columns carved from black and white granite. The roar of a crowd leaked through even its thick stone walls. Whatever trials were being held, they were grand indeed.

Nate found her staring up at the structure and silently dared to join her. “It’s the Colosseum,” he
said. “That’s what the attendant just told Cheren.”

Rosa glowered at Nate suddenly standing next to her and turned so that Ferroseed was in between them. Seeing Nate, Ferroseed whirred in Rosa’s arms because he recognized Nate and, of course, wanted attention.

“Thanks for the information,” Rosa said. “I’m going ahead.”

She followed Cheren inside and left Nate behind, but he jogged to catch up with her.

“Rosa, wait, please,” he tried.

She said nothing.

“Look, I’m sorry, okay? Rosa, stop.”

She whirled. “You’re sorry? For what? For lying to me for years? For not warning me that your other best friend hated everything about me before even meeting me? Or maybe for thinking all this time that I could be associating with cold-blooded child killers? What exactly are you sorry for, Nate?”

His cheek had started to bruise, and his temple was ringed in purple where the pain of Hugh’s punch had left its mark. But it was Nate’s eyes that captured Rosa’s attention, defeated and tired and ashamed. “I’m sorry that I’m the reason for all of this. Maybe I could’ve prevented it somehow if I’d been upfront with you both a long time ago, I don’t know. You’re right, I messed up, and I’m so sorry.”

Rosa set her jaw hard enough to hurt. Would knowing the truth have changed anything? The truth would not bring back Hailey or erase the ones responsible for her death. That didn’t matter anymore. “I really thought he would try to attack me back there,” she said, clutching Ferroseed tighter.

Nate stepped closer, but he stilled when he saw Rosa’s gaze shoot to his hands, hands that could burn her with a single touch. Inexplicably, she felt guilty for the suspicion when she saw the obvious hurt in his eyes that she could think he would harm her in any way. Even so, he clenched his fists at his sides and kept them there. “He wouldn’t have. Hugh’s a lot of things, but he’s not that. He’s good. I mean, he’s as stubborn as a Tauros and sometimes he can come off pretty callous, but he’s good where it counts. He’s better than good; he’s the best guy I know. He’s just... He’s in a lot of pain, and he doesn’t know how to let it go. He doesn’t want to let it go, not really. It’s... It’s all he’s got left of his sister. I mean, it’s no excuse, but... Rosa, I’m so sorry.”

They were getting inside the Colosseum now, and the roaring crowd drowned out her thoughts and anything else Nate might have had to say. “There’s no time for this now,” she said loud enough for him to hear her over the roar. “Cheren was right. There are more important things.”

“Yes,” he said before she could turn away. “Just... please don’t write him off. It was my mistake, not his. Be mad at me, but don’t take it out on him.”

He thinks I’m the same as the Neos! she wanted to scream at him. How could she possibly not take that personally? But she kept the thought to herself and marched inside, leaving Nate behind.

Ferroseed squirmed in her arms, and Rosa appeased him with kiss to the head. The Colosseum lived up to its namesake in spades. Its bleachers were packed with a crowd the size of which Rosa had never seen before, not even for Lenora’s gruesome execution in Striaton City. They were shouting and cheering at the entertainment happening in the arena below.
A group of men and women all dressed from head to toe in suits of bulky scale armor that each probably weighed more than Rosa did were arranged in a tight row behind heavy wood and iron shields as tall as a man. Behind them was a pedestal with a bronze ball resting atop it, and they appeared to be guarding it. In front of them were numerous Ground-type Pokémon—hard-headed Rhyhorn, muscular Seismitoad, and bloated Hippowdon, among others. They, too, formed a defensive line protecting their trainers against the onslaught of three people and their Pokémon.

Wait, three? Yes, Rosa realized, stunned. Those were merely three people, two men and a woman, working together with their Pokémon to attack the fortified defensive line. Between them they commanded a Claydol, a Krookodile, and an Excadrill that were giving the Pokémon holding the defensive line a hard time. A couple Seismitoad combined their Muddy Water attacks to try to wash the attackers away, but the Claydol redirected the filthy waves back on them with its telekinetic powers, while Excadrill burrowed underground and disappeared from sight. Krookodile and her trainer, the lone woman of the attacking group, advanced together, fearless, and Krookodile launched the woman high over a Hippowdon’s head, bypassing the Pokémon defensive line. The woman’s landing opened up a small crater in the dirt arena, and the crowd erupted with a fresh wave of cheers and applause.

“What the hell is this?” Hugh asked no one in particular, transfixed by the sight of what looked like a staged battle.

“This is a tournament,” Rood answered. “An honored pastime here in Driftveil. Often tournaments are held purely for entertainment and bragging rights, pitting people and Pokémon against each other until only one pair is left standing. However, I believe today we have the rare honor of witnessing a Bronze Trial.”

“Bronze Trial?” Cheren asked. “What is that?”

“Why, it’s the most hallowed tradition in Driftveil dating back to this great city’s founding,” Rood explained. “The Bronze Trial is the initiation ritual for the Phalanx.”

Hugh was glaring openly. “Looks to me like they’re fighting for sport. That’s fucking barbaric.”

Rosa said nothing, but she could not have agreed more with Hugh’s assessment. People and Pokémon fighting for entertainment? She did not want to think of how many perished in that arena in the pursuit of glory and the favor of a cheering crowd. From the looks of this Bronze Trial, a fight that did not end in death was not a show worth paying for.

“Yes, it is,” Cheren said. “But we’re strangers here. We have no right to pass judgment on these people’s culture.”

“Maybe we should,” Rosa said before she could help herself.

She felt Hugh’s eyes on her, but he said nothing. Flustered that she’d noticed him, he looked away and continued to glare at the tournament going on below. Rosa bit back a nasty curse and decided to keep silent. There was no way she would be starting a fight with him now.

“Oh my god,” Nate said, leaning over the railing to see better. “That Excadrill!”

Excadrill had emerged from underground wrestling a Dugtrio that must have been pursuing it and Metal Clawed the Mole Pokémon. Dugtrio twitched and relented, his blood spilling on the dusty arena floor, and Excadrill Drill Ran to the line of human defenders. His trainer, a large man dressed in the same armor as the defenders but lacking a full-body shield, was shouting at Excadrill, commanding him. The defenders braced themselves, and when Excadrill rammed them
with all his might, they miraculously held together with their combined strength and formation. Rosa rushed to the railing beside Nate, unable to look away from the morbidly exciting stalemate. Humans who could fight back against such powerful Pokémon as Excadrill without weapons? It was unheard of.

The defensive line was holding, barely, and Excadrill was spinning and kicking up a mountain of dust. The Pokémon on the defensive redoubled their efforts to converge on Excadrill, impossible odds, and soon the dust obscured the entire line from sight. The crowd went wild booing and screaming all at once.

Suddenly, a flash of bright light cut through the haze, and a roar that drowned out even this formidable crowd erupted from the heart of the arena. Rosa gasped, and Ferroseed whirred in her arms, his fear so great that he hid his eyes from sight. There was a terrible cracking sound, and a wave of rock and earth shot up through the dust, cleaving it. Rosa could only stare in shock and awe at the monster that emerged from the chaos, a red-blooded Rhyperior over fifteen feet tall. He had a Hippowdon in his clutches and threw the fat hippo bodily over his head so far that Hippowdon hit the wall of the arena and cracked it on impact. The crowd roared its approval.

“Holy—!” Hugh said, all his anger and betrayal and hurt momentarily forgotten as he watched the scene unfold. “Did you see that?! That Rhyperior just threw a Hippowdon with its bare hands!”

“We’re standing right here, Hugh,” Nate said, watching with arrested fascination.

Incredibly, the line of armored people held against Excadrill, but the man commanding the Subterrene Pokémon shouted something, and Excadrill glowed bright silver. The ground split beneath him in a terrible Fissure, and the shield wall broke as people scrambled to get out of the way or be buried alive. The man, who commanded both Rhyperior and Excadrill, approached the pedestal and retrieved the bronze ball, which he held up for the crowd to see. They screamed in adulation.

“It was a good match,” Rood said. “Those men and women were able to withstand Excadrill for almost a minute, no small feat. They and their brave Pokémon should be accepted into the Phalanx, I think.”

Cheren was pale but unable to look away. “Rood, who is that man? The one who claimed the bronze ball?”

“You don’t know? Why, that’s Gym Leader Clay, of course.” Rood nodded stiffly. “He commands the Phalanx, the upper West Tine’s ultimate human and Pokémon defense force. Not even Dragons can break its full might.”

Clay removed his helmet and waved the heavy bronze ball at the cheering crowd, this round of the trials won. Even as he paraded his victory, the men and women competing for a spot in the Phalanx pulled themselves out of Excadrill’s Fissure and helped each other to medical stretchers. Other attendants saw to their battered Pokémon on site. The Hippowdon Rhyperior had thrown shook out his flat head, dazed but okay. Rhyperior flexed his orange granite-armored arms and roared, but it was to Excadrill that Rosa looked, silent and still as a statue next to his adored Gym Leader trainer. Hugh and Nate were also watching silently, lost in their own thoughts.

If this was how Clay treated his loyal citizens for sport, Rosa dreaded how he might treat his enemies in war.
I’ve been asked about what Pokémon count as Dragon descendants a few times now, but I don’t think I’ve given a consistent answer. Sorry for that, and here it is! True Dragons are any Pokémon that have the Dragon typing by default or acquire it through Mega Evolution (e.g., Mega Sceptile is a considered a true Dragon, but original Sceptile is not). Dragon descendants include all non-Dragon-type Pokémon in the Dragon egg group (which you can look up on Bulbpedia or Serebii). Beyond that, there are additionally a few Pokémon that I’ve included because they can learn certain Dragon-type moves in the games via breeding/tutoring/TM AND “look” somewhat Dragon-like (e.g., Eelektross, Huntail, Kangaskhan, etc.). I fully acknowledge that that’s kind of vague, and I’m sorry about that. Generally, Pokémon used by a Titan/Ridder Knight or someone who works closely with Titans are considered Dragon descendants in keeping with the theme.

The point of broadening the Dragon label beyond actual Dragon types is both to accommodate Pokémon that do have Dragon-like qualities without the formal typing (like Gyarados) and to show that Titans are widely feared because they can exert control over a broad range of Pokémon, including each other’s (a nod to Dragons’ weakness to other Dragons). That’s not something other Tamers can do even within their type specialties, which is why Titans, much like the Dragon types they command, are generally considered the strongest in this particular fic universe. Not every Titan is going to be stronger than every other character, and Dragons can lose pretty badly just like any other Pokémon (see, e.g., the Hydreigon vs. army of Butterfree and Beedrill fight). Yes, Fairies are probably the “best” type in the metagame, but in a realistic world, I personally am not for one second going to believe that a lone Clefable could take out a huge Salamence, like come on.

If anyone has any questions or comments about any of that or would just like to talk about this stuff further, please feel free to leave a comment or send me a message. I’m always happy to nerd out with fellow Pokémon fans. Anyway, I hope this helped clear some things up for anyone who was wondering!
The Driftveil City Gym was nothing like the Gym in Nimbasa City. Where Elesa’s Gym was bright and immaculate, this one was gloomy and cold. The receptionist, a young guy in a suit and cowboy hat named Isaac, had initially tried to turn Yancy away when she knocked on the door early this morning, something about the Gym Leader being away at a trial, but he quickly changed his tune when he got a look at her and invited her to wait in the lobby for as long as she liked. Weary from the long boat ride here and frustrated that there was no way to get to Mistralton City directly without passing through here first, Yancy had declined and said she would return later when the Gym Leader was in. That would not be until late in the afternoon, Isaac had warned her. Then that was when she would return, Yancy had replied, declining his offer to give her a tour of the Gym. She did not need a tour, she needed to get to Mistralton City.

Apparently, according to the coast guard at the Driftveil harbor, the only way was through Chargestone Cave. Of course, Chargestone Cave was a frightening labyrinth of tunnels in the Twist Mountains navigable only by an experienced guide. To venture through the network of caves alone was tantamount to suicide. Okay, fine, so who could she hire to guide her safely to Mistralton, she’d asked the coast guard? Why, one of the certified Gym trainers, of course. There were a number of Ground Adamantines who trained with the Gym Leader, and they could surely get Yancy through for a reasonable fee. But according to Isaac, all the Gym trainers were at this mysterious trial along with the Gym Leader, and anyway, she’d need the Gym Leader’s approval even to hire a guide to take her through Chargestone Cave, which honestly felt like overkill to Yancy. And so, she was back to square one waiting for the Gym Leader to return. What choice did she have?

Elesa would never skip out on her Gym Leader duties to partake in some kind of game, Yancy thought as she killed some time in the Driftveil open markets.

Still, she had never been outside of Nimbasa’s sprawling territory, much less set foot outside the Heart Tine. The markets had everything anyone could ever want and everything they probably never would. An old but spritely crone nearly assaulted Yancy trying to sell her some strange powder that would supposedly guarantee the best orgasm of her life in under ten seconds, thoroughly tried and tested.

“No thank you,” Yancy said politely as she tried to slip away.

But the old crone had her by the wrist with her bony fingers and a surprisingly tight grip. “This ain’t nothing like ya ever did try, darlin’,” she pestered. “Have a look see. That’s Solgaleum, direct from heaven, I tell ya. Pure virility, guaranteed to turn your lover boy into a man and make your sun shine all night.”

Yancy did her very best not to burst out laughing. The old woman looked deadly serious even as she tried to peddle what was undoubtedly bleached flour rather than the essence of a mythical god.

“No, really, I’m fine.”

“You’ll be finer when ya try this! Pretty little thing like you’s got to have a whole line o’ boys in heat followin’ ya around. Why, I bet ya got your pick o’ the crop with those hips. Whaddaya say, darlin’? For you, I’ll give ya a special price, one-fifty for an ounce. I’ll even throw in a bottle o’ my famous homemade Roseli wine, on the house. It’ll add some real color to that pretty pink hair o’ yours, trust me.”

Yancy blurted out the most outrageous lie she could think of to get this poor woman to release her.
“No, I can’t, I took a vow of celibacy when I was five.”

The old woman looked at her like she was the crazy one between the two of them. “Sweet Swadloon, five years old?”

“Oh, yes,” Yancy said quickly. “My only intimate relationship is with my blade on the battlefield.” She showed the old crone her naginata, which was nicked and smoothed from years of handling. “We’re, uh, very happy together.”

_Oh my god, what am I even saying?_

The old crone looked truly sorry for Yancy. She grabbed something off the cluttered table at her stall and shoved it at Yancy. “Darlin’, you’re gonna need this more than me. On the house, like I said.”

Yancy accepted the small glass bottle, and the woman went back to her stall to haggle with the next unassuming passerby. Stunned and unsure if this was really happening, Yancy examined the bottle the old woman had given her. It had a handmade label hastily taped to it that read ‘Roseli Wine’ and nothing else. Well, as least it wasn’t anything weird. Yancy had never gotten anything for free. Shrugging, she pocketed the bottle and went on her way, browsing the various stalls and feeling a little lighter. Despite her purpose here and what she could only imagine was happening in Nimbasa, that had been kind of fun.

Driftveil was so different from Nimbasa that Yancy felt a sense of vertigo just being here. The Twist Mountains that loomed over the city like slumbering giants were taller than anything she had ever seen, even the ancient trees in the Lostlorn Forest that reached upwards of fifty feet at the canopy. This place was old and solid, but just as alive as home. The energy here was different, colder and somehow more ancient, and it was hard to believe this was still Unova. What must it be like in other places? Or even other continents? The world was so much bigger than she’d ever dreamed, and she was so small. As colorful and entertaining as the Driftveil markets were with their hawking vendors and many patrons in all shapes and sizes, Yancy had never felt so lonely in a crowd. She wished Gozen were here.

Yancy found the food vendors and bought lunch, which she ate alone at a picnic table at the northern edge of the open air market. She let Emolga out of her Pokéball to keep her company and distract her from feeling like an outsider. It was strange feeling so many eyes on her, wondering why she was here, where she had come from. Yancy’s attire no doubt drew the wandering stares, as did her unnatural pink hair. Everyone here was dressed casually in jeans, skirts, vests, hats. Driftveil was brown and grey and blue, and Yancy was the splash of pink in the crowd, the sore thumb. She tried not to think about it. What did it matter? She wouldn’t be here for long, and she had a job to do. She wasn’t here to sightsee. Emolga nibbled on a piece of Yancy’s uneaten sandwich, and Yancy petted the small flying rodent.

“I guess we should head back to the Gym soon, hm?” she said. “Gym Leader Clay might be back soon.”

Emolga squeaked happily and scampered up her arm to nuzzle her cheek, and Yancy smiled to herself. She took her time walking back to the Gym, and on the way she stopped at the Lighthouse Inn by the coast, the only hotel in Driftveil, to book a room for the night. Even if she was able to speak with Clay and book a guide to take her through Chargestone Cave, there was no way she would be leaving until the next morning. She had not brought much with her, certainly no street clothes, but wanting to blend in even a little better, Yancy removed her heavier armor and wore only linens and studded leather. She felt naked without her full Rain Warrior armor, but within the confines of the city, she figured the chances of encountering feral Pokémon or any human enemies...
were very slim. Her naginata, however, would not remain behind. She never went anywhere without it, and if it drew stares, then she would just have to live with that. She checked her reflection in the mirror before heading out. The heavy white pearl pendant Elesa had entrusted to her was visible, so she buttoned up her shirt to keep it hidden. It, too, would not leave her person, she’d decided. If it was precious to Elesa, then she would guard it with her life.

Satisfied, Yancy scooped up Emolga from the bed where she had been napping, locked up the room, and headed for the Gym north of the city. By now, it was late afternoon and the sun had already disappeared behind the mountain peaks to the west. Alpenglow cast a haunting orange silhouette against the snowy mountains, as though they were on fire. It was an extraordinary sight Yancy had not been expecting, and she stopped to admire it for a moment.

_I never knew beauty could look like this._

The rare sight filled her with a sense of purpose, and she arrived at the Gym feeling energized and ready for whatever lay ahead. She would wait all night for the Gym Leader if necessary. Her mission was too important to compromise. Determined, she sat down in the lobby with her chin up and Emolga in her lap. Even Isaac the receptionist’s dewy-eyed stolen glimpses of her could not faze her.

Minutes turned to hours, and Yancy jerked in her chair at a sudden feeling of falling. Her eyes flew open and she looked around, but not much had changed. Isaac the receptionist was away from his desk somewhere, and Emolga squeaked in alarm when Yancy’s spasm nearly sent the flying Electric rodent tumbling to the floor. A weak shock of electricity ensured that Yancy would not be falling asleep again anytime soon. She rubbed her eyes and winced at the ache in her shoulders from slumping in the chair. How long had she been out?

“Sorry, Emolga,” she whispered. “But no shocking, okay?”

Emolga was indignant over having nearly been dropped and crawled onto Yancy’s shoulder where she might be safe from further mistreatment. Yancy rolled her eyes. Emolga could be such a prima donna sometimes. Traces of her time as Elesa’s Pokémon years ago, clearly. Yancy dug around in the satchel she’d brought along for a bag with dried Mago berry strips, which she fed to Emolga.

“No more shocking me, and you can have a treat,” Yancy said.

Emolga snatched the dried fruit strip and began to chew voraciously. Yancy popped another one in her mouth and wondered just how long she was going to have to wait here. If no one showed up soon, she’d have to try again tomorrow.

“Oh, you’re awake,” Isaac said. He held two Styrofoam cups in his hands. “I figured I’d leave you this for whenever you woke up. I reckon that’s now, huh?”

He handed Yancy one of the steaming cups of coffee. It wasn’t the best brew she’d ever had by any means, but right now she was so thankful for the caffeine that she could have hugged Isaac for his thoughtfulness.

“Thank you, this is really nice of you,” she said, meaning it.

Isaac smiled awkwardly and blushed. “Oh, no trouble at all, miss. Ya looked awfully tired sleepin’ there. You really got somethin’ important to say to the Gym Leader, don’t ya?”

“Yeah, I do. Do you have any idea when he’ll be back? It’s already dark outside.”

Isaac adjusted his bolo tie and peered out the window by the main doors. “‘Bout thirty seconds, I
reckon.”

Yancy frowned. “What?”

Isaac nodded to the window. “Yep, that’s him and his entourage now. Good Golem, there’s a lot tonight. S’pose that’s on account o’ the trial earlier today. Well, there’s still a good hour ‘n such ‘til closin’ time. Ya might get lucky.”

Yancy shot out of her chair and nearly dropped poor Emolga again. The little rodent clung to her side ponytail for dear life and squeaked frantically. “What’s that supposed to mean? You’re closing in an hour?”

“Well, yeah. Clay’ll hear out folks’ grievances for the next hour or so, then it’s supper time. He always makes it home to the missus for supper time. But if ya get in line soon as he comes in, ya might just make it tonight.”

Line? What line?

Before Yancy could puzzle it out, the doors burst open and a parade of people poured into the Gym. Everyone was talking at once, clamoring to be heard, and the man leading the procession was accompanied by a rugged Excadrill whose fearsome iron-tipped claws were smudged with caked dirt and blood.

“All right already!” barked the man leading the group—Gym Leader Clay, presumably. “All y’all’ll get your turns, so can it!”

Clay and his Excadrill barreled past Isaac, who stood out of their way, and disappeared through another set of heavy iron double doors that led deeper into the Gym. The many people following him scrambled to go after him, and Yancy dashed through the doors with them, determined to get ahead of as many people as she could. Clearly, there was not so much a line as a free for all. Damnit, she needed to talk to Clay as soon as possible.

“Excuse me, sorry, pardon me,” she said as she elbowed her way to the front of the mob.

Many of them were filthy and dressed in heavy plated armor like they’d been buried and dug up recently. The hall branched off into several corridors, and the armored men and women went their separate ways. Gym trainers, perhaps? Yancy didn’t care to dwell on it as she concentrated on getting closer to Clay.

Along with the Gym trainers who looked like they’d been through hell today were a number of plain clothes citizens of all ages, likely locals with complaints to communicate to their Gym Leader. Elesa received her subjects in the same manner, but something about all this felt haphazard and last minute, and Clay himself did not seem too chipper about receiving guests right now.

The hall opened up into a large stone room cut directly out of the mountainside. It was grand and spacious, a receiving room much like the one at the Nimbasa City Gym. Sculptures and statues carved of stone, bronze, and granite grew out of the walls, frozen in scenes of battle. For a moment, Yancy forgot about her race to the front of the line as she could not help but admire the sculptures. She had no skill in metallurgy or stone carving, but even to a layman’s eye these sculptures were exquisitely wrought. The skill and time that must have gone in to carving them all must have been extraordinary. The faces of armored men and women were so detailed that she almost believed they might come to life and climb out of the walls to engage in a real battle. Various Ground-type Pokémon were also depicted in the carvings fighting alongside their human trainers, equally as lifelike. The scenes occupied almost every inch of the walls leading up to the back of the room,
where the Gym Leader took his place as he did now.

Emolga squeaked angrily when someone bumped into Yancy while she was distracted by the artistry in the walls, and Yancy remembered that she was here to speak with Clay, not admire his Gym. She hurried along as quickly as she could without seeming too obvious about cutting ahead of people, but she was unfortunately not the first one to be heard.

“Settle down, folks!” Clay said when he took his spot at the front of the hall. “Now, I just spent my day down at the Colosseum, and I got a hankerin’ for my honey’s home cookin’. So, ya know the drill. Locals first.”

Yancy could just make him out from her vantage if she stood on her tip toes. Clay was decked out in dusty scale armor like he’d just come back from a hard battle. He had a flat, leathery, tanned face and sideburns a mile long. He’d exchanged his helmet for a cowboy hat and took a seat on a plain stone chair wide enough to accommodate two of him. Despite the weathering and sun exposure that undoubtedly added to the lines in his face that made him look older, Yancy guessed he had to be around fifty, a bit on the older side as far as Gym Leaders went. But his Excadrill, which was still out of his Pokéball and seated next to Clay’s stone chair, looked fit and young enough. Yancy had never seen an Excadrill before, but even from her place about fifty feet away, she could feel this one’s hollow stare as he sized up the gathered crowd, silent as a grave. Ground-type Pokémon were generally known for being clunky and slow and loud as a species, but this Excadrill was none of those things.

Clay was attended by a few people also in dusty armor who had marched back to the Gym with him, and they stood tall at his side like personal guards. Two Gym staff members had appeared from one of the connecting corridors carrying trays of refreshments for Clay and his people. Clay was interested only in a lacquered box, from which he selected a fat brown cigar and lit it.

“So?” he boomed. “Who’s first? Make it snappy, now.”

Yancy slowly threaded her way closer to the front while some local Driftveilers aired their grievances to Clay and he weighed his judgment in turn.

“Miss, I’ll have to ask ya to wait right there,” said one of the Gym staff who had previously furnished the refreshments and was now enforcing some semblance of order among the gathered people.

“I’m just here talk to the Gym Leader. It’s really important, and I don’t want to lose my place in line,” Yancy said.

“I understand, but it’s locals first. Gym rules. All foreigners wantin’ an audience’ll have to wait ‘til the locals’re finished.”

A woman in a grey dress that used to be white and frizzy hair that looked like it might come alive and eat her at any moment was at the front of the line screaming about how her neighbor Earl had been on her property this morning and now he was denying it.

“Ain’t got no proof o’ that, Lucy.”

Lucy marched right up to dais where Clay was seated and dangled a lumpy sack. “Oh, I got the
proof. Ya can smell it right here!”

Clay leaned forward in his chair and took a good whiff. He wrinkled his nose and took a drag from his cigar. “Smells like shit to me,” he said.

Earl looked suddenly offended. “Lucy Lemongrass, y’all been stealin’ my leavings?! Oh my god, sir, I been robbed!”

“Oh Earl, give it a rest,” Clay said. “Whole pack o’ Trubbish wouldn’t steal your feces if ya went and shat in their yard and everyone in town knows it, so I fail to see why Mrs. Lemongrass here’d want ‘em. Listen, run on home now and remember to shit in your outhouse. Not around it or behind it, inside it. Mrs. Lemongrass, will that do?”

“’M sorry,” Earl said, genuinely sad. “It just gets so damn dark at night and I can’t hardly see nothin’ when I go. But I gotta go all the same, I reckon.”

“Well, ya can’t go in my yard!” Lucy insisted.

“All right, all right,” Clay said. “Earl, why don’t ya get a little nightlight for your outhouse. Then, it won’t be so dark when nature calls. And I don’t wanna see y’all here again with this business, okay? Public defecation complaints oughtta go through the sheriff’s department first. That’s what they’re there for.”

“Oh, I’ll give ’em a call, count on it,” Lucy said. She shoved the sack of excrement at Earl and marched off.

Yancy’s heart sank as she watched the scene. Great, because this is so much more important than what’s happening back in Nimbasa.

“Miss?” the Gym staff guy said.

“Is this going to take long? I have kind of an emergency,” Yancy said.

He looked a little sympathetic. “I honestly can’t say. Just wait in line until the locals are finished, and I’m sure you’ll get your chance to speak.”

Bummed, Yancy had little choice but to do as she was instructed. She wondered what Gozen would have to say about this if she were here. Probably something negative and sour that would make Yancy laugh. She clutched the pearl charm hidden under her shirt and thought of how much Elesa was depending on her.

Fine, if this is how things are here, then I’m at least going to be first in line when the locals are gone.

It seemed like hours before at last, the final group of locals was wrapping up their complaints. Yancy had been bored almost to tears listening to the mundane grievances the majority of them posed. Only one that she’d heard had seemed even remotely serious involving some kind of workplace harassment. Elesa would never had wasted her time with this kind of whining. That was what a local police department was for. And yet, Clay seemed happy to hear everyone out all the same.

There were quite a few other foreigners here waiting to be heard, Yancy noticed briefly, but they seemed to be very absorbed in conversation amongst themselves and paid her no mind. Finally, when the locals left and Clay stood up from his chair to ask for any foreigners present to come forward, Yancy was ready.
“I got about a quick quarter hour left,” Clay said. “So any o’ y’all who got some problems with my city, speak quickly or wait ‘til tomorrow. Who’s first?”

Yancy opened her mouth to say something, but someone pushed past her rather brusquely and nearly knocked her down. Emolga screeched indignantly, but no one seemed to notice.

“Gym Leader Clay,” said the man who had rudely nudged past Yancy. “I’m here on urgent business regarding the ongoing war with Neo Team Plasma in the East and Heart Tines.”

“Are ya now?” Clay said, unimpressed. “And what makes ya so high ‘n mighty?”

“My name is Cheren,” the man said. “I’m the Gym Leader of Aspertia City. These are my colleagues.” He indicated the small group of people with him. “And I’m sure I don’t have to introduce our mutual acquaintance, Rood.”

An ancient man stepped forward and took his place next to Cheren with a modest bow. “Clay, it has been some years. You look well.”

Clay puffed on his cigar like he couldn’t be bothered by whatever Cheren and Rood had to say to him, but Yancy recognized that look in his eyes. He was stalling for time, time to think. She’d seen Elesa do it countless times. Where before Clay had been patient and guileless with the locals and their complaints, now he was a different beast, shrewd and calculating like he’d taken off a mask. It was gone in an instant as he slowly blew a smoke ring and got comfortable in his stone chair. Yancy set her jaw. She had a sudden feeling of foreboding about this that she could not shake.

“Been longer’n a few years,” Clay said to Rood. “I thought for sure those Neos I’ve been hearin’ so much about woulda done for ya by now. I hear they’re a rowdy bunch.”

“Quite,” Rood said. “I was fortunate enough to find asylum with our friends in Castelia until now.”

Clay snorted in amusement. “How like a buncha Bugs to hide.”

“Clay,” Cheren said. “I’m here on a matter of extreme urgency. I don’t know if you’ve heard, but Neo Team Plasma invaded Castelia City—”

“Excuse you,” Clay interrupted. “Cheren, was it? I was havin’ a conversation with old man Rood here, which ya just interrupted. Around here we call that poor manners.”

Cheren looked a bit taken aback. “Then I apologize for the interruption, but as I said, this is an emergency, and as the Aspertia City Gym Leader, I’m here to beseech your help.”

“Ah, well I’m sorry to tell ya, but I only accept beseeches for help on Wednesdays between noon and four, and today’s Friday.”

“Clay,” Rood said. “Please, I understand that this is a bit strange, but Cheren speaks truthfully. We would appreciate your consideration.”

“Consideration denied. O’ course, Rood, you’re always welcome in Driftveil. Your property’s been looked after in your absence. Aside from that, I see no other reason to drag this nonsense out. Next.”

Clay waved Cheren and Rood away, but Cheren did not budge.

“Excuse me!” Cheren said more forcefully. “I don’t think you quite understand the situation. You haven’t even let me explain. As your fellow Gym Leader, I demand to be heard—”
Clay rose from his chair abruptly, and Excadrill scampered in front of Clay and hissed at Cheren. He brandished his gleaming claws, each as thick around as Yancy’s arm, and Cheren took a few steps back at the unexpected show of intimidation.

“Demand?” Clay said, like the word offended him. “You demand? You’re on my turf, kid. The upper West Tine’s been independent for years. We got three Gym Leaders ‘round these parts, and as far as I can tell, you ain’t one of ‘em. Now, I reckon old man Rood helped ya get past my coast guard, and I ain’t got nothing against tourists. But that’s what ya are: a tourist. And tourists don’t get to make demands o’ me and mine.”

Clay’s and Excadrill’s show of dominance and Cheren’s subsequent quailing set off a chain reaction, and all of a sudden the rest of Cheren and Rood’s party surrounded them.

“Hey, what the hell’s wrong with you?!” said one of the young men who had rushed to Cheren’s side.

“Hugh,” Cheren hissed, making a grab for the young man. “Don’t.”

“No, this is bullshit,” Hugh said. “We came here and waited all goddamned day to talk to this guy listening to a buncha hicks complain about nosy neighbors and literal shit, and now he doesn’t even wanna hear anything we have to say? No fucking way I’m letting that slide.”

Clay’s own guards brandished their Pokéballs and moved to surround Clay in the event of a fight. Yancy was stunned at the sudden escalation and clutched the hilt of her naginata, unsure what was going to happen.

Clay snuffed out his cigar. “Those ‘hicks’ are the good people o’ Driftveil, boy. You’ll mind how ya speak about them in my presence. Katie, Tibor, escort these folks to the back o’ the line.”

Katie and Tibor, two of the armored guards surrounding Clay, tossed out two Pokéballs. A Krookodile and a Claydol materialized in the light, big and rugged and totally fucking terrifying up close, in Yancy’s humble opinion. There were not many Ground-type Pokémon in Nimbasa, and Yancy had limited experience facing them. Elesa and her Gym trainers did not care for them, and so not many people trained Ground types in Nimbasa.

“With pleasure, sir,” said Katie, a tall black woman with chiseled features and a severe don’t-fuck-with-me glare.

“What kinda Gym Leader are you?” Hugh snarled. “You’re not even gonna listen to us?”

“Step back,” Tibor said. He was a huge pale man, taller than Clay and beefy like a Machoke.

“Clay, I really must insist,” Cheren said. “We just came from Castelia, or what’s left of it. The city was invaded from both sides—”

“Yeah, and if you don’t listen us, Driftveil will be next,” Hugh interjected.

Clay laughed from his gut, which was not the reaction Yancy had been expecting.

*So the invasion already happened, she thought with dread. Team Plasma... So they really did work with Drayden?*

She remembered that conversation she’d inadvertently eavesdropped on between the Dragon King Drayden and Team Plasma’s scientist, Colress. What was going on? What had Elesa gotten mixed up in?
“Boy, y’all’re thicker’n molasses,” Clay said. “‘Course I know about Castelia. By now, I bet all o’ Unova knows. News like that’ll spread faster’n chlamydia in a cathouse. So, thanks for the concern, but you’re a lick too late.”

“Wait!” exclaimed a woman in Cheren’s group. “If you already know what happened, then you have to know the threat facing Driftveil now. We’re not far from Castelia here.”

“Rosa speaks truly,” Rood said. “She has seen Neo Team Plasma’s expansion through the lower East Tine and into Castelia herself. I, too, fear that their expansionist goals span greater distances than the Heart Tine.”

“And I speak truly now, so listen well, all o’ y’all,” Clay said. “This ain’t Unova. Hasn’t been for some thirty-odd years. Whatever your problems with Neo Team Plasma, ya can resolve them in Castelia or wherever the hell ya came from. Here, y’all’re n’more than tourists. So tour, shop, come and see the games down at the Colosseum. But I don’t wanna hear ya comin’ to my Gym and whining ‘bout shit’s got nothin’ to do with Driftveil or the upper West Tine. Y’all’re guests here. If ya don’t wanna be guests, then leave. That’s all I’ll hear on the matter. Next.”

Before Cheren could get a word in edgewise, Katie and Tibor and their Pokémon forced his group back to clear the space. Hugh protested, but Cheren silenced him with a few harsh words, and the group reconvened in hushed frantic tones amongst themselves. Yancy could not make out what they were saying, but the spike of dread she’d felt earlier had taken root in the pit of her belly and made her feet feel like two lead blocks.

“Next!” Clay shouted, reclaiming his stone throne.

Emolga nipped Yancy’s ear, and she gasped. It was her turn, finally, and she stepped forward, leery of Excadrill salivating just mere feet away. By the grace of her training, she stood tall and statuesque and bowed politely to Clay.

“Who’re you, little lady?” Clay demanded.

Yancy swallowed hard. She could feel many eyes on her back, and Emolga huddled on her head staring at Excadrill. “Sir, my name is Yancy, and I have a humble request if you’ll hear me.”

Clay was watching her with a curious kind of fascination. “That’s some mighty pink hair ya got there, Yancy. You in some kinda band?”

“I— No, sir. I’m a Rain Warrior here on official Gym business.”

Clay snorted. “Rain Warrior? How like a Fulmen to send a proxy.”

“Lady Elesa couldn’t make the journey herself,” Yancy said. “Believe me, she would have if she had the choice. I barely made it out of Nimbasa on my own, and I desperately require your permission to pass through Chargestone Cave. Please, it’s an emergency.”

“Did she just say Nimbasa?” whispered someone behind Yancy.

“So,” Clay said, looking Yancy up and down. “Elesa sends a soldier to do her panderin’ for her, and ya don’t even want anything to do with me. Ya wanna talk to Skyla, is that it?”

“Yes, sir. I don’t want to inconvenience you. If you’ll assign me a guide, I’ll leave Driftveil as soon as possible,” Yancy said.

“Hey, you’re from Nimbasa?” The woman, Rosa, approached Yancy.
“What? Yeah, I am, but I’m in the middle of—” Yancy began.

“Then maybe you can help me understand why Nimbasa just attacked Castelia for no reason,” Rosa said. She had a bow in one hand and a quiver full of arrows.

Yancy sensed the threat implicitly and drew her naginata. “Don’t come any closer,” she said. “I’m not here for a fight.”

“The rest of Nimbasa sure looked like it was,” Rosa said.

“Rosa,” said another young man from their group. “Hey, don’t do this here, please.”

“Stay out of this, Nate,” Rosa said coldly.

“No, you stay out o’ this,” Clay boomed. “I’ve had just about enough o’ this.”

“No, wait,” Yancy said to Clay. “Please, I’m only asking for a guide to get me through Chargestone Cave, that’s all.”

“Maybe Elesa didn’t explain how this works to ya,” Clay said. “So allow me. Here in the upper West Tine, we ain’t a buncha independent city-states like all o’ y’all Unovans. Ya want my help gettin’ to Mistralton so ya can go around my authority and talk to Skyla ‘bout fighting your war for ya?”

“What? No, that’s not—” Yancy protested.

“And y’all want me to fight your war for ya,” Clay talked over Yancy at Cheren’s group.

“Clay, listen to me,” Cheren said. “If you’ll just sit down with me, we can discuss—”

“But it seems clear to me that none o’ y’all really understands that this war is your war. It ain’t mine, and it sure as shit ain’t Skyla’s. Y’all aren’t in Unova anymore. We do things differently here. We vote and we plan, me’n the other Triumvirs, my fellow Gym Leaders. Now sure, Skyla’s one of ‘em, and might be that she’d even be sympathetic to ya,” he said to Yancy. “I know very well that she’n Elesa got history. But lemme ask ya somethin’, little lady. How many Triumvirs are there?”

Yancy felt exposed under his patronizing gaze. “Three.”

“Exactly, three. That’s where we get the name, after all. Now, how many Triumvirs d’ya see here?”

Yancy set her jaw as she felt the pulse of anger rising up in her. “Just you.”

“Bingo. Meanin’ I get a vote, and nobody else here does. And my vote is no. No, I got no plans o’ gettin’ involved in your mainland problems and puttin’ the good people o’ Driftveil at risk for no fault o’ theirs,” Clay said to Rosa and Nate and the others in their group. “No, this ain’t my war and it never will be. My predecessor made sure o’ that when the rest o’ Unova decided they didn’t want the upper West Tine as part o’ the country anymore after the last one. No, ya don’t have my permission to take a guide through Chargestone Cave,” he said to Yancy. “Now, you’re free to try’n get yourself to Mistralton on your own, but I know ya Rain Warriors’re all plebs, so I reckon ya won’t get far alone n’matter how hard ya can swing that weapon o’ yours. I suggest ya run on home. From what I hear, Nimbasa’s got bigger problems and a growin’ list o’ hostiles out for blood now that Elesa got herself hitched to Drayden.”
Yancy could not believe what she was hearing. Elesa had trusted her with this mission, perhaps the best shot they had at tempering Drayden and Opelucid, and Clay had just shut the entire operation down with a few harsh words. Yancy had bled to get here, and she was prepared to sacrifice her life for Elesa and Nimbasa if need be. She was not prepared to be turned away before she could even get started.

“This is insane!” Hugh shouted. “You’re nothing but a tyrant. If you think you’re safe here because the upper West Tine seceded, you’re outta goddamned your mind. You think Team Plasma cares about political borders? This isn’t a game!”

“Clay, I implore you to reconsider. At least think on it and let me explain exactly what’s been happening,” Cheren said.

Clay was about to respond to that when the doors leading to the reception room burst open and someone was shouting. All eyes turned to the commotion, where Yancy recognized Isaac the receptionist tripping over himself as he hysterically shouted for the newcomers to stop, they were not authorized to be back here, the Gym was officially closed for the evening. But his protests fell upon deaf ears as the small group confronted Clay and his guards, and Yancy moved to get out of their way.

A young woman with a Cottonee on her head spoke for the group. “Gym Leader Clay?” she asked.

“Good Golem, what now? Where’s the goddamned security in this place?” Clay said.

“I’m here to negotiate an alliance with Driftveil to join forces against Opelucid City and its allies,” she said.

“Absolutely not,” Clay bellowed. “Isaac, where the hell are ya? Listen, I want ya to put up a sign in the lobby sayin’ I’m not acceptin’ any requests from foreigners.”

Isaac, flustered and red in the face from his futile efforts to keep the new people from barging in here, lit up at the thought that he was not going to be reprimanded. “Oh, you bet, sir! When did ya want that up?”

“Yesterday,” Clay bit out.

“I dunno who you think you are, lady,” Hugh said to the woman making new demands of Clay, “but we were here first, and we’re not done.”

“Hey, hands to yourself, Quilfish,” said one of the woman’s companions.

“It’s fine, Benga,” the woman said. “I’m not interested in these people.”

“What the... Did you just call me Quilfish?” Hugh said.

“Oh c’mon, dude,” Benga said. “You can’t stand there and tell me nobody’s ever called you that. Have you even seen your hair?”

“The princess said to ignore this peon,” said an older man dressed in gleaming armor. “You would do well to heed her.”

The woman, or princess, apparently, glared at him. “Be silent, Syr Bel,” she snapped. “You don’t have my permission to speak freely.”

The old knight was clearly displeased, but he did not argue. Benga grinned in a roguish sort of way
that could make some girls swoon, but it ignited a potent anger in the old knight that surprised Yancy despite the circumstances.

*Not anger, hatred,* she thought, chilled.

“Enough!” Clay said. “Now ya look here, little lady,” he addressed the woman. “I’m gonna tell ya exactly what I told the rest o’ these hooligans wantin’ me to fight in this war with Team Plasma and what have ya, and that’s a resoundin’ no. Maybe ya got some issues with Team Plasma or Opelucid or the goddamned Tooth Fairy, but the bottom line is I ain’t about to drag Driftveil or anybody else in the upper West Tine into some bullshit mainland conflict that’s got nothin’ to do with us. To do so makes about as much sense as tits on a Tauros.”

The woman was not deterred. “Even if it would mean getting revenge against Opelucid for the Burning?”

Yancy frowned. The Burning? What was that?

Clay seemed to recognize her meaning, however. “Well, aren’t ya just a little history buff. Civil wars were long before your time, I reckon.”

*She has his attention,* Yancy realized. *Who is this woman?*

“Before my time, yes,” the woman said. “But not before Drayden’s.”

“Drayden wasn’t responsible for the Burnin’,” Clay said. “That was the Dragonsbane. I see what you’re doin’, and I can’t fault ya for tryin’. But part o’ havin’ a long memory is rememberin’ who was responsible for what. Cadmus is dead, and I got no issue with Drayden.”

“If there’s one thing we Titans are good at, it’s spotting a lie,” the woman said.

Clay frowned deeply and crossed his arms. Excadrill seemed to pick up on his discomfort and hissed in warning. The Cottonee on the woman’s head tried to burrow deeper into her ponytail in fear.

“A Titan,” Clay said. “Ya don’t say. Bold move comin’ here. I’da reckoned even the young ones know to steer clear o’ these parts.”

“Nah, that’s the thing about us Titans,” Benga said. “We’re bold.”

*Titans.*

Yancy felt her throat clench up painfully. She’d risked her life escaping Titans when she fled from Nimbasa. What the hell was going on? Who were these people?

“Who are ya?” Clay asked, genuinely curious.

“I’m Iris Fafnir,” the woman said, “the rightful heir to Opelucid’s throne.”


“I’m very much alive,” Iris said, still looking at Clay. “And I’m in the market for an army. I already have Gym Leader Marlon’s pledge. I’d like yours, too.”

Clay seemed to consider this a moment, but Yancy was too lost in her own thoughts to really be paying attention anymore. All she could think of was that there was someone else here, someone who might have some real power who wanted to get rid of Drayden as much as she did.
“It’s true. My name is Nuria, and I’m a Syreni and Gym trainer at the Humilau City Gym,” said another woman in Iris’s party. She fished something out of her pocket and held it out for Clay to see. “This is the Wave Badge, proof of my authority to speak for Gym Leader Marlon.”

“Wow,” Nate said, looking as overwhelmed as Yancy felt.

Clay, however, was ultimately unmoved. “Looks to me like y’already got your army, little lady,” he said to Iris. “Ya don’t need my help.”

“Excuse me—” Iris began.

“Yes, excuse you,” Clay said. “All y’all’re excused, in fact. I’ve had enough of this shit for one day. My wife promised me a home cooked meal tonight, and I’m already late on account o’ you lot. Katie, Tibor, go rouse the Phalanx if ya hafta. I want these clowns outta my Gym now.”

Krookodile and Claydol advanced with a very clear intent to attack if opposed, and Emolga slipped into the collar of Yancy’s shirt to hide. Yancy backed away, afraid for her safety.

“Let us be on our way,” Rood said softly. “We have overstayed our welcome here.”

He calmly walked out of the Gym alongside two beautiful blonde women and a few others in grey uniforms, a personal guard. Cheren was not far behind.

“Come on,” he said to Nate, Hugh, and Rosa. “We can’t do anything more here.”

“I can’t believe this,” Hugh said more to himself than to anyone else.

Yancy backed away and followed them out, not wanting to be the last to go.

“We’ll go, too,” Iris said. “But this isn’t over.”

“Oh, it’s over,” Clay said. “And if ya know what’s good for ya, you’ll get outta my city and never come back.”

Iris said nothing to that and turned to leave. The rest of her party had no choice but to follow. Soon, Yancy was back outside with all the others, and Isaac locked the door behind them. She had never heard a more hopeless sound than the lock clicking into place. It was dark outside and chilly. Autumn was right around the corner, and cold winds swooped in from the north from the Twist Mountains. Yancy shivered.

“We’ll return to the safe house,” Rood was saying to his group.

“Hard pass,” said Hugh.

“Hugh, please don’t do this tonight,” Cheren said. “I don’t have the energy to reason with you after that disaster.”

“Don’t. I don’t need you looking out for me. I’m a grown man; I think I can survive for a night without you.”

Yancy watched the exchange without really meaning to, and Emolga peeked out from her shirt. She saw that Nate was watching her quietly, but he said nothing.

“He sounded like he wanted us gone for good,” Nuria said to Iris and the others in her group. “But Father took the Oculus back to Humilau.”
“I know,” Iris said. “It’s all right, we can stay in Driftveil tonight somewhere, and tomorrow we’ll try to speak with Clay again. He was receptive, but having those other people there was the problem.”

Yancy bit her lip and took a deep breath. She approached Iris and her party.

“Hi,” Yancy said. “Sorry to interrupt, but I thought I heard you say you’re looking for a place to stay tonight?”

“Yeah,” Benga said, smiling easily. “Hey, you were back there in the Gym, right? Great hair, by the way. Pink’s my favorite color.”

“Oh,” Yancy said, not sure what to say to that. Benga grinned wider, and somehow she got the feeling that catching her off guard was the point. “Well, anyway, there’s only one hotel in Driftveil. It’s the Lighthouse Inn by the coast, and I’m staying there, too. When I checked in, they were mostly empty, so I’m sure you could stay there, too.”

“Thank you for the suggestion,” Iris said. “I didn’t catch your name.”

“It’s Yancy. And it’s no problem.”

Iris studied her a moment the way Elesa would study the Nimbasan citizens who would come to see her and recount their grievances, looking for cracks. “Yancy,” she said. “Lead the way.”

Emolga had climbed onto Yancy’s head and taken a keen interest in Iris’s Cottonee. The two small Pokémon observed each other, clearly curious but not curious enough to get any closer.

“Hey, you,” said Hugh. He had separated from the rest of his group and jogged to catch up with Yancy. “Where are you staying?”

“Me?” Yancy said.

Hugh scowled deeply. “Yeah, you. I heard you say something about a hotel. I need a place to crash tonight.”

“As a matter of fact, we were just heading to the Lighthouse Inn,” said Benga, amused all over again. “You can tag along if you want.”


“It’s the only hotel in Driftveil,” Yancy said quickly. “And yeah, I think they should have some rooms still available. I can show you where it is. Hugh, right?”

“Yeah,” Hugh said. He shoved his hands deep in his pockets. “Thanks.”

“Hey,” Nuria said, taking Hugh’s hand all of a sudden. “You’re Syreni, aren’t you!”

Hugh nearly jumped out of his pants and yanked his hand away, startled. “The fuck— Where did you even come from?”

“I’ve never met a Syreni who wasn’t from Adria,” Nuria said, unfazed by Hugh’s brusqueness. She reached for him again, but he pulled away angrily.

Benga burst out laughing. “Oh my god, that’s perfect. Get it? ‘Cause Quilfish’re Water-type Pokémon, and he’s a Water-type Tamer!”
Iris rolled her eyes. “Hilarious. Nuria, stop touching him, he obviously doesn’t like it. Let’s just go already.”

Everyone was able to find rooms at the Lighthouse Inn in the end, and Yancy politely parted ways with them all. It was late, and there were so many thoughts muddling her brain that it was hard to make sense of anything. Training had taught her how to compartmentalize her emotions under pressure; Elesa had taught her the importance of sleeping on any major decisions. But Yancy had no idea if she would even get any sleep tonight after what had happened today.

As she lay awake in the dark with Mienshao curled up at the foot of the bed keeping watch and Emolga passed out on the pillow, Yancy tried to make sense of the bits and pieces of information she had learned today and kept coming back to one conclusion:

*I have to convince Iris to help me.*

Who better to help her against an army of Titans than a Titan herself? After what little Iris had revealed to Clay, Yancy got the impression that Iris wanted nothing more than to destroy Drayden. Perhaps, if she was careful, she could complete her mission even if she couldn’t make it to Mistralton as intended.

But Clay’s obstinacy was nothing short of frustrating. Yancy had never resented what she was—normal, average, a pleb. She could fight, she had a couple loyal Pokémon by her side, and she had a noble purpose in life. It had never mattered to her that she was not like Elesa or the other Fulmen at the Nimbasa City Gym with their abilities. It was magical to watch them in action with their Pokémon, so in sync and fluid in ways it was said only Tamers could achieve with their Pokémon, but Yancy had never envied them. The Tamers could do what they could do, but they could not do what Yancy could do. It was the balance that mattered.

And yet, Clay’s warning that she could never make it through Chargestone Cave alone had cut more deeply than Yancy realized. It was true, wasn’t it? In Nimbasa, she was one of many Rain Warriors, a force as powerful as a storm. Here, she was alone except for Emolga and Mienshao. What could she really do? Why had Elesa even sent her here alone? She should have sent more people, or at least one of the Fulmen Gym trainers better equipped to function in hostile situations alone.

*But if I had Iris’s help, then I wouldn’t be alone out here.*

Maybe Iris would even be willing to help her get to Mistralton if she asked. From what little Yancy had seen of Titans already, they tended to be quite strong. And Iris had talked about having Humilau’s support. That was a lot more than Yancy had. But Yancy was a soldier. She was used to taking orders from her superior, not the other way around. Elesa would know how to convince Iris, she was sure of it. What would Elesa do in this situation? Yancy tried to think of what she would say to Iris, how she would say it if she were Elesa, but her thoughts were jumbled and inconsistent, and as she lay awake in bed for hours, she grew more and more exhausted and her thoughts less coherent.

Outside, the nearby lighthouse cast a beam of violet light far out to sea, a beacon to lost sailors. Yancy stared at it for a while, wishing it could guide her to clarity. She’d never seen a lighthouse cast a purple light, but it was hauntingly beautiful in contrast to the pale stone of the lighthouse itself and the ominous darkness of the sea. She had the softly simmering urge to follow the light and see where it led. Eventually, she drifted off to sleep, and by the time morning had come
around, she was even less sure about how she would broach the subject with Iris.

Of course, running into Iris the moment she exited her room had not been part of the plan, not that Yancy had really formulated a plan. “Good morning!” Yancy said a little too loudly.

Iris was startled to see her, but she recovered quickly. She had a bucket of ice in her hands that slushed when she moved. “Morning,” she said.

And then, nothing. There was a moment of awkward silence in which Yancy realized it was only awkward for her but not for Iris, like Iris was used to uncomfortable silences somehow. Yancy resisted the urge to fidget.

“Is that yours?” Iris said, looking over her shoulder.

“Huh? Oh!”

Mienshao poked his head out of the door to Yancy’s room, which she’d left ajar in her distraction for anyone to go in and rifle through her things. Like an idiot.

“Wow,” Yancy said, feeling her forehead. “I didn’t just leave the door unlocked, but wide open. Great way to start the morning.”

She’d forgotten momentarily that Iris was still standing there, and that Iris was, apparently, a princess. A real princess, not by marriage or in a fairytale, but the real thing.

“Technically, yes,” Iris said. “But it depends on who you ask.”

Yancy blanched, mortified. “I just said that out loud, didn’t I?”

Iris was not doing her any favors. She didn’t even smile. “Yeah, you did.” She eyed Mienshao still perched behind Yancy. Emolga was on his shoulder peering at Iris curiously. “I don’t believe it when people say they’re a good judge of character. The fact is that everyone has secrets they keep even from themselves, so it’s impossible for others to ever really know about them.”

Yancy was not sure what to say to that. “Um...”

“But for some reason or other, you seem okay to me,” Iris said. “Benga liked you, and not in his usual fake way. What are you doing for breakfast?”

And that was how Yancy found herself in a hotel room having breakfast with Iris, Benga, and Nuria. Someone had brought them food from the kitchen downstairs where normally guests would go to eat in the shared dining room, but maybe being a princess meant Iris could eat wherever she wanted, Yancy guessed.

“That’s a good-looking Mienshao you got there,” Benga said. “He looks well-trained.”

“Thanks,” Yancy said. “Mienshao’s been my partner since we were both small.”

Emolga squeaked, having finished the bit of scone she had been nibbling on. Yancy tore off the end of her croissant for Emolga to eat next.

“You don’t see many plebs with strong battling Pokémon,” Benga said through a mouthful of waffle. “I’m guessing you’re some kinda soldier?”

Yancy was about to respond to that, but refrained when she saw the way Iris and Nuria were looking at her. Iris was discreet, but Nuria was openly curious. Yancy had seen those looks often
directed at Elesa when she would receive guests from abroad. She set down her cup of tea.

“I think I know where this is going,” Yancy said, “and if it’s all right with you, I’d like to just get to the point.”

Iris was petting Cottonee in her lap, who was sucking a Bluk berry dry. “Okay. What’s the point?”

I guess I’m doing this, she thought to herself. No time to plan out a speech or think about her words the way Elesa might to reveal only the bare minimum, just the honest truth. The worst they could say was no, right?

“Look, this might sound a little bit strange,” Yancy began, “but can I ask... Are you working against Gym Leader Drayden?”

Iris’s face was impassive and difficult to read. “It’s not exactly a secret at this point,” she said. “Yes, I am. Why is that of interest to you?”

“Well, you see, I’m a Rain Warrior from Nimbasa City. So, yeah, I’m a soldier, you could say.” She nodded to Benga. “I work directly under Gym Leader Elesa. Or, I used to. Since she married Drayden, I’m honestly not sure if she’s a Gym Leader anymore.”

Iris’s façade broke and she stared openly at Yancy. “I’m sorry, what did you just say?”

“Elesa married Drayden to force him into an alliance so that they could combine their militaries to invade Castelia,” Yancy said. “This happened a few weeks ago... Sorry, I assumed you knew.”

“Holy shit,” Benga said. “Holy shit.”

“We didn’t find out because we were sailing this whole time,” Nuria said. “This... Does this mean Opelucid and Nimbasa are allies?”

“Yeah, and Lady Elesa sent me here so I could ask Gym Leader Skyla to send help. She never trusted Drayden, but I’m afraid she might not be able to control him like she intended,” Yancy explained. “Iris, when you said you wanted to depose Drayden, I thought... I thought maybe we could join forces. You’re looking for allies, right?”

Iris was looking at Yancy like she’d grown another head and tried to compose herself. “I’m... Sorry, I’m just trying to process what you’ve said.”

Nuria said something in a language Yancy did not understand, and she and Iris began babbling away incomprehensibly. She could not understand a word of what was being said, but Iris’s mounting anger was plain to see.

“Yancy,” Benga said, ignoring the other two. “Are you sure about Elesa?”

“What do you mean?”

“You said she married Drayden to force him to help her invade Castelia. Could it be the case that she’s loyal to him?”

“No, of course not. That’s why she sent me here.”

“Yancy,” Iris said suddenly. “Are you sure? Think carefully.”

Yancy was confused as she looked between Iris and Benga staring her down like a suspect. “Lady Elesa sent me here to get help.”
“No, what Benga means is even if that’s true, is *Nimbasa* loyal to Drayden because of his marriage to Elesa? Will Nimbasa obey him as long as they see Elesa by his side regardless of her true loyalties?”

For a moment, Yancy was not sure how to respond to that. She got an eerie sense of déjà-vu as they cornered her like this. The last time Yancy had come face to face with two Titans, it had almost ended in a fight between Drayden and Marshal that could have rearranged the landscape. What if Iris and Benga were no different from Drayden and Caelith? Titans lied, that was what everyone said. They lied and they knew only control.

“*Trust is just another way to control others,*” Colress had said to convince Drayden to cooperate with Team Plasma.

Was that true?

“Sorry, I’m... I don’t feel well. I didn’t get much sleep last night,” Yancy said, needing to get out of this room.

Benga and Iris exchanged a look, but it was Nuria who got and up and gave Yancy a hand up to stand.

“I’ll walk you out,” she said.

Iris and Benga were talking in hushed tones as Nuria led Yancy back out into the hall, and she took a deep breath.

“You’ll be okay,” Nuria said.

“What?”

“They get like that,” she said. “I don’t know what it is, maybe the blood like they’re always saying. You know, that intensity.”

Was Nuria trying to comfort her?

“...Right,” Yancy said.

Nuria smiled knowingly. “When I first met Iris, I thought she was kind of an asshole. And Benga is Benga. I don’t think I’ll ever know who he really is.”

“You’re their ally,” Yancy said. “Why’re you telling me this?”

Nuria shrugged. “Because Iris is getting better, but she still has trouble asking for help. So I’m asking. You want help, right? Iris is good for it. And between us, she could use someone like you on her side.”

“Someone like me?”

“A trusting person. We don’t see too many of those around anymore. Think about it, okay?”

A door opened nearby, and the old knight emerged from his room.

“Good morning, Syr Belaron,” Nuria said.

Belaron eyed Yancy like she might have rabies and did not return the greeting. “Her again. Making friends, Nuria?”
“I hope so,” Nuria said in a clipped tone. “Iris and Benga are still inside.” She indicated the room next to her. “Yancy’s been really helpful. I hope she’ll stick around.” Nuria winked at Yancy.

Belaron, however, did not seem particularly pleased by the fact. “I was not consulted about recruiting more allies to our cause. Excuse me.”

He nodded politely and knocked on Iris’s door. When he was admitted and closed the door behind him, Yancy could hear raised voices on the other side as some kind of argument ensued. Nuria rolled her eyes.

“It’s always like this. I should go. We’ll see you around, right?” Nuria asked.

“Yeah,” Yancy said. “I’ll be here. Doesn’t look like I have a choice since I can’t get a guide to get me through Chargestone Cave.”

They parted ways, and Yancy headed downstairs. Emolga rode on her head, while Mienshao was back in his Pokéball for the time being. She heard voices as she descended the stairs and approached second landing on the floor below hers, and a door flew open. A man exited the room followed by some of the most colorful language Yancy had ever heard. Yancy recognized the man in the hallway from yesterday at the Gym—Nate.

“This isn’t how I want things to be between us,” Nate said.

“Join the goddamned club,” Hugh snapped. He stood in the doorway looking ready to sprint into battle.

“Damnit, Hugh, I’m sorry. I really am. I never meant to hurt you or Rosa.”

Yancy had clearly intruded on a private conversation, so she tried to scurry downstairs as quickly and discreetly as she could. Unfortunately, it was hard to sneak anywhere with bright pink hair and a five-foot-long naginata strapped to her back.

“Yancy,” Hugh said. “Hey.”

Yancy froze in the stairwell. There was no use pretending like she hadn’t heard him when it was obvious she had. She turned and smiled brightly. “Hey, good morning.”

Hugh closed and locked his door behind him and marched to the stairwell. “Perfect timing. I’ll see you.”

“Hugh, wait,” Nate called.

Hugh went downstairs and flipped Nate the bird over his shoulder. He was soon gone, leaving Yancy still hovering in the stairwell in the second one-sided awkward silence of the day. It was not even ten in the morning yet. Fantastic.

“Sorry you had to see that,” Nate said a little sheepishly.

“I don’t mind,” Yancy said. She immediately regretted her words. “I mean... That came out wrong. I just meant it’s forgotten. I was never even here.”

Nate was watching her across the hall, pensive, like he was taking his time looking her over and forming an opinion before he said anything else.

“Is it weird if I’m glad you were here?” With a laugh he added, “Honestly, you’re the first person
I’ve talked to since I got here who didn’t feel like punching me in the face.”

Yancy was not sure how to respond to that. He hid it pretty well behind an easy smile, but he sounded so sad.

“I mean, unless you actually do wanna punch me in the face. I guess I shouldn’t have presumed,” he said.

Yancy felt her neck grow warm. “What? No, I don’t want to punch you. Did I give you that impression?”

Nate’s smile fell. “What? No, of course not. Shit, sorry, that was a weird thing to say.”

He approached, and suddenly it was awkward again. Yancy almost literally kicked herself because that at least would not have been the strangest thing to happen today.

“No, don’t be. I’m having kind of a weird morning,” Yancy said truthfully. “I need to get some air, clear my head, you know?”

“Yeah, I have the same feeling,” Nate said.

Emolga squeaked and sniffed around Nate now that he was standing a little closer. He peered at Emolga and smiled a little.

“That’s a cute Emolga,” he said. “I remember you having her with you yesterday, too.”

Yancy picked up Emolga from her head and held her out for Nate to see. “Thanks. Emolga’s been with me for a long time. She’s small, but she’s got a big personality.”

Nate held out a hand to pet Emolga, and she sniffed his fingers. “The little guys always do, it seems.”

He was looking at Yancy again with that pensive look, a little thoughtful and a little mysterious, and she began to notice the heat in this place.

“Well, I was about to take a walk,” Yancy said.

“Oh, yeah, I didn’t mean to keep you.”

They headed downstairs to the lobby, where Nate paused to look around and peek in the small dining room. Yancy stopped to wait. He must have been looking for Hugh, but there was no sign of him around here. Nate shoved his hands in his jeans pockets and plastered a warm smile on his face when he rejoined Yancy, unaware that she’d been watching him. They exited together to the street, where Yancy felt almost instantly better than she had in the stifling hotel. The sun was warm, but the sea breeze was cool this close to autumn and filled her lungs with the refreshing scent of salt and morning.

“This place is gorgeous,” Yancy said. “It’s so different from home.”

“Yeah,” Nate said. “You’re from Nimbasa, right? I’ve never been there. Actually, before all this, I’d never really been anywhere.”

“Me, too,” Yancy said.

They were walking side by side in no particular direction, and it occurred to Yancy that he was walking with her. Though it was none of her business, she wondered what he and Hugh had been
fighting about. Whatever it was, it sounded personal enough that she figured they must be close. Acquaintances did not fight like that. Nate was staring at nothing, lost in thought and walking on autopilot. There was a deep sadness radiating off him that made it a little uncomfortable to walk so close to him. Yancy immediately felt bad thinking that when it was obvious he was a little miserable. She bit her lip.

“Hey, Nate?” she said.

“Hm?”

“I know I don’t know you, so maybe this will sound weird, but, well, if you’re not doing anything, did you want to join me on my walk? I mean, since I’ve never been here before, I was thinking I’d explore the city a little, and you said this was your first time here, too, so...yeah.”

They stopped walking and Nate said, “You don’t mind me tagging along?”

Yancy smiled. “Not at all. I’m here by myself, and I’d love the company.”

Nate returned her smile. “Then yeah, thanks. I could use the distraction, to be honest.”

“Okay then.”

They began walking again, this time in a comfortable silence as they people-watched. Driftveil’s citizens were an interesting and eclectic mix of personalities. People from all walks of life roamed the streets—suits dashing to work, construction workers coordinating with Drilbur and Machop, students studying together at cafes, ranchers transporting wagons full of cheese and meat. Yancy recognized one of the ranchers, Earl from the Gym, and grabbed Nate’s wrist in her excitement.

“Oh my god, look! It’s that guy from the Gym yesterday, remember?” she whispered like she might be caught spying.

Nate looked around. “Hey, yeah, the guy who shat in his neighbor’s yard. Who does that?”

Yancy laughed. “I think you mean she raided his outhouse and robbed him.”

Nate laughed, too. “Right, my bad. He’s the victim here, we can’t forget that.”

“That was so ridiculous. Back home, if somebody came to the Gym and complained to Lady Elesa about something like that, she’d probably have them excommunicated for wasting everybody’s time,” Yancy said.

Nate didn’t respond, and Yancy caught him looking at her quietly. She remembered that she was still holding his wrist and quickly released him.

“Sorry, I have this tendency to overshare. Usually Gozen keeps a lid on me when we’re together.”

“Gozen?” Nate asked.

“My sister. Well, not my biological sister. She’s more like my partner. We’ve been training together since we were five, so we’re close.”

“Is she a Rain Warrior, too?”

“Yeah. Wait, how did you...?”

“You mentioned it at the Gym yesterday. You’re a Rain Warrior from Nimbasa City. I’ve never
heard of the Rain Warriors, but it sounded like Gym Leader Clay knew a lot,” Nate said.

“Yeah, he did. I guess I didn’t think you’d remember all that. It was pretty chaotic in there,” Yancy said.

Nate shrugged. “I think it’d be pretty hard to forget someone like you.”

Yancy’s confusion must have shown on her face because Nate looked like he’d swallowed a lemon all of a sudden.

“Whoa, I mean, I didn’t mean it that way,” he backtracked. “I meant, like, with all your armor and the pink hair and that huge spear, it’s hard not to notice. You don’t look like anyone I’ve ever met,” he said. “Uh, and I mean that in a good way. A great way.”

Yancy bit back a laugh at his expense. “I get it, don't worry. I noticed when I got here that I kind of stick out in this crowd.”

Nate shook his head. “I promise I’m not usually this much of an airhead. I just have a lot on my mind.”

“Well, there’s an open air market nearby we can check out. I walked around it yesterday a little, and some little old woman tried to sell me an aphrodisiac guaranteed to please in under ten seconds,” Yancy said.

“Oh, yeah? Sounds like a good deal.”

She laughed. “Yeah, for her to make a small fortune selling snake oil. She was selling it for one-fifty an ounce. Can you believe that?”

Nate whistled appreciatively. “One-fifty? At least tell me you got a free sample.”

“Gross, no way! Who knows what she put in it? Oh, but she did give me this.” Yancy fished out a small bottle from her satchel. “Roseli wine. She said it was her homemade recipe.”

“Seriously?” Nate uncorked the bottle and smelled its contents. He wrinkled his nose. “Wow, that’s strong. You know this stuff’s mildly hallucinogenic, right?”

“It is?”

“Yeah, Roseli berries have hallucinogenic properties. They call them Fairy Berries because of all the psychedelic visions you get when you eat them. But don’t worry, apparently the real danger comes from eating the berries raw. You’d have to drink a ton of this wine to get the full effect, more than just the one bottle.”

Yancy corked the bottle and put it away. “Okay, smarty pants. How do you know all that?”

“Hardly. My best friend is a Sylvan and she knows all about this stuff. Rosa, she was at the Gym with me yesterday.”

“...Oh, the one who wanted to shoot me,” Yancy said. “I remember.”

“Ah, yeah, about that,” Nate said. “We fought against Nimbasa in the Relic Desert when they invaded Castelia, so...”

Yancy cut him off. “Look, I think we should get something straight before you say anything else. I know what Nimbasa did, and I’m here because my Gym Leader needs help getting rid of Opelucid.
I personally had no part in the Castelia business, and I was against it from the start.”

“Whoa, hey, I’m not here to throw accusations,” Nate said. “I’m sorry about Rosa. She’s been through a lot lately. We all have.” He rubbed his eyes. “I feel like all I’ve been doing lately is apologizing to people.”

“Then stop,” Yancy said. “If you’ve apologized and done everything you can to make things right, then there’s nothing else you can do.”

“I don’t think it’s that easy.”

“It’s not supposed to be easy.” Yancy remembered her last night in Nimbasa when Elesa had come to her and admitted that she had been wrong about Drayden, thinking she could control him. Elesa had apologized to Yancy then and entrusted her with this important mission. “But I think if your connection with the other person is strong enough, you can come together and move forward with things that’re more important.”

They continued on to the open air market. Emolga climbed onto Yancy’s head once more to get a better view and squeaked happily.

“I think you’re right,” Nate said at length. “Thanks.”

“Any time,” Yancy said. “My infinite wisdom is free of charge.”

That got a small smile out of him. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Yancy and Nate spent hours in the open air market admiring the different wares and blissfully forgetting for just a while what a disaster yesterday at the Gym had been and what had brought them both to this place. Yancy had always liked people and preferred to have them around than to be on her own, but Nate was especially easy to talk to once they plunged head-first into the excitement of exploring a new place for the first time.

She found out that he was an Ignifer, which surprised her. There were no Fire Tamers in Nimbasa, and she’d heard that they were all mercurial and susceptible to black rages if provoked. Nate did not seem like either.

“You just don’t know me well enough yet,” he teased. He was trying on a carved wooden mask painted with the face of Entei, an ancient Fire-type Pokémon featured in many Johtoan legends as the spirit of fire. “How do I look?”

“Sorry to break it to you, but I don’t think red’s your color,” Yancy teased.

“But I’m the spirit of fire. Look, I have the mask and everything!”

Yancy laughed, and the vendor shooed them away since they were not going to buy anything.

She told him about her position as a Rain Warrior, her partnership with Gozen, and her work for Gym Leader Elesa.

“So you’ve been learning how to fight since you were five? I don't think I could even ride a bike when I was five,” Nate said.

“I can ride a bike, too. I’ll teach you if you want.”
He grinned. “When do we start?”

She found out that he was from Aspertia City far to the south, and since she had never left Nimbasa, Nate proceeded to describe Aspertia in the kind of metaphorical detail only one with a true passion and fondness for the place could have possessed.

“There’s hundreds of lakes just north of the city itself, and when it’s a clear day and the sun hits them just right, it’s like looking at hundreds of mirrors. I mean, they literally sparkle, it’s amazing. And the fields go on for miles, so Rapidash and I can run forever. The Twist Mountains have their foothills there, so if you go a little farther north, you can climb pretty high up. Wild Braviary nest there. The first time I saw one catch a Magikarp in one of the lakes, I knew I wanted to train Pokémon,” Nate prattled on.

“It sounds like a beautiful place,” Yancy said, trying to picture it all. “I’d love to go see it one day.”

“I’ll take you. When this is all over, we’ll go together,” Nate said.

When this was all over, what would the world look like? What would become of Nimbasa and Elesa? Of Yancy herself? But she kept her thoughts to herself and smiled.

“Okay, we’ll go together,” she said. “Promise?” She held out her pinky finger.

Nate smiled at the silly gesture but looped his pinky around hers nonetheless. “Promise. You’re gonna love Aspertia. And you can show me Nimbasa, too.”

“It’s a date.”

They eventually left the market and wandered the city. There was an enormous arena to the south called the Colosseum, and Nate told her he’d been there yesterday with Hugh and Rosa and the others watching the Bronze Trial, where Clay tested up and coming Pokémon trainers to join his Phalanx. Today, the Colosseum was once again being used for more games as people lined up to get inside.

“They were fighting for the fun of it,” Nate said, his expression grim. “I’ve never seen anything like it, making Pokémon fight for entertainment. After what I saw in Castelia, the idea that anyone would do that for sport is just...”

“The Rain Warriors hold a tournament every year during the Solstice Festival back in Nimbasa, and we fight each other to entertain the citizens,” Yancy said. “We use our Pokémon, too.”

“Seriously?” Nate said.

“Yeah, it’s a tradition. I don’t know about here, but for us it’s always been a rite of passage. I fought in it last year with Mienshao and Emolga. I won a few matches, but there are plenty of other Warriors who’re much better fighters than me.”

“Why do it?” Nate asked. “Aren’t there other ways to celebrate?”

“Sure, but by fighting we have the chance to show everyone our value. When the citizens see me fight, they remember the purpose I serve as a Rain Warrior. A baker’s purpose is to feed the hungry, and a farmer’s purpose is to till the land. My purpose is to protect Nimbasa and our Gym Leader, and so is my Pokémon’s. It helps to remind people of that and to foster pride in what the Rain Warriors do. At least, that’s how I think about it.”

Nate listened patiently. “I never thought about it that way. I wonder what Clay’s purpose is with
the games? There have to be easier ways to recruit strong trainers.”

Yancy shrugged. “I guess. But how does he know they’re strong unless he sees them fight?”

“Yeah, I...I guess you’re right.”

He didn’t look entirely convinced, however, and Yancy wondered what he wasn’t telling her. They had wandered back to the harbor and walked north along the pier. Emolga was on Yancy’s shoulder and delighthing in the many foreign scents rolling in from the ocean. The lighthouse was just ahead shining its bright white beacon light. Yancy stared at the light.

“They changed the light,” she said.

“Hm?” Nate said. “Oh, the lighthouse?”

“Yeah, I guess I must’ve dreamed it. I thought it was purple last night.”

“Want to check it out?”

“What, the lighthouse? Is it open to visitors?”

Nate shrugged. “Dunno. But we might as well go see.”

“Sure, okay.”

The sun was low in the sky by now and the marina lights were just coming on to light the pier. The lighthouse itself was a good walk out to sea on its own little island connected to Driftveil by a stone causeway. There was a commemorative plaque embossed on the wall of the lighthouse with information about when it was built.

“Wow, this says it’s almost five hundred years old,” Nate said as he scanned the plaque.

“No one’s answering the door,” Yancy said when she’d knocked a few times. She tried the knob and found that it was unlocked. “Oh. Lucky?”

They went inside.

“Hello?” Nate called.

The bottom floor was a lobby filled with glass cases containing old photographs and nautical paraphernalia. From what Yancy could tell, it was a museum commemorating the lighthouse’s history. She examined one of the glass cases.

“An old sextant,” she said, scanning the description. “This is pretty cool.”

“Hey, check this out,” Nate said. “This photo is the construction crew from two hundred years ago. It says the lighthouse burned down and had to be rebuilt.”

Yancy examined the photos Nate was looking at and read through the information on display. “The family of the lighthouse warden all died in the fire.” She shivered. “Okay, I think I should go ahead and warn you that I have zero tolerance for Ghost stories.”

“Well then, I guess we better turn back now,” Nate said.

He was grinning down at her, and Yancy rolled her eyes. “Oh, that’s great, laugh at me, huh?”
“I’m not laughing,” he said, smiling wider.

“You were seriously considering it.”

“Maybe a little.”

“It’s just kind of creepy, okay? And really sad. Those poor people.”

“Yeah, it’s really sad. But it was over two hundred years ago and it looks like there haven’t been any other problems. Hey, it looks like there’s more stuff upstairs, c’mon.”

Nate took her hand and led her to the stairs, and Yancy was surprised at how warm he was, almost feverishly so. Was this because he was an Ignifer? She stared at their clasped hands as she let him lead her upstairs. What else could Nate do that she could not?

“What’s it like to be a Tamer?” she asked as the climbed the steps.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, you know, I’m a pleb, so...” She shook her head. “You know what, never mind. I never really thought about it before, and it doesn’t really matter.”

“Hey, it’s okay,” he said. “I’d be curious if I were you, too. You never asked Elesa?”

“Huh?”

“She’s a Fulmen, right? You never asked her about it?”

“I... No, I never did. I guess it never mattered to me until now.”

They’d stopped in the stairwell, and Yancy had the feeling that they’d been here before as she remembered the last conversation they had in a stairwell back at the Lighthouse Inn. He still held her hand in his, warm and soft.

“What changed?” he asked.

Where even to begin? Yancy could think of a million ways to answer that. “Everything,” she said.

“Yeah,” he said. “I think I know exactly what you mean.”

“Hugh?” Yancy asked, unsure if it was okay to ask.

“Hugh’s part of it,” Nate said. “Actually, I guess I should say he’s the start of it. He’s the one who convinced me to leave Aspertia.”

And that was how Yancy found herself sitting in a creaky stairwell in an empty, possibly haunted lighthouse with a man she’d only just met but came to know as intimately as she knew herself. Nate told her everything about what had gotten him here, about leaving Aspertia and traveling through Floccesy Town and Virbank City, about meeting Champion Alder and the late Gym Leader Harrison and his daughter, Roxie, and about the war in Castelia. Once he began his tale, it poured out of him like a deluge of raw emotion and memory, and Yancy was as captivated as she was horrified by much of what he recounted.

“Emboar was my oldest Pokémon,” he said hollowly, like he was speaking through a wall to her. “It happened so fast, and I just... I couldn’t do anything. He was right there, right in front of me, and then he was just gone. I can’t get that image out of my head. I see him every night.”
He was on the verge of tears, and just watching him suffering, Yancy felt the sudden urge to weep, too. She touched his hand gently.

“Nate, I’m so sorry,” she said, unsure what else she could possibly say. Nothing would bring Emboar back. “I can’t even imagine what you’re going through.”

“You want to know what it’s like to be a Tamer?” he said, staring at their connected hands. “On the boat ride here, Hugh and Rosa were getting along until Hugh found out that Rosa used to be a Team Plasma Agent when N was still in charge. Cheren had to restrain Hugh so he wouldn’t attack Rosa, and she pulled her bow on Hugh. I wasn’t even thinking when I grabbed her, and I burned her. It was just automatic, like instinct, you know, she’s a Sylvan and I’m an Ignifer, so... I could’ve burned right through her skin if she hadn’t gotten away from me when she did, all just in a second or two. I have this ability, this affinity, and it doesn’t even matter. I had to watch my best Pokémon die right in front of me and my two best friends almost try to kill each other because I lied to them all these years.” He sniffled and rubbed his eyes. “Ah, shit, sorry. There I go again, apologizing.”

Yancy placed her other hand on his, and his steady warmth seeped through her fingertips and crept up her arms like it was alive. “So this morning in the hall with Hugh...”

“Yeah,” Nate said. He composed himself a bit, the initial flood of emotions passed. “Yeah, we’re not really on speaking terms right now. Rosa, too.” He pulled away and ran his hands through his hair. “I’d say stop me before I get all TMI on you, but I guess it’s too late now.”

“No, I’m glad you told me,” Yancy said. “Really, I am. You shouldn’t keep that kind of thing to yourself. It’s lonely.”

“Lonely, huh,” he said, smiling a little. His eyes were bloodshot from the tears that had threatened to fall before. “I guess I do fell a little lonely these days. You know, I’m usually not this much of a killjoy.”

“Killjoy? This is hands down the best day I’ve had since before Drayden showed up in Nimbasa.”

“Oh stop, you’ll inflate my ego.”

She laughed. “That’s better, see?”

“So, weeks? You haven’t had a good day in that long?”

Yancy’s expression fell. “Not really. Lady Elesa married Drayden, and it’s been downhill in the fast lane from there.”

“How does a marriage between them even work? They’re both Gym Leaders,” Nate said.

“That’s the problem: it doesn’t work. At least, not the way she intended it to.”

Yancy told Nate about Elesa’s plans for Castelia and how she had hoped to use Drayden and Opelucid to help her carry them out, as she’d told Iris. But as she began reliving those days of constant anxiety and trepidation, she couldn’t help but tell him more than just the bare facts. There was something about him, about this place, about the way he listened that made it impossible not to want to tell him, to share these things that she’d kept to herself and carried with her all the way from Nimbasa alone. While Nate had left Aspertia with trusted companions and friends, Yancy had been alone this whole time.

“Wow,” Nate said when she’d finished her tale. “That’s... I don’t even know what to say to that. I
can’t believe you went through all that by yourself.”

“Yeah, well, Emolga and Mienshao were there, too,” Yancy said, petting Emolga gently. The little Electric rodent had fallen asleep in her lap. “And then yesterday happened, and I just don’t know anymore. I feel like I’ve failed before I’ve even really started. I’ve never felt so helpless before, and I hate it.”

Nate reached into Yancy’s satchel and grabbed the neck of the glass bottle poking out. “You know what? I think you could really use some of this right about now.”

He waggled the bottle in front of her.

“Yeah, great idea, let’s drink our problems away in a spooky haunted lighthouse,” Yancy said.

Nate shrugged. “More like celebrate airing them out. And for the record, this place doesn’t feel haunted to me. We’ve been here for a while and no jump scares yet.”

Yancy debated a moment. It was very tempting to put everything off for just a little while longer. Surely, she could deal with what the hell she was going to do about getting to Mistralton tomorrow, right? Just another hour or two wouldn’t change anything.

“Okay, but can we not stay in this stairwell? I literally can’t feel my butt.”

“Now that’s a tragedy.” Nate got up and extended a hand to help her up. “C’mon, I bet the view at the top’s amazing.”

“Oh yes, let’s definitely drink mildly hallucinogenic wine at the top of a haunted lighthouse at night,” Yancy said as she followed him upstairs.

“This place isn’t haunted, Yancy, geez. And if it is, the Ghosts could probably use some company, so let’s go!”

By the time they made it to the top, Yancy was warm from the small exertion and Emolga was wide awake again. She leaped from Yancy’s shoulder and glided about the room, which had an enormous electric lamp rotating slowly around the room and shining its bright light through the windows overhead. There was an old wooden table but no chairs, some locked filing cabinets, and another information plaque describing the beacon’s design and specifications for interested tourists.

“Now that’s a view,” Nate said as he looked out the window back in the direction of Driftveil City. Dusk had fallen, and the city lights transformed the place into sea of stars. The Colosseum was magnificently illuminated, as was the Gym to the north. Yancy joined Nate at the window.

“You should see the view of Nimbasa City at night,” Yancy said. “This is nothing.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah, the carnival lights make you feel like the city’s a floating kingdom.” Yancy smiled at the memory. She could picture it so clearly. “There’s this huge Ferris wheel you can ride at night. It’s the closest thing to flying you’ll ever get, and you can see the whole world from up there. I love all those pretty lights.”

Nate didn’t respond, and instead of watching the night view of Driftveil, he was looking at Yancy. In the shadows of the revolving beacon light above, she could not see his face well.
“Nate?” she said.

“Nothing,” he said and uncorked the bottle. “Here.”

“What’re we drinking to?”

“How about to all the pretty lights?”

Yancy accepted the bottle and smiled. It was warm where he’d held it. “Yeah, to all the pretty lights.”

The Roseli wine was not sweet as she was expecting, but it went down smoothly and left her tongue feeling thick with a rosy aftertaste. She was about to tell Nate that the old woman had probably watered the wine down to cut corners, but then the burn hit her deep in the back of her throat like a punch to the gut.

“Oh,” Yancy gasped. She rubbed her throat. “That’s strong. Oh god, just take it away.”

She passed Nate the bottle, and he laughed. “Oh c’mon, it can’t be that bad.” He took a drink and cringed when the burn hit him. “Okay, it’s pretty bad.” He took another sip and made a face. “Wait, it gets a little better as you go.”

“You totally just made that up.”

“I did, but have some more, anyway.”

In the dark, she was pretty sure he couldn’t see her rolling her eyes, but she took the bottle and drank a little more from it. It was still pretty bad, but she’d been expecting it this time. “If this is what Fairies drink, then Tinkerbell had terrible taste.”

“Yeah, I’m gonna have to agree with you on that one,” Nate said.

The alcohol warmed Yancy to her toes, and she gazed out the window languorously. The lighthouse’s beacon swept across the sea in a lazy arc, hypnotic in its pale violet, and Yancy yawned.

“Hey,” she said as the light passed overhead again. “Do you see that?”

“Huh?”

“The light.”

“You mean the beacon? Yeah, why?”

“It’s purple, like in my dream.”

Nate went to examine the beacon’s metal shaft in the center of the room. “Yeah. I guess you didn’t dream it, then.” He walked around the beacon.

Yancy hugged her arms. Emolga was busy cleaning herself on Yancy’s shoulder. “But it was just a regular white light when we came in here earlier.”

“Hey, I think there’s something over here,” Nate said.

He was hidden from sight behind the beacon, but Yancy could see his shadow whenever the light passed over him. Glass shattered, and something spilled across the floor—the Roseli wine. Nate
had dropped the bottle.

Yancy was not one to panic. She had been trained not to panic no matter how bad things got. But right now, in this creepy dark lighthouse alone with Nate and with alcohol in her system, it was getting hard not to panic.

“Nate?” she said, approaching the puddle of spilled wine. “Look, this isn’t funny.”

Emolga suddenly leaped into the air, screeching, and exploded with lightning. Yancy reached for her naginata on instinct and slashed at what she could only describe as a shadow with a gaping mouth opened wide. It happened so fast that she could hardly comprehend what had happened. Emolga’s Spark cut through the shadow where her blade passed through it harmlessly, and Yancy fell back in fright. She tried to shout, but the moment she opened her mouth, something cold seeped inside and drained all her energy. Staggering, she felt like she weighed a thousand pounds and fell to her knees. Above, the eerie purple glow of the beacon light swept low and shined down on her.

*Wait, what?*

The beacon was no longer searching, instead fixated on her like a spotlight. Yancy stared up at the blinding violet light, unable to look away. Emolga was screeching somewhere above, but Yancy could only stare into the light even as she felt her body giving out. Common sense and self-preservation told her to move, but nothing was responding.

“Yancy!” Nate shouted.

A flash of intense heat filled the room, and something crashed. The light shining down on Yancy intensified and glowed a darker, more malicious shade of violet, concentrated, and Yancy felt her eyes water and her tears evaporate as the heat burned her. The cascading beams of light took shape as violet flames, and Yancy heard her voice screaming in her head to *move*, but her body did not respond.

Arms wrapped around her from behind and pinned her to the ground beneath solid warmth, tearing her eyes from the light. The smell of burning hair and flesh permeated the room, but Yancy felt no pain as whatever had shielded her took it in her stead. Another flash of fire, orange instead of violet, lit up the room and swirled around Yancy. But she did not burn, and as coherent thought and range of motion returned to her, she realized those were Nate’s arms and his body absorbing whatever had been meant for her.

“No!” she screamed, trying to push him off, but he held firm.

It was over in seconds, and Yancy was blind in the sudden darkness. It took a moment for her to pick out the beacon sweeping its light around the room, now normal and white as though nothing had happened. Nate coughed and disentangled himself from her.

“Nate! Oh my god,” Yancy said, sitting up.

His hair was singed and the back of his shirt was full of charred holes. He was smoking, but his skin was intact, not a burn on him. Above, a magnificent Rapidash towered over them protectively and stomped her diamond-hard hoof on the tile floor, a warning.

“Hey,” Nate said, coughing. “You okay?”

“Are you kidding me? What was that?!”
Emolga was still screaming in a black rage not far away, and Yancy struggled to her feet to find her. The source of Emolga’s agitation was nothing but a dusty old lantern hanging by the door.

“What?” Yancy peered at the lantern.

She couldn’t remember if it had been there before, but if it had been, it certainly had not been burning.

“Wait, don’t get any closer,” Nate said. He was on his feet again, and Rapidash lowered her head and brandished the wicked horn on it.

“What’s going on?” Yancy demanded.

“I think,” Nate said, his voice shaky. “I think that’s...”

The lantern’s flame flickered pale indigo, and within the flame, two murky eyes opened. Yancy did not even have time to be afraid when all on its own, the lantern floated off its hook and hovered closer. Emolga backed away, afraid but mad as hell at this offensively sentient lamp.

Yancy pointed her naginata at the floating lantern, shaking with fear. “Don’t float any closer, you...you lantern Ghost!”

The Ghost floated closer all the same, drawn to the light of Rapidash’s fiery mane.

“Holy crap,” Nate said. “That’s a Lampent.”

Lampent zeroed in on Nate, perhaps recognizing his name, and unfurled his long black feelers as if to shake hands. Rapidash snorted aggressively, and Lampent withdrew. Yancy could not believe this was even happening.

“Nate, I think... I think he’s afraid of you and Rapidash,” she said.

Lampent was silent, like he wasn’t even there, and shyly floated in place just out of Nate’s reach.

“Pretty sure I’m the one who should be afraid after he almost burned us both to death,” Nate said.

Yancy lowered her naginata, strangely mesmerized by Lampent’s violet flame. “No, look at him. Is he shy?”

Nate held out his hand to Lampent, tentative, and Lampent uncurled one of his feelers to brush Nate’s fingers. Nate gasped at the contact. “Cold,” he said. “You’re so cold.”

Lampent, bolder, drew closer and tried to touch Nate again, but Rapidash interfered. Lampent swept up ribbons of flame from her mane, absorbing the heat. His purple flame intensified, incandescent and strong. Delighted, Lampent rushed Nate without warning and hit him in the chest, knocking him over.

“Nate!” Yancy ran to help him.

He was on his back clutching Lampent by the glass body encasing the flames, and before Yancy’s eyes the flames steadily grew in size and brightness. Nate’s hands began to smoke.

“He’s taking my heat,” Nate said, incredulous.

Lampent suddenly wrenched free and zoomed around overhead as if in celebration. His internal flame was bright enough to cast the room in a hazy purple shade, but unlike before, Yancy did not
feel her will to move and breathe wane. She helped Nate stand.

“That doesn’t sound good,” she said. “Also, for the record you’re the one who said this place wasn’t haunted. Good job.”

“Yeah, I hear you, I was wrong. It’s been known to happen now and then. But how long do you think Lampent’s been here? Since the fire?”

*Maybe, if he caused the fire.*

Lampent rejoined them, bubbly as a newborn, and extended his feelers again. This time, he conjured pale indigo flames out of thin air and juggled them like some undead circus performer. Yancy stared, unsure whether to be horrified or entertained.

“We should get out of here,” she said.

“And just leave him?” Nate said.

Lampent slid a purple will-o-wisp up his arm feeler and bounced it on his head, wildly entertained by his own antics even if the ignorant humans were not. Rapidash and Emolga were oddly enthralled by the floating flames.

“Nate, look at your shirt,” Yancy said. “If you hadn’t been here...”

“But I was here. I don’t think we should leave Lampent in here. What if someone else comes up here and he attacks them?”

“I don’t know,” Yancy said. “He’s a Ghost. I really don’t know the first thing about Ghosts.”

Lampent flung one of his spectral fireballs at Nate without warning, and Nate caught it on instinct. The fire settled in his palm like a ball, and he stared at it in awe. It continued to burn on seemingly nothing but the air around it, and the violet light danced in his eyes. “Neither do I,” he said.

Curious, he tossed the will-o-wisp back to Lampent, and Lampent caught it easily. Yancy swore she heard laughter coming through the rafters, but there was no one there.

“But maybe I can learn,” Nate said, flexing his unburned fingers.

Yancy stowed her naginata and scooped up Emolga from the floor. Her heart rate had returned to normal, and the eerie feeling like her life force was being drained had not come back. Whatever it was, she was pretty sure it had something to do with Lampent. And yet, Lampent had gone from psychotic to playful in just minutes, like nothing had been amiss.

“He can’t replace Emboar,” Yancy said softly.

Nate looked at her like a deer in the headlights. “No,” he said, swallowing hard. “I know that. But maybe I can do something to help him.”

*Like I couldn’t help Emboar.*

The unspoken thought hung in the air between them, and Lampent began to twirl his lower half and conjure more will-o-wisps like some phantom merry-go-round.

“Maybe he’s been waiting here for someone to find him,” Nate said. “I don’t think we should leave him.”
You have a big heart, don’t you?

Yancy sighed. “All right. If you’re sure.”

Nate reached out to Lampent again. “Hey, do you wanna tag along with us? We can get outta this lighthouse if you want.”

Lampent seemed very interested in this idea and launched the will-o-wisps he had been playing with into the air. They swirled around the room and burst into tiny purple cinders that rained down on Nate and Yancy. Yancy shielded herself from them, but when they touched her skin, they were cool to the touch and dissolved, harmless.

That’s weird, she thought. Cold fire?

“I think that was a yes,” Nate said. He recalled Rapidash and followed Yancy to the door. Lampent floated along after them like a lost puppy.

When they got outside, Lampent hovered close to Nate like a personal nightlight and cast a luminous indigo glow all around. In the dark, Lampent’s light was surprisingly helpful.

“I think we should ask someone about Lampent,” Yancy said. “Someone who knows about Ghosts.”

“Cheren would know,” Nate said. He unbuttoned his shirt to take it off, and it fell apart at the back, burned almost completely through. He was left in a T-shirt that did not fare much better, but at least it stayed on his back. “Man, I really liked this shirt,” he said.

“The Gym Leader you were with?” Yancy said.

“Yeah, outside of actual professors, Cheren knows more about Pokémon than anyone I know. He’s probably back at Rood’s safe house. I can get a new shirt while I’m there.”

“Okay, let’s go,” Yancy said.

They started back toward town across the causeway, and Lampent floated in between them just over their heads like their own mobile lighthouse. It was a little surreal. Yancy had never imagined that she would ever encounter a real Ghost, much less one that was basically a floating lantern. What was up with that? As he was now, there was nothing particularly spooky about Lampent. Maybe that was the point, Yancy considered.

What makes cold fire burn?

She wasn’t sure she wanted to know.

“Hey, Yancy?” Nate said.

“Yeah?”

“I wanted to thank you.”

“Thank me for what?”

Nate walked with his hands in his pockets and gazed up at the sky. “For today. I, um... I really needed someone to talk to. I’m glad it was you.”

Yancy was about to tell him that she felt the same when a loud crack resounded somewhere far to
the south of the city. Emolga perched on her hind legs on Yancy’s head, eyes wide as she sniffed the air, and Lampent gazed south, eerily silent.

“What the hell was that?” Nate said, looking around.

Something roared, terrible and violent, and Yancy felt her blood run cold. The lighthouse beacon above swept across the ocean and around to the city, and it slashed through the darkness to illuminate the south side of Driftveil. Sunburst orange glowed in the passing light, and Yancy stared in horror at the outline of a monster whose ilk often plagued her nightmares.

“Holy shit,” Nate said, seeing it, too. “That’s a Dragonite!”

Dragonite was attacking something to the south near the Colosseum, and black smoke rose all around him. But all Yancy could think of was Drayden’s Salamence and how it had hunted her in her nightmares.

“C’mon, we have to get over there!” Nate said. He released Rapidash again and climbed onto her back. “Take my hand.”

“Y-Yeah,” Yancy said, taking his hand and letting him haul her up behind him.

Lampent curled up his feelers and latched onto Nate’s belt loop like an actual lantern, not wanting to be left behind, and Rapidash took off at a hard gallop, faster than the wind. Yancy yelped and held onto Nate for dear life as the world faded to a blur all around and Rapidash flew over the deserted dark streets.

Dragonite fired off a massive Hyper Beam, and the night sky lit up like the dawn.
This chapter takes place during the same day as the previous chapter. Specifically, while Nate and Yancy are off on their own exploring Driftveil, other events are concurrently happening as recounted in this chapter.

It was a miracle Hugh had not tried to punch Nate again this morning, and honestly he deserved a fucking medal for his restraint. Just one day, on goddamned day was all he wanted without having to deal with Nate or Rosa or any of those Team Plasma phonies, and of course, Nate had to go and show up at his hotel room first thing in the goddamned morning trying to explain. Again. Like the black eye he was still nursing from yesterday hadn’t been explanation enough.

“*It’s not what you think,*” Nate had tried to reason. “*Rosa and Rood and the others aren’t like the Neos, they never were.*”

No, they were worse. They were the ones in charge way back when Hailey died. As far as Hugh was concerned, no explanation could ever reason that away. Team Plasma had always been rotten to the core, then and now. Nothing had changed. Whoever was calling the shots didn’t matter.

Yancy showing up when she did was probably the only thing that had stopped Hugh from physically shoving Nate out of the way, and she provided the perfect excuse to get the hell out of there. A part of Hugh felt bad, Yancy seemed like a nice person and whatever, but he just fucking could not anymore. So he stormed outside and stalked off down the street from the Lighthouse Inn with no destination in mind; he just needed to get out.

Driftveil was a big place, so it was not hard to find a place to grab a quick bite to eat and be on his way. Hugh barely tasted his food as his black mood blocked out everything but the revelations and events of the last several days. And to top it all off, the goddamned Gym Leader whose entire *job* was to help people in need had turned Hugh and the rest of his party out on their asses without even listening to them. Ever since Hugh had set foot on that ship that took him out of Virbank City, things had gone from bad to worse. On a scale of one to ten, this was nuclear apocalypse level bad. And Hugh was just sitting here like an asshole doing *nothing.*

He crumpled up his breakfast wrapper and threw it with all his might in a street bin. A passing couple looked at Hugh strangely, and the husband hurried his wife along and avoided eye contact.

“Yeah, you better be afraid,” Hugh grumbled. “We’re sitting ducks here.”

Walking helped a little. Driftveil was in the Twist Mountains and reminded him a little of Aspertia. It was colder here and the leaves were beginning to change colors with the onset of autumn, but this was a monumental step up from Castelia and the Relic Desert. Yeah, he was *never* going back there again. He sucked down some water from the skin he always carried, sort of wishing Cheren was here to see just to spite him.

Speaking of the Relic Desert, Trapinch and the rest of Hugh’s Pokémon were at the Pokémon Center being treated. He wondered if they were okay to pick up now and decided to head over
there and see. The Center was clear on the other side of town, so it took him a little while just walking at a sedate pace, but the journey helped to clear his head a little.

He was so mad at Nate. How could this even happen? There had never been secrets between them. Hugh had never kept anything from Nate, not ever, not even when it was embarrassing or personal. Nate was always the one person he could talk to about anything. When his parents had heard enough about Hailey and how Hugh was so sure the investigation into her death had been sloppy and piecemeal, it was Nate who listened and supported him. Without Nate, he was just some punk who ran his mouth a little too freely and always said the wrong thing and never knew when to let things lie. Without Nate, he was alone.

“Hey Mister? Why’re you cryin’?” said a little boy licking an ice cream cone.

Hugh jumped; he hadn’t even seen the kid come up to him. “What? I’m not crying. I just, uh, I got some dust in my eye.” He touched his eyes to make sure.

Hugh was standing on a street corner outside of a flower shop, and the ladies in the window were arranging some beautiful pieces. They stopped to watch the cute little kid with his ice cream cone. He held it up to Hugh.

“When I’m sad, my mommy buys me ice cream. You can have some,” the little boy said.

Mint chip ice cream dribbled down his chin and added to the growing stain on his shirt. Hugh eyed the slobbery cone, not exactly appetizing, and sighed.

“Thanks, kid, but I’m good. You go ahead and finish it,” he said.

“Julian!” a woman exclaimed. She came out of the flower shop in her high heels, clicking and clacking against the pavement, and kneeled down next to the little boy. “Honey, you can’t just wander off like that. Mommy was real worried!” She noticed Hugh standing there and said, “Oh, beggin’ your pardon, sir. I hope he didn’t bother ya.”

Hugh blinked. “Uh, no, it’s cool.”

“Look at you, all sticky. You’ll ruin your shirt,” the woman fussed as she tried to clean up her son. “Now come on back inside so Mommy can finish payin’, all right?”

Julian went inside the flower shop with his mother, and Hugh watched them go. He shoved his hands in his pockets and continued walking along the sidewalk.

Damn, even a little kid can tell I’m miserable.

He needed a pick-me-up, a distraction of some kind. He needed to do something useful, but he was stuck here in Driftveil unless and until Clay changed his mind.

That’s it, Hugh thought. I’ll go talk to him myself.

He’d wait all day if he had to. It wasn’t like there was anything better to do. He could head over to the Gym as soon as he picked up his Pokémon at the Center. Hugh picked up his pace, feeling markedly better now that he had a goal that didn’t involve being mad at Nate and Rosa, and he made it to the Pokémon Center feeling somewhat refreshed.

“Hugh,” Cheren said.

Hugh had not gotten three feet inside the Pokémon Center when he came face to face with Cheren
looking especially haughty this morning.

“Cheren,” Hugh said. “What’re you doing here?”

“I assume the same as you: picking up my Pokémon.” He dug something out of his pocket and handed it over. “The nurses released your Pokémon to me, too. I was going to stop by your hotel to drop them off with you.”

Hugh scowled and took the Pokéballs. Everyone was accounted for, including that Trapinch Rosa had saddled him with. Great. What the hell was he going to do with a Pokémon who had only ever tried to kill and eat him?

“Thanks,” Hugh muttered.

“Where are you off to?” Cheren asked.

“The Gym. And before you try and stop me, don’t. I’m gonna see Clay and make him listen, and I don’t care what you say.”

Cheren narrowed his eyes. “Unfortunately, you’d be wasting your time at the Gym.”

“Seriously, man? You’re gonna start with me today?”

“I only meant that Clay isn’t at the Gym; he’s at the Colosseum. I just came from the Gym. Apparently, Clay was serious about not accepting audiences with foreigners anymore. The receptionist wouldn’t even let me inside.”

Hugh groaned. “You gotta be kidding me. Is that guy even a real Gym Leader?”

“I know, it’s such a bother,” Cheren said, frowning deeply.

“For once, it really is. Goddamnit.”

“Sorry to keep you waiting!” said Rosa as she rejoined Cheren.

“Oh, fuck this,” Hugh said, turning to leave.

Cheren grabbed him before he could take two steps and yanked him back. “Not so fast, Hugh. If you’re thinking about approaching Clay alone, then stop it. It’s not going to happen.”

Hugh pulled free of Cheren and bared his teeth in a snarl. Rosa’s face was impassive but hard as she returned his glower, aloof like she was somehow better than him. Hugh rubbed his hand instinctively, the same one she’d grabbed and almost desiccated to the bone back on the boat when they argued. He’d never felt pain like that before, like a burn that grew from the inside out, the strength of a Sylvan. Rosa saw him clutch his hand and her expression fell.

“You might be a Gym Leader,” Hugh said, “but you’re not a king. You can’t order me to do anything. And from what I saw yesterday, you can’t even get Clay to listen to a word you say. So it’s my turn.”


“I’m a Syreni,” Hugh said. “He’s a Ground Adamantine. I can handle it.”

“We’re guests in his city. If you even think about challenging him, we’re done. A Gym Leader
isn’t just one man, he’s every trainer in his fiefdom. And here, that means you wouldn’t just be dealing with Clay, but with his entire Phalanx. Think for just one second what you’re saying.”

“We have to do something,” Rosa said. “Staying idle isn’t an option.”

“Nobody asked you,” Hugh snapped.

“Yeah, well I’m not the one cock blocking us in the middle of a war,” Rosa snapped right back.

“Rosa, please don’t tell me you support Hugh’s idea for an all-out coup,” Cheren said.

“What? I’m not suggesting a coup!” Hugh said.

“Of course not,” Rosa said. “I just think we can’t roll over and do nothing. We absolutely have to try to get through to Clay again by whatever means necessary. We could start by tracking him down, like we discussed.”

Hugh looked between the two of them. “Nice, Cheren. Did you plan on keeping Nate outta the loop, too?”

Cheren rubbed his eyes and tried his very best not to give in to the temptation to lose his patience. “Nobody’s keeping anybody else out of the loop. There is no loop. And yes, Rosa, I agree with your proposal, but not by any means necessary. I understand that you two don’t like to hear this, but we have to follow the rules. We’re guests here, as frustrating as that may be.”

“Then what do you suggest?” Rosa said.

“I think we should head to the Colosseum and see if we can talk to Clay there. Who knows? Maybe we’ll catch him in a better mood and he’ll lift the gag order on foreigners.”

“I think he made it pretty clear that talking’s not gonna convince him,” Hugh said.

“Nevertheless, we have to try. I’m not about to make an enemy of a fellow Gym Leader, no matter what he says about borders and sovereignty. Unova includes all of us, and having a common enemy in Neo Team Plasma only strengthens our inherent ties. I just have to figure out a way to make Clay see that without it seeming like an affront to his position.”

Hugh and Rosa both scoffed, and Hugh glared at her because how dare she agree with him? And yeah, that was childish, okay, he could admit that to himself, but nobody needed to know that. At least they were going to do something about this fiasco with Clay.

“Well, I’m going,” Hugh said.

“Me, too,” Rosa said.

There was a nasty retort on the tip of Hugh’s tongue, but he bravely choked it down when he saw Rosa watching him, like she was just waiting for him to throw the first punch so she could have an excuse to get serious. Well, fuck that. He was just as good at ignoring the problem as he was at inflaming it.

“Good, I’m glad to see you two starting to work past your differences,” Cheren said, but it came out sounding a little less encouraging and a little more threatening.

They headed south to the Colosseum as a group, and Hugh felt some of his rising spirits fall now that Rosa was walking not four feet away from him on Cheren’s other side. It wasn’t like he
couldn’t distinguish between Rosa and the Neos he’d fought in Castelia. They’d been out to kill him every step of the way. That wasn’t Rosa. She was technically an ally. She’d fought the Neos alongside him. She’d saved his life at the risk of her own. He really thought he would die down there in the dark, that his lungs would fill with sand and there would be nothing left of him, not a trace. Until he felt her arms envelop him and pull him to the surface, calm and capable even as he was suffocating and completely helpless. He had no idea how she’d even found him buried under all that sand. And he knew that despite everything, he owed her his life.

Rosa had not killed Hailey, but she truly believed in the people who did. It was just as bad, and it was all that mattered. Hugh had no idea what to do with that.

“Looks like we’re late for the games,” Rosa said as they made it to the Colosseum.

There was a line of people waiting to be admitted to spectate, and staff was walking the length of the line shouting about the day’s games.

“I still can’t believe they even have games,” Hugh said. “If these people wanna see blood and death, they should go hit up Team Plasma.”

“Prelims today, folks! Prelims today! Cast your bets on the next rising star to compete in the Bronze Trial! Cast your bets here, folks!” a staff member shouted.

People in line made cash deposits at the service counters and received written receipts for their bets. Hugh was stunned.

“They bet on the participants,” Cheren said. “Amazing. I wonder what the pot is at.”

Rosa said nothing at all as she watched the Driftveilers gambling merrily like this wasn’t a life and death matter for the people and Pokémon they were betting on. For once, Hugh had nothing to add. At least they could agree on something.

“Let’s just find Clay. I don’t wanna hang around here any longer than I have to,” Hugh said, heading for the stands to find a seat.

The Colosseum was packed and roaring as the spectators cheered for the games already taking place in the arena below. This match was one on one, a female trainer and her Mudsdale against a male trainer and his Metang. The humans were well-armored with sword and shield as they clashed alongside their Pokémon.

“Excuse me,” Rosa asked the old man sitting next to her. “What’s this game?”

“Well, hello there, Miss. Ain’t ya as pretty as a Sunday mornin’,” the old man said, grinning. He had a few gold teeth where his natural ones had rotted away, and he was well-dressed and groomed. He clenched a receipt Hugh recognized from the betting windows. “What’s your name?”

“Thank you,” Rosa said politely. “I’m Rosa.”

“Rosa, that’s just lovely. A lovely name for a lovely young lady. You interested in the games?” the old man said. “Name’s Maynard, Donnie Maynard. I own the biggest Tauros ranch in Driftveil. You from outta town?”

“That’s right,” Rosa said. “I came to see the games. Could you tell me about what’s going on?”

Hugh grimaced as Rosa smiled for the old man. It was like she’d done this before. Maybe she had. That old guy was eating it up like he’d been starved of pretty female attention for the last two
hundred years.

“It’s rude to stare, Hugh,” Cheren chided, smirking to himself like an asshole.

“What’re you grinning about?” Hugh demanded.

“These ain’t the games,” Maynard explained. “This’s just the warm-ups for the local kids to get their fifteen minutes. The prelims don’t start ‘til around noon.”

“And the prelims are for the Bronze Trial?”

“You bet. Oh, it’ll be a grand ol’ day, I reckon. Young folks come here from all over Unova to participate, all for a chance to be admitted to Gym Leader Clay’s Phalanx. It’s the greatest honor there is.”

“Sounds wonderful,” Rosa said, smiling politely.

Hugh wanted to tell her to get to the fucking point and ask about where Clay was, but then he remembered that they weren’t on friendly speaking terms because he’d sort of sworn to loathe her for all eternity. Never mind.

“Oh, this is my friend, Cheren,” Rosa said. “He’s the Gym Leader of Aspertia City.”

Maynard whistled appreciatively. “Ya don’t say! No foolin’?”

Cheren smiled dashingly and showed Maynard the Basic Badge he carried with him at all times to prove his identity, and Maynard put a hand over his heart.

“Bless my soul, I do believe that there’s an honest Badge! Martha, come meet my new friends, Rosa and Cheren. Cheren’s a Gym Leader,” Maynard said.

Martha, presumably his wife, ogled the Basic Badge like it was a priceless gem. “Goodness, that’s shiny! Donnie, you’re always makin’ new friends. Oh! Y’all should compete in the prelims!”

“Wait, what?” Hugh said, interrupting the conversation.

“Don’t mind him,” Rosa said. “What do you mean, ‘compete’?”

“Oh Donnie, wouldn’t it be just perfect? A real Gym Leader competin’ for the Bronze Trial. Bet that’s never happened before!” Martha gushed.

“Are you saying anyone can just sign up?” Rosa said, shocked. “But these games are dangerous.”

“I know, ain’t it the Combees knees?” Martha said. “I just love watchin’ strapping young men fight for their lives!”

Hugh briefly fantasized about slapping this ignorant woman in the face.

“Does Gym Leader Clay play a role in the prelims?” Rosa pressed. “We saw him fighting in the Bronze Trial yesterday.”

“Ah, yes, Clay’s always the final challenge for any trial-goers. All they gotta do is survive, I reckon, and they’re accepted into the Phalanx. Seems like a low bar to me, but what do I know? I’m just a humble rancher,” Maynard joked.

“Yeah, what the fuck do you know?” Hugh snarled under his breath.
Cheren elbowed him hard.

“So Clay watches the prelims?” Rosa said.

“Oh sugar, ya really are new ‘round here, huh?” Martha said. “There’s Clay now.”

She pointed to a private box high in the Colosseum’s northern wall, and sure enough Clay and several of his guards were milling around waiting for the prelims to begin. Apparently, they could not be bothered with the fight currently happening. To Hugh’s horror, the Mudsdale in the arena was limping badly and might trip and break his leg at any moment. The crowd cheered.

“He always grants a private audience with the winners o’ the prelims,” Maynard said. “Real man o’ the people, our Clay. He’s always lookin’ out for the little guys, I tell ya.”

“Oh my god,” Hugh said.

“...Right,” Rosa said, her voice strained.

“Oh, look there! If this is your first time in Driftveil, then ya oughtta try some o’ the local snacks. Oi, vendor! Over here!” Maynard waved down a snack vendor wending his way through the spectators.

Hugh had other plans. He got up and headed back to the entrance, fully intending to sign up for the prelims if there were still spots available.

*If I can get that private audience with Clay, then he’ll have to listen to me about Team Plasma.*

“Oh, look there! If this is your first time in Driftveil, then ya oughtta try some o’ the local snacks. Oi, vendor! Over here!” Maynard waved down a snack vendor wending his way through the spectators.

Hugh and Rosa ran to catch up with Hugh, who had already made it to the service desk where some people were still placing bets.

“G’mornin’ sir, how would ya like to place your bet today?” the uniformed serviceman behind the barred window said.

“I wanna compete,” Hugh said. “In the prelims. Where do I sign up?”

“Oh, well that’s—” the serviceman began.

“Hugh, what’re you doing?” Cheren demanded.

“Signing up for the prelims.”

“What?” Rosa said, aghast.

“Hold on just a minute,” Cheren said.

“No, I'm doing this. You heard that Maynard guy. Whoever wins the prelims gets an audience with Clay, which last time I checked is exactly what we need. So I'm competing.”

Cheren grabbed Hugh’s arm and dragged him aside. “Are you out of your *mind*? I thought we all agreed that these games are dangerous.”

“Yeah, but you got a better idea?” Hugh shot back. “Clay banned us from the Gym, in case you forgot. ‘Sides, I got Samurott. He’ll wipe out all those Ground-types, no sweat. I’m a shoe-in.”
Cheren rubbed his temples. “I’m sorry, allow me a moment to process this latest achievement in stupidity.”

“Wait, I think Hugh might actually have a point,” Rosa said.

Hugh looked at her in shock.

“Yeah no, this doesn’t change anything,” she said, “but if it’s a bunch of Ground Adamantines and their Pokémon we’re talking about, then we have the best advantage. Samurott and Serperior could sweep this. And with you and Stoutland in the ring with us, we might actually stand a chance at winning and getting that private audience with Clay. There’s no way he could deny us if we win fair and square.”

“Why do I suddenly get this cold feeling of abject horror in the pit of my stomach at the thought of you two agreeing on something?” said Cheren.

“We’ve all fought in a real war,” Rosa said. “That gives us an advantage. We can focus on quick incapacitation before anybody gets seriously injured. It’s not like I’m looking forward to this, but if it’s our only way, then we have to be flexible.”

“You know that will never work,” Cheren said. “From what we’ve all seen, these fights are the real thing. You’re willing to risk Serperior and Samurott for a little glory?”

“There’s no glory in a fucking game,” Hugh said. “But if we don’t make Clay see reason, then we’re all screwed. Samurott and I can take a little beating if it means nobody else’ll have to see what I saw in Castelia.”

“I agree,” Rosa said. “It’s like you said, Cheren: this is bigger than us. So I’ll work with you,” she said to Hugh. “Think you can do the same?”

Hugh clenched his fists. Fucking hell. “Yeah, fine. It’s not like I want what happened to my sister to ever happen to anybody else.”

Cheren looked between the two of them and seemed to age ten years. “Bother doesn’t even begin to cover this.”

“You’ll do it, right?” Hugh said. “Cheren, c’mon, you know it’s our best shot.”

“Don’t badger me, Hugh. At least give me a minute to pretend like I can come up with a reasonable alternative to this madness.”

“Quilfish! We were just talking about you,” said Benga.

Hugh bristled at that inane and totally uncreative nickname.

“No, we weren’t,” Iris said.

Benga, Iris, and Nuria approached them. They had their whole entourage with them, including Moros, Soriel, and Belaron, whom Hugh had met the previous day on the walk to the Lighthouse Inn with Yancy, and some Humilauan crewmembers from the ship Iris had sailed here in.

“Iris,” Cheren said, surprised to see her. “What’re you doing here?”

“Looking for the Gym Leader. I assume you had the same idea,” she said.

The crowd erupted in cheers all of a sudden, and Hugh glared at the stands. He hated these people,
every single one of them. If they had even an inkling of what a real war was like, real fear and
blood and death, they would not be cheering like this was some fucking circus show.

“We did, actually,” Cheren said. “Honestly, I haven’t quite agreed to the idea yet.”

“We’re entering the prelims,” Rosa said. “Apparently, Clay grants a private audience to the
winners, so if we win, he’ll have to hear us out.”

“Oh, really?” Iris said.

Hugh did not really get Iris. She was serious and enigmatic and apparently a Titan princess, but she
had a Cottonee that delighted in goofing around. Right now, Cottonee was bouncing on her head
having the time of his life, and Iris was a statue as she surveyed Hugh, Rosa, and Cheren with a
quiet intensity. It just didn’t fit. She was hiding something.

“Hey, we should enter,” Benga said. “Iris, this’ll be a piece of cake for you now.”

“No way, it was my idea. You can enter the next one,” Hugh said.

“Just because you enter doesn’t mean we can’t,” Nuria said.

Hugh had heard enough. He went back to the service counter and told the guy he wanted to enter.

“All righty,” said the serviceman. “Now, before I can sign ya up, I need to go over a few rules.”

“Yeah, whatever,” Hugh said. “Let’s hear ‘em.”

“There are three requirements. First, ya have to have a partner. Prelims’re two on two. That’s two
trainers and two Pokémon.”

“Okay, sure, no problem.” Cheren could be his partner and he wouldn't even have to deal with
Rosa.

“Second, only Ground-, Steel-, and Rock-type Pokémon can participate.”

“Wait, what the hell?”

“Um, sir? D’ya need me to repeat that?”

“Are you telling me I can’t enter with my Samurott?” Hugh demanded.

“Er, no sir, I’m awfully sorry. Samurott’s a Water-type, so it’s against the rules.”

“...Shit.”

“Hugh, what’re you doing?” Cheren demanded. “We’re in the middle of a conversation here.”

“Yeah, well, you can all shut up now,” Hugh said. “Apparently, only Ground-, Steel-, and Rock-
type Pokémon can even participate. So we’re shit outta luck.”

“Are you serious?” Iris said. “What kind of preposterous rule is that?”

“It probably has something to do with the fact that these prelims are meant to ultimately select
trainers and Pokémon to join the Phalanx,” Cheren said. “Driftveil’s home to an old family of
Adamantines going back generations. I doubt they’d want a random Samurott in the mix.”
“It’s bullshit,” Hugh said.

“I can still enter,” Rosa said. She held out a Pokéball. “I have Thorny, my Ferroseed. He’s a Steel-type.”

Hugh had a sudden thought. “Wait, I have Trapinch! I can still enter, too.”

“You just caught that Trapinch,” Cheren said, incredulous. “No, no way. This is a bad idea.”

“If you have a better one, I’m all ears. No? Thought so,” Hugh said.

“None of my Pokémon can enter,” Benga said to Iris. “Neither can yours or Nuria’s. And Moros’s Nidoking is still at the Pokémon Center recovering.”

“I’m aware of that. Hugh, Rosa,” Iris said. “You’ll enter, and when you win, I’ll join your audience with Clay.”

“Assuming you can win,” Nuria said.

“Princess, I don’t like this,” Belaron said. “We should find another way. We can’t trust these people.”

“Your disagreement is noted, Syr Bel, and I choose to ignore it,” Iris said in a clipped tone.

Geez, someone’s in the doghouse, Hugh thought.

“I don’t mean to be blunt, but why should we help you?” Rosa said. “What’s in it for us?”

“Because in a negotiation, the ideal outcome is to make both parties better off than they were before,” Iris said. “An audience with Clay would make us both better off. Actively impeding me would earn you an enemy you really don’t want. I have enough enemies as it is. What about you?”

“We have enough enemies, too,” Cheren said before Rosa could respond. “Look, I don’t see any reason why we can’t get along for a common purpose right now.”


Before Cheren could respond to that, Hugh marched back to the service desk. “Okay, I’m back and we’re all good. So sign me up.”

“Ah, right, sorry sir, there’s one more rule I didn’t get to tell ya about,” the serviceman said sheepishly.

“Goddamn, just spit it out! This is kind of an emergency here,” Hugh said.

“Yes, um, well, ya see, we can only accept trainers who’ve passed the qualifyin’ fitness exam.”

“Exam?”

“Yes, it’s given at the Gym and has the Gym Leader’s seal of approval. Without it, I can’t enter ya.”

Motherfucking fuck.

“Hey, I’ve got your Gym Leader seal of approval right here,” Rosa said. She had Cheren by the
elbow and shoved him at the service desk. “This is the Aspertia City Gym Leader, Cheren. He’ll vouch for us.”

“I will?” Cheren said.

Hugh latched onto the idea with gusto. “Damn right he will. Does this work?”

“Ah, well,” the serviceman floundered. “I guess... There’s technically nothin’ in my rulebook here that says it’s gotta be the Driftveil Gym Leader who approves. But, uh, I’ll hafta see proof.”

Cheren grudgingly showed the serviceman the Basic Badge as proof of his identity, and the serviceman took down Hugh’s and Rosa’s information for the prelims. They would be a two-man team with Ferroseed and Trapinch and face an opposing team later this afternoon.

“This is quite unusual,” the serviceman said as he stamped and signed a bunch of official documents and handed Hugh and Rosa liability waivers to sign. “I’ve never heard of a foreign Gym Leader signin’ up his pupils for the prelims. Y’all must be real gung-ho ‘bout joinin’ the Phalanx.”

“Yeah, all the gungs and hos you can imagine,” Hugh said.

“Is everything ready?” Iris asked.

“Unfortunately, yes,” Cheren said. “I can’t believe I just did that. I’m the most irresponsible person I know.”

“It’ll be fine,” Rosa said. “Thorny’s a good Pokémon. We’ll win this.”

“I’m more concerned about Hugh and Trapinch,” Cheren said.

“Yeah, well, at least I’m doing something,” Hugh said.

“We’ll be rooting for you,” Benga said, grinning. “Don’t fuck up.”

Iris’s gaze lingered on Hugh and Rosa. “Yeah, don’t.”

They headed to the stands to wait, and Hugh was glad of it. Something about Iris and Benga rubbed him the wrong way, but he couldn’t place it. He knew what they said about Titans, how they were all liars, so what were these two hiding?

“Listen to me, both of you,” Cheren said. “I know I probably sound like a broken record here, but I feel the need to remind you that this isn’t a game.”

“Technically, it is,” Rosa said. “But not to me.”

“No, and it shouldn’t be. You could really get hurt in there, especially with only two Pokémon to back you up. Hugh, you’ve never used Trapinch in battle before. You barely even know her. It’s not too late to back out.”

“Drop it, Cheren. I’m doing this. We tried your way, and it blew up in our faces. So now we’re trying things my way. I’ll handle Trapinch. You just make sure you’re ready when we talk to Clay again,” Hugh said.

“I know from experience that there’s little reasoning with you when you’ve set your mind to something,” Cheren said, exasperated. “Fine. But hear me when I tell you both that you have to work together if you want to make it through this.”
“Sure,” Rosa said.

“No, Rosa, I’m perfectly serious. In case you both forgot, I was there for your fight. I’m not without sympathy for you, both of you. And don’t look at me like that, Hugh, you were completely out of line in your actions even if your anger may have been justified.”

Hugh clenched his fists. Out of line? Cheren should have been overjoyed that Hugh had kept a lid on it so well when all he’d wanted to do was beat the crap out of both Nate and Rosa.

“I’m not asking you both to forget what happened,” Cheren said. “But I am asking you to put your differences aside for a while. Nothing’s changed. This war, what we’re doing here, everything that’s happened until now, it’s all much, much bigger than any one of us. If you ignore that for even a moment, you could do much worse than lose in there. This is not a game, and there are no technicalities about it. Am I understood?”

“Yeah,” Rosa said at length. Her gaze was averted.

“Hugh?” Cheren said.

Goddamned Cheren and his goddamned sense. He was right about everything, and it was fucking annoying.

“Yeah, I get you,” Hugh said.

Cheren put a hand each on Hugh’s and Rosa’s shoulders. “Even if you can’t bring yourselves to reconcile, then I hope you’ll remember that you both mean the world to Nathaniel. And it’s not as though I’m opposed to keeping you around, either. So try to remember that there are other people who genuinely care about you and want to see you succeed.”

With that, Cheren left them to catch up with Iris’s party in the stands. Hugh watched him go, wondering if he should’ve said something else. Cheren did not often get sentimental or emotional, but when he did, Hugh never knew what to say. All he could do was stand there.

“We should go,” Rosa said. “I saw a sign for the participants over there.”

She headed off without waiting, and Hugh had no choice but to follow.

The Pit, as the other prelim participants called it, was a literal pit with dirt floors and no windows where everyone signed up to compete awaited their turn in the ring. Hugh and Rosa were instructed to arm and armor themselves from the communal supply available to all participants. It was all dented piecemeal armor collected over the years, but it was better than going in the ring with nothing but the street clothes Hugh was wearing. He could only thank his paranoia for not letting him leave his hotel room this morning without the two hook swords he’d brought with him all the way from Aspertia City. Rosa had her bow and arrows, and Hugh grudgingly admired her preparedness. There was no way Nate would have gone out in town with a weapon on his person; he was too trusting.

“Nothing fits,” Rosa said as she tried various pieces of armor.

Hugh grunted, determined not to lapse into casual conversation with Rosa, of all people. There were broad wood and iron shields available, but they were all enormous. Hugh tried one out, but it was so heavy that it would probably do more harm than good. Some of the other participants
noticed him struggling and laughed.

“Assholes,” Hugh grumbled.

“Hey, you’re not seriously takin’ a bow in there?” said one of the participants to Rosa.

He was big, beefy, and country blond, a head taller than Hugh, and Hugh was not a short man. He had his own armor that actually matched and looked new, and a thick sword hung at his belt. One of the large wood and iron shields was strapped to his back like it weighed nothing at all.

“What’s it to you?” Rosa said.

“Just lookin’ out for ya, sweetheart,” the jarhead said. “Haven’t seen y’around before. Name’s Colter. Colter Buck.”

“Of course it is,” Hugh said, valiantly resisting the urge to roll his eyes.

“My name is Rosa, not sweetheart,” said Rosa. “And my weapon of choice is none of your business.”

“All right, if ya say so. But sweetheart suits ya better’n Rosa,” Colter said.

Hugh narrowed his eyes at Rosa, but that Colter guy seemed like the more annoying target at the moment.

“You’re seriously competin’?” Colter pressed Rosa as she went back to examining the available armor for something to wear in an effort to politely ignore him. “A pretty little thing like you?”

“Dude, seriously, there’s a stereotype here and you’re not doing it any favors,” Hugh said.

“What’re you, her keeper? Butt out, punk,” Colter said.

“I realize this may come as an extreme shock, but I’m capable of speaking for myself,” Rosa said to Colter. “And yeah, I’m competing. So excuse me, I have to prepare.”

Rosa walked away with a couple pieces of armor to try on in another corner of the pit, and Colter watched her go with a sour look on his face.

“Che, bitch,” he muttered.

Hugh felt his temper flare, and for a moment he fantasized about shaving a few inches off Colter’s thick head to cut him down to a normal size, but Colter left to rejoin the group of guys he’d been with before. They laughed bawdily about something out of hearing range, and Hugh glowered at them.

He stalked off in the direction Rosa had gone and found her adjusting a studded leather breastplate over her shirt. It was a little big on her, but it was better than nothing.

“If Driftveil’s a buncha Colter Bucks, then I’m almost tempted to say fuck it, let ‘em have their sick show and wait for Team Plasma to come light a fire under their asses,” Hugh said.

Rosa eyes him dubiously. “Tempting, but sadly even misogynists don’t really deserve what happened in Castelia.”

“Leave the annoying common sense thing to Cheren. He’s better at it.”
They lapsed into silence, and Hugh fiddled with Trapinch’s Pokéball. He wondered how this would turn out. Trapinch didn’t know him, and deep down he wasn’t sure this was going to work.

“This might be a good time for you to get to know Trapinch a little,” Rosa said.

“What did I just say?”

“You know, this whole tough guy act only works if you can back it up. Right now, you just sound insecure and mean,” Rosa said.

“Wow, screw you, too.”

“Hugh, look at me. Can you just try to forget it’s me talking to you for a second? We’re about to fight a fake battle with real consequences, and that scares the shit out of me. You can go back to hating me when we’re done, but until then, will you just let me help? Please?”

Hugh clenched his jaw hard enough to hurt, but he could think of nothing to argue that wouldn’t come out sounding petty. “…Fine. What do you suggest?”

“Let’s take a look at Trapinch. If she knows us—you, then we’ll have a better chance out there.”

Hugh nodded numbly and released Trapinch. The Ant Pit Pokémon was good as new after the healing she’d gotten at the Pokémon Center, and she quivered as she looked around the unfamiliar surroundings. Rosa released her Ferroseed, who immediately began to spin and burrow in the dirt.

“Trapinch,” Hugh said, reaching out a hand to touch her.

Trapinch shivered and snapped at Hugh, but he pulled his hand away in the nick of time.

“Crap!” Hugh said, getting to his feet.

“Whoa, Trapinch, it’s okay,” Rosa said. “Thorny, help me out here.”

Trapinch was snapping and backing away, spooked, and Ferroseed rolled after her. The spiny pinecone Pokémon extended his vines and entrapped Trapinch in a ring. Trapinch bumped the vines and spooked again. She opened her enormous mouth in a hiss.

“Hugh, come on,” Rosa said. “Do something.”

“That thing’s gonna try to bite my arm off,” he said, but he approached Trapinch all the same. “This is the stupidest thing I’ve ever done.”

“I sincerely doubt that,” Rosa said.

Hugh took the high road and ignored that, thank you very much, and tentatively reached for Trapinch again. “Hey, Trapinch, remember me? You almost sucked me into a black pit of doom and had me for dinner before. No hard feelings.”

Trapinch watched Hugh like a hawk, still quaking and scraping the ground. She was afraid, Hugh realized. Of course she was afraid being in a strange place with strange people.

“Not exactly the Hano Grand Beach Resort, huh?” Hugh said, dropping the sarcasm as best he could. “I bet they at least have windows there.”

Trapinch’s beady eyes could not see well, but she smelled Hugh as he slowly inched closer. He wondered what it must be like to live your whole life under the sand in the dark. Maybe Trapinch
had never seen the sky before Hugh pulled her out of that sink hole.

“Hugh, I think it’s working,” Rosa said. “Keep going.”

“Uh, yeah,” Hugh said awkwardly. “Hey, Trapinch. It’s cool, see? I, uh, I probably smell weird to you ‘cause I’m a Syreni, huh? Not a lotta them in the Relic Desert.” He got an idea and scooped up a handful of dirt and rubbed it between his hands. “Is that better?”

Trapinch did not try to snap at him again, and Hugh was mere inches from touching her broad snout. When he felt his fingers brush the scaled leathery flesh, he stared in wonderment and smiled a little.

“I’m not all bad when you get to know me,” he said, running his fingers over Trapinch’s snout and forgetting where he was as he experienced the simple timeless joy of connecting with a Pokémon for the first time. “You’ll see.”

Rosa looked on and opened her mouth to say something, but thought better of it. Hugh felt her gaze and found her watching him, the ghost of a smile there for one moment and gone just as quickly.

There was a commotion by the entrance to the Pit all of a sudden, and Trapinch jumped in alarm. She scuttled around Hugh, but Ferroseed’s vines kept her from scurrying away, and she huddled in as small a ball as she could force her body into.

“Where are they?!” bellowed Clay. “I know they’re here, don’t ya tell me otherwise!”

He was shouting at some people Hugh recognized from the Gym, Katie and Tibor among them, and marching around the Pit looking for someone. Hugh had a sneaking suspicion who, confirmed when Clay caught sight of him and stomped toward him. Hugh got to his feet, and Rosa stood with him.

“There they are,” Clay said. “Boy, y’all got some balls thinkin’ ya could sneak in here ‘n participate in the prelims, I tell ya.” He glanced at Rosa. “Well, metaphorically speakin’.”

“What’s going on?” Rosa demanded. “Was there a discrepancy in our paperwork? We followed all the rules.”

“Aye, that ya did. And I bet you’re real proud o’ yourselves for gamin’ the system, eh? Usin’ Cheren to get around my exam requirement, that wasn’t too shabby. I’ll be sure to change the rule to make it more explicit about requirin’ my approval to enter, not just any Gym Leader’s.”

“You can’t stop us from competing,” Hugh said. “And when we win, you have to honor the rules, too, and give us an audience.”

The other participants in the Pit had gathered around to watch, and Hugh hated the way they looked at him, snickering and whispering among themselves like schoolyard bullies.

Clay frowned deeply. “When? I think ya mean if, boy. Y’all think you’re clever makin’ it this far, but this is a tournament for Adamantines. Ya win with pure power and rock-hard determination, not loopholes and tricks.” He glanced behind Hugh and saw Trapinch cowering. “That yours? Trapinch might be a Ground-type, but out there you’ll be facin’ the likes o’ Golem and Krookodile. Why don’t ya just throw in the towel now?”

“There’s no single way to win a fight, and there’s no Pokémon without a weakness,” Rosa said. “We’ll take our chances.”
“We’ll see, won’t we? Don’t say I didn’t give ya the chance to back out gracefully,” Clay said darkly. He left with his entourage, and when they exited the Pit, the roar of the crowd flooded in after them.

Trapinch finally calmed down a little now that there weren’t so many people around, and Ferroseed tried to get her to dig a hole together. Trapinch did not seem interested, much to Ferroseed’s dismay.

“Back out gracefully? Yeah, right,” Hugh grumbled. “He’s probably pissed ‘cause we got a good shot at winning.”

“He’s not wrong, you know,” Rosa said. “Thorny’s a great Pokémon, and you might even be able to pull something off with Trapinch, I don’t know. But if we get in the ring with an Onix or something, I really don’t know how this is gonna go.”

Hugh frowned. What the hell? She’d been so confident before, and now this. “What’s with you all of a sudden? Don’t sulk, it’s weird. I’m not gonna comfort you, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

Rosa scoffed. “Hardly.”

“Then fucking cut it out.”

She gave him a withering look. “Hugh, be realistic. Do you honestly think we can win this? I thought we’d at least get Clay’s attention and that would be enough, but clearly it’s not.”

He tried to think of something to snap her out of it, which totally did not count as comforting her because he’d just vowed not to do that. “Remember in Castelia with that Hydreigon? How that swarm of Beedrill and Butterfree just ripped him apart?”

“I don’t think I’ll forget that for the rest of my life,” Rosa said.

“Good. ‘Cause if a buncha flimsy Bugs can beat a Dragon, then we can beat whatever we’re up against here. I dunno about you, but I’m not quitting until we talk to Clay.”

“We?” Rosa said.

“Yeah, ‘we’. You’re the one who said Trapinch would come in handy the next time I’m fighting on land. Well, guess what.”

Rosa looked at him in a way that made Hugh want to cross his arms and protect himself. It was transient and hardly there at all, but for just a moment there were no walls, no anger. He felt naked without it.

“I’m sorry about your sister,” she said, contrite. “I hope one day you’ll get the justice you both deserve.”

Hugh went rigid and his throat twisted painfully. He’d never understood it when they said you could be at a loss for words, to literally be unable to respond, until now. He’d always had more words than were necessary, to hear others tell it. But she’d blindsided him, leaving no room to doubt her sincerity because no one could look like that and say those things and somehow manage to make him come undone so exquisitely.

There was some commotion at the mouth of the Pit as participants began to herd into the arena. Staff shouted for everyone to line up, the matches were beginning and they would go fast. Trapinch had gotten roped into helping with that hole Ferroseed wanted to dig somehow (who
knew a sentient pinecone could be so convincing?), and both of them were covered in dirt and enjoying themselves. Rosa scooped up Ferroseed.

“We better go,” she said, not looking at Hugh.

“...Yeah,” Hugh said hoarsely.

Trapinch sniffed his leg and gave it a nip. She was little too big to pick up, so Hugh patted her head and recalled her to her Pokéball. Rosa was already getting in line with the others, so Hugh followed and wished this feeling, this weird vulnerability, would go away.

The sun was low in the sky by the time Hugh and Rosa were called for their match. Hugh was getting a sunburn standing in the perimeter pen with the other prelim participants watching the matches before his. He also had to endure the roaring crowd the entire time, and he was nursing a headache from all the noise. Cheren, Iris, and the others were seated together in the stands observing. The last match had just ended, and the losing trainer had to be carried out on a gurney to receive emergency medical attention. Hugh gulped down what was left in his water skin to wash the bad taste out of his mouth. It didn’t help.

He hadn’t said more than two words to Rosa since her apology in the Pit, but damn if it wasn’t the only thing on his mind. It wasn't as if Rosa had held the blade that took Hailey’s life, but her apology was more that he would likely ever hear from the bastards who did.

Maybe Rosa had known the guys who murdered Hailey once. Maybe she’d laughed with them, trained with them, loved them. But they were faceless, nothing but shadowy figures in his imagination born of guilt and hatred and fury. They were teeth and knives, darkness and cold, regret and ridicule. And guilt. So much guilt. They were hardly human, and he saw them everywhere—in the enemy Syreni with the Mega Sharpedo Hugh had killed with his own hands; in Rood and his flock; in Rosa, too. They were everywhere and everyone, and he had never been able to tell the difference.

There is no difference.

Then why couldn’t he get Rosa’s apology out of his head? Why couldn’t he forget the look in her eyes? Why couldn’t he feel any way but this?

“Match Sixteen! Participants may proceed to the arena!” someone announced over the loudspeaker.

“Hugh, that’s us,” Rosa raised her voice to be heard over the crowd.

“Huh?” he said.

“We’re up. It’s our turn to fight.” She steered him to the gate where an attendant checked them off the list and allowed them into the arena.

Hugh shielded his eyes from the sun’s duskling light and the sheer white floodlights that shined down from the top of the Colosseum to combat the encroaching night. The arena itself was a wide sand and gravel pit littered with broken boulders and badly chewed up from the previous matches.

“Hugh, pull it together,” Rosa hissed as they made their way toward the center. “You look like you’re marching to the gallows.”
He pinched the bridge of his nose. “I’m fine,” he snapped. “Just a headache.”

Their opponents were two men Hugh remembered seeing in the Pit. Unfortunately, one of them remembered him, too.

“Y’all again,” said Colter Buck. “Y’know, I kinda feel bad for ya havin’ to face me ‘n Cotter. He’s my brother.”

Hugh rolled his eyes. “Seriously, dude, do us all a favor and crawl back into whatever asshole you came out of.”

Cotter didn’t speak. Maybe he was mute. More than likely he was just stupid given the shared gene pool. Hugh could not have given less of a fuck and regretted giving the matter even this small consideration when he could have been thinking of literally anything else.

“There’s Clay,” Rosa said, shielding her eyes from the light.

Hugh followed her gaze up to the private box Maynard had pointed out before. Sure enough, Clay was there looking down on Rosa and him and their opponents.

“There he is,” Hugh said, feeling his anger simmer as he remembered exactly what he and Rosa were here to do. He clung to that feeling, the devil he knew, and let it fuel him.

“Trial ends when one side surrenders or can’t go on,” the referee informed them.

“Can’t go on?” Rosa said. “What does that mean, exactly?”

“Don’t worry, sweetheart,” Colter said. “I’ll show ya.”

Rosa drew her bow. “I’m sure you’ll try.”

She and Hugh released Ferroseed and Trapinch, and Trapinch shrank at the overwhelming atmosphere of it all. The crowd’s cheering was the worst part, and poor Trapinch began to quiver.

Colter burst out laughing. “Seriously? That’s the best ya got? Cotter, I hope you’re hungry, ‘cause I reckon we’ll be home in time for supper. This ain’t gonna take long.”

The Brothers Buck released their Pokémon and readied their swords and shields. Two Lycanroc coalesced in the light, one each of the diurnal and nocturnal variants. Both were roughly the size of Nate’s Rapidash, which normally would not have bothered Hugh and his small army of Water-type Pokémon. Except that he didn’t have an army today, just Trapinch. Rosa was silent beside him, but one look told him she was not exactly thrilled at the sight of the feral wolves they would have to defeat, not to mention the brothers themselves. Hugh drew his hook swords.

“Begin!” the referee shouted before hightailing it the hell out of there.

The Midnight Lycanroc howled, his ruddy red fur standing on end, and the haunting cry sent a terrible chill down Hugh’s spine. If doom had a voice, it would be this sound. The crowd’s cheering soon drowned out the howl, and Hugh was running.

“Trapinch!” he shouted.

But Trapinch had immediately begun to burrow underground at the first sight of Lycanroc, and she was nowhere in sight. The Midnight Lycanroc tore into the sandy earth and starting digging Trapinch up, snarling and snapping.
“Are you kidding me?!” Hugh said, exasperated. “Trapinch!”

But there was no response from Trapinch as she continued to burrow deeper, desperate to escape Lycanroc. She would be no help. Hugh was on his own, and it was on his own that Cotter, Colter’s meathead brother, found him.

“Whoa shit!”

Hugh barely got his hook swords out in front of him when Cotter came crashing down with sword and shield. He was like a machine, never tiring and relentless, and Hugh’s arms and back caved a little more each time they crossed blows.

Rosa was having trouble of her own as she sprinted across the arena away from the Midday Lycanroc and attempted to find cover behind the enormous slabs of rock that peppered the arena to attack from a distance with her bow. But Lycanroc was not giving her any openings as he slammed into the boulders at blinding speed and shattered them with rapid-fire Accelerocks. The only reason he hadn’t caught up to her yet and ripped her head off was Ferroseed.

The plucky pinecone was wreaking havoc with his Bullet Seed missiles that were not sufficient to deter Lycanroc, but they were annoying enough to distract him and slow him down. Colter was circling closer and looking for an opportunity to get at Rosa directly. He caught an arrow with his shield that soared a little too close to his head and fumed. All the while, the crowd roared and jeered at the spectacle, calling for blood.

Hugh hacked at Cotter’s shield, but he only managed to tear out a few splinters. Cotter kicked him in the shin, and Hugh swore as he was forced to take a knee. It was all he could do to catch Cotter’s blade in a downward arc between the hooks of his swords. For a few seconds, they were at an impasse, but Hugh didn’t need that long to know Cotter’s brute strength would inevitably overpower him. So, he shoved his body aside out of the blade’s direct path, and used Cotter’s considerable weight against him to guide the blade to cleave the ground instead of him.

It took Cotter a moment to realize what had happened, and it was all the time Hugh needed to abandon his swords and slug Cotter in the face with all his might. Pain exploded in his fist and he cried out, but Cotter staggered and dropped his sword. It wasn’t enough to knock the guy down, though.

“Are you even human?!” Hugh said.

The Midnight Lycanroc was still trying to dig up Trapinch. If he caught her, Hugh was sure she’d be dead with a single Crunch, and goddamn his stupid bleeding heart, but he couldn’t let her die like this when it was his fault she was even out here. So, he ran to help Trapinch, but he didn’t get more than two steps when Cotter tripped him and landed him on his back. Hugh barely rolled to the side in time to avoid getting his face smashed to a bloody pulp by Cotter’s heavy shield. For whatever reason, this guy seemed like he was out to kill Hugh or seriously disfigure him, at a minimum.

Fear and adrenaline fueled Hugh as he rolled away as fast as he could, but Cotter scrambled after him like a fucking cyborg Jason Voorhees, impervious to pain or exhaustion. Hugh felt cold fingers close around his throat, and he saw black spots as his brain screamed for oxygen. Cotter squeezed harder, and Hugh gasped for breath as he clawed at Cotter’s armor, desperate.

The wind whistled, loud and shrill, and suddenly the pressure on Hugh’s throat was gone. Cotter grunted in pain and rolled off of Hugh, and Hugh gagged as his lungs filled with air. His throat was on fire, but he could breathe. Cotter clutched his arm to his chest and was working frantically to
extricate an arrow that had landed perfectly in between the segments of his armor, sweating and red in the face.

*Rosa,* Hugh thought.

She had saved him again, and she was still running from that Midday Lycanroc. Stopping to help Hugh, however, had slowed her down, and Lycanroc managed to catch up to her. He growled and Accelerocked past her. Rosa cried out, and red bloomed all up and down her arm where shards of rock embedded in her skin through her ill-fitting armor. But before Hugh could even think to help her, Ferroseed was there spinning furiously and generating a baleful aura. He slammed into Lycanroc with Gyro Ball like a silver bullet, and the huge wolf howled in pain and staggered, stunned. It was enough time for Rosa to make her escape before Colter could catch up to her, and despite her injury, she fired another arrow at him like a boss because honestly, fuck that guy.

Sickly satisfying as these thoughts were, Hugh coughed violently and struggled to stand up. The fight was far from over, and there were bigger problems than Cotter and Colter. To Hugh’s horror, the Midnight Lycanroc had managed to dig up Trapinch and had her quite literally in his clutches. Trapinch hissed in fear, her stubby legs useless as Lycanroc Crunched down on her tough shell hide.

“No!” Hugh screamed, unprepared for how much the sight of her suffering disturbed him.

“Trapinch!”

He ran without thinking or considering the consequences, his thoughts only on Trapinch and how this was his fault, she didn’t deserve to die like this in some fucking *game.* The crowd’s cheering spurred him on, though whether they screamed for Hugh’s rescue attempt or for Trapinch’s impending doom was anyone’s guess. Lycanroc’s red eye swiveled and saw Hugh coming, but by then he was already there and rammed Lycanroc with all his strength. It was like crashing headlong into a brick wall. Even Lycanroc’s blood-red fur was stiff and sharp, and Hugh felt the entire right side of his body explode in pain. If he didn’t break any bones, it would be a miracle. The force was not enough to knock Lycanroc down by any means, but it was enough to surprise him into releasing Trapinch, whose body was full of holes where Lycanroc’s sharp teeth had pierced her carapace. Hugh ate sand and gravel as he fell to the ground, and a part of him wished he would never have to get up ever again.

A huge paw dug into the gravel inches from his face, and Lycanroc snarled over him, ready to claim his consolation prize now that Trapinch was out of reach. Somewhere, Hugh thought he heard Rosa shout his name. Trapinch’s unmoving body lay several yards away, and suddenly the physical pain racking Hugh’s body no longer mattered.

*I’m shit,* he thought. *Hailey, Nate, Trapinch... Everything I touch, I turn to shit.*

Why pretend anymore?

“Hugh!” Rosa shouted.

Lycanroc opened his jaws and his tongue lolled. There was no way Hugh would get away from this, and on some level, maybe he didn’t deserve to.

But life had other plans. At first he thought he was seeing things, maybe the pain had made him delirious, but no, that was really happening. Trapinch’s carcass was splitting in two, and something was crawling out of it like the alien from the eponymous films. Hugh could only stare; he was no far off the mark. He felt it before he saw it, and Lycanroc howled above him. It was like buzzing, or humming maybe, but bone-deep, like an earthquake that began within and grew out. Translucent
wings beat faster than the eye could see, a blur kicking up sand and debris. The very earth began to shake. And then, sound—the crowd was hollering and clapping like they hadn’t been before.

“Vibrava,” Hugh gasped, realizing what had happened had actually happened, not just in his foggy imagination.

She rose from Trapinch’s hollow carcass, strong and alive and no longer afraid. As long as a man was tall, Vibrava rose from the proverbial ashes with only one thought in mind: survival.

Hugh pushed himself up on his elbow, past the pain. “Vibrava!” he shouted.

Vibrava hovered just over the ground, perfectly balanced on her four wings, and her shifty eyes swiveled to find Hugh, recognizing her name. Lycanroc snarled and loped after her, drawn to the challenge, and Vibrava reacted in the only way she knew how. Hugh screamed and covered his ears as Vibrava beat her wings ever faster and unleashed a reckless sonic wave in every direction. Like knives digging into his ears, the powerful Boomburst attack wheedled its way into his head and scrambled his thoughts and quite possibly his brain a little. Someone else screamed, not Hugh, but he’d closed his eyes and assumed the fetal position, totally helpless, as blood leaked in between his fingers pressed to his ears. Lycanroc whimpered in pain, stunned and disoriented, and but the crowd’s roaring tuned it out.

Hugh could not say what exactly happened after that or how long he was writhing on the ground. All he knew was that somehow it was over, and all around him the rest of the match participants had suffered as he had. Rosa was on her hands and knees next to Colter, who was passed out cold—when had she managed to incapacitate him? Both Lycanroc were on their feet but dazed, and Vibrava was...

“Easy,” Benga said. He had an arm around Hugh’s waist and supported his weight. With his other hand, he was reaching for Vibrava, who had fallen eerily still and silent.

“Benga?” Hugh said.

“That’s it,” Benga said, his focus solely on Vibrava. “Come here.”

Amazingly, Vibrava hovered closer as though magnetically pulled. With a simple command, Benga had cowed Vibrava into submission like a kicked puppy. Hugh could hardly see past the double images his brain was sending him as his body recovered from the near-coma-inducing Boomburst attack.

“The hell?” Hugh said, trying to pull away from Benga and stand on his own to little avail.

“Dragons, man,” Benga said. “You’re lucky I’m such a nice guy to help you out. But a little warning next time yours is about to evolve would be good. Hand me her Pokéball.”

Hugh could hardly believe what he was seeing. Vibrava’s dark eyes were wide with fear and uncertainty, but she was as docile as a Mareep under Benga’s influence somehow.

Titans... Is it true what they say?

Could they really force their will onto other people’s Pokémon?

“Hugh, the Pokéball,” Benga insisted. “Now.”

Hugh fumbled for Trapinch’s—er, Vibrava’s Pokéball, and Benga snatched it up. He recalled Vibrava and heaved a sigh of relief.
“Don't worry, your first Dragon’s always a rush,” he said, like that was supposed to cheer Hugh up or fix the pounding ache in his head.

Before Hugh could say anything to that, a horrendous crack resounded to the east that drew everyone’s attention. He could not quite believe his eyes, but the Colosseum wall had cracked and spectators were fleeing en masse from the destruction. Something had struck the outer wall and severely damaged it. Hugh watched, mouth agape, as people disappeared amidst the rising dust and fell into the crack, their screams reverberating around the arena.

“Shit, they’re under attack!” Hugh said.

Another explosion racked the Colosseum as something crashed into the outer wall—cannon fire? Hugh couldn't be sure, and his head was still spinning.

“Is this the part where you decide to play hero?” Benga said through gritted teeth.

Hugh pushed him off. “Fuck you. There’s no heroes, there’s only us. So help or get outta the way!”

Benga looked surprised, and Hugh really did not have time for this crap. He grabbed his hook swords and ran to the destruction, bypassing Cotter, who was still trying to get Rosa’s arrow out of his arm. Speaking of Rosa, she’d managed to get to her feet but had to lean on the remains of a smashed boulder to stay upright. Ferroseed was in better shape and huddled by her feet.

“Rosa,” Hugh said, reaching for her. “Can you walk?”

Rosa was bleeding from her ears the same as Hugh, and she’d vomited up her lunch. “I think so,” she managed. “What’s going on?”

There was no time to hate her or feed his grudge right now; even he could see that he needed her help right now. “I dunno, but somethin’ tells me it’s just gonna piss me off. Can you fight?”

Rosa recalled Ferroseed and tossed out a different Pokéball. Serperior appeared in all his snobbish grace, tall and proud, and glared down at Hugh like he wasn’t good enough for this world. “Yeah,” she said, wiping her mouth and shaking off Vibrava’s Boomburst like it was just another day on the job.

Hugh released Samurott, and the horned otter barked in challenged at the supercilious Serperior. Goddamn, it was good to see Samurott. “Good, ‘cause we’re not done yet.”

Rosa nodded grimly, and together they took off running toward the destruction, Serperior and Samurott right behind them.

The Colosseum overlooked the Driftveil marina where trade barges and pleasure cruisers alike made port. But the usual patrons of the marina were in worse shape than the eastern wall of the Colosseum. Many of the boats had drifted free of their moorings or simply scuttled, forcefully ejected from the marina to make room for a destroyer that rivaled the grandest ships in Virbank’s fleet. Cannons on the deck were loaded and fired into the harbor, the pier, and the wall of the Colosseum with reckless abandon. Like a boot stomping an anthill, the intruders focused their assault on the target that would yield the maximum damage and send the city into total chaos and disarray.

Hugh was stunned at the sight of the enormous destroyer, unlike any he’d ever seen before. A
broad sail rose from the mast and glittered magnificently even in the dusking sky, drinking starlight. It was no ordinary sail, but an array of solar panels, he realized.

“What the hell?” he said. “What is this?”

“Oh my god,” Rosa said. “It’s the Neos!”

People in familiar black uniforms ran down the gangplank and poured into the marina. Whatever the short skirmish in the arena had taken out of Hugh, he got it all back as understanding dawned and his rage boiled. “Did they fucking follow us here or something?”

Rosa gasped, and from the look on her face, she’d had the same thought. Samurott barked, smelling the danger in the wind.

“Hugh! Rosa!” Cheren ran to catch up to them. He was dusty but unharmed, and Stoutland bounded alongside him.

“Cheren!” Rosa said. “It’s the Neos. That ship... It’s a Plasma Frigate. There were plans for building environmentally friendly solar ships that I heard about years ago, but the tech was thought to be too advanced to implement at the time. I recognize the design, it’s definitely the same, but this... This is a war ship. This was never in any of Lord N’s plans.”

“Yeah, well, it sure as hell is now, no thanks to N,” Hugh snarled. No matter what Rosa said, no apology, no matter how heartfelt, could ever make this right.

“How can you say that?” Rosa said, appalled. “This isn’t Lord N’s fault, and it isn’t mine, either!”

“Do you even see that monster?” Hugh said, equally appalled. “None of this would even be happening if it wasn’t for your precious N!”

“Now isn’t the time to assign blame!” Cheren shouted. “We have to stop the Neos before they can destroy any more of the city. Clay and his people will have to prioritize the safety of the people at the Colosseum, so it’s down to us. You can stay here and scream at each other if you want, but I can’t live with any more senseless deaths on my conscience.”

Cheren indicated the smashed wall of the Colosseum slowly crumbling where the cannons had crashed into it. Through the haze of dust and debris, bodies could be seen sprawled on the ground in pieces, sticky with congealing blood. Men, women, even children lay unmoving or worse, too broken to move on their own. People in armor, Clay’s Gym trainers, ran around with their Pokémon doing their best to dig out any survivors and subdue any Plasma Agents who got in their way. A man whose legs had been crushed by rock screamed bloody murder as he was dragged out and hoisted over a Rhyhorn’s back, his legs a pulpy mess.

Hugh’s stomach twisted at the sight, but the smell was even worse. Fire and blood, salt and smoke, and the cloying stench of death made his eyes water. He could taste it on the back of his tongue with each breath.

“Cheren’s right,” Rosa said. “Let’s go.”

“Come on,” Cheren said, and he took off running.

Rosa cast a glance back at Hugh, but she did not stick around to wait for him as she and Serperior raced after Cheren.

“You’ll never be the same, but you’ll learn to accept yourself in time.”
Rosa’s promise to Hugh on the ship before they landed in Driftveil came back to him and did a little to drown out the screams and wails of the injured and frightened Driftveilers pouring out of the Colosseum. He clung to those words like a talisman and breathed, slowly forcing one foot in front of the other. The churning in his stomach calmed a little, and he swallowed the taste of rot in his throat. Samurott loped alongside him, and with each step he found the energy to block out the worst of the internecine happening all around him. A part of him knew there was something here, something wrong and terrible that needed attention, but there was no time now. He just needed to switch it off, focus on the task at hand, never mind the hows and whys of it all.

Cheren and Stoutland led the charge to the Plasma Frigate, and Stoutland charged through a pair of Plasma Agents coming down the gangplank. He Headbutted one of them and sent him tumbling into the water. His partner thought better of her chances and simply jumped in after him, saving herself an unnecessary beating. Hugh sprinted up the quay just behind Rosa and Serperior, and soon he found himself on the deck.

“Stoutland, Hyper Beam!” Cheren ordered.

Stoutland yipped and fired off a sunburst bolt of raw energy at the nearest cannon, smashing it to smithereens. Hugh winced and covered his ears at the noise. They were no longer bleeding, but every splintering crack and shout and explosion was a dagger to the skull, and he was rushed with a nauseating sense of vertigo as the deck moved beneath his feet, rocked by the force of Stoutland’s attack. Rosa was also clutching her ears and staggered. Vibrava’s Boomburst had taken its toll on everyone in the arena, not only the enemy Lycanroc.

Stoutland’s attack drew Plasma Agents like flies to shit, and soon Hugh and the others were surrounded near the mast. There were at least twenty individuals, and nearly all of them had a Pokémon or two, from short Timburr to hulking Gigalith and everything in between. Hugh bumped Rosa as they were backed up against the mast, their Pokémon flanking them protectively. Cheren was rigid on Hugh’s other side, and Stoutland growled at an enemy Arcanine.

“There’s so many of them,” Rosa said.

“Talk about a complete bother,” Cheren said, the strain in his voice as he counted the enemy’s number offering no comfort.

“Well, well, well,” said a female Agent, slow clapping. “Congratulations on making it this far. However, do you see how many of us there are? Why don’t you make it easier on yourselves and surrender your Pokémon quietly?”

She had a sleek Seviper with her, a sight Hugh did not appreciate at all after the last Seviper he’d had the misfortune of knowing. And that one had technically been an ally as part of Roxie’s team. Seviper tasted the air with his forked tongue, and his bladed tail glistened with venom.

“Aldith?” Rosa said, aghast. “You’re with the Neos?”

“You know her?” Hugh said.

Aldith’s face was partially concealed as part of her uniform, but her disgust was plain to see. “Rosa. I’d heard you sided with that turncoat Rood. You know something, I’m glad you did. I never did like you, and now I have the perfect excuse to get rid of you.”

“Turncoat? You’re the ones who betrayed Lord N’s peaceful vision! Look what you’ve done!” She pointed to the destruction in the Driftveil marina and the Colosseum. “This is madness!”
“This is a revolution!” Aldith spat. “N was no visionary; he was just a pretty mouthpiece for Master Ghetsis. Liberation, the true liberation, has begun!”

“Liberation?” Cheren said. “All I see is destruction. You spread fear and incite violence, and for what? Because you can? Because you have the numbers? You’re nothing but textbook bullies.”

“Because in this world, only the strong survive,” Aldith said. “You, you’re the Aspertia Gym Leader, I recognize you. Then you should understand perfectly what I’m talking about. Gym Leaders and Tamers, the wealthy and noble, they’ve all prospered at the expense of everyone else for too long. You want to know about bullies? Look in the mirror! You use Pokémon to keep your stranglehold on everyone who isn’t as strong as you. Well, it’s time to redefine the meaning of strength. We decide who’s worthy, not you.”

“No,” Rosa said. “That’s not what Lord N taught us at all!”

“N is dead,” Aldith said. “It’s Neo Team Plasma and everyone else now. Either you’re with us, or you’re against us.”

She’s a fanatic, Hugh realized. They all are.

The other Plasma Agents were on their toes ready for an all-out fight. How could so many people be brainwashed without even realizing it?

It’s nothing but a fucking cult.

This was what Hailey died for? Some guys who were so insecure about their miserable shitty lives that they had to target the innocent and the vulnerable to feel powerful? Fuck that. No good ever came from the mass organization of a belief or ideal.

Hugh laid a hand on Samurott’s flank. “Hey, heads up,” he said, “I’m about to unleash my rage on these assholes. So you better back me up.” He glared at Rosa over his shoulder.

Whatever their differences, Rosa looked just as inflamed as Hugh in that moment. She drew her bow and nocked an arrow. “My pleasure.”

“Enough of this! Barret, the cannons. The rest of you, kill these vermin!” Aldith ordered. “Seviper, go!”

Aldith’s Seviper hissed and took off unexpectedly fast. He leaped into the air and swung his tail around for a deadly Poison Tail attack, but Hugh was not about to give him a chance.

“Samurott, Ice Beam!”

Samurott dug his nails into the wooden deck and fired off a pale ice bolt at Seviper. He screamed as half his body froze solid, and before he could fall, Hugh was already running. Barret, Aldith’s partner, was heading for the cannons with two other Agents watching his back. If they fired again, more people would lose their lives senselessly.

“Take Down!” Cheren ordered, and Stoutland sprinted after Barret fully intending to run him down.

A Klinklang intercepted with a barrage of gears that it fired at Stoutland mercilessly. Stoutland howled in pain, and by the time he managed a Protect shield, he had a number of gears embedded in his shaggy fur that sparked with stored static electricity.
Hugh took a swing at Klinklang’s trainer, another uniformed Plasma Agent indistinguishable from the others, letting his demonic fury guide him. It was frighteningly easy when he imagined these masked zealots to be the creatures who had attacked Hailey. Maybe they had been masked then, too. Maybe they had cornered her as they’d cornered Hugh here. Maybe this man, who was no match for Hugh’s anger and hatred and caught the hook end of Hugh’s sword in his shoulder, had looked down on Hailey as Hugh now looked down on him: without a shred of pity.

Hugh kicked the guy in the face, and the force of the blow ripped his hook sword free with a sickening squelch. But even at the sight of this nameless enemy bleeding and broken on the floor, Hugh’s rage did not abate; instead, it burned hotter and brighter and demanded more.

An Arcanine charged at Hugh, jaws aflame with Fire Fang, and Samurott was busy dueling with a Lucario and an Ursaring, Seamitars drawn. But before Hugh could really have time to properly fear for his safety, Serperior rushed in out of nowhere and Slammed into Arcanine hard. Arcanine staggered, and it was all the time Serperior needed to wrap himself around Arcanine’s middle and squeeze. Arcanine’s barks turned to whimpers as his bones were ground to dust and Serperior bit into his neck to finish the job.

“We have to stop Barret!” Rosa shouted as she threw another Pokéball. “Deerling, use Energy Ball!”

Deerling came out running, only momentarily surprised by the chaos into which he’d been summoned, and opened his mouth to fire off an Energy Ball at the retreating Barret.

Cheren fought with his bare fists, and Hugh turned to see him punch a Plasma Agent in the gut and send him flying with his inhuman strength. “Cincinno, help Deerling!” He tossed a Pokéball, and Cincinno took off at a blinding sprint, small and agile enough to zigzag in between such larger threats as Aldith’s Gigalith and a terrifying Bewear that was coming after Rosa as she fired off arrows.

“Goddamnit!” Hugh swore as he made a beeline for Bewear. “Samurott!”

Samurott had managed to fatally gut Ursaring with his Razor Shell Seamitars, but Lucario was giving him trouble. The jackal was smaller, faster, and the superior close-range Fighter by a long shot. At Hugh’s call, however, Samurott cut his losses and blasted out a Hydro Pump that washed Lucario away.

“Rosa!” Hugh shouted as she fired off another arrow that took out a swooping Murkrow dive-bombing straight for Cheren.

She turned and saw Bewear coming in with a Hammer Arm that would send her hurtling into the next dimension. But out of nowhere, a Gyarados, of all the things, reared up from the marina below and descended on Bewear jaws first. The Fighter bear vanished in Gyarados’s mighty jaws with a Crunch, and when Gyarados pulled back, blood rained down where Bewear had been just moments ago. Hugh could see what looked like one of Bewear’s thick legs stuck in between Gyarados’s jaws break in half as the huge Water Dragon chewed.

“The fuck...Iris?!”

Iris was perched on Gyarados’s trident horn and somehow commanding this monster.

“Duck!”

Something smacked Hugh in the back and forced him to duck whether he liked it or not. He got a
mouthful of orange hair courtesy of Benga just as something that looked like it had once been a Sceptile tackled the Slaking that had been about to Body Slam Hugh. Samurott joined the creature, a huge green lizard thing Hugh suspected was another of those Mega Pokémon like the ones he’d encountered in Castelia City, and together they tore into the slow and ungainly Slaking like a turkey dinner.

“You’re welcome,” Benga said, getting off so Hugh could stand. “Again.”

“Where the hell do you keep coming from?!” Hugh demanded.

Rosa had adjusted to Iris and Benga’s sudden appearance in the fight a little more smoothly and was sprinting across the deck after Barret. Deerling and Cinccino were in the middle of fighting off a Tangrowth and Purugly that had intercepted them and losing. Cinccino’s Tail Slaps were hardly having any effect against Purugly’s considerable girth and fur coat, while Tangrowth had managed to entrap Deerling in her vines, slowly squeezing the fawn to death.

“Deerling!” Rosa shouted. She fired off an arrow at Tangrowth, but the vines swallowed the bolt and snapped it. “Let him go!”

Tangrowth and Purugly’s trainer came at Rosa with an axe, and he knew how to use it. Rosa lost her grip on her bow narrowly dodging the swing, but the Neo Agent was on her faster than she could get away and wrestled her to the ground. Deerling bleated in pain as Tangrowth Constricted him.

Iris had jumped to the deck, leaving Gyarados to deal with the enemies closer to the railings, and ran to help Rosa. She released her Haxorus, a beastly Pokémon whose skin looked like nothing short of gold-plated armor, and drew her own sword to fight. A Machoke and his Plasma Agent trainer cut her off prematurely, however, and Haxorus slashed at the beefy Fighter with Dragon Claw while Iris fended off the Plasma Agent. Rosa was still on her own.

Deerling let out one final pitiful bleat and went rigid in Tangrowth’s hold, while Cinccino’s tail was caught under Purugly’s meaty paw and the fat cat attempted to crush her with his weight. Rosa took a punch to the face from the Plasma Agent she was wrestling, and she kneed him in the groin with everything she had to get him off.

“Deerling!” she shouted, desperate.

The fawn was barely visible beneath Tangrowth’s thick vines. Stoutland had broken free of Klinklang’s electrified gears finally, and Cheren was running to help Rosa now.

“Stoutland, go!” he shouted.

Stoutland, limping from the multiple shocks he’d taken from Klinklang, nonetheless managed to fire off another stellar Hyper Beam that cut across the deck. The raw light energy spooked Purugly and freed Cinccino from his clutches, but Tangrowth rolled out of the way and avoided the worst of it. Only a few of her vines caught fire, and those were quickly snuffed out. Serperior, sensing his trainer’s danger, slithered across the deck to help her, but time had run out.

“No!” Rosa said, unable to hold back her tears.

But Tangrowth suddenly convulsed erratically and began to spread her vines out as though trying to escape. In between the slithering vines, a bright light escaped, blinding, and the next minute Tangrowth was hurtling through the air raining chlorophyll blood on the deck where her hidden body had been gutted from the inside, bypassing the near impregnable suit of vine armor that
normally protected her. The light that had struck her came from a Mega Horn off a magnificent pair of twelve-point antlers adorned with a crown of luscious summer leaves.

“Deerling,” Rosa gasped, crawling to him. But he wasn’t a Deerling anymore. The Summer Sawsbuck stood tall and magnificent even drenched in Tangrowth’s blood and injured from the Constriction. He had grown large enough for a person to mount.

Serperior caught up to Rosa and slithered protectively around her. He glared at Sawsbuck but did not make a move to attack as Rosa laid her hands on the stag’s lichen-infested coat, shaking.

“Oh my god,” she said, her voice cracking with emotion. It had almost been too late.

“Incoming!”

Soriel, one of Iris’s personal guards, swooped low on the back of her Charizard just then and let loose a Flamethrower that devastated the Klinklang that had given Stoutland so much trouble before and scattered a number of Plasma Agents on the deck, including Barret before he could manage to properly load the cannons again. Moros and his Kangaskhan were in the midst of destroying the many cannons on deck one Mega Punch at a time, and Belaron had his Feraligatr blasting Hydro Pumps at any people or Pokémon who got too close to this good work.

“They’re escaping!” Nuria shouted from the other side of the deck. “In the water, I need help!”

She was in the water riding a Sharpedo and, with the help of a pair of corpse-pale Jellicent and Gorebyss, attempting to sabotage the Plasma Agents trying to get to shore with the help of Water Pokémon and motor boats. A couple of the Humilauan crew members Hugh had seen in Iris’s party were helping her, also riding Water Pokémon and pursuing the Plasma rogues. If they got to shore, they would only endanger more innocent lives. Hugh’s anger boiled hotter than ever at the thought of these slimy bastards sneaking past him and ran to the edge of the deck. He tossed a Pokéball into the water below, and Milotic rose up in all her regal beauty.

“Stop them!” Hugh commanded, pointing to the fleeing Plasma Agents.

Milotic dove, and soon the waters were frothing with an undersea battle of whirlpools and rip tides. Iris’s Gyarados slinked underwater to partake of the slaughter, drawn to the smell of blood in the water. Hugh had half a mind to jump in after his Pokémon, but there was still too much happening on deck, and he couldn’t leave Cheren and Rosa.

“Samurott, let’s go!” Hugh shouted.

“Damn you!” Aldith said. “Don’t you get it? You lost a long time ago!”

“No, damn you! Ya think ya can come to my city and threaten my people? Now ya done ‘n pissed me off! Excadrill, go!”

Hugh was as stunned as the others at Clay’s sudden appearance coming up the gangplank behind his Excadrill. He was bloody and dirty from the chaos back on the shore, but his state only seemed to invigorate him. Excadrill took off and Drill Ran straight into Aldith’s Gigalith, fearless. Gigalith’s rock-hard skin would not break easily, and he fought back in a test of strength. Excadrill, however, was on another level and stabbed through Gigalith’s impenetrable hide with his razor-sharp Metal Claws.

Team Plasma had the numbers, but now that Iris’s group and Clay’s had joined the fray, they were outclassed in terms of raw strength. Barret had his Conkeldurr and Maractus out defending him, and Conkeldurr went after Clay directly with a Dynamic Punch that would easily one-hit KO even
a Ground Adamantine no matter who he was. Clay barely managed to dodge the huge Fighter’s
deadly fist and suffered a glancing blow for his natural slowness. The deck shook when
Conkeldurr’s Dynamic Punch connected with the floor, and Hugh had the violent urge to throw up.
Blood ran from his left ear, and he fell to one knee.

Benga’s Mega Sceptile jumped on Conkeldurr’s back and attacked with Dual Chop, and
Conkeldurr roared in pain. Everywhere Hugh looked, people and Pokémon were fighting for their
lives. Cheren saw him crouched there, momentarily dazed by his own nausea and the madness of it
all, and ran to help him.

“How, get up!” he shouted.

“We decide who’s worthy and who’s not,” Aldith said as she produced some kind of clunky X-
Transceiver device and punched a few buttons.

Hugh got to his feet and found Samurott. The giant otter’s Seamitars and horn were coated in
blood, and he was bleeding heavily from a deep wound in his flank. Aldith had to die. If she died,
the rest would fall, Hugh told himself. It would be easy, not like the first time. He was immune
now, broken in, and rage would do the rest. Killing her would be the justice Rosa said he deserved,
yes, it was here in his grasp. Who was to say Aldith hadn’t been there for Hailey’s death? Maybe
she’d even done the deed herself. Of course she did, look at her. She was psychotic, a cult follower,
a zealot who couldn’t tell reality from fantasy anymore. She had it coming. She was guilty, and
nothing else mattered.

Hugh ran at her, hook swords drawn and ready, so goddamned ready. Aldith was not unguarded,
however, and her Gigalith, still alive, was ready to smash Hugh’s skull now that Clay’s Excadrill
was busy fighting off Barret’s Conkeldurr.

“Samurott,” Hugh said, “Hydro Cannon!”

The air around Samurott bent to his will as water condensed out of thin air and swirled around
Samurott’s whiskered head. He threw back his head and powered up his strongest assault. Aldith
pointed her strange X-Transceiver, seemingly unafraid, and then the strangest thing happened.

Samurott’s super blast of water crashed not into Gigalith as intended, but into Cheren’s Stoutland
nearby. Stoutland yelped and went flying, smashed through the metal deck railing with back-
breaking force, and dropped like a stone into the sea. He didn’t resurface. Hugh gaped in horror at
the deliberate attack on an allied Pokémon for no reason at all.

“What the hell?” he wanted to ask, but Samurott was panting and shaking as though diseased or
possessed or something. His eyes were dilated and unseeing as he struggled against an invisible
demon.

“Stoutland!” Cheren said, horrified and utterly incredulous.

In his distraction, Cheren didn’t see the danger that was upon him, and neither did Hugh until it
was too late. The blade bloomed from Cheren’s chest like a rose, red and almost beautiful in its
smoothness, and Hugh did not quite understand what he was seeing for a moment. Cheren’s dark
eyes were wide and glassy, his bare hands that could break stone and skulls dangling uselessly at
his sides. Blood spurted from his mouth, and he sucked in a rattling breath as the blade withdrew
from his chest back into the hand of some nameless, faceless Plasma Agent. Hugh watched as
Cheren sank to his knees, all his legendary strength gone like a dream upon waking, and his gaze
fell, sightless.
“Cheren!” Rosa screamed as if from another planet, far away.

Aldith pointed her odd device again, this time at Benga’s Mega Sceptile, and he convulsed much as Samurott had, uncontrollable, and impaled himself on twin Leaf Blades in his madness. Benga, who had been fighting against a Plasma Agent and his Mightyena, jerked unnaturally and coughed up blood as he fell to his knees and clutched his belly, now ripped open the same as Mega Sceptile’s. Iris screamed and dropped her weapon as she fell upon him in a fright.

And that was it. Hugh did not even realize he was moving; the fury had taken complete control sometime earlier, and he let it. He couldn’t even feel his hands, his feet, the throbbing pain in his head that held him close in a lover’s embrace. There was only rage, raw and bloody, and Aldith’s slim silhouette blurred behind hot tears as he lunged, blind and happy to be so. Her skin gave easily under his hook swords, like it had been waiting for this moment, and Hugh screamed but heard nothing. There was nothing left to hear but the ringing in his head, the aftershock of a grenade, like a little girl’s scream, soft and loud at the same time. And this was justice, he thought with a laugh that bubbled up from the heart of this lovely darkness and pulled him on puppet strings, pull pull pull, and a part of her was pulled right out on the end of his sword.

The hook swords, covered in Aldith’s blood, were clotted with bits of her skin and bone where they’d rammed clean through her and back, except there was nothing clean about it. The wound in her belly was a bloody ruin all the way through to the spine as though a wild animal had mauled her, just as Hailey had been mauled by her attackers. Hugh yelled, strangled and agonized, and tears that must have been his fell on Aldith’s broken body, but she couldn’t hear him anymore. He couldn’t hear himself anymore. Where had he gone?

Time came to a standstill, or he didn’t notice its passing anymore. He dropped his swords and crawled off of Aldith’s unmoving body. Cheren had not settled far from her, and Hugh staggered to his side. Cheren’s eyes were open and staring up at the dark sky. There was a narrow hole in his chest where a blade had impaled him through the chest and slid back out like it had never been there at all. Hugh blinked, his thoughts strangely silent as he stared down at Cheren. There was nothing but a vacuum of silence where the rage had been. When had it abandoned him? He touched his shaking hands to Cheren’s milk-white face, already cold like the cold tiresome bastard he was.

Tears fell like fat raindrops on Cheren’s cheeks and ran down his neck, and Hugh wiped them away. New ones replaced the old as he couldn’t keep pace.

“Cheren?” he said in a small voice he did not recognize.

“Hugh,” Rosa said.

Her hand was so heavy on his back, and in her other hand she held Aldith’s X-Transceiver device, pilfered off her corpse.

“Hugh, please,” she said.

He looked up and saw that she was lost, gone far away somewhere with the fury that had gone, too. Her hand fisted his shirt and she searched his face for something, anything recognizable. He could not have even begun to explain it in that moment, but he saw a Shade of Hailey in her then, a kind of forlorn despair and disappointment that rendered him pitiful.

You did this, the Shade whispered venom in his ear.

“Hugh,” Rosa said, her voice shaky as if with fear, fear of the thing wearing his skin. “You have to stand. Come with me.”
Sound returned then, the battle and the clang of the steel and the roar of the ocean. Hugh got up somehow, and Rosa took some of his weight upon herself. Sawsbuck and Serperior were there, protecting them both, and Samurott was no longer thrashing. Bodies, both human and Pokémon, lay like confetti all around.

“Get off!” Iris was shouting. “I won’t say it again!”

A barely conscious Benga had been picked up by Soriel in all her mannish strength and was being carried down the gangplank. The others of their party were boarding Swimmers and Flyers to get off the ship, and the remaining Plasma force, still considerable, was mobilizing around the cannons to shoot them down. Rosa took Samurott’s Pokéball from Hugh and recalled Samurott, then Serperior and Sawsbuck, and dragged Hugh to the railing. Milotic was waiting there, and Hugh reached for her like he couldn’t quite remember what she was doing here. She lowered her head and allowed Rosa to grab on before safely lowering them both to the water below. Hugh held on automatically, too dazed to do anything else.

Then, like a nightmare, a true monster rose from a flash of light and took to the skies. A massive Dragonite spread his mighty wings, black in the moonlight, and roared. Iris clung to his back and she pointed out her enemies with her sword.

“Dragonite!” she shouted to be heard, her voice cracking with agony and despair. “Hyper Beam!”

Dragonite threw back his scaly head and revealed a frightening mouthful of teeth as long as swords. He let loose with the epically powerful attack, and it soon became clear why Iris had shouted for everyone to get clear. Hugh’s face burned as the heat from the Hyper Beam rolled out in waves even this far from the ship, and Milotic spirited Rosa and him faster and farther away, afraid of the aftershock. Destruction had never been so beautiful as when Dragonite’s Hyper Beam cut through the steel hull of the Plasma Frigate, tearing it asunder and sending anyone still on deck plunging into the sea or incinerating them in the blast. Hugh watched, august, as the unsinkable destroyer broke apart, its mighty mast splintered and shattered, and the sea claimed its prize. Never had Hugh seen such awesome power, such wanton destruction, as he did from this broken princess and her Dragon.

Rosa fought to keep them both afloat, and soon enough Hugh was on solid ground again with Milotic’s help. She leaned over him and hummed, worried like she could smell the death that clung to him even though it wasn’t his. Rosa’s arms under his helped him stand, but she struggled with his weight.

“Rosa! Hugh!”

Was that Nate’s voice? Hugh couldn’t tell as he watched the last of the Plasma Frigate sink into the sea, hypnotic, and Iris and her Dragonite took to the skies. He roared again, magnificent and terrible and desperately sad, if Dragons knew anything of sadness. Hugh wondered if this was what he’d been waiting for all his life, this justice, and why he could not help but weep.

“Hugh,” Nate said, helping Rosa lift him.

“Oh my god,” said Yancy from somewhere. “Is he...?”

“Help him,” Rosa pleaded with Nate. “Please, I can’t...”

“It’s okay,” Nate said. “It’s okay, I’m here. We’re all here, Hugh...”

Hugh squeezed his eyes shut, wishing they would all go away. Couldn’t they see? He wasn’t here.
Justice, he thought.

But when he closed his eyes, all he could see was Cheren bleeding out, his dark eyes glassy like Hailey’s had been, and even Dragons could not help either of them now.

Chapter End Notes

A moment of silence for Cheren, who I am Charizard-level sad to say goodbye to.

On a happier note, I’ve had a surge of motivation for this fic lately thanks in no small part to the lovely people who have been sending in messages and comments both here, on FFNet, and on Tumblr. While never a requirement, hearing from readers can often mean the difference between timely updates and long gaps in between, because knowing there are people excited to find out what happens next is delightful and encouraging, especially when some things (like Cheren’s end and Hugh’s trauma) can be quite difficult for me to write. Active support goes a long way, so thank you so much!!
Driftveil City was on total lockdown in the aftermath of the unprovoked attack by Neo Team Plasma. Clay rallied the coast guard to set up a strict blockade, preventing any ships from coming in or going out of Driftveil waters for any purpose whatsoever. He deployed the full might of his Phalanx, a force some three hundred strong, to locate and capture any remaining Neo Agents who may have escaped. Of the three hundred men and women, almost a third were pure blooded Rock, Steel, or Ground Adamantines. The rest were Adamantine skuffs and even some plebs. But the distinctions mattered little from the outside looking in. They dressed in identical armor, bore no distinguishing markers, assumed no distinctions in rank, and obeyed Clay’s orders without question. Together with their Pokémon, they spent all night and the next morning covering every inch of the city, and started up and down the coast to check the outlying towns in Driftveil’s jurisdiction. They left no stone unturned and no building unchecked, whether or not the occupants welcomed them. Their organized efficiency was as thorough as it was frightening.

The Driftveil Police Department and volunteers from around Driftveil and its outlying territories were tasked with cleanup, which included searching for survivors and recording the dead. The local hospital was packed to capacity. The town courthouse, Pokémon Center, and even some private homes had been temporarily converted into hospital zones where anyone with medical training worked around the clock to help the wounded and the dying. The recovered bodies of the dead were taken outside the city on wagons and on the backs of sturdy Pokémon, where they were laid out under tarps, recorded, and left to wait for any surviving family members to claim them. Some were taken away to be mourned by surviving loved ones in private ceremonies. Most, however, had attended the games with their families, a popular past time in Driftveil, and there was no one left alive to claim them. They would be cleaned, clothed, and eventually burned on an enormous funeral pyre at the foot of the Twist Mountains whenever construction on the pyre was finished. Driftveil was grieving, and there was not much explanation as to why.

The streets were deserted of shoppers, students, restaurant-goers, tourists, and anyone else who did not have authorization to work on the cleanup. No one wanted to go outside and see the crumbling eastern wall of the Colosseum, evidence of the shadow of death and mourning that hung over the entire city.

Late in the afternoon the day after the attack, there was another skirmish out to sea, this time involving the coast guard blockade. Some Neo Agents who had escaped the Frigate before Dragonite had destroyed it had somehow managed to get past the blockade on a stolen ship. Nuria and the handful of *Oculus* crewmembers who had remained with her on Nymo’s insistence were among the volunteers who were first on the scene. Through Nuria, Iris learned about the Neo spies in the coast guard. It was thanks to those spies that Neo Team Plasma knew Rood had fled to Driftveil and how the otherwise conspicuous Plasma Frigate made it past the coast guard without issue to launch the attack on the Colosseum. A ship carrying the surviving Neo Agents escaped Driftveil’s blockade and set a course for Castelia with those same spies’ assistance. They may have even gotten away if not for Nuria and the crewmembers’ intervention. As it turned out, Neo Team Plasma had not prepared for Syreni and their Swimmers who had no qualms about hunting them in the dead of night in deep waters. Nuria’s Sharpedo pierced a hole in the fleeing ship’s hull, and from there it was only a matter of saving a few fugitives to be returned to Driftveil for interrogation. The rest drowned, never to be heard from again. But even Nuria’s small victory did not bring cheer to Iris.
She sat by Benga’s bedside at the Lighthouse Inn, and she’d barely moved all day, not even to eat. He was sleeping, heavily sedated in an induced coma, but he looked dead. He was as etiolated as a corpse, having lost an inordinate amount of blood, and he’d been in surgery for hours the night before. Soriel had carried him all the way to the hospital by herself, running the entire way, and if not for her bullish determination, Benga would have bled out on the deck of the Plasma Frigate. Even so, the doctors who had operated on him warned that there was about a fifty-fifty chance that he would not wake up, that his wounds would prove too grievous to overcome. Only time would tell.

Sceptile was barely alive, one of the more critical cases the doctors at the Pokémon Center had received, but he was making a much faster recovery than Benga. Pokémon often did. Whatever had compelled Sceptile to stab himself while Mega Evolved, the doctors at the Pokémon Center expressed their amazement that he nonetheless managed to avoid any vital organs. Whether this was happy chance or some deeper sense of preservation, no one could say. Iris knew, though. Whatever had driven a Mega-Evolved Sceptile mad had been powerful, but the bond of Mega Evolution was unlike any other, this she believed from the bottom of her heart. Not even a Titan’s control could beat it, as Iris had seen for herself when she first met Benga. That seemed like ages ago, and lying here in bed as he was, Benga looked like he’d aged years. It was wrong, so wrong. He was always so strong and vibrant and full of life. This was wrong.

But he was alive. Iris had nearly lost control last night when she saw him fall. Since the moment he showed up looking for an adventure, he’d always been there, like a goddamned tick or hemorrhoids; he wouldn’t ever go away. Last night, he almost went away for good, and all Iris could think was that she could not bear to live in a world where he did not exist.

His hand was cool in hers, a little clammy, and small. This bed was so big and he was so small, like it might swallow him whole. She ran her fingers over his knuckles where rough scabs had begun to form, more memories of the battle last night.

“I’m sorry,” she said, hardly recognizing her own hoarse voice. Her throat was raw with last night’s emotions. “I’m so sorry.”

If he’d never come aboard the Oculus, this never would have happened. If she’d just listened to Belaron and left him in Perry Town, he wouldn’t be half dead in a coma right now. None of it would have ever transpired, not their midnight escape to the Hidden Grotto, not the conversations that lasted all night, not the pancakes or the Dragons or the smiles. Not the trust. Not Iris, either. If Benga had never found her, who would she be? Without him, who would she become?

“Please wake up,” she pleaded with him. “I don’t want to do this without you.” She squeezed her eyes shut, so tired of tears but unable to help herself. “I can’t let you go.”

Cottonee was perched on the bed, and he whistled softly as Iris shook with emotion. It was the saddest sound she’d ever heard, hopeless and helpless.

There as a knock on the door, and Belaron admitted himself without waiting for her leave. He had taken some superficial wounds in the fight, nothing too serious, and he brought a tray with food for Iris.

“Princess,” he said softly. “I’ve brought you something to eat. May I?”

Iris sniffled and wiped her eyes. Belaron had been attentive but not suffocating as Iris floundered, shaken to the core over Benga’s precarious situation. He’d stayed with her at the hospital during Benga’s surgery and made no fuss or complaints, the best companion and support she could have asked for in the circumstances. Despite his previous follies, he was truly loyal and had no desire to
see Iris suffer. She regretted her cold neglect of him in the wake of his mistakes. Right now, she needed someone who knew and loved her to help her through this.

“Yes, thank you,” she said, waving him in.

Belaron set the tray of food on the nightstand for Iris and turned his attention to Benga. “No change?”

Iris shook her head. “Nothing.”

Belaron’s mouth was set in a grim line that emphasized the wrinkles around his lips. He had the grace to look abashed. “I’m sorry, Princess,” he said with quiet sincerity. “I know Benga and I have had our differences, but I derive no joy from your suffering.”

He touched her shoulder gingerly, and Iris laid her hand over his. “Thank you, Syr Bel. And...I owe you an apology. You’re my sworn knight, but I haven’t been treating you like it lately. You’ve made mistakes, but so have I. You don’t deserve to be treated like a pariah. You’re the most loyal man I’ve ever met, and you’ve supported me every day since you gave me your oath.”

“That’s... Princess, you don’t ever have to apologize to me. I realize I’ve, ah, spoken out of turn as of late, and I regret it every day. Please, you must know that I have always acted with your interests and safety at heart. I would never do anything to oppose or harm you intentionally.”

“I know, I’ve never doubted your commitment. But what happened last night, and Benga...” She rubbed her eyes, fighting the tears that threatened to fall anew. “The point is, I don’t have the right to take for granted the people closest to me. There’s too much at stake, and I couldn’t abide it if anything happened to you, too. So if you’re okay with it, I’d like to put the past behind us, start fresh.”

Belaron blinked down at her, taken aback. “I... Yes, I would like that very much. You humble me, truly.” He took a knee and placed a hand over his heart. “I swear, I shall do everything in my power to help you fulfill your destiny as the rightful Queen of Opelucid and the Fafnir Dynasty.”

Iris smiled sadly. “Thank you, Syr Bel. It’s you who humble me with your conviction.”

He rose and smoothed his slicked salt and pepper hair. “Before I leave you in peace, I wonder if you’ve decided when we’ll depart? There are other Gym Leaders in the upper West Tine who may have more sense than this one, and with this Neo Team Plasma at large, I believe we should be rid of this place as soon as possible.”

“I haven’t thought much about it with everything going on,” Iris said. “In any case, we won’t be going anywhere until Benga recovers. I don’t know how long that could take.”

“Until he...” Belaron trailed off. “Princess, please forgive my bluntness, but it’s not certain whether Benga will wake up at all or even survive the night. Surely, we must go on without him. For the sake of your mission,” he added quickly.

Iris frowned. “Excuse me?”

“I only meant that the longer we stay here, on Benga’s account or otherwise, the more vulnerable we are. Drayden is surely aware of you by now, and considering what transpired in Castelia City and here, I believe we can safely conclude that he is in some way allied with Neo Team Plasma. I only consider your wellbeing,” he entreated her. “You came here to claim the throne that is rightfully yours. Respectfully, you cannot do that here.”
“I appreciate your dedication, Syr Bel, but this isn’t up for debate. I’m not leaving Benga until he recovers or...or he doesn’t.”

“But Princess, surely you must see that as he is, Benga is only a dead weight. We should leave—”

“I said no,” Iris snapped, her anger spiking at his callous words. “That’s the last I’ll hear of it. Frankly, I’m shocked you think I would even consider it. Benga’s never been dead weight of any kind. He’s an important member of our team. He’s important to me.”

Belaron set his jaw and bottled up whatever protest was on the tip of his tongue. “I understand. Forgive me for upsetting you.”

Iris took Benga’s hand in hers and turned away from Belaron. “Leave us, please.”

Belaron lingered a moment, perhaps weighing whether to argue, but he left in the end. Cottonee watched him go, his luminous orange eyes wide, but Iris was more concerned about Benga. He was what mattered most right now.

“You have to get better, Benga,” she said. “You’re the strongest person I know, so please... Please wake up.”

She brought his knuckles to her lips and kissed them softly. He did not so much as stir. The food Belaron had brought her grew cold, untouched.

Several hours later, Iris had gotten around to eating the food Belaron had brought her, cold as it was, and took the plates down to the hotel kitchen. Benga’s sick room was becoming claustrophobic and she felt like she was breathing recycled air, so she cracked open a window and left Cottonee with him while she left to stretch her legs. It was hard to see him so frail, and she needed to keep up her strength. For what? What was she going to do? Belaron did make one good point: she couldn’t stay here forever.

But as she headed back upstairs after depositing her dirty dishes in the kitchen, Iris found that she was too tired to think about what would be next. As long as Benga languished in that sick bed, his fate was uncertain and so was Iris’s. No matter how hard she thought, she could not pinpoint an exact time or event or conversation that had changed things, but they had changed all the same. Somewhere along the line, Benga had become important to her, precious in a way not many were—in a way no one was, really. Even Belaron, as faithful and supportive as he had been over the years, did not resonate the way Benga did. Whatever that meant, and wherever it led her, all she knew was that she could not leave him. She couldn’t continue on without him. More importantly, she did not want to.

Iris was so lost in thought that she almost ran into Nate coming into the stairwell on the floor below Benga’s. “Whoa, sorry, I didn’t see you,” she said automatically. “Oh...”

Nate was just as surprised to have run into her, too, but the look of him froze Iris in her tracks. He was plainly exhausted. Dark circles under his eyes aged him well beyond his years, and splotchy remains of a black eye added to the haunted look about him.

“ Iris,” he said, unable to manage even the ghost of a smile. “Hey, it’s okay. I wasn’t paying attention, either. Sorry.”

There was a pause, awkward, and then Iris remembered that Nate had suffered a terrible loss in the
battle last night. “Cheren,” she said. “I heard you were really close. I’m so sorry for your loss.”

Nate’s gaze fell, and Iris realized that probably came out wrong somehow. She was often told growing up that she had a tendency to come off as callous and brusque. But he nodded at length.

“We are, um, were. Me and Rosa and...and Hugh. We were all close to him,” Nate said. “He was the best of us, not just ‘cause he was a Gym Leader. I can’t believe he’s gone.”

The way he said it, Iris got the impression that he wasn’t really hearing himself, like this had all been prepared ahead of time and rehearsed. It was like he wasn’t even in there. She had no idea what to make of that, so she said what any other person might say when things were bleak but the world continued to spin.

“You’ll get through this.”

Nate blinked at her, as though he’d seen her standing there just now for the first time. “I wasn’t even there,” he said, barely a whisper. “I wasn’t there.”

*And if I had been, maybe things would be different.*

His unspoken words were plain to hear. How often she’d had similar thoughts, similar regrets. Her mother died when she was still a child, and even now she wondered if there had been anything she could have done if she had been stronger, better somehow. If she had been what she was now, would Drayden have run them out of Opelucid? Would her father still be alive? What would her life be if only things had been different? But in her long and lonely years living a half-life in Blackthorn City, Iris had learned the lesson all people must eventually learn to accept, whether they want to or not.

“You can’t change the past,” she said. “Believe me. I know better than most.”

She couldn’t say why she was still here talking to this man, a stranger who meant next to nothing to her. Cheren had been a Gym Leader, and his death meant something by virtue of his position, but she hadn’t known him personally, either.

*I saw him only yesterday,* she thought. *He stood as close to me as Nate is now.*

If not Cheren, it could have been Belaron, or Nuria, or Benga. It might still be Benga. She could not bear the thought.

“If I can’t change the past, then what am I supposed to do?” Nate said.

There was something of innocence in Nate, a quality Iris held in no high regard, but in him it rang differently. Broken and raw and stretched too thin, he nonetheless possessed a quiet kind of strength, if vulnerability could be considered a strength. It was in the way he drew her in, that undying warmth in his eyes that refused to be smothered completely, like she had known him all her life or perhaps in another. He was a man she had no desire to deceive, not to comfort and not to evade.

“I don’t know,” she said truthfully, Caitlin’s prophetic warnings about her father’s ghost echoing in her head. “I haven’t gotten that far.”

He rubbed his eyes. “Ah, sorry, I didn’t mean to put you on the spot like that. I don’t even know what I’m trying to say.” He composed himself a little and did his best to smile. “Yancy told me she talked to you about teaming up. You’re both working against Opelucid, right?”
The change of subject threw Iris, but the distraction it provided was a welcome one. She shifted her weight. “Yeah, that did happen. It seems like a long time ago now.”

“Listen, I know this might feel a little abrupt, but considering what happened last night, I think abruptness is becoming more and more necessary,” Nate said. “I’m just gonna come out and say it. Will you consider helping us with Neo Team Plasma?”

“Helping? I thought that’s what I was doing last night,” Iris said.

“Yeah, but I mean on a more formal basis. Look, Cheren is—was our unspoken leader. He was the Gym Leader, he had the experience, and he was a natural. But with him gone, everything’s changed. Hugh’s a wreck, I’ve never seen him like this before, and Rosa’s struggling with her own demons. And Yancy’s here all on her own, so I... I have to help them. There’s no one else left, so I have to try.”

Iris was not sure what to say to that. “Nate, I don’t... My fight isn’t with Neo Team Plasma. I’m not here for them, I’m here for Opelucid.”

“Opelucid,” he repeated. “They were in Castelia, you know. When I got there, we had Castelia’s infantry and Virbank’s navy all fighting together against Neo Team Plasma. There was a moment there when I thought we could win. I really believed it. We’d found Rosa and she was alive, and I thought this was it, this is why I left home. This was the good I was doing, and the good guys always win.

“But then the Dragon Riders came. I’ve never seen a Dragon before. That probably sounds bizarre to you, right? I’d never seen Cheren so scared as when they came. It was because of them and Nimbasa that we lost Castelia. Everything we did ended up being for nothing. I don’t even know how many people and Pokémon died then.”

Iris had seen the destruction in Castelia herself. It had been like nothing she’d ever seen before. The power it must have taken to raze it to the ground was unfathomable. How many Dragons would it take?

“But then I saw you and Dragonite last night,” Nate said. “If you hadn’t done what you did, how many more innocent people and Pokémon would be dead right now? It wouldn’t just be Cheren, but maybe Hugh and Rosa, too, and everyone else who was fighting.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Iris said, imagining Benga bleeding out on the deck of the Plasma Frigate as Cheren had. She grew queasy at the thought.

“Because they lived,” Nate said. “Because you saved them. Don’t you see? This is so much bigger than any of us. Opelucid’s just one part of it.”

Iris shook her head. It was too much to process, and she was weak right now, her guard down, exhausted and drained. It was hard to think straight. “I don’t know what you think I can give you, but this isn’t my fight. It’s not that I don’t sympathize, but there are things I have to do, things that’re already set in motion and I can’t stop them.”

“Iris, please,” he began.

But he cut himself off when all of a sudden, the lantern hanging at his hip twitched and rose into the air on its own. Iris’s body was quicker to react than her brain, and she scrambled backwards to the stair rail. Impossibly, the antique lantern had achieved sentience and burned with a bright indigo flame. Murky yellow eyes opened slowly, as if waking from slumber, and looked around,
searching for something.

“What the— Lampent, what’s the matter?” Nate said.

A Ghost, Iris thought, chilled to the bone.

And not like the necrotic Frillish and Jellicent that were as much flesh and bone as she was, but an honest to god specter, nothing but an incorporeal phantom flame. Nate might have been justified in his awe regarding Dragons, but Dragons were real and solid. This Ghost was anything but, and this was the first time Iris had ever seen one like it. Her fingers ached as she gripped the staircase in a white-knuckled grip.

Lampent was not nearly as aware of Iris as she was of him. He floated up the stairwell as if drawn to something on the floor above. A terrible thought occurred to Iris in her heightened paranoia, and any apprehension she’d felt before vanished.

“Benga,” she gasped.

Lampent had already disappeared around the corner, and Iris took off after him without a second thought.

“Iris!” Nate called after her. He was taking the steps two at a time chasing after her.

Ghosts congregated around the dead and the dying, that was what they said. Iris’s heart pounded in her chest as visions of Benga lying dead in his bed, alone, filled her imagination and spurred her after Lampent. Maybe the Ghost was going to collect his soul, feed on it. Could Ghosts do that? She didn’t know, but hell if she would find out after it was too late. At the top of the stairs on the next floor, Lampent had come to a stop.

“What’s going on?” Nate said.

“That’s Benga’s room!” Iris said, unable to hide her desperation as she dashed down the hall.

Lampent was very curious about whatever lay behind Benga’s door, but as long as he inhabited a lantern, he could not pass through solid barriers. Iris turned the knob, but it was locked. She hadn’t locked it when she’d left to return her dishes to the kitchen. What the hell was going on?

“Benga!” she shouted, trying to force the door.

Nate grabbed her by the shoulder and pulled her aside all of a sudden. “Break it down!” he ordered.

A Lucario, presumably Nate’s, was waiting to do just that and smashed through the wooden door effortlessly with a Power-Up Punch. Iris burst through the broken doorway without hesitation, afraid of what she might find, and froze in shock at what she saw.

Cottonee was shrieking as he fended off Belaron standing over a sleeping Benga with a dagger in his hand. Cottonee had puffed up to twice his size and trapped Belaron’s hands within his sticky Cotton Guard fluff as he shed Fairy dust all over the place. As Iris, Nate, and Lucario entered the room, Belaron managed to yank his dagger hand free and drove the blade into Cottonee’s fluffy body.

“Get off, you pest!” Belaron shouted.

Cottonee screeched in anger—no manmade blade could have cut through his thick Cotton Guard defense, but the stabbing shook him loose and Belaron tossed him aside. Belaron grabbed Benga’s
hair and lifted the knife again, his intentions plain.

“No!” Iris screamed, unable to believe her eyes.

“Lucario!” Nate shouted. “Stop him!”

Lucario moved like quicksilver and Tackled Belaron against the wall before Nate could finish the command. The dagger fell on the floor with a clatter, and Belaron landed beneath Lucario with a loud thud. Iris recovered from the initial shock and ran to the bedside, where Cottonee had landed in a pile of shed cotton and Fairy dust. He seemed to be okay, just hopping mad, and she immediately checked on Benga. There appeared to be no new wounds, no blood, nothing to indicate Belaron had successfully assaulted him. Cottonee, the mischievous little Fairy Iris had once considered leaving behind, had protected Benga. Tears blurred Iris’s vision, but they were not tears of sadness of relief.

“Let me go!” Belaron shouted, wrestling in vain against Lucario. “I have to finish!”

The fury came out of nowhere; Iris didn’t know she’d had the energy and vigor to feel so passionately after everything, but it brewed as vicious as a hurricane the magnitude of which she’d never known before. She crossed the room in a few swift steps and fell upon Belaron. Lucario moved out of her way, and Nate was right behind her with Lampent.

“Princess!” Belaron said, his pale face drawn with shock. “I can explain—”

Iris grabbed his collar and slammed him hard against the wall. “Explain?” she shouted in his face. “You just tried to murder Benga!”

Belaron’s blue eyes were wide with fear as he searched her face like he could not comprehend her speech. “Murder? No, no I-I would never—”

“I saw you!” Iris screamed, letting the rage guide her on gale force winds, uncaring who heard. “I saw you with the dagger! Cottonee stopped you, but I saw it all!”

Belaron reached for her wrists, but Iris shoved him against the wall again and he trembled. “Say it,” Iris said through gritted teeth. “Say it, or so help me, I will rip you apart!”

Belaron stared down at her in utter shock, and when he swallowed, she could see his Adam’s apple bob. “All right,” he said, his voice hoarse. “Yes, I tried to...to kill Benga, but it’s not what you think.”

“What the hell am I supposed to think? Why would you do such a thing?”

“To help you!” Belaron shouted back. “To save you from making the biggest mistake of your life!”

Iris faltered at the bizarre answer and the manic look in his eyes, a glint of feverish passion she had not noticed before. “What mistake?”

“Him!” Belaron pointed to Benga still sleeping peacefully under Cottonee’s watchful gaze. Lampent had hovered near, morbidly curious about Benga’s moribund state.

“What did Benga ever do to you?” Iris demanded.

“No me, you. You, Princess. You were ready to give up your crown for him!”

Iris was so taken aback by this ludicrous accusation that she let him go and took a step back. “What
are you talking about?”

Belaron put up his hands, and Lucario growled in warning.

“You wouldn’t leave him,” Belaron said. “You said it yourself. Until he recovers or dies, you wouldn’t leave him.”

“So you thought you should murder him?” Iris shook with rage. “How could you do this?!”

“I did it for you! Everything I have ever done has always been for you!”

Iris shook her head, incredulous. “You’ve completely lost your mind. This is beyond madness.”

“Madness? No, I am your true knight, and you are my princess. You said it yourself, I’ve always been your loyal knight, protected you.” Belaron cast a glare at Benga. “Until he came along and filled your head with his lies and filth. He’s ruined everything! Princess, you must see the harm he’s done, convincing you that your honored father was an evil man, that you’re somehow not worthy of the crown that is rightfully yours? Lies and more lies! Surely, you must see that we’re better off without him. And if you cannot, then I’ll keep you safe from his ilk, as I’ve sworn to do, even if you should hate me for it. This is for your own good.”

By now, others had gathered in the hall, drawn by the shouting. Soriel and Moros hovered just inside, unsure what to make of this confrontation between Iris and Belaron, and Yancy and Nuria lingered in the doorway. Nate discreetly kept them all back with Lampent’s help.

Iris could hardly begin to comprehend Belaron’s twisted reality. “Benga’s done nothing but help me!” Iris shouted. “You’re the one who doesn’t see. If it wasn’t for him, I never would’ve earned the crew’s trust and confidence. I never would’ve learned to accept the truth about my father and what he did. I would have died in Castelia, and I would have deserved it.”

Belaron shook his head sadly, like he pitied her. “No, Princess, this is all wrong. He’s made you feel guilty about who you are. Your crown is—”

“I am not my crown!”

“Yes, you are!”

Oh my god, Iris thought, amazed. Have I been so blind? How could I have never noticed it? She glanced at Benga. You knew, she realized. You tried to tell me, but I wouldn’t listen...

“Princess,” Belaron said a little more gently.

“Stop that,” Iris snapped. “Stop calling me that.”

“But you are a princess.”

“I am so much more than that! But you can’t see it, can you? No, you refuse to see it. To you, I’m nothing but a prize. I’m your trophy to keep safe for my own good, isn’t that right?” Iris’s thoughts raced in her head on hurricane winds, roaring and spinning and making her dizzy as the truth was suddenly so clear. “No wonder you saw Benga as a threat. This was never about your loyalty to me, it was about isolating me from anyone who would endanger your position and help me see the truth.”

“Princess, I—”
“Stop! That’s enough.”

But Belaron had not had enough. He tried to approach Iris, but Cottonee shrieked and Lucario shoved him back against the wall before he could take a step. His face had twisted into a grimace, a far cry from the dutiful knight he had always comported himself as.

_Is this who you’ve always been?_ she thought, horrified.

“You selfish girl,” he spat. “I gave you years of my life, my best years. I was prepared to do anything to see you come into your destiny. How dare you repay my faith with this ungrateful betrayal? And for what, for this filthy vanither who waltzed into our lives practically yesterday? I’ve been with you the longest! I’ve earned my place in your kingdom, not him! I deserve so much better after everything I’ve done for you.”

Iris marched right up to him, fearless and furious. “No, Syr Bel. You betrayed _me_. I decide my destiny, not you or anyone else. It’s clear to me now that everything you’ve done has been to serve your own ends, never mine. You gave me your oath, and you then you smashed it to pieces. All you deserve is my wrath. I will _never_ forgive you.”

Iris turned her back on him and saw all the people watching her. Soriel and Moros looked grim, and Nuria covered her mouth in shock. Nate watched her, that quiet warmth that made him vulnerable and strong and steady as still waters. Iris balled her fists. She knew what she had to do.

“The punishment for a Ridder Knight who betrays his sovereign is severe,” she said, recalling the gruesome tradition. She had seen it carried out once in Blackthorn as a child, and she would never forget it. “A Ridder Knight pledges his sword and his fealty to his Titan sovereign when he takes his vows. But the knight who breaks his vows and throws down his sword has no need for his sword hand.”

Yancy gasped. Even Soriel and Moros looked uncomfortable.

“Bring the traitor outside,” Iris commanded her guards.

Night had fallen when Iris and her party dragged Belaron outside. She left Benga under the watchful gazes of Haxorus and Cottonee, not taking any chances, and Soriel and Moros marched Belaron in between them to the coast not far from the inn. The Driftveil Lighthouse’s searching beacon swept over the dark ocean and the blockade still in place farther out to sea.

Iris could not believe this. Belaron had been her longest-standing ally after her mother died. He had always supported and helped her, especially once she left Blackthorn to come out here. How could he do this? Did their history mean so little to him? When had he drifted so far from her?

“I’ll cut him for you,” Soriel said. “There’s no need to concern yourself with him now.”

“No,” Iris said. “He’s my Ridder Knight, and this is my judgment. It has to be me, no one else.”

Nate and Yancy had joined them outside, and Lampent glowed in Nate’s hand like a true lantern. His expression was unreadable in the dim lighting, but he watched Iris carefully.

Moros forced Belaron to kneel in the sand at sword point. His Kangaskhan and Nidoking flanked him and ensured that Belaron would not be going anywhere even if he tried.
Iris stood before Belaron and looked down on him. Soriel offered Iris her sword by the hilt, and Iris accepted it. “You took a vow to serve me,” Iris said. “And you broke it by attempting to murder Benga.”

Belaron glared up at her. “You’re making a mistake. That fool will only lead you further astray. He was only the first. They will corrupt your purpose here until you no longer recognize yourself.” He indicated Nate and Yancy.

Yancy had a hand on her naginata, but she made no move to approach. Nate said nothing at all.

Iris wondered how they had come to this. All those disagreements, those mistakes, they had only been the symptoms lashing out. The disease itself was a subtle beast nurtured over the years right under her nose. She barely recognized the man kneeling before her now that his blinding chivalry had been stripped away to reveal the ugly resentment beneath, a virulent sickness that had spread over all their years together and finally manifested when confronted directly these past months. And yet, beyond fury and betrayal, Iris could still remember the day Belaron had given her his vow. He had laid his sword at her feet, gleaming silver polished to perfection, and swore fealty.

“Why?” she’d asked him. “Why me?”

No one had ever wanted to give Iris their oath. She was an outcast, the exiled princess, the bastard of a dead king and his second-class mistress. She didn’t speak like the other Blackthorn Titans with her lilting accent, didn’t look like them with her brown skin, didn’t belong among them. And yet, Belaron had given her his oath, anyway.

“Because you are a princess,” he’d said. “And every princess should have a knight to protect and counsel her.”

No judgment, no bargaining, no hesitation, just a simple oath of loyalty, pure and true. If it had not been for Belaron, Iris wondered if she ever would have gotten the courage to make the journey to Unova at all. Iris closed her eyes and felt the weight of the sword in her hands, justice given form. It was hers to wield by rights.

“You were my true knight,” she said, her voice thick with emotion as she remembered that day so many years ago, the first day she’d ever felt like a real princess, just like her mother had always told her she was.

“I still am,” Belaron said. “And you are my princess. Please... Please, think of what you do. I can still save you. It’s not too late.”

“No,” Iris said, forcing herself to look upon him again, kneeling as he had that day, too. As she no longer recognized him now, Belaron had never once recognized her. “I’m a Dragon. I never needed to be saved.”

Iris lifted the sword, and Soriel held Belaron steady from behind so that his arm was flat on the sand. The sword’s weight was heavy in Iris’s small hands as she brought it down hard and true, her grip unwavering, and it hit the sand and sank deep. For a few breaths, no one made a sound. Belaron was staring at his arm in bewilderment, shaking. It was untouched. The sword was embedded in the sand mere inches from it between them.

“I banish you,” Iris said, her throat a knot that made it difficult to speak. “From this day on, you’re dead to me. I strip you of all your ranks and titles and banish you.”

Belaron retracted his hand and clutched it to his chest, but instead of quiet relief over having been
spared such barbaric violence, he sneered up at Iris. “You’ll never be a queen. You’re too weak.”

“Get out of my sight,” Iris said coldly. “I never want to see you again.”

Soriel and Moros gave Belaron some space, and if they questioned Iris’s decision, they kept their thoughts to themselves. With nothing but the clothes on his back and his Pokémon in their Pokéballs, Belaron staggered to his feet looking lost and bitter.

Moros’s Nidoking growled in warning, and Belaron backed away. He had no ship, no money, no supplies, and the only way to go was north. Perhaps he would find help, someone to feed and shelter him and take him across the sea somewhere far from here, Iris did not care. As far as she was concerned, Belaron the Ridder Knight who had known her for half her life had died tonight on this beach. She would never see him again.

He went, naked without his gleaming armor and no different from any other lonely old man, and the darkness swallowed him. Iris handed Soriel back her sword.

“I’ll inform the Police Department about this,” Moros said dutifully. “They’ll know Belaron for a traitor and attempted murderer and ensure that he doesn’t come back.”

“I’ll stay and make sure he doesn’t try to sneak back in until then,” Soriel said. She released Charizard in a swirl of light, and he snarled as though in agreement.

“Good,” Iris said, weary as the raging hurricane within finally quelled. She felt like she hadn’t slept in weeks.

“Iris,” Nuria said. “Are you okay?”

“I would be better if we could get a doctor to check on Benga,” she said.

“Of course, I’ll see what I can do.” Nuria squeezed Iris’s hand gently and then headed off to track down someone who could help with Benga.

Iris watched her go, and soon there were only Nate and Yancy left with her walking back to the hotel.

“Iris,” Nate said, lighting their way with Lampent.

“Not now,” Iris said. “I know you both want an answer about whether I’ll agree to join forces, but now’s not the time.”

“No, it’s not that. He’s wrong about you,” Nate said softly. “You’re not weak.”

“Oh, really? You know me so well, now?” Iris said.

“No. But what you did back there, that wasn’t weakness.”

“I let him go.”

“You showed him mercy.” Nate stepped in front of her, and they all came to a stop. “That isn’t weakness, it’s courage.”

Iris looked at Nate, but she didn’t really see him. All she could see was Belaron as he had been that day he swore his oath to her, youthful and vibrant and full of hope. Her hope. If he could believe in her, then maybe one day others would, too. Maybe she could become the princess her mother had always said she was born to be. How could she possibly take Belaron’s sword hand when that very
hand had been the first to reach out to her when no one else would?

Heat stung her eyes as the deluge of memories overwhelmed her. She didn’t realize she was trembling until Yancy lightly touched her shoulder, a silent reassurance.

“What you just did took more strength than I’ve ever had,” Nate said.

“Me, too,” Yancy said softly.

Iris closed her eyes and let herself believe their words. She did not know how much she needed to hear them. She did not feel strong right now, only tired and hurt and alone.

*Syr Bel is gone.*

Iris clutched a hand over her heart. It hurt to breathe.

“Come on,” Yancy said. “Benga’s waiting for you. I’ll take you back upstairs.”

The urge to look back and see a glimpse of Belaron in the shadows was strong, but Yancy was right. Benga was waiting for her. The only one who was alone now was Belaron, not her.

“Yes,” Iris said. “Okay.”

The days in Driftveil dragged on, quiet with Belaron gone and Benga sleeping. Time blurred together as Iris grew restless and Benga still had not woken up. He hadn’t gotten worse, either, but the lack of any change worried her deeply. Driftveil was slowly pulling itself back together, and when Nuria dragged Iris out to see the sun for a change, Iris could not help but marvel at the Driftveilers’ community work ethic. Farmers and financiers and everyone in between rolled up their sleeves and contributed in any way they could to rebuild and help the victims of Neo Team Plasma’s attack. The funeral pyre had been finished, and there would be a burning tonight to send off the dead.

The official body count was up to 287, larger than the populations of some entire villages in the Driftveil fiefdom. There were still bodies being dug up even now, and some might be lost forever. Many had no names, their faces crushed beyond all recognition. Families who had lost love ones had no way of identifying the remains, left to wonder if this body or that one had once been a father or a young cousin. The city mourned together, a leaden haze that lingered like morning fog rolling in from the sea.

And yet, for every corpse there remained many more who had survived, who were helping those who had lost everything.

“You saved them,” Nate had said of Iris and Dragonite’s brutal destruction of the Plasma Frigate that brought a swift end to the hostilities.

But she hadn’t saved them all. The ones who had perished would burn tonight, one final farewell. Iris would be there to send them off, too. They were not her people, but as a witness to their deaths she felt wrong not to go. Their deaths had been unjust and unwarranted, and she did not want to forget them.

Nuria accompanied her, as did Soriel and Moros. Clay gave a brief but poignant eulogy, a vow of remembrance encouraging everyone to hold the fallen in their hearts where they would live on.
There was no mention of Neo Team Plasma, and Iris was glad for it. They had no place in such a heartfelt ceremony meant to commemorate life, not death. He lit the pyre, and the flames caught on the dry wood and kindling quickly, voracious. A wall of heat hit Iris, but on this chilly night in the mountains under the stars, she welcomed it. She hugged Cottonee to her chest, and together they watched the flames rise up, reaching for the heavens, hauntingly beautiful.

“How’re you holding up?” Nate asked, joining her.

She hadn’t noticed him here among the large crowd, but she wasn’t surprised to see him. Lampent was swaying lazily on an invisible wind, mesmerized by the funeral pyre and balancing indigo will-o-wisps on his uncurled arms in a kind of séance.

“He likes the fire,” Nate said, following her gaze. “Or the heat, I think. I get the feeling that’s why he doesn’t mind being around me so much.”

“This is a stab in the dark, but I imagine all the dead bodies might be a little extra incentive,” Iris said.

Lampent swayed, and his will-o-wisps circled him as though with a life of their own. His flame intensified, filling the dusty old lantern he had possessed.

“I wonder if he can see them,” Nate said. “The people in the fire, their souls...” He trailed off as he watched Lampent. “You never answered my question.”

“I’m holding up just fine,” Iris said. She set Cottonee on her head, his fluff a little too warm against her chest.

Nate studied her. The firelight illuminated the dark russet in his eyes, and Iris crossed her arms under his gaze. “It’s okay if you’re not.”

“I meant to thank you,” Iris said. “You and Lampent. If he hadn’t sensed what Syr—what Belaron was doing, then Benga might be in that pyre, too.”

“I’m glad Benga’s okay,” Nate said softly. “I hope he wakes up soon.”

Iris shifted her weight. “How, um, are you...okay?”

She did not need to bring up Cheren when they both knew her meaning easily enough.

“No,” Nate said. “I’m not okay. But I’m trying.”

She followed his gaze back the way he’d come. Rosa and Hugh were watching the pyre in silence. Hugh stared at the fire as if in a trance. Rood joined Rosa and laid a comforting hand on her shoulder as he whispered something, words of consolation perhaps. The sight of Rosa and Hugh like that, close enough to talk but a thousand miles apart, and Nate pretending to be the impartial observer stirred a deep sadness in Iris. She shivered despite the warmth radiating from the pyre.

“Stop trying,” she said. “At least for tonight, don’t try.”

Nate looked at her strangely. “I’m, uh, I don’t...”

“I wasn’t weak to show mercy, that’s what you said. You aren’t weak to grieve.” She stared into the dancing flames and listened to the soft weeping of all those around her, a haunting ballad that made the fire dance. “It’s not weakness to feel lost without him,” she said, her throat clenching. “Just for tonight.”
Nate’s gaze fell, but Iris could not bring herself to look at him. If she did, she would come undone. She had to try, too, come morning.

Nate hugged his arms around his middle and drew a shaky breath as he let the firelight consume him. “Thank you, Iris,” he said.

They stood there together as witnesses to the flames that consumed the fallen. Tomorrow, the memories would be all that remained, and there could be no looking back. If she looked back, she would be lost forever. No one can change the past.

But for one night, for just a few precious moments, she would drift and anguish, let the flames burn her raw and expose what lay beneath, and grieve for what she had lost and what she had left behind. Tonight, she could be the princess Belaron had dreamed of protecting, just one last time.

Tomorrow, she must become a queen.

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Iris received the summons to appear at the Gym before dawn the next morning. She had risen early and opened the door for the messenger after just two knocks, startling him. The summons was expected. Now that Driftveil was secured once again and the dead had been properly memorialized, life had to go on. Iris was ready.

_I won’t look back_, she promised herself.

And so, she dressed in fine cerulean silk, hand-painted with rippling waves and whirlpool designs in Humilau and fit for any noble lady, and secured the rich garment with a hammered brass belt. She had no crown, but she had a sharp sword and a sharper mind, adequate substitutes that had served her well thus far. Armored in beauty and grace and armed with a carefully considered strategy, Iris left Benga in Soriel’s care and went to the Gym escorted by Nuria, Moros, and Haxorus. Rood and his entourage were already present, including Nate and Rosa, while Hugh and Yancy were the last to arrive shortly after. Iris felt their eyes on her as she passed.

Clay’s leathery face was drawn after a sleepless night and the stress of the last several days. Katie and Tibor flanked his sides as he slumped in his stone throne, hands clasped over his knees, and surveyed the receiving room’s occupants.

“You’re all here,” Clay said. “Thought y’all might want a debriefing ‘fore I tell ya what’s gonna happen next. Long story short, y’all already know ‘bout the fiasco with the blockade. We captured a couple o’ the Neos tryna escape and interrogated ‘em.”

Clay made no mention of Nuria’s key role in the capture of those Neo Agents, as Iris had warned Nuria would probably happen. Nevertheless, Nuria tensed beside her.

“The one Agent, Barret, ain’t givin’ us much. Won’t say a goddamned word n’ matter what I do to persuade him. Far as I know, the Neos planted sleepers in my coast guard, and that’s why the Frigate got past ‘em without a fuss. I’ve personally seen to it that the sleepers got their reward for their service.”

No one said anything to that. Iris did not want to think about what methods Clay and his army of Adamantines might employ in extracting information or dealing with traitors and spies.

“And now, I’m ass bare in a Maractus patch with no way out. See, y’all’re the reason the Neos came here at all.” Clay indicated Rood and his people. “And y’all went and blew up their fancy
ship.” He nodded to Iris. “Still, way I see it, I got no choice but to take a stand now that y’all brought this shit to my doorstep. A Gym Leader died on my watch, not to mention the hundreds o’ my own. So, what am I to do?”

No one said a word.

“I’ve spent the last few days diggin’ up bodies and rootin’ out spies. Folks I knew’re dead, and folks I trusted ended up screwin’ me six ways to Sunday. Rood, you’re a good man, I ain’t denyin’ that. But your ship brought the Neos here ‘n started all this. I’m gonna hafta put ya and your people under arrest.”

Katie and Tibor moved to carry out Clay’s orders.

“What? No, you can’t do this!” Rosa said, panicking.

Hugh looked on, dead-eyed and strangely quiet, and Nate tried to calm Rosa down.

“Rosa, don’t interfere,” he said calmly.

“Are you crazy? This isn’t right! Master Rood had nothing to do with this.” Rosa spoke to Clay directly and said again, “Master Rood had nothing to do with this. What happened was a senseless act of violence. You can’t possibly believe he or anyone else orchestrated this!”

Clay was unmoved. “It was Rood’s ship, the Carmine, that led ‘em here. So it’s Rood who pays the price.”

“It’s all right,” Rood said in his tinny voice. “I shall cooperate, there’s no need for this.”

Katie and Tibor allowed Rood to come quietly. Anthea and Concordia remained with him, as well as a handful of other Plasma loyalists.

“Master Rood,” Rosa said, distraught. “This isn’t right.”

“I am happy to comply,” Rood said. “And if I did lead the Neos here, even inadvertently, then I am willing to accept responsibility for my part in what happened.”

“You’ll be confined to your safe house,” Clay said. “There’ll be a trial. The folks o’ Driftveil deserve to understand what happened to their loved ones.”

Rosa looked on, helpless to do anything, and Yancy whispered something to her to try to comfort her.

“As for the rest o’ y’all,” Clay began.

Iris stepped forward, and Haxorus lumbered alongside her, drawing everyone’s attention. “I have a proposal for you,” Iris said.

“How ‘bout I give ya a proposal o’ my own,” Clay said angrily. “Sit down and shut up. I ain’t finished.”

“Then allow me to finish for you,” Iris said. “You were about to banish all of us from Driftveil, effective immediately. Is that right?”

Clay narrowed his eyes, but Iris didn’t give him a chance to speak.

“I thought as much. So let me save you the trouble. We’ll leave, all of us, and you’ll never see us
again.”

Yancy gasped.

“What the fuck?” Hugh said.

“Iris,” Nate said.

Iris ignored them all. “The destruction of Neo Team Plasma isn’t my purpose in Unova, but it’s become clear that Opelucid has allied itself with them for the time being, and so they’ve become a new obstacle in my path. So I’ll join my people and their allies, including all the might and power of Humilau City, to the fight against Neo Team Plasma as long as they exist as an impediment to my designs for Opelucid.”

“What?” Rosa said, shocked.

“Congratulations,” Clay said unkindly. “But that ain’t my problem.”

“And since it’s also come to my attention that Drayden has wed Gym Leader Elesa and joined Nimbasa’s power to Opelucid’s, I’ll also stand with any Nimbasans who dream of seeing Opelucid gone from their lives and the marriage between Drayden and Elesa dissolved,” Iris talked over Clay. “So here’s what’s going to happen, Gym Leader Clay. I’m going to leave Driftveil City as soon as possible, and I welcome anyone who wishes to join me. We’ll make our way to Mistralton City via Chargestone Cave. And I would never dream of troubling you for a guide; my Dragons are more than capable of defending me from any feral Pokémon we may encounter.”

Iris laid a hand on Haxorus’s flank, and he growled ominously. His golden scale armor glittered, and his enormous tusks caught the light on their razor-sharp edges.

“I’ll be sure to give Gym Leader Skyla your warm regards,” Iris said. “Perhaps she’ll be more amenable to seeing things my way after the tragic events that happened here.”

Clay stared at her in disbelief, and Iris turned on her heel to face the others. Hugh’s expression mirrored Clay’s, and Yancy looked to be on the verge of tears. Nate held Iris’s gaze, steady, and smiled.

“We’ll join you,” Nate said. “Our fight isn’t over yet.”

“Humilau will stand with you until the end, Iris,” said Nuria, grinning.

“Me, too,” Yancy said, brimming with relief and excitement. “Nimbasa may be formally allied with Opelucid, but we bear them no love, I promise you. Lady Elesa sent me here expressly to get help in rebuffing Opelucid, so count me in.”

“Now hold on just a goddamned minute!” Clay bellowed, finding his anger. “Y’all can’t just go around me. I know what you’re thinkin’, and it ain’t gonna work. Skyla ‘n Brycen defer to me. They’ll never overrule me.”

“Really?” Iris said. “Because I can be very persuasive. I’m sure I could even persuade Aspertia City and its allies to see things my way now that their honored Gym Leader Cheren perished here on your watch. Surely, they won’t take such a terrible loss lying down. I wonder if your fellow Triumvirs would take that under consideration?”

Clay was red in the face at Iris’s audacity, but she would not be deterred. When diplomacy did not work, all that was left was to find a new tactic. Get a big enough hammer, and eventually even the
most stubborn nail will fall into place.

“What do you think, Nate?” Iris said. “Could you get a bird to Aspertia and inform them of their beloved Gym Leader’s fate? They have a right to know.”

“I already did,” Nate said. “I sent birds to Virbank and Floccesy, too. The lower West Tine cities’re pretty closely aligned, especially after they experienced Neo Team Plasma’s violence first-hand.”

Iris allowed herself the barest smirk. It seemed Nate had taken her advice last night and woken up today ready to move forward, too, come what may. “How thorough of you.”

“This is way outta line,” Clay said. “I wanna see the Neos pay for what they did as much as y’all,” he said to Nate, “but I don’t take kindly to threats.”

“Good, because I don’t like giving them,” Iris said. “But your options are very limited, as are mine. Over the last few days, I’ve had to make some very difficult decisions, but now I see clearly. We all may have different goals, but there’s one unifying force that connects us all, and that’s Neo Team Plasma. I will retake my rightful seat in Opelucid. But I can’t get something for nothing, and respectfully, neither can you.

“I didn’t come here to make enemies, none of us did,” Iris went on. “But I also didn’t come here expecting to find true allies. So please, reconsider. We’ve bled for this city. They’ve lost not just a Gym Leader, but a friend.” She gestured to Nate and his friends. “I’ve lost my oldest companion and came close to losing my newest. You lost hundreds of innocent Driftveilers, good people who didn’t deserve their cruel fate. So I’ll ask you one more time, Gym Leader Clay. Help me. Help us as we’ve helped you. Because as someone I’ve unexpectedly come to value and respect in these last few days very wisely told me, this is much bigger than us, and there’s no way in hell I’m letting you stop us.”

Nate joined Iris at her side, and his presence beside her brought that steady warmth he radiated, that tranquil strength that she drew on now. Between Haxorus on her right and Nate on her left, Iris felt almost invincible, and even if Clay denied them now, she would not waver. She would not look back.

Clay looked at them with the turbulence of a man warring with himself and his pride, a losing battle for many. “I don’t like this,” he said, like a petulant child. “Y’all come here makin’ demands, tryin’ every angle ‘til somethin’ fits. I don’t like it one bit. Ya backed me into a corner, little Princess, and that I’ll grant ya. But ya hear me good ‘cause whatever ya think o’ me, I’ve been around long enough to get a sense o’ the world. Ya might be clever, and ya might even be inspirin’. Your father was the same, oh, I remember him well enough. The man could make anybody follow him. It’s a gift, and ya might well be his true daughter, after all.

“But your father, great and powerful king that he was, he was a weak man. I dunno what the future’s got in store for ya, but I do know that repeatin’ the mistakes o’ the past don’t bode well n’matter who y’are.”

Iris had not been expecting Clay to talk about Cadmus, and it caught her completely by surprise. But he didn’t give her a chance to speak.

“Fine,” Clay said. “I’ll send ya to Mistralton if that’s what ya want. Go with my blessin’, and Skyla’ll receive ya well enough. The Neos crossed a line comin’ here, and killin’ a Gym Leader ain’t forgivable n’matter where ya go. But mark my words, all o’ ya. What you’re askin’ for’s a war, a ya don’t know what that means. Couple o’ battles’ll bloody ya good enough, sure, but they’re nothin’ but games, same as my Phalanx fights in the Colosseum. I was your age for the last
war, and that... That was a long time ago.”

His gaze was far away and cloudy with memories he could not forget. Everything about Clay was rough and tumble, true grit and tough talk, and he lived up to his title of Gym Leader in every sense. But the fear Iris saw in his weathered face in that moment was as real as Haxorus standing next to her, and there was something apocalyptic about a seasoned man like Clay showing his fear, like the moment a child loses his innocence—gone, and nothing will ever be the same again.

“Talk to Skyla ‘n Brycen,” Clay said at length. “If ya can convince ‘em to risk their people and their freedom against Neo Team Plasma and whoever they’re workin’ with, then I’ll support ya, too.”

Iris had never seen Clay look so tired, so sad as he did in that moment, and even though Nuria hugged Moros in her excitement and Yancy exclaimed her delight to Hugh and Rosa, she could not ignore the trepidation that colored Clay’s concession. Beside her, Nate was also not rejoicing, although he bowed deferentially to Clay and thanked him sincerely for reconsidering.

Thanks were given and the parties agreed to depart as soon as Iris had figured out a way to transport Benga safely. She considered airlifting him with Dragonite’s help, but that would leave the others to go through Chargestone Cave without her.

“Iris, that was amazing!” Nuria gushed at her in rolling Adriati as they headed back to the hotel. “You really convinced him to help us, and we have Nate and Yancy and the others helping us now, too. If we do things right, we might be able to get Virbank and Aspertia to join us, maybe even Nimbasa. That’s more than enough to take on Opelucid even without these Triumvirs.”

“Yeah, it’s a solid step forward,” Iris agreed. “I thought it would be really unlikely for Clay to stick to his guns and refuse to help us in the end.”

Nuria frowned. “You don’t sound super happy about it. What’s the matter? You got everything you wanted.”

“I know I did. I just...”

Why do I feel this dread?

The way Clay had spoken of war, of her father and his weakness. What did he mean?

“Iris?” Nuria said. “You know you can tell me. I’m on your side, whether you like it or not.”

“I know. I’m not about to forget Humilau.”

“No, idiot, I mean me. I’m your friend against my better judgment. Don’t ask me how that happened.”

Iris spared her a fleeting smile. “Because I’m amazing and it was just a matter of time?”

“Oh, well, I guess you’re feeling better,” Nuria grumbled. “And you’re all right, but you got a long way to go. Just Iris.”

Nuria forgot about her suspicions as she chatted away, and Iris was glad for it. She didn’t want to sound irrational or paranoid, and even if she trusted Nuria enough not to jump to conclusions at this point, she didn’t have the words to express this feeling, this portentous unease. It might have been nothing at all but the compounded stress of the last few days. It wouldn’t be the first time Iris had let her emotions consume her, like the time she sequestered herself in her room on the Oculus for
She and Nuria arrived at the Lighthouse Inn and headed upstairs to their rooms, but as usual Iris made a stop at Benga’s room to check on him.

“You’re back,” Soriel said. “We were just talking about you. All good things, don’t worry.”

Benga was sitting up in bed, and Zweilous was out of her Pokéball tearing a pillow to shreds for fun and getting feathers everywhere. They both looked up at Iris where she’d frozen in the doorway, and Benga smiled.

“Hey, miss me?” he said.

As though she had been gagged and slowly suffocating these past few days since the battle, the veil lifted and suddenly she could breathe again, light and thrumming as life returned and rejuvenated her. She crossed the room in a few steps, and before Benga could get a word in edgewise, she threw her arms around him and held him tight.

“I’m not going anywhere,” he said.

“You better not. I didn’t give you permission to die, so don’t ever do it again.”

His hand on her cheek brought her closer again, and they were caught in suspension as she hovered over him on the bed.

“Well, you know what they say: ’to die would be an awfully big adventure,’” he whispered.

“No,” Iris said, unable to look away. “Not yet.”

She closed the distance between them with a kiss, crashing and ardent, and he responded in kind. Her heart was in her throat threatening to burst as she sank into him, and her skin buzzed, electrified all over like storm winds. They enveloped her, chaotic and screaming in her ears like thunder, threatening to lift her up and carry her away, but he held on to her, the calming anchor that wouldn’t let go. Fingers tugged at her hair, raked down her back deliciously, and he kissed her back like he might truly die this time. He smiled against her, and it was contagious.

“That was worth staying alive for,” he said against her lips when she broke the kiss.

“Good,” she said, biting back the smile he’d drawn out of her. “But don’t scare me like that again, idiot.”
He rubbed his thumbs over her temples and searched her eyes. “Soriel told me everything,” he said. “You saved my life.”

Iris opened her mouth to respond, but words eluded her. He pulled her down for another kiss, this one soft and lingering and full of the despair she had left behind for all that she’d lost.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I’m so sorry, Iris.”

It would be so easy to fall now, to let him carry her as he had in the past, to wallow adrift in a sea of memory she might like nothing better than to drown in. But Iris lightly touched her fingers to his lips and smiled sadly, weary and accepting.

“It’s done,” she said. “And it’s time to move on.”

He took her hand in his. “Then count me in. Whatever it takes, I’m with you.”

“I don’t need knights.”

“I’m not a knight; I’m a Dragon,” he said, grinning.

His too-sharp incisor flashed pearly white and drew her gaze. Heat pooled in the pit of her belly, and she pulled him close for another blinding kiss. He wrapped his arms around her waist and held her against him, asphyxiating, and to hell with his healing injuries. They both wanted this, and Iris was tired of lying to herself.

She straddled him, and gravity did the rest. His palms were searing to the touch over the feather-light blue silk she wore, and she arched into his touch. She moved against him, waves crashing against the shore, the threat of drowning, but his grip on her waist anchored her to him and kept her from washing away. She closed her eyes and saw dark skies, lightning and high winds, and they swept her up, terrible and rash and exquisite, but he was there to pull her back in, again and again and again until there was nowhere left to go come crashing down. Her fingers fisted in his shirt, clinging to a lifeline, and she fought to catch her breath against him.

He didn’t give her the chance before dragging her into another maelstrom kiss, teeth and incandescence. And for a blissful moment, Iris thought that yes, maybe to die like this would be an extraordinary adventure.

But it was not the path they were on. He held her beneath the sheets, and she told him of her plans for Mistralton, the deal she had struck, the long journey ahead. He listened to her voice and she listened to his heartbeat, blessedly strong and real. The greatest adventure of all, Iris thought, would be to live.

Chapter End Notes

Since Syr Belaron’s issues may not be immediately clear to everyone reading based on questions and comments I’ve received on this chapter: the benevolent sexism of chivalry (played out to its logical and very unfortunate extreme). Look it up. Alternatively, see also: Jorah Mormont (book version), aka my inspiration for Syr Belaron’s character.
Drayden did not deploy to Castelia with the Dragon Riders and a host of Ridder Knights, choosing instead to remain in Nimbasa. There was much to discuss regarding the new alliance between Nimbasa and Opelucid, not the least of which was what would happen after Castelia was sacked—and there was never any doubt of their victory. When word that the city was as good as fallen and the Castelians and their allies were scrambling, it was almost anticlimactic. Lucius, a middle-aged Dragon Rider and lieutenant serving directly under General Caelith, reported back to Drayden about the latest status of the captured city and explained that the takeover was straightforward with fewer casualties than originally anticipated thanks to Neo Team Plasma’s involvement.

“Neo Team Plasma?” Elesa said. “They were in Castelia?” She stopped petting her Manectric, who was snoozing on a cushion next to where she lay on a blanket in the garden outside the Gym. It was afternoon and nearly autumn, but Nimbasa’s climate was mild all year round and particularly warm today. Elesa wore sleeveless yellow linen and sandals to keep the heat at bay. Manectric opened his eyes and his fur sparked faintly as he bristled at something.

“Yes, Your Grace,” Lucius addressed Elesa by her new title. “They invaded from the south, by sea. They were already there when we arrived and engaging the Virbank Navy. As it turned out, they split Castelia’s military and gave us a healthy advantage.”

“That’s very convenient timing,” Elesa said. “Too convenient.”

“That’s because it was planned,” Drayden said stiffly. Everything about him was stiff, from his pressed slacks and suspenders to his severe amber gaze that chilled this lazy lovely day.

“Is that so?” Elesa turned on Drayden, and Manectric lifted his head off her lap. His thick mane sparked as he opened his mouth in a wide yawn, revealing pearly white fangs as long as fingers. “I don’t remember planning anything with Neo Team Plasma.”

If Drayden sensed her ire, he hid it well. “I was contacted directly by a man called Colress. He wanted to work together to bring down Castelia, but I refused him. It’s not my concern what Neo Team Plasma does or does not do. If their presence helped our cause, then all the better. But I see no reason to work directly with them.”

Elesa felt a hot rush of anger warm the back of her neck at his nonchalance. She masked it with a knowing smile and reached over to dust imaginary lint from Drayden’s shoulder. Her loose long hair brushed his arm, and she was close enough for him to smell her. “I have no desire to break bread with fanatics, either, but I expect to be consulted the next time we’re approached by Neo Team Plasma or any other group. We’re on the same side, and I’m sure you’ll find my perspective valuable, as I value yours.”

Drayden met her gaze just inches from his shoulder. White lightning absorbed from Manectric jumped from her fingertips and raised the hairs on his neck. “I value you very much,” he said quietly. He did not flinch from her touch or her threat, and if he was anyone else, Elesa may have even enjoyed the challenge. But he wasn’t anyone else, and there was nothing enjoyable about this tendency of his to do as he pleased. Titans were known to be slaves to their control. It was in his nature, she supposed, and people could not change.
Elesa snaked her fingers around his neck and pulled him in for a kiss on the mouth without warning, just long enough to be sweet, and he returned her kiss until she broke it a moment later. There were limits even to a Titan’s control.

Lucius averted his gaze from the display.

“Oh no, I’ve embarrassed your lieutenant,” Elesa said, pulling back and running her hand through Manectric’s thick blue fur. “Forgive me.”

“Lucius, you may go,” Drayden said. “Keep me updated. I want to know when Gym Leader Burgh’s been taken into custody. He’s not to be harmed.”

Lucius bowed. “As you wish. Please excuse me.”

Lucius left, and Elesa was alone with Drayden and Manectric in the garden once again. He sat stiffly against the cushions set up outside for their leisure, like he couldn’t relax if he wanted to. They had been in the middle of a picnic lunch when Lucius reported in, romantic in every way except for the two of them. Still, appearances mattered. Elesa may not have been born royal like Drayden, but she understood the power of symbols better than anyone, and Drayden readily acquiesced to her suggestions to be seen around Nimbasa spending time together walking or eating or simply enjoying one another’s company. Almost overnight, the Nimbasans had fallen in love with the pair of them.

“What purpose would that have served? This alliance concerns Opelucid and Nimbasa, not Neo Team Plasma. I have no control over their actions,” Drayden said.

“Yes, it is.

That was sweet. She did not have to trust Drayden to understand him. Bringing down Castelia was a mutual goal and one he would never have compromised, especially not now that their fates were entwined. He may be a king, but he was answerable to her now, his queen.

*Queen Elesa,* she thought. *The Dragon King and his Lightning Queen.*

“Yes, we,” Elesa said as she petted Manectric. She rubbed her fingers together and watched the white sparks dance. “This is a partnership.”

“It is,” Drayden agreed. “Which is why I’d like to propose something to you. Now that our victory in Castelia is assured, we should think about the future of our partnership. I want to introduce you properly to the people of Opelucid—your people, now. They’ll want to meet their new queen.”

“You want me to leave Nimbasa?” Elesa said.

“No forever, of course. But I would prefer to keep you close by for consultation and the like. We’re partners now, and I would have everyone know it.”

Elesa looked at him pointedly as he threw her words back at her. “Surely you don’t expect me to
agree to such an important proposal without some time alone to consider. Gym Leaders don’t normally leave their fiefdoms.”

“You’re not just a Gym Leader anymore,” Drayden said. “You’re a queen. I would have you reap the full benefits of that power for both Opelucid’s and Nimbasa’s sakes. And as of a few minutes ago, Castelia, too.”

“A united Heart Tine. It would be first time in 3,000 years.”

“Indeed.”

Imagine what she could do as the leader of over a third of Unova’s population. The prospect was tantalizing, and Drayden knew just how to sell it. That was exactly the problem.

“I’ll need time to think on your proposal,” she said, getting up. “I’m sure you understand that I can’t just leave on a whim without notice.”

“Naturally,” Drayden said. He remained seated on the blanket in the grass and leaned back on his elbows. If he were anyone else, he might have appeared relaxed and lazy enjoying the warm afternoon. “I imagine we’ll be recalling soldiers as soon as tomorrow once Burgh is secured.”

“Tomorrow,” Elesa repeated. “Right. We’ll discuss this again later.”

Manectric stretched out and flexed his thick muscles. He reached Elesa’s chest at his full height and followed her back inside the Gym.

“This is fucked up,” Gozen hissed as she and Elesa stole a few surreptitious moments alone in the darkness by the Blue River late that night. “You can’t go to Opelucid!”

Elesa had chosen this place to speak with Gozen about everything she could not say with four walls on all sides. Ever since Drayden had arrived in Nimbasa City, he seemed to be everywhere. Where before Elesa had always found familiar faces around her, suddenly no matter where she turned, there was a Ridder Knight or a Dragon Rider in the same room who might happen to overhear her conversations. Drayden was subtle in his manipulation, and there was a kind of genius beauty in the game he played, but the consequences were no less dangerous for both Elesa and Nimbasa should she allow him to ensnare her. She would do no such thing.

“He’s given me until the end of tomorrow to decide,” Elesa said. “Yancy wasn’t wrong; he does have another agenda. I believe he means to control Nimbasa through me somehow. As Queen or as a highborn hostage, once I’m in Opelucid the distinction won’t matter.”

Gozen stared at her like she did not recognize her. “With all due respect, are you out of your fucking mind? You think Drayden wants to take you hostage, and you’re just totally cool with that? It doesn’t make you feel, I don’t know, betrayed? Worried? Afraid?”

“There’s no point in worrying. Drayden can’t betray me now that I’m his wife. Our legal bond is unbreakable, so my position is secure wherever I go. Any move against me will undermine whatever control he thinks he can command over Nimbasa, so he’d only be hurting himself.”

Gozen was not convinced. “Forgive me for not feeling reassured by you being basically shackled to this creep for the rest of your life.”
“I’ll go to Opelucid, that was never truly optional,” Elesa said. “If I refuse, he’ll remain in Nimbasa and bring in more of his people. Any retaliation from me could be taken as breaching the terms of our alliance. The last thing I want is to give Opelucid any reason to doubt Nimbasa’s loyalty. My only choice is to remove the threat entirely by removing myself.”

“No, it’s not. You’re a Fulmen! And so’re your Gym trainers. You have me and the other Rain Warriors and the whole Nimbasan military. We can protect Nimbasa together, like we always have,” Gozen insisted.

“Our old ways won’t work anymore. You forget that this alliance works both ways: I’m bound to Drayden, but he’s also bound to me. Opelucid is his stronghold, where his confidantes are, where he keeps his secrets. I never would have gotten this kind of opportunity to infiltrate his inner sanctum before. I must go, which is why I need the Rain Warriors here in my absence. My Gym trainers are strong, but it’s the Rain Warriors the people respect. In their eyes, you’re just like them. You’re the best of them. They’ll look to you for hope and security in my absence.”

Gozen did not like this. “The Rain Warriors are your protection.”

“They’re the Gym Leader’s protection,” Elesa said. “My position as Gym Leader is an important institutional symbol that must always be protected, but I’m expendable; my city and her people are not. I’ll hear no more on the subject. I want you to brief Nikola; Drayden’s informants don’t watch you as they watch me. She and General Curtis will take control of the city in my absence.”

“As you wish, my lady. But I’m going to Opelucid with you. And don’t even try to forbid it. It’s my right as your personal guard, Nikola will agree with me. And with Yancy gone, I’m doubly responsible for your safety.”

Gozen had been less than thrilled when Elesa told her about the secret mission she’d given to Yancy. They should have gone together, she’d insisted. The world was a dangerous place, and with Opelucid watching their every move, Yancy could have encountered trouble leaving the city. She might not have even made it out. There was no word from her, but there wouldn’t be. If Drayden should learn of Yancy’s clandestine mission to involve Mistralton and possibly the entire upper West Tine in his affairs, it could escalate to all-out war.

“Will Gym Leader Skyla even send help?” Gozen asked. “She’s a Triumvir. They can’t act without the others’ approval.”

Elesa closed her eyes and slowly let her layers of armor melt after so long on her guard. With Gozen, she could relax and trust, but the longer she spent around Drayden and his people, the harder it became to remember that. “I don’t know,” she admitted, feeling the uncertainty she’d been ignoring all this time dig its claws into her back. “I haven’t seen Skyla in years.”

Seventeen years, to be exact. Elesa had fostered in Mistralton as a girl, an attempt by her grandmother and Gym Leader predecessor, Elya, to improve relations with the autonomous upper West Tine. Elya’s deep-seated mistrust of Castelia ran so deeply that she had no problems sending away her eleven-year-old granddaughter to live alone in a strange land with Caelifers, of all people. They would hate her, Elesa had feared. All Caelifers hated Fulmen. It was impossible.

“You are a Fulmen,” Elya had said. “Just as our ancestor, the sorceress Elysanna, once created life out of death, you must now create love out of hatred. Impossible is in your blood.”

And she had. She and Skyla, the daughter of then-Gym Leader Gawain, got off to a rocky start. Elesa was educated in a lady’s custom; Skyla was educated in a workshop. Elesa’s tools were courtesy and charm; Skyla’s tools were wrenches and sparkplugs. They were night and day, and yet
they were born for the same role, heiresses to their Gyms and the great cities they protected. Elesa discovered that there was no need to create love out of hatred; she needed only to take advantage of what already existed. Skyla’s love for machinery, design, and invention was the furthest thing from anything Elesa had ever grown up valuing, but it was love nonetheless. All Elesa had to do was associate herself with Skyla’s passion and reap the benefits of it. Machines and metal were not Elesa’s forte, but the art of invention was at least never boring, and Skyla’s genuine excitement when Elesa and her Electric Pokémon animated her work was contagious. Raw electricity was a cleaner and more efficient source of power than coal, and even a Caelifera like Skyla soon learned to get over her fears and let the magic guide her.

Beyond the Blue River, the Rondez-View Ferris Wheel turned in a lazy arc, its floating lights like so many fallen stars against the inky night sky. It had been a gift for Elesa’s induction as the new Nimbasa Gym Leader when her grandmother passed and quickly became the star attraction of the carnival in the years to follow. Elesa had not seen Skyla in years, but Skyla’s designs and technical genius had made their way here. Every night they lit up the sky, beautiful, and Elesa thought of her unlikely friend. Perhaps Skyla thought of her, too, whenever she achieved a breakthrough on some new project and watched it come to life powered by the refined Thunder Stones Nimbasa exported to Mistralton for Skyla’s particular use.

“I haven’t seen Skyla in a long time,” Elesa said again as she followed the Ferris wheel lights rising and falling. “But she’s my sister. You would want to help your sister if she were in need.”

Gozen averted her gaze, thinking of Yancy.

“Nevertheless, Yancy’s mission may fail, and we may never see her again. That’s why I must operate under the assumption that we’re on our own. I’m not about to leave the fate of this city and her people up to chance. You’re right about the Triumvirs. We all must answer to others. I must answer to Drayden as his wife now. But he must also answer to me as my husband. He won’t have any choice but to accede to my conditions when I agree to travel to Opelucid. I would be an irresponsible Gym Leader in violation of Nimbasan law to leave the city unguarded or in the care of foreigners.”

“What law? There’s nothing that says you have to leave an honor guard or fill defense quotas when you’re gone.”

“There is now,” Elesa said. “I signed it an hour ago.”

Gozen chuckled humorlessly. “You’re a piece of work.”

“Pack for a northern winter, Gozen. I anticipate that our stay in Opelucid will be an extended one. We have a lot of work to do.”

She turned to leave, but Gozen grabbed her wrist to stop her. “Hey, Elesa,” she said. “I know you have to play a part and make difficult decisions, but you’re not expendable. Not to me.”

Elesa looked at Gozen and ground her teeth, caught off guard by the rare display of affection from the normally deadpan Gozen. She nodded. “Thank you.”

The journey by boat north to Opelucid was just under a week, but Elesa was exhausted by the time they finally arrived. Some of Drayden’s party had flown ahead on their Dragons to alert the city of its king’s return, and by the time they set foot in the city, it seemed like the entire city had turned
out to catch a glimpse of Drayden and her. The Nimbasa Gym trainers and a full garrison of General Curtis’s best soldiers had accompanied Elesa as her personal guard and escort alongside a host of Electric-type Pokémon.

Elesa rode Zebstrika bareback, and the magnificent stallion’s hooves kicked up purple sparks with each step he took. She slowed the procession considerably as she dismounted to greet the closest civilians who had turned out for her arrival. She had carefully chosen a sky blue gown with long tapering sleeves for the chilly northern weather, a golden brocade bodice, and hundreds of Thunder Stones as tiny as seeds sewn into the skirt and sleeves that made every step she took dazzle with a light all their own despite the dusking sky. The many Opelucidians pushed and shoved to get a good look at this radiant young queen who shined like the stars above and smiled like sunrise. She laughed and waved and stopped to touch the hands of the smallest of children. A thousand eyes followed her every move, mesmerized by her beauty and kindness, especially when the wagons carrying barrels of amber mead were unloaded and cracked open for anyone to taste. Open-air tents had been erected with long communal tables for the townspeople in anticipation of Elesa’s arrival and the gift she brought. Today was a day to be merry and celebrate, she called to the people, and they happily indulged her right there in the streets. They cheered her and her entourage as Elesa slowly made her way deeper into the city.

The merriment that soon spread across most of the western quarter of the city contrasted sharply with the grey solemnity of the stone buildings that loomed over the people in somber judgment. Opelucid was walled to the south by the vast Lostlorn Forest and to the north by the ominous Darkwood, a sprawling expanse of bushy bear pines, tall sentinel pines, and the abundant black Aspens that gave the wood its name. Beyond the Darkwood many leagues farther north rose the misty Vertress Mountains and the ruins of Vertress City, now abandoned after a terrible lightning storm razed it to the ground. Some said the people of Vertress had angered the mythical weather god, Thundurus, when they offered their city and all its spoils to N, the mysterious former leader of Team Plasma. Elesa held no stock in myths and even less in men with a single letter for a name. No lightning storm, god-sent or otherwise, would have ever razed Nimbasa the way it had Vertress while she was around. It was Vertress City’s own fault for remaining autonomous without the protection of a Gym Leader.

“I thought the Lostlorn Forest was creepy,” Gozen said as she, too, stared at the endless expanse that was the Darkwood.

Elesa said nothing to that and continued on to Dragonsong Castle’s inner courtyard mounted on Zebstrika. The striped stallion was used to crowds and noise, but his wild mane sizzled with purple static and made the Thunder Stones sewn into Elesa’s dress glow like a thousand fireflies. She patted his neck and whispered soft reassurances, though she could not shake the baleful claustrophobia she felt with the Darkwood and the Lostlorn Forest pressing in from all sides.

Inside the castle courtyard, grey stone walls rose high enough to muffle most of the celebration going on in the city in honor of Elesa’s arrival, and another crowd had gathered to meet the procession. These were the court Titans, the noble families, the wealthy and the wily. All the free mead they could drink would not win their love as it could the love of the commoners and proletarians. For these, Elesa would have to wear a different skin more flattering to their imperious sense of invincibility.

Drayden seemed to have a similar thought as he offered Elesa his arm to dismount Zebstrika and led her to the center of the courtyard where he could address all those gathered. “Friends and fellows,” he said in his soft baritone that nonetheless carried in the walled courtyard. “I return to you with good news from the south. Castelia is fallen, Nimbasa is our proven ally, and I have a beautiful new queen: Lady Elesa, Gym Leader of Nimbasa City.”
Everyone clapped, and Elesa curtsied. Her skirt twinkled as she swished it, the tiny Thunder Stones reflecting a light all their own like so many yellow diamonds and drawing a path of sparkling static all around her.

“It is my great honor to serve you all and this great city alongside your good and valiant King Drayden,” Elesa said. “Together, we will unite the Heart Tine for the first time in 3,000 years, and the world will once again know the might and valor of Dragons.”

The cheering was louder and more exuberant this time around.

“I hope you brought more mead for us, Your Grace!” someone shouted with a laugh.

Elesa blushed prettily and graced them with a knowing smile. “Oh no, I trust my lords and ladies would much prefer the taste of Sparking wine.”

She gestured to the men wheeling in a wagon with crates packed with the luxury Nimbasan bubbly wine, made from local Wacan berries that required ozone to grow plump and ripe. Difficult to find outside the tropics of Hoenn where thunderstorms were both frequent and severe, Fulmen in Nimbasa City had cultivated Wacan berries for centuries using their unique electrical abilities and produced a limited supply of the sparkling Sparking wine, fondly named by some Fulmen ancestor with a facetious sense of humor that nonetheless stuck. Elesa had brought enough for everyone here to claim his or her own bottle, and the generous and expensive gesture was not lost on them as many people chatted excitedly. Castle staff transported the crates inside to a lavish dining hall, where tables and food and live orchestral music would delight and entertain while the wine flowed freely. Opelucidians of high and low birth would celebrate the night away in honor of their new queen.

“Nicely done,” Drayden whispered to her as they headed inside the castle. “I almost believed you myself.”

Elesa narrowed her eyes at him, but before she could respond, a round oily man approached Drayden with his fat pink fingers clasped tightly in front of his person. He looked up at Drayden through his pale lashes, tentative, and his lower lip glistened with spit as it trembled.

“Sire, a thousand pardons for interrupting, but I must speak with you about certain matters requiring your, ah, immediate review,” the man said. He bowed his head almost timidly.

“Ryon,” Drayden said. “Very well, lead the way. Elesa, excuse me.”

Ryon bobbed like a Pidove, and balding and all in grey and white, he quite resembled a fat Pidove. Elesa’s skin crawled at his obsequious attention, but the flash of anger at the sight of Drayden’s back and his dismissiveness drowned it out.

What did he mean he almost believed me?

“I’ve lived in Nimbasa my whole life and I’ve never had the famous sparkling wine,” Gozen said. The Rain Warrior sidled up to Elesa now that Drayden was gone. Her blue hair and leather and mail armor drew a number of gazes from the opulently dressed court lords and ladies, though Gozen either didn’t notice or didn’t care as she chewed on some finger food.

“Sparking, not sparkling,” Elesa corrected.

Gozen rolled her eyes. “I hate puns. How much did this even cost you?”

“For what I hope to get in return, pennies.”
“You really think a little alcohol is gonna win these people over?”

“You forget who these people are. You know it isn’t about the wine,” Elesa said.

“No? Then what’s it about?” said an unfamiliar voice.

A striking woman with haunting violet eyes and luscious dark hair twisted into a long braid approached Elesa and Gozen. She wore a gown of cream silk studded with amethysts that only emphasized the hypnotic shade of her eyes, and Elesa was momentarily taken with the sight of her.

“Because between us, a good party will make you a hero in the eyes of most of these tawdry leeches,” the woman said.

She held out a glass flute filled with pale Sparking wine for Elesa to take.

“Thank you,” Elesa said, accepting the glass. “And you are?”

“Still waiting for an answer,” the woman said, smirking. Her gaze lingered, and she held her own flute lazily, like the weight was a bother to her delicate wrist.

“If you have to ask, then you weren’t paying attention.”

The woman laughed lightly. “Oh, please, we both know everyone pays attention whenever you’re in the room. No, I simply want to hear you say it.”

“Say it?”

“Entirely for my own benefit, I assure you. I rather enjoy confirmation bias.”

There was something wicked and fun about her, like she was constantly laughing at everything and everyone around her. She had an easy confidence, innate rather than learned, dangerous in the present company. But she seemed not to care.

Elesa scanned the room, taking note of the men and women dressed to impress in their court finest as they mingled. Tawdry? Hardly. Elesa smiled prettily.

“I’m afraid I can’t give you the answer you’re looking for,” Elesa said.

The woman made a show of pouting. “Well, I can’t say I’m not disappointed, but I do so love a little challenge.” The woman grinned and held out her glass to Elesa. “Rayanna Regnbage.”

Elesa clinked her flute against Rayanna’s, and they sipped the expensive wine. It tasted like thunder and honey on her tongue. Rayanna Regnbage. That explained everything. The Regnbage family was an old and noble pleb family, one of the wealthiest in the Trident thanks to the abundant opal mines they controlled. The Fafnir Titans may rule through their blood, but blood did not pay for their castles and their wars—Regnbage opals did. Rayanna was a member of Drayden’s council and heiress to her family’s vast fortune.

“Rayanna Regnbage,” Elesa said. “What a delightful pleasure. I’ve heard so much about you.”

“Some of the stories are even true.” Rayanna reached up and tucked a tress of Elesa’s hair behind her ear. Her fingers were warm to the touch and feather light. “Though I hope you’ll give me a chance to make a good first impression. I’m particularly good at those.”

Elesa took another sip of bubbly. She offered Rayanna her hand. “Yes, I can see that. Perhaps you wouldn’t mind helping me make the proper introductions? I’m sure I could benefit from your
particular kind of first impression.”

Rayanna accepted her hand and they linked arms like girls swapping secrets and giggles. “I’m sure you could. This way.”

The party was in full force by now, with many people dancing as well as conversing. Ethereal strings and bold brass filled the room with music, and couples twirled and swirled as they swept the marble dancefloor. Stone Dragons watched over the festivities from on high, their snarling fangs bared and their empty eyes all-seeing.

Rayanna introduced her to many names and faces that night. There were the Vogs, a lesser Titan family with ancestral dwellings on the rocky eastern coast with a preference for Water Dragon Pokémon. Lord Fiskyr Vog was a great fat man red in the face from wine and mirth, and his voice carried like laughter. His wife, Lady Kona, was as thin as a reed and severe of both posture and demeanor. Lord Fiskyr kissed Elesa’s hand and welcomed her graciously, but Lady Kona was cold and curt. Once out of earshot, Rayanna confided that they had a daughter, Heilla, whom they had tried to wed to Drayden for years unsuccessfully. Lady Kona would never forgive Elesa for taking the place she believed had been meant for her daughter. Heilla, a plump girl several years Elesa’s senior with curling blonde hair that reached past her butt and laughing eyes she’d inherited from her father, seemed less stricken over her loss as she happily imbibed and chatted up a couple of dashing men from lesser houses.

The Falks were an old and powerful Titan family with a long history of intermarriage with the Fafnir Dynasty. One of their members, the Dragon Rider Thorys Falk, was currently serving on Drayden’s council, Rayanna told Elesa. Elesa remembered meeting him in Nimbasa before the soldiers had marched south to Castelia. Like Thorys, the rest of the Falks were blonde, blue-eyed, and likely to suffer nosebleeds from how high they turned up their noses at all the riffraff around them. Rayanna burst out laughing when she heard that.

“Oh, but I do like you,” she said, squeezing Elesa’s arm playfully. “But keep your eyes on the Falks, Your Grace. It’s no secret that Drayden resents them for a terrible slight against his brother, the late King Cadmus. If they weren’t so important for the Dragon Riders, he would have eliminated their permanent seat on the council years ago.”

“What slight?”

Rayanna’s eyes lit up as they whispered together like gossiping school girls. “It’s from a little before our time, but I’m sure you must know the story. Theryssa Falk was betrothed to Cadmus since her infancy, but she eloped with an Ignifer skuff from Floccesy Town just before the civil wars broke out. A skuff, can you believe it? It was true love, they said. She shamed her entire family, of course, and Queen Iridia called off the betrothal and wed Cadmus to my cousin, Aedith Regnbage, even though Aedith was promised to Drayden originally. It was quite the scandal.”

Elesa had heard the story, now that she thought about it. “That Ignifer skuff, if I remember correctly, wasn’t he one of Champion Alder’s sons?”

“Yes, the younger: Kino. But Alder wasn’t named Champion until after the civil wars. When Theryssa ran off with Kino, he was just some distant Ignifer’s diluted seed. It’s a pity Theryssa didn’t choose Alder’s elder son, Attacus. He was an Ignifer for true, some said with the potential to surpass even his father. But Attacus died fighting in the civil wars, so maybe she made the right choice. Not that it matters now. She and her skuff husband fell to the Red Plague like so many others, and their only son became a vanither who hasn’t been seen here in years. It’s all really quite sad.”
“Yes, I suppose it is,” Elesa said. “How different things might have been.”

“I know, you and your delicious Sparkling wine might not be here to distract me from the rest of these buffoons tonight. A tragedy, truly.”

“Surely the only tragedy would have been missing my opportunity to meet you.”

Rayanna grinned wickedly. "Your Grace, you have a way with certain words. Careful, or I may be ensnared by your charms."

Elesa smiled knowingly. "Careful that you aren't already. And it's just Elesa. I'm beginning to miss the sound of my own name the longer I'm here."

Rayanna laughed. “Elesa it is. But you must call me Ray. All my true friends do.”

“Then, I imagine you, too, must miss the sound of your own name.”

Rayanna closed her fingers around Elesa’s where they held her flute, and she sipped from it. “I do. I’m a good friend to have, and quite loyal if I find you’re worth my while. You’ll see.”

A dangerous friend, Elesa thought, her eyes drawn to the trickle of wine that escaped Rayanna’s painted lips. But an invaluable one, too.

Coin was not Elesa's currency of choice, but no man or woman was ever worse off for a fat purse at their disposal. And besides, there was no reason she couldn’t have a bit of fun here along the way. Elesa wiped the wine at Rayanna’s lip away with her thumb, and the Thunder Stone static that illuminated her every step jumped from her fingers to Rayanna’s skin, startling her. Elesa took her flute back and drank the rest.

“So am I,” Elesa said. “You’ll see.”

Rayanna touched her face where Elesa had shocked her, but instead of fear at encountering a power far beyond anything she could imagine, she grinned and grabbed two fresh flutes from a passing server and held one out to Elesa.

“Cheers, Queen Elesa,” she said. “Long may you reign.”

“Cheers,” Elesa said, clinking her glass against Rayanna’s.

Long may I reign.

Drayden had spared no expense for Elesa’s material comfort during her stay at Dragonsong Castle. He had assembled a small army of handmaidens and servants for her particular use, and they in turn waited on her every need and whim. She had her own bedroom, as was customary of Opelucidian royalty, and her own wing in the South Tower facing the Lostlorn Forest and Nimbasa far beyond, a subtle but thoughtful gesture that pleasantly surprised Elesa. Her Gym trainers and Nimbasan soldiers acted as her personal guard at all times, patrolling her wing of the castle and accompanying her whenever she ventured outside the walls. Gozen was given a guest room near Elesa’s so that she could stay close at all times.

By day, Elesa made a point of being seen in the city by the common folk. She frequented the markets to pick out her own food and interact with the local merchants and vendors; visited an elementary school and an orphanage, where she regaled the children with tales about Nimbasa, the Fulmen who protected it and who would protect them now, too; learned every court lord’s name
and invited every lady to her wing of the castle for luncheon, cards, and conversation. Rayanna became a constant in her daily life, helping her navigate the various Titan and pleb families, their feuds and family ties, and their secrets, too. Gozen had not liked the idea of Rayanna spending so much time around Elesa at first, but Gozen did not like anyone in this city. Elesa would sooner keep it that way. Unlike Rayanna, she detested confirmation bias and wished to be challenged at every turn by those she trusted most.

Elesa became the newest addition to Drayden’s Council. Two of the four official members, Thorys Falk and Mydros, the leader of Opeulucid’s Ridder Knights, were still away in Castelia along with General Caelith, who had led Drayden’s Dragon Riders in his place. Only Rayanna, the council treasurer, and Ryon, the unctuous scribe and master informant were in current attendance. The latest word from Castelia brought no news of Burgh, alive or dead. They were still searching for him in the network of underground tunnels that ran all across Castelia City, previously unbeknownst to the council.

“How difficult can it be to hunt down one terminally ill Volucris?” Drayden said. “Ryon, send word to General Caelith. I want those tunnels ripped open, whatever it takes to find him.”

“Your Grace, is it wise to tear the city apart?” Rayanna said. “Granted, I have little experience in matters of war, but it seems to me that blasting through their city won’t warm the Castelians to our cause.”

“More than likely, the Castelians are hiding Burgh somewhere as he continues to lead the resistance. The Volucris are notoriously insular, and like so many Combee protecting their queen bee, they will continue to fight like drones until they drop. So long as he remains in the wind, Burgh is a symbol of hope they will happily sacrifice their lives to follow. I would smash that hope at the earliest convenience,” Drayden said. “A hive without its queen will warm to boiling. Your concern will be getting me the coin to begin rebuilding after the fact.”

Rayanna nodded. “So now we’re builders. I always did want to see my name dedication on a great monument.”

“Erect whatever monuments you want. Just get me the coin first.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Rayanna said.

“I think we should consider bringing any Hive soldiers into our fold,” Elesa said. “If we can convince them that their prospects and pay are better serving us, they’ll help win over the people.”

“An excellent suggestion, Your Grace,” Ryon said sweetly.

“Only insofar as my Ridder Knights can control them,” Drayden said.

“My Nimbasan soldiers are perfectly capable of holding Castelia,” Elesa said. “From the reports we’ve received, the city is in disarray. The Hive soldiers lost half their rank fighting off Neo Team Plasma, and the desert siege gutted their rear. Surely, those who remain could be persuaded to—”

“Not before Burgh is accounted for,” Drayden interrupted. “He is the key to everyone else falling in line, as I’ve already explained. The Hive soldiers remain under the sword until I can be sure they have no further reason to incite rebellion.”

Elesa hid her frown by taking a sip of wine from her cup. When she looked up, she saw Rayanna’s spooky eyes on her, as if they could see right through her.

“Ryon, see that General Caelith and Syr Mydros receive my orders.” With that, Drayden rose and
left the room, not waiting for Elesa.

She got up to follow, incensed at his blatant dismissal in front of the other others. She ran after him, her silver heels clacking on the stone floor, but he was gone when she made it out of the meeting room.

By night, Drayden would often visit Elesa’s chambers to fulfill his duties as a husband in the weeks that passed. A king needed an heir, and Elesa had contemplated producing one in the beginning, but she soon rid herself of the thought when she began to understand the depth of Drayden’s cold and callous façade.

On their wedding night, after expertly playing the blushing bride and charming many of Drayden’s Titan and Ridder Knight underlings, Elesa was ready to cement this alliance and her ruling position in it in the bed chamber.

Elesa was not for want of practice in pleasing her partners, be they male or female, for one night or one year. She had discovered her beauty at a young age—sultry dark eyes, jet-black hair and ivory skin, a figure made for an artist’s inspiration, and something more, intangible but pervasive, an allure that separated the merely beautiful from the truly radiant. She had never wanted for sexual attention or affection when she sought it out. Others seldom refused her attentions. But Drayden was a different breed of man, or hardly a man at all.

He allowed her to touch him for just the barest moment or two on that first night, but soon lost interest, as though he were calculating the objective costs and benefits of a tryst with the woman he’d just married. Nothing tempted him when he made up his mind, and Elesa spent that first night alone in the enormous draped bed, the rose petals adorning the duvet grown brittle and stale. There was nothing about Drayden that tempted her carnally, and there likely never would be given their nearly twenty-year age gap. Sexual satisfaction had never been a factor in her decision to enter into this political arrangement. But lying alone in the wedding bed made her seethe and rage nonetheless. And a small part of her began to doubt and fear in the darkness.

Until hours later, when he returned and woke her abruptly from slumber with quiet urgency. She was still half asleep when she felt him disrobing her with mechanical efficiency. She woke up fast after that, and he was inside her before she could get a word in edgewise. There were no words, no whispers or sensual promises uttered beneath the sheets, not even his touch. He barely touched her except to take. Elesa wrapped her arms around his neck and drew him in, calling to him with eyes and lips and fingers that few, if any, had ever been able to resist in the throes of passion, but Drayden’s stare was blind to her entreaties. He did not see her at all even as he moved, thrusting as though dutifully counting down the motions, unfeeling. And when it was over, he left her there alone once more.

Even though they had relocated to Opelucid, Drayden’s frigidity did not improve. And yet, he came to her almost nightly and spoke to her on one occasion of producing an heir. There was nothing Elesa wanted less in the world now. She could bend herself to play the role of dutiful wife, beautiful trophy, and ingratiating queen to get what she wanted, but she would not do this thing. No power was worth such a price, and she had been careful to secure and carefully hide from her handmaids the necessary medication to prevent it from ever becoming a possibility. Drayden would never know the difference.

Like a poison, Drayden had slowly exerted his control over her and Nimbasa in ways Elesa had not originally predicted he would. For a man as cold and direct as Drayden, the subtlety of his subterfuge was a thing of beauty she may have appreciated if she were not the target. Sending Yancy away to alert Skyla of the situation had been the best move Elesa could come up with on
such short notice and with minimal justification other than her own shrewd suspicion. Drayden had gotten physical with Elesa at a tour of the Nimbasa barracks, a momentary lapse of control on his part when Yancy mentioned Marshal the Bellator’s departure. Despite Yancy’s baseless ramblings about Drayden somehow working against Nimbasa, the paranoia had nonetheless touched Elesa. Where some might have let fear send them reeling perilously into the throes of rash stupidity to protect themselves, Elesa’s fears were always for Nimbasa and they made her skeptical and hostile, a mother bear sensing the threat to her cubs. If there was even the remotest chance that everything Yancy had worried about and more held any merit, Elesa would not squander a chance to rectify the situation.

But Drayden was just a man. He may have been the latest in a long line of royalty descended from Dragons, if the myths about Titans could be believed, but he was flesh and bone, the same as her. And Elesa was not some court whore or common simpleton. She was a Gym Leader, a powerful Fulmen, and now she was Queen. All she needed was something she could use to break his manipulation, turn it against him and protect her interests and Nimbasa’s from the inside. When Caelith returned from the Sack of Castelia, Elesa saw her chance.

Elesa and Drayden received her, Syr Mydros, and a score of Dragon Riders and Ridder Knights in the throne room to congratulate them on their efforts. Drayden even smiled when Syr Mydros marched a battered Burgh to the twin thrones and forced him to kneel. He was in terrible shape, dirty and covered in mottled bruises, and blood caked his clothes and hair. His eyes were sunken and his face was gaunt and etiolated; he looked as though he’d died ten years ago. When his eyes met Elesa’s, there was nothing in them but a cold and quiet strength despite his physical deterioration. This was a man who would not be beaten with sword and fist.

*Then let his illness take him*, Elesa thought bitterly.

“Gym Leader Burgh of Castelia City, Your Graces,” Syr Mydros said. “Shall I escort him to the dungeons?”

“Of course not,” Drayden said. “A highborn hostage requires a high tower cell. See that he gets a bath, a hot meal, and fresh clothing. I won’t have an honored Gym Leader suffering under my watch.”

*I have a high tower cell, too, Elesa thought. But it’s me sitting next to Drayden, not Burgh.*

As though he’d heard her thoughts, Burgh stared directly at her. “Gym Leader Elesa,” he said, his voice thin and raspy but undeterred. “I’ve heard stories of your beauty. And your ambition. I guess congratulations are in order.”

Elesa got an unpleasant chill the longer his sunken eyes bored into hers. Emolga had been seated in her lap, and he awoke now and began to spark, sensing Elesa’s mounting anger. Drawing upon Emolga’s static, Elesa lifted a hand and admired the sparks dancing in her palm.

“No congratulations necessary,” Elesa said. “Groveling, however, may suit you, Volucris.”

“Why should I grovel to you? We’re both on our knees at his pleasure,” Burgh spat.

Syr Mydros hit him roughly on the back of the head for the insult, and Burgh collapsed on all fours and coughed violently. Blood splattered on the pristine polished stone, and Elesa watched in horror and fury.

“Take him away,” Drayden said in that soft venomous way he had.
But Elesa had clenched her sparking fist so hard that her nails drew blood from her palm. Emolga squeaked angrily at the smell of her blood, his hackles raised.

Damn him, Elesa thought. Damn him to hell.

Her grandmother, Elya, had hated Castelia and Burgh’s uncle and predecessor, Gym Leader Artie, with a rare passion. Elya had implored Elesa to maintain caution when dealing with Castelia and their arm’s length trade agreement, for Castelia had been known to encroach upon Nimbasa’s territory and to mine Thunder Stones from the Relic Desert that rightfully belonged to Nimbasa. They could not be trusted, no, and if not for their wealth, she would have eliminated all trade with them the moment she’d taken office as Gym Leader. It seemed Elya had been right in her distrust of Castelia, and no doubt Nimbasa was safer now without the threat of the super metropolis and all its resources looming over it.

Syr Mydros took Burgh away, and it was Caelith’s turn to address Drayden and Elesa. Unlike Burgh, she spared Elesa not even the barest glance as she focused entirely on Drayden and delivered her report. Castelia had surrendered, Neo Team Plasma was assisting with the transition of power by providing feet on the ground, and everything had gone according to plan. Except for one small problem.

“What do you mean, there’s a problem?” Drayden demanded.

“We had an encounter,” Caelith explained. “Thorys and Syr Mydros and myself, a few of the other Dragon Riders. Hostiles landed in Castelia after the fighting abated, and we engaged them.”

“What hostiles?”

Caelith hesitated, and given Drayden’s reaction, Elesa guessed that this was not a normal reaction from her.

What’s going on?

“What do you mean, speak plainly,” Drayden said softly, and it gave Elesa chills.

“They were Syreni from Humilau City, Your Grace,” she began. “I recognized one among their ranks, a vanither who once lived and trained here. Theryssa Falk’s son, Benga.”

“I care not for some vanither whelp,” Drayden said, barely acknowledging the name of his brother’s former betrothed. “There’s obviously something else. Tell me.”

Caelith flinched, and Elesa was at the edge of her seat. Emolga was also perched on his hind legs, curious as he sniffed the air and read the tension in it.

“I,” Caelith began. “Sire, I believe...”

“What, tell me,” Drayden said sharply.

“King Cadmus’s bastard daughter was with them,” she blurted out. “She was leading them.”

Elesa and most of the others gathered to hear this testimony had fallen totally silent. Rayanna was among the onlookers, and even she could not hide her shock at the revelation. Elesa had heard about the bastard King Cadmus had sired from an Adriati woman, one of Queen Aedith’s ladies in waiting. As Cadmus’s only issue, the bastard half breed was the only living soul able to contest Drayden’s claim to the throne, but her illegitimate birth made her claim tenuous at best. Even so, it was common knowledge that she had perished in the Red Plague like so many others.
“Iris,” Drayden said at length. “Are you certain?”

He’s not denying it, Elesa thought, thunderstruck. Has Cadmus’s bastard daughter been alive this entire time? And he said nothing of it?

How could he let her live if he knew? When she was a direct threat to his claim? Bastard or not, the blood of the Dragon was revered above all else, this much Elesa knew from even her short few weeks in Opelucid. It was unfathomable that Drayden had let her live.

Unless she was being protected by someone powerful all this time. But who? And why?

Caelith looked just as surprised by Drayden’s acceptance of Iris’s existence as Elesa felt. “Yes, Sire. She confirmed it, and so did Syr Mydros. He remembered the girl from when she lived here.”

“And where is her body?” Drayden asked. “I’d like to see it. I want to confirm for myself that she’s dead this time.”

“I... Sire, she’s, that is,” Caelith faltered.

“What, Caelith?” Drayden said. He was on the edge of his seat and gripping the armrests of his throne with white knuckles.

“She’s not dead,” Caelith said. To her credit, she spoke with a strong voice and held her head high, no easy task in Drayden’s presence. “We... I fought her, but she escaped. She, ah, her Dragonair evolved into Dragonite in the middle of the fight. There was little we could do against a King Dragon with no notice.”

A Dragonite, Elesa thought, awed. She had seen Drayden’s Salamence up close a number of times by now, and its immense size was the stuff of myths and legends. A Dragonite would be just as grand, its scales shimmering like sunlight and gold. It would occupy the entire throne room easily. A bastard girl of mixed blood commands a Dragonite against Drayden. Incredible.

Drayden did not find this very incredible. “You let her go?” he said, rising from his throne. “My strongest general and the commander of my Ridder Knights simply...let her go?”

To Caelith’s credit, she stood her ground and let Drayden stalk toward her like a hunter.

“It’s my fault, Your Grace,” Caelith said. “Once she made herself known, I should have—”

Drayden's hand came down hard on Caelith’s cheek, and she lost her balance and fell to the floor with a yelp of pain.

She did not get up. She stared at the stone ground and dared not look up at Drayden. Blood dripped from the gash in her cheek where he’d opened one of the thick pulsating veins in her face with the heel of his palm.

“Everyone out,” Drayden said, eerily quiet. "Now."

Everyone shuffled out, and remained on the floor clutching her bloody cheek. “Sire, I swear to you that Iris will never set foot in Opelucid.”

Drayden looked down on her as if she were nothing but a pebble under his boot. “She won’t. Because if she does, I’ll feed you to Salamence along with her.”

Caelith's sunken eyes were wide and glassy. Her fingers were sticky with blood. She looked as frail
as a child at Drayden's feet. “Yes, Your Grace.”

Drayden considered her a moment. "You're dismissed."

Caelith scrambled to her feet to obey. She dripped blood behind her as she swiftly left the throne room. Elesa discreetly rose from her throne to slip away before Drayden’s black mood could have a chance to turn on her next.

“Fucking hell,” Gozen swore now that they were alone.

Elesa put up her hand. “Not here, Gozen. The walls have ears.”

Gozen held her tongue, but her eyes were a storm of fury and indignation. Elesa, however, was calmer than she’d ever felt in these walls. For the first time, she had a solid prospect for how to solve her problems on Drayden’s terms, and her mind was racing with possibility.

“Have the handmaids prepare my solar for tea,” she said. “I’ll be entertaining a guest this afternoon.”

Caelith's cheek was a bruised and bloody ruin. The bleeding had stopped, but she left the wound exposed to heal naturally. Elesa politely did not stare at the hole in her face, instead focusing on filling two porcelain cups with fragrant tea.

“What do you want?” Caelith asked bluntly.

“You haven’t touched your tea,” Elesa said. “Try adding a drop or two of honey. I prefer my tea with something sweet. I find most things in life go down more smoothly when you add a little something sweet to them.”

“I don't like tea. What do you want? Your Grace,” she added as an afterthought.

Elesa smiled and set down her porcelain teacup. She wore comfortable clothes, heeled boots and a yellow and black linen and velvet dress that hugged her curves. A Thunder Stone ring the size of a Grepa berry adorned her right index finger and caught the light of the afternoon sun.

“I want to ask you the same question,” Elesa said. “What do you want, General Caelith?”

Caelith was confused by this. “I want you to tell me why I’m here.”

“You already know why you’re here. You accepted my invitation, after all.”

Caelith said nothing to that.

“May I ask you a personal question, General?” Elesa said.

“You may ask, and I may choose not to answer.”

“Why do you follow Drayden?”

Caelith frowned. “For the same reason you follow him: he's my king and keeper.”

Elesa carefully sipped her tea, letting Caelith's statement hang. The woman across from her shifted in her seat, uncomfortable. Elesa smiled. "Is that why I'm here?"
As expected, Caelith's confusion deepened. “What are you saying? You... You're not here by choice?”

"Not at all. It was my choice to come here, as it was to wed the king. I chose to survive," Elesa said.

Gozen looked at Elesa like she had lost her mind. What was she doing speaking in this way to Drayden's right hand?

“No,” Caelith said softly, as if afraid she might be overheard. “He would have taken Nimbasa by force if he had to.”

“He could have, but it would have cost him Castelia. We both know this, so there’s no need to rehash the past. What I’m concerned with is the future. Does the future concern you, General?”

“No. The future is already set in stone. Drayden’s vision will come to fruition. It's inevitable, just as your being here was inevitable.”

“Was Iris showing up in Castelia inevitable, too?” Elesa challenged.

Caelith blinked but did not flinch. The girl was carved from stone, truly. “No. I made a mistake, I’m not above admitting that. But next time, I’ll be prepared. She’s nothing but a nuisance.”

“A nuisance with a Dragonite.”

Caelith set her jaw. The engorged veins around her lips throbbed. “Even so, I’ll handle her. She will not live to see Opelucid again, I promise you that.”

Elesa had the urge to laugh, but that would have been rude. She was many things, but rude was not one of them. Caelith looked as though she might break a tooth if she set her jaw any more tightly. Elesa set down her tea and looked at her pointedly. “Why do you love Drayden?”

Caelith leaned back in her chair, jaw relaxing as if something within had uncoiled without her realizing it. The sudden personal question took her by surprise, just as Elesa expected it would. Elesa studied that veiny face carefully, searching for any signs of truth.

Caelith swallowed and folded her hands in her lap for something to hold on to. She had not spoken a word, but for a few fleeting seconds, her truth was as plain as the day was bright. Caelith loved Drayden fiercely, and it crushed her.

"Did he take you in after the Red Plague, or did you go to him? I imagine a survivor of the disease that claimed so many, including Drayden's own family, would have been an irresistible prospect for a man like him."

"A man like him?" Caelith hissed.

Elesa was unmoved by her offense. "You're loyal, no one can question that, but you're not a simpleton. Drayden has an eye for power. He's like me: a survivor." Elesa considered again. "Loyalty like yours runs deeper than a mere bond of fealty. You love him. I want to know why."

Caelith hardened her gaze. The hole in her cheek glistened as fresh blood bloomed through the cracks in her skin. “He saved me,” she said softly. "I was alone.”

_of course_, Elesa thought. _He took her in when no one else would. A blight would find no kindness from anyone, and so for him to extend a hand when no one else would... Of course._
Caelith, of an age with Elesa herself, would have been a child when the Red Plague ran its savage course through Opelucid. And Drayden, a father newly without children of his own, would have been ripe for the taking. Elesa could not imagine Drayden as a father worth loving, but she had been wrong before. For all his gifts and power, Drayden was just a man like all the rest, imperfect and capable of humanity. Perhaps he had shown Caelith what little remained to him. To a ravaged child without a soul in all the world, it would have inspired the fiercest kind of love there was.

Elesa understood now. This pitiful creature sitting before her had never stood a chance. Was that what Drayden saw in her, too? Elesa's tea had grown sour on her tongue, and she set it down, unable to stomach another sip. But she said nothing of her true thoughts, her gaze briefly alighting on the hole in Caelith's face. She had suffered enough cruelty for one day.

“He trained you,” Elesa guessed. “I understand that you're a very gifted Titan.”

“The Old Blood is strong in me,” Caelith said proudly. “It’s why I survived. His Grace recognized my power immediately.”

Elesa's sad pity morphed into a sudden and malignant anger. She folded her hands demurely on her lap to keep them from shaking. You bastard, she thought. You kidnapped this woman from herself. Caelith's faith in herself—as a Titan, as a soldier, as a human being—was tied inexorably to Drayden's faith in her. He was her strength, her compass, her king, her god. She belonged to him entirely.

You bastard.

Elesa swallowed her fury as easily as she swallowed her tea. “It must have been very difficult for you to survive alone for so long until Drayden found you.”

“That’s in the past,” Caelith said, oblivious. "Kind Drayden is the future. He’ll unite all of Unova. It’s been his dream since he became king, to make a better world for the children.”

“The children,” Elesa repeated.

“Of course. There’s no higher purpose but to provide for the next generation.”

Drayden is not your father, you poor soul, she wanted to say. "The next generation. That would include Iris, too. She's his niece, after all."

Caelith's dark eyes flashed at the sound of that name. "Iris is a bastard and a usurper. If she chooses to remain in Unova, it will be to her own demise."

"Do you think so?"

Caelith looked at her suspiciously. "You disagree?"

Elesa smiled politely. "No, I don't doubt that if Iris were to come here now, she would not leave with her life intact. But she isn't coming here now. No one seems to know where she is, or with whom she may be speaking."

Caelith took the hint and did not like it one bit. "She'll try to build an army, I have no doubt about it, but she has nothing to offer: no support, no crown, no claim. No one would follow her."

"Humilau follows her. And as for her claim, well, she is the daughter of King Cadmus. I'm only a queen by marriage, so you must forgive my ignorance on these matters, but bastard-born or no, a king's daughter comes before a king's brother, does she not?"
Caelith bared her teeth, disturbing the wound in her cheek where Drayden had struck her. Blood dribbled down her chin to stain the peach marble floor. "She does not. And since you are ignorant in these matters, Your Grace, allow me to enlighten you: death is the just reward for treason in Opelucid."

Elesa laughed prettily. "That sounds quite serious! Forgive me, General, I didn't mean to cause you distress. I was merely extrapolating."

Caelith didn't look convinced, but she also did not look comfortable arguing with Elesa. She was not built for this game, and she knew it. "Well, I'll leave you to extrapolate all you like. I have work to do. Please excuse me."

She got up, and Gozen walked around Elesa's chair to show Caelith out. Elesa remained seated.

"Thank you for joining me this afternoon," Elesa said.

"Thank you for the invitation," Caelith said with forced politeness.

Gozen escorted Caelith to the door, but Elesa called to her before she could leave.

"You should see someone about that wound. Allow it to lie and fester unchecked, and it will end up killing you."

Caelith glared back at her. "That will never happen."

Elesa smiled knowingly, and Gozen closed the door behind Caelith before she could say anything else.

*I suppose we'll see, won't we?*

"Great, she bled all over the floor," Gozen said. "What was even the point of all that?"

"That remains to be seen," Elesa said. "But I'm not without hope for our taciturn general."

Gozen looked at her strangely, the way she did when she did not really understand Elesa's reasons. Gozen didn't need to understand, not yet anyway. More importantly, Elesa needed to determine her next move. Rayanna, Caelith, and now Gym Leader Burgh here as Drayden's glorified hostage... The pieces were piling up in need of a learned hand to move them.

"Gozen, send for wine. I want to be alone to think."

Gozen shot her a look, peeved that Elesa wasn't more forthcoming. "Sure."

She left to fetch the wine, and Elesa let Manectric out of his Pokéball to sit with her. She ran her fingers through his staticky yellow main, relishing the ticklish sparks jumping on her skin. He licked her hand affectionately. Such a simple creature, so easy to win over, his love unconditional. Would that humans were more like Pokémon, at least when they needed to behave.

It was not Gozen who returned with Elesa's wine, but one of the handmaids Drayden had assigned to her.

"Thank you, Sheera," Elesa said.

"Yes, Your Grace. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"No, I'd like to be left alone."
Sheera bowed. She was a short woman dressed in grey, like all the servants in the castle. Her brown hair was tied back in a tight bun, and her green eyes were bright but watery. “Yes, Your Grace.”

Elesa drank her wine in peace, a rich but sour red, and headed outside into the garden with Manectric. It was a beautiful afternoon, and she had an excellent view of the sunset over the Lostlorn Forest from her south-facing balcony. Zebstrika, who had been grazing, moved to stand next to her, and Elesa leaned against the strong stallion, relishing in his presence as she sipped her drink and thought again of the conversation with Caelith.

She heard me, I know she did. So, what will she do?

There was something there, something she could work with given time. Time was what she had now as long as she was here. But for how long? Iris was coming with an army at her back, and Caelith was deluding herself if she thought otherwise. Elesa did not know how, but she knew Iris would come prepared. A woman in pursuit of a crown had to be, she knew from first-hand experience. What did it mean for her and her position as Drayden's queen? So many moving pieces, and Elesa was not quite sure how to handle this one just yet.

Elesa took another sip of wine, and her stomach rumbled uncomfortably. Like an earthquake, the tremor spread lightning fast to her extremities and warmed the back of her throat uncomfortably. Her mouth watered, and she covered it on instinct. Dropping the goblet of wine, which shattered on the stone balcony, Elesa ran back inside to the bathroom. She barely made it in time to the toilet and wretched up the little wine she'd drunk, as well as what remained of her lunch. Her eyes watered and snot ran from her nose. Heaving, she pushed her long hair out of her face to keep it from getting soiled. Her handmaids heard the commotion and rushed to help.

“Your Grace!” Sheera said, alarmed. “Are you unwell?”

Sheera and another girl held back her hair as she wretched again, and someone soothed her back. “Go and fetch the king, Alanna, quickly!” Sheera ordered.

Alanna, mousy and corpse-pale, scampered off to do just that.

“No,” Elesa tried to say, but she wretched again and swallowed her words.

The spasm passed eventually, and the women helped her clean up. Elesa felt nauseous and tired, and she was shaking. Someone had finally alerted Gozen, and she was there to help.

“Get away, I’ve got her!” Gozen shouted at the fawning handmaids. “Hey, are you okay?”

“Something I ate,” Elesa said groggily as she clutched Gozen’s arm. “I’ll be fine after I rest.”

“No, Your Grace, this must be morning sickness,” Sheera said, beaming. "Oh, how silly of me, I should have realized! You haven't bled for more than a moon's turn, after all."

Elesa stared at her, but it was Gozen who responded first. “What the hell did you just say?”

A moon's turn... Has it been that long? I've been so busy... But try as she might, Elesa could not remember the last time she'd bled.

Sheera faltered, but soon enough Drayden had arrived with Alanna and took Elesa in his arms.

“I just heard the news,” Drayden said in his poisonous whispering monotone. “Elesa, you're with
Elesa stared up at him as though in a dream and clutched his arms.

“Isn’t it wonderful?” Sheera gushed. “A little one for us to dote on!”

Gozen was in shock, and Elesa remembered herself and tried to push Drayden off. He held firm, even when her Thunder Stone ring lent her the electrical energy to shock him.

“It’s wonderful,” he agreed, staring down at Elesa over his nose. “My heir will solidify the alliance between Opelucid and Nimbasa forever.”

“No, I’m not pregnant,” Elesa insisted. “It’s not possible.”

“Oh, but of course you are!” Sheera said. “Come, Your Grace, I’ll prepare you a special tea for the morning sickness. It’ll make you feel as good as new, come!”

Sheera managed to get Elesa out of the bathroom, but Elesa soon broke free and made a dash for her dresser. She tore open the drawers and rifled through the undergarments and slid open a hidden panel at the back, where she’d hidden a box of special pills she’d been diligently taking every day to prevent this disastrous outcome. When she found them, she scrutinized one of the pills and licked it, tasting it.

Sugar, she realized, horrified. Sugar pills.

Someone had found her medication and swapped it out for sugar pills. Which meant...

“Oh, I do hope it’s a girl!” Sheera said excitedly. “I would love to dote on a little princess. She would light up these dreary halls with her smile, and she would be as beautiful as her mother, I don’t doubt it!”

“Son or daughter, I have no preference,” Drayden said.

Elesa dropped the box of sugar pills back in the drawer and stared into nothing. Her whole body shook as her mind began to accept what her body was telling her. How could she have been so careless? How could she have not noticed that her pills had been switched? How could she have been so focused on him that she did not once stop to consider her own situation?

He did this.

The truth rang in her ears louder than whatever Drayden was saying behind her now. She felt him looming tall behind her, his shadow long and dark and taking up all the space in the room. How could she have been so careless? How could she have not noticed that her pills had been switched? How could she have been so focused on him that she did not once stop to consider her own situation?

He did this to me.

He had planned it, she knew it in her bones. He had planned it, and he’d trapped her. A subtle beast, patiently waiting for the opportune moment to strike and sink his claws in. This wasn’t her child, it was his. She was just the shell carrying it. And through this child, Nimbasa would be his, too. He had a legal claim now.

“All child is a blessing,” Drayden said, touching Elesa’s shoulder. “Isn’t that right, my love?”

Elesa looked up at him, her horror unguarded, and she saw him for what he truly was then. He slid
his hand around the back of her neck, his fingers scaly and cold as the nails raked over her skin. When he smiled, his teeth poked over his lip, long and sharp like a creature's. A man... He wasn't a man at all. And for the first time in all her life, Elesa felt completely and utterly helpless.

And afraid.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was very difficult to finish. I find these subterfuge stories both very challenging but very fun to write, and Elesa’s a great lens through which to do it. She’s far from being a villain, but she’s also not out to save the world and help those in need. Those morally grey characters are the most interesting in my opinion. Also, I thought it was time for a break from our so-called heroes for a bit. We won’t be returning to them for a little while yet while we explore what’s been going on in the rest of Unova since the Sack of Castelia.
Colress hated this heat. His clothes clung to him, endlessly moist with perspiration despite the arid climate. Indoors was not much better. And there was sand everywhere: in his hair, in his ears, under his shirt. The locals had the right idea covering up with scarves, but a scarf would suffocate him in this damnable heat; he’d already tried it. As a child, he’d never much noticed the heat here. Maybe he was really getting old. If he never returned to Castelia City again, it would be too soon.

The city was finally becalmed in the wake of the bloody pandemonium that was the Sack of Castelia. After the initial carnage that ensued when Neo Team Plasma clashed with Castelia and later the Virbank Navy, the Dragon Riders swept in and eradicated what resistance remained while Nimbasan soldiers dealt with the desert-dwelling Sand Sleepers. Drayden had followed through on his plans for invasion, and the campaign was a complete success as a result, just as Ghetsis had predicted it would be. A man like Drayden knew only control, how to get it and how best to apply it; he would not pass up a chance to smash Castelia when he had such a willing co-conspirator in Neo Team Plasma.

But now the time for fighting was done. After many days spent combing the city and its vast network of subterranean tunnels, Gym Leader Burgh had been located and extracted from the hole he’d hidden himself in. He was Drayden and Elesa’s problem now that he’d been shipped off to Opelucid as a gesture of good faith by Neo Team Plasma. They had come here with a different target in mind.

“Time, time, time,” sang the prisoner in his cell to no one at all.

“Time is all we have,” Colress said coldly. “Ramble all you like, old man; you can’t talk your way out of this. Not anymore.”

Cedric Juniper’s cell was little more than a concrete box with bars, one of many in the Castelia Sewers, where the city’s lowlifes and criminals were kept under lock and key. No sunlight penetrated these walls, nor fresh air. There was a faint but persistent odor of shit and blood, though whether that was a new development courtesy of the fighting or just another delightful feature of this sewer prison, Colress could not say.

Colress looked down at the old man through his sleek rimless glasses and raised an embroidered handkerchief to his nose for the smell. Bedraggled and dusty with a black eye and an infected cut on his forehead, Cedric was a far cry from the man he had been so many years ago. But then, much had changed. Years ago, he would have been on this side of the cell standing next to Colress.

“Old man, yes, I’ve gone and done it, I suppose,” Cedric said. “The damned thing snuck up on me. But we of the Order of the Geriatric have nothing but time. Time to mourn, time to reflect, time to regret. You, on the other hand, are lingering in a sewer. By choice. Have you lost your senses?”

He smiled up at Colress.

*Senile old loon. You can't fool me.*

“You can drop the act. I know your wits are as sharp as ever. Burgh would be long dead if they weren’t.”
At the mention of Burgh, Cedric’s smile fell and he pulled his legs together akimbo on the floor. “Quite something, the Volucris. Did you know they have a kind of super cell that makes them resistant to all kinds of—”

“I don’t care about any of that, and you know it,” Colress interrupted. “I’m just here to give you your old job back. The lab in Lacunosa isn’t exactly as you left it, but I’m sure you’ll manage.”

Cedric looked at him like he had only just noticed Colress was standing there. The old man had an uncanny ability to play the halfwit when it suited him, but Colress knew all his tricks and tells. He had not tolerated the man’s eccentric pedagogy as his most dedicated disciple for a decade for nothing.

“I shut down that project,” Cedric said, his voice hoarse. “I left, and it shut down.”

“And I revived it,” Colress said, his tone clipped. He wiped the sweat from his brow with an embroidered handkerchief. “I’m nearly there, but I find myself in need of an informed second opinion.”

Cedric wasn’t listening. “I ordered the site blasted and buried. I saw the demolition with my own eyes. You cannot—”

“—and yet, I have,” Colress interrupted. “It’s done, or near as much. Obviously, I want to be beyond absolutely certain things will work out as I envision them, but considering the, ah, lack of comparable test subjects, I have only theories. What I need are results. You can get me results.”

“You fool,” Cedric said. “You cannot be serious. Even if by some miracle you succeeded, it cannot be controlled.”

“Is that right?” Colress produced a clunky handheld device from his pocket and punched in a few commands. “Because this is the model I sent to Driftveil after your companions, and Agent Barret reported some remarkable results. William?”

Colress waved to the Neo guard watching Cedric, and the man opened the adjacent cell. A Scyther was chained up in the cell, his green carapace punctured and blackened with burns from the fighting. He was wild and spitting mad, even this long after capture. The Volucris had trained their Bug brigades well. Colress pointed the handheld at Scyther and waited.

Cedric looked away in shame and disgust when Scyther, as though compelled by an unseen higher power, suddenly ceased his struggling and drove his bladed appendages into his belly, impaling himself. The green mantis convulsed in a death throe, and soon he slumped in his chains, dead. Colress watched the grisly scene unfold impassively; he’d seen this result a hundred times before.

“I’m told the EM technology is potent enough now to override the power of Mega Evolution,” Colress said lightly. “The strongest bond between a Tamer and a Pokémon...is now mine.”

“Then you have what you want,” Cedric said, forcing a smile. “How wonderful. You always were bright, and I knew you would go far.”

Colress almost laughed. “Save your empty praise, old man. I know you don’t mean it.”

“But of course I mean it,” Cedric said. “I always knew you would go far. But it seems you haven’t gone quite so far as you would like if you waged war on Castelia just to find me. Aurea was right about you, Colress. You’ll only ever go as far as the path someone better makes for you.”

Colress felt an elemental rage color his neck just for a moment, but it was long enough. Cedric saw
his weakness, as he always had, and he lay back against the wall of his cell like some self-satisfied cat. So many years as the man’s most devoted acolyte, and this was his reward? This washed up eccentric pitied him? He would carve a path. He would carve it right here and now.

Colress emptied one of his two Pokéballs, and an ungainly Beheeyem coalesced beside him. The Psychic was short and stunted, dwarf-like, and his bulbous bronze head was nearly as large as the rest of his body. His stumpy arms bore colorful protrusions, conduits for his telekinesis. He hovered next to Colress, barely half his trainer’s height, in total silence.

“I make my own path,” Colress said.

Beheeyem raised his arms and pulsed with telekinetic energy. The invisible wave hit Cedric, and his eyes rolled back in his head. He twitched, and under his eyelids his eyes moved, jittery. He would be seeing a phantasmagoria of memories, real and invented, each more horrific than the last. Beheeyem was not the kind of infamous Psychic like Alakazam or Gardevoir, but he was a master of memories. He fed on them, on the energy people poured into cherishing or burying them. Through memory, Beheeyem could bring anyone to their knees, even Cedric Juniper. It was Beheeyem’s Psychic abilities that had first given Colress the idea for a side project that eventually blew up into an international bioweapons program: Chimera.

“We’ll talk again when you wake up,” Colress said to the convulsing Cedric crumpled on the floor of his cell. “Let’s go, Beheeyem.”

Colress left the cellar and headed upstairs to the Gym offices and living quarters above ground. Neo Team Plasma had commandeered the space for its personal use, and Colress had a private room near the tech lab previously occupied by the Gym’s Ant division. The equipment here was the top of the line out of Virbank and Saffron City’s prestigious Silph, Co., but Colress had seen it all before. Castelia was a modern city, but it was no Lumiose with its X-Transceiver grid and electric trams and burgeoning Holocaster technology.

Colress’s Holocaster, as it happened, had a missed call when he retrieved it from the desk in his private room. The technology was still in beta testing, but Lysandre Labs, the conglomerate behind the futuristic new technology, had issued a limited release to certain VIP patrons. Colress’s family had offered seed funding to Lysandre Labs in its fledgling years, an investment that had paid off in spades in the decades since then and fostered a close professional relationship with his family’s foundation. Lysandre had made a gift of the unreleased Holocaster technology to Colress’s older sister in honor of their continued prosperous relationship. She was the head of the family foundation ever since their father had passed many years ago. It was from his sister that Colress saw the missed call, the only number he had on the device. He hesitated before redialing.

She wants something.

She always did, that sweet sister of his. As the elder, she may have inherited their father’s vast fortune and business, but none of his scientific acumen. It was all the old man had left to Colress, as the inside family gag went. Colress had never found it funny. Then again, neither had she. Perhaps it was for the best. Their father’s passing had given them the motive and opportunity to finally work together, though not as the old man may have envisioned.

If he didn’t return her call, she would just call again, and she would make him regret avoiding her. She had always had a knack for knocking her little brother down in ways most others could not. Family, he supposed. Colress went to the bathroom to splash some cold water on his face. Beheeyem hovered by the window next to the bed, staring into space at things perhaps better left unseen. When he caught his reflection in the mirror, Colress frowned deeply. It was his father’s face staring back at him, cold and unfeeling and never, ever satisfied. He showed the mirror his
back, went to the desk, and dialed his sister’s number.

After a few rings, the handheld transceiver buzzed with connection, and a hologram of a woman’s bust flickered into existence like an old movie projector. The picture was a little scratchy, but the tech was still in development. For a beta version, Colress was impressed at how far along it already was. Save for the intermittent flickers of static, he could have almost believed he was sitting across the table from her.

“Finally. What took you so long? You know I hate waiting,” she said.

Colress sat back in his chair and adjusted his glasses. “Lusamine,” he said. “It’s good to see you, too, sweet sister.”

Lusamine was ice-queen beautiful with her mossy green eyes, as deep and murky as raw-cut emeralds, platinum blonde hair, and a face and figure carved from marble. She was pale as winter light and just as chilly. She often had to be in her role as President of the Aether Foundation that had made millions when the founder, their twice great grandfather, had made a fortuitous investment. Originally hailing from Hoenn’s Rustboro City, he used his modest retirement funds to back a close childhood friend with big dreams: Devon Stone. Stone had her own dreams of starting a mining company that could access the rich gemstone deposits north of Rustboro City. It was not that the drill technology did not exist to exploit the mines, but rather the problem of feral Pokémon that made their homes in the area and warded off any human encroachment: from ornery Aggron to immense Onix and Steelix. In those days, humans were the extreme minority species, and large settlements were nearly non-existent in Hoenn.

But Stone was a Steel Adamantine, a secret then well-kept but that emerged after her phenomenal success. Stone used her gift and her team of frightening Steel-type Pokémon to fight off the feral Pokémon and open up the land for human development. She struck gold, or rather rubies and sapphires and emeralds, earning her and her investors, of which there was only one in those early days, a fortune on the returns. The eponymous Devon Corporation was born, Rustboro City blossomed as a permanent urban settlement, and Colress’s twice great grandfather turned his angel investing side business into what would become the multinational Aether Foundation, an umbrella venture capital firm that would go on to invest in more successful businesses in the years to come.

Years later, Colress’s grandmother moved the foundation to Unova and settled in Virbank City to be near her then-newlywed husband’s family. It wasn’t until Colress’s father assumed the presidency of the Foundation that the tiny Alolan branch office was converted to the main headquarters. At the time, Alola was desperate for foreign investment to bolster infrastructure especially on Akala and Melemele Islands, which had traditionally lagged far behind the more cosmopolitan Ula'ula Island. In exchange for a generous tax haven provision, Aether moved to a private facility known as Aether Paradise off the coast of Akala Island and provided the bulk of financing required to revamp Akala Island’s floundering tourism industry. Luxury hotels were erected, streets and dilapidated buildings in Konikoni and Heahea Cities were cleaned up and fixed up, and hundreds of new jobs demanded filling. In less than a generation, Akala Island transformed into the jewel of the Alolan tourism industry, attracting visitors from Kanto to Kalos to sample their Michelin star restaurants, pristine white beaches, and rich island culture.

Aether was a beloved household name in Alola, and Lusamine had inherited all the prestige and wealth that came with it when their father passed, leaving everything to her to run after him. And she ran it damn well. So well, in fact, that she had no need of her younger brother around. Colress had not even bothered to make the move to Alola back when they were both still young teenagers, his father’s decision. He was not the heir and had no head for business, so he had no business poking his nose into the Foundation’s affairs. Instead, Colress had remained in Unova with their
dementia-diagnosed grandmother until her death, and then he made his own way through two Ph.D. programs and into the waiting lap of the then-fledgling Team Plasma. Colress and Lusamine shared their looks and blood (they had often been mistaken for twins as children being only a couple years apart), but their paths branched from there, never to meet again. Until now.

“Pleasantries?” Lusamine said in that cutting low timber that to this day made Colress feel like a little boy at her mercy. “I hope you’re not serious.”

“You know me, always facetious,” Colress said flatly.

She did not smile or otherwise acknowledge the light teasing. He didn’t expect her to. Years ago, she may have smiled for him, but not anymore. She had no smiles left in her.

“To what do I owe the pleasure of your call?” Colress went on.

“You know what,” Lusamine said. “Are you alone?”

“I’m secure. No one will overhear our conversation. I’ve taken this room as my own.”

She looked around over his shoulder, her curiosity piqued. “Where are you? You’re not in your lab.”

“Castelia City,” Colress said with a wry smile. “Or what’s left of it. Things are moving along quite nicely in my neck of the world.”

She did not appreciate his smugness, and it showed. “How quaint. But I don’t pay you to play the toy soldier with Team Plasma. We have a more pressing problem.”

Colress sat up in his chair. “What is it?”

Lusamine frowned, and for a moment, she looked half a girl again, the way she used to look before devastating loss had changed her. “I’ve had my team working tirelessly on your last updates, but it’s no use. The specimen continues to malfunction. Every attempt has been met with resounding failure, and it’s only getting worse.”

“What? That’s impossible. My calculations were perfect,” Colress began.

“Clearly, not perfect enough. I’ve already had to retire some of the older specimens and reclassify them as Type: Null.”

Colress stared at her, aghast. Type: Full was supposed to be the pinnacle of his years of genetic mutation research. “I don’t understand. You did use the genetic code I engineered?”

“DNA from Gyarados, Salamence, Tyranitar, and all the others... I had my top scientist commission the Type: Full project exactly according to your specifications. And it was working until we proceeded with the RKS implantations. The specimens rejected them violently,” Lusamine said, her ire almost palpable. “They went berserk.”

Colress mirrored her disgust and bared his teeth. “The last I heard, I was your top scientist, not that fool Faba. There’s nothing wrong with my specifications; if there’s a problem, it’s with his implementation of them.”

Lusamine narrowed her eyes. “Faba was doing stellar work until we introduced your RKS implants. I admit, the idea of forcing Type: Full to believe it was any type of Pokémon at any convenient time to fully access each element’s potential was intriguing. But it’s physical power I need, not
“Chimera is both,” Colress hissed. “That’s the point: to create the perfect killing machine with no weaknesses and absolute obedience. No beast can be perfect if it doesn’t listen. RKS is the next step in my EM wave technology. By implanting it in the specimen from birth, there’s no need for any external hardware or even EM wave signal. The technology grows organically within the specimen, like any other organ. All it would take is a verbal command from the programmed master to access different RKS memory files.”

It was the height of Colress’s scientific genius. Already, he had come so far since the early days using clunky hardware implanted into Pokémon’s brains to feed the mind-controlling EM signal to them that way. Barret’s report from Driftveil City confirmed that the technology had moved beyond the limitations of hardware to function remotely. But to eliminate even that middleman, to achieve total control with a single command... That was the future of Chimera. That was Colress’s legacy. Type: Full was supposed to be a totally new species of Pokémon, crafted from the best of them and literally created to obey. And Lusamine had fucked it up.

“And I’m telling you it doesn’t work. I can’t fight monsters without a few monsters of my own. This is your failure, dear brother. Fix it.”

It was hard not to lose his temper with Lusamine, especially when she was thousands of miles away on her private island with no way to get to him here. Even so, he held his tongue. If she wanted to hurt or humiliate him, she always found a way. He had learned that lesson time and time again.

“I would love nothing more than to help you,” Colress said, trying to stay calm, “but I’m in the middle of my own crisis here in Castelia City. Perhaps you remember Castelia. We used to visit here as children with Grandmother. You used to love the Casteliacones and would beg me to share mine after you finished yours.”

Lusamine was unmoved. “I fund your intellect, not your vapid sentimentality.”

And there it was. Lusamine had been his generous benefactor for years, and it was through Aether’s secret funding that he had even gotten Chimera off the ground at all. Team Plasma had not had any use for researchers and scientists in the days when N was in charge, but Ghetsis saw Colress’s potential with Chimera and brought him into the fold. If not for Chimera, he would never have impressed Ghetsis. And if not for Lusamine, there would be no Chimera. Knowing her, she would keep that leash taut for the rest of their lives.

But looking at her now, it was hard to forget that there was once more connecting them than money. Maybe he really was getting old and sentimental. She was the only family had had left.

“I haven’t forgotten your investment,” Colress said in a clipped tone.

Near the window, Beheeyem sensed his mounting anger and hovered closer. He could feel the Psychic’s hollow stare on the back of his neck, probing with invisible fingers. Beheeyem had been his companion since he was a young boy as an Elgyem and had grown to trust him, but you never really knew with Psychics. All it would take was one malicious thought, and Beheeyem could turn Colress’s brain to mush on a whim. He was no Clairvoyant who could safeguard himself from telekinetic terrorism.

Colress cleared his throat. “But sadly, my hands are tied at the moment. I know this will sound alien to you, but I answer to others.”
“Use your brain, not your cock—you don’t need your hands to get it working,” Lusamine snapped. “I want to see progress by winter’s end.”

“Winter’s end? I thought you were in a hurry,” Colress said, almost forgetting the spike of fury at her insult at this interesting new piece of information.

“...A minor setback. Your nephew is rebelling, and he needs a firm hand. Luckily, I happen to have one of those at my beck and call.”

“Teenagers tend to rebel,” Colress said carefully, although he had to wonder.

He had met Lusamine’s children, Gladion and Lillie, when they were very young and he made the trip to Alola for their father’s funeral, but he had never had any meaningful relationship or contact with either of them living thousands of miles away. To think that a child could unsettle his pitiless sister when Colress, a grown man with much more clout, never could. It had to be serious.

“What has Gladion done?” he asked.

Lusamine made a face at that name. “Nothing he’ll get away with, I assure you. But I have more pressing concerns.”

She can’t even say his name.

Ever since the incident with her late husband, she had had trouble talking about her children. But it was not Colress’s concern. Lusamine was right, they both had more pressing concerns.

“Get back to me as soon as you can,” Lusamine went on. “My own preparations are nearly complete. I have everything I need for a full exploration, and it’s only a matter of time before I can open the gate. I expect to be properly armed and armored when that time comes.”

“Of course, sweet sister. I’m here to help. That’s what brothers are for.”

Colress smiled, but Lusamine was not moved. He could never move her these days, not anymore.

“We’ll see.”

Lusamine cut the connection, and her hologram flickered into nothing. Colress was left staring at the white-painted wall behind the desk where his sister’s face had once been.

“Beauties and their beasts,” he said aloud. He would never understand her obsession. Perhaps if he had gone through what Lusamine had gone through, he would sympathize a little more. But he hadn’t.

Beheeyem watched him silently, his luminous eyes unblinking. Colress gazed into those glowing pools of green, thinking. Lusamine and Type: Full, Chimera, and of course Cedric’s own little project that Ghetsis was keen to see finished.

“So much to do...” He would need his strength. Cedric would not sleep forever, and he had a mind to have another chat with the man when he woke.

Colress did not have all the time he would have wanted to interrogate Cedric and get him to agree to cooperate with Team Plasma, so he was forced to ship the old man off to Lacunosa to await him there until this newest business was done. Perhaps some time in his old lab would put things into
perspective for the old loon. That, and being monitored at all times by an army of Neo Agents who would give him no peace even to take a shit.

Just a few days after Colress had even found Cedric, he was informed that he would be leaving Castelia City, and he could not refuse. Ghetsis was a man who was seldom refused anything.

“Tell me what you see, Colress.”

Ghetsis spoke softly, rarely ever raising his voice for any purpose. His was the kind of voice people heard above all others in a crowded room. His pale coloring matched the somber greys and blacks and whites of Opelucid City looming before them where they stood on the docks, unloading from the long seafaring voyage north from Castelia. The sunlight diffused through the overcast sky, brightening the silver in his hair. To the uninformed passerby, Ghetsis had an unremarkable look about him, not too tall, neither handsome nor hideous, a face that could blend in with a crowd, forgettable. Except the eyes. There was no light in his deep brown eyes, not even a glimmer, as though they consumed the sunlight where it touched them, and nothing dared illuminate what lay beneath.

Colress cleared his throat. Ghetsis did not speak merely to hear himself talk. “I see a quiet city,” he said. “It’s smaller than I imagined it would be.”

Ghetsis chuckled. “I had the same thought the first time I visited. I was a young man then, hardly more than a boy.”

“I imagine it must have been a very different place at that time.”

Three hundred years was quite a long time ago.

“You imagine incorrectly,” Ghetsis said. “Names and faces change with time, but human nature never does. Nowhere is that truer than among Titans.”

I suppose you would know.

But Colress held his tongue. The Neo Agents in their party had finished unloading and were escorting the small party into the city. There was not much, but a royal visit necessitated royal gifts, and Castelia had plenty to contribute to Neo Team Plasma’s cause, from fine dyed silks and satins to rare desert blooms so red and fleshy they could have been soaked in blood. Ghetsis’s party would be received as any important guest would be and treated with the same courtesy. No expense had been spared, except for Neo Team Plasma’s.

As they entered the solemn city, Colress could not help but feel humbled. It was an ancient settlement, and history seemed to ooze from the weathered stones that had been here since the Age of Kings, when myths were made of flesh and bone, sorceresses could raise the dead, and kings and queens ruled in silver palaces from Icirrus to Undella and everywhere in between. An age long gone, forgotten, and depending on who you asked, perhaps never more than a fairytale to entertain on cold nights around a hearth. Colress had never cared much for history, preferring to concentrate on the future and what he could make of it. Science was a forward-thinking profession. Until, of course, he had met Cedric Juniper and learned that sometimes the only way to move forward was to take a step back.

Thinking of Cedric soured Colress’s mood, and he could not find any passing awe at the marvelous architecture all around him. Ghetsis noticed his deterioration and studied him in that way he had that could make Colress’s skin crawl. He liked to watch and learn for himself, making the subject of his scrutiny squirm and give away more than he might offer up otherwise. Ghetsis’s patience in
all that he did, it was said throughout Neo Team Plasma, was what made him the effective leader no one else could ever match. Not even N. Especially not N.

“It’s nothing to concern you, sir,” Colress said, preempting the question he knew was coming. “I was merely thinking of Cedric. He was not keen on cooperating when I last saw him, but I’ve shipped him off to Lacunosa Town where he’ll be under more reliable guard.”

Ghetsis thought about this, taking his time before answering. “But he will cooperate.”

It was a question and a command, and Colress knew there was only one right answer. “Yes. I know him. He’s too curious to refuse the work. That’s how the project began in the first place. Once he’s back in that environment, all I’ll have to do is wait for the inevitable.”


“Sir?”

“You met him. What did you make of him?”

“...Cautious,” Colress said after a moment’s consideration. “And cunning. Perhaps too much so.”

“Arrogant?”

“No,” Colress found himself saying. “No, not at all. Just...certain. I gave him an opening, and he took it without ever accepting. He knew what I was trying to do when I told him Neo Team Plasma would invade Castelia City, and somehow he got the benefit without the cost of making a formal alliance.”

“As if he were a true king,” Ghetsis said.

“He does wear a crown,” Colress said. “I suppose there’s no other word for him.”

Ghetsis’s spooky eyes alighted on him, Colress had to physically restrain himself from flinching away. “We all wear crowns, Colress. Drayden’s is forged of blood and tradition. Yours glorifies your science at the expense of all else. N’s embodied the hollow promise of peace and understanding.”

“Sir?” Colress said, not understanding.

“We are all kings of our own making,” Ghetsis went on, “and each of us possesses a mandate from the gods that dwell within us. As self-ordained kings, we rule on our own terms for our own ends. It’s human nature to believe we are right and denounce all dissent.”

“You make it sound like a farce,” Colress said.

“That’s because it is a farce. There is no truth, only conflicting ideals drawn ceaselessly into battle with each other since time immemorial. It’s the oldest war ever waged, the war between these figments of truth. A clash of crowns.”

“What about you?”

Ghetsis stared up at Dragonsong Castle looming just ahead, its ramparts and towers like swords reaching for the heavens. Above, high in the sky, Dragons soared like gulls, coming and going on the whim of the wind.

“Me?” Ghetsis said. “I’m a kingmaker. And I’m in the market for a new king.”
They had arrived at the castle gates, passing by throngs of locals going about their daily lives. People stopped to watch their small caravan pass, but no one gave them any trouble. They carried no banners, wore plainclothes, and kept only a few Pokémon out on guard. Ghetsis himself was draped in a ratty brown cloak to cover his more formal attire. He never liked attracting attention to himself, preferring to remain quietly in the shadows while a figurehead took center stage. His face was not well-known, although since N’s downfall, his identity became more widely publicized. There were those with power and influence who discovered his true nature as a Reaper, a cannibal among his kind. Drayden was one such person; the de facto King and Gym Leader of Opelucid City was very informed, perhaps too much so, Colress thought. But Ghetsis knew what he was doing. If he deemed this visit to be important, then surely it was.

But when they arrived at the heavily guarded gates, the caravan stopped as the Neo Agents leading the column spoke with the sentinels on duty. Colress tried to see what was going on up ahead, but behind the wagons bearing the goods from Castelia, he had a poor vantage.

“Sir, the guards are refusing us entry,” said a young man who had appeared out of nowhere next to Ghetsis.

Colress was startled to find another young man, nearly identical to the first, on his side and gasped in spite of himself.

“They do not allow entry to foreigners without a prearranged audience,” said a woman, the third of their group.

_The Shadow Triad_, Colress thought, frowning deeply at their nasty habit of skulking like thieves in the night.

Malik, Hamza, and Leila were triplet siblings Ghetsis had found living under some rock. Dark of complexion, strong of jaw, and with the emotional capacity of a pebble, the triplets were notoriously scarce and silent until Ghetsis needed them. They were his personal guards, Reapers all three that he had turned personally. They had guarded him for years, since before Colress had joined Team Plasma, even. There had once been a pot going for how long it would be before Ghetsis finally cannibalized one of them, but the Agent who’d started it, a bawdy hotshot called Axel with a penchant for running his mouth, met an untimely end when Leila apprehended him and Ghetsis granted her and her brothers full custody to do with him as they saw fit. No one had ever seen Axel again. Colress had to wonder, though. It had been nearly a year since Ghetsis had consumed his last Reaper, some spy sent to infiltrate Neo Team Plasma’s ranks, but the stolen youth would not last forever. Who would he consume next? Colress did not want to know.

The Shadow Triad had three Pokémon at their disposal that Colress had never seen them without, not even hidden away in Pokéballs. The beasts were always about, always sniffing around. Malik’s Mightyena was feral and brutish, a salivating canine that looked ready to maul the next guy who looked at him wrong. Leila’s Liepard was the opposite in every way: sleek and posh, almost regal in her delicate manner, but beneath the surface the she-cat had teeth, too, and a pair of yellow eyes that were almost more unsettling than Ghetsis himself. But it was Hamza’s Absol that disturbed Colress the most. The beast was bigger than either of her companions with paws larger than a man’s head and a wicked horn Colress had once seen cleave an Outraged Feraligatr from navel to nose. All three Pokémon were silent and patient as they waited on their masters’ whims.

“Is that so?” Ghetsis said, dismounting the wagon to stand between Malik and Hamza. “You were right, Colress. This one is cautious.”

“Sir, would you like us to open a path for you?” Malik asked. His Mightyena snarled.
“That won’t be necessary. I’ll do it myself.”

Before Colress knew what was happening, Ghetsis tossed out one of his Pokéballs, and a flash of light later the sun disappeared from the sky above. A great shadow descended on the caravan and filled the square in front of the closed palace gates, and Colress stared up in awe and terror at the monster Ghetsis kept as his favorite pet. Hydreigon, the three-headed King Dragon, towered almost as tall as the gates in all his black and blue glory. A crepuscular Dragon, Hydreigon was more accustomed to hunting under the cover of night, when his glossy midnight scales blended in best with the shadows. Under the bright light of day, he was perhaps even more horrific to behold simply because there was no hiding those teeth as long as swords and those tattered wings and the three sets of bloody eyes, hungry. Hydreigon was so tall that his main head blocked Colress’s view of the sun and sky directly above. But perhaps most unsettling of all was the Dragon’s eerie silence. For all his tremendous size and killing power, he was a quiet predator. Death always is.

The castle guards, however, were not so quiet. They saw Hydreigon and erupted in a frenzy of activity.

“Tell them again,” Ghetsis commanded the Shadow Triad. “Neo Team Plasma’s Ghetsis would like to see their king.”

“As you command,” Leila said with a bow.

She and her brothers absconded to do his bidding, and soon enough, the gates opened. Colress walked along numbly, wincing at every step Hydreigon took behind him. Pokémon should not grow so big, not naturally. Dragons were the stuff of myths and legends, a world apart from the rest of the Pokémon that walked and swam and flew the earth. And in the fairytales, knights always slew the Dragons. Well, Dragons were real, and no knight in his right mind would dare face Hydreigon with sword and shield alone. Colress wondered how today would go.

Hydreigon did not fill the inner courtyard, which was large enough to accommodate at least three of him, and the way to the throne room was through an immense arched corridor just large enough for him to duck under, as though a creature of his size had been in mind when this palace was designed. Perhaps that was the case.

The throne room itself was a vast stone and marble chamber. Dragons carved from black and white marble looked down on the procession as they passed, snarling as though threatening to come alive at any moment and rain fire and lightning upon them. Colress could not place it, but something about these ancient Dragon guardians unsettled him deeply, more so than the flesh and blood Hydreigon lumbering along behind him. They had endured since this castle was raised over three thousand years ago, and they would endure long after everyone here was dead. A true immortality, not a stolen one.

Whatever they said about Titans and their Dragons, there was no denying the magic that surrounded them, an old power that no one, not even Ghetsis with his stolen lifetimes, could ever hope to match.

Two people sat at the head of the room on a raised dais. Their thrones were marble carved into the shape of sleeping Dragons, one black and one white, forever at odds. Zekrom and Reshiram, the twin Dragons of myth, were the Fafnir Dynasty’s sigil representing the harmony between truth and ideals that every king and queen who sat upon those thrones in generations past had struggled to maintain, so the story went. Colress wondered how that was going for the most recent king and queen seated before him.

“Your Majesties,” Ghetsis said, bowing politely. He had removed the ratty brown cloak he’d worn
on the way here, revealing crisp woolen robes dyed black and pale green, amorphous to hide the contours of his body and whatever he hid on his person. He looked like an especially well-dressed priest, a queer marriage of piety and luxury that was impossible to ignore despite the royals seated before him.

Behind him, Hydreigon had to lower his primary head to keep it from bumping the lofty ceiling. His teeth glistened, slick with drool, and his lesser heads snapped at each other. The Shadow Triad flanked Ghetsis with their Pokémon, each taking a knee as though waiting for a word from their master to leap into action. Colress hung back a bit with the other Neo Agents, his palms clammy. It was not so much Drayden and his queen, Gym Leader Elesa of Nimbasa, that preoccupied him, but the woman standing to Drayden’s left, the blight he’d met the last time he spoke with Drayden. Her swollen red veins pulsed like fat squirming worms along her cheeks and neck, around her sunken eyes, but she stood tall and silent with sword in hand. Her Flygon loomed behind her, a fraction of Hydreigon’s immense girth but no less threatening in her own way at nearly twice Colress’s height. Others stood a level down next to the dais, men and women in stately attire, greys and purples and blues, the highborn lords and ladies of Drayden’s court. All had turned out to see Ghetsis.

Drayden tapped a finger on the clawed armrest of his black throne. He wore a crown wrought from ebony and ivory that brought out the pale yellow of his eyes. Aside from the simple crown, he wore no other jewelry or distinguishing attire, as solemn and hard as the throne upon which he sat. “Ghetsis,” he said. “I wondered when you would finally show yourself.”

“Yes, we are long overdue for a proper face to face meeting,” Ghetsis said. “My apologies for sending Colress to you before. You understand the need for caution.”

Drayden and Elesa both turned their gazes on Colress, who adjusted his glasses under their scrutiny. Elesa did not look surprised to hear of Drayden’s prior dealings with Team Plasma, though Colress could swear the room grew a bit colder under her frigid glare.

“I understand it quite well,” Drayden addressed Ghetsis. “Which is why I find myself at a loss for why you’ve chosen to show yourself here. Team Plasma has never been welcome in Opelucid.”

“Nor in Nimbasa,” Elesa said coldly.

Her crown matched Drayden’s, ebony and ivory, but unlike her Spartan husband, Elesa was a vision in blue velvet and white Vulpix fur. She wore Thunderstones on her fingers and about her neck, and they seemed to make her glow. For all her beauty, there was nothing soft or sweet about the way she was looking at Ghetsis.

*This may have been a mistake,* Colress thought.

“Even so,” Drayden interrupted his queen, “I recognize Neo Team Plasma’s role in the Sack of Castelia. I have Gym Leader Burgh in my custody thanks in part to your organization’s efforts. So speak plainly. I don’t often receive unwanted visitors.”

“King Drayden,” Ghetsis said. “I come to you not as an unwanted visitor, but as a kindred spirit.” He gestured to Hydreigon, and the behemoth Dragon draped his tattered wings about Ghetsis and his escorts. “As for why I’ve come, you should already have some idea of my intentions. I’m here to formalize our existing partnership, and to offer you Neo Team Plasma’s services in whatever endeavors lie ahead for Opelucid.”

It did not escape Elesa’s notice that he made no mention of Nimbasa, but she held her tongue. Barely. Drayden gave no indication of his feelings on anything at all. They could have been discussing the weather or genocide or anything in between. The man was a rock.
“Endeavors?” Drayden probed. “Do I have a political agenda to which I’m not privy? I’ve accomplished what I set out to do. There is nothing else.”

“Your Majesty,” Ghetsis said with almost obsequious decorum, “a man of my humble position has the means to acquire knowledge before it is far disseminated. I’ve heard of the bastard pretender who dares to challenge your position. You won’t know this, but my Agents recently engaged her in Driftveil City. From there, it’s an easy journey on to Mistralton and Icirrus, as I’m sure you understand.” He let the implications of that linger just a heartbeat, long enough to sink in. “I would offer my ample resources to you in order to find and eliminate her before she can wander too far north, among other things.”

A few of the court lords and ladies dared to whisper amongst themselves, and before Drayden could say anything, Ghetsis added, “Iris Fafnir, I believe she called herself.”

“She has no true name,” Drayden snapped.

“But I hear she has your blood,” Ghetsis said. “The Old Blood, and a Dragonite to do her bidding.”

If Iris’s existence was once a closely guarded secret between the royals and their inner circle, it no longer was. The way the court lords and ladies were looking around and whispering amongst themselves told Colress that the news would be all over Opelucid within the hour and all over Unova by the end of the week, if even that long.

It was not Drayden who reacted, but his blighted general, Caelith. She advanced, sword at the ready. “How dare you speak to the king with such disrespect,” she spat.

The Shadow Triad was quick to position themselves between Caelith and Ghetsis, along with their Dark Pokémon, but Caelith’s Flygon was not about to let her master rush into a fight alone. The sleek sand Dragon reared up on her hind legs, and her wings began to buzz furiously. Hydreigon took Flygon’s challenge as a direct threat and broke his silence in a guttural snarl that startled most of the people gathered in the throne room, Elesa included. She sat back in her throne as her guard, a blue-haired warrior with a katana and a Roserade by her side shouted something. Hamza and his Absol were closest to Caelith, and he drew his own thin sword as Absol growled in warning.

Hydreigon looked about ready to chow down on Flygon as the comparatively puny Mystic Pokémon hovered higher over her trainer, but suddenly he froze, jaws agape, as though time itself had stopped. Colress watched in awe, at once mesmerized and giddy, at a sight he’d never witnessed personally but had hoped he would see one day.

Drayden, still seated on his throne, raised his hand to Hydreigon and uttered just one soft word:

“Stop.”

Hydreigon stopped. Caelith also stood her ground, her hand out to call off Flygon. The Shadow Triad looked between Caelith, Flygon, and Ghetsis, unsure how to proceed.

_A Titan’s control_, Colress thought. It was better than any EM wave technology he could ever cook up, as much as it pained him to admit it. But a Titan’s control had its limits. Chimera had none. _Still, the power to stop a King Dragon as old as Hydreigon with a mere word... That’s what I need._

Lusamine swore the RKS iteration of Chimera technology did not work on Type: Full. Perhaps implantation was not the right direction at all, as he’d originally thought. Barret said the transmitter had interrupted Mega Evolution in Driftveil, and Team Rocket’s experiments with the pure EM wave version of Chimera had had some success on the Ghosts of Lavender Town. If he could
somehow amplify the signal but restrict it to a specific target, keep it under precise control so it would not spread indiscriminately and dilute the signal... But how?

How do you do it? he wanted to ask Drayden.

There was so much work yet to be done.

“Back to your Pokéball, now,” Drayden said.

And just like that, Hydreigon dissolved into a glare of red light that reverted back to the Pokéball in Ghetsis’s pocket. The old Reaper said nothing, and that worried Colress far more than any words could have.

“Ghetsis,” Drayden said. “I will consider your offer.”

Elesa got up from her throne in a rage, having regained her senses after the scare with Hydreigon. “Absolutely not,” she hissed. “We never discussed this. You cannot—”

“I am the king,” Drayden interrupted her, his tone turned venomously scathing. “I can do whatever I want.”

They stared at each other, neither backing down, and Colress sensed something much more poisonous going on between them than met the eye. What, he could never guess, but he knew as well as the next person what it meant to get into bed with a Titan.

Titans lie.

“Sit down,” Drayden commanded.

Elesa’s Thunderstone jewelry sparked, and the static gathered in her hands between her long fingers, snapping and popping. But she relented, perhaps the wiser choice, and retook her seat in silence.

“I’ll consider your offer,” Drayden said again, “but let me be clear. I know you’re not what you used to be no matter how many years you hoard for yourself. I’m not some green boy with dreams of peace and prosperity you can mold to your liking; I am King of the Heart Tine. You’re a rat in the darkness looking for your next meal. And you’re certainly no kindred spirit to Dragons.”

Ghetsis chuckled lightly. “I’m afraid that’s where you’re wrong, Your Majesty. After all, we play our part well.”

“What part would that be?” Drayden asked.

“Human.”

Drayden said nothing to that, but for the first time since they’d arrived, Colress could have sworn the man looked unsure.

“Excuse me,” Ghetsis said, bowing once more. “I’ve overstayed my welcome. But I’m sure we’ll be seeing much more of each other soon enough.”

With that, Ghetsis turned for the exit, and the Shadow Triad followed him out. The other Neo escorts followed, Colress among them, and he cast a glance back at Drayden and Elesa on their cold thrones.

Ghetsis whispered commands to his Shadow Triad, and they dispersed among the ranks to do
whatever he wanted of them. Colress said nothing, hands in his pockets as he played with the two
Pokéballs there, absurdly missing his Pokémon right now. He’d never felt the particular bond so
many Tamers seemed to feel with theirs. Though, he was no Tamer, so perhaps that was why. But
now, in this place, seeing Drayden dismiss Hydreigon so easily, a beast over a century old, made
him grateful he had Pokémon immune to a Titan’s influence.

_It must be like this for the ones who meet my Chimeras in battle._

The thought lifted his spirits a little. The sun was nearly set, but the column was heading back to
the harbor; they would not be welcome in Opelucid after that chilly reception, that much was
obvious. And yet, Ghetsis had seemed confident. He was a patient man, after all.

“I want you on the first ship out of Castelia as soon as we get back,” Ghetsis said to Colress when
they were below deck in Ghetsis’s private cabin on the Team Plasma ship and sailing safely out of
Opelucid. It was past dark now. “I don’t care what it takes, get Cedric Juniper on board.”

“Yes, sir,” Colress said. He made the mistake of lingering.

“What is it, Colress?” Ghetsis said.

He had no choice but to respond now. “Apologies, sir. I was thinking of Opelucid. It’s not my
place to question you.”

“And yet, you just have. Don’t worry about Opelucid. Drayden likes to think he’s a king, but he
really is nothing but a green boy.”

“His crown?” Colress asked, recalling their earlier conversation.

“A crown is a self-fulfilling prophecy,” Ghetsis said as he poured himself a goblet of wine. “He’ll
soon learn that he’s a king of nothing, just like N did. And I’ll be there waiting when he does.
People never change.”

_What of your own self-made crown?_ Colress almost asked. But he did not have a death wish. He
did not think Ghetsis would truly kill him, not when he was as valuable as he was. But it was no
guarantee. Nothing ever was with Ghetsis. He called himself a kingmaker, but in Colress’s
experience, he was just as good at unmaking them. The memory of Striaton still visited terrors
upon him in his dreams.

“Excuse me,” Colress said, backing out of the room.

“No,” Ghetsis said. “Do not fail me. The next time I see Drayden, I want to show him the true
meaning of control.”

Colress nodded. “Yes, sir.”

Castelia was as hot as Colress remembered it even into autumn now. It had been nearly two weeks
since he’d last spoken with Cedric Juniper in his cell, having shipped the old scientist off to
Lacunosa Town before the extremely brief trip to Opelucid City. And now, Colress was packing
his things once again to follow Cedric to Lacunosa. He was eager to get back to his lab; these
bloody battlefields and throne rooms were not his natural environment. He could just picture the
clean sterility of his personal lab, the staff that answered only to him, their version of a king. As he
packed his toothbrush, he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror and touched a hand to his
sli**cked platinum blond hair, imagining a crown there. 

*They’ll call me a god when I succeed in this,* he thought. *Not even kings will compare to me.* 

The Castelia Gym was abuzz with activity. Much was being done to rebuild the city and make it a viable base of operations for Neo Team Plasma. Drayden called himself the King of the Heart Tine, but Opelucid’s and Nimbasa’s presence here was scant compared to Neo Team Plasma’s. Drayden held Gym Leader Burgh hostage, true enough, but a Gym Leader in absentia was far from the minds of the Castelian citizens who worried about whether they would go to sleep with full bellies tonight and roofs over their heads. Neo Team Plasma had boots on the ground working to rebuild, seeing to the displaced citizens’ needs, and maintaining order.

Colress was nearly finished packing his things when there was a loud knock on his door. It opened before he had a chance to admit whoever was calling, much to his annoyance.

“Celine,” he said, recognizing the Neo Agent. “This is my private room.”

“I’m sorry, sir,” she said, saluting. “But this is an emergency.”

“What kind of emergency?”

“We’ve just received word from the crew of the *Harmonia*.”

The *Harmonia* was the ship Cedric Juniper had been on that would take him to Lacunosa Town.

“What is it?” Colress demanded.

“It’s Professor Juniper, sir,” Celine said. “He never reached Lacunosa Town.”

“What do you mean, he never reached it? Where could he have gone?”

Celine looked very uncomfortable. “Sir, that’s what we’re trying to figure out. He had a Sigilyph with him, and the captain reported that he likely Teleported once they were in sight of land—”

“Sigilyph? And how the hell did he have access to Sigilyph when I specifically ordered that he be kept separated from Cedric and in his Pokéball at all times?”

Celine blushed and set her jaw. “I-I’m not sure, sir. I didn’t ask...”

Colress could hardly believe what he was hearing. “Get out of my way.”

“But sir—”

“Report to cleanup,” Colress snapped. “You’re relieved of your duty. I need Agents who have enough brain cells to ask questions.”

He didn’t wait to hear her response as he stormed off toward the communications center to get to the bottom of this. His head was spinning. If Cedric was missing, then it could mean disaster if Ghetsis found out. He had to get on top of this, or he was fucked.

*“Do not fail me,*” Ghetsis’s warning echoed in his head.

*Shit.*

He was going to murder someone with his own hands. Whatever incompetent fool had allowed Cedric access to his Sigilyph was getting a lot more than a demotion to cleanup duty. He let himself into the communications room, where Neo Agents managed the Tranquill and Unfezant
carrying coded communications all over the Trident to different Neo Team Plasma cells, along with electronic communication with established bases in Lacunosa and Striaton. But when he entered, he saw that Ghetsis was already there, and he almost lost the contents of his bowels right there when Ghetsis turned to face him.

It was the look many had not lived to tell about. There was a chilling hatred in those dark eyes that seemed to plunge them into darkness when he let the mask fall and revealed the essence of the creature he truly was.

“Colress,” he said, his voice low and reverberant as though speaking from beyond the grave in a dream.

“S-Sir,” Colress stuttered, unable to help himself. “I’ve just heard about Cedric. I’ll get on it right away.”

Ghetsis advanced. “I’m relieved to hear it.”

The Agent he’d been speaking with previously was white as a sheet and shaking. A glass of water lay shattered on the floor near his feet. He could not even gather the strength to move now that Ghetsis had moved on from him.

“I trust that I don’t have to tell you how important Cedric is to my plans. You’re the one who said you couldn’t complete the project without him,” Ghetsis said.

He was inches away, and it was all Colress could do not to flinch away. He had no smell, no graveyard soil or bloated bodies, like Colress might have imagined him to carry. He emanated no warmth, and his breathing was so subtle that he appeared not to breathe at all. His skin, smooth from his last feeding some months ago, nonetheless clung to the sharp bones in his face like a pale mask stretched taut over his true face beneath.

“We play our part well,” his dark warning to Drayden echoed.

Colress swallowed hard. “Yes, sir. I... I have some ideas...”

“Do you?”

Colress did flinch this time, but he dared not back away. “N-Nuvema Town,” he stuttered. “He has a daughter, an old colleague of mine. Sh-She’s all he has.”

Ghetsis stared, unblinking. He seldom blinked, like some fish that lived deep in the sea where no light could reach. “Find him, and bring him back. If you fail me, I’ll deal with you myself.”

Colress had lost his voice and could only nod meekly. Ghetsis lingered in his personal space for a few moments, his aura oppressive. He wondered if this was what Tamers felt in each other’s presence, this asphyxiating gravity, and wondered how they could bear it. Ghetsis pulled away at length, totally silent save for the soft pad of his footsteps, and exited the communication room. The lights seemed to brighten upon his departure, and sound returned to the enclosed space. Computers beeped and birds chirped on their perches, waiting for new messages to carry. Colress leaned on the nearest wall, his knees wobbly, and tried to catch his breath. It was a miracle he hadn’t fainted. The Agent who had been here before him, the room’s only other occupant tasked with managing incoming and outgoing communications and who had probably been the one to receive the Harmonia’s message, had slumped to the ground in an upright fetal position, shaking.

“You,” Colress said, swallowing his nerves. “What’s your name?”
“C-Ciaran,” the man said, not even bothering to hide his fear. Ghetsis seldom interacted with the Agents, and when he did he was generally controlled and quiet, his perfect mask tightly in place. Today, he had not bothered.

“Ciaran,” Colress said, cleaning his glasses to give his trembling hands something to do. “Send a message to the Frigate, the one bound for Lacunosa this morning. We’re changing course for Nuvema Town.”

“Nuvema?” Ciaran repeated, dark eyes wide like a lost child’s.

Colress took a deep breath. He had seen Ghetsis’s true nature before, but this poor man never had. He could remember his first time, too. He often remembered it when he closed his eyes for the night.

“Ciaran, get up. He’s gone, but he’ll be back unless we fix this. Get the message to the Frigate. I need to depart immediately,” Colress said.

This seemed to get through to Ciaran, and he scrambled to his feet, disoriented but slowly recovering. “Y-Yes, sir. Sorry, sir. I’ll get right on it. Nuvema Town, yes.”

Colress barely heard him as he tried to calm his own breathing and thought of the journey ahead, not the one he’d planned. He had not been to Nuvema Town in many years. He had not seen her in many years.

Aurea Juniper.

The first to encourage him, the first to challenge him. The only woman he’d ever loved, and the only one he’d ever hated. She was every bit her father’s daughter, and he was never allowed to forget it. She had been the one to send help to Professor Samuel Oak in Kanto when the Chimera technology Colress had sold to Team Rocket was helping them take over the continent. Always getting in the way, Aurea Juniper.

This time, he would remove her from his path. Permanently.

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, I totally headcanon Colress being related to Lusamine. I wanted that to be a real thing so bad when he showed up in Sun and Moon (because of course he’s not in jail for, like, trying to destroy the world in B2W2...). And Type: Null was basically the posterchild for Chimera when it was revealed. I lost my sanity for a little bit there when I got the whole story playing the game and couldn’t stop thinking how convenient Game Freak made everything for my fic’s canon tie-ins. How nice of them. Anyway, I love the idea of Lusamine and Colress being normal cute children doing experiments and learning science together and having a nice childhood before they grew up and things slowly but terribly deteriorated beyond repair. Plus the potential parallels with Gladion and Lillie and history repeating itself and all these other ideas I have about that family... I’m getting carried away. Anyway, it’s A Thing™ in this universe. Also, Alola confirmed.
Elesa was insufferable after Ghetsis and Neo Team Plasma’s visit, at least for a time. She made her position against any kind of alliance known in the next council meeting, whose members were now all accounted for with the soldiers’ return from Castelia. Drayden could see Mydros agreeing with her and Thorys actually listening carefully as she advocated against an alliance. Rayanna took no sides, but Drayden’s informants posing as Elesa’s maids spoke of the closeness between the two women of late. Rayanna often took afternoon tea or after-dinner drinks with Elesa in the privacy of Elesa’s suite, and the two would walk in the courtyard and even into town to brave the chilly days for a chance to escape prying eyes and ears.

Perhaps he had underestimated his new queen’s resilience and cunning. The pregnancy trap had cowed her for a time now that Nimbasa and the line of succession were directly in Drayden’s crosshairs. But Elesa would not give up so easily, if at all. If he were a different man, and this a different life, he would have admired her fierce strength. Maybe he even would have loved her for it. As it was, she was a thorn in his side making things very difficult.

“Any kind of alliance with Neo Team Plasma would be a farce,” Elesa addressed the council. “It’s obvious that this Ghetsis person can’t be trusted after his actions in Striaton City. He would turn on us at the opportune moment and jeopardize everything we’ve achieved on the Heart Tine.”

_A thorn with a point_, Drayden allowed. She was not wrong about Ghetsis’s duplicitous nature, on this they agreed.

“I am inclined to agree,” spoke the graying captain of the Ridder Knights, Mydros. He scratched at his long white sideburns, a habit when he was nervous. “Ghetsis himself is no friend to us. Nor to Nimbasa.”

“But he has an army,” Thorys said. “And with that army currently sitting on Castelia indefinitely, we have a knife aimed at our backs.” He wore a thick cast on his right arm where he’d suffered injury fighting in Castelia, and faint yellowing bruises ringed his blue eyes. “I don’t like the smell of a Reaper on any day, but it would be stupid to ignore an army at our doorstep without _some_ deliberation.”

“There’s nothing to deliberate,” Elesa said a little forcefully. “He’s not offering the strength of Neo Team Plasma for nothing, and he’s not attacking us directly. He wants something. Something he thinks only such a staggering offer could buy. The only answer we can give him his no.”

“But if he retaliates against us?” Ryon said meekly. “What then? Oh dear, I can’t bear to think of the good people of Nimbasa facing an invasion from Castelia after the hard battle we just won.”

“The point of our alliance is that Nimbasa wouldn’t face Neo Team Plasma or any other threat alone,” Elesa said in a clipped tone. “We should refuse Ghetsis and send the Ridder Knights south to fortify my Nimbasan army. It’s the only way to deter Ghetsis from getting any ideas about marching north.”

“If we send anyone, it ought to be the Dragon Riders,” Mydros protested. “My Ridder Knights suffered far more losses than they did in the Sack of Castelia. They deserve some time at home with their families before I ask them to take up arms again so soon.”
“The Dragon Riders are not yours to command,” Thorys said. “And in case you forgot, we’re the reason your foot soldiers weren’t eaten alive by Castelia’s Bug brigades. The Dragon Riders will remain in Opelucid, not go south to play at guard duty.”

“In case you forgot, Thorys, the Dragon Riders are mine to command,” Caelith said. “And I answer to the king. This is his decision, not mine and certainly not yours.”

Thorys bared his teeth at Caelith, a vulgar insult on the tip of his tongue, but he dared not challenge her in Drayden’s presence.

“Is Ghetsis truly as old as you say, Your Grace?” Rayanna interrupted. She was looking right at Drayden with those sultry violet eyes that reminded him so much of Aedith’s, they could have been sisters instead of cousins. “Is it even possible?”

All eyes turned to Drayden. Ryon sweated and dabbed his fleshy face and forehead with a silken handkerchief. Even Mydros, the weathered old guard who had survived a civil war and a virulent plague and even Cadmus’s short but bloody rule, looked uneasy all of a sudden.

“We play our part well,” the memory of Ghetsis’s silken warning whispered in Drayden’s ear.

Drayden discreetly folded his hands in his lap and fisted them until the knuckles were white. “He is...a relic of an older age living on stolen time,” Drayden said. “A parasite who won’t stay dead.”

“He hasn’t yet crossed swords with a Dragon,” Caelith said defiantly. “Parasites bleed the same as old men.”

Not if they’ve found a host strong enough to threaten a Dragon, Drayden thought. Even with N gone, Ghetsis still had the single largest militarized force on the Trident shielding him. And Thorys was right: to ignore such an army would be less than prudent.

“Ghetsis will bleed,” Drayden said, “but not with all of Neo Team Plasma guarding him. He’s untouchable for now, and he’s not my primary concern, anyway.”

“Then what is?” Elesa said in challenge.

“Opelucid,” Drayden said. “As it’s always been.”

She glared daggers at him. “Opelucid doesn’t stand alone. Nor should it have power to decide the fate of the rest of the Heart Tine alone.”

“Which is why I’m grateful for your presence as my queen, Elesa,” Drayden said. “You represent my interests in keeping Nimbasa and her people safe. You and our unborn child.”

Elesa stared at him like she no longer recognized him. Strong and willful with the presence of a true noble, she nonetheless lacked the one thing that made her no match for Drayden. He had learned the true price of a crown when his last family was torn from him; Elesa would never even come close.

“We’ll adjourn for now,” Drayden said to the others. “I need time to think on all your wise counsel before I make my decision.”

Everyone gathered their things in relative silence to file out of the small meeting room, and Elesa did not even look at him as she hurried out of the room. Rayanna was not far behind her, and the two women disappeared from sight in a whisper of silk and soft voices. Drayden watched them retreat down the hall around the corner.
“Caelith,” he said to his young protégé as she waited with him after the others took their leave. “Stay with Elesa.”

“Sire?”

“It’s come to my attention that she’s struck up a friendship of sorts with Rayanna Regnbage.”

Caelith blinked guilelessly. “I suppose so. Does that worry you? Queen Elesa poses no threat so long as she remains in Opelucid carrying your child. Rayanna has been your loyal Treasurer for years.”

“I know.” And what an odd pair they make. “Just do it, Caelith. I want to know if they’re plotting something.”

“I mean no disrespect, but I’m your top general. I have other duties to the Dragon Riders, and with Neo Team Plasma to worry about now, I think one of the handmaids would be better suited to this task.”

“I want you to do it,” Drayden said. “If you have to delegate command to Thorys, then so be it.”

“To Thorys? He’s a commander, true enough, but he’s an arrogant fool! I would never trust full command of the Dragon Riders to him—”

“Then choose another commander, I don’t care. I’ll hear no more argument on the matter. I’m your king, and I command it.”

Caelith looked like she wanted to protest again, but she wisely held her tongue. Her sunken dark eyes were as unreadable as two black pits, but he could sense her anger and humiliation at having to perform such a demeaning task as spying on his wife. As he knew she would, however, Caelith accepted the posting with no more argument. She would follow through. Handmaids could be bought with favors and gifts and saccharine words, especially where Elesa was concerned; Caelith’s loyalty to Drayden had no price.

“Yes, Your Grace,” Caelith said, bowing respectfully. “As you command.”

She left him, and Drayden was alone in the drafty hall. He did not linger, instead returning to the North Tower where his private rooms were located, the king’s rooms. The silence here was deafening, but he needed silence to think and reflect on all that had transpired in the last twenty-four hours since Ghetsis’s arrival and swift departure soon thereafter.

Drayden had not slept much since the ancient Reaper made his appearance. He knew eventually he would come face to face with Ghetsis, but he had not imagined it to happen so soon. After all these years, nothing had changed.

They had met once before, though Ghetsis had not known it. Drayden was just a boy, no more than seven years old at the time peeking through the peep holes in the walls as his mother, Queen Iridia, met with Ghetsis and his people in her private audience chamber. It was Cadmus’s idea to spy, as it always was. He was always roping Drayden into some mischief or other, usually ending with Drayden getting caught and taking the blame for the both of them.

Back then, Drayden did not understand much of what his mother was talking about with Ghetsis. He was more curious about the strange old man dressed in bizarre black and purple robes, like a character out of a storybook. A villain, undoubtedly, Drayden had thought. Those eyes... They had been cold and empty even through his wrinkled smiles. And something about his presence in the room. It was like the shadows in the corners grew and twisted when he entered, and the light from
the fire in the hearth could barely keep them at bay.

Ghetsis’s meeting with Queen Iridia had been a short one, and she caught Cadmus and Drayden spying after all when later that night she scolded them for snooping. When Cadmus asked her about the creepy old man who had come to see her, she kissed her young sons on their heads as she tucked them into bed.

“That was no man,” she had told them both, “but a creature wearing a man’s face.”

Years later, when Iridia and Cadmus and so many others were gone, Drayden heard of the rise of an environmental rights group calling themselves Team Plasma. Ghetsis was one of their Seven Sages operating largely from the shadows behind the youthful face of N, the group’s supposed leader, and Drayden realized what his mother had meant that night. Ghetsis was a Reaper, one of the feared cannibals of his kind who had managed to cling to life by consuming the souls of other Reapers. In keeping to the shadows, Ghetsis greatly minimized the risk of being recognized by most people except those who could divine his secret through powers beyond even his control. He would have never imagined that anyone in Opelucid recognized him now that Iridia’s generation was long dead, but he had not counted on Drayden knowing his true identity.

But it didn’t matter in the end. Ghetsis had left, as requested, but not emptyhanded. Most things in life were only a matter of time, and a creature like Ghetsis had only time in infinite quantities.

*He thinks I’ll capitulate,* Drayden thought to himself as he stood in his solar and gazed at the vast forests that stretched far to the north, dark at this late hour. *He thinks I’ll have no choice but to join forces with him on his terms. No, he knows it.*

How, Drayden could not say. A man as old as Ghetsis would have experienced many things in his too-long life, would know secrets no man ought to know. He knew about Cadmus’s bastard whelp, about things Drayden himself did not know. Did he know what would happen next? If he had lived for so long, then at what point did the future cease to be the future, but merely the timeless repetition of events past, predictable and unavoidable?

Drayden changed into warmer clothes to brave the autumn frost and headed outside to the wide north-facing balcony, where he released Salamence from his Pokéball. The King Dragon was so immense that he barely fit on the balcony. Drayden climbed up the beast’s bent leg onto his back, ignoring Salamence’s snarls, and commanded him to take to the skies. Together, they soared north over Opelucid City, a shadow against the twilit sky, and Salamence’s bloody wings appeared black in the gloom as they carried Drayden over leagues of city, then outlying villages and the opal mines, until only the inky stretch of the Darkwood opened under them like a still sea.

Birds took flight from the forest as Salamence passed over, frightened from their nests and squawking. A murder of Murkrow and Honchkrow cawed angrily as they flew west, a wave of darkness that parted for the Dragon and his king. The biting night air drew frozen fingers over Drayden’s cheeks, seeming to grow colder and more blistering with every league they gained. It would be as easy as this to leave everything behind, Opelucid and the Heart Tine and Neo Team Plasma and Elesa and all of it. The memories, the lives lost, the hopes dashed, the graves.

But if he left, then *she* would claim it all. Her, the mixed blood bastard daughter of Drayden’s fool of a brother and some Adriati thrall. She had the Old Blood despite her ignoble origins, the only reason Cadmus had raised her as his own until his demise. It was an insult to the throne, to the generations of rightful kings and queens who had sat the black and white thrones before them, and to Cadmus’s queen and wife, the only woman Drayden had ever truly loved.

“You cannot possibly raise her as a princess!” Drayden had shouted in one of their more heated
Cadmus shouted right back.

“Aedith matters! Our family, our honor, our traditions matter. You’ve already been marked for a nidding by carrying on with that Adriati thrall and getting her with child. Now you would shame the rest of us to legitimize your half-breed whelp, and for what? What could possibly be worth ruining a legacy more than 3,000 years old?”

“For an heir! For a legacy that’s mine. Iris shall be my legacy, a Titan for true, a worthy daughter of the Old Blood. Your own sons were born useless skuffs, Drayden. You of all people should understand Iris’s worth.”

Drayden shook in a anger as that conversation, the last he would ever have with Cadmus, replayed in his mind as clearly as that fateful day. He could hear Cadmus’s voice over the wind, booming like the skies themselves were out to crush him now. He couldn’t bear their weight, and he cried out in blinding anguish and rage.

“Salamence!” he screamed, raising his arms to feel the vicious winds draw him up off the Dragon’s back a few inches. “Draco Meteor!”

Salamence, so in tune with his trainer’s emotions, roared bloody and terrible at the oppressive night sky as it seemed to sink all around them. Light and heat erupted from Salamence’s immense maw, and he caught the wind in an updraft that lifted them ever higher. Drayden watched as light and fire rained down on the dark forest below, a hundred meteoric lights that crashed and burned and razed a square mile of earth in their fury, as if the stars themselves had fallen over to defy the night sky and do Drayden’s bidding.

The wanton destruction lit up the night in a blaze of light and heat, and when the smoke cleared, nothing but broken branches and burning leaves remained of the wide stretch of forest below. Drayden laid his hands on Salamence’s sleek blue scales, cold to the touch and thrumming with power. He had been a Shelgon when Cadmus and Drayden argued about Iris, but after the Red Plague swept through Opelucid, he evolved and emerged as much a king as Drayden himself in the ashes of all those who had succumbed to their gruesome fates.

“You wanted a true Titan heir?” Drayden shouted at the skies above. “Look no further, Brother!”

Salamence roared and echoed his trainer’s incantation, but only the howling winds returned their cry. Cadmus was not here, not for a long time. Aedith had overheard their argument about Iris and decided to take matters into her own hands that night out of fear for herself and her family’s position. It was not her fault she was barren, only an unhappy chance of bad luck the same as her broken engagement to Drayden and hasty marriage to Cadmus when Cadmus’s betrothed broke her oath, another cardinal sin worthy of the dreaded mark of nid, and ran off with a lowly Ignifer skuff. Drayden had had no choice then but to drive his sword through Aedith in retribution for her grievous crime. She was the woman he had always loved with a passion his own wife had never been able to draw out of him, but Cadmus was his blood, the Old Blood. The blood of the Dragon always came first. Always.

“I hear she has your blood. The Old Blood, and a Dragonite to do her bidding,” Ghetsis had taunted him.

Iris may be a Titan for true, but she was not his blood. She had no right to bear Cadmus’s name, his name, and no right to take the throne after all that Drayden had done for Opelucid. He had rebuilt the city after the Red Plague ravaged it all those years ago. He was the only one left standing when
everyone else sank into their graves. His sons were dead, and his unborn child would be a Fulmen, not a Titan. He was all Opelucid had left, the only one left standing on the city’s behalf. And he would defend it with all his might against any who threatened it.

“Promise me,” Braeia’s delirious dying wish haunted his lonely nights. “Promise me you’ll make it right.”

For all the treachery and wrongs committed, for the innocents who had suffered and died long before their time, for the city and its people that had been left with nothing and no one but him to shoulder their grief alone, he would make it right. That was his duty as a king, the power of the crown he wore. No one would hold Opelucid and its people hostage the way Cadmus had threatened to do. Especially not his half-cocked bastard daughter with something to prove.

Elesa could never be a queen like Drayden was a king. Unlike her, he had absolutely nothing left to fight for but the broken stones and souls that made up Opelucid City.

By the time Drayden returned to Dragonsong Castle, the sun was breaching the eastern horizon. He had not slept a wink, but the flight had rejuvenated him and filled him with a renewed sense of purpose and determination. He was weary but strong, ready to face the day’s challenges. First on his list would be Iris and how to deal with her. If Ghetsis thought him spread thin maintaining control over the Heart Tine, he was dead wrong. A Dragon was worth a hundred regular men. It would not take an army to hunt down one tacha bastard and eliminate her before she took another step north. He simply needed the right soldiers for the job.

But the moment Drayden recalled Salamence and stepped inside his chambers, Ryon was waiting for him looking disheveled and red in his plump face as though he had run all the way up the tower steps.

“Your Grace,” Ryon said, out of breath. “Forgive the intrusion, hah, hah,” he panted. “I have urgent news. I thought, hah, hah, you had departed, and I’ve been searching, hah, the castle—”

Drayden glared impassively at his chief scribe and informant. “Ryon, sit down. Catch your breath. Tell me what the matter is.”

Ryon was wiping his forehead with a silken yellow handkerchief that clashed horribly with his flushed skin. But he got the message and swallowed his panting as best he could to speak.

“There’s a man,” he said, “in the throne room. He demands an audience.”

Drayden narrowed his eyes at that word, demand. Ryon seemed to read his thoughts and quaked.

“That is, ah, he was quite adamant...”

Drayden closed his eyes and took a calming breath. His back was sore from hunching over Salamence for so long in the cold night air, but a king’s job was never finished. “Who received this
“Why, Queen Elesa and a handful of the court,” Ryon said. “Ah, but the man wishes to speak only to you. He’s said nothing as yet, not even his name.”

Drayden thought about that a moment. No man would ever come before him and make demands. If Ryon didn’t know his face, then he could not be from Opelucid. A foreigner, then. “I’ll be down shortly. Have the Ridder Knights shackle him if he becomes a nuisance.”

Ryon bowed his head and pushed himself up out of the plush sofa chair. “Yes, of course.”

He excused himself, waddling like his knees had forgotten how to bend properly, and Drayden headed for his private quarters to the bathroom. He did not waste time changing clothes, but he splashed water on his face and beard to wash out the night winds and the smell of smoke. His reflection in the wide vanity was severe and haggard, the face of a man far older than his forty-eight years.

“We play our part well.”

Drayden clenched his jaw so hard he almost broke a tooth. The longer he stared, the more he recognized the face in the mirror, the true face. His eyes narrowed to reptilian slits, his skin taut over his whiskered cheekbones pebbled as though scaly, and when he parted his lips, his teeth were too long and too sharp to fit in his mouth.

“I am a Dragon,” he said to his warped reflection.

*I have no need to play any other part.*

Drayden donned his wrought ebony and ivory crown and headed to the throne room on the other side of the castle. When he arrived, there was some kind of commotion going on as the foreign man shouted at the Ridder Knights attempting to restrain him. Elesa and her Rain Warrior body guard, Gozen, were there, and Elesa’s Manectric was out of his Pokéball snarling in warning at the commotion. Rayanna was among the court lords and ladies who were present, as was Caelith guarding Drayden’s black throne.

“I received you here,” Elesa said in a chilling voice. “The king doesn’t normally grant unscheduled audiences, especially not with one so savage as you. Choose your words carefully.”

“I’ll speak to the Dragon King only,” the man spat, “not to some wench in a pretty gown.”

Elesa got up from her white throne, and Manectric got up with her. But it was Gozen who leaped into action lightning-fast, katana drawn and poised to slice the man open from navel to nose. The Ridder Knights who had restrained him dropped him in a surprise at Gozen’s sudden appearance, and some drew their swords. Elesa’s heels clicked on the polished marble floor as she slowly and deliberately advanced on the man like a war goddess here to slay the unbelievers with Manectric in tow.

“I’m the queen,” she said, touching a hand to Manectric’s sparkling blue fur and brandishing the other at the man who had fallen down before her. “But more importantly, I’m a Fulmen. So choose your words again, wretch. *Carefully*.”

The man had nothing left to say to her, though, as he stared in fright at an electrified Elesa towering over him. Gozen’s katana had nicked the skin of his neck, and bright blood trickled down in a thin sad stream like it was afraid, too. It took the Ridder Knights a moment to remember themselves and surround Elesa for her protection, though it looked like the man needed it more than she did.
Drayden entered the throne room then, and the court lords and ladies and the Ridder Knights attending security bowed before him. He said nothing as he slowly took his place at his black throne, and Caelith joined him at his right.

“I see you’ve met my wife,” Drayden addressed the bedraggled man. “She makes quite the first impression.”

Elesa glared at him over her shoulder, but the man found his voice again.

“K-King Drayden,” he said, his voice raspy. “You came.”

“It is my throne room,” Drayden said.

The man was not just ragged, but older, too. Streaks of silver and white peppered his dark hair, and his face was ashen and weathered as though he had braved the elements to get here. His clothes were old and unwashed, plain clothes worn by civilians and average quality, salt-stained. He had seen better days.

“How nice of you to join us,” Elesa said, withdrawing. “I was just asking this visitor what possessed him to storm in here making demands and throwing insults.”

“Forgive me,” the man said. “I-I did not know you as the queen.”

“Fortunately for you, in our dungeons, men have little need to know anything,” Elesa said.

“State your business,” Drayden said. “You’ve deeply offended my court and my queen. I see no reason not to do as she suggests.”

The man seemed to regain his courage and scrambled past Gozen and Elesa to approach the throne, but he didn’t get far when the Ridder Knights caught him and yanked him back. Elesa returned to her own throne next to Drayden, not once looking at him as she gracefully took her seat.

“Please,” the man said. “I’ve traveled so far to get here.”

Drayden was growing increasingly annoyed by this peasant who dared to come in here like he deserved something. He waved his hand, angry that he’d wasted even these few minutes on something that clearly was not as urgent as Ryon had made it sound. “Take him to the Bone Cells.”

The Ridder Knights moved to do just that, but the man was not making it easy. “No, please! Hear me out, Your Grace! I have valuable information! It’s about your niece, Iris Fafnir!”

In an instant, Drayden’s fury and fears from the previous night returned to him at the sound of that infernal name. He raised his hand, and the Ridder Knights stopped hauling the man away. “What did you just say?” he said, eerily soft.

The man looked hopeful just then and held his chapped hands out to beseech Drayden. “The princess, Iris Fafnir—”

“That bastard girl does not bear my name,” Drayden cut in, getting up from his throne. “Who are you? Answer me.”

The Ridder Knights restraining the man dragged him bodily to the dais where Drayden stood and threw him on the floor at his feet. He had a smell about him, an odor of salt and sea that did little to cover the stench of soiled breeches and sweat and body odor from days, perhaps weeks exposed to the elements. His beard had grown in patchy, unkempt, and his hair was a knotted mess. But his
eyes were bright blue, lucid and hard.

“My name is Belaron,” the wretch said. “I am...was a noble Ridder Knight in the princess—in Iris’s service until recently.”

The sounds of incredulity filled the throne room as the implications of Belaron’s declaration, if proven true, circulated. Even Drayden found himself momentarily stunned at the revelation. He took a better look at the man—pale eyes and skin, dark of hair, sword-less. Could it be true? Could this man be a foreign Ridder Knight sworn to Iris’s service? And if it was true, what was he doing here?

“I-I can prove it!” Belaron said, getting to his feet and dusting himself off. He reached into the sleeve of his shirt and withdrew two Pokéballs. Before anyone could intervene, he released his Pokémon, a ferocious Feraligatr and an Arbok upwards of fifteen feet long. The beasts looked spooked at their unfamiliar surroundings and the presence of strange people, and they flanked Belaron protectively.

Elesa’s Manectric barked in warning and began to charge power, while Gozen released her Roserade to protect her mistress. The Ridder Knights erupted in a commotion, drawing swords and Pokéballs alike in the face of the threat. But Drayden simply raised his hand and forced Arbok and Feraligatr into submission, cowing them until they were as docile as Deerling beside their trainer.

“Feraligatr and Arbok are foreign to Unova,” Belaron explained. “I came across the sea from Blackthorn City with Iris and her company, and I’ve been traveling with her around Unova ever since.” When Drayden did not respond right away, he stammered on, “I know things! Things about Iris, her movements, her plans... I could tell you where she is right now and where she’s going!”

“Driftveil,” Drayden said. “And on to Mistralton after that, presumably.”

Belaron looked disheartened that Drayden already knew these things, but he would not be deterred. “She has allies! Gym Leader Marlon has pledged his loyalty to her cause.”

This was news, and it was all Drayden could do not to smash Belaron’s face in just to feel something break. Of course Adria would support Iris. Her mother had been Adriati, after all. And that son of a nidding Marlon had never been a friend to Opelucid. Drayden never imagined that he would take up arms, though. Alone, Humilau was no match for Opelucid, especially with the Reversal Mountains dividing the cities. Syreni were fish out of water on land; they could never hope to cross the mountains easily. Something did not seem right.

Belaron continued to prattle on, taking Drayden’s silence for encouragement. “And more allies appeared after the Sack of Castelia, including the Aspertia City Gym Leader. But he perished in the attack on Driftveil’s Colosseum, and his companions were Tamers but young and green, from what I could tell. She even took in some pink-haired thrall woman, but Clay would not be convinced—”

Drayden was too busy processing all this information, and he barely acknowledged Elesa’s gasp behind him, one of many in the throne room as the court heard Belaron’s wild stories. Drayden put up his hand for silence, and Belaron shut up suddenly.

“Convinced?” Drayden said. “Convinced of what?”

“I beg your pardon?” Belaron said.

“You said Gym Leader Clay was not convinced,” Drayden said. “Convinced of what?”

Belaron opened and closed his mouth like a fish as he tried to find his words. “Ah, that is,
convinced to help her on her quest.”

Drayden felt heat warming his neck as his anger began to boil. “And what quest is that?”

Belaron looked unsure and laid a hand on Feraligatr’s flank for some meager comfort. “She, ah... She returned to take back Opelucid... from you.”

From the moment Drayden had heard of Iris’s return to Unova, he knew what she intended. But to hear it out loud from her Ridder Knight—and Drayden was convinced the man was telling the truth knowing that coming here would mean certain death—somehow made it real.

“How long ago was this?” Elesa demanded all of a sudden.

Belaron blinked up at her. “How long?”

“When you left Driftveil and Gym Leader Clay was not convinced to help her. How long ago was it?” Elesa said.

“I...believe some weeks. I cannot be sure. I traveled on foot north from Driftveil, and I had no money for passage across the strait. I’ve been trying to get here for so long.”

What’s happened in those unaccounted weeks?

The question went unspoken, but everyone in the throne room was thinking it. And they were all looking to Drayden to decide what to do next.

Damn you, Drayden thought, picturing Iris as he last saw her, a stick-thin little girl missing teeth and brown as a copper coin, like a little smudge on the solemn grey and black and white walls of this castle. Damn you to hell.

“Why are you here?” Drayden asked all of a sudden.

“Why, to tell you all I know, of course,” Belaron said obsequiously. “I consider it my duty as a Ridder Knight to serve.”

“As a Ridder Knight, your duty is to Iris, as you said. Why, then, are you here?” Drayden pressed.

“I...my duty...”

“Your duty was to your sworn Titan ward. That is the purpose of Ridder Knights the world over, as you would know claiming to be one of them. This is the last time I ask you. Why are you here?”

Belaron was defeated and seemed to shrink from his previous broad-shouldered confidence. “...I left her.”

“Ridder Knights are forbidden to leave their wards,” Mydros said, stepping forward with a hand on his sword. “The only way a Ridder Knight may part from his ward alive is through banishment for betrayal.”

“All right, it’s true,” Belaron said defensively. “She banished me, but that’s why I knew I had to come here and warn you!” he implored Drayden. “I-It’s as you said, Your Grace, Iris is no true princess. She’s not even a true Titan, being a bastard. I was wrong, I admit, but—”

“Iris is a bastard born out of wedlock,” Drayden said. “Her existence is the result of my brother’s cardinal sin, for which he now suffers under the mark of nid. She is no princess... but she is a Titan for true. The blood does not lie.” He drew his sword, Evighet, the sacred sword of the Fafnir
Dynasty passed down from kings and queens before him for generations, the one he inherited upon Cadmus’s death and had used to bring Cadmus’s wife and killer to justice. A golden Haxorus head roared at the pommel, its fire opal eyes burning for blood. “A Ridder Knight who betrays his Titan ward must be punished.”

The blade was rippling platinum steel allegedly forged millennia ago in Mt. Coronet in Sinnoh, the seat of the First Dragons. The legends said this blade’s steel was infused with the blood of Dialga, Keeper of Time, and thus withheld the ages ever sharp and strong. The legends also said it was one of three such sacred swords, each a relic of one of the three Dragon gods of old Sinnoh and imbued with magic lost to the ages. But legends were stories. Whatever the truth behind the blade’s origins, its wielders had cared for it over the years as the Fafnir Dynasty’s most precious heirloom and emblem of its leaders.

“Wait, please,” Belaron said. “I—I’m valuable. I can tell you about Iris, her allies, anything you want to know! I’ve known her since she was a child, how she thinks, her weaknesses—”

Drayden nodded to Mydros, and the Ridder Knights soon confiscated Belaron’s Pokéballs and recalled his two Pokémon, still docile under Drayden’s control. They shoved him to knees on the marble, and one of them retrieved a wooden stool from somewhere upon which to lay Belaron’s right hand—his sword hand.

“This Ridder Knight betrayed the Titan he served,” Drayden bellowed loudly enough to fill the throne room for all to hear. “She was too weak to repay his treachery in kind, but I am not. Those who plot and scheme against the one they serve shall not be shown anything but iron justice.”

He caught Elesa staring at him, her dark eyes hard and unreadable. The entire court’s eyes were on Drayden.

“Please!” Belaron wailed. “I came here to help you! I am a Ridder Knight, a servant of the crown!”

“Oh, you’ll serve,” Drayden said. “Your service begins now, Syr Belaron.”

He brought down his blade on Belaron’s exposed wrist and cut clean through. Blood squirted from the open stump, coating the blade and the stool and the white marble floor in bright crimson spurts. Belaron howled in pain and convulsed, clutching his raw stump, and his severed hand fell to the floor with a soft thud, the fingers twitching.

Drayden withdrew Evighet, Belaron’s blood coating the pale steel like a second skin, and watched the sheets of red run down the blade’s edge, beautiful and smooth. He wiped it clean with a rag one of the Ridder Knights passed to him and sheathed the blade once more.

“See that the traitor has every comfort the Bone Cells have to offer,” Drayden ordered.

The Ridder Knights carried Belaron away, weeping and broken and bloody, to the dungeons below the castle named for the bones of Dragons that barred them, harder than any iron cells. Perhaps he could reveal more useful information in the future, but a traitor could not be trusted, no matter who he had betrayed or why. Belaron would live out the rest of his days in darkness and squalor in the Bone Cells, however many remained to him.

“Syr Mydros, I want no more visitors today,” Drayden said. “See that any aggrieved parties postpone their audiences until tomorrow. I don’t want to be disturbed.”

Mydros nodded stiffly. “As you command.”

Drayden left the throne room and the mess Belaron’s maiming had made for someone else to clean
up. He locked eyes with Elesa on his way out but said nothing; she had heard and seen all she needed to today, as far as Drayden was concerned. Ryon was waiting for him by the door, tittering and nervous as always. The man had the constitution of a child in the face of blood and violence.

“Walk with me,” Drayden said, not slowing down as he exited the throne room and made his way back to his chambers.

“Yes, Your Grace,” Ryon said shakily. He had to jog-waddle to keep up with Drayden’s long loping strides, and soon began to sweat as they made their way up flights of stairs back toward the North Tower.

“I’m displeased, Ryon,” Drayden said. “I’m sure you understand why.”

“A thousand pardons, Your Grace. I do not know how this news of the Aspertia City Gym Leader’s death or Iris actively attempting to recruit the Triumvirs escaped my whisperers,” Ryon said, abashed. “I admit I have fewer contacts in the Upper West Tine than elsewhere…”

“And Humilau?” Drayden said, his tone scathing. “How are your contacts over there?”

Ryon had the sense to look abashed. His head was so red Drayden was sure it might pop right off at any moment like a burst pimple. “We knew she’d been traveling with help from some Humilauans, but we had no idea she had a formal alliance with Humilau. It’s all my failure, Your Grace. I shall dispatch my informants to Driftveil at once.”

“See that you do. Whatever that girl is doing over there, I want to know. And not weeks later from a washed up Ridder Knight turned traitor.”

“At once, Your Grace.”

Ryon’s hesitant tone did not go unnoticed, and Drayden glanced at him askance as he slowed to wait for the heavyset scribe doing his best to keep pace as they climbed another staircase.

“What is it, Ryon? Speak.”

Ryon was panting a bit now, and dabbed his head with an already soiled handkerchief. “It’s just... The Triumvirs have made it a point not to involve the Upper West Tine with the rest of Unova’s affairs, not since the Civil Wars. Whatever may be possible seems extremely unlikely to pass, especially if…”

“Especially if I align myself with Neo Team Plasma,” Drayden finished his thought.

“Forgive me, Your Grace. I didn’t mean to suggest…”

“You’re a member of my council. It’s your job to make suggestions, even ones I may not care to hear.”

Ryon nodded and stared at the floor.

“I have much to think on,” Drayden said as they reached his wing in the North Tower. “Schedule a council meeting tomorrow morning, first thing. I’ll have my decision for you all by then. And Ryon.”

“Yes?”

“I have one more job for you. It concerns Queen Elesa.”
Back in the privacy of his living quarters, Drayden dismissed his servants to be alone. Ryon had scuttled off like a Venipede to do his bidding, both with regards to dispatching a network of informants in the Upper West Tine and Drayden’s personal request to have eyes and ears on Elesa at all times. Caelith could be trusted to be loyal, but she had no head for the schemes and calculations Elesa was so fond of. If there was any inconsistency with Caelith’s reports and Ryon’s, Drayden wanted to know.

Drayden unclipped his sword belt and set the sheathed blade on a table in his solar. He would have to clean it properly later. To the untrained eye, it was no different from any other fine sword. But Evighet was a magic sword, so the tales went. In the age of the First Dragons when Titans were the first and only Tamers the world had known, it was said that a mighty Titan empress wielded Evighet to cut through Time itself and save her lover from an untimely death. Drayden did not believe in any of the stories; Evighet, if this was even the true Evighet and not some well-made copy disguised as the real thing, had never functioned as anything more than an ordinary, if not expertly forged, sword. Even the dreaded mark of nid and the hellish eternity of suffering those who bore it were condemned to was nothing but a fable woven to scare and cow the ignorant masses. But there was power in fables and the legends they enshrined. Legends, like Evighet, were symbols, and symbols could cut deeper than any sword if wielded correctly.

And yet, he had not killed Iris when he’d had the chance. When she was young and vulnerable and no threat at all. Maybe he should have done as Braeia had insisted and killed her all those years ago, curses be damned. Instead, he banished her and her mother, never to be seen again.

“She’s just a child,” Drayden had said in the muted candlelight of their shared bedroom, this very room where he now stood alone.

“She’s not just a child; she’s a Dragon. Cadmus was not wrong about that,” Braeia had warned him. “And think of our own sons.”

But Drayden’s own sons had been skuffs. They would never inherit the throne no matter who their parents were. Such was the cruelty of this world to give a bastard all the gifts never meant for her. Iris was small and skinny, shy with a cute smile, as all children can be cute. She was no threat, and if he sent her away, she would never grow up to become one. It didn’t matter where she went as long as she was gone from Opelucid, gone from Unova. It wasn’t her fault she’d been born, but in the eyes of the masses it would be Drayden’s terrible fault if he slaughtered her in her sleep.

Most killing was justice, cruel and cold as it had been with Aedith or the victims of war. But the murder of an innocent was one of the four cardinal sins worthy of the mark of nid, an eternal condemnation that damned the sinner to become food for the ravenous spectral wyrm Giratina until the end of time.

“If I kill Iris, I’ll be marked as a nidding, doomed to suffer for all eternity,” Drayden reminded Braeia.

“You don’t believe in those stories.”

“It doesn’t matter what I believe. The people believe it. I would be forever marked in their eyes, as Cadmus was.”

“Then at least you would see Cadmus again in your shared suffering, and our sons would be safe.”

Their sons were dead now, and Braeia too, and only Drayden and the bastard girl he couldn’t kill
were left. Iris had not made him a nidding, but if things continued as they were, perhaps she might if she eventually made her way here.

*If she were to recruit the Triumvirs to her cause...*

It could not happen. It was unlikely to happen, but unlikely was not impossible, as Ryon had wisely reminded him. Iris needed to be stopped before she started a war that would find its way here to the people of Opelucid who had already suffered more than their fair share of loss and grief.

“They would never accept the bastard daughter of a nidding as their queen,” Drayden said, taking comfort in hearing the words aloud. “She’ll look a stranger to them in every way. She’ll never take Opelucid.”

Outside, the sky was overcast today with the threat of freezing rain. Drayden touched a hand to the glass window overlooking the Darkwood to the north. Everything for as far as the eye could see to the north was his domain, and everything to the south, as well. But if Iris came with the strength of Adria and the Upper West Tine and possibly Aspertia at her back, would he be able to defend it? Or would she make him rue the day he showed her mercy over justice?

Those questions and many more remained unanswered the next morning when Drayden found himself once again seated with his council. Everyone was talking over each other after the show Belaron had put on yesterday, each of them clamoring to be heard.

“We have to send an envoy to Driftveil immediately,” Thorys said, slamming his good hand on the table. “The last thing Gym Leader Clay will want to do is get in bed with an exiled bastard when he knows he’ll be positioning himself and the rest of the Upper West Tine against Opelucid. It’d be suicide.”

“Talking will do no good,” Elesa said. “Clay remembers the Civil Wars and everything Opelucid did in the Upper West Tine. He’s a Ground Adamantine; he’ll never forget or forgive.”

*Is that what you’re counting on?* Drayden wondered. With Elesa, he could never tell. As his wife, he could not imagine how she or Nimbasa would benefit from a war between Opelucid and the Upper West Tine.

“Then we crush them,” Caelith said. “Adamantines will be no match for the Dragon Riders.”

“Seeing as I’m commanding the Dragon Riders for now, I say there will be no crushing until we’ve sent an envoy,” Thorys said.

Caelith looked ready to put out his eye, but she kept her silence on her secret mission for Drayden to spy on Elesa for him.

“I think it’s clear that whatever we do, we must eliminate the threat Iris poses,” Mydros said as though the words pained him. “We could have her captured and brought here, perhaps.”

“Captured?” Rayanna said. “Surely a quiet assassination would be easier. I have the coin to finance such an operation, even in the Upper West Tine.”

Mydros looked uncomfortable. “She may be a usurper, but she is a Titan and King Cadmus’s own blood.” He shot Drayden a furtive glance as if to say, ‘And your blood, too.’

“Iris must die,” Caelith said. “By assassination or otherwise, she is a usurper and an enemy of Opelucid regardless of her blood. Her death would mean justice.”
“The Upper West Tine won’t cooperate with Opelucid,” Elesa warned. “Any army will be rebuffed as Neo Team Plasma was rebuffed in Driftveil.”

“Neo Team Plasma was alone in that attack,” Ryon said meekly. “Perhaps the prospect of a more, ah, coordinated front could be enough to deter the Triumvirs…”

Rayanna rested her chin on her hands. “My goodness, Ryon. Are you suggesting we accept Ghetsis’s proposal for an alliance with Neo Team Plasma?”

Caelith stared in horror. “Absolutely not. That unholy creature is no better than a monster in a mask. No good could ever come of an alliance with Neo Team Plasma.”

“I agree,” Elesa said. “The Neos have shown themselves to be violent brutes with no respect for Gym Leaders or the rule of law. Even now, they occupy Castelia when it rightfully belongs to us.”

“Sire?” Ryon said. “What is your decision?”

All eyes turned to Drayden, suspicious and frustrated and a little hopeful, but his decision was already made before this meeting began. “We will bolster our information network in the Upper West Tine to collect intelligence on Iris and her allies. If an assassination attempt is possible, we’ll take it.”

“Your Grace,” Mydros protested.

“I thought we didn’t have people in the Upper West Tine,” Rayanna said, her deep violet eyes narrowed in suspicion.

“Neo Team Plasma does,” Drayden said. “We will use their sleeper agents.”

“You can’t be serious,” Elesa said. “You mean to ally with Neo Team Plasma?”

“I mean to test the benefits of a potential alliance. If the Neos are successful in dealing with Iris, I’ll have no further use for them or their alliance. If not, their numbers will be useful in whatever war she hopes to start,” Drayden said.

“Yveltal can take your alliance!” Caelith shouted, beside herself as she leaned across the table. “We cannot trust Opelucid’s welfare with the Reaper’s true intentions, whatever they may be!”

Drayden was momentarily taken aback by her belligerence, but he recovered with a force. “How dare you take that tone with me? I am your king, and my word is final.”

Caelith shook with disbelief. “How can you say that? We are Dragons. To debase ourselves with an alliance with a cult of firebrands is beneath us!”

“Victory is not beneath us,” Drayden said. “Survival is not beneath us. We are Dragons. We soar above all others. Neo Team Plasma is one tool of many at our disposal, and a powerful one at that if wielded prudently.”

“She has terrified you,” Caelith said, almost in a daze. “Iris has terrified you. Sire, please, hear me —”

“No, you hear me. All of you.” Drayden stood up to look down on them all. “I’ve made my decision after careful consideration. You may not agree, but you must obey. No monarch has done what I’m doing for Opelucid. With victory comes sacrifice, but there are some sacrifices I’m not willing to make. If someone will die for our victory, it will be Neo Team Plasma, not my Ridder
Knights or my Dragon Riders or any Opelucidians.

“Now go, do your jobs. Make this happen. The next time we convene, I expect to hear about Iris’s demise and her little rebellion along with her. Is that clear?”

Ryon stood and clasped his hands over his middle. “My informants are weaving their webs as we speak, Your Grace.”

“I’ll pay a visit to the royal coffers,” Rayanna said quietly.

Mydros said nothing and bowed his head respectfully, and Thorys grinned wolfishly. Elesa remained seated, subdued and quiet. Drayden took his leave of them all, the air grown stifling. Caelith’s sunken eyes bored into him as he retreated, empty and unblinking as she wallowed in spurned disgrace.

*Let her pout*, he thought as he retreated. No matter how much she struggled and protested, she would see things his way in the end. She always did.

Chapter End Notes

Insert obligatory, “When you play the game of thrones, you win or you die,” here.
Nate

Clay’s Gym trainer, Tibor, led the hike through Chargestone Cave. A giant of a man at six-foot-seven and built like a Boldore, Nate felt like he needed to give the man a wide berth so as not to get stepped on by mistake. Tibor had a square jaw, grey eyes cut like granite, and sandy windblown hair that did little to soften his rugged intensity. He preferred to lead the expedition mostly in silence, broken only by the occasional warning not to touch or stumble upon the surrounding environment. His Claydol, as strange as it was large at nearly seven feet tall and floating as though it weighed nothing at all, seemed to possess an innate sense of direction in this place and hardly stopped at all to reorient itself.

Which was a good thing, because Nate, like most of the rest of his party, was too distracted by the environment to pay much attention to directions. Chargestone cave was a living geode of sorts. Outside it appeared to be little more than a natural cave in the rocky Twist Mountains between Driftveil and Mistralton Cities; inside it was alive with light and energy the likes of which Nate had never imagined could exist outside the realm of science fiction.

Crystals in every shade of blue and purple imaginable burst from the rock like searching fingers. Some were no bigger than a Pecha berry; others were as large as a house and just as tall. They sprouted from every surface like mushrooms, and they glowed with an eerily beautiful internal light that illuminated their colors and made torches and flashlights superfluous. Like a house of mirrors, Nate caught his warped reflection in the cut faces of the crystals, bathed in blue, and when he touched the smooth surface of the crystal, he felt a subtle electrical jolt, warm to the touch. Lampent, who had been dormant hanging from his belt on the long hike to the cave’s mouth from Driftveil proper, came alive in here and marveled at his reflection and the way the faceted crystal faces warped the image of his indigo flames.

“That’s Galvantula excrement,” Tibor said when he saw Nate’s wandering fingers.

Nate jumped. “What?”

Tibor nodded nonchalantly. “The glow. Galvantula shit conducts electricity. Piled up over the centuries ‘n ya got electrified crystals.” He gestured at a particularly lustrous crystal the color of the dawn sea. “They can sense whenever prey touches the crystals.”

Nate swallowed. “Like a giant crystal spider web.”

Tibor nodded again, solemn.

And I’m the fly.

He crossed his arms as tightly as he could.

“Best not touch,” Tibor said, then stalked off.

Nate imagined hundreds of compound eyes glittering in the darkness, watching him, stalking him as he made his way through the cave, waiting for him to lose his way. He released Lucario and made sure to keep him out of his Pokéball for the rest of the time they were in this baleful spider’s nest.

Lucario loped alongside Nate, ever vigilant as the hours turned to days in the iridescent darkness, but the jackal was extremely displeased with Lampent’s presence in the group and growled whenever the sentient lamp drifted too close for comfort. Naturally, Lampent found Lucario’s
reactions delightful and made a game out of trying to sneak up on the taciturn Lucario just to see how close he could get. It was a testament to Lucario’s patience and absolute regard for Nate that he didn’t react with violence against Lampent.

“Not babysitting that Bug today?” Hugh asked as he fell into step with Nate.

Hugh had barely spoken a word to him after the horrific events of the Neo Team Plasma Frigate invasion at the Colosseum. Nate had given him space as much as he could, but he’d never realized how empty and alone the world felt without Hugh’s acerbic commentary filling the spaces. Silence did not suit him. Since Clay conditionally agreed to help them with their cause if they could sway the other Triumvirs, Hugh had started to come around a little, but there was a haunted look about him, like a wound that refused to heal agonizing him with every breath he drew. Every breath that Cheren no longer drew. Nate had suspected that Hugh was deeply disturbed by his own actions and the actions of others in the Sack of Castelia, but Cheren’s death and Hugh’s violent reaction to it had put him over some invisible precipice to which he had somehow wandered too close without Nate or anyone else even realizing it. Nate had no idea how to pull him back up. Maybe he never would, but he had to try. They both did.

Nate managed a small but genuine smile for his best friend. He’d been feeling under the weather recently, nothing serious but enough to exacerbate the trauma and mental anguish of the events of the last several weeks. Now that they were hiking and in the dark, the cold had begun to aggravate him more noticeably. “I tried to check on Larvesta last night, but she was all wrapped up in some kind of cocoon. I think she’s hibernating until she evolves. Alder said her mate already did a while ago, so I guess it’s her time, too.”

Hugh grunted. “About damn time she started being useful.” He shoved his hands in his pockets as he stared at the floor and his feet moving one in front of the other, mechanically.

Ahead, Rosa walked with Ferroseed just behind Tibor and his Claydol, silent as she admired the crystals but did not touch them. It seemed that both of his best friends were still giving him the cold shoulder, for the most part. Not that he blamed them entirely. If he’d only been upfront with them from the beginning, this all could have been avoided. Maybe Rosa and Hugh wouldn’t have stormed off to find Clay and gotten dragged into the attack on the Colosseum, and Cheren might still be alive...

No, Nate scolded himself. I had my chance to grieve and feel sorry. Now, I have to be strong. For them.

“Hugh, I know you’ve been through hell lately,” he began.

“Don’t,” Hugh cut him off. “Just don’t, Nate. Nothing you say can change or fix what happened, so don’t even try. I’m sick of hearing you apologize.”

He sounded so forlorn and lost, so un-Hugh-like that Nate wanted to shout at him to wake up. But after what Hugh had been through, was there any waking up, truly? Even if time healed him, the scars would never leave him. It didn’t matter. Nate was awake now like he had never been before, which would have to be enough for both of them.

“I know,” Nate said softly. “I’m done apologizing. I just wanted you to know that I’m looking forward now. Cheren’s gone.”

Hugh glared at him, but Nate was not deterred.

“He’s gone, but I’m still here. And I’m not giving up. You said I had a responsibility to leave
Aspertia to help out because I can, so that’s what I’m gonna do. I can’t apologize to you anymore.”

“Huh? Nate, that’s not—”

Nate didn’t give him any time to interject. “Take all the time you need, okay? I’m here for you whenever you need anything. I always will be. But I’m done apologizing, for Rosa and for you.”

Hugh looked at him with tired eyes, deep and dark blue as the colors of the crystals reflected in them. He said nothing.

“Come on Lampent, Lucario,” Nate said, beckoning them back.

Hugh hiked on ahead and shoved his hands deeper into his pockets as Nate hung back with his Pokémon. The sight of Hugh’s back was a sad one, but there was nothing else he could do for Hugh until he let him. Hugh had a short fuse and a long memory, but even he could not survive on his anger fumes forever. But Nate couldn’t play the waiting game any longer, not with Hugh and not with Rosa, either. Cheren was gone, and their fight needed someone to take the lead, however inadequately.

*I’m doing this for them,* Nate told himself. *I’m helping them.*

He had to believe it. If he didn’t, he would lose his mind.

Behind him a ways was Iris’s group. Benga was recovering quickly, but he was riding in a basket on Moros’s Nidoking’s back to accommodate his grievous injuries and weakened state. Iris’s Haxorus was a fearsome sight to behold, almost more intimidating than her Dragonite with his huge golden tusks and gleaming armor. While lacking Dragonite’s sheer size, Haxorus had a mean and merciless look about him that made Nate think the informally-dubbed Executioner Pokémon was extremely aptly named.

Nate wiped sweat from his brow. It was not warm in here, and with autumn in full swing, the days were getting shorter and noticeably colder. Even so, Nate felt clammy and chilled in the feverish sense, but he did not have a temperature. Probably just a common cold. Hiking all day and sleeping on the ground wasn’t helping matters.

As though sensing his thoughts, Lampent hovered near all of a sudden and got in his face. Two yellow eyes, more a trick of the pale fire than true eyes, flickered and stared down at him. He extended his feelers and gingerly touched Nate’s cheek, his neck, his shoulder, almost shy.

“Shhhhh,” something seemed to whisper in his ears, from everywhere at once.

But it was gone so quickly that he must have imagined the sound. Lampent was cold to the touch despite his blazing indigo fire, and Nate shivered.

“Hey,” he said. “Are you okay, Lampent?”

Lampent withdrew and curled his feeler arms, and when he extended them again, he was holding purple will-o-wisps and offered them like candy to Nate. He couldn’t help but smile at the oddly endearing gesture, as though Lampent were trying to cheer him up. He held out his hand for one of the wisps, amazed at how it floated in his open palm, cool and weightless as though it was nothing but a hallucination.

Lucario yipped, and Nate was surprised to find him a healthy distance up ahead, well out of reach of Lampent. As a Steel-type, Lucario had always been a little wary around Nate’s Fire-type Pokémon, but over the years they had built a solid bond of trust in each other and in Nate. Maybe
Lampent was still too new to the team for Lucario to get along with him. Or maybe it was something else.

The will-o-wisp flickered in Nate’s hand, not fizzling out, and he wondered how that could be. He wiggled the fingers of his free hand over the flame and watched as they reached out, grasping, little freezing tongues.

So cold.

He tried channeling heat into his hands, the way he would do to burn whatever he touched if he concentrated hard enough, and watched mesmerized as the purple flame grew in size and began to warm. Lampent danced overhead, delighted at the little display.

“Nate,” Iris said.

Her voice startled him and he nearly dropped the will-o-wisp, now grown to twice its original size, but Lampent swooped in with an alarming burst of speed and deftly scooped it up. He floated off, cradling the engorged will-o-wisp in his feelers like he was trying to hide it, and slowly absorbed it back into himself through the glass. Nate was too busy falling into step with Iris to pay Lampent much mind.

“Hey,” he said. “Whoa...”

Haxorus trudged along, heedless of anyone in his path, including Nate, and Nate had to back off the path and shove himself against a large crystal to make room. The edge of it dug into his arm and made his hair stand on end a little as he felt a weak electric jolt jump between them.

I wonder if the Galvantula felt that...

Lucario was back at his side all of a sudden, growling in warning at Haxorus, but the golden Dragon hardly noticed the puny jackal and lumbered on by. Iris’s Cottonee was freeloading as he rode on Haxorus’s head, seemingly at ease between the axe-head tusks that looked like they could have cut through even the enormous crystals that marked their path.

“Why did you stop?” Iris asked as they resumed their trek along the path.

“Huh? Oh.” He looked ahead to where Hugh was hiking up over the small hill in the path around a particularly fat cobalt crystal.

Iris followed his gaze. “I sometimes think Syreni are an entirely different species. It’s difficult to predict what they’ll do or why. Take Nuria, for instance.”

Nate smiled a little. “Yeah, that sounds a little like Hugh.”

“Quilfish’ll be fine,” Benga said from his perch on Nidoking’s back. “He’ll have to be if he wants to stand a chance in hell at training Vibrava.”

Benga’s manner was gruff, and he even looked like a roguish outlaw from some storybook who could do impossible things like slay giants or fly. Nate was not yet sure what to make of him and all his wolfish grinning, but he’d seen the way Iris risked everything to save him, and that was good enough for him.

“Yeah,” Nate said. “Speaking of which, I’m glad you’re back on your feet.”

“Back on Nidoking’s feet, you mean,” Benga said. “Not a bad way to travel, actually. I invited Iris
to ride shotgun, but she wasn’t into it.”

Iris snorted. “Obviously.”

Benga feigned hurt. “Quiet, or you’ll offend Nidoking’s delicate ears.”

“You’re offending my ears. Sit back and try not to open up your stitches again.”

Nate watched their teasing, and even Iris could not help but smirk just a little to herself as Benga’s gaze lingered on her.

“Yeah, yeah,” Benga complained, but he was grinning and settled back into the basket.

Nuria laughed as she joined them. “I like this very much. Benga in a basket. He’s like a little child riding around on his mother’s back.”

“Well, you’re half right,” Iris said.

“One of my best qualities is that I look great in all vehicles and containers,” Benga said.

“Debatable,” Nuria said.

“You’ll look better walking,” Iris said. “Hey, stop leaning over like that or you’ll pop your stitches for sure.”

“Hm? Oh, you mean like this?” Benga leaned his head backwards over the edge of the basket.

“You’re going to fall out,” Nuria warned him.

“You better not,” Iris said.

“Nidoking won’t let me fall out, right big guy?” Benga scratched him behind his ear.

Nidoking made a rumbling growling sound in response.

“Hah, that’s a no,” Benga said.

Nate watched them banter and wished he could partake, but he felt a bit like an outsider looking in. He tried to picture himself with Hugh and Rosa in their places, to imagine what it might be like for the three of them to get on so easily. But all he could picture was sullen silence between them, which was worse even than their impassioned fighting had been.

He slowed his pace as they climbed the hill, letting them walk on ahead. Lucario whined up at him, as though sensing his inner despondency, and Nate scratched him behind the ear. “Must be nice, huh?” he said.

Lampent suddenly wooshed in from above, and Nate nearly tripped over his own feet.

“What the...?”

“Hey, Nate!” Yancy called. “Oh!”

Lampent zoomed in and orbited around her, much to both Mienshao’s and Emolga’s chagrin. The latter began to spark her frustration, but Lampent didn’t seem to mind at all and began juggling indigo will-o-wisps like some circus performer to entertain Yancy. She laughed.
“Yancy,” Nate said, relieved to see her. He waited for her to catch up.

Lucario stiffened next to Nate when he caught a whiff of Mienshao, and Yancy paused, one hand on Mienshao’s shoulder. The two Fighters faced off for a moment, sizing each other up, but soon enough Lucario bowed, and Mienshao returned the deference, if reluctantly.

“Um...” Nate said, watching the scene unfold.

“Fighters are proud,” Yancy said as she joined him. “It’s okay, I’ve seen Mienshao do this before. It means no one’s going to die today.”

“Oh, well, that’s good,” Nate said, falling into step with her. “Is that a Rain Warrior thing?”

“Hm? Oh, not really. Marshal taught me that.”

“Marshal?”

Yancy averted her gaze. “Someone I used to know.” After a moment she added, “He’s a Bellator. He trained with us for a while. Until Opelucid came.”

Nate swallowed. He knew she didn’t like thinking about Opelucid, the reason she’d had to leave her home and come out here alone. “Sounds like you were close.”

“Yeah, I guess. Sort of. He was kind of distant. But...well, I guess I learned a lot from him. It’s funny, actually. I don’t think I really appreciated a lot of what he taught me until all this.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Tamers and all that, you know? I think...I lived a lot of my life not really thinking about it. How it all works, what it means.” She bit her lower lip and glanced at him askance. “Marshal actually told me the secret for how to beat Tamers.”

Nate looked at her, bemused. “Oh, yeah? What’s that?”

She rolled her eyes. “You’ll laugh.”

“If I do, I’ll thank you for it. I could use a good laugh.”

Yancy considered a moment. “...He said Tamers only think about what they can do, not about everything else. That they have their abilities for that.”

Nate thought about that. “So...you think we rely on our abilities too much?”

She shrugged. “I dunno, maybe? You know, I haven’t met a whole lot of Tamers outside the Nimbasa Gym trainers, and they’re all Fulmen. I guess...you’re sort of my first.”

Nate thought of Emboar suddenly. He’d died despite the fact that Nate was an Ignifer. And Cheren was gone, too, even though he was an Atlas. Stabbed through the heart, and none of his inborn strength could stop it. He had fallen the same as anyone would have. “Abilities aren’t always enough,” he said.

“He said the same thing, Marshal. Abilities aren’t always enough.”

Nate said nothing to that.

“But, you know...I think that’s why it’s important to embrace the weakness. If you ignore it, you’ll
never see it being exploited until it’s too late.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Nate said. He couldn’t picture Cheren taking a knife to the heart. He couldn’t picture Cheren as anything but strong and proud and alive. How did this happen?

“And, at least for me,” Yancy said hesitantly, “I’m glad I have Iris and you and the others here with me. You can do things I can’t, but maybe...I can do things you can’t, too. So it’s kind of like we balance.” She touched his arm. “Like the world doesn’t seem so big when you have people watching your back.”

Nate ran his hand through his hair and dispelled the thought of Cheren’s death from his mind. Yancy was looking at him expectantly. “You’re right, Yancy,” he said, taking comfort in the warmth of her fingers on his sleeve after Lampent’s cold fire. “I’m just kind of out of it right now, I guess. Not the best company.”

She searched his eyes. He’d told her everything already, everything that mattered. She had to know what was on his mind. And yet, she smiled. “I know what you need: a game.”

Nate looked dubious. “A game?”

“I spy with my little eye something...blue,” Yancy said.

Nate couldn’t help but chuckle. “You’re serious.”

“I can’t give you any hints, if that’s what you’re hoping for.”

“I haven’t played ‘I Spy’ since I was, like, eight.”

“Something blue, Nate.”

“Everything in here is blue.” He gestured at the crystals, which glittered in every shade of blue imaginable.

“Pick something.”

He sighed, looking around. Lucario paced beside him, stoic and silent as he kept a vigilant eye for any feral Pokémon who might dare to show themselves.

“...Lucario’s blue,” he said.

Yancy beamed. “You got it! Okay your turn.”

Seriously? he wanted to ask. But her smile was dazzling, and he felt marginally less shitty being around her, just talking about something pointless. After Hugh and Rosa and everything that had transpired in Driftveil, it was a foreign feeling of weightlessness, being around Yancy. She made him forget that the sun wasn’t shining in here.

Why not?

“I spy with my little eye,” Nate said, looking around. He caught movement up ahead. “...Something yellow.”

“Ooh, yellow? Let’s see,” Yancy said, doing her best impression of a sleuth and scouting about for clues. “Emolga?”

“Nope.”
Emolga squeaked, indignant like she had fully expected to be the center of this inane game. She perched on Yancy’s head and sniffed the air.

“Oh, I know!” Yancy said, excited. “Is it those Joltik?”

The tiny yellow arachnids were crawling over the crystals, scattering when the humans and their guardian Pokémon came too close, but they peered down, curious nonetheless. No bigger than the palm of Nate’s hand, their compound eyes reflected the crystals’ blue sheen, shy but undeterred. There had to be thirty, maybe fifty of them crawling along the edges of the crystals, following the group at a safe distance and wondering at the strangers in their midst.

“Yeah,” Nate said, watching the tiny bugs crawl on deft hairy legs. They drew sparks from the crystals, as though feeding on the electrical currents running through the stones.

“Feel better?” Yancy asked.

“A little, yeah,” Nate said.

She grinned. “I’m glad. Okay, it’s my turn. I spy with my little eye...”

Yancy made the hike through Chargestone Cave more than bearable. He lost himself in the welcome banality of the game until a few hours later, he spied something big and green and hungry hanging off the ceiling, and Emolga nearly electrocuted both Yancy and him in her fright. A truly enormous Ferrothorn hung from the cave ceiling from his suctioned appendages, making a blood-curdling grinding noise like crunching gravel. There was a dark bloodstain in the path beneath him, and the remains of a Boldore that had become Ferrothorn’s unwitting prey—the rest of Boldore was being ground to a bloody paste in Ferrothorn’s razorblade mouth above. Tibor and Claydol were directing everyone around the area on a side path out of Ferrothorn’s reach. Rosa, however, was lingering next to Tibor and watching Ferrothorn, fascinated.

“He just hangs up there and drops down when something walks by?” she asked Tibor.

“Yup. Lazier’n shit, Ferrothorn.” He pointed beyond Ferrothorn deeper into the cave, where an entire colony of Ferrothorn were suctioned to the ceiling, seemingly asleep as they lay in wait for prey. “But walk under one, and they’ll drop down.” He smacked his hands together. “All that barbed steel can crush bone ‘n rock. Best watch your step.”

“That’s fucked up,” Hugh said, also pausing to watch with morbid fascination as Ferrothorn chewed above.

Rosa’s Ferroseed rode in her arms, his yellow eyes glued to Ferrothorn above. She hugged the little pin cushion Pokémon closer to her chest. “That’s gonna be Thorny one day,” she said, determined.

Hugh looked at her like she’d been the one to drop down on the unsuspecting Boldore instead of Ferrothorn.

Iris’s group had absorbed Hugh as they trudged onward over the next several days, and Nate was glad to see his best friend engaging in even menial conversation with others after all he’d been through. Benga seemed to be especially determined to get Hugh to engage, going so far as to poke fun at him and complain about Syreni in general, which prompted Hugh’s cartoonish ire. Rosa, however, kept mostly to herself as they hiked and spent much of her time puzzling over the handheld device she’d pilfered from Aldith’s corpse. Rosa didn’t reveal much about it other than her suspicions that it was a new iteration of a Team Plasma experimental technology for controlling Pokémon against their will—a project known as Chimera that she’d encountered in Kanto.
“I want to ask Gym Leader Skyla about it,” she said when Nate pressed her.

“You think she’d know?” he asked, incredulous.

“She’s supposed to be some kind of engineer or something,” Rosa said. “Maybe she can take it apart and tell me how it works.”

“Right, okay, but even if we know how it works, that doesn’t change much.”

“I just want to know, okay?” Rosa said, exasperated. “The Chimera technology I saw in Kanto looked a lot different from this. If I know what they’re doing differently, then maybe I can figure out why…” She trailed off. “I have to know.”

Nate left it at that. Rosa needed closure, something to help her reconcile her beliefs with Neo Team Plasma’s actions. Whether she would get that, if it was even possible, he had no idea. But she had to believe, so who was he to question that? Faith is personal, which means it is selfish; like the narcissist gazing at his own reflection in the water, it can only be conquered by the realization that there are other voices screaming to be heard in the shadows. That they, too, are alive and real and wishing desperately to be heard. The hardest thing in the world for the faithful to do is to look up from the water and hear those voices.

But Rosa would hear them. She was not like the Neos, who zealously adhered to their beliefs at the expense of others. She had faith in N, but Nate had faith in her. She would not let him or the rest of their group down, not even for N. It was why she had put her life on the line to help Hugh and save his life even after he’d cruelly belittled her values and beliefs, because it was the right thing to do. That was the kind of person Nate had always known Rosa to be. He just wished she could see it, too.

When they emerged from Chargestone Cave after four days in the glowing dark, Nate had almost forgotten what fresh air tasted like when he felt the sun on his skin, blessedly warm. He was still nursing that cold, chills and a mild fever and minor body ache, but it wasn’t too bad. The fresh mountain air tasted good, and Lampent and Lucario were just as happy to see the sun again, too. He felt better already.

Mistralton City was a good few miles down in a long open valley nestled between the towering Twist Mountains on all sides. The same mountains that had their modest foothills far to the south in Aspertia City were on full display here between Driftveil and Mistralton, and their peaks soared ever higher as Nate gazed north, where the mountain city of Icirrus sat somewhere far from here, the City in the Clouds. But Nate couldn’t see very far north today; the peaks were thick with fog as the clouds obfuscated them at the higher elevations.

The valley below was a warm autumn amber as the leaves were turning colors in full force, evoking a sense of welcoming and even nostalgia in the wide open grassy fields and farmlands and rustic stone and timber dwellings. Smaller towns and villages peppered the valley floor, and Nate could make out more manmade structures carved directly into the mountainsides themselves, towers and series of honeycomb caves. Windmills spun lazily in the open fields, hundreds upon hundreds of them generating enough electricity to power the entire territory. The autumn harvest was in full force with all manner of crops from golden wheat and corn to ruby red Leppa berries and more, each growing plot a colored square like patches on a quilt that blanketed the vast reaches of the fertile valley floor. Nate fantasized about sitting before an open hearth with something warm to drink talking with his friends, a happy daydream after four days without sunlight sleeping on rocks.

“Wow,” Yancy said, breathless as she joined Nate at the overhang he’d paused at. “I didn’t even
realize how much altitude we must’ve gained in the cave.”

“Me neither,” Nate said. “It looks beautiful down there.”

“It’ll look even better when we’re in it,” Soriel said, clapping them both on the shoulder. “Dunno about you two, but Moros could use a bath.”

“I beg your pardon,” Moros groused.

“You just spent four days hiking through a cave. Five if you count the hike up from Driftveil,” Soriel said with a shrug.

Moros gaped at her, and his dark eyes seemed to bulge out of his skull almost comically. “We all did that. Honestly, what kind of complaint is that, anyway?”

Soriel winked at Nate and Yancy. “Okay, move it along, Lieutenant Greaseball. You’ve wasted enough time dawdling up here as it is.”

Nate watched them go, bickering as they went like they had all the energy in the world. Moros’s Kangaskhan ambled alongside them, unflappable like she was used to this kind of behavior. Tibor and his Claydol waited for everyone to clear out of the cave, directing them down the switch-backed path that would lead them into the city.

“Tibor,” Nate said. “Thanks for guiding us through safely.”

“Yes, thank you,” Yancy said. Emolga squeaked from her place on Yancy’s head.

Tibor glanced at them with stony indifference. His was the kind of face Nate suspected was incapable of smiling. But Tibor nodded his understanding all the same.

“You’re welcome. Like I told the Sylvan, the path to Mistralton’s a direct route. Ya shouldn’t have no trouble reachin’ the city.”

“You’re not coming with us?” Yancy asked.

Tibor shook his head. “My duty is to Driftveil.”

It seemed like a harsh deal not to at least rest up a bit before heading back, but Nate didn’t even bother arguing. If Tibor was anything like Clay, he would not change his mind without monumental effort.

“In that case, get back safely,” Nate said.

Tibor nodded solemnly. “Farewell.”

Tibor laid a hand on Claydol’s side, and in a flash of light, they had disappeared into thin air. Nate jumped at the sudden Teleportation, and Yancy gasped.

“He could’ve given us a little warning,” she complained once the initial shock had worn off.

Nate rubbed his mouth and stared at the spot Tibor and Claydol had been just moments ago. “Yeah,” he said. “I kinda wish he could’ve just Teleported us all here in the first place.”

“With a group this big? Not a chance,” Yancy said. “Only Clairvoyants can do stuff like that. I mean, from what I hear.”
They fell into step together and followed after the group down the mountain trail. “Clairvoyants?” Nate said. “You know, for a pleb who’s never left home, you really know a lot.”

Yancy elbowed him lightly. “Don’t sound so surprised. Actually, Marshal’s the one who told me about Clairvoyants.”

“That Bellator you told me about? The one who trained you?”

Yancy nodded.

“Huh. I guess that makes sense. If he’s as tough as you say he is, maybe he got in a fight with a Clairvoyant and managed to live through it.”

Nate shoved his hands in his pockets, chilled. Just thinking about crossing paths with a Clairvoyant made him nervous. What he could do was one thing, but to be able to manipulate reality with a thought? Could Clairvoyants do things like that? He hoped he would never meet one on the battlefield and find out.

“Actually, the opposite,” Yancy said. “He said he has a good friend who’s Clairvoyant. I know, weird, right? But he said he hadn’t seen her in a long time.”

“That is weird,” Nate agreed.

“I guess it’s like how you’re close with Hugh and Rosa. You guys’re like a walking game of Rock, Paper, Scissors.”

“Hah, funny. So what am I? The scissors?”

Yancy made a face. “No, that’s definitely Rosa.”

“Then I’m the rock, obviously.”

“No way, Hugh’s obviously the rock. More like a boulder. A falling boulder that’ll smash anything in his way.”

“Okay, point, but I can’t be the paper.”

“Why not?”

He showed her his hands. “Because fire beats paper. I’d just burn it all up.”

Yancy bit back a laugh. “It’s Rock, Paper, Scissors. As far as I know, there’s no fire involved.”

“Oh, fine, but scissors beats paper and Rosa’s a Sylvan, so it doesn’t work. I should be the scissors,” Nate said.

Yancy rolled her eyes. “Oh my god, you’re impossible. I can’t believe you’re having an existential crisis about Rock, Paper, Scissors.”

Nate smiled. When he didn’t respond, Yancy glanced at him.

“What?” she said.

“I’m really glad you’re here, Yancy,” he said.

Yancy stared at him for a moment, unsure how to respond to his unexpected candor. She settled
for taking his hand and squeezing gently.

“Back at you,” she said.

Nate savored the feel of her hand in his, a source of warmth that invigorated and rejuvenated, if just for a moment while they remained connected. If it hadn’t been for Yancy, he was sure he would not have made it this far lacking Hugh and Rosa’s active support.

“I think if your connection with the other person is strong enough, you can come together and move forward with things that’re more important.”

Forward, Nate though, recalling Yancy’s words to him in the Driftveil Lighthouse when he was at his lowest point. With her here, at least, he knew he could keep going forward.

Lampent come close all of a sudden, spooked by something above. Nate and Yancy broke contact as they both saw what had alerted Lampent. It was coming at them from the west.

“What is that?” Yancy asked, squinting against the light to see better. “A Flyer?”

“I’ve never heard a Flyer sound like that,” Nate said, also puzzled.

Emolga chittered on Yancy’s head, also drawn to the noise, a faint but persistent droning. Ahead, Iris’s group, Rosa, and Hugh had also noticed the strange bird as it swooped low down the mountainside and flew over the valley toward Mistralton proper.

“That’s not a Pokémon,” Rosa was saying when they caught up to the others. She had taken a knee with one hand on Leafeon’s back as she “saw” the Flyer’s lifelines with her Sylvan sight. “Its lifelines aren’t organic...”

“What’s with the noise?” Hugh said.

“The noise...” Benga said. He was well enough now to be walking on his own, and he shielded his eyes from the sun to see better. “Wait, I think I know what that is.”

“You do?” Yancy said.

“I saw one in Hoenn years ago when my grandpa and I visited Rustboro City. It looks a lot like the one at Devon Corporation. That’s an airplane.”

“What the hell is an airplane?” Hugh demanded.

“Something that flies without wings, apparently,” Iris said. “Gym Leader Skyla’s a Caelifera...”

“And a super-nerd mechanical genius,” Benga said.

“The stuff powering that thing...” Rosa said. She got up. “I think we should pick up the pace.”

“Agreed,” Iris said. “Let’s go.”

By the time the group made it to the valley floor, it was nearly sunset. It had taken hours to hike down from Chargestone Cave’s exit, and not everyone had Pokémon capable of quick transport over land. Iris preemptively vetoed flying.
“Flying into a city run by Caelifers would be the pinnacle of stupidity,” she’d said.

Nate was inclined to agree. The sky was clear, but he wondered if the Caelifers knew they were here. They said Caelifers had 20/4 bird’s eye vision, able to see even the smallest Patrat running on the ground from nearly two miles away. If there were any Caelifers watching, surely they would have spotted Nate and the others by now.

Lampent hung dormant at his hip, for all appearances a regular, if not noticeably antique, lantern. The hike in the sun and Yancy’s presence had lifted Nate’s spirits considerably, but now that the sun had dipped behind the mountains, he once again felt the effects of the cold he’d been steadily nursing. His limbs ached, and he shivered with chills despite his warm jacket and hat. Yancy asked him if he was okay when he sneezed four times in a row.

“Yeah, just a little under the weather,” Nate said with a smile to appease her.

“I guess we’ve been roughing it for a while. You should get some rest tonight,” she said.

“I can’t wait to sleep in a bed, to be honest.”

“I can’t wait to take a bath,” Nuria said. “They better have tanks big enough for my Swimmers. Gorebyss and Sharpedo will be hungry after all this time cooped up in their Pokéballs.”

Nate swallowed. “Sharpedo... Somehow I doubt the hotel tubs’ll be big enough for a killer shark.”

Nuria grinned wickedly at his obvious apprehension.

“I’m sure the Gym will have proper accommodations for our Pokémon,” Iris said. “Gyarados will need to feed, too.”

“They better,” Nuria said. “At least Jellicent got to stay behind at sea since she can’t travel in a Pokéball.”

That’s a lot of big Water-type predators...

They were following a path through the valley floor toward Mistralton, and Nate noticed Rosa slowing her pace as she kept looking around, one hand on her bow like she was afraid it might disappear. Leafeon stalked alongside her, ears twitching and crouched low to the ground.

“Rosa?” Nate asked. “Are you okay?”

She frowned deeply. “It doesn’t bother you?”

“What doesn’t bother me?”

Rosa looked at him directly, as though just noticing he had been the one to address her. “There’s no cover here. The entire valley’s open. The only trees’re near the mountainsides.”

Nate looked around. “Yeah, I guess? This is all farmland and fields. Aspertia’s like this, too.”

Yancy was also looking around. “No, you’re right, Rosa,” she said. “It’s a little weird.”

“It’s wrong,” Rosa said.

“...Okay, why?” Nate said.

Yancy pointed at the mountains that encircled the entire valley. “Imagine if this place was invaded.
There’s nowhere for the locals to take cover and hide, not even to mount a defense. The enemy has the high ground on all sides.”

Nate tried to imagine such a scenario. Who would even get this far to invade with an army? Wasn’t the point of the mountains to stop that exact situation?

“I don’t like this,” Rosa said.

But they continued on anyway. Mistralton lay several miles out yet, and they wanted to make it to the city before night fell. Those plans came to a screeching halt when all of a sudden, Soriel shouted a warning, pointed at the sky, and set off a chain reaction of chaos. One moment, Nate was walking along wondering about what had Rosa and Yancy so paranoid, when the next the sky was falling on top of them.

Iris’s Cottonee exploded with fluff in a fright as something swooped in low from above, and all of a sudden the wind picked up with a force and the air was filled with the sounds of beating wings. Bright flashes of light indicated people releasing Pokémon, and Nate heard Hugh’s Samurott’s telltale barking, among others. A strong gale sent him to one knee, and he shielded his eyes from the gusting winds that had come out of nowhere. A glance up showed him figures swooping down the mountainside at incredible speed from seemingly out of the stone itself, Flyers one and all, except they weren’t all Flyers. The closer they got, the more discernible their shapes became. Not wings, but arms; not feathers and talons, but sleek suits and swords. Those were people, and they were flying alongside the Flyers at their command.

“Whoa, shit!” Nate barely got the words out as he was forced back on his ass like he’d been punched in the gut, the wind was so harsh. Before him, two enormous talons each large enough to pluck his head from his shoulders dug into the grassy earth just inches away. Magnificent red, white, and blue feathers puffed out, glossy in the sunset glow, but there was no mistaking that silhouette—he’d seen it a thousand times before, just never quite so close. The Braviary stood at nearly thirteen feet tall at his crested mane, the largest bird in the world, and let out a piercing squawk more akin to a roar that Nate felt in his bones. He covered his ears to the crushing sound.

People were shouting and Pokémon were screaming, but the commotion lasted only seconds, it seemed. When Nate remembered how to breathe, he saw that his group was surrounded. Flyers of all shapes and sizes—from silvery Unfezant to spiky Skarmory to the regal Braviary that towered over Nate—had planted themselves on the ground next to their trainers. The trainers wore strange hooded suits with sleeves that connected to the pant legs, like an Emolga’s gliding flaps. They carried silver swords and daggers, much thinner and lighter than any swords Nate have ever seen.

Samurott, Haxorus, Kangaskhan, and Benga’s Zweilous looked ready to taste blood as they flanked their trainers and the rest of the group. A hand reached out for Nate to grasp, and he found himself looking up at an unfamiliar face in one of the odd glider uniforms.

“Hello,” the woman said, smiling cheerfully. “Want a hand up?”

Nate was so stunned that he could only stare at her. Her fitted cap and flight goggles made her look like an alien, and Braviary glaring down at him with one yellow eye over her shoulder was doing him no favors.

“Come on,” she said, waggling her fingers at him. “But don’t burn me. You’re the Ignifer, right?”

Nate opened his mouth to say something, but he had no words. All he could do was take her hand and let her help him to his feet. Lampent rattled at his hip but remained dormant.
The woman who had helped him up was still smiling as she shook out her hand. “A little warm, but not too bad! You’re not as hot as my last Ignifer.”

“Um,” was all Nate could manage.

“What is this?” Iris was demanding at all the trainers with their weapons drawn and the intimidating flock of Flyers that had them all surrounded. “We’re not here to attack the city.”

“Call off your beast,” one of the uniformed trainers demanded, brandishing his thin sword at Samurott.

“Back the fuck off, Spandex,” Hugh spat, his own swords drawn.

Yancy had her naginata at the ready, and Emolga was sparking as she clung to the handle, ready to pounce and shock at the slightest command. Yancy caught Nate’s eye and shot him a look of concerned confusion.

“Hey, we come in peace,” Benga said calmly. “Gym Leader Clay sent us with his blessing.”

“Oh, yeah? Why should we just believe you?” asked one of the sleek suited trainers.

“We were told you have a Dragonite,” said another.

“You want proof?” Nuria said, incredulous. “Really?”

“I train a Dragonite,” Iris said, raising her voice to be heard.

“Then show us.”

“Yes, show us!”

“Prove it!”

Benga whispered something to Iris, and she shook her head.

“All right,” Iris said. She selected a Pokéball from her belt. “You might want to stand back.”

Iris threw the Pokéball, and from within the ensuing flash, her monstrous Dragonite coalesced in all his sunburst glory. His weight hit the ground, and immediately the closest Flyers—every one of them a buzzing fly in comparison to Iris’s Dragon—erupted in a cacophony of squawks and shrieks. Many took flight in their surprise, kicking up a fresh gale and shedding a flurry of feathers in their wake. To Nate’s amazement, many of their trainers leaped into the air like gravity was optional for them. Dragonite growled low and foreboding, and he lowered his massive head to Iris’s eye-level to allow her to stroke his snout. His teeth were as long as her arms.

Braviary, however, did not spook. He spread his wings against the gale-force winds his fellow Flyers kicked up in their frenzy and looked on at Dragonite like he was sizing up the king Dragon for a duel. Other larger Flyers, like Skarmory and Swanna and Togekiss, also stood their ground by their trainers. Nate had never seen so many different species of Flyers in one place at the same time.

“I’m Iris Fafnir,” Iris said. “Here’s your proof.”

Braviary’s trainer, the woman who had given Nate a hand up and somehow knew him as an Ignifer, squealed in delight all of a sudden and rushed at Iris and Dragonite. “Incredible! He’s even bigger than I imagined! Oh!”
She reached out a hand to feel Dragonite’s neck, and Moros looked like he might have an aneurysm as he tried to warn her to please keep her distance for her own safety. But Dragonite remained docile as the woman ran her hands over his scales and marveled like a child in a toy store. “I see! Your wings look like they’re better suited for gliding and undersea navigation than for burst aerial combat, so that’s why... Aha! What did I tell you?! Chase, come and take a look at this! I told you!”

By now, Iris had caught up to the eccentric woman. “Excuse you,” she said, her tone scathing.

“I see what you mean,” said one of the suited men, presumably Chase, as suddenly he was observing Dragonite’s left wing. “That webbing would make him a slower Flyer than even Tropius.”

“Oh no, no, not slower, just less agile,” the woman corrected. “There’s a difference, see? I bet you’re a beauty when you’re gliding!” she preened at Dragonite.

“Excuse you,” Iris said more forcefully.

“Yeah, what the hell is this?” Hugh demanded.

“Hm? Oh!” The woman removed her goggles and pulled down her hood. Sky-blue eyes illuminated her freckled face, and rich auburn hair fell long over her shoulders in a tousled mess. When she smiled, her dimples gave her a laughing look that charmed and disarmed. “Sorry, I’m Skyla. The Gym Leader. Hi.” She waved at Nate. “Hello again!” To Iris she said, “Clay said you had a Dragonite, so I just had to see him as soon as possible!”

Iris looked like she’d been kicked in the stomach. “You’re...” She looked at Benga. “Her?”

Benga put up his hands like he was in no way at fault for any of this, though Iris’s glare suggested otherwise.

“Skyla, I think we’ll have a hard time fitting Dragonite in the Sky rookery,” Chase said, deeply concerned. “We may have to impose on Iris to recall him.”

“Oh, no! No, just a little bit longer,” Skyla said, still admiring Dragonite, who seemed perfectly happy to let her preen. Perhaps he sensed that she meant him and his mistress no harm.

“Ma’am...” Chase said.

“Wait, Clay told you we were coming?” Rosa said, her bow drawn and nocked with an arrow she hadn’t fired but hadn’t sheathed, either.

Skyla whirled around and smiled. “Yup! He said to expect all of you and that you were coming to ask for my help against Neo Team Plasma after the attack on Driftveil. Oh my god, Chase, isn’t it just horrible what happened? All those people...”

“Yes, ma’am,” Chase said, laying a heavy hand over his heart. “An honest tragedy, and one we won’t soon forget.”

Skyla’s smile had fallen as she pondered the tragic events of days past she had not personally witnessed, but after a moment she brightened again and turned on Rosa. “I’m guessing you’re the Sylvan, the one who can shoot, yeah? You must have pretty good vision for a Sylvan to use that bow. Oh! I mean, not that Sylvans have poor vision, like, in general. Just more in comparison. But not you, obviously!”
Rosa frowned. “I’m a good shot,” she said, unsure if this was some kind of test.

Skyla whirled around and looked around at her ambushed guests, completely forgetting about Rosa. “And then there was the Syreni with the big mouth, the Syreni with the bigger mouth, and...”

“Hey!” Nuria and Hugh said at the same time. Hugh proceeded to glare at Nuria and grumble to himself, but she found it funny and laughed at him.

Skyla’s gaze settled on Yancy. “...And the lone Rain Warrior.”

Yancy nodded. “Lady Elesa sent me to find you,” she said, lowering her naginata and saluting Skyla with a fist over her chest. “Please, hear me out on her behalf. She said you were like a sister to her once, and that you might help Nimbasa against Opelucid’s takeover. I’ve come a long way to tell you that.”

Skyla sobered a little and looked thoughtfully at Yancy, taking a moment to study her. “She said that about me? Truly?”

“Ma’am,” Chase said. “Perhaps we should take this inside? Farmer Jenkins has been giving us the stink eye since that training mishap last week in his cornfield, and I think we better not push our luck...”

Skyla jumped in surprised. “Oh, of course! Chase, hurry up and get them inside! What are you waiting for?” Chase looked abashed, and Skyla looked around. “Where is everyone? Hey! Hey!!” She waved to the Flyers circling above. “I have Walkers down here and not enough wings! Everybody come back!”

Nate looked up and, to his amazement, the trainers were somehow able to glide alongside their Flyers in their special suits. But even if they were Caelifers, they didn’t have the power of true flight, that was well known. So how were they doing it? It seemed he would not get his answers now, though, because all of a sudden he found himself being pulled onto Braviary’s back. Skyla was strapping him into the saddle, which was little more than a few taut leather straps that secured Nate’s legs, and telling him something important about flying that he probably should have been paying close attention to instead of daydreaming.

“Just hang on and Brave’ll do the rest, okay?” she said, grinning brightly as she lowered her flight goggles over her eyes.

“Wait, what?” Nate said.

“Great, Fly!”

Braviary leaped into the air, and Nate thought his neck would snap from the whiplash. Frightened and feeling the sudden urge to throw up everything he had ever eaten in his life, he ducked on instinct and hung onto Braviary’s thick feathers for dear life. The winds rushed him on every side, and he had to squint through the tears drawn out by the biting wind. But after a few seconds, his vision cleared up and he could see...everything. Wide-eyed and slack-jawed, he looked down on the valley floor shrinking below as Braviary rose higher in the sky, chasing the departing sunlight. Nate could see the edge of the sun over the mountains this high up, and for a fanciful moment, he imagined he could reach out and pluck it from the horizon before it fell away to night. Braviary squawked under him, a commanding scream that echoed through the skies. This was his domain, and here he was king with Nate merely along for the ride.
Before he even realized it, Nate was laughing. The days in darkness in Chargestone Cave, the cold he was nursing, the bizarre almost hostile welcome they’d received here in Mistralton, all the pain and tears and blood and death of Castelia and Driftveil, all of it faded as he dug his fingers into Barviary’s mane feathers and lived out a childhood dream.

*I’m flying on a Braviary!*

Braviary seemed to sense his delight and squawked again, fierce and proud, and the other Flyers all around echoed his cry. A Skarmory carrying Yancy let out her shrill shriek; Rosa’s Swanna honked; and Dragonite roared as he brought up the rear in all his mythical glory. Nate laughed through his windblown tears. He never wanted to walk again, only fly.

A bolt of blue and auburn zipped by him all of a sudden, and Nate realized it was Skyla defying gravity and flying on her own. She literally ran on the wind, climbing the gales like stairs and jumping off them to catch an updraft under her suit flaps to stay aloft, only to tuck her arms in and shoot forward at high speed like a dive bomber. And he didn’t question it or really care, even, because there was magic in this great wide world and he was flying on a goddamned Braviary and even Helena would scream her excitement when he told her about this when he got home.

Rosa was flying closest to Nate on her Swanna, one of the few of their group who had her own Flyer, and she shot him a look of concern at the sight of his inadvertent tears. Nate laughed at her and dared to let his arms rise free to feel the wind beneath them.

“I’m the king of the world!” he shouted at her, remembering that sad romantic movie they’d watched one summer in their younger years in Nuvema Town that Rosa had begged and begged him to see with her when he visited. Nate had had a front row seat in the one-screen Nuvema Town theater sandwiched in between the fangirling Rosa and Bianca when Juniper took them all to go see it.

Rosa returned his laugh with a smile she couldn’t hide, and that made him feel like real royalty. He hadn’t seen her smile like that since their reunion in Castelia, before everything went to shit.

Hugh and Nuria had both been unceremoniously strapped to an effervescent Togekiss delighting in the chance to fly with new people. Neither of them looked too happy to be so high off the ground, however. Nuria was clutching Togekiss’s downy white feathers like they might disappear, and Hugh was clutching her. Soriel and her Charizard saw them like that and nearly fell off her mount laughing her ass off at their vertigo. Hugh was too afraid of falling even to shout a rude retort at her.

Maybe this is what Mom needs, Nate thought as he continued to have the time of his life flying with Braviary. A little adventure, something exciting to brighten up her days.

When he got back to Aspertia, maybe he’d finally go and catch a Braviary of his own and learn how to fly. Maybe he could teach Helena, too. They could do it together.

“Woohoo!!” Yancy whooped as she soared by on Skarmory.

Braviary squawked and darted after Skarmory, not appreciating being passed by the smaller bird, and Nate had to hold on with both hands and duck down to stay aboard. The flight was a short one in the end, as Braviary soon landed on a rocky outcropping in the western mountainside directly overlooking Mistralton City far below, but Nate felt like a new person, better than ever. It was getting quite dark by then, and the stars were peeking out against the darkening sky as the last of the sun’s rays faded behind the towering Twist Mountains. Skyla herself helped him out of the saddle straps.
“First flight?” she asked, grinning at him.

“Holy shit, that was incredible!” Nate gushed. “I thought I would die, and then I felt invincible. I’ve never felt anything like it before.”

Skyla looked like she was on the verge of tears all of a sudden as she took Nate’s hands in hers. “Oh, yes! That’s exactly the feeling I get whenever I fly. Isn’t it just magical?”

“Yes!” Nate said, grinning like an idiot.

She wiped an imaginary tear. “You may be an Ignifer, but you’re a Caelifer in spirit, I can tell. Um...”

“Nate,” Nate said.

“Nate! What a delightful name for a delightful guy!”

The others were arriving in droves with Skyla’s team of trainers—Gym trainers, if Nate had to take a guess, and many of them Caelifers judging from how many were able to “fly” without mounts like Skyla had. Yancy and Skarmory landed not too far away, and Skyla lit up at the sight of them.

“Over here, Skarm!” She waved at Skarmory, who squawked like a puppy getting attention from her owner. “Brave, be good for Nate, ‘kay?” She ran off to help Yancy dismount from Skarmory.

Nate ran a hand through Braviary’s neck feathers, marveling at their fine softness. Braviary ruffled his feathers and lowered his head to accommodate the several feet of height he had on Nate.

“Brave,” he said, using the bird’s nickname. “Thanks for the flight.”

“Get me offa this bird!” Hugh demanded as one of the Gym trainers fiddled with the straps securing him to both Nuria and Togekiss. “Hurry, before she takes off again!”

“I assure you, Togekiss won’t Fly without my command,” said the man helping. “There’s nothing to fear.”

“Oh, I don’t feel so good,” Nuria said, rubbing her stomach.

“What? Hey, hey! Don’t get sick on me! I’m still stuck to you!” Hugh said.

Nuria said something in Adriati and shook her head.

“What’d you say? What did she just say?” Hugh demanded.

“Uh, I’m not sure,” said the man helping Hugh dismount. “I don’t speak Adriati...”

Nate sighed. “Sorry, man, I’ve got him,” he said to the Gym trainer helping Hugh and Nuria. He left Braviary to approach them just as Hugh got free of the straps.

“Fucking hell, Nate, did you see that?” Hugh said when he was back on his feet. “One minute me ’n Samurott were ready to go all out, and the next I get strapped onto that bird like goddamned chattel. And of course they put me with Nuria, ‘cause all Syreni know each other and we’re all friends or some racist crap.”

Nate looked bemused. “Weren’t you just randomly standing closest to Nuria back there?”

Hugh scowled. “Don’t take their side. You’re s’posed to be my best...” He trailed off like he’d just
remembered he wasn’t really speaking to Nate anymore.

“Best friend?” Nate finished for him. He put a hand on Hugh’s shoulder. “Yeah, I am. You better not fucking forget it.”

Hugh looked like he wanted to be anywhere but here right now as he warred with himself for a moment. Nate was about to leave to see if Nuria was all right when Hugh said suddenly, “I didn’t forget. I won’t, I mean.”

He looked like he wanted to say more, but there were people bustling about shouting commands and Flyers squawking and shrieking as their trainers led them deeper into the mountainside to the rookery nests. Intuiting Nate’s thoughts, Hugh nodded gruffly and looked away, effectively ending the conversation but perhaps leaving it open for later. That was the best he’d get out of Hugh for now, knowing him, so Nate left it at that and dared to feel a little hopeful. Rosa’s smile, and now Hugh’s big mouth... Maybe there was hope for them yet.

Dragonite was too large to fit under the shallow overhang where everyone had landed, so Iris had to dismount and recall him. She landed with Benga, and Nate stared openly at the sight of Benga’s own mount that now safely carried both of them to the ground. A Volcarona with three pairs of wings that radiated heat and light buzzed and bobbed with perfect aerial control as he smoothly landed and allowed Iris and Benga to dismount.

A Volcarona... But how?

Alder had said they were a species on the verge of extinction. What were the odds of Benga randomly having one on his team? Unless he knew Alder somehow. And then, Nate had the strangest thought as Benga dismounted and patted Volcarona’s snow white fur.

He kind of looks like Alder, just a little...

Iris found Nuria and was speaking in rapid-fire Adriati with her about something—maybe Nuria was complaining about Hugh. Nate was about to go talk to Benga about his Volcarona when Yancy grabbed his hand.

“Hey, come on, Skyla and her Gym trainers’re saying we should go inside,” she said, tugging him along.

“Huh?” Nate said as he let Yancy drag him. “Oh, okay.”

They had landed in a cut in the stone mountain face, carved out as though a great thunderbolt had struck the mountain and opened it up like a smiling wound. Above, more Flyers landed in smaller openings in the rock, honeycombed pockets stacked together in a cluster that led into the mountainside. Nate and Yancy followed the group down a stone corridor past murder holes in the ceilings, but they weren’t murder holes at all. A man in a gliding suit dropped down from one of the holes just a few feet in front of Nate, light on his feet and silent as a feather despite what had to be at least a fifty foot drop.

The corridor led to stairs that Nate and Yancy and the others climbed up and up until Nate’s legs began to burn from the effort. The steps were steep and narrow and seemingly without end, until finally light filtered down from above and he found himself in a high-ceilinged room carved directly into the stone. It was a study, with woven rugs covering the floor that muffled his footsteps, an enormous hearth roaring with a fresh blaze, and a wide oaken desk littered with documents and some electrical contraption that looked broken with all the wires sticking out, like someone had been tinkering with it. Tapestries hung from the walls: a great map of the upper West...
Tine and its major cities; a portrait of a young man with auburn hair and an austere hardness to his 
gaze. A Swoobat hung upside-down from a perch under the portrait of the man, asleep beneath her 
folded wings but twitching awake at all the noise. More tools lay on a rumpled blanket on the 
floor in front of the hearth, wrenches and screwdrivers and the biggest handheld drill Nate had ever 
seen, along with disassembled electrical parts that were unrecognizable broken apart. Across from 
the hearth, the room opened up onto a wide balcony that overlooked the outcropping where Nate 
had landed before. On the valley floor was the best view of Mistralton City, so small this high up. 
Nate shivered and sneezed as the wind blew through the open doors to the balcony and buffeted 
the sheer blue curtains. Yancy looked at him in concern.

“Welcome, welcome!” Skyla said, swooping in past Hugh and Moros into the study. “Welcome to 
the Mistralton City Gym!”

“This is the Gym?” Rosa said.

“This isn’t the Gym,” Hugh said.

“She just said it was,” Rosa said, crossing her arms.

“Yeah, but look around. Seriously.” Hugh crossed his arms and scowled at Rosa.

“Well, you’re sort of both right, actually,” Skyla said as she unzipped the arm flaps of her uniform. 
“This is just the western stronghold of the Gym, which I like to call the Sky Tower. To the east 
over there,” she headed to the balcony, “is the Sun Tower. And there’s the Moon Tower in the 
north, and the Star Tower to the south. We have rookeries at every one and then some.”

“You can see the entire valley from the mountain holds,” Yancy said, understanding.

Skyla smiled. “That’s right! My Valkyries see everything and everyone who comes to this valley.”

“Valkyries?” Iris asked, Cottonee on her head as she and Benga and the rest of their group filtered 
into the study. Chase brought up the rear and closed the door to the stairs behind them.

“The Valkyries are Mistralton City’s finest warrior Caelifers,” Chase said. “And we’re the largest 
single human and Pokémon combination aerial combat team in the world.”

“Wow,” Nate said. A floating army.

Iris seemed to be thinking the same thing. “Bigger than Opelucid’s Dragon Riders?”

“Of course,” Chase said, the pride evident in his tone. “Many Dragons can Fly, but they lack the 
speed and precision of most other Flyers. And Titans are Walkers; they can’t match Caelifers in 
aerial combat. The Valkyries know no equal in Unova or elsewhere.”

If Iris took offense, she hid it well.

“Walkers?” Nuria asked. “Isn’t that a dead person? Like in the movies? What’s the word in the 
common tongue, I forget.”

“Zombies,” Iris said. “That’s not what he meant.”

“Compared to Caelifers, we sort of are zombies,” Benga said, stepping forward. “Gym Leader 
Skyla, it’s great to finally meet you. I met your old man when he came to visit me and my grandpa 
in Floecsey Town a long time ago.”
Skyla looked at him strangely. “You’re the other Titan, Benga, right? Benga... Oh! You’re that Benga? I didn’t realize!”

“Yeah. I’m hoping we can talk to you about what’s going on in Opelucid City these days. You said Clay gave you a heads up about us all coming out here?”

“And Neo Team Plasma,” Hugh said.

“Wait, Skyla,” Rosa said, holding out the device she’d taken from Aldith. “I found this during the Neos’ invasion in Driftveil, and I was wondering if you could take a look at it and tell me how it works.”

Everyone began talking all at once, and soon no one could be heard. It didn’t last very long, though. Skyla let out a piercing whistle that filled the room and silenced everyone. Swoobat woke with a start and fell from her perch, where she landed with a thud on the floor.

“Whoa, whoa! Everybody, take a deep breath.” Skyla took a deep breath herself and waved her arms for everyone to follow her lead. No one did. “Okay, that’s better. Now, I get that you’re all super excited to talk to me, which, awesome. I love meeting new people! But let me save you all some breath. Clay already told me about your requests for help with Opelucid and Neo Team Plasma, and I’ve been following events on the Heart Tine on my own, too. So everybody can, like, chill out for a hot sec.”

“Respectfully, Clay didn’t understand the direness of my situation,” Iris said. “I’d prefer the chance to explain it all myself.”

“Yeah, I one-hundred percent hear what you’re saying,” Skyla said. “But here’s the deal. You’re all tired and probably hungry and I’m sure you want to clean up. So get some rest, and tomorrow we can all do the speed dating get to know you thing, ‘kay?”

“I think that sounds reasonable,” Nate said. “Iris, are you okay with doing this first thing in the morning?”

Iris held his gaze. “Fine. Tomorrow, then.”

“Fantastic!” Skyla said. “I’ve had rooms prepared for all of you here in Sky. You’ll have to double up, so decide that amongst yourselves. I have to see to a shipment that just flew in today, so I’ll be tied up for the rest of the night. Chase and a few of my other Gym trainers will be available if you need whatever. ‘Kay?”

“That’s fine, thanks Skyla,” Nate said before Hugh or someone else could blurt out something they might all regret.

“Well, Swan and I are off!” Skyla pulled down her goggles and headed for the balcony, where she released a Swanna to Fly her down to Mistralton City. “Oh, and just as, like, a quick preface to tomorrow, I already told Clay I’m super open to being convinced about fighting Neo Team Plasma. Anyone who attacks one of us attacks all of us.”

“What?!” said everyone at the same time.

Skyla took off with Swanna, leaving the room in chaos once more as everyone began talking over each other and Chase had to deal with them all by himself. Swoobat, now thoroughly awake, Teleported the hell out of there the first chance she got. Nate rubbed his temples, feeling a headache coming on. It was going to be a long night.
Skyla had created a strict schedule in which she would meet with everyone in Nate’s group individually over the next several days to hear their version of events and the case for why she should step in to help them, all while engaging in some kind of activity that had nothing to do with negotiations for her own amusement. She had expressed her willingness to hear their cases to take up arms against Neo Team Plasma to prevent further attacks, but as for taking the fight to the Heart Tine, opposing Opelucid directly, or intervening on Nimbasa’s behalf, she had no intention of starting any unnecessary fights without some convincing.

When it was Nate’s turn to speak with her after breakfast on his second day in Mistralton City, Skyla took him to groom Braviary and some of the other Flyers who lived in the Sky Tower rookery. Braviary’s nest was within one of the many honeycomb caverns in the mountain’s face, lined with broken branches and soft moss that the bird had brought in to cushion the hard stone. Skyla wasn’t in her gliding suit today, but in leather pants and boots and a Mareep wool sweater to stave off the biting autumn chill that cut a lot deeper this high up in the mountains.

“I saw how you really took to Brave,” Skyla said as they walked to the rookery nooks. “So I thought you might like a chance to learn how to care for birds. You know, if you ever decide to catch a Flyer for your team.”

“I’d love to learn, thanks,” Nate said, following her instructions on how to clean and groom feathers of different types.

“Flyers can groom themselves,” Skyla explained, “but I think it’s nice to do it for them sometimes, you know? Like when you brush a friend’s hair. It brings you closer.”

Nate had the most ludicrous image of Hugh brushing Rosa’s hair as a way to bring them closer.

“I’ll, uh, take your word for it.”

Skyla was an odd woman, a bit of a free spirit prone to caprice and fancy, but she was thoughtful and warm in a way most people were not. She was strange, but Nate instantly liked her. In another life, perhaps, they could have been friends outside of all this.

“I’ll have a Flyer soon, actually,” Nate said. “When my Larvesta evolves into Volcarona.”

“Oh! Like Benga, huh? Did you get yours from Champion Alder, too?”

“Yeah... So Benga did, too?”

“Well, yeah. I would think he’d give his only grandson the chance to train Volcarona before anybody else, you know?”

_Alder’s grandson._

Nate thought about that a moment. The resemblance was there, he just hadn’t put the pieces together before. Benga was a Titan, so his mother had to be a Titan, too. But that didn’t mean his father couldn’t have had Ignifer blood if he was Alder’s son. It seemed silly that Nate hadn’t put it together earlier now that he knew. What would Benga think of him having Larvesta? Was it even appropriate to ask Benga about Alder?

“So, Nate. What brings you to Mistralton?” Skyla interrupted his thoughts.

“You’ve already talked to most of the others,” he said. “I think you know why by now.”
“Mm, Neo Team Plasma and Opelucid, yeah, I heard. Seems like you guys made a lot of enemies getting here.”

“It’s not just us. What I saw in Castelia, and then what happened in Driftveil... It was awful.”

Braviary shifted his weight as Nate smoothed down the long blue feathers of his left wing.

“I bet,” Skyla said. “I took Rosa shooting yesterday. She’s a pretty good shot, like she claimed!”

Nate blinked at the abrupt change of subject. “Yeah, she almost never misses her target.”

“Well, she missed a lot yesterday. It turns out moving targets a mile away are hard to keep an eye on. But she learned pretty fast, for a Sylvan.”

Nate tried to get her back on track. “Rosa had some Neo Team Plasma tech she wanted to show you. Did you take a look?”

“Oh, that transmitter? Yeah, complicated stuff. Since when do they use EM wave technology? That stuff will fry your brain in the kinds of concentrated doses that tech was packing.”

“She said it was for a project called Chimera,” Nate said. “It’s a program Neo Team Plasma’s been using to mind control Pokémon.”

“Yeah, she mentioned that. When I told her this was a remote signaling device, she was really spooked and asked me to lend her Swoo to deliver a message all the way to Kanto. I guess there’s someone there who would want to know about this Chimera technology. But I’m not sure what good sending word to Kanto will do us all over here.”

Nate didn’t know much about that, but he made a mental note to ask Rosa later. “You asked me why I came to Mistralton. Rosa’s one of the reasons.”

Skyla paused from her work on Braviary’s mane feathers. “Oh?”

“Rosa, and Hugh, and all the others, too. I came for them. I... I never wanted to leave Aspertia, but I did it for them.”

“Why?”

“Because I was in a position to help. Hugh reminded me that if you can do something, you should do something.”

He gave Skyla a meaningful look, and they shared the gaze in silence as he implored her to take his meaning.

“Hugh’s an interesting guy,” Skyla said at length. “He has a passionate heart.”

“He’s been through a lot,” Nate said. “But he’s one of the strongest people I know.”

Skyla laughed.

“What’s so funny?” Nate asked.

“No, sorry. Hugh and Rosa said the same thing about you. It’s almost like you rehearsed it.”

A particularly cold gust of wind blew in, and Nate shivered. He sneezed twice and felt lightheaded for a moment as the rush of fever chills and the chronic cold he’d been living with for last week or
so reared its ugly head. His sneezing must have woken Lampent, who had been hanging dormant all this time. The Ghost stirred and detached himself from Nate, awake and curious about this new environment.

Braviary ruffled his feathers in agitation at the buzzing Ghost lantern, a warning, but he didn’t spook. Skyla, surprisingly, also remained calm.

“Oh, you have a Lampent!” she said cheerfully.

“Yeah. Or I guess it’s better to say he’s got me.” Nate tried to smile and swallow the nausea he felt from this sickness.

Skyla observed Lampent, but she scooted closer to Braviary when he floated a little too close to her, like she didn’t want him to touch her. Nate didn’t blame her for her wariness around a Ghost.

“Lampent, hey, come here,” he said, reached out a hand for Lampent so he would stop floating around like he owned the space.

Lampent, ever silent as the grave, twirled his feelers and danced around Nate’s head. His internal fire blazed brightly today, and he seemed to be in a cheerful mood.

“Are you sick?” Skyla asked all of a sudden.

“Huh? Oh, it’s just a cold. I’ll be okay.”

Skyla nodded, but she wasn’t looking at him. “Hey, I have an idea, if you’re up for it.”

“An idea?”

“There’s someone I think you should meet. She lives here in Mistralton. Well, not exactly in Mistralton, but to the north a ways. It’s a little bit of a hike, but I think she’d appreciate the visit.”

“Uh, I mean, not to be rude, but I thought we could talk about Neo Team Plasma some more. And you haven’t talked to Iris or Yancy yet, right?”

Skyla shook her head. “Take Hugh and Rosa with you. They’ll want to talk to her, too.”

“Skya, wait a minute. I feel like we should really talk more about what happened in Driftveil. We really need you to help us with Neo Team Plasma before they make their way here, too. I don’t want what happened in Castelia and Driftveil to happen anywhere else.”

“I’ve heard what I needed to hear. If everyone else was like you, Nate, then my choice would be an easier one. But the rest of you don’t even agree on who the enemy really is or why we should be united against them. Even if I agree that Neo Team Plasma and their allies have gone too far, how am I supposed to convince Brycen when I’m hearing different things from everyone I’ve talked to? Because if I’m not on board, Brycen will never even grant you an audience.”

“So you agree,” Nate said, swatting Lampent out of his face when he hovered to close. “You agree that the Neos have to be stopped.”

“I agree that our time hiding and hoping the rest of the world will forget about us is up,” Skyla said softly. “But this isn’t Aspertia or Castelia. I’m one of three Triumvirs; I don’t have the power to act alone. I think you can understand that very well from personal experience.”

“Skyla—”
“Please go talk to my acquaintance,” she interrupted. “And take Hugh and Rosa. You want my colleagues and me to stand as a unified front against Neo Team Plasma, right? I think first you need to make sure your people are unified before you try to recruit others.”

Nate didn’t have a choice now that she’d made up her mind, and the next thing he knew he was using the one-car gondola often used by non-Caelifers to travel between Mistralton City and the Sky Tower with Rosa and Hugh.

“So, remind me again why we’re wasting time visiting one of Skyla’s exiled sorority sisters?” Hugh said.

“Hugh, come on, man,” Nate said, not in the mood to placate him when his headache was getting worse. Lampent sensed his discomfort and tried to “help” by touching his shoulder, but Nate just shivered at the contact.

“No, really,” Hugh said. “You know what she did when we had our one-on-one? She made me let out Vibrava, and I spent like an hour chasing her around the valley floor trying to get her to calm down. And you know what Skyla did? Nothing. She had to call in some of her Valkyries to help corner Vibrava.”

“Valkyries?” Nate asked. “The Caelifer team Chase was telling us about?”

Hugh scowled. “Yeah, her Spandex squad. Vibrava was really spooked. It took me forever to get her to land and sit still.”

“She’s still getting used to everything,” Rosa said. “You can’t blame her for being on edge still. Just give it some time.”

Hugh looked like he wanted to retort, but he thought better of it and miraculously remained silent.

“I heard Skyla took you shooting, Rosa,” Nate said in an attempt to defuse the situation.

Rosa made a face. “That’s one way to put it. I shot for a while, and then she shot at me. Sawsbuck’s large enough for me to ride, and he’s pretty fast. If it wasn’t for him, she and her Skarmory would’ve skewered us with those feather blades. Those swords she and her Caelifers use? Repurposed Skarmory feathers. Deadlier than you’d think, and literally light as a feather.”

Nate paled. “So, the moving targets she mentioned...?”

“That was her.” Rosa crossed her arms. “I’ve never fought a Caelifera before. They’re hard to hit in the air.”

“Huh,” Nate said, smiling to himself a little.

“What?” Hugh said.

“No, it’s just, I think she was trying to get to know us. I mean, as people. I just didn’t expect that after Clay.”

“How’s that s’posed to help? We should be out there crushing the rest of the Neos,” Hugh said.

“Us and what army?” Rosa countered.

“Exactly. She needs to get on board, and we need to get to Icirrus and get that Brycen guy on board, too. Then, Clay won’t have a choice,” Hugh said. “I’m never letting the Neos sneak up on
us again, I swear it.”

“Guys, please,” Nate said, raising his voice. “For one day, or even for a few goddamned hours, can we not fight? I really don’t have the energy right now.”

Rosa laid a hand on Nate’s shoulder. “Hey, are you okay? You don’t look so good.”

“Just a cold. I’ll be fine.”

Rosa and Hugh shared a look, but mercifully they stopped their argument for now. The gondola deposited them at the outskirts of Mistralton City near the hangar, where the so-called airplane had docked on their first day here. Since then, it had made a few more trips and was now undergoing routine maintenance. It was to the hangar that Skyla had directed Nate, where he would find someone to take him to see her acquaintance.

It was a sunny day, blue skies and puffy white clouds, and the wind chill was not as bad on the valley floor as up in Sky. Locals populated the cobblestone streets going about their business and paid Nate and the others little mind as they passed. Shops and restaurants and inns lined the busy streets, cheerful and brightly lit, and various Pokémon transported people and goods all over town. Nate had to stand aside for a pair of Mudsdale drawing a heavy covered wagon packed to the gunwales with freshly picked Leppa berries. Street signs directed the way to the Pokémon Center, the hangar, and other areas of note.

“There,” Rosa said. “That must be the hangar.”

It was a huge metal and glass building constructed more for utility than aesthetics. People in engineering uniforms went about their business inside, and when Nate stepped through the double doors, he could not help but stare at the colossal airplane docked inside. It was as big as Iris’s Dragonite, maybe bigger, with great metal wings and bladed propellers that looked more like gruesome tools of execution than a means to fly. Engineers accompanied by various Fire- and Electric-type Pokémon worked on the hull and inside the airplane making repairs. Gurdurr helped people unload large crates packed with fish and transfer them to waiting wagons drawn by Tauros and Mudsdale. There were two more airplanes, significantly smaller, also parked in the hangar.

“Coming through!” shouted a uniformed engineer.

He was pushing a rubber-lined cart filled with a few large shimmering chunks of crystal. They shone like sunlight made solid, as beautiful as any precious gem even in their raw uncut state.

Rosa gasped. “Those...”

The engineer wheeling the cart was headed to the large cargo plane, but as he passed, Hugh suddenly shouted a curse and there was a flash of light. Eelektrik had jumped out of his Pokéball on his own and landed on the cart among the shining stones, flopping and gasping for breath out of water.

“Shit!” Hugh said.

“What the—get it off!” the engineer said in a fright as Eelektrik began sending off Thundershocks in desperation.

Others were drawn to the commotion, but no one dared approach while Eelektrik was popping like a busted spark plug.

“Hugh!” Rosa said.
“I know! Damnit, get back here!” Hugh had Eelektrik’s Pokéball and was trying to recall him, but the cart had begun to roll on its own under Eelektrik’s weight, and the sparks made him wary about getting too close.

A big Drilbur lumbered to the cart and stopped it from rolling right into the wheel of the airplane. She was immune to Eelektrik’s shocks and reached into the cart to drag him out, flailing and trying to bite Drilbur.

“Return!” Hugh shouted, throwing the Pokéball at Eelektrik from as close as he was willing to get to the errant sparks. Luckily, he hit the mark and Eelektrik disappeared back inside his Pokéball. Drilbur blinked and looked around as though she’d forgotten what she was doing.

“Drilbur! Good timing,” said another engineer. She bent down to pat Drilbur on the head. “If those Thunderstones had hit the hull, we could’ve all been fried.”

Drilbur grunted, happy to be getting some positive attention for her efforts.

“Thunderstones,” Rosa said. “Of course, I should’ve known.”

“Huh?” Nate said.

“The inorganic lifelines powering the airplane that I saw when we got here,” she explained. “It was them. They’re teeming with electrical energy, more than I’ve ever seen in such a concentrated area.”

“Well, that’s just lovely, but Eelektrik almost just died thanks to them,” Hugh said.

“You’re the one who let him out of his Pokéball. What were you even thinking?” Rosa said.

“Oh my fucking god, really? You’re blaming me for this? Like I’d be dumb enough to let Eelektrik out where there’s no water.”

“You, leave!” said the original engineer who’d been pushing the cart of Thunderstones. “You shouldn’t be in here!”

“Great,” Nate said. “That’s just great.”

“Don’t take her side, Nate,” Hugh said. “It wasn’t my fault!”

“I’m not taking anyone’s side! Goddamn. Let’s just go before we get in any more trouble.”

They went outside, but had to step off the road to make way for the wagons carrying the fish and other cargo that had arrived on the plane. Hugh was examining Eelektrik’s Pokéball, and Nate sighed and felt bad for shouting.

“I’m sure Eelektrik’s okay,” Rosa said suddenly. “Obviously I don’t think you would just release him in there. ...It was probably just a malfunction in the Pokéball. You can get a new one for him later.”

Hugh looked up in surprise, but he recovered quickly and scowled. “Yeah, I guess. It was just...” He shook his head and replaced Eelektrik’s Pokéball in its holster. “Whatever, never mind.”

_Huh_, Nate thought. That was almost worth it.

“Cargo transport, that makes sense,” he said, changing he subject before one of his friends could say something to ruin the moment. “Ships can’t reach here or Icirrus up in the mountains.”
“The Triumvirs allow cabotage between their fiefdoms tariff-free. Nothing builds camaraderie like no taxes, apparently.”

The woman who addressed them was dressed in a crisp white golfing uniform and lightly tanned, like she’d just come from a round. Her white-blonde hair hung long and wavy, and her icy eyes contrasted with the aura of aloof indifference she projected. Tall, comely, and fit, she gave Nate a sudden chill like he’d been caught cheating on his homework. A bird Nate didn’t recognize was perched on her shoulder.

“Who’re you?” Hugh asked.

“Skyla asked me to meet you here,” the woman said. “I’m Kahili.”

Her accent was one Nate had not often heard. She was not from Unova, and that bird she kept was giving him pause. She was a pretty Flyer at first blush, periwinkle wings and long feathers, but the longer Nate looked at her, the more he got the impression that the bird was nothing but a husk. He began to notice the frayed edges on her feathers, the hollow unblinking stare, the faint smell of rot. And then he realized the oddest thing of all: Lampent was hanging back.

“That Lampent,” Kahili said. “He’s yours?”

Nate blinked and nodded. “Yeah. That bird...”

Kahili stroked the bird along her purple wing, but the bird never took her gaze off Nate and Lampent, almost statuesque. “This is Oricorio. She’s dead.”

“Uh, what?” Hugh said.

“Another Ghost?” Rosa asked, her curiosity piqued.

Kahili nodded. “I’ve learned quite a lot about Ghosts since Oricorio died. She used to be a Fire bird with luscious red feathers and a personality to match them. She perished a few months ago just after I arrived here, and now...she’s back. In a way.”

Oricorio made no sound as she ruffled her feathers and nipped at Kahili’s finger affectionately.

Nate swallowed. “Are you...”

He couldn’t even muster the word.

“...A Medium?” Kahili said with a secret smile. “No. I’m a Caelifera, the same as Skyla. But ever since Oricorio’s, ah, transformation, I’ve been spending a lot of time learning about Ghosts. Come on, we should get going.” Her gaze lingered on Nate and Lampent. “We’re expected.”

Kahili led them north through Mistralton with her undead Oricorio perched on her shoulder. Nate learned that there were many species of Oricorio in Alola, Kahili’s homeland, but that only the ones who clung desperately to life or to the lives of the ones they left behind in death ever resurrected, as hers had.

“I think she couldn’t let me go,” Kahili explained. “And I couldn’t let her go, either. Oricorio was my first Pokémon. Losing her was unbearable.”

Nate shoved his hands in his pockets for warmth and tried to repress his shivering. He couldn’t help but think of Emboar and his untimely death.
You were my first Pokémon.

But Emboar didn’t come back the way Oricorio had. The dead tended to stay dead. He didn’t want to think about it.

“You say it like she’s still a regular Pokémon,” Rosa said. “...Is she?”

“If Ghosts are regular. She can fight, just not the same way she used to. I’ve had to learn how to work with Oricorio from scratch. It’s like she transformed into an entirely different Pokémon when her soul repossessed the remains of her corpse. It’s quite fascinating, actually. I’ve heard there are other Pokémon who cling to life like Oricorio when they die and sometimes return as Ghosts.”

“Fascinatingly creepy,” Hugh muttered.

“So, what’re you doing here? Alola’s not exactly close,” Nate said.

“Traveling, seeing the world. A lot of tourists visit Mistraltion for the sky diving. Skyla invented a suit that lets even non-Caelifers feel what it’s like to fly, at least temporarily,” Kahili said.

“Fuck that,” Hugh said. “I hate flying.”

“A lot of Walkers do,” Kahili allowed. “Especially Syreni and Adamantines. It’s your loss.”

They were leaving downtown Mistraltion at this point and walking at a steady incline north toward Route Seven. Far ahead, however, Nate noticed that a series of rock slides had destroyed the path, felling sentinel pines and piling up the debris to make passage impossible. Route Seven was supposed to connect Mistraltion to Icirrus by way of the Twist Mountains.

“How long has that been blocked?” Hugh said all of a sudden, also noticing the damage.

“Since the secession,” Kahili said. “Brycen ordered Route Seven closed. No one goes to Icirrus now unless they can Fly. Not to subscribe to stereotypes, but talk about cold.”

*That doesn’t sound promising,* Nate thought. Brycen sounded like he would be a very hard man to win over, perhaps more challenging even than Clay.

“How much farther?” Nate asked, hugging himself for warmth.

Kahili looked at him askance. “Celestial Tower is just ahead.”

“Another tower?” Hugh said. “How many does Skyla even have?”

“Only four. Celestial Tower’s just a ruin now. It used to be the tallest and most fortified of the rookeries, and the main site of Mistraltion City’s Gym. But it was mostly decimated during the Civil Wars. Skyla’s father, Gawain, defended the tower and got his people out, but he was wounded and rendered permanently disabled. He couldn’t fly anymore after that.”

“Shit,” Hugh said. “That’s... Shit.”

“The tower was never rebuilt. It stands now as a memorial to the fallen, a reminder of the cost of war and how it touches us all. Skyla honored her father’s wishes to preserve but never reconstruct it.”

“And that’s where we’re headed?” Rosa asked. “Why?”

“Because that’s where she lives now. She’s Celestial Tower’s caretaker.”
Celestial Tower soon came into view. While dilapidated, it still loomed taller than many of the buildings in Mistralton proper. Cracks and holes had been filled with plaster and cement on the lower levels, but past the seventh story, the alabaster stone was black with char and crumbling. Metal structural rods stuck out at queer angles like tangled weeds, and at the foot of the tower sat the cracked remains of a bronze bell, turned green from years of exposure to the elements.

Rosa slowed down and fell behind the group a ways until Hugh noticed her absence.

“What’s up with her?” he asked.

“Rosa?” Nate called as Kahili led the way to the threshold.

Rosa hugged her arms for warmth and rejoined them. “Everything here is dead,” she said.

“Huh?”

Nate looked around, and now that he was paying attention, he saw that there were no trees here, no flowers, not even any grass. Only dead leaves covered the ground, blown through on the autumn wind, but they had rotted to black on the ground as though frostbitten. Only the cobblestone walkway leading to the mouth of the tower was a splash of color against the blackened earth.

Lampent huddled close to Nate like a second shadow, his arms tucked in and uncharacteristically calm, even nervous.

“Are you guys comin’ or what?” Hugh called from the threshold where he waited with Kahili.

“Yeah,” Nate said. “Come on, I’m sure it’s fine.”

Rosa looked at him. “You look awful, Nate. Are you sure it’s just a cold?”

Nate sniffled and rubbed his nose. “Yeah, I’m fine, see? Maybe there’s soup or hot cocoa inside. I could go for that.”

Rosa didn’t look convinced, but she relented and followed him inside after Hugh and Kahili. Celestial Tower’s first floor was lived in and well-kept, and if Nate didn’t know better, he would have guessed he’d stepped into someone’s home. Beyond the foyer, which had likely functioned as a reception lobby when this place used to be the Gym, the marble floor opened up into a large living room. There were windows, but the glass was murky and admitted little light. A hearth burned and warmed the room, and cast a glow over the dark leather furniture and wine-red rugs. An elaborate candle-burning chandelier hung from the ceiling and gave off a warm glow. Nate ran his hands over the nearest sofa, an old leather loveseat that sagged from years of use, supple as suede.

“Hello?” Kahili called. “It’s Kahili.”

“I’ve never seen so many books in one place outside a library,” Hugh said, running his fingers over the dusty tomes stacked to bursting in the many bookshelves that lined the walls.

“These paintings,” Rosa said, examining one of the few paintings on the wall. “Nate, can I get a light over here?”

“Sure.” Nate grabbed onto Lampent and joined Rosa at the wall, where he shined Lampent’s indigo glow on the painting. “It’s pretty, I guess.” He didn’t know much about art, but it looked like a nice enough painting. It showed a sweeping mountain landscape on a clear summer day, birds in the sky, and a tower Nate thought he recognized. “Hey, that kind of looks like the Moon Tower.” He pointed to the crenellations on the stone jutting from the mountainside that betrayed its
“Yeah,” Rosa said. “But that man...”

Nate hadn’t even noticed the man until she pointed him out. A smaller figure against the backdrop of the magnificent scenery, he was dark of hair and clothing as he gazed up at the Moon Tower and the Flyers swarming around it.

“Hard to forget a face, right?” he teased.

Rosa didn’t take the joke. “I’ve seen him before.”

“It’s...a picture of the back of him. You can’t even see the guy’s face.”

Rosa moved away to the next painting, and Nate followed. This was another landscape painting in a different place. It was snowing, and the mountains were soft and white. The dark-haired man from before was in this painting, too, his back to the audience as he admired the sublime winter scenery.

“Him again,” Nate said. “I guess it’s a collection.”

Rosa shook her head. “I saw these in Castelia. I mean, not these exact ones, but the same style. I think it’s the same artist.”

“Castelia? You mean at the Gym?”

She nodded.

“Ow,” Hugh said across the room. He was shaking out his hand. “The hell?”

“Hugh?” Nate said.

He was looking up. “Something hot just...” He trailed off and stared at the ceiling.

“Hugh,” Rosa said, moving to join him. “What’re you—”

He shot out a hand and grabbed her wrist hard enough to hurt, silencing her, and pointed to the ceiling when she tried to struggle. Rosa ceased her struggling and gaped.

“Oh,” she squeaked.

Lampent came alive in Nate’s hand and buzzed around his head in a frenzy, and Nate tried to grab him. “Hey, Lampent, cut it out! What’s wrong?”

Lampent bumped his chest and pushed against him, and Nate was forced to hold onto him like a child. He looked up just as the source of Rosa and Hugh’s shared fear descended on them. The chandelier had come undone from the ceiling and was floating of her own accord. The candles she held dripped black wax, melted under the indigo flames she carried. Two murky yellow eyes flickered in her glass body amidst an enormous blaze. Nate’s voice and wits escaped him as he came face to face with what he could only assume was a Ghost far more powerful than even Lampent.

“What? What what? Chandelure, you’ve fallen again!” said a short bespectacled woman who spoke like she couldn’t get her words out fast enough. Little footsteps padded over the rugs to get in between Chandelure and Hugh and Rosa. “How did you come loose? Oh my, no good, no good at all...”
Chandelure rotated to see the woman better, and she lifted the sentient chandelier with one hand like she weighed nothing. As soon as the woman made contact, Chandelure’s indigo flames blazed brighter, lighting up the room in a splendid violet glow better than sunlight.

“Silly girl, feeding time is later. Did you forget? Always forgetting...” the woman muttered.

Chandelure resumed her place on the ceiling like a regular chandelier, and Lampent dared to emerge from Nate’s arms. He’d forgotten Lampent was there as the experience of meeting Chandelure consumed him, but now his arms seized up and a fresh wave of chilling ache passed through his body. He fell to his knees, shaking.

So cold.

“Nate!” Rosa said, rushing to his side. Hugh was right behind her.

“What what? You’ve fallen, too,” the woman said.

“He’s been like that since I met him,” Kahili said. “I didn’t want to alarm them by saying anything.”

The woman nodded. “Yes, understood. You did the right thing. Very right. Now get over here.” She reached for Nate.

“Huh?” he said.

But before he could take her hand, the woman snatched Lampent and yanked him back. Lampent erupted with little purple will-o-wisps, but they bounced off the woman like cotton balls.

“Shush! No crying for you, Lampent,” the woman scolded. Lampent’s flame shrank as if in shame or fear.

Nate could not make heads or tails of what was going on.

“You, bring him,” the woman ordered Hugh and Rosa. “There, the couch. Now, bring.”

Hugh and Rosa complied, and each took one of Nate’s arms and dragged him to a couch by the hearth to lie flat. Even the heat of the fire didn’t do much to warm him.

“Hm, Ignifer,” the woman said, sniffing Nate and adjusting her enormous glasses. “Little lamp knave, you know better.” She glared at Lampent, who was still in her clutches.

“What do you need?” Kahili asked, for some reason extremely calm and nonchalant about all this when Nate felt like he might die of hypothermia right there.

“Fire. You, Syreni, get the fire.”

“What do you mean, get? And how did you know—”

“No talk, just fire! Fire now! Shoo!” The woman actually shooed Hugh, and Nate had to laugh. He regretted it when his vision began to swim and his headache screamed. It felt like someone was drilling into his head with a rusty nail.

Hugh passed the woman a burning stick he’d drawn out of the fire, which she accepted, spilling cinders on the rug that fizzled out.

“Take the lamp,” the woman said.
“Who’re you...” Rosa asked.

But she lost her words when out of the woman’s body, a shadow rose on its own. Rosa yelped and scrambled back and right into Hugh, who caught her and pulled them both shaking against the wall as far as humanly possible from whatever the hell that was. The shadow had a single burning red eye that looked directly down at Nate.

“Dusknoir, don’t eat him,” the woman said as she handed off Lampent to Dusknoir the fucking enormous Ghost.

Dusknoir, little more than an amorphous shadow with a vaguely humanoid shape, grasped Lampent in one smoky hand and floated across the room.

“And now, Ignifer,” the woman said. “We will burn the cold out of you.”

“Wait,” Nate said, but there was no stopping her.

“Just relax,” Kahili said, leaning over the couch. Oricorio hopped off her shoulder and peered down at Nate with her dead eyes and opened her beak in a hiss.

Another shadow rose from the woman’s shoulders, this one far smaller than Dusknoir, and blinked two sparkling eyes. He perched on her shoulder like a tiny purple man with diamonds in his eyes, and grinned wolfishly to reveal a set of rotted pointy teeth. Somewhere, someone was laughing.

Is that in my head?

“Sableye,” the woman said. She bit her thumb to draw blood, then offered it up to the tiny Ghost.

Sableye bit down on her thumb, but if she felt pain she didn’t let on. Sableye’s sparkling eyes bled to red, and he grinned wider as he lost his shape and became a cloud of noxious gas. The gas descended on Nate, and he felt something heavy on his chest. A large uncut gemstone, red as blood, pressed onto his chest and became a cloud of noxious gas. The gas descended on Nate, and he felt something heavy on his chest. A large uncut gemstone, red as blood, pressed onto his chest through the gas, and little clawed hands grasped its edges. Horrified but unable to move, Nate watched as Sableye pushed the stone into his chest, and if he wasn’t delirious at this point he may have actually thought there was a hole in him where his soul was peeking out. Pearlescent fingers of smoke grew from his chest, grasping, and Sableye licked his rotted lips as his ruby eyes glittered hungrily.

“Mega Sableye,” the woman said. “Don’t touch!”

She held the burning stick over Nate’s chest, and he watched as the flames were drawn into his chest, consumed. All of a sudden, the heat became unbearable even for him, like he’d never been warm in all his life until this moment and he couldn’t take it. He opened his mouth to scream, but all he heard was the roar of the fire. Mega Sableye grinned down at him through the flames, and Nate realized the cackling he heard was coming from the Ghost. And then, everything went dark.

He dreamed he was sleeping in on a Sunday morning, the sun streaming through his blinds in his bedroom in Aspertia City. The sweet smell of the mountain lakes and wild flowers drifted through his window, and the sun’s rays warmed his cheeks. Just downstairs, Helena would be waiting with breakfast; she’d always made brunch on Sundays when Paul still lived with them, a happy family of three. Emboar, just a little Tepig back then, would be jumping on Nate and grunting cutely, ready for him to wake up and start the day. It was a beautiful day, couldn’t he see? Today would be a great day...
When Nate opened his eyes, it was not Sunday sunlight and the promise of brunch with his parents that greeted him, but shadows and susurrations. And Emboar was still dead.

“Ugh,” he groaned, trying to sit up and expecting his head to start aching again.

But it never did. Blinking, Nate rubbed the sleep from his eyes and looked around. He was on a small twin bed opposite a small but roaring hearth. The window shade was open, and he saw that it was dusk. The sun was nearly set, and the stars were coming out. He remembered what had happened and immediately felt his chest. But there was no hole, and not even a cut or scar when he pulled his shirt up to check. And when he got up off the bed, he realized he could breathe. The chills were gone, the feverish aching, the cold. He felt better than he had in a long time.

“Was it a dream?” he wondered, touching his chest.

Was that...my soul?

And then he remembered Lampent. That Dusknoir had absconded with him somewhere, and Lampent had been afraid, terrified.

“Damnit,” Nate said, starting to panic. He had to find Lampent. He couldn’t lose him, not after he’d been the one to take him from the Driftveil Lighthouse, after Emboar...

He pulled on his shoes, which someone had removed, and let himself out of the tiny bedroom. It opened up into the living room he’d been in, but no one was around, not even the Chandelure that had been hanging from the ceiling when he’d arrived. Worried, Nate felt for the rest of his Pokéballs—all were accounted for. He grabbed Rapidash’s Pokéball, taking some comfort from the knowledge that she was by his side should he need her, and went outside. What he saw nearly made him want to run back inside for a moment.

A goliath of a creature nine feet tall stood sentry outside. If it wasn’t so tall, Nate would have wondered if it was simply a man in an ornate suit of blue and gold armor, rusted and cracked with age in places. But then he noticed the glimmer of smoke rising from the joints, the same shadowy tendrils Duknoir and Sableye had secreted, and he knew instinctively that he was looking at another Ghost.

“You’re awake,” said Kahili, who was leaning against the threshold. Oricorio was nowhere in sight, but she had another Flyer, this one a seven-foot-tall bird with the largest and most brightly colored beak Nate had ever seen.

“Kahili,” Nate said.

“Toucannon and I were keeping watch. The others should be back from town soon. Shauntal had them do her grocery shopping while they were here. Two birds and all.”

Kahili’s Toucannon looked agitated, but she didn’t seem as perturbed by the sentient suit of armor as Nate was.

“What is that?” he asked.

“That’s Golurk. Shauntal set it to watching over the tower, but I guessed you would rather wake up and find me instead of it...”

Nate looked up at Golurk. Through its helmet, it was hard to tell where its eyes were looking. You guessed right.
“Shauntal?” he asked.

“The Medium who cured you. She went to feed Chandelure in the woods. Your Lampent went with them.”

Nate shook his head. “Wait, slow down. A Medium? As in, a Necromancer?”

“I prefer Imago,” Shauntal said as she emerged from the shadows. Chandelure floated alongside her, and Lampent trailed behind. When he saw Nate, however, his inner flame blazed brightly and he rushed to meet him.

“Lampent!” Nate said, relieved to see his Pokémon. “Hey, little guy.”

“Ah ah! Careful, now,” Shauntal said. “I scolded Lampent, but Ghosts don’t learn without discipline. Discipline, Ignifer. Understand?”

Nate stared at this woman, Shauntal, who had apparently cured him of his aggravating illness that was a hell of a lot more dangerous than a cold. She was older than him, at least forty, but dressed young and cute in purple and black, a dress with tights and an oversized sweater that made her look more like a school girl going through a goth phase than a forty-year-old Ghost whisperer. Her black hair was pinned up out of her face, which was half hidden behind large round spectacles that made her dark eyes appear even larger.

A real Medium, he though, equal parts horrified and mystified.

“I...”

“From what I gather,” Kahili said, “Ghosts like to feed on people and Pokémon’s life energy. So those of us who aren’t Mediums and don’t have the kind of Aura that can sustain Ghosts safely have to be careful not become their food.”

“Fire, Ignifer. Fire. Chandelure’s line likes fire. Burning bodies, dead bodies, even living plants can be a nice snack, but corpses are better. Meatier. You feed him that and he won’t feed on you.”

Lampent unfurled his arms and began juggling will-o-wisps in an attempt to engage Nate. Shauntal looked affronted.

“Ah! None of that, you lamp knave!” she scolded. “No siphoning his heat with your will-o-wisp shenanigans until he regenerates, understand?”

So that’s what happened.

That was why he’d gotten sick, so cold... Lampent was stealing his life energy in the form of heat, slowly but steadily. That pyre in Driftveil must have sated him for a time, but once they got through Chargestone Cave, enough time must have passed without Lampent getting the energy he needed to sustain his flame.

Nate stared at Lampent in understanding. “You could’ve died without feeding, and I had no idea... Lampent, I’m sorry. You won’t go hungry again, I promise. Okay?”

Lampent twirled his arms around as though clapping, and Nate smiled a little.

“You’re not disturbed?” Shauntal asked. “He could have killed you.”

“I guess a little, but I pulled him out of the lighthouse, so I’m responsible. It’s my fault he was
hungry. I wish I’d known all this before,” Nate said.

Shauntal nodded. “This one is very strange. I quite like him. Kahili, you’ll stay the night. And you, Ignifer.”

“It’s Nate.” When she didn’t respond, he added, “You know, short for Nathaniel.”

Shauntal smiled. “Nate-short-for-Nathaniel, you’ll stay, too. Where are the others? I’m hungry and would like food.”

“Shauntal,” Nate said. “I don’t know what you did, but...thanks. I feel a lot better.”

Shauntal crossed her arms and shook her head. “Soul was cold, so warm the soul up. It’s very basic. Mega Sableye thought you tasted awful. Not to worry, this is good.”

“It is?”

“Mm. Sableye feed on greed, because greed tastes sweet and never runs out. You taste foul, no greed. Lucky, or you would be dead. Sableye is the greediest of them all and can’t resist the taste. Mega form makes him useful but insatiable. Even I couldn’t stop him.”

Nate looked at her, at a loss for words.

“Do you read, Nate-short-for-Nathaniel?”

“I mean, it’s just Nate... You know what, never mind. Yeah, I guess I read. Not a whole lot lately, though.”

Shauntal clapped her hands together. “I’ll get you a book. Good for the soul, while you heal. Kahili, you’ll have one, too.”

Kahili shot Nate a look that said ‘it’s not worth it’, so he didn’t argue.

“Nate!” Rosa shouted when she saw him coming up the hill. “You’re awake!”

She and Hugh were just coming back from town carrying a few bags of groceries. Sawsbuck was accompanying them, tall and proud. The leaves adorning his antlers had turned a golden brown, and the lichen and moss in his coat had also dulled with autumn’s chill. Nate wondered how he’d measure up against Rapidash; the two were of a height now that Sawsbuck had evolved.

“Food!” Shauntal exclaimed. “Hurry, hurry now.”

“We’re coming, for fuck’s sake,” Hugh grumbled. “Can’t believe she made us do all her shopping for her, goddamn.”

Golurk stood aside for them to pass, and Sawsbuck herded Rosa away from it protectively, though he need not have bothered. Golurk was like a stone guardian that barely noticed their passing.

“Nate,” Rosa said again, handing off the shopping bags to Shauntal and hugging him. “Oh my god, you’re okay. You look great.”

“I feel great,” he said, hugging her back. “Like it never happened.”

Hugh dropped his bags and joined them. “You mean it’s never gonna happen again. That glow stick has got to go.”
“Yeah, I’m with Hugh on this one,” Rosa said.

“Guys, relax,” Nate said, smiling. “Lampent stays, and I’m calling a moratorium on all arguing in honor you agreeing on something for once.”

“What?” Shauntal said suddenly. She rubbed her ears. “No, no, no.”

“Shauntal?” Kahili asked, reaching for her.

Shauntal jumped in a fright like she’d been doused with cold water. She looked around and adjusted her glasses, regaining herself. Golurk lumbered toward her, his footsteps utterly silent, and took a knee in front of her.

“My apologies. I didn’t mean to alarm anyone,” Shauntal said. “The voices can get loud when they’re excited.”

“Dude, fuck this haunted asylum cliché,” Hugh said. “I say we get back to Sky. I’ll even fly, I don’t care.”

“Shauntal invited us to stay the night,” Nate said. “And she did sort of literally save my soul back there, so...”

“It’s fine, Hugh,” Rosa said. “I’ll watch over you as you sleep if you’re that scared.”

Hugh scowled. “Ha ha, says the one who clung to me shaking like a leaf when that Dusknoir popped out.”

“That never happened,” Rosa said.

Hugh smirked his papercut smirk. “The hell it didn’t.”

“Shauntal, do you want help with the food?” Rosa said, stalking off.

“Inside, inside, let’s go!” Shauntal said, shooing them all in like hens. “Quickly now. Mischief is best entertained in small groups and close quarters.”

That night after dinner, which was surprisingly not bizarre or horrifying in any way if one accepted as normal Chandelure hanging from the ceiling like a regular chandelier, Shauntal had gathered Nate and the others in the living room in a circle of chairs and sofas by the fire. Nate recalled his first thoughts upon setting eyes on Mistralton, how he’d wished to curl up in front of a fire with something hot to drink and hang out with his friends, and thought he’d never imagined it turning out quite like this. Lampent sat on the arm of his chair like a regular lamp, basking in the heat of the fire but taking care not to siphon any heat from Nate himself. Whatever Shauntal had fed him that night had been enough to sate him for now.

Rosa and Hugh were on a sofa together, but only because they both wanted a blanket and Shauntal didn’t have any extras, so they had to share. They were mercifully mature about it, and Hugh even seemed to have relaxed a little with Leafeon curled up asleep in between them, purring. Nate caught him scratching the cat behind his ears a couple times, but valiantly held his tongue so as not to embarrass Hugh. Kahili had a seat to herself with her Oricorio, and Shauntal sat cross-legged on a pile of cushions. Her Sableye had assumed his corporeal form and was playing with some rings and crystals Shauntal had set out for him from a box she kept on the mantle, priceless gems that
nonetheless seemed to hold more value to the Ghost than to her.

“Shauntal,” Rosa said. “I was meaning to ask you about the paintings.”

Shauntal grabbed a ring and waved it in front of Sableye like a cat’s toy. She made a game out of watching him jump to swipe it from her fingers, grinning devilishly all the while as he danced about. “I like art. Not so much as books, but art is an adequate substitute on lonely nights when I want to feel lonelier. Get lost in the color.”

“Where did you get them?” Rosa pressed.

“From the artist, of course. Do you like them? I was going to pick out a book for you, but the painting is nice, too.”

“No, I mean, that’s nice of you, but that’s not what I meant. I saw paintings like these in Castelia, at the Gym. Burgh had them. He said his sister, Vivian, painted them. I was wondering, did you get them from him?”

Shauntal looked up, and Sableye looked up with her. It was the eeriest synchronicity of movement Nate had ever seen, and despite the warmth of the fire and his blanket, he shivered.

“The Volucris,” she said. “Vivian was a talented artist. You saw her die.”

“I... I did,” Rosa said.

“Wait, how would you know that?” Hugh asked.

“I don’t,” Shauntal said. “Dusknoir does. He told me. He smelled her death on you. Very faint, but we take our memories with us everywhere we go, little fault lines in time that crack and shift, crack and shift...”

“You’re a really unsettling person,” Hugh said as politely as he possibly could.

Shauntal shifted her gaze to him, and Sableye mimicked her movement perfectly. “Unsettling, yes... I can sense and see things you cannot, and that is unsettling, but more for me than for you...trust me.” She smiled a little. “You remind me of him, a little. There’s a darkness in you like there was in him.”

“Him? Who?” Hugh asked.

Shauntal blinked, and her smiled faded. She looked away. “The one who failed.”

“Shauntal,” Kahili said. “I believe Rosa wanted to know about your paintings?”

“Oh! Oh, yes, the paintings, can’t forget, I promised to keep them up.” She got up, and Sableye clambered onto the cushions with his cache of gems and rings. There were too many for him to gather up in his little stick arms, though, and he soon became frustrated.

“She never did paint his face,” Shauntal said wistfully, running her finger over the image of the painted man’s head in one of the landscapes. “I think she was afraid of what she would see.” Shauntal shook her head. “The future is always clearest to those who’ve already lived through it. Silly, silly.”

“You know the man in the painting?” Rosa asked. “Burgh told me he was Vivian’s companion, that they traveled all over Unova hunting great treasures.”
“One treasure, just the one,” Shauntal said.

“What treasure?” asked Nate.

Shauntal looked at him. “The one that would save the person he loved most in the world.” She looked away. “But that’s an old story now, dusty like the books I collect. I love old stories, but most people prefer to forget.”

“I’d like to hear the story,” Nate said.

“Me, too,” Rosa said. “Why do you have Vivian’s paintings? Did you know her? Or her companion? Who was he?”

“He was a hero,” Shauntal said. “Or, he tried to be. But he failed, very tragic. His name was Hilbert, and he tried to challenge a king.”

“A king?” Hugh asked. “What king?”

“Oh, I...thought you knew. You came to hear about the king, didn’t you? Skyla said so...”

“What king?” Rosa said. “You mean King Drayden?”

Shauntal blinked in confusion. “No, the king. The one who was crowned. The Ideologue.”

“We don’t know what you’re talking about,” Nate said gently. “What’s the Ideologue?”

Shauntal looked gravely worried, and she went back to her cushions much to Sableye’s dismay. He crawled onto her lap and gnawed on a particularly fat emerald.

“You don’t know the story... No, of course not, everything was erased. And Grimsley was erased, too. All of it, gone...”

“So the man in the painting is Hilbert,” Rosa said. “And he was Vivian’s companion. And this king he challenged?”

“You know him,” Shauntal said, pointing to Rosa. “You carry him with you wherever you go.”

“I...” Rosa touched a hand to chest. “Wait, you mean...”

“Yes. The one called N is the king, the Ideologue. He was untouchable for so long, and we feared...”

“Feared? N was a good man. I know, I was a part of his Team Plasma before all this,” Rosa said.

“Good man, bad man, it doesn’t matter. His ideals were the strongest. This is what we feared. So we tried to stop him. But he... His conviction was too strong. We had no idea he would go so far.”

“What did N do?” Nate said, unable to mask his curiosity.

“He became the hero we feared he would,” Shauntal said. “He summoned the legendary Dragon, Zekrom, and Zekrom killed them all.”
My life closed twice before its close—
   It yet remains to see
   If Immortality unveil
   A third event to me,

   So huge, so hopeless to conceive,
   As these that twice befell.
Parting is all we know of heaven,
   And all we need of hell.

His footsteps echoed against the cold damp walls like so many hands clapping his coming, a crowd raised in ovation, their faces hidden in darkness and stone. If he closed his eyes, he might imagine them here with him in these drowned halls that had not heard footsteps or applause or singing in millennia. There would be sunlight, warm and bright on his cheek, the smell of wild flowers, hands reaching for him in adulation. He could almost hear their voices, the cheering and the singing, most of all the laughter.

He loved their laughter best of all. From the moment he’d heard laughter for the first time, he had loved the sound. If he closed his eyes, he could imagine all that had come before—the sunlight, the cheering, the laughter, even the love. All of it, so clear and vivid and his, even in this dreary damp place long lost to darkness.

He was born in sunlight. Or, sunlight was his earliest memory. It filtered through the canopy, flickering in between fleshy green leaves at the height of Spring. The grass was soft beneath his bare back and smelled sweet. There was a voice telling him he couldn’t stay here dreaming, this wasn’t a place for him, but why should he have to leave? Why should he have to go back? The sun was here, so warm and lovely, and back there was nothing, a place not even memory still lingered. He couldn’t go back, he wouldn’t.

“But you must,” the voice said sadly. “You must wake up.”

If I go back there, will it hurt? he wondered.

“Very much.”

Will you come with me?

“No,” the voice whispered. “But I shall wait for you, when you choose to come home.”

I’m afraid, he confessed, his voice so small as he gazed up at the sunlight through the leaves. I don’t want to die.

“My child,” the voice said, far away, “you already have.”
He reached for the sunlight, but his hand was so heavy he could barely lift it. A great shadow stood over him and drank all the light in its rainbow crown as it looked down on him lying there, unable to breathe. Not warm, but cold. Not grass, but blood, cloying in his nose, the back of his tongue, filling his lungs. He choked and longed to grasp that woven rainbow crown and the one that bore it, but he couldn’t move.

“Now, it’s time to wake up,” the voice said as it came closer, closer.

Tears filled his eyes, but all he could do was lie there and suffocate and try to wake up like the voice asked him to do. If he woke up, there would be pain, but there would also be light, he had to believe it. Cool lips kissed his forehead as light and shadow covered him, swallowed him, and he squeezed his eyes shut and wept, trying to be brave.

And he woke up.

It was many years before he truly understood why he couldn’t talk about it. Why it made others uncomfortable. It wasn’t normal, it wasn’t right. Young boys were not supposed to live alone in the forest, never speaking or hearing another human voice or feeling the touch of a gentle hand. When he was asked about his childhood, he said what they wanted to hear.

“I was an orphan,” he said with that sad, pretty smile he’d practiced in the mirror. “Until Father found me.”

He didn’t like that word, ‘orphan.’ It implied abandonment, loneliness, a life lived in shadow and wretched obscurity. His life had been none of those things. He had the trees to shelter him, the sun to keep him warm, the river to bathe in. And he had all the pretty lights that surrounded him, shielding him from darkness even in the dead of night. The pretty lights led him to his companions, and one day they led him to Father.

“Hello,” said the man who would become his father, kneeling down to his eye-level. He smiled kindly. “What are you doing out here all by yourself?”

He said nothing and huddled behind a tree trunk, shy but curious. His companions were watching over him, and he felt their strength with him.

“Are you lost?”

He shook his head vehemently. Lost was something he had never been.

“I see. Are those your Pokémon?”

He blinked and looked down at one of his companions. She was soft and furry, cream and coral, and she was the fiercest of them all. Beside her was the clumsy one, constantly tripping over his feet. Up in the trees, another was perched on a low branch, feathers ruffled and ready to fly. The littlest of them prodded his bare leg with his little red fingers, nervous.

He looked up at Father again, but still he said nothing.

“How would you like another Pokémon? Shall I give you one?”

He frowned. Give? A companion couldn’t be given; they had to be found and befriended, if they wanted to be found at all. He could always find them, though. He was never lost.
“Here, take this.” Father held out a small ball, red and white, and rolled it over the grass to him.

Curious, he cautiously emerged from behind the tree and took the ball, turning it over in his small hands. There was light within, he could see it. He shook the ball, but nothing happened.

“Press the button,” said Father.

His fiercest companion hissed a warning—she was very protective—but he petted her and called her back. His fingers found the button and pressed it, and the ball popped open in a flash of light, startling him. He gasped and ran back behind the tree, daring to peek out just a little.

A small creature with glossy black fur stood next to the open ball, his ears twitching as he sniffed the air.

“This is Zorua,” said Father. “Would you like to keep him?”

“Zorua,” he repeated the strange name in a voice scratchy from disuse.

This pleased Father, and he smiled again. “Yes, Zorua. Go on.”

Tentative, he stepped out from behind the tree again and beckoned for Zorua. The little fox came closer, wary but curious, but his fierce companion hissed again and scared him. She didn’t trust Zorua and feared he would try to trick them.

“No!” he shouted at her.

Father laughed, a rich sound he had never heard before but that he instantly liked. It was like the river running over the rocks and the wind in the leaves. He tried to mimic the sound, but it came out sounding choppy and discordant. Father smiled nonetheless.

“They have names, too. Your other Pokémon. Would you like to know them?”

Crouched down in the brush, he looked up at Father through his tangled bangs.

“That little red one hiding behind you is Darumaka.”

He looked back at Darumaka, who was being very shy today. Usually, he was so upbeat and boisterous, but Father made him self-conscious.

“The bird is Togetic,” Father said. “This one here is Scraggy.”

Togetic remained still on his branch, his dark hawk eyes unblinking. Scraggy clutched at his legs, where the abundant folds of leathery scaled skin sagged like pants that were too big on him, shifting his weight and glancing about. Father made him uneasy, too.

“And that one,” Father indicated the fiercest of them, “is a very special Pokémon. Her name is Sylveon, and I can see that she’s very loyal to you.”

“Syl...veon,” he repeated, trying out the strange name.

Sylveon’s ears perked up, like she recognized her name. How had he never known it, or any of the others? Did he have a name he didn’t know, too? He couldn’t remember.

“What about you? Would you like a name?” Father asked.

He nodded. A name, yes, he wanted a name. More than anything.
“A special name for a special boy,” Father said softly. “The last boy I took in I called M. So, perhaps I’ll call you N. What do you think of that, N?”

N, he thought. It wasn’t as pretty as Sylveon or Zorua, but it was his. He smiled.

“Well then, N,” said Father, standing. “Why don’t you take my hand? We’ll get you a bath and some clothes, and something to eat. Your Pokémon can come, too. Won’t you let me help you?”

N stood up and looked at Father. The pretty lights surrounding him were dark like the night sky, just like Zorua’s. N had never been afraid of the dark, not when the pretty lights swathed him wherever he went. He’d never had a companion quite like this, so he took Father’s hand and let him lead him out of the forest.

Learning came easily to N. Math and science, letters and prose, philosophy and history. He devoured knowledge the way Darumaka devoured Nanab berries. Suddenly, all the things he thought he knew had names he’d never heard of, meanings he’d never imagined, and it was all connected. He had sisters, too. Anthea and Concordia, and they took their lessons with him. Father was very invested in their education and took great pleasure in hearing them each recite their lessons to prove they’d taken root. N was especially precocious and intellectually curious in a way M and L and K and all the other boys before him had not been, to hear Father tell it. Father made sure he understood how proud that made him.

“You have so much potential, N,” Father said. “I think one day you could be a king among men.”


Father rose from his chair in the study where he conducted his business. He was never to be disturbed in here unless he sent a summons. He laid a hand on N’s shoulder and squeezed lightly, the age spots on his hands pinching. “Kings and queens aren’t born, they’re made,” he said with that slight smile of his. “Never forget that, N.”

He didn’t forget.

Father taught him about Pokémon, about their strengths and weaknesses, and even about battling. N was horrified at the thought of battling.

“I know it sounds cruel,” Father said, his dark eyes heavy with regret. “But this world is cruel. If you don’t learn how to fight, you’ll never be able to protect yourself or your Pokémon. That would be even crueler, don’t you think?”

N could not imagine any harm coming to his companions. “Yes,” he said, clutching little Zorua to his chest and earning a happy lick in return. “I’ll never let them come to harm.”

“Then why not learn how to defend yourself? Come, I’ll teach you.”

He learned to fight. Sword and shield, axe and fist, he took to them all with relative ease. Training the body was not so unlike training the mind. To let one stagnate would disrupt the balance, and he wanted to please Father very much.

He learned to train his Pokémon, too. Sylveon and Togetic, Zorua and Darumaka and Scraggy, they all had strengths and weaknesses N had never known. Each was unique, with special powers and traits, and it was his responsibility to learn how to hone those powers to their best advantage.
Practicing became a game, and the game became fun.

“Moonblast!” he ordered, and Sylveon exploded with brilliant light that burned through solid stone.

Father clapped when he saw N’s progress. “Excellent, my boy. I daresay you’ll be as strong as any Gym Leader in no time at all.”

His companions grew, too. Togetic, Zorua, Scraggy, and Darumaka evolved in time, just as Sylveon had so long ago when she found him lying in the grass, sticky with his own blood staring unseeing at the sunlight through the canopy. A little Eevee, separated from her litter and lost in the forest, had wandered until she found him, and then neither of them was lost anymore.

When Father had him start training against opponents who fought with their own Pokémon, N could not stomach it.

“It’s unconscionable,” he insisted late one night. He’d stormed into Father’s study, sixteen and headstrong, and interrupted Father’s reading. “I won’t harm another living creature. It’s barbaric.”

“N, my boy,” Father coaxed. “No one is asking you to harm anyone, simply to defend. Would you allow some rogue to cut you down without a second thought? Would you stand by idly as he cut down Sylveon? Or Zoroark?”

N paled. “No, of course not.”

“Then you must do as I say. It’s just practice. No one need come to harm so long as you do not let them, I promise.”

He had promised, and so N believed him. Father never lied to him, steady as still waters. N would have been able to tell if just the slightest ripple of light was out of place to accommodate a lie.

*The light doesn’t lie.*

He practiced, and he succeeded. Pokémon battling was no different from a game of chess so long as one knew how to recognize which moves were best suited to which situations. N was methodical, calculating, ruthlessly logical in battle. He learned to anticipate his opponents’ strategies, studied their Pokémon’s strengths and weaknesses, and predicted the swiftest outcome. Until one day, he didn’t predict what was coming next.

Scrafty was fighting alongside Darmanitan against a man the likes of which N had never encountered before in sleepy Lacunosa Town, where he spent his years of learning. The man was swathed in brilliant light, like Father and a scarce few others N had battled at Father’s behest, but his light was bloody red and fierce, coming off him like great wings. He commanded two Pokémon, a Druddigon and a Fraxure, and they were putting up a good fight and excellent teamwork. They had Darmanitan cornered with the threat of Dragon Claws, and Darmanitan was slow. Fearing for his companion, N shouted for Scrafty to help Darmanitan.

“Go, Scrafty! Hi Jump Kick!” N commanded.

Scrafty leaped into the air and came down hard over Fraxure to give Darmanitan an opening to escape the Dragons’ assault. But the trainer, an older man with silver in his hair and lines on his face, reached for Scrafty as he soared through the air and shouted:

“Fall!”

N watched, incredulous, as the man’s ruby red light reached with him and caught Scrafty in mid-
air. Scrafty convulsed and, against all reason and logic, sabotaged his own attack and plummeted to the ground head-first. He crashed with a sickening crack, and Fraxure was immediately upon him to exact revenge for the targeted attack. N screamed as he watched his loyal companion struggle, defenseless and deaf to his pleas to get up.

“No!” N cried, running to intercept the fight himself.

He leaped at Fraxure and tackled the Dragon off Scrafty, but the red light still shackled Scrafty in its vice grip, paralyzing him. Frantic, N tore at the lights and ripped them like tissue paper between his fingers, though they made no sound and held no substance. His opponent shouted something in angry confusion, unsure of what had just happened. Free from the oppressive influence, Scrafty lay on the ground, twitching erratically. His skull was caved in on the side like a deflated balloon, his head fin a bloody ruin. N cradled him in his arms, shaking, as the referee blew his whistle and called an immediate halt to the training match.

“Scrafty?” N pleaded with his companion.

The light circling Scrafty, glossy black and rich chestnut that N had always found beautiful, was weak and fading. Scrafty was afraid, so afraid, and N could feel his fear as if it were his own. He tried to coax the light out with his fingers, but it wasn’t responding, too weak to shine any longer. And soon, it faded completely.

“No,” he said tremulously as tears stung his eyes.

“What the hell was that?” the man he’d been practicing against demanded. “How did he break my control? That’s impossible! No mere pleb can come between a Titan and a Dragon descendant!”

N’s tears fell on Scrafty’s scaled face, but those dark eyes had lost their glimmer. Pain like he’d never known welled in his chest to the point of bursting. It hurt so much, too much, this parting.

I was warned, he thought woefully. I knew it would hurt.

But it was unbearable, lingering and forced to endure such a loss. N rose to his feet and gently laid Scrafty’s body on the ground.

“What did you do, boy?” the man said behind him.

Scrafty’s blood smeared his palms, still hot. N drew the dagger at his hip, turned, and without hesitation drove it in between the man’s ribs. He gasped, and his blood joined Scrafty’s on N’s hand where he clutched the dagger, pushing deeper all the way to the hilt. All the while, he watched as the man’s pretty lights, those crimson threads that swathed him, faded too.

“What...are you...?” the man croaked as blood spilled down his chin.

N said nothing as he watched the life slip out of the man’s eyes, and he let him slump and fall at his feet, shaking until he bled out.

“Sweet Swadloon,” the referee said, backing away in a fright. He pressed a button on the comm he wore. “Patch me through to Master Ghetsis. Th-There’s been an accident...”

N barely heard him as he surveyed the corpse at his feet, bleeding out. Blood dripped from his dagger to the ground in soft plips. The Dragons smelled death and turned tail toward the forest, completely abandoning the battle and Darmanitan, who crawled toward Scrafty’s corpse and just stared at it forlornly.
When they came to fetch him, N let them take him inside, wash the blood from his hands, under his fingernails, in his hair. But when Father came to see him, he could no longer contain himself.

“What grievous misfortune,” Father said with a sigh. “I’m told you acted with unhesitating purpose, N. I’m so proud of you. Such a fiend did not deserve his life.”

“Scrafty is dead,” N said, his voice thick as he sat in the tub, pruning. “You said it was safe, that no harm would come to my companions.”

“Ah, I did.” Father took a seat by the tub and folded his wrinkled hands in his lap. “It was a dirty trick that Titan pulled. In all my years, I ought to have foreseen this tactic. Alas, a Titan can always be counted on to exert his control.”

“Titan,” N said slowly.

Father shook his head. “I had hoped to wait until you were more comfortable with battling to tell you. But...I imagine you must have already seen. The heartstrings don’t lie, isn’t that right?”

Heartstrings.

The pretty lights. It was something only N could see because of what he was. That was what Father told him.

“You’re a very special boy, N. I’ve been searching for such a long time for someone like you. A son worthy of my tutelage and affection,” Father said. “A living Magus.”

It was his true name, a name for the ones like him. Except there were none like him, so Father said. He was the last one. The only one in hundreds of years. The only one who could see the heartstrings, the pretty lights that cloaked all people and Pokémon. Every Tamer had a different color, just as every Pokémon did, too.

But N had to keep the secret of his identity between the two of them, masquerade as an ordinary pleb boy. If they found out, they would come for him and his Pokémon.

“Who will come?” N asked, imagining Scrafty succumbing to the world’s cruelty in his arms.

“Everyone,” Father said. “But I shall protect you, my boy.” He laid a heavy hand on N’s shoulder and smiled. His black heartstrings crawled down his arm like so many oily snakes and twisted around N. They spilled into the water like smoke until the bottom of the tub was nothing but a black abyss. “Trust me.”

N hugged his knees tighter and closed his eyes, imagining those mighty dark heartstrings surrounding him like a shield. If he feared them, then surely anyone who meant him or his Pokémon harm would never stand a chance. Father had promised, after all.

“Yes, Father...”

Team Plasma began as all great intellectual movements do: with an idea.

“I want to make this world better,” N declared to Father on the morning of his twentieth birthday.

“Oh?” Father said, setting down his tea and looking up from his morning paper. He liked to read the paper every morning, bright and early. Lacunosa Town didn’t get much news, but the papers
had stories about what was happening all over Unova, and even in the wider world beyond sometimes. Like N, Father valued knowledge above all else and consumed it voraciously. No detail was too minor. “And how would you like to do that?”

“By imparting knowledge. I’ve finished my studies with you, and now I want to teach people how to live peacefully alongside Pokémon. I want to put an end to cruelty and violence.” I want to make a pure world where Pokémon will be safe.

“A noble ideal,” Father said, scratching his chin. “But a lofty one, too. This is an unforgiving world, and you’ll find that most people prefer to live in ignorance.”

“I’ll teach them,” N insisted.

“Knowledge is a weapon,” Father allowed. “But most prefer not to bleed.”

“I’ll do it peacefully. I’ll gather followers.” He smiled in the way he knew could sway Father if he really tried.

“Will you, now? And how will you do that? Why should anyone follow you?” he challenged.

“I’ll make them love me,” N said with conviction. “You said I could be a king if I wanted to. So I’ll be a king. Their king. People can learn to love a king.”

Father smiled. “Yes, they certainly can. But they don’t know you.”

N reached for Father, and Father’s black heartstrings reached back. He watched as they blended with his own pale pink ones, a dance, and Father shifted in his seat. He could not see what N saw, but on some level he could feel it, this connection.

“No,” N allowed. “But I know them. I can see everything.”

It began small in Lacunosa Town. Door to door, person to person. It was easiest here, where he knew the faces and the names after all the years he spent growing up here. He never forgot a face or a name, and they spared him the time to listen. They gathered when he spoke at the park, when he appeared at a local ball game, at the training fields when he demonstrated his bond with his Pokémon.

“Pokémon are as complex as you and I,” he beseeched the small crowd. “They’re wonderful beings who will help us in our time of need if we’ll only do the same. Treat them as companions, not as tools or chattel. I believe we can coexist peacefully with Pokémon and live more fulfilling, healthier lives. Don’t you agree?”

They applauded and voiced their agreement. Why wouldn’t they? Deforestation, pollution, strip mining, encroachment... All threatened the natural environment shared by Pokémon and people alike. What was the use in destroying the environment when humans depended on it just as much as Pokémon? Where was the sense in abusing Pokémon, enslaving and controlling them, when the same ends could be achieved through companionship and voluntary caregiving?

The turnouts began small, but as word of N’s philosophy spread, curiosity won over more new faces, young dreamers who wanted to make their mark on the world but did not know how. N taught them how. He went north to Undella, south to Striaton and Nacrene, and the dreamers followed, few in number but vocal and effusive. When he made his first appearance in Castelia City some years later, Gym Leader Burgh himself turned out to hear him speak and invited him to the Gym for a private consultation. Burgh was of an age with N and full of hope for his great city, having just been named Gym Leader and eager to start his tenure on a positive note. It was in
Castelia City that N met Professor Cedric Juniper, a brilliant scientist with an intellectual curiosity that rivaled N’s own. N’s vision for an official group, a team of likeminded people who shared his values and beliefs, first came to fruition in Castelia City.

Father secured the funds N needed to continue his travels and speaking tour, which steadily experienced more and more demand, especially from the younger generation. Father had his hands in a number of ventures and savings enough to fund the movement once he saw that it was truly taking wing and not a passing fad. He brought his colleagues, men with sharp business, political, and philosophical acumen to advise N and help him nurture and grow his fledgling ideology into a true political movement. They became his Seven Sages, wizened men of learning who more than made up for what N lacked in age and experience. He gained audiences with wealthy citizens, mayors, and other local politicians who saw the catalyzing effect N’s proselytizing had on their cities’ restless youth populations and wanted to capitalize on that unified fervor. He was well-received where his followers demanded action from their local leaders, and change began to happen.

N was so swept up in the ardor of his developing convictions that burgeoning fame and fortune went almost completely unnoticed, until one day years later he woke up and realized he could not walk down the street without at least someone recognizing him. His followers, ever growing in number with each passing day, carried his picture with them, practiced his teachings about treating Pokémon as companions rather than as tools, and lobbied for stricter environmental protection laws. They called him charismatic, vibrant, the personification of youth and activism, the voice of the forgotten and the trampled, a paragon of peace and understanding sorely missed in this industrialized, commoditized, materialistic world they had lost themselves in.

They called him other things, too. Not everyone was happy with N’s proselytizing, but that was to be expected. Investors in Nacrene’s timber industry decried his environmental policies as draconian and antithetical to free-market enterprise; many Gym leaders and the military forces they commanded rejected his views on how best to coexist with and train Pokémon; some cities, like Opelucid, refused even to allow N and his people into their territory, wary of any and all mass ideological movements and deaf to reasoned negotiation. They called him a zealot, an extremist, a demagogue. But for every voice who tried to silence him and his followers, another clamored louder and longer, refusing to be silenced. They were not lost anymore. Now, they were free.

Liberation had not been N’s idea, to tell it true. He had never considered Pokémon as property and could not fathom thinking otherwise. Someone brought it up at a party or a convention, he couldn’t say, and soon it was the newest buzz. Liberating Pokémon from unworthy trainers became the logical progression of N’s philosophy: if anyone did not agree to lead a peaceful coexistence with Pokémon, if instead they chose to brutalize or enslave or otherwise abuse Pokémon for any reason whatsoever, then they had no business even being around Pokémon. Liberation was the solution his followers came to of their own accord, but they ascribed liberation to N in an act of love and devotion, as a rallying point and an ideal to which they could aspire. He had made them love him, indeed. When he could see their heartstrings, read their emotions and desires as easily as he could read their pain, it was easy to show them empathy. We are all creatures of heart and soul, and in the end all any of us wants is to be understood, to know we are not lost or alone, to feel included. As the last Magus, N understood that desire acutely. It was the gift he had been entrusted with, after all.

Team Plasma was Father’s idea. He liked the allusion to scientific phenomena, the poetry of metaphor and matter. N liked the idea of a team, a group that was stronger together, united behind a single cause. It would bring his followers together and give them that connection they craved wherever they went, the comfort of belonging to a group. Anthea and Concordia began to travel with him, speaking for him when he was too busy, or when he thought the audience needed a
different face.

Over the years, reports of emboldened Team Plasma members’ “liberation” of Pokémon came at the expense of human lives. N remembered the first time Father mentioned one such liberation. Some of N’s followers had found out about a man in Virbank City who’d been poaching Staryu and Starmie, harvesting their jewels to sell to private collectors at a premium, and throwing them back into the ocean to be picked off by predators with no chance to defend themselves. A mob of hooded Team Plasma followers had dragged the poacher from his home, judged him, and sentenced him to death by stoning. They threw his mangled corpse into the sea to become food for the Staryu and Starmie, and they feasted on him in the deep. The story made the papers all over Unova, and it was met with harsh opprobrium nationwide. This kind of sadistic vigilante justice was neither legal nor laudable in the modern world no matter how morally corrupt the victim’s crimes.

“Does it disturb you?” Father asked. “A man was executed.”

N thought of Scrafty and how that Titan had forced him to fall to his death. A man was executed. It should have disturbed him. Yes, he would have said if Father was anybody else. But with Father, there need not be lies or pretty words. A world without that poacher and his cruelty was a better world for all, even those who lambasted the brave souls who had brought him to justice. To N, those followers had been heroes. “If left to his devices, he would have continued his abuse without remorse.”

“That’s true. Such a man would only sow more chaos and violence. It is human nature to carry on in our fashion at the expense of others.”

N stared at his hands, pale and long-fingered, but he could remember how hot that Titan murderer’s blood at been on the hilt of his dagger. “A man such as that is tainted. His death was a liberation, for him and for the ones he harmed.”

Father laughed that throaty laugh he had. “I couldn’t agree more. There is evil in this world, and it takes root in the hearts of the weak. We’re doing good work, my boy. Think of all the Pokémon you’re helping.”

It was not the last liberation, and soon there were too many for N to keep track of. There were reports of Plasma Agents threatening bodily harm to any unworthy people who refused to turn loose their Pokémon, attacks on businesses or factories known to use oppressive or inhumane means to force Pokémon to work. There were interviews with people claiming to have been victimized by Team Plasma, saying they did not understand why strangers had bullied them into releasing their Pokémon. The elderly, the incapacitated, even children. What had they done wrong? Why were they targeted?

“Because they are weak.” Father said when he read about the tragic death of a young girl in Aspertia City. Team Plasma was not directly implicated, but foul play had been suspected, as it had been in many and more disappearances and mysterious deaths associated with Pokémon liberation. “Weak parents beget weak children, and it is no excuse. It’s a pitiable fate, but one they choose for themselves. Do not trouble yourself over this.”

“Iconoclasts are using Team Plasma as a scapegoat for any crime that gets committed,” N said, frustrated. “I care not for myself, but if my philosophy is tarnished, all my followers will be lost without anyone to guide them. I cannot abandon them to the whims of the cruel majority.”

“Fear not, my boy,” Father said. “Let me worry about these spurious accusations and conspiracy theories. You must think only of the greater good and reassure your followers. They would indeed
be lost without you.”

Father enlisted one of the other Sages, Gorm, to investigate unsubstantiated claims of Team Plasma’s brutality. Gorm had been a media tycoon before his retirement and had considerable influence over and access to the major news publications that circulated Unova. He promised N personally that these defamatory stories would cease, and that he would allow only the substantiated truth to be reported. Soon, N ceased to hear about the accounts almost entirely. Gorm used his considerable influence to persuade the news outlets to publish stories about Team Plasma followers making headway on lobbying local governments for better environmental protection, exposing corrupt and inhumane business practices, rescuing Pokémon from polluted or toxic environments.

It was working, N thought. Progress was happening, slowly but surely. Change was within reach so long as they kept asking for it. The greater good was moving with him and his plans. It was only a matter of time.

The years passed, his thirtieth birthday come and gone and then some, and he continued to speak wherever he was welcomed. He grew more confident at the pulpit when his audience was a thousand shadowy faces, united in their desires and doubts. Their heartstrings blended into one amorphous glow, like a rainbow star that pulsed in time with their hearts at his impassioned words. Their light became his sun and sustenance, feeding off of him as much as he fed off of it. He could see their hopes and dreams in their light, their deepest secrets and wishes, and he granted them with his every charmed word. If he called for redoubled recruitment efforts in underserved Virbank, he got it. If he called for organized protests of what he saw as savage traditions at the expense of Pokémon, such as Driftveil’s Colosseum, he got them. His followers loved him, worshipped him, revered him, and as Father had promised him they would, they truly made him into their king.

But for all the support and adoration N’s name and image inspired wherever he went, there were very few people he felt truly close to. Anthea and Concordia, both plebs, had grown up with him and loved him well, but they had each other and were inseparable. Theirs was a bond more powerful than any either of them could ever share with N, for they had been together since the beginning. People were not like Pokémon in that sense, he came to learn. Some bonds were stronger than others, and there was no changing that. With Pokémon, things were simpler. Even Father spent less and less time with N over the years as he preferred to manage Team Plasma’s growing business and corporate affairs behind the scenes with the other Sages.

N didn’t mind too much. He had his Pokémon, and they had him. As in the beginning, as now and forever. He was a Magus, a Fairy Tamer born from the blessing of Xerneas, Giver of Life, a god who had found him worthy over all others. Or so the mythology speculated. There were no Magi left, that was what Father told him, and so N had to seek out their history on his own. The answers were out there, surely, and he simply needed to find them.

But how fitting, he thought as he stared at his pale reflection in the mirror in the tiny room he’d rented at a hotel in Nacrene City. How fitting that he was alone in this, too. But he would not give up. These trips to Nacrene City were few and far between, and he made use of every spare moment he had to comb the vast library archives. Nacrene’s library was the largest in all of Unova and held interlibrary loan agreements with distant facilities from Kanto to Kalos. All the information in the world was at N’s fingertips should he put in the request and spend the time, and over the years he had slowly but surely pieced together the history and mythos surrounding the fabled Magi, where they had come from, who they were, why they had all perished—suicide, by and large, he discovered. Why? Were there others like him out there sitting in a dusty corner of some distant library, reading every scrap of information they could get their hands on and wondering the same thing? Did they feel lonely, or were they hopeful that one day, they would meet their creator again?
“Last call,” said the library staff woman as she made her way through the stacks and peeked into the small study rooms, as she did every night.

N rubbed his eyes. The words on the page he was reading had begun to blur together. He’d been here all day, the same as yesterday and the day before that. His trips to Nacrene were infrequent and usually for business rather than pleasure. When he did have precious free time for his studies, he preferred to take these trips alone. Nacrene was a large city, and his face was not so recognizable when he took care to disguise himself, except by his Team Plasma followers who had started carrying around his picture in lockets like a kind of proof of membership. If it gave them comfort, N did not begrudge them the practice. But there was something to be said of anonymity, something he never had in places like Lacunosa Town, where every man, woman, and child knew his face no matter what he did to conceal himself. Sometimes it was nice to be alone. Quiet.

“Last call,” the woman called out again, making him jump. Was it so late already?

“I’ll just finish this page, N told himself. He had been reading about a Kalosian king who lived over 3,000 years ago in the time of the Great War, a man known only as AZ and believed to be the very first Magus. The tome had finally arrived from Canalave Library in Sinnoh, and N had had to pay a pretty penny to convince the archivists to ship it all the way to Unova. It was an ancient tome that required special care and handling.

“Burning the midnight oil again?”

N looked up at the sound of the staff woman’s voice so close all of a sudden. She was leaning in the doorway clutching a stack of books in her arms. He recognized her, having seen her working here every day since he arrived for this particular trip, but never on his previous visits. She must have been a recent hire. Her brown hair was pulled back in a ponytail, and her dark eyes seemed to laugh when she smiled, like she had a secret she was dying to tell him but never would, just to keep him guessing. But what had caught his particular interest in her—and given him reason to sequester himself alone in this private study room—was her heartstrings. They shone a brilliant pearlescent white, a thousand rivers of pale light that shrouded her like armor. She was Clairvoyant, and Clairvoyants could often see things they should not.

“I’m leaving,” N said as he quietly rose and closed the tome. It had to be packed carefully in a special container to keep its pages from degrading.

The woman lingered. “I’ve seen you here every night this week. You’re always the first one here and the last one to leave. Are you an academic?”

N finished packing up the tome and hoisted the case under his arm to return to the circulation desk for safekeeping until tomorrow. He smiled his slight smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “No,” he said. “I just like to read.”

“Of course,” the woman said. “I’m sure the History of the Great Kalosian War makes for excellent light reading.”

Her heartstrings danced about her, and N realized she was making a joke. More importantly, she knew what he’d been reading. Was she spying on him? Father had warned him not to draw undue attention to himself when he wasn’t making official appearances in public, where confrontations could be controlled and kept at arm’s length. One-to-one encounters were an entirely different story.

She took his hesitation for discomfort, and her smile fell. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to pry. It’s just that I put in the interlibrary loan order for that, and I wondered who requested something so
obscure. I guessed you must be a professor or academic of some sort.”

*What is she doing? Fishing for information? Does she know me?* He knew that a smile was the best way to disarm an opponent, be it a crowd of hundreds or an audience of one. Father had taught him that, too. “I’m too young and inexperienced to be a professor,” he said amiably. “It’s just a hobby.”

“You look like an old soul to me,” she said.

N blinked in confusion. He couldn’t quite place it, but something about this woman made him nervous. Clairvoyants were known to be devious in their methods. He saw no Pokéballs on her person, but that didn’t mean she didn’t have them stashed in some pocket in her jean shorts or that baggy vest she wore. If she had Psychics with her, she could prove dangerous. It could not be a coincidence that a Clairvoyant had singled him out like this when never before had he encountered such a thing at this library. He made to move past her.

“Excuse me, I need to return this,” he said.

“Oh, I can do that,” she offered, reaching for the case.

“No, I’ve got it,” N said, heading back toward the circulation desk.

“Suit yourself...” She followed him, anyway.

N got to the desk and rang the bell for assistance. The woman hopped the divider and situated herself at the desk opposite him.

“Hello, returning?” she said.

N stared at her, and the longer the silence stretched, the more her heartstrings pulsated. *She is laughing at me.*

As though reading his mind, she laughed lightly, a tinkling sound that made him feel pleasantly sleepy. He set the case with the tome inside it on the desk without thinking about it.

“Sorry,” she said. “I’m not laughing at you, but your face...”

“You have a pleasant laugh,” he said soberly in an effort to deflect attention from him discomfort.

“Oh.” She was still smiling as she looked up at him and laid a hand on the case between them. “You’re a very serious person, aren’t you?”

He didn’t understand. What did she want? There were many who did not support his Team Plasma, as was the case with all great revolutionary movements. N had met plenty of resistance over the years, and Father had warned him that there would be those who would try to sabotage his efforts, slander his name, corrupt his ideals. Was this woman one of them?

“What do you want?” he asked abruptly.

“What do I... I don’t know what you mean.”

“I know what you are,” he said softly. “And I can tell if you lie. Why did you approach me?”

She looked genuinely surprised, but N watched her heartstrings carefully. They never lied.

“You were the last patron still here, and it’s my job to close up,” she said, the laughter gone from
her eyes. “And honestly? I thought you might want to talk to someone.”

“This is a library. People come here to read and to be alone.”

“People come here to lose themselves in stories,” she countered gently. “You could live a hundred lifetimes in one day at the library. Isn’t that why you come here? To live?”

Yes, he wanted to say. The history, the stories thousands of years old, all those lives lived and lost, they were an addiction. In them, he could be the Kalosian King, a general who led men into battle, or a boy raised from the dead embarking on a new journey. Their stories were his stories, his life. In them, he was not alone.

She pulled the case across the desk. “Why don’t you let me buy you a cup of coffee?” she offered. “There’s a café across the street from here that’s open late. I’ll put this away for you until tomorrow.”

“Why?” he asked.

“I don’t know. It just seems to me like you’re not ready to end your story yet,” she said, checking the name on the card slot in the case. “...N. Just N?”

“It’s my name,” he said.

She nodded and stowed the case in a safe under the desk and locked it.

“Okay, N. What do you say? It’s my treat.”

She was smiling at him again, soft and secret, and the pearly sheen of her heartstrings made her dark eyes glow. He wanted to refuse her, but as he had the thought, he was already telling her yes.

“All right,” he said.

“Great!” She hopped up on the desk and swung her legs over to land beside him. She was a good five or six inches shorter than him, and he had to look down to see her properly when she offered her hand to shake. “I’m Hilda.”

He took her hand tentatively, wondering if this was some strange dream conjured from the darkest corners of his subconscious. Perhaps he’d fallen asleep reading, and this was just another fable, a piece of the past that didn’t really belong to him but that he clung to desperately, for any connection at all.

“Hilda,” he said.

Her heartstrings fluttered as he said her name, and he let her lead him outside into the rain, where they ran to escape it to get to the café across the street. She laughed as they made their mad dash, and as they stood under the awning dripping wet, he smiled.

She had a beautiful laugh.

It didn’t take long for Hilda to learn of N’s true identity as the leader of the grassroots political and environmental rights movement, Team Plasma. Year over year, N’s notoriety slowly grew out of his control. He would read about Team Plasma members organizing peaceful protests in his name, and he hardly recognized himself. It was as if his name and his face had become separate from
himself, a symbol others borrowed and elevated at their pleasure. But kings and queens are made, not born, as Father had told him. So let them make him a king if they liked.

Hilda was a Clairvoyant, and she trained Pokémon just as many Tamers did. Her quiet library job in fact took her many places all over Unova in search of both manuscripts and artifacts, relics of history that deserved a place to be commemorated. The Nacrene City Museum, whose investors also funded the library, displayed all manner of trinkets and treasures from old Unova, civilizations thousands of years old that had risen and fallen and risen again. Hilda and her brother, Hilbert, had been hired by the investors as retrieval specialists. Their Clairvoyance made them able to travel long distances in the blink of an eye through Teleportation, thus making them ideal treasure hunters for the Nacrene historical society.

She told N all about her life and her work that first night when she bought him a coffee and they waited out the rain. And when the library closed the next evening and he was once again the last patron, he agreed to stop at the café with her again, this time without much resistance. She was an excellent conversationalist, as far as N could tell. Not that he had much experience. Most of his conversations were with Father or his sisters, sometimes with the other Sages. Rood was the most amenable of the Sages, always polite and engaged when he asked N about his philosophy, like he truly wanted to understand and better himself. The others spent more time with Father than with N. But as for strangers, those outside the inner circle, N had little experience. Addressing a crowd with a prepared speech came easy. The energy and enthusiasm of the masses was infectious, their heartstrings a symphony of color that filled N with purpose and hope. Sitting across from Hilda in a private conversation she fully expected him to participate in was perhaps the most challenging trial he had to face in his adult life thus far.

But she made it as easy as it could ever be. She always seemed to think of something interesting to say, some new observation or thought that kept the conversation going and the time passing. It was art, what she did. He told her as much on the third night at the café.

“Art? You flatter me,” Hilda said, grinning. “I’ve read about the heartbreaking speeches you give about peace and liberation. You have so much passion and such faith in your convictions, and people respond to that. I’d say you’re the artist, not me.”

“You are,” N insisted. “You have a unique ability to connect with others on a very personal level. That’s not the same as what I do.”

“Anybody can have a conversation with anybody else,” Hilda said. “It just takes practice, and a maybe little courage.”

“That’s easy for you to say.”

She leaned across the little wooden table and folded her arms. “What’re you so afraid of? They’re just words.”

He considered. “They’re not just words. They have power. If I can plan them, reflect and consider, I can wield them like any weapon. But conversations like this... They require spontaneity, improvisation. I dislike that.”

“So, you’d rather give a rehearsed speech to a bunch of faceless strangers than be sitting here with me?”

Something in her voice gave him pause, and once again he found himself watching her heartstrings. This close, they brushed against his own, pearl and pastel. He touched a finger to their confluence that only he could see, and she looked at him in question.
“I never said that,” he said, watching as the pretty lights swirled about his fingers. “This just feels... very intimate.”

Hilda was no longer smiling as she watched him, thoughtful. “That’s the point,” she said softly. “Intimacy isn’t something you can get behind a podium.”

“No,” he agreed. “I suppose it isn’t.”

Her retrievals took her all over the Trident, and it made planning a rendezvous rather convenient. Four days in Striaton, two in distant Vertress City, a quick dinner passing through touristy Undella Town. N found himself visiting Team Plasma factions in accordance with Hilda’s travel schedule whenever possible. She was a welcome change from his time spent with followers. They fiercely supported N’s ideals, but they knew little of N himself.

It is my fault, he thought. If he made the effort, like Hilda had made the effort with him, then perhaps he could find a more intimate connection with his like-minded followers. But when the choice was between spending time cultivating more personal relationships with them and spending time with Hilda on the occasions their paths crossed, the decision was an easy one.

One such rendezvous saw them cross paths in Nimbasa City. N had been reluctant to visit this place on account of Gym Leader Elesa’s aversion to Team Plasma. She was not alone in her views, and Castelia’s hospitality only fueled her suspicions. Nonetheless, Nimbasa had a small underground Plasma faction that kept themselves quiet so as not to invoke the ire of the Gym Leader, and Father agreed that N should visit them to keep their spirits and loyalties afloat.

“You look like a Bug in those sunglasses,” Hilda teased as they walked side by side down the bustling Nimbasa City downtown streets. “A cute Bug.”

“This disguise was your idea,” he said, lowering the brim of his hat to hide his dirty blond hair. It had gotten quite long in his neglect, and he had to tie it back in a ponytail.

“Sorry for not wanting to get mobbed by any of your loyal fans while we’re out to dinner.” She nudged him playfully.

She did that a lot, touching him. He didn’t mind physical contact, having shaken so many hands over the years at rallies that he hardly thought about it anymore. People wanted a little recognition, a little connection, that was all. Hilda was no different. Neither was he. The way she touched him, though, it was different somehow. The followers he met and spoke to did not touch him like she did.

“I’m glad we could meet up while you were here,” she said cheerfully as she sucked the straw of her cream soda. “I know you’re busy.”

“Not particularly,” he said. “Nimbasa’s Gym Leader has made it clear that she wants nothing to do with Team Plasma. I merely came to meet with the few followers I have here to reassure them.”

“Oh-huh,” Hilda said in that way she had that told him she knew better. “You know, you’re risking a lot showing up here and going to those underground meetings.”

“A king who ignores his subjects would be a paltry symbol of hope.”

Hilda grinned. “King, huh? Do I need to start bowing to you, Your Majesty?”

N frowned. “Don’t jest.”
“Oh, not at all, Your Majesty. I’m here to serve.” She did a little curtsy.

N flushed, thankful for the oversized sunglasses he knew made him look ridiculous. “You laugh at me.”

She tossed her empty cup in a bin on the sidewalk. “I thought you liked my laugh?”

She had caught him in a trap, as she often did. It amused her greatly to watch him struggle to find the right words, and even more when he managed to surprise her. Practice and courage, that was what she had recommended to improve himself in spontaneous conversation.

“You’re twisting my words again,” he said. “I don’t like these games.”

“A shame,” Hilda said. “I really love to laugh. You make it so easy.”

“I’m just standing here.”

She laughed again. “You’re so serious! Even kings can play a game sometimes, don’t you think?”

“All right. What game did you have in mind?”

He should have known he was walking into another trap when she grinned wickedly and called out Reuniclus, a gelatinous Psychic that looked a bit like an alien plushie doll. Before N could protest, Hilda Teleported them both to the Nimbasa Theme Park all the way on the other side of town and insisted they try the games before the stalls closed down for the evening. It was already getting dark, and they had to be quick about it.

One of the games pitted trainers and their Pokémon against each other in teams to keep a rubber ball from hitting the ground using only their heads to bounce it around.

“Absolutely not,” N said when he saw the people and their Pokémon bouncing around like imbeciles and running into each other or the guard rail more often than they were able to hit the ball. “It’s pandemonium in there.”

“Oh, come on, it’ll be fun!” Hilda insisted.

“I sincerely doubt it.”

“If you break a nail in there, I promise to buy you one of those cute Piplup dolls in apology.”

“I’m more concerned about my head than my nails,” he said. “I don’t want a Pokédoll.”

“What? That’s like saying you don’t want ice cream.”

“I don’t want ice cream, either,” he deadpanned.

“Quit being such a Negative Nuzleaf for five seconds. How about this? You play this game with me, and you can pick the next one. Deal?”

There was a twinkle in her eye at the thought of a challenge.

“...All right, fine. One game.”

N’s Darmanitan took to the game with alacrity, delighting in running around on all fours to bounce the ball as high as he could. Reuniclus was having less luck and kept Teleporting away whenever the ball came too close, forcing N or Hilda to jump in to save it before it fell.
“I’ve got it!” he shouted, jumping to head-butt the rubber ball.

“Mine!” Hilda said at the same time.

They ended up colliding with each other and another trainer’s Pignite in a tangle of limbs. Pignite grunted and stepped all over them to try to extricate herself from the pile, and her trainer apologized profusely to N and Hilda. His sunglasses had cracked in the fall, but it was too dark to be wearing them, anyway, and in any case he was too distracted by Hilda’s tearful laughter as they lay sprawled on the ground. Reuniclus hovered over them like a worried mother hen.

After that, they visited a number of other stalls for food and games alike. They tried ring tossing and three-card monty, tests of strength and weight guessing games, shared the most enormous pink Cottonee candy N had ever seen, and even visited a fortune teller with a crystal ball that Hilda insisted they try.

“You of all people should know she’s a charlatan,” N protested when he got a look at the woman draped in silks running her ringed fingers over her crystal ball. “Any fortune she gives you will be a sham. She just wants your money.”

“What luck!” Hilda said, grabbing his hand and dragging him to the line. “I so want to give her my money.”

It went about exactly as N imagined it would, empty platitudes and good fortune for all, all for the low low price of half the coins in Hilda’s purse. But when the fortune teller assured Hilda that she and N would have a very happy life together with many healthy children, Hilda found that absolutely hilarious and was very happy to pay for the reading.

“I can’t believe you paid for that tripe,” N said as they walked side by side through the carnival. “She probably gives the same fortune to everybody who walks in there.”

Hilda shrugged. “You really are too serious. Haven’t you ever wondered what your future holds?”

He frowned. “It was just a fantasy. A trite and clichéd one, at that.”

She leaned in conspiratorially, far too close for comfort, and touched a finger to his forehead. “So let’s go live out a fantasy, just for tonight.”

N’s mouth was suddenly dry at her proximity, and the light of her heartstrings was overwhelming, almost blinding as they fluttered like undulating waves, beckoning. Without thinking, he found himself reaching for her, the edge of her vest, her long bangs that brushed his shoulder, her parted lips that smiled.

“Well?” she said, pulling away. “What should we do next? It looks like most of the rides and games are shutting down.”

N clenched his jaw and swallowed the dryness in his throat in an attempt to compose himself. What was that?

She was looking around for something to do, but the carnival lights were all ablaze for midnight strollers to admire the night view while families and honeymooners and school kids headed home.
“Or are you tired?” she asked when he didn’t respond. “If you really don’t want to do anything, we can just call it a night. I have an early day tomorrow, anyway.”

“No,” he said before he could stop himself. “Not yet.”

She looked at him expectantly, and he racked his mind for something to do, something to prolong the night and live the fantasy for just a little longer.

“That,” he said, pointing to the huge Rondez-View Ferris Wheel slowly turning. “We can ride that.”

“Really? I didn’t think you’d want to go on any of the rides.”

“I want to ride that,” he insisted, taking her hand. “With you.”

Hilda smiled in that way she had that said she had a secret, and for a moment he was sure she would refuse. “Okay, let’s do it.”

He purchased their tickets at the booth, and the short line moved quickly. Soon, they were seated opposite each other in one of the small gondola cars and rising steadily into the sky. The Ferris wheel lights reminded N of floating stars, glittering in every color imaginable against the backdrop of the inky night sky. True stars twinkled higher up, and the view of downtown Nimbasa was a sea of shimmering light. As he gazed out the window, he was reminded of his awakening, his earliest memories of the sun through the trees, and that crystal crown that refracted all the colors on the spectrum when he dreamed that a god had kissed him.

“Wow,” Hilda said. “We’re so high up, you can even see the brightest lights in Castelia City.”

They were faint, nothing but a glimmer on the horizon, but far to the south Castelia’s night lights penetrated the darkness like a beacon lost at sea. N laid his hand against the glass.

“Yes, it’s beautiful.”

She was beautiful. Those pearly white threads that cloaked her like a ribbons of light dazzled, and when she laughed they trembled and danced, like she felt her joy in every cell of her body. The Ferris wheel stopped while they were high up enough to admire the view for a while, and it felt like they were the only two people in the whole world up here.

“I wish you could see what I see,” he said softly.

“Never ever tell a soul,” Father had warned him. “No one can ever know about you, N. The Magi went extinct for a reason. If anyone should find out about you, I fear that will be the end of our liberation.”

But Father wasn’t here; she was. And when he traced the rivers of light that flowed around and between them, she leaned toward him.

“What do you see?” she asked.

He smiled and followed her heartstrings to her chin, tracing her jawline with his fingertips. “A lovely fantasy.”

She tasted like sunlight when he kissed her there in the darkness illuminated by the lights only he could see. His hat fell to the floor when she ran her hands through his hair, but he hardly noticed it and pulled her onto his lap. The god had promised him pain when he awoke, and pain was what
he’d gotten. Pain was his fortune, his future, for to live is to suffer. But for just a little while, he could forget it all and fall into a dream where the sun shined and the grass smelled sweet and she was soft against him. Just for a little while.

The Rendez-View Ferris Wheel hung suspended in the night sky, and they lay adrift in a sea of stars, alone together.

His boot splashed in a deep puddle at the foot of a grand staircase, and he halted. His echoing footsteps ceased, carried away down the barren tunnels, and he opened his eyes. The gloom was all-consuming, the silence a roar as mighty as the ocean. Why had he come here? What had he hoped to find? What he sought was not here, not anymore.

A fantasy, he fancied. I came for the fantasies.

He could hear it, the static white noise masquerading as silence. It was all around him, everywhere, and when he called to it, it called to him. Those static screams were in the walls of this palace, buried with its relics and treasures and the stories of all who had come before. Buried, but not forgotten.

I will never forget.

The rumbling deep heard his conviction and answered in kind. After all, he was not alone. She was here, too.

Father summoned N to Lacunosa Town in the middle of a rally N was attending in Accumula Town. When N flew in on Togekiss and landed in the cleared section of the woods behind Father’s secluded home, the house where N had grown up, Father was waiting.

“Father,” N greeted. “What is so important that you called me away during my rally? My followers were upset to see me depart so soon.”

“You have plenty of followers in Accumula Town,” Father said.

His Scolipede, a giant of a Bug with the brute strength of a Gigalith, had dragged the carcass of an Audino from the forest. He was curled around his kill by the trees, feasting on Audino’s entrails spilling out of its belly. Audino’s eyes and tongue were black with poison, and the foul stench reached N’s nose on the breeze. The sight made him sick to look upon, natural order or not. Audino’s anguish was as plain as day—it had died in agony.

N forced himself to look away from Scolipede’s ravenous hunger. “Yes, and they deserve to see their king.”

“A king, you say?” Father challenged, approaching. “A king wants a kingdom. What do you have to call yourself a king?”

N was taken aback at Father’s anger. He rarely became cross with N, and N hated to displease him. Father’s heartstrings looped around him in steady coils, ever placid and curling despite the emotion he’d let slip. Unlike all the other people and Pokémon N had encountered in the world, Father was the only one he could not read. He was immune to N’s empathy, and N was never quite sure what
he was truly thinking.

“I’ve displeased you,” N said, hoping to quell Father’s ire.

Father reigned in his anger and put a heavy hand on N’s shoulder. His heartstrings dripped off him like oil, slow and thick and the most radiant shade of midnight black. “Yes,” he said, as though it pained him to admit it. “But I know you did not mean it. We both must simply work harder. A king wants a kingdom,” he said again. “So let us make one.”

“How?” N asked. “I’ve traveled far and gathered much support. I’m recognized wherever I go. They love me truly.”

“Yes, but it’s not enough, my boy. You must reach out to more people, go where you are not so welcome. Make them understand.” His dark eyes searched N’s face, looking for something he could not see. “You can see their heartstrings, the desire in their hearts. So take it for yourself. Only you can do it, N.”

Perhaps he wasn’t doing enough. Perhaps he could gather more followers if he could reach farther, listen better. To win the hearts of people, all he had to do was read their heartstrings to divine their deepest wishes, and then grant them. In the end, people all wanted the same thing even if they could not name it.

“I can offer them connection,” N said. “All anyone ever wants is to feel connected to others. I can be that connection.”

Father smiled. “I knew you would see things clearly,” he said. “Take that conviction with you on your travels, N. Seek out those who have closed their hearts to you. Make them understand.”

“I will, Father. I won’t let you down.”

“Good. And I shall do my part, too.”

“You do so much already.”

Father shook his head. “There is much and more to do, and I am but one man. The Seven Sages have been instrumental, but I see now that I require alternative expertise. Come. There is someone I’d like you to meet. He’s been working tirelessly on a new technology sure to free Pokémon from the oppressive control of those who would seek to do them harm.”

N followed Father inside, doing his best to ignore Scolipede’s crunching. “A scientist?”

“Yes,” Father said. “Colress. I’m quite impressed by his vision for the future of human and Pokémon relationships. No need to concern yourself with the details, but I’d like your take on his...trustworthiness.”

“Of course, Father,” N said. “I’m happy to help.”

“I know you are.”

Hilda slept more soundly than anyone else in the world, N was convinced. Where his nights were often restless and plagued by insomnia, Hilda slept through the night, every night. Sometimes, when he lay in bed wide awake, he would wonder what she dreamed about. Clairvoyants were
notoriously dangerous Tamers because it was never certain what they could do. Some were
Timewalkers, able to glimpse the distant future or the forgotten past. There were rumors of
Clairvoyants who were Cleavers, able to slay undead Ghosts and abyssal Darkness otherwise
untouchable to their light. Memory Weavers, Telekinetics, and Telepaths, each was uniquely gifted.
And then there were the Dreamwalkers.

N had read about one such alleged Dreamwalker, one of the five Imperial Generals of Sinnoh’s
Lotus Order, a Clairvoyant called Lucian who could enter the dreams of those familiar to him and
converse, as in an alternate reality under his command. When N looked at Hilda, dreaming away,
he wondered what she saw, or who. Her heartstrings, normally concentrated over her heart to cover
her like armor, sometimes converged around her head when she slept, like a swirling halo of light.
Was it just a dream? Or was she a Dreamwalker, as awake within the confines of her subconscious
as she was during the day? Who did she dream with? What did she say?

He asked her about it once. It was the first time she ever lied to him. He could see it in her
heartstrings, the way they convulsed as though electrocuted, very faint but unmistakable. She had
lied before, was good at it. She had learned how to control it.

“You’re lying.”

“Why would I lie to you?”

“I don’t know,” he said, his tone cold like it never was with her.

She heard his anger and had the grace to look abashed. She pulled the sheets higher over her chest
where she sat cross-legged on the bed. “…Okay, I lied.”


“No, I…” She touched his shoulder, and he couldn’t help but lean into her touch. “You’re a pleb, so
you might not understand. It’s not something I usually talk about. It’s not safe.”

“You’re safe with me,” he insisted, taking her hands in his.

“I know,” she said, kissing his knuckles. “I know that. I only meant…”

“What? You can tell me.” He held her close and breathed in her scent.

“You’re always so perceptive,” she said against his neck. “You seem to know things before I can
even say them. Sometimes I wonder if you’re not Clairvoyant yourself.”

“Hilda…”

Why are you sad?

It was very brief, just a moment, but her light faded, heavy with sadness as he cradled her to him.
As soon as he noticed it, it was gone. She pulled away and smiled up at him.

“All right,” she said. “If you want to know, I’ll tell you. Remember I mentioned when we met that
I have a brother?”

Hilda’s twin brother, Hilbert, was as Clairvoyant as she was and spent much of his time offsite
hunting treasures around Unova and abroad for the Nacrene Museum under Gym Leader Lenora’s
patronage. They were both Dreamwalkers, and it was with Hilbert that she shared her dreams from
time to time. They rarely saw each other in person, as even Psychics under the tutelage of a skilled
Clairvoyant could not normally Teleport the distance between continents. But in dreams, time and space were irrelevant.

N met Hilbert in Castelia City. Hilda arranged for them all to overlap in the sprawling desert metropolis for a couple days before Hilbert had to be off once more. He had just procured some ancient figurines from a dig in Geosenge Town Kalos and was on his way to return them to Nacrene City for further study. The stop in Castelia was not for him, but for his assistant and unofficial apprentice, who was the younger sister of Gym Leader Burgh.

“The famous N,” Hilbert said, shaking his hand when they met at the Gym. “I’ve seen you in my dreams.”

“Ew, don’t be creepy, Hil,” said Hilda.

“What? I thought you told him about our Dreamwalking, Hil,” Hilbert teased. To N he said, “Our parents got lazy with our names, as you can see.”

N was not quite sure how to respond to that, so he merely smiled a little.

The sibling resemblance was obvious in their shared square jaws, long noses, and coloring. Hilbert was a short man, of a height with his sister and stocky, broad in the shoulders, where N was tall and slender. Hilbert had a bit of a rogue adventurer quality to him, from the edgy five o’clock shadow to the leather bomber jacket and utility belt, the pirate and the professor rolled into one.

“So, I hear you’ve made quite the name for yourself,” Hilbert said as they spoke in the underground terrarium that was the Castelia City Gym. “The King of Team Plasma, right?”

“Well, king is just a word,” N demurred.

“Ah, but words have power,” Hilda said. “I think I remember someone telling me that a long time ago.” She smiled.

“Yes, they do,” Hilbert agreed, though he didn’t quite return her smile.

The subterranean Gym was a living jungle in the middle of the desert, and just as humid. Bugs of all shapes and sizes crawled and scuttled and fluttered through the canopy. If Hilbert or Hilda was bothered, neither showed it.

“Sorry to keep you waiting!”

Vivian, Burgh’s nineteen-year-old kid sister and a Volucris in her own right, ran to join them out of breath. She was a curvaceous brunette woman with a pretty face that flattered her with an older and more mature appearance. Her Leavanny and Heracross were with her, much less in a hurry to be going from the way Heracross was busy gorging himself on a particularly juicy Pomeg berry.

“No worries,” Hilbert said casually. “Everything square?”

“Yeah, we’re set to head out tomorrow. And I took the liberty of arranging rooms for everyone here at the Gym.”

“Oh, you didn’t have to do that,” Hilda said.

“Eh,” Vivian waved her off. “If you’re here, you might as well stay. My brother wants to meet with N, anyway. If you have time.”
“Of course I have time,” N said. “Burgh has been very generous to my followers, a true comrade.”

“Well, you better tell him that tomorrow. He’ll love to hear it.”

“Shall we?” Hilda said.

Dinner was a bit of an out of body experience. Aside from Hilda, N spent very little time talking to people about anything other than Team Plasma. Tonight, he was regaled with tales from Hilda’s childhood, from embarrassing coming-of-age crushes to summer camp adventures and everything in between. He did not participate much, content merely to listen as Hilda laughed and came alive. Her heartstrings entwined with her brother’s in a stunning symphony of starlight as they reminisced over good food and wine. Vivian was just as comfortable around the telepathic twins. She was quick witted and sharp-tongued, and she played well off Hilbert’s lackadaisical drawl. It was clear that Hilbert loved them both well.

“So what was so important that you had to drag your ass all the way back here from Kalos?” Hilda asked.

Hilbert grinned. “You’re never gonna believe it.” He looked over his shoulder as though searching for assassins amidst the dinner crowd, and Hilda rolled her eyes.

“Oh my god, just show us already, Indy.”

He put up his hands. “No can do, amigos. It’s all in high security storage at the Gym until Viv and I leave tomorrow.”

“You’re such a tease.”

“Luckily, my lovely assistant here has worked her magic to give us the next best thing.”

Vivian dug around in her bag for a notepad that looked like it had survived the apocalypse, it was so dirty and worn. She opened it up and showed them all the drawings she’d made of their find, all exquisitely rendered in the hand of an experienced artist. N leaned over the table to get a better look.

“What is it?” Hilda asked.

“That,” Hilbert said triumphantly, “is a figurine of the legendary Dragon, Zekrom.”

Vivian squealed in delight. “Isn’t it fantastic? We found it in a cache on a dig in Geosenge Town, and the head archeologist there had no idea why it was there.”


“The legend,” Hilbert corrected, taking a gulp of his wine. “There’s a difference.”

“Come on, Hil, you don’t really believe that crap,” Hilda said.

“You come on, Hil,” he said. “You know as well as I do that the Adriati have their lore about the legendary Dragons—”

“Which is just lore,” Hilda interrupted.

“—and the Magi have their account. This proves it’s not just a bunch of Snubbullshit. The Hero Twins were real, and they came from Kalos, not Adria. That,” he tapped a finger on Vivian’s sketch, “is the proof.”
N had gone very still at the mention of that word: *Magi*. Hilda was saying something about coincidences and circumstantial proof, when N spoke up.

“The Magi?” he asked.

Hilbert side-eyed him. “Yeah, the Fairy Tamers. I know.” He put up his hands as if to preempt an argument. “It sounds bogus. They all died out, what, like 400 years ago? But even in the Adriati folklore, there were references to the Great Kalosian War and the Hero Twins being Tamers.”

“Oh, I know where this is going,” Hilda said. “It’s the living mother and the dead father, right?”

“Think about it, Hil,” Hilbert said, his excitement building. “You can’t really have a dead father, it’s just a metaphor. But Life and Death, that’s Xerneas and Yveltal, the original mom and dad of all Tamers, so to speak. If you interpret it that way, then it makes sense.”

“You think the Hero Twins were actually a first-generation Magus and Reaper? Wow.” Hilda took a satisfying drink of her wine and shook her head. “Let’s for one second say this is all legit. You have one problem. A Zekrom figurine doesn’t prove anything. It’s not even circumstantial, really. From the sketch alone, I can see that the style is *distinctly* post-Brisaeian. They didn’t start using molds until the reign of the Dragon Queen Brisaeis, a good 900 years *after* the Great Kalosian War ended. That little Zekrom could’ve made its way to Geosenge in any number of ways.”

Hilbert’s dark eyes twinkled like he had a secret. N had seen Hilda adopt that same look on a number of occasions.

“What?” Hilda said.

“Please direct your attention to my lovely assistant,” Hilbert said.

Vivian was grinning from ear to ear as she flipped through the notebook to a new sketch. This one was colored and done in even more detail than the Zekrom figurine. It was another Dragon, from what N could tell. Hilda had gone very quiet.

“...No,” she said. “No way.”

“Yes way,” Hilbert said.

“Vivian, how much did he pay you to draw that for me today?”

“Please, we both know he doesn’t have the kind of cash to buy my silence. With Hilbert, it’s all glory and no fortune. This is the genuine article. Here, there’s more.”

She flipped through the notebook, revealing more drawings of the same roaring dragon from different sides. They were all colored with charcoal.

“The date?” Hilda said in a small voice.

“Well, Sis, I’m not an art history whiz like you, but my gut tells me pre-Brisaeian. Pre-*Fafnir*, actually.”

“What is it?” N asked, the only one at the table who did not quite understand what the significance was.

Hilda took his hand as if she were about to tell him the most important news of his life. “This is the Original Dragon,” she said, her voice high and unfamiliar and brimming with emotion. “If it’s
genuine, then it’s incontrovertible proof.”

“Of what, exactly?” N asked. He looked at Hilbert.

“Proof that Zekrom and Reshiram were real. That they were once one Dragon, the Original Dragon, and the Hero Twins came here from Kalos after the Great War to conquer this land from it. And that means—”


“It’s all true,” Hilbert echoed her, grinning like a fool. “And we can be the ones to find their remains.”

“The highest of the high,” Hilda said.

“And the deepest of the deep,” Hilbert said. “Hero Twins. You and me, Hil. Let’s go hunt down a legend.”

The stairs were slick with sea water and sand, and they muffled his footsteps as he ascended. He shivered in the damp dark cold that seeped through his armor and clothes. He couldn’t hear the voices anymore, the crowds cheering and the children singing. Did they miss him? Did they remember him?

He had turned a blind eye to the world of late. Maybe the world had forgotten him, too. So deep in darkness, no one would find him, anyway. Not even Father had come looking.

What had become of his followers? What had become of their king?

“You are only a king because I have made it so!”

A few more steps to the top, to the ancient doors closed for millennia. Just a few more steps, and I’ll be vindicated.

After the dinner with Hilbert, N had become very interested in the myths and stories surrounding the legendary Dragons of Unova. He read every book on the subject he could find and returned to Nacrene City’s library to place requests for further reading from around the world, anything that mentioned even in passing the Unova creation myths. Though he had promised Father he would redouble his efforts at recruiting more followers and indoctrinating the ones he already had, N’s studies consumed his time and attention. Father was not happy with the progress reports on Team Plasma’s membership statistics, but N had no desire to compromise his studies, at least not until he found what he was looking for. So he had to get away somewhere, just for a little while, where Father would not follow him.

Vertress City was the perfect place for N to conduct his research into the legendary Dragons and the Hero Twins myth away from prying eyes. Father rarely left Lacunosa Town, preferring to remain out of the spotlight and conduct his business on behalf of Team Plasma from the sidelines. His work with his newest pet, Colress, was occupying his attention, as well, and gave N an excuse to slip away without much resistance. Anthea and Concordia accompanied N, happy to oversee what N envisioned as an official headquarters for Team Plasma separate from Father and the other
Sages.

The Iron Keep was an ancient castle stronghold once the seat of lesser Fafnir Dynasty princes and princesses who could not inherit the throne during the Age of Kings, but it had become obsolete in the last five hundred years as it sat unoccupied and dilapidated. N purchased the rights to the lands through a blind trust Zinzolin had set up and claimed the old keep as his base in anonymity. Repairs had been underway over the last several years, much to the locals’ satisfaction—the keep had become an eyesore in its deterioration, but Opelucid had no interest in maintaining it when Vertress City itself had few resources and almost no arable land to offer in exchange. The city was a part of Opelucid’s fiefdom, but it cost the Dragon throne more money that it was worth to defend and monitor ever since the opal mines had dried up five hundred years ago, the reason for the castle’s abandonment. N had had little trouble securing the anonymous real estate transaction, and he quietly made the rounds in the city to make himself and his beliefs known. By the time the castle keep was ready for full-time occupants, he was well-loved by most of Vertress’s local inhabitants who felt neglected by their Gym Leader and would-be king, and they welcomed him warmly to their city.

He called upon Cedric Juniper, the talented scientist he had met in Castelia City, to travel north and assist him in his research. Cedric’s expertise included Pokémon evolutionary biology, and N put him to work researching the origins of Dragons in Unova. In exchange for his assistance, N gave him access to funds and complete autonomy to pursue any other projects that interested him using Plasma facilities in Vertress City. Cedric could not accept fast enough, packed his bags, and settled in quite happily.

When Hilda saw the refurbished Iron Keep for the first time, she confessed that she never wanted to leave. “I guess every king needs a castle, right?” she teased.

“Something like that. Do you like it?”

It was not so great a castle as Dragonsong Castle in Opelucid, but it had weathered time and the elements and remained standing for 2,500 years. The stones and towers were black as pitch, and the sprawling castle sat on a hill overlooking a turgid river that fed into the sea via the eastern strait separating the Heart Tine from the East Tine. The Darkwood, a vast forest that separated Vertress from Opelucid many leagues to the south, surrounded the city like an army slowly creeping up the hillside for a midnight ambush.

“It’s breathtaking,” she said as they stood together at the gate with a view of the high courtyard walls, the two towers, and the rushing river behind the castle. “Team Plasma spared no expense, I take it.”

“Master Zinzolin manages all the Plasma accounts. Father likes to say he has a golden touch for how talented he is at growing wealth out of nothing,” N said.

Hilda took his hand and smiled up at him. “You’ve mentioned your father a few times in the past. When do I get to meet him?”

Her hand was warm in his despite the northern chill, and for a moment his mind was blank as his gaze lingered on her lips. “Meet him?”

She laughed. “You met my brother, so I guess I’m wondering if I’ll ever get to meet your family.”

Her heartstrings pulsed in time with her laugh, and N smiled. “He’s not my family. That is...I was an orphan, and he took me in.”
“Oh,” she said, her smile fading. “Sorry, I didn’t realize...”

“It’s all right. I suppose...I was so young when he found me, that he’s the only family I’ve known. Him, and my sisters.”

“Sisters?”

“Anthea and Concordia. They were also adopted very young.”

“Ah.” She took his other hand and leaned toward him. “The mysterious N. You never told me any of this before.”

“Am I mysterious?” he asked, leaning close so they were only inches apart.

“Oh yes, very. Are there any other siblings I should be aware of?”

Once, N had asked Anthea and Concordia about the boys who had come before him, if they remembered any of them. They remembered only M, they said.

“What happened to him?” N had asked.

“He wasn’t special,” Concordia said. “He disobeyed Father.”

“So Father made him a Reaper,” Anthea said. “They’re together now.”

“N?” Hilda pressed.

He blinked and pulled away, disturbed by how vivid the memory was to draw him out of reality like that. M... Father had turned him into a Reaper to become food for him. Because he wasn't special.

He wasn’t me.

“Hm?” N said. “Let’s go inside. You must be tired.”

She looked like she wanted to say more, but thought better of it and kissed him lightly. “Lead the way, Your Majesty.”

She stayed for the weekend, and it was like living in a dream. With Hilda, he often felt like a dreamer, the way he had in Team Plasma’s early days when it wasn’t even a team yet. It was just him and his ideals and his Pokémon, and it had been enough. But after Hilda, none of it seemed quite as grand as it used to. Team Plasma still grew and N’s ideology spread across the continent, but that pervasive reach was also what isolated each chapter and each geographic stronghold. Team Plasma was not an army and had no reason or duty to mobilize like one. Burgeoning but geographically discrete membership pocket kept Team Plasma from affecting the truly national policy changes N dreamed about. It was a trade-off, he supposed, and one he didn’t mind making whenever he was with Hilda.

She was tending to her Pokémon in the courtyard after dinner. Reuniclus was yawning, perpetually tired, and Sigilyph was cleaning his bright feathers on a perch by the fountain. Hilda’s Serperior had her full attention as she stroked the basilisk’s regal neck. Serperior would be off to hunt for her own dinner now that dusk had fallen.

N’s own Pokémon were out and about, as well. Togekiss had already claimed a rafter in one of the two castle towers for his nest, and he was settling in for the night. Zoroark had disappeared with
Sylveon in the Darkwood, and Darmanitan was happily gorging himself on a pile of Pecha berries, as per his usual. N scratched the hairy red gorilla behind his ear as he waited on Hilda.

“What?” she asked when she caught him watching her.

“Nothing.”

She sauntered close and ran her hands over his chest. “Nothing, huh? Why don’t I believe you?”

“I’ve been thinking,” he said, bemused.

“Oh, dear.”

“What if I asked you to join Team Plasma? Not as a regular follower, but as an Agent. An advisor, if you like.”

“Advisor? To who?”

“To me, of course.”

She grinned and snaked her arms around his neck. “Is His Majesty in need of advice?”

He wrapped his arms around her waist and leaned back against the edge of the fountain. “I’m serious.”

She studied him. “You’ve never asked me to join Team Plasma before.”

“I’m asking now. Unless...you don’t agree with my philosophy?”

“I never said that.”

“You’ve never said much about it.”

“You’re really serious?”

“You often remind me that I am.” He touched their foreheads together and let his eyes drift closed. “Your opinion is important to me.”

She kissed him softly, and he wished they could stay here all night under the stars with their Pokémon, no other people in sight.

“I think your philosophy is a noble one,” she said after a time. “And I know you truly believe in what you preach. I think that’s admirable.”

She trailed off, and he opened his eyes. “But?”

“But... I guess those reports about some of your followers liberating Pokémon from people, hurting them to do it, even murdering them...”

N stood up and took her shoulders. “Unsubstantiated, by and large. There are many who wish to undercut my success, and so they attribute all kinds of unfortunate events to me. In any case, those incidents were a long time ago.”

“Some of the ones I’ve heard about were substantiated,” she said softly. “And they still happen, all the time. I’m not telling you this to upset you, but just because the papers stopped reporting on them for some reason doesn’t mean they’re not happening.”
He frowned. “There will always be those who take things too far, I admit that. But even so, there are cruel people in this world who deserve to be brought to justice.”

“By you? Or by the law?”

He did not like the way she asked those questions. “Do you think it’s right for people who abuse Pokémon to live free and undisturbed?”

“Of course not.”

“Or companies that dump their waste in rivers and forests, destroying the natural habitat and displacing or killing off countless Pokémon?”

“No, of course none of that’s right. I just question the best way to deal with problems like that.”

“I deal with them by eliminating them. It’s as simple as that.”

She touched his cheek. “And who decides these things? Who determines when there’s a problem that needs eliminating?”

“I do, of course. It’s not difficult. People are either worthy, or they are unworthy.”

_I was worthy, chosen by a god. I should know._

“I see,” she said in a voice he did not recognize. Her heartstrings had slowed their pulsing and dragged in their orbit around her, tightening defensively.

“Why are you afraid?” he asked, reading her emotions in her heartstrings easily.

“I...” she said, surprised by his uncanny empathy. “…I guess it’s just a lot for one person to handle.” She let her hands fall to his once more and entwined their fingers. “Even someone like you. I worry about you, that’s all.”

“I have help,” he said. “Father, my sisters, the Seven Sages, and others.”

“Oh, really?” She grinned and looked up at him through her lashes. “So they share your ideals, too?”

Yes, he wanted to say. But he thought of Father and his many heartstrings, and the words escaped him.

Hilda sensed his hesitation and pulled him back toward the doors. “You know what? I’ve never slept in a castle with a king. Would you like to help me with that?”

N went with her without a fuss, her heartstrings suddenly bright with excitement as they drew him in, and all he wanted to do was be close to her.

The room he’d selected for himself was lavish, fit for any king, to be sure, but he hardly noticed it when she was here to light it up. Every night they spent together, she banished the darkness and shadows, and he was swept away anew. As he lay with her, tracing her body and breathing her in, he could even forget the god’s warning to him when he awakened. Any pain, no matter how great, had to be worth this warmth, this comfort, this passion. This trust.

Moonlight cast her in a pale silhouette under the sheet, and he ran his long fingers down the small of her back, pressed a soft kiss to her forehead.
“I don’t think Father truly shares my ideals,” he whispered, almost afraid to hear the words aloud. Hilda hardly stirred next to him. “Why do you think that?” she asked as she kissed his neck.

“Because he lies.”

“No one can lie to you,” she teased. “You read people so well, it’s uncanny.”

“He can.” He stared out the window where the pale moon was full and bright against the night sky. “He’s a...cannibal.”

He felt her fingers on his cheek, and she scooted up to look him in the eye. “A cannibal,” she said. “You mean—”

“He’s a Reaper. A very old one. His light isn’t his, and I can’t read it.”

There was genuine fear in her eyes and in her heartstrings, which twitched as though jolted by electricity.

“N,” she began.

“Don’t be afraid,” he reassured her. “He can’t hurt me. He wouldn’t, besides.”

“You’re a pleb,” she insisted. “Reapers can...harvest plebs.”

He smiled and brushed her bangs from her eyes. “He can’t hurt me.”

“If what you’re saying is true, then he’s not even a man; he’s an abomination. N, you don’t know how dangerous he is.”

“I do,” he said. He could taste it, this anticipation, this secret thrill in the knowledge that he would defy Father and tell her something he had never told another soul, not even his sisters. “He can’t hurt me because I’m untouchable.”

She pushed herself up and cast a shadow over him. “What are you talking about?”

“Me,” he said, reaching out a hand and tracing her looping heartstrings. “I’m a Magus.”

He couldn’t see her expression well in the darkness, but he could see her emotions.

“You said it yourself,” he said. “It’s uncanny how I can read people’s emotions. I’ve wanted to tell you... Give me your hand.”

“N, I don’t—”

“Shh. Just...feel. Please, let me feel you.”

He took her hand and watched their heartstrings entwine.

“There,” he said, dazzled by the light. “I can see it.”

“See what?”

He rose on the bed and smiled into the kiss. “Your love.”

Her breath hitched, and he realized that she’d begun to cry even as her heartstrings swelled with the emotion he’d only recently begun to notice, an emotion he couldn’t name right away. He held her
against him, and they fell together. He could taste her tears on her cheeks, and he could not understand why she was so sad even as she held him close and asked for more. But he soon lost himself in their embrace, in her, and for a moment of insanity, he wished he could give it all up. Everything, all his plans, his dreams, all the work he’d done just to stay here with her forever.

Cedric Juniper’s research led him down a rabbit hole of impossible theories and outlandish hypotheticals. His research into the origins of Dragons in Unova led him to the myths and legends surrounding the Original Dragon, a beast of unimaginable power said to have commanded weather spirits to raise the Unovan continent to become its kingdom for all eternity. It was an ancient myth, so obscure that even the Original Dragon’s name had been lost to history. As a man of science, Cedric was initially reluctant to indulge such obscure folklore tales. But as a matter of intellectual curiosity, he doggedly pursued every angle if only to disprove it. He had yet to disprove what he and N learned about the Original Dragon and the Hero Twins who supposedly split it in two when they waged their war for control of Unova.

“Three,” Cedric corrected.

“Excuse me?” N said.

“You said two, but you meant three. Three splits.”

“Reshiram and Zekrom represented the split between Truth and Ideals. There are two of them.”

“Ah! But this here—see that passage?—yes, that says they “emerged from the husk” of the Perfect Dragon. So, there you have it.”

“You have a minor detail and an imperfect translation.”

“But the husk could be three. Reshiram and Zekrom were the heart and the soul, but they left a body behind. A body, son. Do you know what happens to bodies? They get buried. If you want to find these Dragons, we should find their bones, first.”

“Yes, the remains. But where?”

Cedric grinned. “Where is merely one question we should be asking.”

“What do you mean? What else is there?”

“Come and see.”

Cedric led him to the large basement lab N had set aside for his particular use. At least, it was supposed to be a lab. Cedric seemed to have converted it into a working library. There were dirty plates from meals he had consumed in here while he worked, stacked on one of the worktables and forgotten as they began to smell. N wrinkled his nose.

“You asked me about the origins of Dragons in Unova,” Cedric was saying. “I thought that was an odd request at first. You know my specialty is Pokémon evolutionary biology, and this was more of a historical query. Ah, but then I had a thought. It must be something even you could not puzzle out on your own. Yes, just so. I knew what I was looking for. But how fortuitous to call upon me!”

Cedric had a tendency to blabber on nonsensically and jump to conclusions in his head he expected others to keep up with. N waited patiently for him to finish.
“Fortuitous?” he asked.

“Precisely! You knew I did my post-doc work in Nimbasa City, clever boy. I never would have considered it otherwise...”

“Professor,” N said. “You wanted to show me something.”

“Quite so! Have a look. I remembered it from my dissertation research. Nimbasa has a special archive restricted to those with permission from the Gym Leader. Of course, I received permission as a student at the university, but this particular passage was irrelevant to my studies... Alas, I never forget a bit of intrigue.” He wiggled his eyebrows.

N ignored the jest and read the scan of a passage from an ancient manuscript in a language he did not know. It was accompanied by a faded etching of a woman in gold.

“I can’t read this,” N said, a little surprised. Father had made sure he was tutored in the Old Tongue, Adriati, and High Kalosian, among others. The latter had been useful in his studies about the Great War and his Magi ancestors. This language was not one he recognized.

“No, I daresay not. It’s not a language, but a code. Watch your fingers!”

Cedric produced a small looking glass, which he held over the scan of the manuscript page. He wore thick rubber gloves to protect himself from the concentrated electricity in the looking glass, which N immediately recognized as a Thunderstone from its sparkling heartstrings. It had been cut and polished, but it held enough volts to electrocute a man to death with a single touch. N peered over his shoulder, and suddenly the words in the manuscript came to life.

“That’s the Old Tongue,” N said, amazed. “It was coded to be revealed through a Thunderstone lens? Why?”

“The same question I asked when I came across this problem in my dissertation studies. Gym Leader Elya made a gift of this looking glass to me to help in my studies. Oh, she was quite smitten with me, I daresay. If my wife had only been the type to turn the other cheek, alas...”

N wasn’t listening as he read over Cedric’s shoulder. “Elysanna...a sorceress said to have the power of reanimation.”

“Quite so!” Cedric said jovially. “Elysanna was the progenitor of Lady Elya’s family, the first in a long line of Fulmen going back to the Age of Kings. Elysanna, of course, lived during the time of the Hero Twins, or shortly thereafter. It varies by account.”

“This says...” N could not believe what he was seeing. “Unable to preserve the husk, she used her power to seal away Truth and Ideals for all time, until...”

“Yes, yes. That is her,” Cedric pointed to the woman in gold. “And those,” he indicated the stones in her hands, “are the Light Stone and the Dark Stone.”

“You mean to tell me, this Fulmen sealed the spirits of Zekrom and Reshiram into these stones?”

Cedric sighed. “I know, it’s quite disappointing. There’s little mention of the physical remains. But fear not, Lord N. I have a mind to find the Dragons’ remains, this husk that perished when Elysanna sealed their spirits.”

N could hardly believe it. “Until such time as the strongest Ideologue appears to wear the Crown,” he read the faded text through the glass. “The Hero of Ideals,” he recalled from the research he had
done on the Adriati version of the Hero Twins mythology.

He brought down Thunder and Lightning to shock the unbelievers into submission.

“Well,” Cedric said, smug. “I say this discovery merits a little celebration. Have you got any vodka? Some limes, perhaps?”

N took the page they had been examining and folded it into his jacket pocket. “Help yourself. I have work to do.”

“Oh, if you’re sure...” As N made to leave, Cedric said, “I’d like to continue to pursue this, if you don’t mind? I have many more theories I’d like to look in to...”

“I’m sure your further studies will be commensurate with your discretion as to mine,” N said.

Cedric bowed and smiled knowingly. “Absolutely. Liber esse, my lord.”

“Liber sum.” N returned the salute. It had been Bronius’s idea to cultivate a slogan for Team Plasma, a little code that added another link to the chain binding all of N’s followers together.

N retired to his wing of the castle, where he had his personal study and a robust collection of history texts and treatises he had amassed over the months of his study. He leafed through the tome on Adriati lore and legends and found the passage he had been looking for, the one Hilda had referenced during their dinner with her brother.

“If it’s light you desire, ascend to the highest of the high. But if it’s night you wish to cleave, dive to the deepest of the deep,” he read in the original Old Adriati.

From his pocket, he produced the coded manuscript scan and smoothed it over the table. He ran his hands over the image of the golden sorceress, the Fulmen Elysanna, and the Dark Stone she clasped in her hand.

“Where would one hide a Dark Stone as black as night?” he wondered.

Perhaps in the deepest darkest place one could find.

N rose to pack. He would be departing at first light, and he did not know when he would be back.

When Father found out about N’s research into the legendary Dragons and the Plasma funds he had been funneling toward the project, he was less than pleased.

“The legends of Unova are true,” N argued. “Everything I’ve discovered in my research proves it!”

“You mean the stories,” Father said. “Ah, I know them all. And I’ve lived long enough to see history warped and reworked to suit a storyteller’s fancy. Time does not heal, it wounds. You will forget this folly at once, or would you abandon your followers so easily?”

“Of course not,” N said, aghast. “I simply believe I’ve come far enough to finish. I’m so close, Father. If I could meet Zekrom...”

Why not? He’d met a god, so why not a legend? The more he thought on it, the more he liked the idea.
If I could meet Zekrom, I could become the Hero of Ideals. I could change my fate, turn fantasy into reality...

He was so lost in thought that he did not see Father’s anger boil over until it was too late. “You want to meet a Dragon?” he snarled, throwing a Pokéball. “I’ll show you a bloody Dragon, boy.”

Father’s Hydreigon appeared between them from the light, his huge claws landing like meteors in the grassy earth outside their home on the outskirts of Lacunosa Town, far from the rest of the villagers. Hydreigon was fright given form, as tall as the forest trees and blacker than the new moon sky. His shadow could darken the moon, and the blood in his eyes was poison to look upon. He was over a century old and, in his prime, and unfailingly loyal to Father.

Father’s heartstrings, as black as the bottom of the sea, swirled around him like thunderclouds, warring with each other. N had never understood when he was a boy why Father’s heartstrings moved differently from everyone else’s, why they never bent or rippled in a lie or out of fear when prompted. But the more he learned about the Magi, about himself, the more he learned about their natural enemies, too. Reapers like Father had the power to cannibalize their own kind, to consume their heartstrings and the life energy with which they teemed. Father’s heartstrings were not his own, but a mix of others. So many others. N had tried to count once, but lost track. They were all a part of Father now, those Reapers who had come before.

“No, Father,” he said, unafraid under Hydreigon’s bloody glare. “I’ll show you a legend.”

“It’s a fool’s errand!” Father spat, his teeth bared in fury. “I will not let you throw away all that I’ve accomplished!”

“All that you’ve accomplished?” N said. “What have you accomplished? They’re my followers. My ideals. I am their king, not you.”

“You are only a king because I have made it so!” N had never seen Father so angry, and his heartstring simmered and popped like boiling tar sloughing off his sagging skin and dripping in between his fingers. “You’re chasing a fantasy, boy.”

“A fantasy,” N said, smiling sadly. “Yes. I’ll meet Zekrom and turn my lovely fantasy into reality.”

“You simpering fool! I am sick to look upon you like this. Your insolence shall not be borne.”

His words wounded, but N could not let them deter him. He was special, Father had said it many times. He would not be cast aside or consumed like the ones who had come before. He was untouchable, Father knew it, too.

N released Togekiss and mounted the snow-white bird. “Farewell, Father. I’ll show you the power of my ideals when it’s done, you and the rest of the world. You’ll understand then, I promise.”

Togekiss leaped into the air, and Hydreigon made a snap at him. But Togekiss was a fast Flyer and well-trained. He cloaked himself in his Fairy aura like a shining bullet and smacked Hydreigon’s maw as he sped past. The Play Rough attack was enough to shock the huge Dragon and give Togekiss enough time to spirit N high into the sky. Father did not command Hydreigon to pursue, and N did not look back.

I’ll make you understand, he thought to himself as Togekiss carried him west to the Relic Desert, where he was so close to finding the heart of that ancient civilization buried deep beneath the sands.
Father said he was the last Magus. The others had all perished hundreds of years ago, never to be heard from again.

They had been kings in their own right. Even the mighty Dragons trembled before them, for a Dragon’s control was nothing but chaos against a Magus. He had learned that lesson, too, but much too late.

They built silver palaces, towers that touched the clouds, and slept under the stars. Theirs was a power unlike any other, the power to feel, to understand, to love. A king is only truly a king if he has the love of his people, as he had. Once.

He lingered at the doors, touched his hand to the damp stone and sea glass, smoothed and sanded over the ages. He could feel no love here. There was only darkness now, a darkness of their own making.

*What drove them all to death?*

He pushed open the doors and stepped inside.

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It had appeared to N, just as he steadfastly believed it would. The Dark Stone, the vessel holding Zekrom’s spirit sealed by the sorceress Elysanna, was nothing more than a large black pearl, heavier than it appeared. Buried in darkness where the sun had not seen it in nigh on 3,000 years, it called to him as he descended deeper with the excavation team. The Relic Desert ruins had been excavated before, they said, so why was he so interested? What did he hope to find deep below the earth’s surface?

*Something no one else could,* he thought as he held the Dark Stone in his hand. It was like it had wanted him to find it when others had tried and failed. *I can see its heartstrings, they cannot.*

Hilda found him like that in his bedroom at the Iron Keep, staring into the pearl’s dark depths and the swirling galaxy of bloody red heartstrings within. When she asked, he told her what he had found.

“The Dark Stone?” she said, incredulous. “You’re not serious.”

“I’m very serious,” N said. “I can see them, Zekrom’s heartstrings. But they won’t respond to me.”

Hilda was very quiet as she stood over him, seated on the bed with Sylveon snoozing on a pillow next to him. When she said nothing, N looked up.

“How can you say that so calmly?” she said, her voice shaky. “If that’s real, how can you possibly...”

He sighed, understanding. “I see. You’re worried about what might happen when I summon Zekrom.”

“When?” Hilda said. “N, even if you knew how, you can’t do that.”
“Of course I can.”

“You’re talking about a legendary Dragon, a monster like nothing we can even imagine. The king Dragons alive today can grow as big as a house, but a creature like Zekrom... It’s unreal.”

“I’ll make it real,” he said with conviction. Sylveon perked up from her nap and got up to stretch. “Don’t you see? Zekrom serves the Hero of Ideals. It’s perfect, Hilda. Everything I’ve ever worked for with Team Plasma has been with the end-goal to make my ideals accepted by everyone. Peaceful coexistence, integration and understanding, a pure world where Pokémon don’t have to live in fear of villains who would abuse them. I’ve accomplished so much already, but with Zekrom’s help, I can finish it.”

“What about the people who don’t agree with you?” she demanded.

“They’ll understand. It’s my gift.” He wove his fingers among her heartstrings, and she shivered.

“And if they don’t?”

N frowned coldly at the thought. “Then they’ll have no place in my world. Anyone who delights in the pain of others has no right to exist.”

Hilda opened her mouth to say something, but she thought better of it and held her tongue. He could see her warring with her thoughts. She had such a warm heart, Hilda... He loved her like he loved none other, but this was not her task to complete. She could not be a Hero like he could be. Even she was merely human, and she would come to understand, too.

“I don’t know why Zekrom won’t answer my calls for him to come forth,” N said, returning his attention to the Dark Stone.

“Maybe your ideals aren’t as strong as you thought,” Hilda said. “I know you think you want this, N, but maybe it’s for the best that Zekrom stays dormant. There’s a reason that sorceress locked him and Reshiram away.”

“Yes,” N agreed, “until the Heroes of Truth and Ideals returned to command them once more. I am the Hero of Ideals reborn, I know it.”

This is why you chose me, isn’t it, Xerneas? You said I would suffer, but not for naught.

Hilda was suddenly upon him, her hands on his face as she pressed her body to his. She kissed him fiercely, and his body responded to her touch.

“N,” she whispered against him, running her fingers through his hair the way she had the very first time when they rode the Ferris wheel together. “Come away with me.”

“What?” he said, unable to think straight as her scent made his skin vibrate with desire. She could make him lose all reason when she touched him like this, and he was happy to surrender it.

“Come away with me,” she said again, raking her nails over his chest and pushing him down to the bed. Sylveon spooked and bounded off to nap somewhere less noisy. “Anywhere, I don’t care. Let’s leave and never come back, just the two of us.”

The Dark Stone slipped from his hand and rolled across the bed, but he barely noticed as he tugged at her shirt and she straddled him. “Hilda,” he said, out of breath.

“We can leave now,” she said. “Forget about Zekrom and Team Plasma and all of it. Just come
with me, and we’ll live in that fantasy, you and me. We’ll make it real.”

He caught her wrists and blinked to clear the passionate haze from his vision. She was so close, real and warm and his, and he would be a pitiable fool to deny her, to deny himself the happiness she was offering. But he had made his choice long ago.

“No,” he said, genuinely sorry. “I want to, but I can’t abandon my followers. I can’t be happy knowing others are suffering when I can do something about it.”

Her eyes glistened with tears that threatened to fall. “You love me. I know you do.”

The sight of her tears broke his heart, and he caught them with his thumb. “With everything that I am.”

“And I love you,” she said, leaning into his touch. “Please, just say yes.”

“Once this is done,” he promised her. “When I’ve summoned Zekrom, and I’ve changed this world, then we’ll be together. We’ll go anywhere you want.”

She smiled sadly as she cried, and he sealed his vow with a drowning kiss.

Hilda left, unable to sway him, and N was alone to ponder the mysteries of the Dark Stone. What was he doing wrong? Was she right, and his convictions were not strong enough? How could that be? He had devoted his life to his ideals, to making this cruel world safe for Pokémon. Scrafty had died for that dream, and countless other Pokémon. He had given his voice, his body, his very soul to the followers who demanded a piece of their king. Everything he had ever done had been for this.

But what if it wasn't enough? Peaceful protest could raise awareness, but it could not heal the hearts of the wicked and the willfully ignorant. Men pursued evil not because they recognized it as evil, but because they mistook it for good. They would not give it up unless they were forced.

“Is that what you want?” N asked the Dark Stone. “Proof of my conviction sealed in blood? Sacrifice?”

He had not killed a man with his own hands in many years, but it was no different now than then. This villain was no less guilty than the last, no less deserving of justice. They were everywhere, these vile men and women who took what they wanted and left a burning trail of rot in their wake. There was a man who beat and starved his wife’s pet Lillipup to make an example of her. He received a knife to the gut.

There was a farmer outside of Striaton City who raised Pidgey for the slaughter and kept them in cages so small that they had never been able to stand up in their short lives as they were force-fed through a tube and fattened for the cutting board. Zoroark was happy to feast on the farmer and his complicit wife as the unwitting masses would have feasted on those tortured Pidgey. N and Sylveon visited each of the farmhands in their beds with sharp claws and knives, while Zoroark feasted.

There were boastful youths who pitted their Pokémon against each other for sport, a Sawk versus a Gurdurr, placing bets and jeering as they watched the Pokémon bloody each other for their entertainment. Darmanitan bashed their skulls together, and no bets were placed on either of them.
Abused Pokémon tasted their freedom, and N tasted justice. For weeks he continued his secret and systematic judgment of the unworthy, but it was not enough to stir a reaction from the Dark Stone. Back in Vertress City behind the walls of the Iron Keep, N was at his wits’ end.

“What do you want?” he shouted at the Dark Stone, whose heartstrings glimmered like a lover’s teasing wink. “I’ve offered you everything. My voice, my faith, my justice, everything!”

Sylveon jumped up on the railing of the balcony where N was pacing outside his bedroom. He had an uninterrupted view of the river and the Darkwood beyond, aglow under the pearly moonlight. She meowed, sensing his mood, and he leaned his weight on the railing.

“What more could I possibly have to give?”

Sylveon rubbed against him, purring, but she could not stir his affection when he felt so hopeless. Deep in the woods, Zoroark howled over a fresh kill, sending up a murder of Murkrow from the canopy in a fright. Their glossy wings caught the moonlight like so many shattered mirrors, rising to join the stars above. N clutched the Dark Stone in his hand and watched them rise.

“To live is to suffer,” he said, mesmerized by the pale fronds of moonlight reflected off the Murkrow’s wings and the dark pines below. “I was warned...”

The Dark Stone’s heartstrings glowed iridescent in the moonlight, and N clutched it close to his chest.

The next morning, he woke in silence. There was something in the air today, in the overcast grey sky that blocked out the sun’s light that wanted silence and solemnity. He thought of Hilda, as he often did during her absences when she was called away for work, and longed to see her. It had been weeks since their last parting, before he embarked on his bloody purge.

When she Teleported into the courtyard of the castle with Reuniclus without forewarning, he went to meet her only to find that she was not alone. Hilbert was with her.

“You,” Hilbert said, advancing. His Musharna floated above him, her red eyes droopy with sleep and leaking dream mist. Her pearly heartstrings were constricted in alarm.

N signaled to his Pokémon, who had free roam of the castle, and out of nowhere Zoroark leaped down from a rampart with a snarl. Hilbert’s pale heartstrings pulsed with hostility and anger, but N could only wonder at what had provoked it.

“Stop,” Hilda said, getting in between them. “Let me talk to him first.”

“You’ve had years to talk to him, Hil. Time’s up,” Hilbert said, drawing a long saber from the scabbard at his hip.

“What is this?” N demanded.

Hilda approached. She was dressed in studded leather and scale armor like he’d never seen her before. Hilbert matched her, and N grew more suspicious.

“Please, listen to me, N,” Hilda said. “Where’s the Dark Stone?”

“With me, as it always is,” N said. “What is this about? Why is he here?”

“I had no choice. When we talked about the legendary Dragons, I never imagined you would go this far... Please, give me the Dark Stone.” She tried to go to him, but Zoroark snarled viciously.
N calmed Zoroark with a gentle hand. “Why do you want it? Hilda, tell me what’s going on.”

“Hilda,” Hilbert said. “Get away from him.” He drew two more Pokéballs and released a Galvantula large enough to carry a man on his back and an Emboar that could have eaten him for breakfast.

Togekiss squawked from on high, suspicious of all the hostility in the courtyard, and Sylveon silently crept to N’s side, her hackles raised.

“Just talk to me,” she said as calmly as she could. “I know what you’ve been doing. You killed all those people, N. You went too far.”

“How... Have you been following me?” he said, incredulous.

“Just your dreams,” Hilbert said. “More like nightmares, in your case. You're a murderer, N.”

“Hilbert, that’s enough,” Hilda said.

“My dreams...” N turned on Hilda. “Why would you do such a thing?”

Hilda faced him like one might a rabid animal. “It wasn’t by choice, and I was worried about you. N, just tell me the truth. Did Ghetsis put you up to all this? Those innocent people, the whole plan to summon Zekrom, was it his doing?”

N stared at her, at a loss for words. “Father...? What...”

“I know about the boys who came before you,” Hilda said. “Thirteen of them. Ghetsis stole them all, orphans no one would miss. He started it a hundred years ago, and we never had any concrete proof until one of them escaped, the one before you. M,” she said. “He told us everything, but we couldn’t protect him from Ghetsis.” There were tears in her eyes. “Please,” she begged him, taking his hands in hers. “Tell me this is his doing. You were a child, you never stood a chance against him.”

N looked at her like he was seeing her for the first time. “I never told you who my father is.”

She shook her head. “What? N, listen to me. If you come with me, I can get you help. I’ll stay with you every step of the way.”

He barely heard her. “I never told you his name. How do you know?”

“Okay, I know this is a lot—”

“Answer me!” he shouted, tightening his grip on her hands.

She gasped and pulled free of him. Reuniclus was right behind her, fearful of Zoroark but unwilling to abandon Hilda.

“Answer me,” he demanded again, his hands beginning to shake.

Hilda’s eyes glistened with unshed tears. “N, I...”

“She’s a spy,” Hilbert said. “The best. And you were the target.”

Hilda covered her mouth to hide a sob.

Hilbert drew something out of his pocket and brandished it at N. “Give it up, N. I have the Light
Stone and the power to summon Reshiram now. Give up the Dark Stone and come quietly, or I swear to god, I’ll use it.”

“Weeeeelllll, I think we’ve seen enough,” said an unfamiliar voice.

Before N could process what he had heard, a small group of people Teleported into the courtyard just behind Hilbert. N recognized Vivian by her chartreuse heartstrings, Hilbert’s Volucris assistant. The four others were unknown to him, but he grew alarmed at the sight of them: a Reaper, a Clairvoyant, a Bellator, and, incredibly, a Medium.

The speaker was the Reaper, a tall snake of a man itching for a cigarette. When he smirked, his black heartstrings danced with laughter.

“Magus,” said the Medium, adjusting her enormous glasses like her hands might fall off with nothing to preoccupy them. “That one, a Magus. Right there. I see him!”

N stared at the Medium woman, horrified. Her violet heartstrings were amorphous and undulating, more smoke than light, and within her he could see others, Ghosts that haunted her. Mediums were rare, typically only one in a generation, and so he had never feared meeting one. They had the power to see Auras, the shadows of heartstrings—the power to see him for what he really was. She had exposed him, and he was suddenly afraid.

“So it’s true,” said the Bellator, his muscles rippling under his gleaming teak skin and a cold façade. “Bet that’s why the old Crypt Keeper kept him over the others.”

The Clairvoyant, more a china doll than a woman, remained silent next to her Alakazam, the one responsible for Teleporting them all here.

“Oh, that’s not the only reason.”

N whirled at the sound of Father’s—Ghetsis’s voice. He emerged onto the courtyard flanked by his Shadow Triad, as well as a small army of Team Plasma Agents in grey uniforms. They began to spread out in the wide courtyard, surrounding the newcomers.

“Father,” N said, aghast. “What are you doing here?”

“You didn’t really think Zinzolin wouldn’t keep me apprised of your little property acquisition,” he said with a smile. “And your...other activities.”

“Ghetsis,” the enemy Reaper spat. “Motherfucker...”

“Grimsley, don’t,” said the Clairvoyant, touching a delicate hand to his arm.

“My, my,” Ghetsis said. “What a welcome. Caitlin the Graea, it’s an honor. And the elusive Shauntal, Unova’s own Medium. Marshal... You were Champion Alder’s apprentice. I see no expense was spared if you’ve all come together especially on my account.” His gaze lingered on Grimsley. “I see you even brought me a gift.”

Grimsley drew the sword he carried and pointed it at Ghetsis with a grin that could have cut through stone. “Oh, I’ll give you a nice little gift, you cock-sucking cannibal.”

Vivian had gone to Hilbert, who looked shocked to see her. “I ordered you to stay out of this, Viv!” he hissed.

“Not on your life! I’ve been with you every step of the way to find the Light Stone, and I’m not
about to abandon you now,” she argued.

The voices all blended together as N stared between Hilda and Hilbert and the incandescent Light Stone in his hand, unable to process any of this above the only revelation that mattered.

“You,” he said to Hilda. “You betrayed me?”

She wiped her tears but could not stop them. “It wasn’t like that, I swear. It was all about Ghetsis. My employer, the International Police, suspected you might be one of his abductees, and we thought you might be able to help us figure out his plans. He’s been the International Police’s top target for the last two hundred years.”

“Well, congratulations,” Ghetsis said. “You found me.” He raised his spotted hand, and the Plasma Agents released an army of Pokémon and drew their swords as if for battle. “And now, I shall take that Light Stone off your hands, boy,” he said to Hilbert. “Thank you for bringing it all the way here.”

There were so many Pokémon, and they surrounded the courtyard that N could not hope to count them all. He didn’t even bother.

“You lied to me,” he said to Hilda. “All this time—” He anguished, and the image of her blurred as tears filled his eyes. “You lied to me.”

“No!” Hilda pleaded with him. “No, it wasn’t like that. I didn’t plan on it, but I couldn’t help... I couldn’t...”

“How sweet,” Ghetsis said. “Love always is for a while. N, I warned you about that woman. You brought this on yourself. Now, your loyal followers are here to clean up the mess.” To the Plasma Agents he shouted, “You will protect your king, will you not?”

A battle cry went up as the followers clamored their loyalty, their faith in N. But as he stared at Hilda and understood the depths of her betrayal, he found that he had no faith left.

“When you asked me to come away with you,” he said, recalling their last parting.

Hilda could not speak as she choked on a sob, and N had to turn away, unable to stomach the sight of her suffering.

All those times we were together and she was sad, planning this betrayal...

“How many Tamers?” Grimsley asked Shauntal.

“Many and more,” she said, nervously looking around. “Two and four and fourteen...more, many more.”

“Well...I’m feeling lucky today. So, I’ll take all of them so long as you do your job and kill Ghetsis,” Grimsley said to Marshal.

Marshal tossed out two Pokéballs, and a hunchbacked Conkeldurr and an emaciated Medicham coalesced, mean and out for blood. “Just stay the hell outta my way.”

Ghetsis gave the order. “Kill them all! Liberate their Pokémon and protect your king!”

The Plasma Agents roared their loyalty and threw themselves into battle. The four Tamers Hilbert and Hilda brought, as well as Vivian, all released their Pokémon and met their charge. Bodies, in
whole and in part, flew through the air trailing blood, clobbered by fists or flayed with telekinesis. Shauntal leaped high into the air carried by her Ghosts, and came down to earth to rip the souls from every person and Pokémon she touched, while Caitlin remained perfectly still and silent, directing her Psychics in perfect synchronicity with her mind. Hilbert shouted at Hilda as he battled a Plasma Agent with his sword until Emboar intervened with a bone-crushing Hammer Arm. Everywhere in the courtyard, there was chaos and carnage. The fountain’s waters soon ran red with blood that spilled over onto the cobblestones, and the screams of humans and Pokémon alike entwined in a terrible dance of death filled the air.

N watched it all in quiet shock, all those lives and lights extinguished by blade and fist and fury. He could not even move as his Pokémon leaped to defend him against anything that got too close, driven by their love for him. He drew the Dark Stone from his pocket in a shaky hand. The bloody heartstrings still glowed in its heart, Zekrom’s heart, if he was even truly there.

“N!” Hilda shouted behind the safety of her Serperior, who was busy Vine Whipping an enemy Krokorok. She ran to get to him, desperate to make this stop.

*What more do you want?*

“N, please!” she pleaded as she ducked a Plasma Agent’s combined attack with his Dewott, and her Sigilyph swooped in with a Psybeam that tore the man’s arm off, exposing the bone.

“Hilda! Get away from him!” Hilbert shouted. He was fumbling with the Light Stone in his bloodied hands as he fended off enemy Pokémon and Plasma Agents.

*What more do I have to offer?*

“Stop this!” Hilda said, drawing close. “You’re their king! You can make them stop, and we can end this! I beg you!”

Zoroark snarled as she got too close, but Serperior engaged him. They began to brawl. Serperior Constricting and Zoroark Night Slashing as they quickly ripped each other to ribbons. When Reuniclus joined the hopeless fray, Togekiss was there to swoop in with a Sky Attack and take a vicious Psychic at point-blank range. N could only watch as his Pokémon struggled in vain to defend him with what little was left of their lives, paralyzed in his pain and grief like had never been before.

Everywhere, blood and mayhem and suffering. So much suffering.

*What I have left to give...*

She flew at him, and he caught her in his arms. For one beautiful moment of insanity, he imagined they were a million miles from here, floating in a sea of stars high above the world in a Ferris wheel where nothing and no one could reach them.

“Stop this madness,” Hilda said, taking his face in her bloody hands. “Or I’ll have to stop you.”

Tears streaked her cheeks and made her eyes puffy, but surrounded by her brilliant white heartstrings, she was just as stunning as that night in the Ferris wheel. N threaded his fingers in her hair.

“Please,” she said again. “That first night, the Ferris wheel, we can have that again. Just the two of us and all the pretty lights.”

“Oh, my love,” he said, letting his hand fall. “You were the loveliest fantasy of all.” It took
everything he had to swallow the sob that threatened to break him in two as he looked down on her in that moment, close enough to kiss. “And all I have left to give.”

She opened her mouth to speak, but all that came out was a gasping ‘Oh!’ Her heartstrings froze in shock, like a flash of fireworks that lasted only a second, and then they fell all around her. He watched as her light began to fade, and he shoved his blade deeper in between her ribs with a shaking hand.

N blinked the tears from his eyes as he held her close, his grief too much to bear any longer. The last of her tears were bitter where he kissed her cheek, her lips. She grew limp in his arms, and he shuddered.

*I give it all,* he thought in the darkest corner of his mind that didn’t ache for her.

**I give it all for the sake of my ideals.**

Hilbert saw her go limp in N’s arms and wailed inhumanly. He reached for Musharna, and she released a devastating Psychic wave that cut down all the Plasma Agents still standing in between N and himself, ripping them bodily in half as though invisible hands had pulled them apart like taffy. Sylveon leaped to protect N and fired off a Moonblast, which struck Galvantula, but Emboar charged in a reckless Flare Blitz to flatten the Fairy feline. Darmanitan recklessly Tackled Emboar out of nowhere, and the three of them crashed together into the fountain, cracking it and spilling red water everywhere.

N sank to his knees and clutched Hilda’s body to him. Her blood spilled all over him and bathed them in a growing puddle. He clutched the Dark Stone in a white-knuckled grip, shaking with the force of his conviction.

*Take her,* he thought. *I have nothing left.*

And so, it did.

Hilbert was nearly upon him, the Light Stone in hand, when all of a sudden, the Dark Stone grew so hot that N had to drop it. The black pearl floated of its own accord, slick with Hilda’s blood, and rose into the air. Hilbert saw it, too, and stopped, thunderstruck.

“Her blood,” he said. But the sight of her, broken and lifeless in N’s lap, put him over the edge, and he screamed. “No! Reshiram, I summon you!” He thrust the Light Stone up. “Help me!”

The overcast sky turned progressively darker as the Dark Stone rose higher and began to spark. Far off, thunder boomed. The sparks coming from the Dark Stone grew larger, and a fat lightning bolt cleaved the heavens, followed by another and another until the fighting below ceased and all eyes turned skyward.

N rose, and it was the hardest thing he had ever done to let Hilda’s body slip away and reach for the Dark Stone.

“Zekrom,” he said.

The sky erupted in dazzling light, and the pungent smell of ozone filled the air. N gagged and clutched his throat, momentarily blinded. People screamed and shouted, and there was a loud *crack* like a sledge hammer striking stone. When N’s vision cleared, he was looking up at a fantasy made real.

The black Dragon of Ideals towered over him, darker than the sky and larger than life. He stood taller than the Iron Keep’s tallest tower, with great leathery wings. He could have ripped Ghetsis’s
Hydreigon apart like a paper doll. His thick tail sparked with blue lightning, as though he carried a storm within him to eviscerate any who opposed him. And when he roared, the sky itself began to weep as rain fell and thunder clapped. The Plasma Agents ran in terror, most of them abandoning the siege and attempting to flee the castle with their Pokémon.

“Not good!” Shauntal shouted. “He’s real, very real!”

“Fuck me,” Grimsley said, staring in horror at the monster N had awakened.

Ghetsis was silent as he watched, his dark eyes narrowed and his true feelings forever a mystery to N.

Zekrom looked down at N and opened his abyssal maw. He reached toward him and scooped him up in one enormous clawed hand. N clung to him and watched as Hilda’s body shrank below him.

Hilbert was hysterical as he threw himself at Hilda’s corpse and dragged her to him. “Hilda!” he wailed. The Light Stone glowed in his hand, and N watched, wondering if Hilbert had summoned Reshiram. It would be a clash of Truth and Ideals if he succeeded, two Heroes forever at odds, the same as it had been 3,000 years ago.

Hilbert glared up at N, his tears and her blood washed away by the rain. “I’ll kill you!” he shouted, his voice cracking with pain and anguish. “You fucking monster, I’ll kill you for this!” He thrust the Light Stone skyward, and his Musharna was at his side, ready to fight.

But all of the sudden, the Light Stone seared with white-hot light, and Hilbert cried out in pain, dropping it and clutching his burned hand. Swearing, he shouted for Musharna to stop N.

“Psychic!” he screamed. “Tear him apart!”

The Light Stone exploded with light and floated of its own accord, and for a moment N thought this was it, the inevitable clash. But Musharna was jettisoned away as the Light Stone’s power erupted, burned to a bloody char before she could ever get her attack off, and Hilbert was thrust into the air. He clawed at the rain, disoriented for one horrifying second, and the next he was pulled back toward the Light Stone. He screamed, but all trace of him faded as he was sucked into the stone, eaten, as the Dark Stone had eaten Hilda’s blood sacrifice. The Light Stone lost its incandescent shine and fell to the ground, dormant once more.

Vivian wailed and ran to find the Light Stone where it had rolled away, shouting for Hilbert, unable to comprehend what was so clear to N.

You were not worthy...but I am.

Zekrom took to the skies, and they seemed to part for him and for N. His heartstrings, draconian red and sparkling yellow, were magnificent to behold as they entwined with N’s in perfect harmony.

Yes, he thought as he felt them. You understand everything.

People below were shouting, and N had lost sight of Ghetsis. Not even his heartstrings were anywhere to be seen. But Ghetsis was no longer his concern. Hilda’s blood stained his clothes, and his despair drained him of energy. He could not bear to look on her remains or this place where they shared so many memories. He could not remember her like this.

“Zekrom!” he shouted to be heard over the roaring wind and rain. “Show me your power!”
Zekrom roared, and the heavens opened up above. He crackled with blue lightning and summoned a terrible storm. N gasped as he felt the lightning course through him, unable to hurt him so long as he and Zekrom were one. So much passion, so much power, and all of it at his fingertips.

He reached for the heavens, and the heavens reached back. Zekrom unleashed a devastating Fusion Bolt that struck Vertress City and the Iron Keep, lighting it up like the dawn. He heard no screams, no pain, no death.

There was only light, and it was beautiful.

The acropolis at the top of the stairs was littered with the bones of creatures that had fallen here, picked apart and pieced together where they lay atop each other in this graveyard.

A kingdom of bones, thought the king once known to the world as N.

The skylight in the domed roof was once the tallest point in this place, a window to the heavens with nothing in between the stargazer and the stars he reached for. Now, there was only murky darkness, and slithering shadows that swam ominously just beyond. They saw him, knew what he dared to do, this invader who dared to defy time and space to tread these Abyssal Ruins.

Sunk in the Cataclysm said to have been sent by vengeful weather spirits angered by the arrogance of man, no one had walked these sunken halls since the last Heroes saw them reclaimed by the sea. But like the ones who came before, he had come here in search of something. A king wanted crowning.

N’s relic crown sat on the stone pedestal in the center of the observatory, the place beneath the stars. Blackened and cracked, it had once been a symbol of Truth and Ideals, silver and mother of pearl, driftwood and stone. He kneeled before it, his weight heavy on his knees, as so many kings had kneeled here before him.

It could have been Hilbert here instead of him, but he had not been worthy in the end. He had lied, too. He was no Hero of Truth to be worthy of a crown. But then, perhaps that was simply the nature of heroes—like kings, there can be only one.

Above, beyond, Zekrom loomed and watched over N, his chosen one. His thunder parted the waves and reached down deep to this place for the one he loved most.

Do you remember? N wondered. Do you remember love?

He couldn’t hear Hilda’s laughter anymore. Not in this place. He could not even recall the sound, though he tried.

He reached for the relic crown, but it fell apart in his hands. Too long in darkness, battling time and salt and pressure, the twisted treasure crumbled to dust. He closed his eyes and felt the heat of tears boil behind them.

“Just a lovely fantasy,” he said.

Zekrom loomed over N, waiting and patient, his constant companion now and forever. The proof that he had won, that he was everything they said he would become for the price it had cost him everything to pay and left him with nothing but dust. He had been warned, after all. To live was to suffer, and to die had never been his fate.
N clutched the remains of the broken crown like he had clutched her at their final parting, and he wept. He understood a little, finally, of why the Magi had taken fate into their own hands.

Zekrom reached through the skylight of the observatory at the top of the acropolis and scooped him up. Around him, electrified waters swirled tempestuous, and high above loomed the sky, so far away. N laid his hand on Zekrom’s head, amazed at the warmth and comfort a single touch could convey. Perhaps he remembered her sacrifice, after all.

“I’m sorry,” N said, unsure what else to say. “I’m so sorry.” But there was no one left to hear.

Zekrom spread his great wings and leaped. They rose past the murky waters and the denizens that lurked within, climbing ever higher, faster and faster. N held fast.

The night sky was brilliant when they breached the water’s surface. Below, the waves crashed and buried the Abyssal Ruins once more, until the next Hero came looking. There would be no crown for them to claim anymore. Only darkness and dust.

So long he had been away, searching for that faraway place beyond the sunset that Hilda had dreamed of escaping to together. She was there, he knew, waiting for him. Zekrom believed it, too. But no matter how high they flew, there was no reaching the heavens.

It was just a fantasy, and his ideal reality had no place for it. It never had.

Chapter End Notes

Poem credit: “Parting” by Emily Dickinson, which has been a favorite inspiration for the lovely but often (in my view) tragic FerrisWheelShipping.

To anyone wondering about the Magi, I recommend checking out my other fic, Wanderer, which focuses a bit more on them. Any other questions will be addressed as this fic progresses. As always, all my Pokémon fics build off each other insofar as they exist in the same universe.
Rosa

By the time Shauntal finished her tale, the fire had sputtered out to embers. Rosa had listened intently along with the others, enraptured by the strange and heartbreaking story of N’s rise and fall and the tragic roles the Clairvoyant twins Hilda and Hilbert had played in it. By the end of it, she was so stunned that she could hardly think straight.

“He killed anyone he considered unworthy to please Zekrom,” Shauntal had recounted. “Murdered in cold blood. Dark and terrible deeds to raise a dark and terrible monster.”

Rosa’s head was spinning. Beside her, Hugh was equally silent as he stared, wide-eyed and aghast, at Shauntal and tried to process what he had just heard. N was one of the fabled Magi, Zekrom was real, and both were possibly still alive out in the world somewhere.

“That poor woman,” Kahili said softly. “What a wretched end.”

“Mm,” Shauntal said, jittery even for her as she revisited the awful memories. “Both of them. Failed, we all did. Should’ve known. He was a Magus, after all.”

“Wait, what do you mean by that?” Nate asked, the only one of the trio able to keep up the conversation in the wake of Shauntal’s staggering revelations.

Shauntal looked around the room nervously and hugged her knees to her chest. Sableye fixed his glittering eyes on Nate and grinned wolfishly. “The Magi, yes, very tragic. My Ghosts know the truth, all truths. Dead men tell no lies, and the Magi are all dead. Born to die, die to live. Only supposed to do it once, but not them, no... Madness. Madness. Maddened to death... Or death to the mad?”

She was making little sense, and Nate tried to ground her again. “What about the Light Stone? Did you recover it?”

Shauntal just stared through him like she didn’t recognize him sitting there beside her.

“He murdered her,” Shauntal’s voice rang in Rosa’s head. “Offered her to Zekrom. The woman he loved. Stabbed to death, oh, so terrible.”

Rosa regained herself and stood up abruptly. Her head spun, but she ignored it, suddenly feeling claustrophobic in the cozy living room. Leafeon hopped down from the couch and stretched out.

“Rosa?” Kahili said. She was looking at Rosa like at any moment, Rosa would be the one to start stabbing.

Nate got up. “Rosa,” he said, his questions forgotten as he focused on her.

“I...” she heard herself say, her mouth dry.

“Rosa,” Hugh said, his voice paper-thin and barely a whisper as he looked up at her.

The sound of Hugh’s voice was the last straw. Rosa headed for the door. “I have to go.”

Footsteps came after her, and she could feel Nate’s heat at her back. Leafeon was hot on her heels when she reached the door and let herself out into the cold night.

“Rosa, wait,” Nate said, reaching for her hand.
Golurk, still standing sentry, lurched in its heavy haunted armor, spooking both Rosa and her pursuers. She had forgotten the huge Ghost was out here. Leafeon hissed at it.

“This is a lot to take in, I know, so please just talk to me,” Nate said.

Rosa avoided his hands and tossed out Swanna’s Pokéball. Hugh came outside after Nate just as Swanna coalesced in a burst of white light and honked.

“Just leave me alone,” Rosa said, her throat clenching as she recalled Leafeon and hopped onto Swanna’s back.

Golurk’s gaze was heavy on her profile, hidden behind its rusted helm, and Rosa felt her skin crawl as though another minute under its scrutiny would peel back her flesh and reveal everything hidden beneath, everything she was barely holding in as her hands shook. She squeezed her eyes shut and urged Swanna to Fly.

“Rosa!” Nate shouted over the rushing winds as Swanna leaped into the air.

Shauntal and Kahili came outside, but they merely watched Rosa take off without a word. Soon, the ruins of the Celestial Tower shrank below, and Rosa and Swanna were awash in a sea of moonlight and biting autumn wind. She felt the chill in her bones, lashing at her cheeks and ears as Swanna flew swiftly, but she didn’t care. Tears filled her eyes, and her chest felt like it would burst at any moment.

The Sky Tower rushed by, and soon the valley was far behind with only the trees and stars left to accompany her. Swanna touched down in a clearing amidst the sentinel pines, ever green as they prepared to weather the coming winter, and Rosa and Swanna were awash in a sea of moonlight and biting autumn wind. She felt the chill in her bones, lashing at her cheeks and ears as Swanna flew swiftly, but she didn’t care. Tears filled her eyes, and her chest felt like it would burst at any moment.

Every breath she drew was a knife to the gut, and she shook with the violence of her emotions like she never had before. Not even Beartic’s death all those months ago on Cinnabar Island could compare to this. Then, she’d been able to do something, avenge his death and destroy all traces of those responsible. Now, she could only tremble and grieve alone as everything she thought she knew, everything that had kept her going on this mad quest shattered and turned to ashes in her mouth.

She looked up, but the crescent moon was blurry through her tears. “What am I supposed to do now?” she asked, getting to her feet. She wiped her tears on her sleeve and bared her teeth at the night sky. “What the hell am I supposed to do? Answer me!” she shouted. Her voice cracked with anguish.

But only the wind answered her, whistling softly through the trees and the brittle grass. Swanna waddled beside her and lowered her long neck, concerned.

“Please answer me,” Rosa pleaded. “Please...”

Without N, without Team Plasma, without a reason to believe what she was doing mattered, that it would help, that it had a point, what was she supposed to do?

Rosa clutched her Pokéballs close and slumped to the ground again under a tree whose golden leaves were half shed. She could hardly summon the energy to lift her head as her Pokémon
emerged from their Pokéballs and surrounded her. Serperior’s long scaled body coiled about the tree and Rosa, shielding her from the world beyond, and Ferroseed burrowed down next to her, for once not making a fuss as he sensed her despair.

Rosa hugged her knees to her chest and cried herself to sleep.

One day melted into the next, and Rosa remained in the wilderness north of Mistralton. Her Pokémon saw to their own meals, and ingrained survival skills that no amount of melancholy could overpower moved Rosa to see to hers, as well. But she had little appetite, and the first meal of a roasted Bunnelby she tried to swallow she retched back up. It was no good. She was empty, and no amount of sustenance could fill her now. Still, she forced herself to eat a little.

She hardly spoke, and she didn’t stray more than a couple miles from that clearing Swanna had brought her to that first night. She couldn’t go back to Mistralton, not like this. She couldn’t face them, any of them. She couldn’t even face herself.

She’d gone to get water from a nearby stream, and she just sat there at the bank, staring at her runny reflection in the clear water. She hardly recognized herself.

*Did I know?* she wondered. *Did I know all this time?*

Everyone else seemed to know, or else they were happy to believe whatever they heard. Was she denying what was so obvious to everyone else all this time? Was she so blind? Was she truly the same as the Neos?

She thought of Aldith. Of an age with Rosa, they had joined Team Plasma around the same time, both eager to be involved in something bigger than them, something that would make a difference in the world, give them purpose. Aldith had revered N and his philosophy, zealously promoting his teachings through community service or rallies or peaceful protests. She’d had so much energy and enthusiasm, was so devoted to affecting positive change, just like Rosa and so many others. The Aldith who faced Rosa on the Plasma Frigate in Driftveil was not the passionate woman she remembered. That Aldith would never have used Pokémon for violent ends as she did, would never have killed so many innocent people. She would never have used the abominable Chimera technology for any purpose, the very antithesis of N’s philosophy of coexistence rather than control.

When had their paths diverged? When had Aldith and all the other Neos lost sight of N’s true ideals? Or was it Rosa who had lost her way?

*“Team Plasma murdered my little sister!”* Hugh screamed desperately in her memories.

Rosa smacked her hand over her reflection in the water, uncaring that the stream was freezing. She collapsed on her hands and felt a fresh hot wave of anger and despair and shame boiling in her chest.

First came the shock of Shauntal’s revelations, then the pain and desperate sorrow that accompanied the earth-shattering truth, and finally the fury. A black choler like she had never known began to needle its way under her nails, in her veins like a poison, as the bitter shame and resentment amassed into a monster that fed on her, and she let it.

N was alive out there somewhere, news that should have brought her joy and relief, but all she could feel was this twisted loathing and misery, and she hated him for it. She hated herself for it.
Serperior was the only one of her Pokémon who could stomach to be physically close to her like this, unafraid of her poisonous anger or too proud to care, and he hardly left her side at all out here, perhaps more for her own good than for his. Those liquid ruby eyes glared down at her on her hands by the stream as if to say, 'Pathetic human, you thought this would be easy?'

It was late morning when she heard a familiar voice. “Rosa?”

Serperior slithered around her and tasted the air with his forked tongue, but he did not move to attack. Rosa got up and turned to see Yancy, flanked by her Mienshao and Emolga, naginata drawn but lowered, and a rucksack on her back. Sawsbuck emerged from the woods, his antlers festooned with golden leaves, and Leafeon cracked open an eye where he lay slumbering on a high branch above. Only Ferroseed seemed happy to see Yancy and whirred noisily toward her, tossing up crunchy leaves and pine needles in his wake.

One look at Yancy’s face, and Rosa had an idea of how haggard she must look. “Yancy,” she said hollowly. “What’re you doing here?”

“I tracked you,” she said. “It’s just me, no one else, don’t worry. I brought you some food.”

She sheathed her naginata and unshouldered the brown rucksack.

“Why?” Rosa said.

Mienshao had his suspicious eyes on Serperior, while Emolga chittered down at Ferroseed from Yancy’s shoulder.

“...You’ve been out here for five days,” Yancy said. “I thought you might be hungry. Everyone’s really worried about you.”

Rosa wasn’t hungry, but the monster feeding on her was, though not for the kind of food Yancy was offering. She felt the bite of its fangs in her gut as the anger and shame coiled tightly. “I’m a Sylvan,” she snapped. “I know how to survive in the wilderness better than anyone.”

Yancy looked at her. “Right, my mistake. You’re a Tamer, and you can do things I could never understand.”

Over the bestial gnawing in her chest, Rosa felt a pang of regret at her words. “I’m sorry, I... I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Yes, you did,” Yancy said. “But I’m not so easily offended.”

Rosa said nothing to that, and Yancy looked around the clearing where Rosa had been spending her days. There were arrow notches in a gnarled tree trunk where Rosa had loosed them in a rage, the remains of a campfire she’d used to roast the game she hunted, and a flattened bed of fallen leaves where she slept exposed to the elements. Had it really been five days? Rosa hadn’t been counting, having thought of little other than N and his betrayal.

He betrayed me, she thought. Just like he betrayed Hilda and all the others who believed in him.

So why couldn’t she just accept it? Why did she still linger here, lost in the woods? For a Sylvan most at home in the wild outdoors, she had not been able to find her way back, much less leave this place.

Yancy drew a hand axe from a leather holster at her hip and, without a word, went to the tree filled with arrow holes and began to hack away at it. The hand axe was a slim little thing, hopeless
against the thick dead trunk, but Yancy hacked at it all the same, putting power behind her swings
to bite into the bark and send wood shavings and splinters flying.

“What’re you doing?” Rosa demanded, approaching. She’d come out here to get away from
everyone. How had Yancy even found her?

“I’m beating the shit out of this tree,” Yancy said. “Wanna try it?”

“I came here to be alone,” Rosa said.

“How’s that working out for you so far?” Yancy paused and glanced her over.

Rosa was too tired to react to the baiting. She had more important things to worry about, like facing
a reality where a hero she had looked up to had turned out to be a fraud. Black thoughts fed the
beast chewing at her inside, and she felt like screaming.

Yancy pressed the hand axe into Rosa’s hand all of a sudden. “Try it,” she said gently.

“I don’t...” Rosa protested.

“Don’t think, don’t talk about it,” Yancy said. “Just let it out.” She nodded at the mottled tree.

The axe was light in her palm, tempered steel and crafted for small hands. Serperior hovered over
Rosa, his unblinking stare fixed on the tree.

This is stupid, Rosa thought. But she guided her hand down against the trunk anyway, just to see
what it would feel like. The axe head bit into the bark a couple inches, and she yanked it back out.
Splinters tumbled to the ground, and a tiny gash opened up in the bark. Frowning, Rosa, brought
the axe down again, but the hole barely widened at all. The blade was small but sharp. Again, then
again, and again, until she wasn’t thinking about the impact, the flying splinters, the steady ache in
her arm as the muscles worked. All she could think about was N, about his image in her locket that
had given her courage and strength to get through her darkest trials until now.

Damn you, she thought, gritting her teeth as she hacked.

She switched hands fluidly and swung hard, dislodging a nice chunk of bark that went sailing and
would have hit Emolga and Ferroseed if Mienshao hadn’t Karate Chopped it lightning fast. Rosa
hardly noticed.

Damn you!

There were tears in her eyes, though she could not say when they’d started to fall. She paused
briefly to wipe her nose, switched hands again, and unleashed everything she had on the dead tree.
The last blow she dealt saw her hand slip from the axe handle, and the blade grazed the tree and
fell to the ground. Rosa landed against the trunk, now a raw pulpy mess, and she let out a strangled
sound like a dry heave. Her arms and hands ached, and she didn’t know how long she’d been at it.
N’s pendant dangled about her neck, and in a last burst of infuriating energy, she ripped it from her
neck ready to smash it. But the sight of N’s picture stole what little was left of her, and she couldn’t
do it. She clutched it to her chest and sank to the ground, and Yancy appeared next to her with a
damp rag she’d wetted in the stream. She said nothing as she pressed it to Rosa’s forehead and
face, wiping grime and sweat and tears away. Rosa let her work, barely feeling the cool rag on her
hot flesh.

“I don’t know what you’re going through,” Yancy said softly. “I can’t imagine how difficult it
must be. But I know you’ll find your way through it.”
Rosa looked at Yancy as she worked. Her bubblegum pink hair was tied up in a ridiculous side ponytail, and her naturally narrow grey eyes were focused on her task. She had a warrior’s hands, rough but precise, but right now there was nothing war-like about her as she tended to Rosa like Bianca used to when Rosa pushed herself too hard training with her Pokémon. Bianca and Yancy had to be as different as night and day, and yet the memory eased some of the pressure in her chest, and she breathed deeply.

“Why?” Rosa asked. Why was she here? Why was she helping? Why did she even care? They barely knew each other. Yancy owed her nothing.

Yancy set down the rag. “You remind me of my sister, Gozen,” she said. “She doesn’t know how to be vulnerable, either.”

Was that what this helpless feeling was? Vulnerability? She loosened her grip on N’s pendant and held it out to see. The sight of his picture stirred the beast’s ravenous fury and shame, but only distantly, like at the bottom of a deep dark well. She could not bring herself to deface his image or throw it away. She needed it, this talisman of courage and strength, the very picture of the man who had robbed it all in a night. She wanted to laugh and cry at the irony.

“I’m pathetic,” she said, her voice cracking.

Yancy looked at her with a quiet sort of empathy that reminded Rosa of Nate in that moment, like she could see the whole truth and had no desire to pass judgment on it. “Sometimes when people break, the only thing they can do is break something else. I don’t think you’re pathetic at all; just a little cracked.”

Rosa laid her head back against the trunk and felt the bark with her fingertips. “Not as cracked as this tree.”

Yancy smiled. “No, definitely not.”

Yancy stayed with Rosa the rest of the day and through the night. She never once asked Rosa to talk about what was bothering her, though Rosa guessed she probably got the story from Nate already. Such a small concession, and yet Rosa appreciated it more than she thought she would. There was something calming about Yancy’s presence, the silence between them as Rosa sharpened her arrow heads and Yancy cut up some Leppa berries she’d brought with her from Mistralton. Rosa got the impression that Yancy had done this before, been a pillar of quiet strength for someone else. Hers was the rarest kind of patience.

“You mentioned you had a sister,” Rosa said as they ate across a small campfire. Leafeon had decided to curl up next to Rosa as he cleaned himself, no longer wary of her turbulent emotions. The physical venting had helped a little.

Emolga pilfered a Leppa berry core from Yancy’s plate and nibbled greedily on it, drawing Ferroseed’s curious attention.

“Gozen,” Yancy said. “She’s not my blood sister, but we grew up together.”

Rosa watched the flames. “I have a sister like that, too. Bianca.”

Yancy smiled. “It’s the strongest bond in the world, the bond between siblings. I think so, at least.”
Just thinking of Bianca brought a small sad smile to Rosa’s face. She was so scatterbrained, always forgetting things like where the spare key was (always in the same flower pot at the back door since they were small) or getting lost in places she’d known all her life (like the Nuvema beach trails). She never said a bad word about anybody, and she was fiercely compassionate and thoughtful to a fault. Rosa had always been more reserved with her feelings and her generosity, even callous. It was hard to believe they’d grown up in the same house and turned out so differently.

She missed Bianca terribly. With everything that had been going on, it was hard to get a free moment to remember the people she’d left behind, to worry about them.

“Where’s Gozen now?” Rosa asked.

Yancy’s smile fell. “With Lady Elesa. Our duty was to protect her at all times.”

She sounded unsure. “With Elesa. So she’s with Drayden, too, I imagine.”

Yancy nodded. “I would think so, yeah.”

*She’s afraid,* Rosa realized. Of course she would be. If half the things Rosa had heard about Drayden were true, she’d be afraid, too. At least Bianca was among allies and friends who could protect her. Gozen probably did not have that luxury.

“You said I reminded you of Gozen a little,” Rosa said. “If that’s true, then she won’t take anything Drayden can throw at her lying down. I wouldn’t.”

“True, but that’s also sort of what scares me. She’s got a big mouth.”

“And a big sword to go with it?”

Yancy chuckled. “Oh, yeah.”

It felt good to hear laughter, even just a little of it. But the good feeling soon passed as the weight of Shauntal’s revelations bore down on Rosa’s shoulders yet again, lest she forget them. Hilda and Hilbert had been siblings, but their bond wasn’t strong enough to save them from N. How could Rosa hope to do any better? How could any of them?

*I hate this,* she thought forlornly. *I hate everything about this.*

Yancy sensed her change in mood and watched her thoughtfully. She looked like she wanted to ask, but she didn’t. For that, Rosa could have hugged her if she was the hugging type.

“Thanks,” Rosa said at length. “For coming out here. I, um... I’m not the best company right now.”

“You’re welcome,” Yancy said.

Emolga finished nibbling her Leppa berry core, and there was a crunching sound as Ferroseed ground up the remains in his serrated jawless mouth. Yancy cringed at the sound.

“Thorny, come here,” Rosa said, holding out her hand for the spiny Pokémon.

Ferroseed whirled his segmented body and barreled toward Rosa, overjoyed at her invitation after all these days without it. He was so enthusiastic that he nearly stabbed her with his steely barbs, but one glare from Serperior stopped him dead in his tracks before he could trample Rosa, and she picked him up carefully.
“That’s a cute nickname,” Yancy said. “But you don’t strike me as the type.”

“I’m not,” Rosa admitted, settling Ferroseed on her lap. “A friend suggested it a long time ago.”

“Must be a good friend for you to stick with the nickname.”

Ferroseed blinked up at her, his yellow eyes catching the firelight, and Rosa ran her fingers around his barbs the way she knew he liked, massaging gently so he would grow drowsy. “He is,” she said. “I helped him win a war once.”

“Then he owes you one,” Yancy said, scooping up Emolga and petting her as she yawned.

“Yeah, he does,” Rosa said. *I’m counting on that.*

They turned in for the night, and Rosa slept fitfully, as she had every night out here. The trees and the earth normally soothed her like no goose down bed ever could, but when she slept she dreamed, and her dreams were always of N. She saw him holding the sword that had beheaded Lenora, except it wasn’t always Lenora on the executioner’s block. Sometimes it was Juniper, or Nate, or Vivian. Sometimes it was Cheren, his mouth gaping in a silent scream as even his last words died in his throat. Sometimes was a little girl of ten years whose face looked so much like Hugh’s. Sometimes it was a woman Rosa didn’t know, a woman who looked a little like her, in whom she saw herself, who had also believed in N and loved him dearly despite her suspicions of what he truly was. N killed them all, and Rosa just stood there watching, doing nothing. She felt cold hands on her shoulders, dead hands, ancient and claw-like, his breath foul like rotten eggs and night soil. He was darkness, all-consuming, and she felt him dragging her down. She reached for N, for the light she had always depended on, but he smiled his sad smile and watched her sink, his arms bloody to the elbows and the heads of his victims surrounding him like an adoring audience. They rolled and watched her, too, through glassy dead eyes.

Rosa woke with a start and gasped for breath. Serperior was awake and coiled about her, and he nudged her gently. Rosa reached for his head with shaking hands and touched her forehead to his, taking comfort in his sleek strength.

Yancy was awake and admiring Sawsbuck, who was busy grazing and had no interest in her as she ran her hands over his golden coat. Rosa got up and went to them.

“Hey,” Yancy said, looking her over. “Are you hungry? There’s breakfast if you want it.”

Rosa rubbed her eyes and once again silently thanked Yancy for not asking about her night. She was certain the evidence of her nightmares was apparent in the bags under her eyes and pale pallor.

“Thanks, yeah,” Rosa said.

They ate, and Yancy packed up the few things she’d brought.

“I’m heading back to Mistralton,” Yancy said. “Do you feel like coming?”

“No,” Rosa said. *I don’t know if I’ll ever be ready.* “But I’ll go with you.”

Yancy nodded. “Okay. If you’re sure.”

“I can’t stay out here forever,” Rosa said. “Not with everything going on.”

*I’ll have to deal with this myself.*
She didn’t know how she would do that, though. Her time out here was supposed to help her process and accept, but she’d done very little of that. The uncontrollable rage and shame had abated with Yancy’s help and understanding, but it didn’t change what Rosa now knew to be the horrible truth.

They recalled their Pokémon, and Rosa released Swanna for them both to ride. Swanna was a strong Flyer capable of holding two riders, though it would be a tight squeeze. Thankfully, both Rosa and Yancy were in shape and slight of frame. Emolga was overjoyed at the prospect of flying alongside Swanna, but Yancy set her in her lap for the ride. Emolga could never have kept up with Swanna’s speed.

Together, Rosa and Yancy flew south back to Mistraltion and the Sky Tower. It was a grey day threatening rain and sleet, and Rosa passed the flight in brooding silence as she wondered what she was going to do. Facing others was the last thing she wanted to do. Unlike Yancy, they would likely not be so understanding, especially after nearly a week in absentia.

They landed in the Sky Tower rookery, and Rosa set Swanna up in one of the empty honeycomb nests. It was midday, and most people would be in town or on patrol or training. All Rosa wanted to do was retreat to the room she’d shared with Yancy those first couple nights here.

They parted ways, with Yancy mentioning a trip into the city, and Rosa made her way down the narrow stone steps to the living quarters. The only sound was the wind in hollowed stone, no sign of voices or human presence at all, for which she was grateful. She would have to face the others soon, and though she was not ready, as least she could do it on her terms.

Mercifully, she encountered no one on the way to the small bedroom. It had one round window paneled with glass to let the light in, but otherwise it was nothing but a hollow bubble in the mountainside barely large enough for two twin beds and a small armoire. The bathroom was shared with the adjoining room, but no one was around in the middle of the day. Rosa ran a bath, stripped out of her musty clothes, and sank into the blessedly hot water.

Steam filled the stone bathroom and fogged the mirrors and lone window that overlooked the valley floor to the south, bathing the room in a soporific haze that lulled and dulled the senses. Rosa lay back in the brass tub, exhausted. She hadn’t had a decent night’s sleep in days thanks to the nightmares, and waking was little better. She couldn’t cry another tear if she tried, and wondered if she ever would again. It felt like everything had been used up, and all that was left was an empty pit, like the tickle of hunger that can never be sated, and deep down at the bottom lay the ignominious beast that haunted her in its malevolent fury and sadness, neutralized for now but never gone.

*How long will I feel this way?* she wondered, not really wanting to know. She could not imagine getting over this, accepting it and moving on. N’s pendant no longer hung around her neck, but she plucked it from the pile of her discarded clothing and wiped the steam from the picture face.

The Magi all perished, most of them by suicide in the end. But N still remained, so it seemed. Rosa could not imagine what would drive them all to taking their own lives, but she wondered if N knew. If he’d always known somewhere behind that sad enigmatic smile that could charm anyone, as he’d charmed her all those years ago at a speaking event in Accumula Town. If he was the murderer everyone claimed him to be, perhaps he did know something of death.

Rosa closed her fingers around the pendant, unable to look upon his image any longer but unable to let go, either. She laid her head back against the rim of the tub and drew a shaky breath, shivering despite the hot bath water warming her.
I’m lost. I don’t know where to go from here.

She closed her eyes, and she could see the world’s lifelines shimmering for miles. Bright white lights that connected earth and sky, human and Pokémon, everything in between, all of it visible and traceable with the help of her Grass-type Pokémon and a little patience. If she concentrated, she could even find the clearing she’d fled to deep in the northern wilderness. She could find the Mistralton hangar replete with its Thunderstone cache. She could find Nate or Yancy or even Bianca. She could find her way almost anywhere in the world.

But like those dizzy days and nights in Pinwheel Forest, there was no finding her way out of this. There was no thread to follow out of the darkness, and when she closed her eyes now all she saw were terrible visions of blood and betrayal. She clutched N’s pendant, wishing she could forget, just for a few minutes, just a moment, anything at all.

When she stirred, the bath water was tepid and the sun had sunk behind the mountains to cast the world in shades of hazy grey. Rosa blinked bleary eyes and winced at the sour taste on the back of her tongue. She must have dozed off for a time. Her hands were pruning, and the soap bubbles had mostly disintegrated. Rosa dunked her head to rinse out her hair and rub the sleep from her eyes. Then she remembered N’s pendant. She’d been holding it the last she recalled, but no longer. It wasn’t in the tub with her, and she looked around.

“Looking for this?”

Rosa jumped at the sound of that voice so close by. She hadn’t even noticed that someone else was in here.

“Iris,” Rosa said, turning in the tub to see her leaning against the wall out of direct view of the tub’s interior.

Iris was holding N’s pendant. She made no move to return it or approach the tub, and Rosa turned around to face her over the edge of the tub.

“I didn’t want to wake you,” Iris said. “So I waited.”

“What’re you doing here?” Rosa said. “Did Nate send you?”

“No one sends me anywhere,” Iris said. “I’m here of my own volition.”

The surprise had worn off, and now Rosa was growing irritated. “I’m finished. If you want to use the bath, wait for me to get out.”

“Skyla’s amenable to my cause,” Iris said, ignoring her. “But she won’t commit until she feels that everyone is on the same page. I’ve agreed to assist your people against Neo Team Plasma insofar as they’re allied with Opelucid and pose a threat to my goal. Now I hear you’re having second thoughts.”

“Is that what this is about?” Rosa said. “Talk to Nate about this. My issues have nothing to do with you or Opelucid.”

“That’s exactly the problem,” Iris insisted. “We all heard about the Medium’s revelations and your poor reaction to them. Skyla’s being difficult, so now I’m going to be difficult unless you resolve this quickly. I need Mistralton on my side.”

Rosa gaped at Iris. “Wow, do you even hear yourself? How selfish can you be? This isn’t about you or some power struggle you have with Drayden.”
“Selfish?” Iris approached the tub and glared down at Rosa with pitiless dark eyes. “I’m not the one who ran away to the woods because I heard a story I didn’t like.”

“Fuck you,” Rosa spat, rising from the tub and not caring about modesty one bit. “You don’t know anything about it.”

“I know more than you think.”

Rosa snatched up a towel and wrapped it around herself. The stone floor was cold against her bare feet, and she shivered. “Right,” Rosa said, meeting Iris’s glare head on. “I guess a Titan would know something about lies and treachery. My bad.”

She tried to get past Iris to the door, but Iris grabbed her wrist in a scaly grip. Rosa whirled, but the look in Iris’s stormy eyes gave her pause. There was anger there, yes, but also something much darker, familiar somehow. Rosa thought of her own distorted reflection in the stream and how she’d dashed it, unable to look upon herself in that state any longer.

“I know what it’s like to find out someone you loved and revered turned out to be a monster,” Iris said. “I know it better than most.”

Rosa had gone silent, unable to rectify the raw emotion and pain Iris was so clearly projecting with the image of the Dragon Princess she had witnessed fearlessly standing up to Clay, commanding Dragonite in battle, and taking charge when everyone else, herself included, had been too disoriented or self-absorbed or shaken. From the moment Rosa had met Iris, she had seemed like a force of nature, a tempest that could equally fill the sails of her allies and obliterate anyone who stood in her path. She was strong, confident, unflappable, the kind of person who ought to be a princess. This Iris before her now was small and raw as a nerve ending, scarred and still standing, and it hurt to look upon her like this and see herself reflected back.

“My father,” Iris said by way of explanation. “I never knew about everything he did until I came here. He was always just my father to me. But to everyone else, he was the Dragonsbane.”

Rosa knew enough history to know about King Cadmus, the Dragonsbane and the Scourge of the West. He had earned his bloody reputation for his brutal killings in the civil wars. Nuvema Town was far removed from Opelucid or even the effects of the civil wars, but the upper West Tine had been the battleground in those days. Rosa could not imagine what it must be like for Iris to be back here carrying a legacy like her father’s, what it must have taken to stand up to Clay the way she had.

“He was the first to betray me,” Iris said, “but not the last. I’m sure Nate told you about Syr—about Belaron. So yes, I suppose I do know something about lies and treachery.”

Rosa had heard the story from Nate about Belaron’s betrayal, though Rosa had not witnessed it herself and hardly spoke two words to the man or even Iris herself back then. The man had nearly killed Benga in his sick bed in cold blood, a man Iris had trusted with her life and safety for years, Nate said.

“I’m not telling you this out of pity,” Iris said, collecting herself and standing up straighter. “It’s just the truth, and I’ve had to face it. I tried avoiding it for a long time, until Benga and Nuria convinced me that running would only make things worse. They were right. So, I’ll do for you what they did for me.”

Iris pressed N’s pendant into Rosa’s hand and released her grip on her. “No matter what you learn or what others tell you, none of it can erase what came before. It doesn’t invalidate your feelings or
your memories, or all the good and the comfort you find in them. No one can ever take that away from you.”

Rosa clutched N’s pendant, and she found that she had not quite shed the last of her tears. Iris’s words were like an enchantment, piercing the empty howling hole that had opened up inside her and releasing everything that was buried deep. Rosa felt her chest swell with emotion, and her throat clenched around a gasping sob. Iris waited patiently for Rosa to collect herself, and she rubbed her eyes.

“Damnit,” Rosa said, unsure what else she could say as she felt the force of her emotions flooding every vein in her body and slowly releasing like the air from a swollen balloon. “I’m a mess.”

“Messes can be cleaned up,” Iris said. “I know.”

“He’s still out there,” Rosa said, no longer concerned with hiding her thoughts at this point now that Iris had eviscerated her to the core. “God, he’s still out there after everything, and I can’t...”

“You can,” Iris said. “You’ll have to. We all have to. We’re on a collision course with monsters, myths, and the men who dare to control them. And we’re running out of time.”

Rosa nodded numbly. “I know. I know I have to prepare for the worst.”

“Yes,” Iris said. “We all do. I’ll let you get dressed. You won’t have any more uninvited visitors tonight.”

The unspoken promise lingered as Iris headed for the door to give Rosa her privacy, and Rosa found herself strangely humbled for the second time in as many days.

“Iris,” she called. “I’m... Thank you.”

Iris cast her a last glance and let herself out quietly.

The next morning, Rosa woke early, showered, and took some care with her appearance. She brushed out her long hair and pinned it in up in bun tails, donned jeans and a rich green woolen sweater she’d bought in Driftveil City, and even applied a bit of makeup. Growing up, Bianca was always the one who was wearing her emotions on her sleeve, quick to cry and quick to laugh. Rosa had been more subdued, even taciturn on her worst days to hear Juniper tell it. After the days of torment and the deluge of acute distress and despair, Rosa was determined to regain some semblance of her former iron clad control over her emotions, beginning with a careful perfection of her physical appearance and presentation. It was a kind of armor, Juniper liked to tell Bianca and her—a carefully tailored appearance could fortify the heart better than any sword or shield in a battle of words and wits. For the confrontation she was going to have today, Rosa could not afford any cracks in her armor, and every little bit helped.

Ferroseed was intensely interested in makeup and paint and all things colorful, Rosa had learned early on. Once, Bianca had painted him all over with lipsticks of various shades, hearts and stars and happy faces, and Ferroseed had been over the moon at the attention. He wasn’t getting made up today, but Rosa picked him up carefully and held him up in front of the mirror so he could see them both. Ferroseed whirred and made a clicking sound that she recognized as a sign of his pleasure. If he was so easy to win over, maybe she would have some luck with Skyla.

“I don’t need luck,” she said to her reflection. “I need confidence.”
Ferroseed seemed to agree as he squirmed in her hands, and Rosa set him back down on the floor to recall him to his Pokéball. She released Leafeon in his stead, who made considerably less noise as he padded over the stone floors and up the stairs next to Rosa on the way to Skyla’s study.

Skyla was waiting within and tinkering with some kind of circuit board. Her right hand, Chase, was also present and for once not clad in his glider suit, but in casual plain clothes as if to take a walk around town. Chase was a tall and lanky blond man with soft hazel eyes, a crooked nose that had been broken too many times, and a neatly trimmed beard. He had a boyish face even with the beard, but he was in fact in his early forties and one of Skyla’s most capable Caelifers.

Nate was also there, and he looked up when Rosa entered. She hesitated a second, his presence catching her off guard, but she swallowed the surprise and strode purposefully into the room with Leafeon at her side.

“Rosa,” Nate said, like he hadn’t seen her in ages. “Yancy told me you were back.” He went to her and looked her over. “You look good,” he said, surprised. “Are you... I mean, how are you doing?”

“Not good,” Rosa said, seeing no point in lying about what he already knew. “But I’m here.”

“Good morning!” Skyla said cheerfully. She was clad in a woolen blue and white dress over thick tights for warmth and her auburn hair loose and long. She got up when Rosa entered. “I was just thinking about you, Rosa. Hey, did you have breakfast yet? Chase was just about to grab us some doughnuts!”

Chase looked like this was as much news to him as it was to everyone else. “Ah, well, I suppose I could, if you like.”

“You’re a doll,” Skyla said, smiling brightly for him. “Ooh! See if they have the ones with the chocolate filling. I love those.”

“I’m not hungry,” Rosa said. “I wanted to talk to you about Neo Team Plasma.”

Skyla looked at her and smiled like she had a secret. “Oh, really? What did you want to talk about, exactly?”

“Rosa,” Nate said softly. She could feel his natural heat through her sweater, a small comfort that was difficult not to lean into. “Whatever it is, you don’t have to do this now. We can talk about it, just you and me, if you want.”

He was looking at her with that tranquil understanding he had, like nothing she could ever say or do would make him push her away, even if she deigned to push him away. She had pushed him away back in Driftveil when she learned the truth about Hugh, but it felt like ages ago. It was so hard not to fall back in with him when he made it so easy. Sometimes, Rosa thought she had the better deal in their friendship, but Nate had never felt that way. He was good like that, too good maybe. She wasn’t good like him, but she could be strong for him.

Rosa took his hand and squeezed gently. “No,” she said. “I’m ready.”

She let go of him and approached Skyla at her work table. Leafeon hopped up onto the table and sat down, his dark eyes unblinking as they watched Skyla. “I want to talk about you committing to the war against Neo Team Plasma.”

“You spoke with Shauntal,” Skyla said, more a statement than a question.

Rosa curled her fingers into fists, but she nodded. “I did. I know the whole truth now. It doesn’t
“Yes, it does,” Skyla said. “A week ago, you were clear about your allegiance to the old Team Plasma and N. Now, you’re saying none of that matters anymore? I don’t believe you.”

Rosa fished N’s pendant from under the collar of her sweater and set it on the table between Skyla and herself. “You don’t have to believe me. This,” she indicated the pendant, “is mine. It’s personal. It’s something I’ll have to sort out on my own, and no one can help me with it. No one can take it from me, either. But I’m not here to talk about me. Someone important to me told me once that this is so much bigger than me. He was right.”

Skyla gave very little away of her true thoughts as she looked at Rosa. “You must know where this road will lead you.” She reached out a hand and touched N’s pendant. “Surely, you must know.”

What would she do if she saw N again? What would happen if he turned on her like he’d turned on Hilda and Hilbert and all his followers? If she had to choose between N, the keeper of her faith that had kept her alive and fighting through her darkest hours, and the people she loved and was sworn to protect, what choice would she make? She didn’t know. None of us ever knows who we truly are until the moment we may no longer be. But she knew one thing.

“I know Neo Team Plasma has to be stopped,” Rosa said. “No matter the cost.”

N had paid the ultimate price for the sake of his ideals. To beat him, to face him and his monster, Rosa would have to be willing to do the same, even if it meant the risk of losing everything she had ever held dear.

“Thank you for your candor,” Skyla said gravely. “I have some work to do, but I’ll get everyone together tonight. You’ll have my final decision then.”

Rosa withdrew N’s pendant and tied it back around her neck again. Nate fell into step with Leafeon and her.

“I’ll walk you out,” he said.

They headed down the winding narrow stairs that connected to the landing area and the gondola that transported people into Mistralton. Rosa’s steps felt light on the stone, the low heels of her boots clicking dully over the stone and Leafeon purring as he trotted alongside her. The view of the valley was rainy and grey with fog setting in from the mountains beyond Route Seven. Some Gym trainers were about, but they were passing through on their way out. Rain or shine, the Valkyries took their duties seriously and kept a careful watch over the fertile valley floor.

They were coming up on the kitchen and dining room when Nate said, “Are you really sure about this?”

They paused, and Rosa hugged her arms around herself for warmth. “You heard Shauntal. There’s two sides to this. I picked one.”

Leafeon meowed and rubbed against Rosa’s leg.

“That’s not what I meant.” Nate searched her eyes.

“I know what you meant. Listen, Nate, I know you want to help. You’re always helping people and putting them first. I love that about you, I always have. And I know...even when you make a mistake, your heart’s in the right place.”
Nate’s expression fell. “If this is about Hugh...”

“It’s not,” Rosa interrupted. “It’s about you and me. You’re my best friend. I’m sorry I haven’t been treating you like it lately.”

He pulled her into a hug that melted whatever resistance remained between them since their fight in Drifveil, and Rosa hugged him back. She did not know how much she’d missed him, really having him here on her side come what may.

“It’s okay,” Nate said, holding her close. “Everything’s gonna be okay. We’ll get through this.”

Rosa smiled sadly. Maybe, if they stayed together through all this, it just might be. And if not, then she would be ready. Iris was right. Time was running out, and she would have to be ready for the worst.

“You think they’re still serving breakfast?” Rosa asked.

Nate grinned. “If not, I have it on good authority that there’ll be doughnuts coming.”

Rosa returned his smile and looped her arm through his. “Then what’re we standing here for?”

It was a good day, all things considered. The weather was for shit and inside, Rosa was still reeling from everything she’d learned about N and what that meant, but it was easier today than it had been yesterday and the day before that. Yancy met up with Nate and Rosa later in the morning, having just returned from a run in the rain and covered in mud.

“Why would you wanna work out in the rain?” Nate said, pale like the thought made him nauseous.

“What kind of Rain Warrior would I be if I was afraid of a little water?” Yancy teased.

“For the record, the last time I was caught in the rain, I was poisoned by wild Koffing,” Nate said.

“I mean, that’s terrible, but it has nothing to do with the rain,” Yancy said, poking him in the chest.

“Nate always hated water even when we were kids,” Rosa told Yancy. “We’d go to the beach in Nuvema in the summers, and this one time he was in a really sour mood and sat in the sand getting sunburned all day.”

“Ignifers don’t sunburn,” Nate said. “Yancy, don’t believe a word she says.”

“How sunburned are we talking?” Yancy asked, trying not to laugh and failing.

“Have you ever seen a Darmanitan’s asshole?” Rosa asked.

“Okay, that’s enough,” Nate said, flushed with embarrassment. “What kind of comparison even is that?”

Yancy was laughing and Rosa was finding it hard not to laugh with her. Nate let them have their fun, even if it was at his expense, and soon he was laughing with them.

Hugh had gone with Iris’s group into town, but when Iris and Benga returned by themselves, Nate asked if they forgot something.

“I doubt anyone could forget Hugh if they tried,” Iris said.
Benga snorted. “Qwilfish and Nuria stayed in town for the rain,” he said. “Syreni, man. You shoulda seen ‘em when it started pouring. It was like in those vampire movies where the master, like, psychically connects to all his minions and they trance out all, ‘Give me blood.’” Benga made a face like he had fangs and went after Iris. “Blood! Give me blood!”

Iris rolled her eyes and tried to shove him off, but he caught her from behind and spun her around. Soon she was trying not to laugh as he buried his face in her neck and blew raspberries to tickle her. “Hey, put me down!”

Iris’s Cottonee whistled and jumped from her head so as not to be Count Benga’s next victim, and Rosa caught him. He burrowed into her chest, soft as a cloud, and squirmed to get free again.

Benga had put Iris down, but he still held onto her and whispered something only she could hear.

“We’ll see you later tonight,” Iris said to Rosa and the others, the shadow of a smile on her lips at whatever Benga had said to her. He had her by the hand and was leading her away.

Cottonee whistled and zipped after them, leaving a trail of cotton in his wake that made Rosa sneeze and Leafeon glare condescendingly, because how dare he.

“Wow,” Yancy said. “I didn’t realize they were... I mean, it crossed my mind, but Iris is so, I don't know, serious?”

“I know,” Rosa said. “But you’d be surprised. There’s more to her than that.”

“Yeah,” Nate said, his gaze far away. “There is.”

By the time evening set in, Rosa was in her room and washing up for dinner. Skyla wanted to gather everyone together in the dining hall so she could address them all, along with her Valkyries and some representatives from the city council. Everyone had a stake in the future of the upper West Tine, and everyone would be affected by whatever she decided, perhaps irreparably.

When she was ready to go, Rosa caught her reflection in the mirror and took a steadying breath. Whatever Skyla decided, she would still have to deal with her personal stake in all this and figure out where to go from here. Fighting the Neos was one thing, but the truth about N had shattered her spirit in ways she had never imagined.

“Sometimes when people break, the only thing they can do is break something else.”

So be it. If there was one thing Rosa was good at, it was that. She had earned her stripes in Kanto and all over again here in Unova.

Her armor was back in place, made up nicely without a hint of her time alone in the wilderness lost and alone with her melancholy thoughts, and she was ready to face them all. They would not see her cracks.

She made her way to the dining hall, falling into step with some of Skyla’s Valkyries who were chattering away amongst themselves. Rosa tailed them quietly with Leafeon, her second shadow. The dining room was filled with people taking seats around the various long lacquered tables stacked side by side to maximize efficient use of the stone cavern. Hearths blazed along the long walls all the way to the dais at the back, where Skyla’s table was set for her and her closest advisers and honored guests. Chase was sitting with her, as well as a few other Valkyries Rosa recognized from her time spent here. There were civilians, too, probably the city councilmen here to receive Skyla’s decision for Mistralton. Rosa half expected to see Iris up there with Skyla, but the Dragon Princess was seated at one of the long communal tables between Benga and Soriel, the
latter of whom was telling some ribald story to the Gym trainers seated across from them.

Rosa looked around for an empty seat, but most were taken by now. Leafeon meowed up at her, and she picked him up so no one would accidentally kick him as they walked by in this narrow space. She found a seat at one of the tables across from Nuria, who smiled when she saw her.

“Rosa, welcome back,” Nuria said. “We were missing you these past few days.”

Rosa set Leafeon on her lap and smiled politely. “I needed some air.”

Nuria made a face. “I’ve had enough of air being so high up. Today’s rain was just what I needed.”

“I heard about that from Benga earlier.”

She grinned wickedly. “Benga likes to jest. Be careful you don’t believe everything he says, or soon he’ll have you believing you’re like a codfish. You know what they say.”

Rosa looked at her bemused. “Not about codfish, no.”

Nuria shrugged. “You know what I mean.” She caught a glimpse of someone over Rosa’s shoulder and waved excitedly. “Hey, over here, Qwilfish! We saved you a seat.”

“How many goddamned times do I have to tell you people to stop calling me that?” said Hugh, though he approached the empty seat next to Rosa all the same. When he saw her, he paused. “Oh.”

Rosa tensed as he loomed over her, and when she met his gaze, it was as though carved from stone.

“I was just telling Rosa about how the rain brought us closer together,” Nuria said.

Hugh frowned. “No, it didn’t. Just because we’re both Syreni doesn’t mean we’re besties or some shit.” He sat down next to Rosa and crossed his arms sourly, like no angle in his chair was comfortable.

“Oh, really? You seemed happy to ask me about how to reduce your dependency on drinking water,” Nuria countered.

“Whatever,” Hugh said, scowling and turning away to hide his flush. “So I asked you some questions. Doesn’t mean you get to spread rumors.”

“Passho berries,” Rosa said.

“Huh?” Hugh said.

Rosa studied her water glass. “A cup of their distilled juice will let you go without water safely for up to a week.”

He stared at her dumbly, and she frowned.

“You asked,” she said.

“Mm, yes, I’ve heard of this,” Nuria said. “They’re rare, right? I don’t think they grow in Adria anywhere.”

“They’re tropical. You’ll only find them in Alola and Hoenn in the wild,” Rosa said.
“Too bad. Sounds like it could be useful.”

Hugh said nothing, but Leafeon popped his head up from Rosa’s lap, stretched out, and jumped over to Hugh’s lap uninvited. He began to knead Hugh’s pants.

“Ow! Shit,” Hugh swore, but he didn’t try to push Leafeon away, instead carefully removing his claws from their grip on his pants. “Uh, okay...”

Nuria got distracted by one of the Adriati crewmembers who had accompanied Iris’s group, and she turned around to speak with him in Adriati, choppy and totally unintelligible to Rosa. Leafeon lightly smacked Hugh in the face with his tail, and then hopped down under the table to find somewhere more comfortable to sit. Rosa watched it all in silence.

“Damn cat,” Hugh said, shifting in his seat. He caught her looking at him, and an awkward silence ensued.

“Team Plasma murdered my little sister!”

Rosa looked away as the accusatory memory haunted her once more.

“Rosa,” Hugh said, lowering his voice so the people around them wouldn’t overhear. “Look, about what Shauntal said...”

“Don’t bother,” Rosa cut him off. “I don’t want to fight with you.”

“I’m not trying to pick a fight,” he said a little defensively.

She shot him a withering look. “Then there’s nothing to say.”

“Hey, I’m not the bad guy here.”

Some of Rosa’s subdued pain and anger showed briefly on her face. “No, N is. Is that what you want me to say? You were right. Are you happy now?”

“No,” he said, slamming his hand on the table and drawing a couple looks. “I’m not fucking happy about it. Is that really what you think about me?”

“What am I supposed to think?” Rosa said, already feeling exhausted and in no mood to hash it out with Hugh.

“I don’t know!” he said, as exasperated as she felt. “Maybe at least that seeing you so fucking torn apart would never make me happy? You were gone for days, and I was afraid you... I mean, I thought...”

Rosa looked at him with a mixture of shock and simmering anger.

“Everyone, hey! Hey out there, cut the noise a sec!” Skyla shouted to be heard from the front of the room on the dais.

After a few moments, all the talking ceased and Skyla rose to be seen and heard by all.

“Wow, it’s been a while since we had one of these social dinners. I forget how cozy this room can get!” she said with a smile. “Anyway, thanks everyone for being here. Councilmen, my Valkyries, and of course all my guests.

“I called you all here tonight, as you know, because I have a really big decision to make that’ll
affect all of you. So I guess I’ll cut right to the chase. Tonight, I’m officially joining the war against Neo Team Plasma.”

Voices erupted in the hall. The councilmen talked over each other, and a number of the Valkyries called for a victory toast. They had made no secret of their anger about the Neos’ attack on Driftveil, and they wanted blood and recompense.

“This means I’ll also be throwing my support behind the resistance in Nimbasa and Castelia against Neo Team Plasma’s allies in Opelucid City,” Skyla shouted to be heard over the din.

Someone huzzaed, of all the things, and Rosa saw Nate hug Yancy, both of them laughing as he spun her around. Beside her, Hugh stared at Skyla with quiet surprise, like he didn’t know how to feel about this. Rosa had thought he would be the most pleased out of everyone.

“Okay, settle down, people,” Skyla said soberly.

She clapped her hands for order, and Chase and some of the other Gym trainers got up and shouted for quiet.

“I know this news won’t be well-received by some of you,” Skyla continued when the room had quieted down again. She cast a glance at the councilman seated beside her. “Mistralton remains my number one priority, and the safety of her people are my first concern. But given recent events in Driftveil and Neo Team Plasma’s actions in Castelia and Nacrene, I’ve realized that I can’t keep my promise to the people of Mistralton unless I join the fight. The Neos invaded Driftveil. I won’t let them get this far.”

Shouts of agreement echoed, as well as a few obscenities for the absent Neo Team Plasma. The councilman to Skyla’s left was an old man, beetle-browed with a huge nose full of broken veins. He had a look about him like he’d eaten something rotten and never forgotten the taste. But he remained silent, his displeasure with Skyla’s decision clearly outweighed by the support from the rest of her guests tonight.

“As most of you know, I have the honor of hosting a number of guests here at Sky,” Skyla said, smiling softly. “You’re all welcome here. I’ve heard your causes, and after today, I see that you all have the unified perspective my fellow Triumvirs and I lack. This world is changing with or without us, so I choose to change with it. If that means war, then my Valkyries will stand with you.”

She smiled and waited for the next wave of cheers and shouts to pass. Rosa found herself served with a mug of ale and an entire flagon of wine so dark it was nearly purple, which the Valkyrie next to her gladly took upon himself to pour for everyone around him.

“I know you’re all super excited for the feast, so I won’t talk at you for much longer. There’s just one last thing,” Skyla said, her blue eyes sweeping the gathered crowd of diners. “My guests, you bravely took up arms to defend Driftveil’s citizens and made the journey here. Listen to me.”

Rosa bit her tongue as she leaned forward in her chair. She felt as though Skyla were speaking directly to her. Next to her, Hugh was also listening attentively, and Nuria across from them.

“We’re young and green, and war is a word we throw around without really understanding what it means. My colleague, Gym Leader Clay, remembers the civil wars. He fought in them as a young man, younger than any of us. You’ve all seen a little of war in Castelia, but you haven’t seen its consequences the way he has. So please don’t think too harshly of him; he’s only ever wanted to spare us all as long as possible. I think the only time we can ever really appreciate that is when it’s
already too late. Some of you might already know what I mean.”

Hugh grabbed his ale mug and drained it in a few gulps. Rosa looked at him in concern despite their earlier tiff.

“My father wanted me to create, because he thought all he’d ever done was destroy,” Skyla said, raising her glass. “It won’t be easy, and I’m afraid the hardest part is still to come. But let’s create a better world together. I think it’ll be worth it in the end. Who’s with me?”

The room erupted in hoots and hollers as everyone smashed their mugs and glasses together and drank. To the good fight, to the downfall of the enemy, to a better world. Nuria raised her glass with the rest, and Rosa had her glass in hand, too.

To war, she thought, her other hand resting over N’s pendant hidden beneath her sweater.

She toasted Nuria and did her best to participate in the merriment as food was brought out from the kitchen. Hugh got up and launched into some conversation with the man next to him, whom Rosa recognized as another of the Adriati crew members. Hugh’s mug had been refilled, and he was on his way to emptying it all over again.

“Here’s to doing and drinking, not sitting on your fat asses and thinking!” Soriel toasted loudly to a round of raucous laughter.

“Salud!” Nuria toasted everyone around her in her native Adriati. “What do you say in the common tongue? Cheers? It’s most definitely a time for cheering!”

Rosa’s glass found Hugh’s next to her. “Cheers,” she said, downing her wine.

“Yeah,” Hugh said, his mind elsewhere. “Cheers.”

War, Rosa thought as the wine soaked her tongue and made it heavy. War against N.

She had chosen her side.
Minccino wrinkled his little pink nose at the mess his mistress found intensely more interesting than him, from the way she’d been holed up down in the lab for days on end. Currently, Professor Aurea Juniper was busy examining the fruits of a dissection she had conducted on a Lopunny brain that had been in cold storage, one of the many specimens she kept in the freezer for her studies. It was fuller now than it had ever been, but her day job reviving ancient Pokémon from fossilized remains did not require intact, whole-body specimens the way this experiment did.

Aurea wrinkled her nose much in the way her pet chinchilla did at the thought. An experiment, yes, that was what this was. This anomaly, the taint she had discovered but could not quite explain, much less reverse-engineer—it was some kind of experiment, like all evolutionary changes in nature. But there was nothing natural about the state of this poor Lopunny’s brain, black with rot in the interior and swollen to bursting, cancerous.

“What happened to you?” Aurea muttered to herself as she zoomed in on the sample she was examining through a microscope.

But she had made little progress in answering that elusive question conclusively. She had her theories, oh yes, but theories were only as good as the science that could prove them. And even then, no amount of scientific inquiry could explain the methods of men who took nature into their own hands and ripped it to shreds.

Her back ached from hours hunched over her work, so she stretched out and yawned. Her honey-brown hair was tied back in a messy bun and needed washing. She’d lost track of the time down here, a regular occurrence ever since she’d returned from the harrowing journey to Striaton City with Rosa all those weeks ago. After every terrible thing she had seen with her own eyes, Aurea was convinced more than ever that whatever this was, this so-called Chimera virus, it was Team Plasma’s doing. Her self-appointed task since she returned to Nuvema Town had been to find out how, and possibly why. Seventeen defrosted specimens later, and she was little closer to the answers than she’d been weeks ago. One thing, however, was clear: the virus was getting stronger. Mutating, evolving, like all pathogens were wont to do.

Aurea caught a glimpse of herself in the glass cold storage window. At forty-one, she was normally vibrant and full of energy and passion for her life and her work, but she saw none of that looking back at her now. She was haggard, with bags under her eyes and pale from all the time spent under artificial lighting without enough sleep. Her jeans were feeling tight and itchy, and there were growing sweat stains under the pits of her green blouse. She hadn’t eaten anything that didn’t come in a foil wrapper in twenty-four hours. As though sensing her thoughts, Minccino squeaked from his perch on the back of a chair and twitched his large ears.

Aurea checked her watch and frowned at the time, already four in the afternoon. She’d been at it all last night and half the day without so much as taking a break to sit down. Minccino squeaked at her again, fed up with being ignored all this time. Without Bianca and Rosa around to remind her to come up for meals and spend at least a couple hours outside every day, it was easy to sink into the monotony of work that never seemed to get done. The thought of Rosa gave Aurea a chill, and she reached for Minccino to let him perch on her shoulder.

“Let’s get cleaned up, hm?” she fawned at the little Pokémon. “I bet you’re hungry, too.”
Minccino, not one to be cajoled so easily when his mistress had left him to fend for himself all night and day, pawed at her hair and chittered. Aurea gave him a little scratch, cleaned up her workstation, and headed upstairs to the main floor of the house. Her steps made the old wooden stairs creak loudly, a sound that she knew could be heard easily even up on the second floor. It was the same sound that would alert Bianca that she was emerging from her lab and hopefully give the girl enough time to warn Rosa to get out of the tree she was undoubtedly climbing and sneak back into her room before either of them were caught awake past their bedtime. The thought made Aurea smile. She could still remember how Bianca would look up at her, teary-eyed and ever so guilty, while Rosa merely awaited her scolding in cold silence, steady and ready to weather any storm. They had been so different as children, and they had grown into such different women, too. But they were both away now, doing their parts to deal with the crisis Team Plasma had created. Bianca was due back from Aspertia any day now, having sent a bird ahead. And Rosa was who knew where. Aurea had not heard from her since they parted ways in Striaton City.

"You better be okay, Rosa," Aurea thought. She would never forgive herself if anything had happened to Rosa, Sylvan or no. No news was good news, was that what they said? No news could also mean the worst news, though. Aurea tried not to think about it, and so she’d sequestered herself in her lab to help in the best way she knew how. If she could solve the mysteries surrounding Chimera, perhaps she could figure out a way to beat it and whoever created it.

She made it upstairs to the kitchen and yawned, disturbing Minccino on her shoulder, and rubbed her tired eyes. First, she’d feed Minccino, and then she could jump in the shower. One thing at a time. She moved like a somnambulist to the refrigerator, where she kept the brand of Pokébeans Minccino liked. She got the lid off the Tupperware when all of a sudden, Minccino shrieked in alarm, clawed his way up her hair to burrow, and she yelped and sent the tub flying. Multicolored Pokébeans scattered all over the kitchen floor and countertops and rolled under the couch in the living room, and Minccino snapped the band keeping Aurea’s hair back and sent it falling in total disarray.

In her shock, Aurea caught a glimpse of what had spooked the little chinchilla in the form of a rather blasé Croagunk staring up at her next to the refrigerator door, his wide mouth like a dopey smile that opened to reveal a long tongue. Croagunk snatched up a couple Pokébeans with his sticky pink tongue. Aurea had a hand on her chest and her heart was pounding.

"Sweet Swadloon," she gasped. How on earth had a Croagunk gotten in the house? They weren’t even native to these parts.

"Nothing sweet about it, Ma’am," said a man, emerging from around the corner in the living room. He had another Croagunk at his side, this one moving fluidly with all the grace of a trained Fighter and oblivious to the food scattered on the floor as she stayed close to her master. "We didn’t mean to startle you, though."

Aurea gaped at the stranger in her living room, a man she had never seen before. He looked to be some years her senior; there were lines in his face that suggested a life of hardship, or perhaps some trauma that had haunted him. His hair was black as pitch and matched his somber eyes. He had a long face, stern but not hard, like he was not easily rattled. It was a handsome face, but a jaded one. He wore a long beige trench coat over slacks and a shirt with a tie, like some private eye straight out of a fifties black and white murder mystery. He had a bolero in his hands. Maybe he thought it would be rude to wear a hat indoors, though he seemed to have no qualms about breaking and entering. Aurea reached for Vanilluxe’s Pokéball at her hip and took a few steps back, eyes wide.

"Who are you?" she demanded, her voice shaky from the lingering shock of their encounter. "What
the hell are you doing in my house?”

He blinked at her and put his hands up in a placating gesture, also taking a few steps back, as though just now realizing that he had, in fact, entered uninvited. “Hold on, it’s not what it looks like.”

Aurea was pretty sure it was exactly what it looked like, and either way, she wasn’t about to take any chances. She released Vanilluxe, and the temperature in the kitchen dropped noticeably. The floating Triton shells that hid Vanilluxe’s true body were covered in flaky hoarfrost, and as Vanilluxe hovered just inches away, Aurea saw her breath mist. Minccino dared to poke his head out from the rat’s nest he’d made of Aurea’s poor hair.

The stranger’s second Croagunk immediately positioned herself in front of him, three-toed fists clenched and ready to spring at any moment. The other one who had been stuffing his face with Pokébeans, however, was paralyzed with fear as he stared up at Vanilluxe. Silent as the grave, Vanilluxe began to leak sub-zero mist as she floated closer to the frightened Croagunk, smelling his fear.

“I’m warning you,” Aurea said, some of her confidence regained. “I train powerful Pokémon. Get out, and I’ll call her off.”

“Wait a minute,” the stranger said, his breath misting as the cold permeated the kitchen and adjoining living room. “If you’d just let me explain—”

Minccino sneezed from the cold, and that was enough to send the scared Croagunk over the edge. He jumped, and Vanilluxe blasted him with a frigid puff of Powder Snow. Aurea shielded Minccino and herself from the burst of cold, and she heard a thud as the stranger stumbled back out of the line of fire. And then, the strangest thing happened. The frightened Croagunk melted under the Powder Snow’s freezing caress and fell to the floor with a plop, reduced to a sad puddle of lavender goo. The other Croagunk, braver than her companion, confronted Vanilluxe and croaked, her vibrant red throat puffing out in warning that her touch was poisonous as well as bone-shattering. Vanilluxe stopped her advance, but she did not back down even in the face of a type disadvantage.

“Damn it, call off your Pokémon!” the stranger said, fishing something out of his pocket and waving it around for Aurea to see. It was an identification badge stamped with a blue shield that she recognized instantly.

“The International Police?” she said, aghast. “You’re...”

“Yes! Now call off your Vanilluxe before she turns Ditto into slush!”

The blob on the ground twitched, covered in frost. Aurea didn’t quite understand, but she recalled Vanilluxe all the same. As soon she did so, the officer kneeled down and scooped up Ditto’s gooey body in his two hands. A pair of beady black eyes blinked up at him, and he began to knead Ditto like silly putty to warm him back up.

“Pull yourself together, Ditto,” the officer said. “It’s just gas.”

Ditto made a little cooing sound, bubbly but weak from the cold. It took Aurea a moment to realize he had burped, having consumed about half the spilled Pokébeans while he wore Croagunk’s shape. The real Croagunk was still wary, but she stayed close to her master. She had been well-trained.
“International Police or no, you broke into my home. You owe me an explanation right now,” Aurea demanded. “Who are you?”

The officer got back to his feet and set Ditto on the counter to regain his composure. The sentient blob rippled, a little damp as he shed his frosty layer and warmed back up. He stretched out, like little hands reaching up under a purple sheet.

The officer handed Aurea his badge for her to inspect. It contained all his information, including a date of birth that put him at an age with her despite her earlier assessment. “Detective Lou Karr of the International Police. Most people just call me Looker for short. As for why I broke in, I already apologized for that. Since you reached out to us, I suspected foul play when there was no answer at your door.”

Aurea stared at Looker, shocked for the second time in the span of about five minutes. “I’m sorry, what? I never contacted you.”

He reached into one of the pockets of his trench coat and pulled out X-Transceiver, which he began to scroll through on the touch screen. “...Dispatch received a non-emergency request for assistance from an ‘Aurea Juniper’ of Nuvema Town at approximately oh-seven-hundred on the seventeenth of July—”

“That was last year!” Aurea interrupted. “After all this time, I figured... Wait, are you saying you people just now decided to follow up? All this time, I thought my message was ignored.”

“No ignored, Ma’am,” Looker said, scratching the five o’clock shadow on his chin. “Other agents of ours followed up in kind, but they never reported back in. We’re spread thin, so when I learned that no one had checked in on the status of the mission after months of radio silence, I volunteered.”

“How charitable of you,” Aurea said.

Looker’s expression darkened. Good, Aurea thought. He’d broken into her home, so he could stand to swallow a little indignation. Minccino was less upset by the whole situation, however, and had jumped down onto the counter to inspect Ditto. He sniffed at the odd creature, and Ditto stretched out and changed his shape to match Minccino’s perfectly. Minccino was so startled by the sudden transformation that he squeaked and jumped half a foot in the air, his fur standing on end.

“Listen, Miss Juniper—”

“It’s Professor,” Aurea interrupted. “Professor Aurea Juniper. And I still don’t understand what exactly you’re doing here.”

Looker took her irritation in stride as best he could and nodded. “Right, Professor. I was actually hoping you could help me with that. The agents we had investigating the so-called Team Plasma haven’t been heard from in nearly a year, and the local consultants who were supposed to be providing tactical support have vanished without a trace. My superiors suspect the worst.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, but how am I supposed to help?”

Looker punched in a code on his X-Transceiver and offered it to Aurea. The picture was of a crowd of people gathered in a town square, and they were frozen mid-applause for the young man in the center of the stage with his arms raised in adulation.

“You reached out for help with Team Plasma,” Looker said. “Now I’m here to request your help tracking down its leader, this man: N.” He indicated the man in the center of the stage. “My
Aurea examined the photo, recalling the last time she’d seen a crowd gathered for Team Plasma in Striaton City. But it wasn’t N who had been leading them then. She handed the device back to Looker. “You won’t find N here. He died in Vertress City last year. I’m guessing your colleagues shared his fate if they were investigating him, as you say.”

Looker blinked at her, but his lack of reaction suggested he’d already known that. To hear it confirmed aloud changed nothing. “I see,” he said. “I had expected as much given the lack of communication.” He rubbed his chin like he did not know what to do with his hands. “I see,” he said again.

Despite herself, Aurea felt a pang of sympathy for this man who had traveled a long way get here. The International Police were based out of Sinnoh, as long a journey as any to arrive in Unova on the other side of the world. To have come all this way only to find that his mission was over before it had even begun had to be a difficult blow. But she suspected it was more than that.

_He knew them, those agents_, she realized, watching his gaze drift out of focus as he could no longer plausibly deny what he’d likely known all along. _You were more than mere colleagues._

“This is the man you’re looking for.” Aurea tapped her finger on the grainy image of a man in black robes off to the side of the stage, standing alone in the shadows. “Ghetsis is the real leader of Team Plasma.”

Looker stared down at the photo and swallowed whatever pain or remorse he was deftly keeping inside. The man was a professional, she could not begrudge him that. “Ghetsis?” he said. “I know that name. He’s been on our most wanted list for centuries. My father hunted him before I was born. That was in Johto, many years ago…”

Aurea paled. A man who had lived for centuries could mean only one thing. “He’s a Reaper,” she said, shuddering at the word. _Of course_, she thought. She should have known, back then in Striaton, how he’d always been in the shadows...

“Yes, a cannibal among his kind. We’ve been hunting him for a long time,” Looker said, the gears in his head turning. “…I see, so that was their true mission here. Ghetsis must have been their ultimate goal.” He grimaced. “Damnit. My superiors knew all along…”

“Wait a minute,” Aurea said. “Are you saying your own bosses sent you here without telling you what was going on?”

Looker shook his head and clenched his fists. “We’re supposed to work assignments in teams, Tamers and plebs working hand in hand. And yet, they kept this mission a secret from us.”

His anger, while subdued, was palpable. Aurea understood it well enough, the divide between Tamers and plebs and the enmity it sewed. People could not change their natures, but they would have been wise to compensate for them. Perhaps then, Looker’s colleagues would not have met their untimely end.

“Well, you’re here now,” Aurea said. “So you might as well make yourself useful. I contacted your organization last year for help with Chimera.”

Looker gave little away of his thoughts. “Chimera?”

Minccino and Ditto, still disguised as Minccino, had taken to squabbling over the remaining Pokébeans on the floor and were making quick work of clearing them all out. Croagunk watched
them silently, too good to eat anything off the floor.

*Better late than never, I guess,* Aurea thought. Maybe a fresh pair of eyes was what she needed to achieve the breakthrough she was looking for.

“Have a seat, Looker. I’m going to clean up, and when I get back, I’ll explain everything.”

By the time Aurea was refreshed, Looker had done little to make himself comfortable in her living room. He got to his feet like he couldn’t wait to stand up when she returned downstairs, showered and changed, and looked uncomfortable simply being in her home.

“This Chimera,” Looker said. “I did some research in the InterPol while you were upstairs. It’s a defunct technology that popped up in Kanto last year, some wayward experiment by Team Rocket, also now defunct, from what I gathered.”

*Right down to business,* she thought to herself. Either he loved his job, or he had nothing else in his life to love. She decided not to ask.

“You’ve got half your story right,” Aurea allowed.

She explained what she’d discovered in the many months since Chimera had first reared its ugly head in the form of mutated Skorupi hordes pouring out of Pinwheel Forest into Nacrene City proper. She shared her theories, now proven fact, that Chimera had originated with Team Plasma and was likely sold to or stolen by Team Rocket in its early stages.

“This one was pulled out of a rampaging Snorlax that razed half of Pallet Town,” she said, showing him a glass canister holding an old hardware model of the earliest Chimera technology, little more than a few tentacles tipped with fine knives that burrowed into the skull of a host. It had come to her by way of her old mentor, Professor Samuel Oak, and the Devon Corporation in Hoenn. “Now, the pathogen is far more advanced.”

“Pathogen?” Looker said. “This is hardware. Are you saying it causes disease?”

“That’s what I’ve discovered in the last several weeks here. The electromagnetic radiation is somehow working like a virus that rots the nervous system.” He was looking at her a little blankly. “Think of it this way. This tech zaps the brain’s control center, basically taking over it.”

“...Like mind-control?”

She could taste his skepticism. “I know how it sounds. But I’ve seen the hordes myself, and the results don’t lie. If you’d like to see for yourself, I have a thawed Lopunny brain downstairs that I’ve been examining. The pathogen’s progression is what killed it.”

“Thanks, but I’ll take your word for it,” he said a little too quickly. “I still don’t understand. How can technology create a virus? Is it... Is it contagious?”

“Not that I can tell,” Aurea said. “But whatever is being used to infect these Pokémon is aggressive in large and continuous doses. It’s ultimately fatal.”

“So we’re dealing with zombified Pokémon,” Looker said grimly.

“That, and the genetic mutations.”
He pressed his lips into a hard thin line. “...On second thought, perhaps I will have a look at your lab.”

Aurea showed him all of it, the mutated Pokémon parts she had collected for dissection and study, the results of her many autopsies, all of it. Looker absorbed it all in morbid silence and kept his distance from it all, letting Aurea handle everything herself as she explained her research to him.

“I don’t understand,” Looker said more to himself than to her. “How did this escape the reports on Team Plasma? If what you’re saying is all true, and it’s spreading all over Unova, then this is a threat far worse than Ghetsis himself. I have to inform my superiors immediately.”

“Those were my thoughts last year when I requested assistance,” Aurea said, unable to help the bitterness at the thought that her request had been totally ignored.

Looker had the decency to look abashed. “There’s no doubt that the InterPol are stretched far too thinly to respond to proven crises. If I could make it up to you, I would.”

“You can, by helping me get to the bottom of whoever’s behind this,” Aurea said.

“It’s Ghetsis, surely.”

“No, this kind of science, if I can even call it that, is something extremely advanced. It’s vicious, angry, like a kid with a magnifying glass. Whoever did this didn’t just want to control Pokémon, they wanted to make them suffer. There’s a selfish cruelty to this that’s as infantile as it is insidious. The Ghetsis I know is a patient manipulator; this is chaos. Control through the loss of control. It’s almost poetic.”

“It’s psychotic,” Looker deadpanned.

“Yes, it is.”

“And you’re working on a cure?”

“I don’t know if there is a cure. It doesn’t quite work like that.”

“Then what are you doing? What’s the point of all those bodies?”

“If I can figure out exactly how it works and why, I can take the information to a Gym Leader I trust. Cheren of Aspertia City. He went north when Team Plasma launched a siege against Castelia City. By now, I would imagine he’s back in Aspertia or on his way. I should know more when my assistant, Bianca, returns from there tomorrow morning.”

Looker thought about this a moment. “Right. I’ll need to send word to my superiors, anyway. We’ll reconvene in the morning. Where is the local inn from here? I didn’t pass it on my way from the harbor.”

Minccino had exhausted himself playing with Ditto, who had resumed his lavender putty form while he slept on the couch curled up with Minccino like a living blanket. Croagunk had taken her perch by the window facing the woods in the back of the house, vigilant for movement of any kind. It was well past dark by now.

“You can stay here,” Aurea said. “There’s plenty of room.” Rosa won’t be needing her room anytime soon. The thought made her sad to think about, but she had to believe Rosa was out there somewhere fighting. Perhaps she’d met up with Cheren by now. It was a nice sentiment.
“Oh,” Looker said, visibly uncomfortable again. “Well, that’s...”

“It’s fine,” Aurea said. “These days, I’d be happier keeping allies close by. We’ll need all the help we can get in this fight against Team Plasma.”

Looker nodded stiffly. “Then I’m much obliged. Thank you.”

She showed him upstairs to Rosa’s room, which she kept made up and clean in her absence, ready the moment Rosa deigned to walk through the door in one piece with news of victory. Aurea could only hope it was more than just a dream.

She slept soundly that night, all things considered. Looker was only one person, but he was one more than there was before. The next morning when Bianca arrived on the ferry from Aspertia, she brought tidings that were less than glad.

“Cheren is...” Juniper said, unable to say it aloud.

Dead.

Cheren was dead. It was as though she’d been punched in the gut. First Lenora, and now Cheren. The world was not right, and she hardly recognized it amidst the madness anymore. Bianca reported everything she’d learned when the acting Aspertia City Gym Leader, Moira, had received that portentous letter from Nate in Driftveil City. Castelia was sacked and burning, Driftveil itself had suffered an unprovoked attack from Neo Team Plasma, Gym Leader Burgh’s whereabouts were currently unknown, if he was even still alive, and Gym Leader Harrison was killed in the fighting. And Cheren, the best of them, had fallen. The lower West Tine was without either of its Gym Leaders, and it was now as vulnerable to invasion as the lower East Tine had been when all this began. It was madness. Bianca was a shell of her normally ebullient self, having shouldered all this alone without Rosa or Aurea or anyone she loved near to share her grief. She was weeping now as she recounted it all.

“I-I swore I wouldn’t cry this time,” Bianca sobbed, her oversized glasses moist with her tears, and she had to remove them. “I just c-can’t believe it. Oh god, Cheren...”

Aurea took her in her arms and hugged her close, curiously dry-eyed as the shock alleviated even the burden of breathing momentarily. Bianca trembled in her arms, a wreck barely standing on her own two feet with Musharna hovering close by and pulsating, as though he sensed his mistress’s crestfallen defeat and knew he could do nothing to assuage her. Looker went to the kitchen to offer them a private moment, uncomfortable in the face of such raw emotion and unable to contribute anything to help.

“I know,” Aurea whispered, rubbing a hand on Bianca’s back soothingly. Her hand shook, but she had no idea what else to say. She could not believe it, either.

“Oh god,” Bianca whimpered through her sniffles and sobs. “Th-The last time I s-saw Cheren, I was s-s-so awful!”

“No, Bianca,” Aurea soothed her. “No, you couldn’t be.”

Bianca pulled away. Her cute round face was puffy and tear-strewn, and she looked completely beaten. “No, I...” She sniffled. “H-He loved me, Aurea. He loved me and I cou—I couldn’t love him b-back! And now he’s...he’s!”

Aurea took her face in her hands and wiped her tears. “Listen to me, Bianca,” she said in as steady a voice as she could muster. “You listen to me, all right? Cheren was your best friend. He knew you
“cared for him.”

“B-B-But I didn’t, I mean, not like—”

“He knew,” Aurea insisted. “Believe me, he adored you, and he knew you adored him. That’s all that matters, not the what-ifs or could-have-beens. He knew that, too. He was that kind of man. You can’t blame yourself, all right? He wouldn’t want you to. Tell me all right.”

Bianca nodded miserably. “A-All right.”

But all was not right. Holed up in her lab working tirelessly on solving the Chimera conundrum, Aurea had not realized how far she had drifted from the rest of the world, and how much things had deteriorated in such a short time. The only good news to be had was of Rosa’s safety—Nate wrote that he was with her and Hugh, and he spoke of alliances and new friends banding together against Neo Team Plasma.

“What’ll we do?” Bianca asked. “What can we do? Oh god, Cheren...”

“It sounds to me like your contacts have the right of it,” said Looker, approaching cautiously. “Forging new alliances with Gym Leaders could be the key to defeating Ghetsis and Neo Team Plasma.”

Bianca sniffled. “Who’re you?”

“Looker’s with the InterPol,” Aurea explained. “I’ll tell you all about it later.”

“I think I should continue my investigation in Driftveil City,” Looker went on. “I’m not much use here.”

“No,” Aurea said.

“Excuse me?”

She shook her head as her thoughts raced. “Gym Leader Harrison is dead, but if I recall, he had a daughter: Roxie. She was being groomed for succession, but she’s young.”

“Huh? Aurea, I don’t understand,” Bianca said, wiping a few errant tears from her reddened cheeks.

“She’s Veleno, and she’s in a unique position to be taken seriously.”

Looker stiffened. “More Tamers. Trouble’s never far behind them here, I’m starting to see.”

“You were right,” Aurea said to Looker. “There’s nothing more we can do here. I’ve done all I can. Even if I can figure out how to beat Chimera, it won’t mean anything against Neo Team Plasma’s numbers.”

Looker watched her grimly. “I don’t like where this is going. My position doesn’t grant me authorization to get involved in a national uprising.”

“You’re already involved,” Aurea challenged.

“Wait, what’s going on?” Bianca asked.

“We’re going to help Rosa and the others,” Aurea said with quiet resolve. “By taking everything I’ve discovered about Chimera to people who can actually do something about it.”
“But Roxie’s just a girl,” Bianca said, her green eyes two wide watery pools. “I’m not sure...”

“Roxie’s not the only person in the lower West Tine with some influence,” Aurea said. “Bianca, I know this is asking a lot, but can you head back to the harbor and arrange our passage to Virbank City? Any boat will do so long as it has room enough for the three of us.”

Bianca was off to the harbor later that day, and Aurea and Looker were left at the house to compile Aurea’s research notes, including several specimens she insisted on transporting. When Looker questioned her reasoning, she explained that the Champion of Unova lived in Floccesy town, a suburb of Virbank City, and that if anyone could rally the shaken lower East Tine cities in the wake of losing their beloved Gym Leaders, it had to be him.

“Champion,” Looker said, looking as skeptical as his Croagunk with her eternal frown. “If he’s so respected, why hasn’t he made a move yet?”

“I don’t know, why didn’t your bosses make their move a year ago when I first contacted them?” Aurea shot back as she had Vanilluxe freeze the left hemisphere of a Palpitoad’s brain she had been examining for storage and transport.

“It’s hardly the same thing,” Looker said, unfazed. “My superiors answer directly to the Imperatrix back in Sinnoh. They can’t act on unsubstantiated theories without something more.”

“Well, your divine empress is welcome to examine my wares. Catch.”

She tossed the bottled brain matter to Looker, who caught it with a curse and nearly dropped it on the floor. “Yes, nothing says S.O.S. like a mutant autopsy.”

Aurea ignored his sarcasm and glared. “Send her the whole specimen if it’ll get her to send us some backup. The way things are going, we could use the InterPol at its full power.”

Looker examined the grey brain matter with thinly veiled distaste. “Well, you don’t need to convince me any further...”

They worked quickly, and by the time Bianca had returned with word of her success, it was well past dark. Now that Aurea knew what had befallen Cheren and the others in Castelia City, she could not shake the feeling that nowhere was safe from Neo Team Plasma, not even the sleepy seaside hamlet she’d called home for so long. They had to get to Virbank City. She only hoped it would not be too late, and that fear would not have won the city over yet.

Bianca was upstairs preparing some food for them all to take with them. Aurea did not want to waste another minute more than necessary now that she knew the drastic state of affairs Nate had reported. She wanted to grieve for Cheren. She wanted to think of Rosa and of Nate, the childhood friend who had brought so much joy and light to Rosa’s life growing up. She wanted to comfort Bianca properly. But all she could do was move as quickly as possible, no time to think or ponder. She’d done quite enough of that these last weeks.

As she was stuffing whatever clothing was in reach into a knapsack in her bedroom, Aurea thought of her former mentor turned dear friend, Professor Samuel Oak. He would have known what to do, how best to proceed. In a moment of weakness, she dropped the shirt she’d been holding, her fingers trembling.

I’m afraid. Her traitorous thoughts struck a hollow chord in the pit of her belly.

Oak had always had faith in her even when she was just starting out, an enthusiastic twenty-something with big dreams and a bigger head. Whenever she came upon a problem she could not
solve, he always seemed to know how to guide her to the answers she was looking for without spelling things out for her. He knew when to push and when to stand back. He had been the father she’d always wanted but never had in her real father, who had taken a one-way trip out of Aurea’s life when she got the scholarship to study in Kanto, never to be heard from again.

But Oak was gone now, too. Killed by the same evil that now plagued Unova. There was no one left to play the wizened guardian but her. Aurea had never much thought of having children of her own, having never felt the urge or desire like so many others did at her age. But Rosa and Bianca were counting on her, as she had once counted on Oak.

Aurea stuffed the shirt into her pack, but before she zipped it up, she grabbed a small frame on the dresser with a picture of her and her girls posing for the camera at a festival in Accumula Town when they were teenagers. They were laughing at the camera, even Rosa, a perfect moment captured and preserved.

There was a sound like breaking glass downstairs suddenly, followed by muffled voices.

**What was that?**

Aurea stuffed the picture frame in her pack among the hastily proffered clothing, zipped it up, and headed downstairs as quickly as her feet would carry her. Minccino rode on her shoulder, tail erect and alert. She made it a few steps up from the living room when she saw what had caused the commotion. Bianca had dropped a casserole dish half-filled with leftovers, and it lay oozing sauce all over the kitchen floor. She was frozen in place and surrounded by four uniformed men and women. Musharna was equally still, his sleepy red eyes wide as he nervously leaked Dream Mist. The source of Musharna’s distress was another Psychic, a Beheeyem, hovering silently as he stared Musharna down in a silent battle of mind power. Though neither Psychic moved, the air grew thick and muggy as their telepathic powers entwined and threatened to consume the other. There was no sign of Looker. He was probably still in the lab downstairs.

“Aurea,” said a voice that sent a spike of cold anger down her spine.

Aurea stared in shock at a man she had once called a colleague, a friend. Colress’s smile was thin and cruel. She had once thought it handsome in its arrogance. The brilliant have a right to their arrogance, and once upon a time, few had been more brilliant than Colress. Few had been more relentless in their pursuit of progress, either, no matter the cost. The cost, judging from the blue heraldry embroidered upon the black uniforms of Colress’s four associates, was Neo Team Plasma.

In that split second’s recognition, she knew why he was here, what she’d been missing all this time. It was right in front of her, and she’d never thought to consider it. The ethically dubious experimentation on Pokémon, the artificial nature of the Chimera pathogen, the admittedly genius creativity that had contemplated a level of suffering inaccessible even in nature—it all pointed to him.

*EM wave radiation...*

She’d never thought to consider him, even knowing how the discovery of his unauthorized vivisections using EM wave radiation had cost him a prestigious grant award to work with Devon Corporation’s top scientists and engineers. Surely, it couldn’t be him. Surely, she had not once cared for a monster. Surely, she would have seen him for what he was.

“You’ve aged,” Colress said, his cruel smile stretching his pale cheeks taught over his cheekbones like cellophane.
Like some blood-sucking demon, he had not aged or changed at all in all these years.

“Colress,” Aurea said, shocked at the poisonous anger she heard in her own voice. It gave her strength, and she clung to it. “It was you.”

“It’s always been me,” he said. “No one else could have ever accomplished what I have.”

He was proud of himself, and it ignited an old but familiar fire. “No, no one else would’ve had to resort to primeval trial-and-error cruelty to achieve results. You’re right about that.”

His yellow eyes seethed at her dismissal, and he adjusted his rimless glasses, a nervous tell to hide his unease. He really had not changed at all. “Primeval,” he spat the word. “Chimera is a global phenomenon. I’ve achieved more than you ever will holed up in your homemade laboratory. Such a waste.” He shook his head and looked sympathetic. “You always were brilliant, Aurea. It wounds me to see you squander your gifts in this backwater place, truly. But I’m not here for you.”

“Musha!” Bianca said.

Musharna was leaking Dream Mist and shaking, agitated. The mental battle with Beheeyem was escalating, but neither Psychic was willing to risk direct engagement until the other was safely neutralized. Bianca’s distress drew the room’s attention, and Aurea took the opportunity to reach into her pocket for the two Pokéballs there were tucked away there. Where the hell was Looker?

“Hey, hands where we can see them, Doc!” ordered one of the Plasma Agents. His Herdier growled a warning at his side, and Minccino squeaked in alarm.

Aurea had no choice but to obey, cursing herself and this whole situation. Without access to her Pokémon, there was nothing she could do against four Neos and Colress. Bianca was equally helpless so long as Colress’s Beheeyem kept Musharna occupied, though Aurea did not know for how much longer. If Beheeyem overcame Musharna, Bianca would undoubtedly be his next target. She had to stall for time, think of something, anything.

“Why are you here?” she demanded. “You said it wasn’t for me, but here you are at my home. You couldn’t call first?”

He didn’t appreciate the snark, then and now. “No time,” he said. “I’m in pursuit of a rogue asset.”

“And you thought they’d come here?”

*If I can just get to that lamp, I can smash it and distract them long enough to call out my Pokémon.*

Aurea took a step down the stairs, then another, slowly.

“He’s your father, after all,” Colress said. “Where else would he go?”

At that, Aurea stopped short. “My... My father?”

“Aurea’s resolve left her momentarily as she processed what he was telling her. Her father, the man who had been estranged from her for years without so much as a birthday card, was not only alive and well, but on Neo Team Plasma’s radar. Nothing made any sense.

“S-Stop! Don’t you come closer!” Bianca warned one of the Neos who attempted to approach her in the kitchen.
“What do you want with my father?” Aurea managed, her plan to cause a distraction all but abandoned as curiosity took hold.

“What nothing more than he promised to do.”

“What are you... Are you saying he worked for Neo Team Plasma?” Aurea said, aghast. “No, that’s impossible.”

Colress shrugged. “How would you know? You haven’t spoken a word to him in years. I know the feeling.”

Her anger reared its head again. “Get out of my house, Colress. My father isn’t here, and I don’t have the time or patience to assuage your wounded ego.”

He sighed. “I’m afraid I can’t do that. You understand that I can’t just take your word that he’s not here. I’m afraid I’ll have to insist on a search.”

“And I’m afraid I’ll have to ask you to vacate the premises,” said Looker from the lab stairway.

Except it wasn’t Looker coming up the stairs, but Colress. Aurea went slack-jawed as she looked between the two Colresses, not quite believing her eyes. The Neos were equally dumbfounded.

“What the... Boss?” asked the Neo that had threatened Aurea before.

Bianca was quicker to react than the rest, and she flung a coffee maker that was within reach across the kitchen counter at Beheeyem without warning, disrupting his concentration. Musharna, freed from the oppressive Psychic duel, Zen Headbutted the nearest Neo Agent and sent him crashing into the kitchen table with a *crack*.

All hell broke loose then as Looker’s Croagunk leaped onto the enemy Herdier and began pummeling him with her slippery fists. Aurea had no chance to think, and that Neo that had threatened her before was coming right for her, so she grabbed the porcelain lamp at the foot of the stairs and smashed it over his head with all her might. He swore and lost his footing, and she shoved him down the lab stairs. He went tumbling down like a sack of flour.

The other Neos and Colress released more Pokémon, including Colress’s Magneton, and soon Aurea’s kitchen and living room were transformed into a war zone. Fists and furniture flew, fire singed the carpet, and an errant Thundershock nearly barbequed the second “Colress” as he dashed into the thick of the chaos after Croagunk. Aurea released Armaldo while Minccino screeched indignantly in her ear, and the ancient Bug went after Beheeyem like a turkey dinner. The Psychic fired off a Psybeam in his defense, but Armaldo had picked up the blood-stained kitchen table, stepped over the unconscious Neo Agent Musharna had thrown over it, and hurled it at Beheeyem just in time to catch the deadly Psybeam.

“Smack Down!” Aurea shouted.

The Plate Pokémon roared and lunged at Beheeyem directly, caught him between his armored pincers, and sent them both crashing to the floor.

“Come on, we have to get out of here!” said “Colress” as he caught up with Bianca and Juniper in what was left of the kitchen.

Before either of them could respond to that, his face warped and melted away. Beneath, Looker’s face emerged, and Ditto pooled in his hands back in his normal form.
“I have what you need.” Looker indicated the duffel bag he carried. “So let’s go!”

“I don’t think so!” shouted one of the remaining Neos, a woman with a Roselia. The Roselia unleashed a barrage of vines that caught Looker and Bianca each by a leg and yanked them off their feet. Looker hit his head on the edge of the kitchen counter, leaving an angry smear of blood behind.

Aurea was so angry that she moved without thinking and tossed out Vanilluxe’s Pokéball.

“Vanilluxe! Blow them all away!”

The spooky Snowstorm Pokémon lived up to her name as she conjured a terrible cold front out of thin air. Colress shouted something, and his Magneton powered up a Mirror Shot attack to neutralize Vanilluxe, but Looker’s Croagunk was there to intercept with a swift Jump Kick that scattered Magneton’s three heads. Roselia spooked as her vines froze and withered, and she went flying against a wall under the force of the Icy Wind attack, too light to hold her ground. Her trainer was soon covered in biting frost and gagging, and she turned tail and ran for the sliding back door.

Armaldo, who was favoring his left leg heavily due to Beheeyem’s Psychic attacks that had cracked and filleted his right leg, nonetheless roared and braved the freezing winds to get to Aurea. She recalled him and helped Looker to his feet with Bianca’s help.

“‘Aurea!’” Colress said, back with Beheeyem, who was bleeding from his inflated head but still standing. “You can’t win! It’s only a matter of time. Chimera was the first step, and Cedric’s legacy will be the last. You can’t stop Neo Team Plasma!”

“Maybe not,” Aurea said, laying a hand on Vanilluxe’s clammy cold shell. “But I can stop you. Ice Beam!”

Vanilluxe’s spiral shells frosted over, the grooves and dips forming what looked like ghastly happy faces as the temperature in the room dropped dangerously low and she fired off an iridescent beam of frigid light directly at Colress. The flash was dazzling, and cold even more so as the entire eastern wall of the living room froze under two inches of raw ice right where Colress had been standing. But when the mists parted, there was no sign of him or his Pokémon, as though he’d magically warped out just in time.

“Aurea, hurry!” Bianca said through her chattering teeth, dragging Looker toward the open front door.

If Colress had Teleported to safety with Beheeyem, then there was nothing to be done about it. They had to get out of here, because no matter what he said, there was still time. There had to be.

Looker was sluggish on his feet, but he was conscious and walking as best as he could. Croagunk and Ditto, who had assumed Croagunk’s appearance to move around more quickly, hopped after them, while Vanilluxe brought up the rear. They were soon out of the house and under the cover of night.

There was no time to clear out the mess or the unconscious Neos, not when the possibility of more showing up or Colress coming back was very real. Aurea was furious just thinking of the state of her home, of what those Neos would do to it when they woke up—if they woke up. The one she’d pushed down the stairs had not stirred an inch when he landed. But she couldn’t think about that now. She needed to concentrate on getting out of here with Bianca and Looker.

“‘My head,”’ Looker groaned as they trudged along as quickly as they could.
“I’ll take a look at it when we’re on the boat,” Aurea said in hushed tones.

“Aurea, that man, you knew him?” Bianca said, her voice quivering from the shock of it all. “And what he said about your father, what was he talking about? I thought your father lived far away in Kalos.”

_That was a white lie I told you to avoid the sad truth_, Aurea thought guiltily.

“I’m as confused as you are,” she said. “Let’s just get to the harbor first.”

They made it, but Aurea was looking over her shoulder for pursuers even with Vanilluxe and Musharna about them keeping watch. They were not followed, and eventually they were boarded and on their way northwest into the dark sea. It looked like rain tonight, and Aurea had a chill that made her shiver violently.

The barge Bianca had bought them passage on, the _Mermaid’s Kiss_, was a private yacht originally headed for Castelia City to pick up a wealthy family for a wedding party, but with the recent unrest and danger in that city, the captain had decided to dock in friendlier waters and forgo her promised commission. It had taken only a little convincing and a fat silver coin purse to chart a course for Virbank City, no questions asked. Aurea got the feeling that this captain had seen her share of questionable characters and knew how to look the other way when she barely glanced at Looker’s bloody face.

The cabin they’d been given was rented out for the wedding party, from the looks of it. Everything was white and pristine, and an enormous banner hung over the bed with “Congratulations!” written in obnoxious gold glitter. Bianca went to fetch a first-aid kit from the crew on deck, while Aurea sat Looker down on one of the plush white leather couches and rummaged through the nightstand drawers for anything she could use to clean him up. All she found were various books on the art of pleasing one’s partner, gifts for the newlyweds, she presumed. How quaint. She went to the bathroom and wet a towel to clean Looker up.

“I’m sorry about your house,” Looker said tiredly.

“Not as sorry as those Neos were,” Aurea said as she wiped the blood from his face and neck. “That was quick thinking with Ditto.”

Looker grunted. “An old trick we’ve been using for years. Works every time.” He spared her a small smile.

Bianca returned with a first-aid kit, and Aurea got to work disinfecting and examining Looker’s head wound. It looked worse than it was, but she wanted to keep him awake and talking in case he had a concussion.

“Don’t think I could sleep after that, anyway,” Looker grumbled. Croagunk was sitting on the arm of the chair like a trained Lillipup, and Ditto was resting in his Pokéball.

“If you hadn’t been there, I dunno what would’ve happened,” Bianca said, hugging herself. “Musha might not’ve beaten back that Beheeyem.” She shivered just thinking about it.

“Well, I think the real heroine of the night was Vanilluxe,” Looker said.

Vanilluxe and the rest of Aurea’s Pokémon were back in their Pokéballs for now until she could get Armaldo to a Pokémon Center to see to his leg. But they weren’t the most pressing matter on her mind right now.
“Chimera was the first step, and Cedric’s legacy will be the last.”

What did he mean by that? And why did she get the feeling that everything she thought she’d known about Chimera, as terrible as it was, was only the tip of the iceberg?

What did you do, Dad?

Aurea did not think of her father often, but right now, she wished she could see him and ask, beat it out of him if she must. From the way Bianca was looking at her, she guessed their thoughts were along the same vein. Aurea rubbed her tired eyes.

“This was my fault,” she said softly. “They came because of me. Because of my father. I’m sorry I got you mixed up in this, Bianca. And you, too, Looker.”

“Professor Juniper,” Looker started.

“Just Aurea,” Aurea interrupted. “I think after tonight, we’ve been through enough to be on a first name basis, at least.”

Looker swallowed uncomfortably, but he nodded gravely.


“I used to. He’s an old colleague of mine,” Aurea said. “We met in college, and he came to work for my father’s lab in Castelia City. We were friends, once... Until a lab tech found out that Colress had been conducting inhumane experiments on Pokémon. Long story short, my father’s investors threatened to pull funding, so he expelled Colress from the lab and cut all ties. Colress lost a prestigious research grant as a result and disappeared off the radar...until now.”

“I don’t understand,” Bianca said. “You never talk about your father. What does he have to do with any of this?”

“Honestly, I have no idea. The truth is, he was never in Kalos. Or if he was, I never knew about it. We’re estranged, ever since I went to Kanto to complete my Ph.D.” Aurea played with her hair nervously. “I guess...I was ashamed to tell you and Rosa any of that. He’s my father; our past differences shouldn’t matter when it comes to family, but I just couldn’t let it go.”

Bianca took her hands in hers. “Please don’t think that,” she said. “I could never be ashamed of you. Rosa would say the same thing.”

“I’m afraid it’s a bit late for that,” Aurea said. “I knew he was living in Castelia City, but I didn’t think he was working with Team Plasma. Damnit all.”

“But he’s not working with Team Plasma,” Looker said. “At least, not anymore.”

“Huh?” Bianca said. “But that Colress guy said——”

“---that he came to Nuvema Town looking for Cedric Juniper. Meaning, Cedric abandoned or escaped from the Neos. I find it hard to believe a man like that would still be working for the very people he’s running from.”

“Oh, that’s a really good point,” Bianca said. “So, Colress thought Cedric was here with us, but he wasn’t. Then, where could he be?”

“I have no idea,” Aurea said. “But right now, there’s not much we can do about it. I think we
should stick with the original plan and get to Virbank as fast as we can.”

They were agreed on that much, and so they turned in for the night to get some rest. Aurea could not sleep, so she lay awake in the double bed next to Bianca, who was breathing heavily in a deep sleep. Looker was somewhere else on the boat, keeping awake until the danger of a possible concussion passed. Aurea got up after about an hour of lying in bed wide awake and slipped outside the cabin.

The rain had started, but the thunder was distant and intermittent. The swell was mild, and Aurea hoped it would stay that way so Bianca could sleep undisturbed. Other suites lined the narrow hall, all empty without the wedding party. There was something eerie about the silence and emptiness, all this luxury and joy relegated to shadows and dust without people here to enjoy them. Aurea hurried past the rooms to the crew’s quarters, where she heard voices at the end of the hall.

Looker was sitting in the crew’s mess hall conversing with a couple deck hands who were about their work and had taken a short break to share a bottle of bourbon. They greeted Aurea when she entered, and gave their excuses that they had to get back to work after finishing off the rest of their drinks.

“Couldn’t sleep?” Looker asked when Aurea took a seat at the table across from him. He passed her a glass and poured two fingers of bourbon.

Aurea was about to refuse, but the golden liquid looked warm and inviting after that moribund wedding hall, so she thought better of it and pulled the glass toward her. “Is that surprising?”

“Not really. Civilians shouldn’t have to see what you and Bianca saw tonight.”

Aurea took a long sip of the bourbon. It was smoky and sweet, thick on the back of her tongue, and went down smoothly. The alcohol pleasantly warmed her down to her toes.

“Bianca’s out like a rock,” Aurea said. “She always was a heavy sleeper. Training Musharna often has that side effect.”

“I wouldn’t know.” He refilled her nearly empty glass, and they sat there in comfortable silence for a bit.

“You’re not going to ask me?” Aurea said when it looked like he was simply going to sit there.

“Do you want me to ask?”

“You’re a detective. It’s your job to ask questions, isn’t it?”

“Some questions are better left alone,” he said. “I learned that lesson to my detriment a long time ago.”

Not for the first time, she wondered what terrible event had scarred him. Aurea had seen trauma before in her time working at the Castelia University Hospital for her father’s lab, victims of violence and the human condition. Looker was haunted by something, an event that had aged him beyond his years and weighed him down. Aurea stared at the bottle of bourbon and his glass, wondering how many he’d had, when she noticed that it was empty. It had not even been used. He caught her looking.

“I’ve been sober five years,” he said, answering the question she didn’t ask. “But the weight and feel of a bottle still brings me some comfort now and then.”
“I can understand that,” Aurea said.

“You’re not going to ask me?” Looker said, echoing her question from before.

“I’m not a detective,” she said. “And it’s none of my business.”

“Right,” he said, pensive. “Unfortunately, I may have to modify my earlier position and ask you some questions, after all.” He looked at her pointedly. “Colress is one thing, but if your father is involved, then I’m afraid I may have to go down a road you won’t like.”

The lighting in here was dim, like candlelight, and his hard-lined face appeared softer, even kinder. Maybe it was the bourbon, or the shared desperation of the events from before. He had a face that wanted trusting, an honest face. She didn’t know him, but he made her want to. Perhaps he was a much better detective than she’d given him credit for.

Aurea sipped her bourbon. “I don’t know what my father’s involvement with Neo Team Plasma is. Or was, whatever. And I don’t know where we might find him.”

“I believe you.” He watched her carefully. “But you do have something on your mind.”

She shook her head. “Something Colress said about my father’s legacy.”

“Yes, I heard that. I didn’t make much of it since you said they worked together once. Does it mean something else to you?”

Aurea gestured with her glass aimlessly. “Only what I’ve known my whole life. My father was never as renowned as some of his colleagues, and that always stung him. When I was chosen for a prestigious mentorship program working with the famous Professor Samuel Oak in Kanto, he was so furious at my perceived betrayal that he gave me an ultimatum: him or Oak. You don’t have to be a detective to divine the rest.”

Looker nodded in understanding, but he showed her no judgment. “I’m sorry. That’s no choice at all, especially not from a father.”

Aurea nursed her bourbon. “He was always going on about his legacy, how he would show everyone one day what he was capable of. He stopped responding to my letters when he heard that I revived a Tirtouga from its fossilized remains, the first time anyone had ever revived an extinct Pokémon at the time. I think he couldn’t take it, that I had achieved more than he had, and he resented me for it.”

Looker said nothing to that, and she was glad for it. That had hurt more than anything, knowing that her own father resented her for her intelligence and success when it had been him to encourage her as a girl, always her biggest supporter in the largely male-dominated scientific world. Until he realized that she was better than him, and he had never meant for that to happen. Tirtouga, now a Carracosta, went to Hugh, Nate’s Syreni friend in Aspertia City, when Nate told Aurea about how his sister had died and he was distraught over it. Aurea could think of no one better to raise a baby Pokémon than a boy who desperately wanted something to love.

“So when Colress talked about his legacy, and about how Cedric was working with Team Plasma, you think he’s done something worse even than Chimera?”

Aurea drained her bourbon and held her head in her hands. “I don’t know what to think.” She tugged on her loose long hair, wanting to dig her fingers into something and squeeze. “I just... I wonder if our estrangement pushed him toward Team Plasma. If he thought he had no other recourse.”
“No,” Looker said. “You can’t think like that. Whatever his reasons, whatever he’s done, it was his choice. And we don’t have the full story yet. We don’t even know what “it” is, if it’s even anything. Colress could have lied to hurt you. I assume he knows what transpired between you and your father?”

“Yeah, he knows.”

He had used the situation to try to take advantage of her vulnerability. Colress had pined for her when they were still students and working together, but she had always rebuffed his advances, too engrossed in her work to worry about romantic attachments with anyone at the time. She never wanted to admit it, but a part of her knew he held her rejection against her, took it personally. How fitting that he would create a pathogen that surrendered the target’s free will. The ones who could not accept the choices of others often sought to take the option of choice away entirely. She just never imagined things would come to this.

“Yveltal can take him if he’s involved in all this,” Aurea cursed, slumping over the table, exhausted. “Damn it all.”

Looker was quiet a long while, and then, “I had a wife,” he said. “And a son. Once.”

Had.

The drinking, the trauma, his profession. He didn’t have to say any more to make her understand. Before her sat a man who had lost everything and everyone, the part that made him human. All that was left were the questions, the case, the guilt that was so plain to see in the stress lines on his face that it was a wonder she hadn’t guessed the truth on her own. The way he was looking at that bourbon bottle, like a drowning man looks at a lifeline, broke her heart.

“What do you need me to do?” she asked.

“Whatever needs to be done.”

The way he was looking at her, she knew it was asking a lot. But in that moment, when he showed her who he really was, how much it pained him, she could not say how much she appreciated that it was him who had come and not someone else.

Maybe that’s why they sent him, she wondered. He’s too good at this.

Aurea refilled her glass and raised it to him. “Whatever needs to be done.”

She drank alone, and the bourbon went down stinging hot. She fought not to gag.

The *Mermaid’s Kiss* arrived in the Virbank harbor three days later, and Aurea and the others headed straight for the Virbank Gym. Harley Dufrene, formerly a high-ranking naval officer in the late Gym Leader Harrison’s armada, was acting Gym Leader these days, but Aurea’s intended audience was not her. Instead, it was Harrison’s teenaged daughter, Roxie, a Veleno with a rebellious streak who had seen the horrors of war and its ravages first-hand when her father died in her arms in Castelia City.

Harley was running a tight ship in Virbank these days as the city tried to recover from the loss of their beloved Gym Leader and a sizeable chunk of their fleet in the wake of their defeat in Castelia City. Tensions were high in the city, and the fear was almost palpable in the air as the locals
hurried on their way to work and avoided eye contact, scuttling like Bugs hoping not to get squashed. When would Team Plasma strike? It was no longer a matter of “if” after what had transpired in Castelia City.

Harley received Aurea, whose name and reputation were well known in Unova, but Aurea knew five minutes in that she would not budge to lend assistance against Team Plasma anytime soon, much less allow her to see Roxie.

“Our city is recovering,” Harley said bluntly. “I can’t possibly divert resources, military or otherwise, to fighting an enemy that’s everywhere and nowhere. We already tried that.”

The Virbank Gym was lush and green, built over a canal with direct access to the harbor for quick deployment. Poison-, Grass-, and Water-type Pokémon were in abundance in the Gym’s aquifers and greenhouse jungle environment, and they had a Pokémon Center nurse on call who was more than happy to take a look at Armaldo’s shredded leg. Bianca’s Musharna hovered over her protectively, as usual, half asleep but never far from his mistress.

“It’s not that I don’t care about the rest of the lower West Tine,” Harley said. “We received the letter from Driftveil about Gym Leader Cheren’s demise. I take no joy in it. He was a good man and a great leader. But I have to think about Virbank first.”

“I understand your position,” Aurea said. “I really do. And I wouldn’t be asking if it wasn’t extremely important. I’ve discovered many of the secrets behind Chimera, Neo Team Plasma’s aggressive technology that gives them the power to control any Pokémon at will. It’s only a matter of time before I can come up with a countering measure. I’m only looking for Virbank’s support to stand against them.”

“If it’s shelter or resources to complete your research that you need, you’ll have it. But I can’t give you anything more than that right now. I’m truly sorry.”

Harley had a leathery face, the face of a woman who had seen the worst of the world and grown jaded to it. Wizened, skeptical, the kind of leader a Virbank in crisis needed right now. Unfortunately, that also meant she was not the leader who would take a risk at war again so soon, no matter what Aurea brought to convince her.

“Is Roxie around?” Bianca asked. “I wanted to give her my condolences personally.”

Harley did not oblige her request. Perhaps she knew their true purpose here. “She’s not, sorry. The poor girl hasn’t spoken more than a few words ever since Harrison passed.”

“Then we’ll take our leave,” Looker said, getting up. “Thank you for your time.”

Harley got up with him. “My pleasure. And...good luck. If things were different, I’d really like to do more to help. Perhaps in time.”

Aurea followed Looker and Bianca out of the Gym, her steps heavy. “She wouldn’t even let us see Roxie,” she fumed. “Dammit, if we had Roxie, we could have Virbank, I’m sure of it.”

“It’s only one city,” Looker said. “We still have that Champion you’re so proud of in Floccesy Town to visit. As I understand it, his is the ear we have to have.”

The day was overcast, like the rain had followed them here from Nuvema Town. Aurea’s mood matched the weather, and she found little consolation in Looker’s point of view.

“Champion Alder is one man, and he’s old,” Aurea said. “As much weight as his name carries, he
isn’t what he once was, I’m sorry to say. If we had Virbank, things would be different. But I can’t say I blame them. I knew this was a one-woman fight coming into it.”

Bianca put a hand on Aurea’s shoulder. “It’s not a one-woman anything. You have me, and Officer Looker, too. We’re in this together, okay?”

Aurea wished she had Bianca’s optimism, she really did.

“Either way, we should get to Floccesy Town as soon as possible,” Looker said. “Where can we rent some Gogoat?”

They were leaving the Gym grounds and headed into the city to do just that when a voice shouted for them to wait. Startled, Aurea turned and saw a young woman sprinting after them, an electric guitar slung over her shoulder bobbing precariously on its leather strap, and a Seviper slithering alongside her impossibly quick. She caught up to them, and Aurea recognized her.

“Roxie?” she said, confused.

Panting, Roxie bent over her knees and looked up at the trio. “Yeah, in the flesh. I heard some fancy professor from Nuvema Town was here asking about Nate’s letter, so I had to see you. I don’t care what Harley says.”

“You know Nate?” Bianca said.

Roxie wiped her white-blonde bangs from her brow and nodded. “I know him, all right. Hugh, too. And Cheren.” She fisted her gloved hands and bared her teeth in a snarl. “The Neos killed him, I heard. Just like my dad.” There were angry tears in her eyes. “Well, they’re not fucking getting away with it!”

“Does Harley know you’re out here?” Aurea asked. Having raised two girls herself, she knew Harley would not be thrilled to know that Roxie had run off on her.

“Why would she care? I’m almost seventeen, practically an adult, and she treats me like a kid! She won’t do anything to fix this! She’s not helping Dad at all! But I wanna help. I wanna do something! I know he’d want me to.”

“Aurea,” Looker said. “I’m not sure about this...”

Aurea agreed with Looker. This was not how she’d envisioned this going. Getting Roxie’s support was the goal, but not if it meant undermining the acting Gym Leader. Roxie had other plans, though. She fumbled with the glove on her right hand and showed them her rotted fingers, the nails jagged and purple with blight.

“I killed a Neo with this hand,” she spat. “I’m Veleno, and I’m strong. I’m sick of waiting around here doing nothing. I can fight, just like Nate and Hugh fought in Castelia City. Nate sent that letter ‘cause he needed help. Well, I wanna help. And I think you need me.” She looked between Aurea and Looker and Bianca. “That’s why you came, right? ‘Cause you need Virbank? Well, I am Virbank. I can get the people here to follow me, just like they followed Dad. I might be young, but I’m ready to step up to stop the Neos. Are you?”

It was crazy, maybe the craziest thing Aurea had ever done, but this was a desperate time. Any moment, Colress or other Neos could show up and try to stop them. The time for thinking and waiting was over. Now, it was time to act.

“I am,” she said. “You’re right, that’s why we came here. Roxie, I know it’s a lot to ask, but if
you’d be willing to help us, then I have to ask.”

“Anything,” Roxie said, wiping her tears. “Anything to get back at those Neo freaks.”

“I think we had better get a move on,” Looker said, eyeing the Gym and the trainers who had wandered outside looking for Roxie. “We may not be free to leave for much longer.”

“This way!” Bianca said, taking off at a run.

So they ran. Aurea took Roxie’s gloved hand in hers, and together they sprinted after Looker and Bianca into downtown Virbank. They acquired some Gogoat mounts, and before the Gym could mount a proper manhunt, they were well on their way west to Floccesy Town.

Torrential rains followed them all the way to Floccesy Town, but Aurea could not have cared less. Roxie was with them, and there was hope. She was a spunky girl, forced to grow up fast after the devastating loss of her father. But while she nursed her grief privately, she chose to channel it toward a fighting spirit they needed. No one was more determined to see Neo Team Plasma fall than Roxie, and she made sure they all heard it loud and clear. More than ever, Aurea knew that if Neo Team Plasma was ever going to fall, it would have to be against a united front that encompassed all of Unova. It was bigger than her, than Roxie, even than Chimera.

Aurea had known Alder since she returned from her studies in Kanto and established herself as a Pokémon Professor in Unova. Her name was known around the world, and a Champion had reason to acquaint himself with her. He’d been dashing once, strong and full of life and purpose. He was an old man now, his youth and vigor long behind him, but his title still meant something. She was counting on that, though it had been many years since she’d last seen him.

His house was the largest in Floccesy Town, a rundown mansion made of wood and stone in the forest north of town. Like its owner, its glory days were long past, but it stood the test of time and did its job adequately. It was here that the Gogoat carried Aurea’s group faithfully. It was late, past dinner time, but decorum was not a priority tonight, so Aurea knocked on the door and hoped he was home.

The lights were on inside, and soon the door opened to reveal a hulking man in a moth-eaten patterned serape and a mane of hair that was more grey than orange in his old age. He had a mug in hand, and he stank of vodka. Nevertheless, he stared down at Aurea and her entourage with a lucid alertness only high-functioning alcoholics can possess.

“Yveltal take me—Aurea Juniper,” he swore, recognizing her. “This is a surprise.”

“Alder,” Aurea said. “It’s been a long time. I’m sorry to call on you so late, but it can’t wait.”

He nodded and turned back inside. “Whatever, just come on in. It’s pouring out there, and I hate the rain. Bah.”

They followed him inside, and Roxie made a face at the smell. “The Champion lives in this dump?” she said.

“The Champion ain’t made of money,” Alder said. He caught a glimpse of her and let his eyes fall to her thickly gloved hands. ”You Veleno, or just a germophobe?”

“Yeah, I’m Veleno. You got a problem with that, old man?” Roxie said, jutting out her lip and
Crossing her arms.

“This is Roxie,” Aurea said. “Harrison’s daughter.”

Alder considered that a moment. “You don’t say. Well then, it seems we have a quorum of sorts.”

Bianca wrung out her sopping wet hair on the faded green rug in the foyer, but Alder didn’t seem to care. Looker had remained silent all the while, and Croagunk wandered at his side ever observant. Alder led them to the kitchen table, where another guest was seated with a mug of coffee. He was extremely fit, and he didn’t seem to mind the autumn chill in his baggy sleeveless vest. His arms rippled with muscle underneath his warm teak skin. Aurea did not recognize him. A glass of vodka and a used lime, unattended, sat before the empty chair next to his.

Alder was in the kitchen rummaging in some cabinets. He procured a fresh bottle of vodka, which he was using to fill up his mug. He also grabbed a few more glasses. “I’ve got vodka, coffee, and milk if it ain’t expired. Take your pick.”

“Coffee,” Looker said at the same time that Roxie said, “Vodka.”

Bianca gave Roxie a reproving look, and Aurea took a seat at the table across from the stranger. Looker’s Croagunk immediately made a beeline for the stranger.

“Croagunk, hey,” Looker said, surprised.

The stranger had his arms crossed and glared down at Croagunk, appraising. “Hmph, she’s not too shabby,” he said. “Long way from evolving, though. She’s too puny.”

“Croagunk’s been my trusted companion for years,” Looker said a little defensively.

Alder returned with the drinks and sat down at the head of the table. “Don’t mind Marshal. He’s an asshole.”

Looker was staring at Marshal, who scratched at his dyed blond buzz cut, while Roxie happily snatched the vodka bottle and poured herself a glass. Alder was quicker, however, and swiped the glass from her to pour into his mug, to her dismay.

“I know you,” Looker said. “I’ve seen you before.”

Marshal spared him a glance. “I doubt it.”

Looker pulled out his X-Transceiver and began scrolling through his files while his coffee grew cold. Aurea helped herself to his coffee, and Roxie furtively helped herself to another glass of vodka to replace the one Alder had swiped.

“Alder, unfortunately this isn’t a social call,” Aurea began. “I have a lot to talk to you about Neo Team Plasma.”

Alder put up his hand. “I’ve heard it all before.”

“Please, Mr. Champion,” Bianca said. “My friend, I mean... Gym Leader Cheren is... He’s...”

Alder leveled her with a heavy stare. “I know about Cheren. He passed through here a while back with two recruits, hoping to get me to take up arms against Neo Team Plasma. I read Nate’s letter.” He sighed and rubbed his bloodshot eyes. “He’s a good egg, Nate.” The way he said it, so tired and sad, Aurea wondered if it pained him to know what had befallen Nate and the others.
“Nate spent his summers in Nuvema Town,” Aurea said. “I know him well, and I know he wouldn’t send that message if it wasn’t urgent. But I’m afraid it’s not just that.” She opened up the bag containing her samples from the lab and set a canister with part of a Lopunny’s rotted brain inside on the table. “The Neos have a technology that acts like a pathogen, and they’re using it to control Pokémon. They can raise armies with the press of a button, and eventually the tech kills the Pokémon, like it killed this Lopunny. I know who’s behind it.”

“Mind control?” Marshal said. “How does some tissue in formaldehyde prove that? I know Team Plasma’s rotten to the core, but this is just ridiculous.”

“Sorry, but who the fuck’re you, again?” Roxie said.


“Um, Officer Looker?” Bianca said, worried. “Are you okay?”

“You know me or somethin’?” Marshall said.

Looker produced his badge. “I’m a detective with the International Police. I came here to investigate the disappearance of two of my colleagues who were infiltrating Neo Team Plasma. They were supposedly working with local consultants, powerful Tamers...”

Marshal was as unreadable as stone, but he was silent for a long time. “InterPol, huh?”

Looker leaned across the table. “Hilbert and Hilda, those were their names. They were siblings. Twins, in fact. Clairvoyant. One of their consultants was a powerful Bellator called Marshall.”

Marshal hardly moved. He seemed not even to breathe for how still he was. Bianca had gulped down Roxie’s second glass of vodka in order to keep her from doing something stupid like drinking it herself, and Roxie looked sullen as she pouted at the table. Bianca was starting to flush red.

Alder cleared his throat. “Marshal was my student a long time ago. He’s been known to work with others with special...affinities. I’m sure he wouldn’t keep his mouth shut when it’s the InterPol asking.”

Marshal took the hint and shifted in his seat. “Yeah, that was me. It was a long time ago now. Mission failed, not my problem anymore.”

Aurea could not abide this tangent, no matter how important it might be to Looker personally. “Alder, I implore you. We both know your title means something, even now. I think it’s clearer than ever that Neo Team Plasma has to be stopped. I know who’s behind Chimera now, but I can’t stop him alone. I can’t stop Ghetsis alone.”

“Don’t look to me like you’re alone.” Alder nodded at Roxie and the others in Aurea’s entourage.

Roxie, twice thwarted in her attempts at underage drinking, stood up in her seat and leaned across the table. “That’s right, she’s not alone. And neither’re Nate and Hugh. I’m here to help them, like they helped me back then.”

“Alder, I implore you. We both know your title means something, even now. I think it’s clearer than ever that Neo Team Plasma has to be stopped. I know who’s behind Chimera now, but I can’t stop him alone. I can’t stop Ghetsis alone.”

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“Sorry, but who the fuck’re you, again?” Marshal threw her words back at her.

“I’m Roxie. My dad was Virbank’s Gym Leader, and I’m gonna take his place. That’s what he would’ve wanted, just like he wanted to stand up to the Neos even though he was just a pleb. I’m sure as hell not gonna let him down when he put everything on the line to keep me and Virbank City safe.”
“Cute story, kid, but like I said: not my goddamned problem.”

Roxie pointed at him accusatorily with her poisoned right hand. “If you’re such a hotshot Tamer, then it’s your job to make it your problem and fucking do something. Both of you.” She turned on Alder next. “Otherwise, you’re just as bad as the Neos, and you know it.”

Marshal glared at her, but he made no reply. Alder sipped his vodka sludge, also silent. There was some shuffling at the stairs to the second floor.

“Ah, Alder, I’m afraid your second floor toilet’s got a bit of an attitude. Finicky old thing, hm...”

Aurea nearly spat up the gulp of coffee she’d taken at the sight of her father walking into the kitchen dressed like she’d never seen him before in casual plaid, jeans, and Doc Martens with a plunger in hand.

“Excellent comedic timing as usual, Cedric,” Alder said, finishing off his coffee-vodka concoction and reaching for the vodka bottle to drink it straight up. “Harrison’s girl here was just giving us a rather intimidating call to arms against the Neos that killed her father. You have any thoughts?”

Cedric Juniper looked at the new faces that had joined the table in his absence, and he waved the plunger about as if to say, “Eh.”

Aurea regained herself and stood up abruptly. “Dad?” she said. “What’re you doing here?”

Cedric squinted at her. His bushy eyebrows were like two caterpillars too heavy for his eyes to open very wide. “Good Groudon, are you that daughter of mine?” He wielded the plunger as if to defend his honor from her.

Looker got up, too, and moved to stand next to Aurea as she confronted the man she had scarcely seen for nearly two decades. His honey-brown hair, once the same warm shade as Aurea’s, had faded mostly to silver and thinned, and he was wiry of frame but short. His clothes were a size too large for him, and combined with his spritely movements and disposition, they gave him the appearance of a teenaged farmhand.

“I’m the only daughter you have,” Aurea said. “Or maybe you forgot.”

“Well, what are you doing here?”

“I should ask you the same question! Do you have any idea what your actions have cost me?”

Cedric set down his plunger, deeming the situation non-lethal for the time being, and moseyed to the seat next to Marshal, where his half-drunk vodka with lime was collecting condensation. The ice had melted, and it was diluted. He made a face as he tasted it. “Oh, Alder, I really don’t know how you do it. Life in the country must be so hard. No reliable working amenities, warm vodka...”

“You get used to it,” Alder said.

Aurea slammed her hand on the table, startling everyone present. Poor Bianca, who was feeling the buzz from the vodka she’d drunk to save Roxie’s innocence, jumped a foot out of her seat and hiccupped. She mumbled courtesies and turned even redder in her embarrassment. Roxie gave her a weird look.

“No,” Aurea said, her tone scathing. “You’re not going to talk around this, Dad. Not this time.”

“So this is your daughter?” Marshal asked, cool as a Tentacool. “She seems adopted.”
“You know, I used to get that all the time,” Cedric said. “Got that temper from her mother...”

“Mr. Juniper,” Looker said.

“Professor,” Cedric interrupted. “It’s Professor, clearly.”

Marshal snorted. “Not in those clothes, it’s not.”

“Ph.D. or no, after everything I’ve seen since I arrived here in Unova, I’m half convinced to put you under arrest by order of the International Police.” Looker had a pair of handcuffs he fished out of his pocket, and Croagunk hopped onto the table.

At this, Cedric set down his drink. “My, that sounds quite serious.”

“It is serious,” Aurea snapped. “The entire reason I’m here is because I got an unwelcome house call from an old student of yours. Maybe you remember him.”

From the way Cedric shrank into his oversized flannel shirt, she knew he remembered very well. “I had a feeling Colress might be paying you a visit, mm. Having deduced his intentions correctly, I came here instead.”

Aurea was beside herself. “You... You knew what he was and that he was hunting you, and you didn’t think to warn me?!”

Looker grabbed her by the shoulders before she could do something drastic like climb over the table.

“He wrecked my home!” Aurea said. “The home I share with Bianca and Rosa, whom you’ve never even bothered to meet!”

Cedric put up a finger. “Actually, I did meet Rosa in Castelia City. Lovely girl, though not as much of a drinker as that one,” he nodded at Bianca and smiled warmly. “Hm, I do wonder if she survived the Sack of Castelia...?”

Aurea was so mad she could have spit. This time, when she lunged across the table and made a swipe at Cedric, Looker didn’t hold her back. Her backhand echoed in the roomy kitchen, and Cedric’s cheek turned red. The room was silent as he moved his jaw to dispel the pain.

“...Forgive me,” he said, soft and contrite. “That was uncouth of me.”

Roxie snorted. “I’ll say.”

Cedric reached for the vodka bottle and topped off his glass. He drank the tepid alcohol down without complaint and rubbed his cheek. “If you’re here, then you escaped Colress just as I did, I take it. Perhaps you even had the same idea as me to enlist Champion Alder for help against Neo Team Plasma.”

“I came here for help stopping Chimera,” Aurea said, still seething. That slap had felt good. “Colress was happy to take credit for it.”

Cedric frowned deeply, and the lines in his face deepened, betraying his age. “Filthy work, this Chimera project. I never wanted anything to do with it.”

“No, because you were working on something else for Ghetsis, weren’t you?”

At this, the room’s mood shifted. Marshal glanced askance at Cedric, his dark eyes narrowed with
“What’s this, now?” he asked. “Alder, you never said he was a Neo.”

“I beg your pardon,” Cedric said, affronted. “I am no such uncultured groupie, and I resent any insinuation to the contrary. If you must know, it was N who brought me in. I did my work for him and only him.”

“You mean you did your work for yourself,” Aurea said. “After all this time, you’ve never changed. Always with this stupid legacy bullshit no matter the cost.”

Cedric’s eyes flashed with anger. “My legacy is all I have!”

“You had me!” Aurea shouted back. “You had a family. We’ve been here all these years, but you couldn’t swallow your goddamned pride for us.”

“What is it?” Bianca asked, having recovered a little. “Your legacy. It must’ve been something amazing for you to work with Neo Team Plasma and get Colress’s attention. So, what is it?”

Cedric wrung his hands and shifted in his seat, like he couldn’t get comfortable.

“I suggest you answer the lady’s question,” Looker said, the cuffs still in hand. “Now.”

Cedric rubbed his mouth, stalling, and Aurea almost felt like smacking him again. Finally, he spoke.

“It was always my idea,” he said stubbornly. “My idea. N didn’t care one way or the other so long as he got what he wanted, and I delivered. But this... This was mine. It was to be my greatest achievement, the power of god and kings at my fingertips.”

“What?” Aurea said. “What could be so important that Colress had to destroy my home hunting you down just to get it?”

Cedric nursed his vodka and lime, and when he met her gaze, all the flim-flam was gone. He was just an old man, tired and worn down.

“I called it Kyurem.”

Chapter End Notes

Welcome back after a bit of a hiatus! I had to take the Bar exam, and now that’s over with and I have some long-awaited vacation time. Looker will be one of the main characters in the forthcoming Sinnoh fic, so I thought it’d be fun to introduce him here before we get to that one. I’m basing him primarily on his Generations version rather than the game version, since I really enjoyed his neo-noir detective vibe in those shorts. Sinnoh fic hype!! Anyway, I hope you enjoyed this chapter, and please feel free to drop a kudo or comment on your way out! Feedback means so much to me. :)
Hugh

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The morning after the feast, Skyla began making preparations for the group to go to Icirrus City. She insisted they meet with Gym Leader Brycen personally and get his blessing. After all, Brycen’s was the deciding vote whether to move against Neo Team Plasma with all of the upper West Tine’s strength. If they could convince Brycen, Clay would have little choice but to take up arms against Neo Team Plasma.

Hugh felt out of sorts, agitated but unsure quite why. Shauntal’s revelations had something to do with it, but even knowing that N was the murderer Hugh had always claimed he was in the end didn’t lift his spirits. Something else was bugging him, gnawing at him inside, had been for weeks now. He couldn’t place it without taking the time to really reflect on it and had no desire for such a self-confrontation, and so he ignored it as best he could.

Rosa was back after her spirit quest or whatever the fuck she’d been doing in the woods. In the middle of autumn this far north, you’d have to be crazy to spend the night outside willingly. Either way, she was back now, and it seemed like she’d reconciled with Nate. Hugh supposed that was good. Nate was more fragile than he liked to admit, and he needed others to have his back for him.

The days blurred together one after another, and time passed as more of an afterthought. Hugh tried not to think about it and focus on discrete actionable tasks to keep his mind from wandering to thoughts of the Neos, which always put him in a black mood. Part of the preparations for Icirrus involved acquiring a wardrobe appropriate for the coming winter in the mountains. Hugh had never been much for shopping and was relieved to know that the Gym had plenty of gear to go around, stockpiled over the years and handed down to anyone who might make use of it. He found a long grey parka, fur-lined boots insulated with Wailmer blubber to keep them waterproof, and a bright green hat he did not want to bother with but figured was better than losing an ear to frostbite. The hike north would be long and trying, and he didn’t want to take any chances.

Except, as it turned out, there would be no hiking involved. The morning of their departure, Skyla directed everyone to the Mistralton hangar, where a metal cargo plane would be flying them to Icirrus. Hugh balked at the suggestion.

“You gotta be shitting me,” he said to anybody who would listen, which as usual was Nate and nobody else. “At least Flyers can actually stay in the air. This thing’s a buncha metal and propellers! How’re we s’posed to know it’s even safe? That we won’t crash and die?”

“Science?” Nate offered unhelpfully, shrugging.

“Fuck that. There’s no way I’m getting on that thing.”

Benga overheard their conversation and caught Hugh in a rough headlock. “Qwilfish! C’mon, I saved you a seat.”

“Get the fuck off me!” Hugh shouted as Benga dragged him up the ramp to board the plane. He was considerably stronger than he looked, and Hugh struggled to free himself from the hold.

“What was that? I can’t really hear you with your head down.” Benga had a smile in his voice as he practically skipped them up the ramp.
“Goddamnit, let go!”

Benga let go, and Hugh was in the airplane whether he liked it or not. Nate had followed him up, and Yancy was already seated talking to Rosa. Iris was relaying instructions or something to the Adriati sailors in her party, though they too looked none too happy about the prospect of traveling by airplane. Hugh was about to say something rude to Benga when one of the engineers making equipment checks shoved something soft into his arms.

“What’s this?” Hugh said, accepting the package. It looked like some kind of knapsack, horrendous look-at-me orange.

“For safety. Hold onto it,” the engineer said before moving on and handing out more of them to everyone on board.

“Over here,” Benga called to him, patting the open seat next to him suggestively. “I kept it warm just for you, buddy.”

“Don’t talk to me,” Hugh said, but he sat down next to Benga all the same and fumbled with the many safety belts. “Is this even necessary?”

Benga shrugged. “Safety first.” He had his orange safety pack on his lap.

Hugh made a face. “Whatever.”

Iris had finished talking with her people and was now talking with the pilots who would be driving this dumpster through the air. Hugh watched her. He couldn’t make out what she was saying, but she could have been describing how to change a flat tire and make it sound compelling and important. Some people just had that poise, Hugh supposed. He’d never forget how she handed Clay his ass to him back in Driftveil.

Benga blew his nose loudly and made a face at the used tissue, now filled with sticky yellowish snot. Hugh grimaced.

“You wanna explain to me how a loser like you ends up as the right hand man to a future Dragon queen?” Hugh indicated Iris.

Benga crumpled his used tissue and stuffed it in a pocket somewhere in his pants. “Charm,” he deadpanned.

Hugh felt his mood sour further, and Benga burst out laughing.

“Okay, okay,” Benga said, collecting himself somewhat. “How about you? How’d you end up the best friend of a guy like Nate?”

“Huh? That’s nowhere near the same.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah. We grew up together. We’ve always been friends.”

“So just because you didn’t know someone as a kid, you can never get close enough to understand them?”

“That’s not… What? That doesn’t even make any sense.”

Benga shrugged. “You said it, not me.”
“You literally just said it!”

Benga leaned back in his seat. They were all lined up along the length of the plane, side by side for utility over comfort. “We didn’t meet until she landed in Unova, but Iris and me go way back.”

Hugh rolled his eyes. “If you say it’s a Titan thing, I swear…”

“Nah,” Benga said. “I mean, sometimes it is. It started that way, and it can still be that way. But it’s more than that. It’s an Iris and Benga thing.”

Hugh snorted, and Benga looked at him pensively. It was a look that was all wrong on him, totally at odds with his wild hair and wilder personality. It gave Hugh the creeps, honestly.

“Sometimes you meet people,” Benga said, “and there’s something there that’s always been there. I dunno how to describe it, it’s just… It’s like remembering a dream you had a long time ago, like one day it just all comes into place. When I met Iris, I had a vague idea. Now, consider me a believer.”

“Believer in what?” Hugh asked, curiosity winning out over his pride.

“That no matter what it took, I was gonna be in her life, and she was gonna be in mine.”

“Oh,” Hugh said dismissively. “Fate.”

“Yeah, I guess you can call it that,” Benga said. “What’re the odds of meeting the way we did?”

“Pretty sure they call that a coincidence.”

Benga laughed. “Well, whatever you want. But personally, I like to know that all the shit I’ve done, everything I went through, it all got me somewhere in the end.” He looked up at Iris, who did not notice his gaze as she continued to speak with the pilot. “I never really believed in anything until Iris, not even in myself. It can’t just be a coincidence. I won’t let it.”

Hugh didn’t really get it. The whole fate construct was just that, a construct. Fate was for gullible teenage girls giggling over fortunes about their future love lives, or fairytales that began with Once Upon a Times and ended with Happily Ever Afters. It was for religion and history and morals. More than anything, it was the stuff of stories, and stories had captivated people since time immemorial. He got it, but he didn’t buy into it.

What kind of world fated little girls to die and their killers to get away unpunished? Doomed cities to fall and tyrants to rise? And what happened when fate changed its mind and destroyed everything you thought you knew to be true and precious? Everything you believed in and fought for, nothing but a dirty, bold-faced lie?

Rosa looked up at him across the aisle, and Hugh realized he’d been staring at her without even meaning to. He looked away, frowning deeply.

The engines started, and everyone was directed to take their seats and buckle up. Hugh counted his Pokéballs, drawing some comfort from knowing they were all there with him. And then, whether he was ready for it or not, the airplane began pulling out of the hangar.

Hugh had prepared himself for the whooshing vertigo he’d experienced with Togekiss when they first arrived in Mistralton. This was nothing like that. The whole metal frame shook and groaned, and he was absolutely certain the metal sheets keeping it all together would peel off with the force of the winds and leave them all exposed. He kept a white-knuckled grip on his orange safety pack,
as if it would really help at all should this thing go down in smoke and fire. Next to him, Benga seemed to be enjoying the sensation because he was a fucking lunatic.

Benga said something and grinned salaciously, but Hugh couldn’t hear him over the roar of the engines and his teeth rattling in his skull. Skyla’s Valkyries, dressed in their thermal flight suits as if on their way to perform at the upcoming circus, bobbed in their seats and raised their voices in a song. Hugh couldn’t make out all the words, but he was pretty sure they were singing about a Shelgon who dreamed he could fly and evolved into Salamence just to grow wings and never set foot on solid ground again. Hugh was going to be sick.

*It’ll be over soon. Real soon. Just keep your shit together, dude.*

It was not over soon, and Hugh became painfully aware of the hours passing by at a snail’s pace. He tried to concentrate on the rumbling engines and pretend he was on a particularly loud ship, the water just beyond the windows if he chose to jump in for a swim. When he chanced a look out the windows of the plane, he saw endless blue, but not the wet kind. He felt his stomach lurch.

And just when he had half tricked himself into thinking this was all a dream, the plane began to shake more violently. Outside, twilight had fallen. They had been in the plane all day and still hadn’t arrived at their destination. Worse, it looked like it was snowing. No, storming. When Skyla got up and confirmed this, Hugh wondered what would happen if he fainted right there. Just passed the fuck out, and whether he woke up in Icirrus or never woke again, at least he wouldn’t have to live through this experience a minute longer.

“Okay, everyone!” Skyla shouted to be heard as she walked the length of the aisle holding on to the bars lining the roof of the compartment to keep balance. “Listen up, we’ve arrived in Icirrus! Go ahead and equip those safety packs we handed out, okay? We’re cleared to drop!”

“Drop?” Hugh said in a small voice that the engines completely drowned out.

When he saw the Valkyries get up and shoulder their orange safety packs, he grew nervous. When they opened the hull door and let in the screaming storm winds, he felt his heart leap into his throat and visions of his childhood flash before his eyes. But when they began to jump out one by one, bright blue and orange confetti sucked into the wind and snow out of sight, he just about shat his pants.

“No fucking way,” he said.

Iris was being helped into her safety pack, and one of Skyla’s Valkyries strapped himself to her. Hugh watched in horror as Iris bravely approached the exit, pulled down her goggles, and jumped out with her Valkyrie escort like she was the world’s badass-est of badasses and she didn’t care who knew it. Benga was next, and he winked at Hugh just before he and his Valkyrie partner jumped out. Yancy looked nervous, but she bravely took the plunge next, followed by Nate, who smiled back at Hugh in a way that did absolutely nothing to help. Rosa looked like she would rather swallow a bag of needles than jump, but Skyla reassured her.

“Unfortunately, the storm makes Flying dangerous!” she shouted to be heard. “Chase’ll take good care of you, I promise!”

Chase saluted his fair Gym Leader, and Rosa cast a last glance back at Hugh like she wanted someone to remember her after she was gone. And then, she really was gone, just sucked out like she’d never been there at all. Hugh was next, but they would have to pry his safety pack out of his cold dead fingers. Unfortunately, a Valkyrie almost twice Hugh’s size was more than happy to do just that, and soon Hugh found himself strapped in and standing near the open doorway unable
even to hear his own thoughts over the howling storm winds. Snow smacked his cheeks and numbed his nose, and for as far as he could see the sky was grey and empty. There was no sign of the ground below, and the mountains were barely faint silhouettes in the murky gloom. He gripped the edges of the doorway so hard he was sure he might pierce the metal coating.

Skyla’s hand on his shoulder nearly made him jump out of his own accord. “Just close your eyes and think of home!” she said. “You’ll be fine!”

“F-F-F-Fuck—!” Hugh began, but he never finished his sentence when the big Valkyrie he was strapped to leaped out of the plane and sent them both hurtling into space.

Hugh screamed, or at least he thought he screamed—he couldn’t be sure over the surging banshee winds and biting cold that smacked him around like an abusive husband. He tumbled over and over himself, and soon he had no idea which way was up and which way was his imminent and violent death. The big Valkyrie strapped to him shouted something, but it was drowned out in the chaos. Thick arms wrapped around Hugh to keep him from flailing wildly, and Hugh squeezed his eyes closed but found that that was worse. All he could see was endless grey and the sick feeling of movement, free-falling.

He tried to think of home, like Skyla had said, anything to take him away from this nightmare, but it was no use. The mountains rushed to meet him through the fog, and he imagined his body landing among them, crushed on impact and jelly-soft. The snows were fierce, but the farther Hugh fell, the less they swirled and obscured, as if they dared not follow. The sight he saw would’ve taken his breath away if he’d already spent it all screaming hysterically. Icirrus City, the City in the Clouds, glittered like a diamond amidst the snow and ice surrounded by black mountain stone and tall green pines. The glass peaks of its buildings stretched to meet him like a burst of cresting crystals and frozen light, and the frost covering the paved roads shimmered mirage-like in the dying light of day. Hugh barely had time to admire it when he was violently jerked back. His parachute was released, and it caught the swelling winds and propelled him harshly south. The Valkyrie he was attached to was steering, albeit poorly, and Hugh finally lost what little was left of his dignity and retched up his lunch.

The remainder of the descent passed in a queasy blur, and he collapsed when his feet hit solid ground. Soon he was unstrapped from his Valkyrie escort and given a hand up to stand. He wiped his mouth and coughed, his breath misting, and tore off his goggles, which had frosted and fogged up. He looked around at the others gathered and found them all in a similar state of recovery. They had landed in an open snowbank somewhere just outside of town, and all around them the Twist Mountains towered higher than they did anywhere else in Unova, white-bearded old men looking down on them in stony judgment. Hugh looked up and was amazed to see that the snow had stopped, at least down here. Above, the storm raged on and buffeted the rest of their parachuting party. But below, the air was still and calm, and he could hear voices and footsteps.

“Hugh!” Nate called to him.

He had Lampent in hand, bright with violet light, and trudged through the snow to meet him. Hugh was grateful for the shoulder to lean on.

“You okay?”

Hugh glared at him. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

Nate grinned. “You sound like Hugh, all right.”

Hugh saw steam rising between them, and he looked down to see that the snow around Nate’s feet
was fast melting and soaking both their boots. He stared.

*What the fuck?*

More of their party landed and extricated themselves from their parachute lines and each other, but Hugh’s and Nate’s attention was drawn to the people who were fast approaching from town. There were a lot of them, all armed and armored in leather and fur and steel, and they carried spears and swords and lances. But their blades were curiously pale, not quite the silver of steel so much as the milky pallor of moonlight. They had Pokémon with them, burly Beartic and creepy Cryogonal, a pair of towering Aurorus and even a handful of the rare snow-white Ninetales, whose weight mysteriously did not sink the powder snow on which the Fairy foxes walked. Leading the procession was a man who, on first glance, embodied everything Hugh ever imagined a fairytale warrior prince could be. He was tall and slender, and his white mail and plate armor was studded with precious blue diamonds. He carried a pale longsword, the same strange milky substance as the other weapons. The blade rippled in the light, shimmering as if the metal swam, liquid bright. When he removed his helm, he revealed himself to be a man as pale as the snow he treaded, his hair long and straight like a woman’s and so platinum blond it was nearly white. Intense blue eyes as immortal as the diamonds studding his ostentatious armor stared unflinchingly at the parachuters who had dared to intrude on his land. And it was his land, Hugh decided. No one else exuded the frosty confidence this man did, the kind of confidence only the truly beautiful and the truly wealthy and the truly powerful can emanate.

His Pokémon flanked him. A huge Beartic lumbered behind him decked out in his own battle armor, but it was the creature hovering beside him that gave Hugh genuine pause. He looked like he had once been a Glalie, a ghastly floating skull covered in patches of leathery, frostbitten, black skin and ice. But there was something different about this creature. He was bigger than any Glalie Hugh had ever seen or heard of before, his maw hanging open and grotesquely dislocated at the hinges. He breathed frost that seemed to freeze even the snow on the ground, and his deadened blue eyes glowed with quiet malice. Hugh wondered if this was another Mega Pokémon, and then he had another unsettling thought: could Mega Glalie be responsible for the odd snow globe weather? Storms didn’t just end fifty feet above ground level…

Skyla, who had landed and unhooked her parachute like the tempestuous fall had bored her and she could not wait to get to the action, approached the warriors who had come to meet them. Iris was right there with her, and Iris’s people followed her.

“Hey, let’s go,” Nate said, dragging Hugh along.

Hugh didn’t have much of a choice but to follow, and so he did.

“Brycen,” Skyla greeted with her usual cheer. “It’s been a while.”

Gym Leader Brycen, the third and final Triumvir with whom they would have to parlay, regarded Skyla with almost elven regality. There was something distinctly otherworldly about him that his men did not share, like he had been plucked from another time and even another species entirely. Brycen approached Skyla, who was shivering in the cold despite her thermal flight suit and cap, and touched bare pale fingers to her ruddy cheek. The cold seemed not to affect him at all.

“Skyla,” he said. Even his voice was attractive. Hugh hated the guy already. Teenage dream-level beautiful, happy to flaunt his obvious wealth and power, and an affinity for cold, dead, and drear. He was the kind of man who made other men feel like giving up all prospects of ever accomplishing anything of value in their lives, better in every imaginable way.

Brycen’s wintry gaze shifted to take in the crowd, and Hugh shivered when that gaze briefly cast in
his direction. “I see you’ve brought guests.”

“Yup! These are the ones I wrote to you about,” Skyla said, oblivious to Brycen’s frigid presence. Hugh wondered if she was that good of an actress, or just shallow.

“Gym Leader Brycen,” Iris said, boldly stepping forward. “Thank you for agreeing to meet with me and my people. I know you’re a very busy man.”

Brycen looked down at Iris who, for all her commanding presence, looked like nothing but a child shivering in the cold next to him.

“The Halfling Dragon Princess,” Brycen said. “You’re…smaller than I imagined you would be.”

“Iris Fafnir,” Iris said in a tone that seemed to Hugh to mount a challenge without actually threatening Brycen. “My height is the only thing small about me, I assure you.”

Brycen regarded her. “I see,” he said, though it sounded to Hugh like he didn’t see at all. “I find myself quite busy these days, it’s true, but…not so busy as to pass up an opportunity to meet the thorn in Drayden’s side.”

If Iris was bothered by his manner of speaking to her, she did not let on. Hugh had no idea what to make of their conversation, and he didn’t really care to try at the moment. Nate next to him, however, was watching as if this was the most exciting thing that had happened to him all day.

“I trust you and yours won’t mind the cold during your stay.” Brycen set a hand on Mega Glalie. “Winter is nearly upon us, and I sense this one will be long and arduous.”

Incredibly, the storm raging above began to quell as he spoke. The raging winds died down, and the snow fell in fat fluffy flakes, the mystical barrier sheltering the city mysteriously gone.

“I’m counting on it,” Iris said.

“Well, then,” Brycen said flatly, gesturing to the city behind him. “Welcome to Icirrus.”

Skyla smiled brightly and fell into step with Brycen, who escorted her by the arm like a gentleman, and the rest of their group followed.

Bunking with Nate in a tiny cave carved into a mountainside back in Mistralton had been a trying experience, the kind of place that gave Hugh the creeps to get up in the middle of the night to take a piss. Better to stay in bed huddled under the covers than to face the howling night winds and staggering heights, the cold stone floors and the feeling that at any moment, the room would cave in and he and his full bladder would be buried alive.

Compared to that, Icirrus was a luxury. No, it was another world entirely, and not just any world, but a five-star paradise that spared no expense. Hugh had his own room in a huge log cabin complex just outside of town, as did everyone else in their large party, though it was not so much a room as a hotel suite complete with every necessary amenity and plenty of unnecessary ones, as well. His bed was a four-poster queen with Swanna down pillows and a thick Mareep wool duvet dyed a forbidding midnight blue. He had a fireplace and a sitting room complete with an antique tea set, a cast iron tub large enough to accommodate two, and a huge abstract watercolor painting of the northern lights that Hugh found himself staring at and actually feeling something. A X-Transceiver phone connected him to some sort of concierge that promised to accommodate any
request he might have, from food to a spa treatment to girls, depending on his particular proclivities. The Gym Leader’s guests were to be given the royal treatment, and no request was too big or too brazen. Hugh hung up the phone so fast he nearly broke the receiver.

That first night in Icirrus, there was to be a feast welcoming them all, so Hugh bathed, washed the taste of vomit from his mouth, and changed into the warmest clothes he had. When he was finished, he headed outside. Though it was still technically autumn, Icirrus appeared to have only one season for every occasion. Snow continued to fall in quiet fluffy flakes the size of golf balls, covering everything in a soft foggy whiteness made blue under the veiled moonlight behind the clouds. It was a dark night, but not particularly cold so long as one kept moving. Hugh’s breath misted through his scarf. There was no sound at all except for the faint rustling of snowflakes landing in the trees and in his hair. Hugh breathed deeply and stuffed his hands deep in his pockets. He would have to find a body of water that wasn’t totally frozen over for his Pokémon at some point.

Others were emerging from the various buildings to make their way to the Gym for tonight’s dinner, and Hugh fell into step with them. He recognized a few of Skyla’s Valkyries, although Skyla herself was nowhere to be seen. No sign of Iris and Benga, either, but he did spy Yancy and Nate together a ways ahead of him.

“Hello!” Nuria jogged to catch up with him.

“Oh,” Hugh said, lacking her enthusiasm. “Hey.”

Nuria was bundled up for the weather like a stuffed ham. She even had honest to god snow pants and crampons for her boots. The metal tines clinked on the packed snow and stone path they followed into town.

“It’s so cold here!” Nuria complained. “I never imagined a place so cold existed.”

Hugh shrugged. “It’s not that cold.”

“It is. Even the water here is all frozen. It’s not even supposed to be winter yet!”

Something told Hugh it was always winter here with Mega Glalie around, but it was pointless to argue with Nuria. She sneezed suddenly and groaned, rubbing her nose. Hugh rolled his eyes.

“You’ll be fine when we get inside,” he tried to reassure her, but it came out sounding like a chastisement.

Nuria nodded. Her dark eyes appeared nearly black in the gloom, though Hugh imagined her nose was bright red.

“Hey,” he said, “what do you think about finding someplace for our Swimmers to stretch out later? Even a buncha Crystallos hafta keep running water around.”

He meant it to cheer her spirits a little, but she looked at him gravely. “I doubt they have anything that will be big enough to fit Gorebyss. And there’s Iris’s Gyarados to think about, too. Ugh, how can people stand to live so far from the ocean? I could never do it.”

“Beats me.”

They were entering the main part of the city now, and Hugh and Nuria each took in the sights with quiet reverence. It was an old city, and perfectly preserved, unlike Driftveil and Mistralton. The civil wars had not touched this place the way they had the others. It was a cold and forbidding city
of stone, but the roofs of nearly every building were glass-topped green houses brimming with life insulated from the cold. There was hardly any color to the place, especially on this dreary night, but even so it was possessed of the kind of beauty reserved for graveyards—melancholy and empty, but unchanging and deeply personal. It was the kind of place one would wander alone, lost in thought under the falling snow.

The city was nestled on all sides by snowy peaks that crowded the buildings together with nowhere to expand, like so many shivering bodies huddled together to keep warm. Switchbacked paths zigzagged down the mountain faces connecting the city to numerous mining tunnels. The night shifts were busy transporting the day’s haul down the mountains to be processed, but soon the workers would return to the warmth and light of their homes to rest until the next morning.

“It’s so quiet,” Nuria commented as they passed by lighted storefronts, all in the same solemn stone façade as the rest. “Like no one’s here.”

Hugh was struck by how quiet it indeed was. There seemed to be very few people out, though it was early yet. Perhaps the snow had driven them inside. Whatever the reason, Hugh found it incredibly unsettling.

The Gym was a sprawling building that took up an entire city block in the center of downtown. It was easily the tallest building around, though none of Icirrus’s buildings was over six stories tall. Like the rest of the buildings, the Gym was crowned in glass and green and presented the same dark stone façade. There were people there to greet them all and usher them inside, and Hugh was swept along with the crowd not up, as he expected, but down. They descended three levels, and he knew they must be underground. Nonetheless, the stone and earth tunnels were large enough to accommodate a Mamoswine, and they were well-preserved and well-lit. And they were full of people.

All the sounds that had been wanting above ground hit him down here like a slap in the face. People bustled along the tunnels, which branched off in various directions. Couples rushed by on their way to a romantic dinner, dusty miners shuffled along in groups of twenty or more after a day’s hard work, school-children finishing their club activities gossiped and laughed and patronized the various food and sweet stalls set up along the walls. The entire city was alive down here where they had warmth and shelter from the elements. Hugh wondered just how bad it could get when winter was in full swing for the these people to have built up a network of tunnels that touched every corner of the city.

They came up in a nearby building that was only a single story above ground, but it was the largest dining hall Hugh had ever seen. In place of walls, there were only thick panes of glass that offered a clear view of the sky and the dark mountains, impressive on this grey night but no doubt stunning when it was clear. In place of the natural night sky hidden behind the snow clouds tonight, they had lit up thousands of tiny lights in the glass that glowed and dimmed in waves of green and indigo and blue after the northern lights said to be visible during the coldest nights of the year. It was so realistic that Hugh couldn’t help but admire the display. How the hell had they gotten all those little lights up there? Whose job had that been?

Hugh was seated at one of the long communal tables before he quite knew what was going on, and he just sort of went with it. He was next to a big man he did not recognize. The guy was as broad shouldered as a Bouffalant with hands like ham hocks and a neck so thick there was no telling where it ended and his head began. His skin was the color of polished teak, and his eyes, impossibly, were even darker, two black pits over a broad fleshy nose with huge nostrils. Most eye-catching of all was his hair, long dark dreadlocks woven with iron clasps and silver bells and a faded blue ribbon that would have suited a woman better, perhaps a lover’s favor. Hugh soon
learned that his name was Trygg, he was already two tankards of ale into the meal that had not yet begun, and he was a Gladiator.

“Wait, a what?”

“Gladiator,” Trygg said in a voice so low and rumbling it was like to trigger a fault line. “I’m Brycen’s man.”

Hugh thought about that. “You mean like a Gym trainer?”

Trygg chuckled. It was a pleasant chuckle, the kind that sounds like the person is truly enjoying the conversation. “I said I’m a Gladiator, boy. My training was in the frozen Twist Mountains and the Moor of Icirrus. My sword’s tasted blood and ice alike, and my shield’s never once been broken. I’ve killed more men than I can count and bedded more women than I can remember. Once, I slew a Zoroark and took his pelt for my own. His mate was so smitten with my strength that she took me to bed in his place.”

“Wait, you fucked a Zoroark?”

Trygg grinned conspiratorially. His teeth were impossibly white against the coal of his skin, almost uncomfortably so. He leaned in like he dared not let anyone overhear their conversation. “Best fuck I ever had. They’re tricksters, Zoroark, always changing their shape, you know. Mine transformed into the most beautiful woman you ever saw, with full hips made for dancing and breasts ripe as summer melons. And she was soft, oh was she soft, the kind of woman you can grab by the handful.” He demonstrated with his meaty hand by squeezing a roll of doughy bread set out before the food was served. It gave in his fingers and released hot steam. “Bore me nine strong pups, she did. It’s how I got my name.”

Hugh narrowed his eyes. “Trygg Fox-Fucker?”

Trygg threw his massive head back in a guffaw so loud and deep that it seemed to rattle the foundations of the room. It was a good long laugh, full-bellied and raucous, and by the time he calmed, his eyes glistened with mirth. “That was well met! You know, I’ve always said all you need to live a good life is heart and humor. A little of one, a little of the other, and you’ll face every day hale and happy. What do you call yourself, boy?”

“I’m Hugh,” said Hugh. “And I’m not a boy. I’m a Syreni, from Aspertia City.”

“All southerns’re boys until you’ve survived your first northern winter. Syreni, eh? Best keep yourself warm, or you’re like to freeze those little pink balls right off. Here’s a start.”

Trygg filled Hugh’s empty tankard with ale from a jug on the table before Hugh could say a word about it. Then, Trygg smashed his own tankard to Hugh’s, who was forced to hold on or risk spilling ale all over himself.

“Cheers,” said Trygg, looking at Hugh expectantly.

Hugh said the first thing that came to mind. “May we all one day have balls as hairy and warm as yours.”

Trygg guffawed again, drawing stares, but drank merrily like this was the greatest fun he’d had all year. Hugh cracked a smile at the big man’s callow sense of humor that was nonetheless endearing in its sincerity, and he took a drink. The ale was so cold that he nearly choked keeping it down. When he examined the tankard, he noticed the iron was dusted with fine frostlings vaguely in the shape of a handprint. He licked his lips to warm them.
“You’re all right, Hugh,” Trygg said. “You stick with me, and you might just survive this winter we got coming.”

Something about Trygg’s crass sensibility reminded Hugh of Harrison, though he was sure the two men could not have been more different in personality. Hugh got the sense that the man was a storyteller at heart, the kind of man who thrived on laughter and good cheer and was willing to say just about anything to let others thrive on it, too. The longer the feast went on, the more Hugh learned about his jovial neighbor. Heart and humor, that was the kind of man Trygg was. A man who was easy to like and even easier to trust.

“Are all the Gladiators Crystallos?” Hugh asked as he worked his way through the main course: Unfezant stuffed with Figy berries and roasted in honey and rosemary.

“Well, we got the quorum, that’s no lie,” Trygg said. “But some of the men’re plebs, few skuffs in the mix, too. Why, you thinking of trying out? Never had a Syreni Gladiator before, s’far as I know, but there’s no rule against it. Wouldn’t be easy, though. You’d have to survive the training without freezing to death.”

“Tempting, but I’ll pass,” Hugh said. “How many of you are there? Is it just the Gladiators, or does Icirrus have a regular militia, too?”

Trygg chewed on a large drumstick. Slathers of honey dribbled down his chin, and he wiped the sticky hot syrup with a cloth napkin so soiled from previous use that it hardly did any good.

“Thinking of heading into battle, Syreni?”

“Not until Iris can convince Gym Leader Legolas up there,” Hugh said, frowning.

He glanced at the head of the room, where a dais had been raised and seated the feast’s most important guests, of whom Hugh was clearly not one. Brycen sat at the center in all his princely splendor. Hugh was pretty sure the guy’s hair was fake. No man had hair like that. Not even many women had hair like that. Skyla sat next to him in the place of high honor, along with her second, Chase, and a few other high-ranking Valkyries. Yancy was also at their table, but Hugh figured someone had to speak for Nimbasa and Yancy wouldn’t want to pass up the chance to make her case to Brycen. Iris was there with her lieutenant, Moros, but Soriel was conspicuously absent. Hugh hadn’t talked to Moros much, but he got the distinct impression that Moros was a by-the-book kind of guy who lived for his duties and little else. Curiously, Benga was not with Iris, but instead sat with the masses. Hugh watched as Benga regaled a few Gladiators and Valkyries with some idiotic story, his hands gesticulating wildly for emphasis. They seemed at least momentarily captivated by whatever bullshit he was telling them.

That’s weird, Hugh thought. Benga and Iris were pretty much conjoined at the hip. Why wouldn’t she deem it important for him, her most important ally, to be with her as she spoke to Brycen?

But weirder still was Nate’s presence on the dais on Iris’s other side where Benga should have been. He was quiet as he listened to the conversation, but he was there.

“The Dragon King’s bastard,” Trygg said. “She’s not half as beautiful as I’d heard, though bastards never are.”

“I don’t care what she looks like,” Hugh said. “She stopped the Neos in Driftveil, and she convinced old man Clay to change his mind about us after he was basically gonna excommunicate us. She’s the best thing that’s happened to us since Castelia, and she didn’t need balls to do it, hairy or otherwise.”
Hugh drank a long swig of ale, wincing at the bitter taste. When he set down his tankard, he found Trygg looking at him thoughtfully.

“Might be that’s true,” Trygg said, “but Drayden’s no simpering fool.”

“Neither is Iris.” Hugh could still remember the way she’d risen up on Dragonite and decimated the Plasma Frigate, doing in one smashing blow what would have taken a whole army to accomplish. He’d never seen anything like it. If only she’d acted sooner, maybe Cheren wouldn’t have gone down with the Neos.

He drained his tankard with a violence that shook his hands and slammed it down on the table, startling the woman next to him and drawing a few looks. Rosa was seated a few chairs down, though he hadn’t noticed her until now. They locked gazes for a brief moment. If Iris hadn’t acted when she did, it might have been Rosa at the bottom of the bay with Cheren. Hugh looked away.

“I hear she has a Dragonite,” Trygg said, oblivious to Hugh’s inner thoughts. “Not too many of those around, true enough, but Drayden’s got a Salamence. I saw it once. You know the Red Plague that swept through Opelucid some fifteen years back?”

“I know it,” Hugh said.

“Well, they call that motherfucker the Second Coming. They say Drayden feeds the beast other Dragons, the ones that disobey or get too old or get hurt and can’t fight anymore. And I don’t just mean the Dragons with scales and claws. There’s nothing on this great green earth half as accursed as the cannibal.” Trygg looked very grim as he shared this information with Hugh.

Hugh wasn’t sure if he believed that, but Trygg seemed to, and that was all that mattered. “All the more reason to take them all down. The Neos, Opelucid, whoever they got in their pockets. Their time is up.”

The threat rang hollow to his ears, deflated somehow. He suddenly felt quite tired. Perhaps he’d had too much to drink, or not enough.

“Now that I’ll drink to,” Trygg said. He grinned, and it made him look half a beast himself.

The rest of the dinner passed in much a blur to Hugh as he went through the motions of trying to eat. At one point, Nuria found him again and tried to get him to sign a drinking song with her, but it was in Adriati and Hugh couldn’t remember the words she tried to teach him, though he gave it a remarkable amount of effort that surprised them both. Too late, he realized he’d had way too much to drink and couldn’t keep his sea legs. The party was still going, but Hugh struggled to stay awake and upright, and he sank into a chair and began eating a slice of pie that wasn’t his with a fork he picked up from the floor. He made it about halfway through before he realized it was Cheri and he fucking hated Cheri. He was so disgusted that he threw the fork and the bit of pie stuck to the tines across the table, where it nearly hit a fat woman who was red in the face from laughing at some joke the man next to her had regaled her with. She looked at Hugh like he’d meant to stab her with the errant utensil. A pair of hands took him by the shoulders and hauled him up. His feet began to move, though not of their own accord. Someone was half dragging half carrying him out of the hall back into the subterranean tunnels.

They made it just out of the dining room when Hugh’s stomach twisted and he vomited all over his escort. The man, one of the wait staff who had at some point dressed Hugh in his parka and looked ready to escort him home, cursed colorfully and pushed Hugh off him.

“Disgusting,” the man spat, not at all pleased that he now had vomit on his uniform.
Hugh wiped his mouth and tried to say something, but the man just left him in the tunnel. It was late and there weren’t many people about, but the few who passed him, either leaving or returning to the party, shot him embarrassed stares and hurried past like they were afraid they might catch a disease if they lingered too long. Hugh clutched his head in his hands and groaned. If it wasn’t so fucking cold on the ground, he might just curl up and sleep here. Hell, he might just do it anyway. There was no way he was getting back to his room across town in a place he didn’t know at night and too drunk to walk on his own.

“Fuck,” he said to himself. “You fucking fuck…”

He had no idea what he was saying, only that there was a growing ball of ugly twisting heat in the pit of his belly making him sick. Sick with drink and sick with the cold and sick with this whole fucking escapade, he grew angrier and angrier. What the hell were they even doing here? Why were they feasting and dancing and drinking the night away when the Neos were out there probably plotting their next bloody massacre right now? When N himself was still out there possibly with a goddamned mythical Dragon under his control?

“Goddamnit,” he muttered, unable to think of N without thinking of Hailey. “Goddamnit all.”

“Are you happy now?” Rosa had asked him, knowing he must be. Of course he would be. He’d been right about N all along, and she had been chasing a pipe dream. Yeah, who wouldn’t be fucking overjoyed?

“Hugh,” a familiar voice was saying. “Hugh, wake up.”

Hands shook him, not roughly but hard enough to get his attention through the stupor.

“Come on, Hugh, you have to get up.”

Even so, she dragged him up all on her own and managed somehow to sling his arm over her shoulders. And then, she began to walk.

“Rosa,” Hugh muttered. “Just… Just stop, ‘m fine.”

“You’re not fine,” she said, hurrying them along. “You’re wasted.”

Hugh felt his feet dragging. He hissed when his toe stubbed against the uneven stone floor.

“Wasted,” he said. “Waaasted.” He liked the way that sounded.

Rosa didn’t respond except to hoist his weight higher on her shoulder. Soon, the frigid night air hit them and Hugh sneezed something awful when he inhaled snowflakes.

“She’s right,” he slurred. “‘S cold here. Cold as, as fucking…just goddamn cold.”

“We’re nearly there, just keep it together,” Rosa said in a voice he couldn’t really read. It was like talking to a robot. Or maybe her voice was all in his head, and he was still in the tunnel on the floor imagining freezing his balls off. That thought made him laugh. Not enough hair on them, after all.

“Come on, Hugh, it’s not far now.”

A part of him, a very small part, had some inkling that he was being a complete douche making her practically carry his sorry drunk ass through the snow in the middle of the night, so he started to try to shuffle his feet and walk with her. Why was she even here? She’d made it pretty clear that she hated him.
“I don’t hate you,” she said, but it came out sounding a little like ‘fuck off’. Well, not that he could really blame her given the current circumstances, but still.

“Get outta my head,” he complained. Did he say that one out loud, too? He couldn’t tell.

Suddenly, the wind gusted and Hugh got a mouthful of snow when the ground rushed up to meet him. He’d tripped over a snowdrift and brought them both down in the powder. Rosa scrambled to her feet and cursed.

“Damnit, Hugh!”

She checked herself for any serious injury and, finding none, rolled him into a sitting position. She put her hands on him then.

“Where are they?” she said, tugging open his parka and fumbling at his waist.

He tried to grab at her wandering hands. “Hey,” he said.

She ignored him and found what she’d been looking for: his Pokéballs. She selected one at random and got up.

“Maybe Samurott will have more luck,” she said, tossing it out.

But it was not Samurott that appeared in the blinding light. The creature coalesced amidst the light and grew out of it. He was sleek black scales and fluttering bloodless fins, teeth and talons. He was twenty feet long from his gaping jawless mouth to the end of his tapering serpentine tail, and he hovered above the snow as if repelled by it. Electricity danced up and down his muscular arms and coiled around his webbed talons, sharp for cutting through flesh and scale and bone.

It took Hugh a couple seconds to take it all in, but Rosa was sober and self-aware, and she did the sensible thing and screamed. Hugh got knocked back and ate snow again, and she tripped over him in her haste to get away.

“W-What the hell?!” she said.

Hugh shook the snow from his hair and stared in awe and a little horror at the Eelektross that had no business being there the size that it was. Hugh saw his breaths coming in foggy puffs as his heart rate accelerated in conjunction with Eelektross moving—slithering through the air like it was water.

Twenty feet long, Hugh thought, horrified. Twenty fucking feet!

Eelektross rarely grew to lengths longer than twelve or thirteen feet even in the wild. And they never evolved so fast. He’d still been an Eelektrik just days ago in Mistralton, a little lethargic and under the weather for a few weeks ever since he popped out of his Pokéball at the Mistralton hangar…

Eelektross slithered closer to Hugh, and he had to admit that even shiftfaced, Eelektross was a fucking science fiction nightmare to behold. He couldn’t imagine what Rosa was feeling. Thankfully, she could be counted on to let him know with her words.

“Hugh, what did you do?!?” she demanded, shaking him.

“Ow! Fucking—stop shaking me!”
Rosa stopped, but not on his account. Eelektross came closer, and she got up and got away real fast to search for his Pokéball, which she’d dropped in the snow. Hugh, meanwhile, looked up into Eelektross’s filmy black eyes and reached up a hand to touch his mouth. It hung open and dripped something foul-smelling and sticky that melted the snow when it dribbled to the ground. The falling snow fried as soon as it came within inches of Eelektross’s electrified scales.

Where did you come from? he wanted to ask as he touched a hand to Eelektross’s snout and suffered a mild static shock. All that came out was an eloquent ‘Hey.’

A flash of light later, and Eelektross once more disappeared inside his Pokéball. Rosa had managed to retrieve it from the snow, and she looked out of breath for her efforts. She trudged back to Hugh, shoved Eelektross’s Pokéball at him, and released Sawsbuck.

“Sorry,” she said, helping Hugh get up.

“It’s fine,” he said.

“Not you, Sawsbuck. You reek of vomit.”

“Oh.”

Being carried like an old sack of grain through the woods surrounding Icirrus City while in a drunken stupor gave Hugh an uncanny sense of déjà vu. Hadn’t there been another ride of shame out of town somewhere? He tried to remember, but all he could think of was coffee. Coffee and vodka. The thought made him sick again.

By the time they reached the apartments, Sawsbuck had lost a good pound or two of his remaining golden antler leaves and left a trail of them to mark their passing, like breadcrumbs one might follow back the way they’d come. The snow would soon bury them, though. For some reason, the thought made Hugh a little sad.

Rosa helped him down and dragged him inside. Somehow, he ended up back in the room they’d given him, on the bed whose lavish comforts he couldn’t properly appreciate, and out of the wet parka and jeans he’d been wearing. He rolled over and buried his face in the pillow while Rosa got a fire going. He tried to listen to her moving around, to wait until she left to show his face again, but her sounds blurred together and eventually faded. He felt the warmth of the fire on his face and felt the covers pulled over his shoulders. He wondered if it was her, if she’d left.

Sorry, he wanted to tell her. He could picture the way she’d looked at him that night at Shauntal’s before she ran out, those green eyes wide as if it had been her N had sacrificed. I’m sorry.

Then there was nothing but darkness.

It was a few days before Hugh got the nerve to emerge from his room after the mess he’d made of himself that first night in Icirrus. Nate had been to visit him the most, and Yancy a few times, too. Benga dropped in briefly with Nuria, who offered to take his Pokémon to a nearby lake where they could let their Swimmers out to stretch and hunt. Hugh sent her off with everyone but Vibrava, forgot to warn her about the abnormally large Eelektross lurking in his party, and ran out after her. Once he’d done that, he figured there was no point in skulking back inside with his tail between his legs.

It was a beautiful day in the mountains. The sky was so clear and blue that just looking at it made
Hugh cold down to his toes despite his double layer of woolen socks. The snows had finally let up last night, and today the world was still and clean. He stood outside in the woods facing north toward the city and breathed deeply. If he closed his eyes, he could picture Aspertia. It never got this cold down south, but even Aspertia had its share of cold fronts down from the north. The air here reminded him of home. It had that same crisp purity the air north of town had, where the lakes were clear and deep and the foothills of these very mountains rolled over each other in a race to the top. But the Aspertian air didn’t burn like this air did. If he breathed it in too deeply for too long, he was sure his lungs would fill with ice and freeze him from the inside out.

Hugh wrapped his scarf tighter around his nose and mouth and lowered his ugly green beanie over his ears as low as it would go, leaving only a small opening slashed across his face for his eyes. Then, he trudged toward town.

His first thought was that he should check in with Nate and see what the hell was even going on with Brycen. Nate had tried to explain that he was working with Iris on things, that he was learning a lot from her and that she seemed to value his perspective, but Hugh had a hard time following the details of it all. He had little patience for these tawdry political machinations and no desire to be a part of them. The last time he’d tried to get a Gym Leader to listen, it had blown up in his face. And something about Brycen just pissed him off. Guys like that, the ones who had a little bit of power and knew it, were the worst kind if you asked Hugh.

Nate was nowhere to be found, however, and Icirrus was not a small town. Hugh wandered around downtown, poked his head in a few shops, and generally kept to himself. There was a cafe on the corner that looked open, and he could smell the roasting coffee beans and fresh-baked cookies when a customer exited as he passed. He went inside on a whim, hoping to find something to warm him up a little. Somehow, it was colder on this clear day than it had been while it was snowing before.

It was a cozy place, the kind where patrons hung out for hours reading a book at the bar or chatting with friends on the couches. Hugh ordered a coffee and checked out the selection of cookies while he waited. The snickerdoodles were tempting him, but they were wildly overpriced.

“Hugh,” said a familiar voice. “Hey, how are you?”

“Yancy, hey,” Hugh said, nodding to her. He looked around, but she appeared to be alone. “Nate’s not with you?”

She was flushed from some recent exertion, and she had her naginata strapped to her back. Her clothing was snow-blown and damp. “No, I was doing some exercise with Mienshao. I think he said something about meeting with Iris this morning, but I haven’t seen him.”

They stared at each other for an awkward pause, and then Hugh winced. “Shit, sorry. You probably want a coffee.”

Yancy smiled. “The thought had crossed my mind.”

She went to order, and Hugh reached for his wallet. “Hey, let me get it.”

“Oh, you don’t have to.”

“No, it’s fine, really. I, uh, consider it you doing me a favor.”

Yancy looked at him thoughtfully, but she didn’t pry further. “Okay, thanks.”

They grabbed a table with their coffees and sat down to admire the wintry scene outside.
“Icirrus is so beautiful,” Yancy said dreamily. “It’s like living in a snow globe. I can’t believe this place is on the same continent as Nimbasa.”

“Tell me about it,” Hugh said. And then, because undoubtedly all of Icirrus had heard about his night of debauchery and Yancy was being polite in not bringing it up first, he added, “Look, Yancy, about the other night.”

“What about it?”

He shifted in his seat. “I mean, you know. I don’t really remember a lot, but I remember I was bad. I wasn’t, I mean, I didn’t do anything to, you know, make things harder or…or something…?”

She smiled. “You think you getting drunk somehow blew our chances at convincing Brycen to help?”

Hugh stared a hole through his paper coffee cup.

“Sorry to break it to you, but you’re not even on Brycen’s radar. Honestly, I’m pretty sure none of us is…” She shook her head. “Anyway, I’m cautiously optimistic about Icirrus. General Trygg came out for Iris yesterday. So if he thinks we have a point, then that has to mean something, right?”

Hugh wasn’t sure he heard her right. “Wait, who?”

“General Trygg,” Yancy said. “He’s the commander of the Gladiators. I mean, under Brycen, obviously, but he’s basically the number two military commander in Icirrus as far as I understand it. I wasn’t there when this happened, but apparently he just interrupted a meeting Brycen was having with Iris and Skyla and the city council, and he said Icirrus should support Iris over Drayden.” Yancy shrugged.

*The commander of the Gladiators,* Hugh thought, incredulous. *I called him a fox-fucker.*

“Did he give a reason?” Hugh asked hoarsely.

“Not really,” Yancy said with a shrug. “He just said something about how Iris ended the Neo Team Plasma invasion of Driftveil, and how he thought anybody who can convince Clay to reconsider anything should be taken seriously. Anyway, I’m just glad we have an insider helping us make our case, you know?”

Hugh sat back in his chair. “Yeah…”

“Anyway, thanks for the coffee, Hugh.” Yancy got up. “Hey, are you going to the Snow Festival tomorrow night?”

“Snow Festival?”

“Yeah, I think it’ll be fun. I guess it’s a festival to welcome winter. They were supposed to have it last week, but the weather’s been bad and this is the first clear day they’ve had lately. I heard they’ll have a bunch of game stalls and food, and there’s a midnight hike through the mountains. There’s also supposed to be a smith making moonsteel charms.”

“Huh?”

Yancy gave him a look like he should have known better. “You know, that pale metal all the Gladiators’ weapons are made of? It’s moonsteel, and this is the only place in the world that
produces it.” Yancy was clearly very excited about the prospect of a rare metal used for weaponry, because of course she would be. “The formula and exact composition are a secret, but there’s diamond in it, and it’s supposed to conduct cold, so the Crystallos can freeze whatever they cut. Isn’t that amazing?”

“I guess?”

Yancy waved him off. “Anyway, I gotta get going. I’m actually supposed to meet up with Nate in a bit. We’re going to check out Dragonspiral Tower.”

“What the hell kinda Dragon tower would be in a city run by Crystallos?” Hugh asked.

“Beats me. It’s technically in the mountains outside the city, though. Brycen said it was built like 3,000 years ago by some Dragon king or queen back when all this land belonged to the Titans or something, I don’t know. It’s been abandoned for centuries, and it just stands empty now I guess. Anyway, Iris wants to check it out, and Nate’s curious about it, so I thought I’d tag along. You want to come? Everyone’s been missing having you around, you know.”

Hugh snorted. “That’s rich. I’ll pass. No desire to freeze my ass off hiking in the snow.”

If Yancy was offended, she didn’t show it. Instead, she smiled warmly. “Okay. I’ll keep an eye out for any fossilized Dragon teeth and bring you back a souvenir if I find anything.”

“Thanks,” Hugh said, though he had no idea what he’d do with such a useless trinket even if Yancy miraculously did find anything there.

She turned to leave, then stopped and looked back.

“By the way, she’ll listen to you.”

Hugh gave her a weird look. “What?”

“Rosa,” Yancy said. “If you want to talk about things, even if it’s hard, she’ll listen to you. She’s better at listening than most people are. Trust me.”

Hugh flushed and glared at her, but Yancy waved and exited the coffee shop before he could say anything to that.

Trust her? Hugh mulled over what Yancy had said later that day as he walked around town with nowhere in particular to go. Since when does Yancy know so much about Rosa? Since when do I even care?

He didn’t care. He and Rosa were on opposite sides of the spectrum, that much was made abundantly clear in Driftveil and especially in the wake of Shauntal’s revelations. There was no bridging that chasm.

He wandered north out of town, where the trees grew a little thicker and the buildings popped up farther and farther apart. Above, he could see the mines in the mountainside and people hiking the switchback trails transporting cargo with the help of Pokémon. Diamond, he figured. Icirrus was famous for its diamonds, if Brycen’s designer armor was anything to go by. Hugh’s breath misted in the cold, and he shivered. The miners were so high up that he couldn’t hear a sound of their strenuous work. From down here, they look like little Durant scuttling up and down their ant hill, the day’s work never quite done. It was so fucking quiet here. How could people live like this? Aspertia was quiet outside of town, but not like this. There were neighbors, farms to tend, children playing, Pokémon going about their lives. Even the wind blew in Aspertia like it had something to
Hugh released Vibrava, wishing for anything to keep him company and remind him that unlike the immutable mountains, he was still alive and warm. Vibrava hovered over the snow, her translucent wings buzzing loudly enough to shake snow from the trees. She was immediately taken with the snow and jumped in surprise when she touched a tentative foot to it, startled by the cold. Hugh watched her.

“I guess you woulda never even dreamed of snow living in a desert all your life,” he said.

Vibrava watched him watching her, but she didn’t spook or try to fly off the handle the way she had in Mistralton. Hugh slowly approached and removed his glove, which he instantly regretted as the cold crept up his sleeve and numbed his fingers. Vibrava, still a little wary of him, nonetheless hovered marginally closer. Her compound eyes glittered green and gold in the bright sunlight, and this close to her, Hugh could make out her tiny scales packed tightly together to keep her safe from harm.

“We’re both kinda out of our element here, huh?”

Vibrava watched Hugh curiously, but she remained just out of reach of his fingertips. He held his breath and reached for her. But just before he could make contact, something snapped in a nearby tree, and Vibrava jerked, on high alert. She saw something he couldn’t, and suddenly she was flying at the tree after whatever had drawn her attention. A spooked Delibird squawked and fell and landed in the snowy tree well. Vibrava immediately went after Delibird and began to dig him out, but the red-plumed bird shot out of the snow and took off, shedding feathers and honking in his fright. Vibrava flew after him, zippy-fast.

“Great,” Hugh groaned. “That’s just fucking great.”

He was about to chase after Vibrava, but then realized there was literally no reason to do so. He couldn’t fly, he didn’t know this land, and Nuria had his other Pokémon.

“Yeah, well, you’re on your own, Vibrava!” he shouted at the fast disappearing Vibration Pokémon. “Waste of goddamned time. You wanna chase that stupid bird? Fine, don’t let me stop you.”

He turned and headed back for town, figuring he’d track down Nuria and see where the hell she’d run off to with his Pokémon. Vibrava could find him later if she didn’t want to freeze out here.

Vibrava didn’t return that night or the next morning, and Hugh was starting to worry about her. Dragons didn’t do well in extreme cold, Benga had warned him before they came up here. Hugh wondered where Vibrava had gone, and if she would come back at all. He supposed on some level he wouldn’t blame her for leaving. She’d had a rough time of it since she’d met him, from being uprooted from her home to nearly becoming Lycanroc food, and then being chased down by an army of Flyers back in Mistralton when she spooked and tried to fly off. Maybe this time she was gone for good, and honestly, Hugh couldn’t bring himself to be mad about it. But he was surprised at how depressed he felt thinking that he’d never see her again. He kept his eyes on the sky against his better judgment, wishing for the telltale hum of Vibrava’s wings.
That day, Hugh was surprised to find so many people actually outside in town instead of in the tunnels below ground. There were people hanging strings of pretty lights on the storefronts, food vendors setting up stalls, and children playing in the streets. Then Hugh remembered that Snow Festival Yancy had mentioned before. That must have been it.

Near the center of town by the Gym, people had erected magnificent ice sculptures. Hugh stopped to watch, mystified as men and women and children shaped the cold statues with their bare hands, and the statues grew into twisting ribbons, glass-like in their clarity and winding like water through the air. Others packed snow together and chiseled it into the shapes of various Pokémon. One group was building an enormous snow sculpture of a Beartic twenty feet tall in the center of it all. It was not finished, but already Hugh could see the level of detail and thought that was going into the reconstruction.

*Crystallos,* he thought as he watched the people grow the ice and snow with nothing but their bare hands and a little imagination. *One touch and I’d be a Syreni snow cone.*

He gave them a wide berth, but lingered to watch them at their work. Whatever this Snow Festival was, he supposed having snow and ice sculptures on display was probably the bare minimum requirement. Farther along, more people were setting up what looked like a stage out of snow. It would all be done in hours, in time for sunset, when the festivities were scheduled to begin. Hugh decided to head back to his room for a bit to warm up and get some food.

By the time the sun dipped behind the mountains and he wandered back out, he was late to the party. Paper lanterns hung on poles along the streets and cast their pale glow on the frosty cobblestone and the faces of the people walking along. Children laughed and squealed with delight as they tried the various carnival games, from darts to ring tosses to a variation on the horse race water gun game, which involved freezing the water as it shot out to make the cut-out Rapidash and Zebstrika racers leap toward the finish line. The pleb and skuff children fell hopelessly behind, while the Crystallos children delighted in their inherent unfair advantage.

There was food everywhere, and Hugh was not shy about sampling some of it. They were odd snacks, and everything seemed to be either pickled or raw. The drinks were a little more familiar, and Hugh helped himself to a hot chocolate piled high with marshmallows that quickly dissolved in the sweet brown heat.

The stage he’d witnessed being built earlier was now complete, and performers were getting ready to put on a show of some kind. Hugh stopped to watch them mill around the stage in elaborate costumes, marveling at how they seemed unbothered by the cold. There was a blonde woman among them who wore literal ice on her bare arms and in her hair like some blown-glass crown. She was shockingly beautiful, all high cheekbones and willowy slender frame and intense blue eyes made for drowning. Hugh couldn’t help but stare as she moved fluidly across the stage, barefoot and light as a snowflake.

“Best guard your gaze around the lady Freya,” said a familiar rumbling voice.

Trygg came to stand with Hugh to watch the stage and the players upon it. He was dressed in fine armor, hammered steel scales that gleamed like silver and thick Beartic fur. The little bells in his dreads tinkled softly with every step.

“General Trygg,” Hugh said.

His tone must have betrayed his annoyance, because Trygg grinned down at him smugly. “I see someone told you my title. Been wondering what my new Syreni friend got up to since that first night.”
Hugh scowled. “Mostly staying inside feeling sorry for myself, like an asshole. You could’ve at least mentioned who you were and saved me the extra embarrassment.”

Trygg laughed his full-bellied laugh. “And miss out on the entertainment? I think not. Boy, you had me laughing harder than I have for a while. You should never apologize for laughter.”

A pair of warriors who looked like they might be Gladiators given their armor passed and stopped to salute Trygg. “General,” they greeted.

Trygg nodded at them, and they continued on their way. Hugh watched them go, but the beautiful Freya called his attention again from the stage.

“How is she?” Hugh asked.

“Off limits,” Trygg said with a grin that suggested he might have been willing to test those limits.

“I guess once you’ve had a Zoroark, there’s no going back to the regular thing,” Hugh deadpanned.

Trygg laughed again and patted Hugh on the back good-naturedly. “Well met. But to tell it true, Freya would not satisfy my particular desires. My fellow Crystallos often don’t. Perhaps I should introduce myself to one of yours. I’ve never had a Syreni woman.”

“Well, you won’t find many up here.”

“No, I think not,” Trygg agreed. “It’s their loss, and Freya’s, too. Brycen’s beloved sister prefers the company of snow and sleet to a bed and a body to warm it. Best move along before your heart is frozen, boy.”

Brycen’s sister.

That explained her looks. He noticed the blue diamonds sewn into her flowing white dress in the shape of delicate forget-me-nots, and it seemed to him that her fingertips were blue, too. Hugh did not understand how Crystallos could survive such cold temperatures and still have a pulse.

“Why’d you do it?” Hugh said, turning to give Trygg his full attention. “Why’d you defend Iris to Brycen? He’s your boss, isn’t he?”

“You know, most people would accept the windfall and move on.”

“I wanna know,” Hugh insisted. “Did you mean it?”

Trygg studied him, taking his time with his answer. “I meant it when I said I like you, Hugh. Heart and humor, that’s what a man needs. But most men got too much of one and not enough of the other. Sometimes they got none at all. You may be a southron boy used to splashing about in sand and puddles, but there’s a passion in you. You fucking reek of it.”

Hugh glared. “Thanks a lot, asshole.”

It came out instinctively, and he immediately regretted his thoughtless insult. Trygg, however, just brushed it off.

“See? You’re Hugh, and nobody else. People will love you or hate you, but either way you don’t hide. Now, people like Brycen and Freya and your halfling Dragon princess, they hide. Not out of shame or fear, but because that’s the game they have to play. There are rules they have to follow to stay in the game, rules they can’t risk breaking.” He nodded at Freya up on the snow stage, where
she was speaking with some lower-born locals helping out with whatever the production was. “If they do, they bare their true faces, and there’s no going back from that. Your princess, she’s bastard-born, and bastards can’t wear crowns. But a true-blooded Titan can.”

Hugh thought about that. “So, what, because I’m not running around looking for an ass to shove my nose in, I’m not on their level?”

“You’re not even in the game,” Trygg said, laying a heavy hand on his shoulder and sending a frightful chill down his spine. “And you’re not trying to be. That makes you an honest man, for better and for worse. I trust an honest man to stick to what he knows.”

Hugh wasn’t sure what to say to that. He didn’t think it was a compliment, but Trygg wasn’t trying to put him down, either. Hugh believed the man when he said he liked him.

“All I know,” said Hugh, “is that there’s a shit ton I don’t know. That, and I’m no good on my own.” He thought of Nate almost dying from Koffing poison back in Virbank, the Plasma Syreni he murdered with his own hands, Trapinch and the Lycanroc. He thought of Hailey, of Harrison and Roxie, of Aldith and Cheren. And he thought of Rosa, who had every reason to despise him and yet seemed to be the only person keeping him alive and moving since Castelia. “I’ve never been any good on my own.”

“None of us is. So don’t stay on your own.”

Trygg said it so matter-of-factly that Hugh almost agreed with him outright. It seemed like such an easy thing, and yet so far out of reach.

“Gonna be a good show tonight,” Trygg said. “You enjoy yourself, Hugh. You never know what’s waiting for you tomorrow, so make the most of today. But forget about Freya. You’ll thank me for it, see if you don’t.”

Hugh nodded. “Yeah, sure.”

Trygg left and shouted at some people Hugh assumed had fucked up somehow, and he was alone again. It was dark now, but the lanterns lit up the whole city as if the stars themselves had descended to float among them just for tonight. The buildings were pillars of solid darkness in the night, but their elaborate glass roofs shimmered like moonlight over water. Hugh could not help but admire the sight. It reminded him of the sea on a clear night.

“Hugh?”

Hugh was standing in the middle of the street, wandering aimlessly, when she called to him. He knew her without having to turn, and honestly he wondered if it would look that bad if he just kept on walking and pretended not to hear.

“Hugh,” she said again.

Hugh turned. “Rosa.”

She was dressed for the weather in a thick parka and boots, and she had the most obnoxiously cute furry earmuffs that Hugh momentarily mistook for the oversized buns she favored as her typical hairstyle. Tonight she wore her hair loose and long with a thick green scarf wrapped around the lower half of her face. Something rubbed up against Hugh’s leg, and he looked down to see Leafeon shedding hair all over his pant leg. He scowled at the presumptuous feline, but bent down to give him a good scratch behind the ear.
“Are you alone?” she asked, her voice muffled by her scarf.

“Is that a crime?”

She looked at him, and it was hard to tell what she was thinking with her face half hidden. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

Hugh sighed and stood back up. He was not in the mood for an argument with Rosa right now. And his hot chocolate was empty. He crumpled the paper cup and looked around for a bin to dispose of it. She was watching him like she was waiting for something.

“You’re alone, too,” he said, trying his damnedest to make that sound not petty and offensive.

She paused, perhaps looking for the insult hidden in those words, but satisfied that this time there was none, she said, “I didn’t want to go to Dragonspiral Tower with the others.”

Well, he couldn’t blame her there, he supposed.

“What were you drinking?” she asked, indicating the crumpled paper cup.

Hugh flushed. “It was just hot chocolate,” he said a little defensively.

She frowned, and he realized his mistake.

“Just… I have every intention of staying sober tonight, is what I meant.”

“Okay.”

People passed them without paying them much mind, and Hugh noticed that she was standing a good distance from him. Leafeon looked up at him and meowed like he wanted another pet.

Hugh closed his eyes and counted to five. He knew what he should do in this situation, but it didn’t make it any less odious a task. “Listen, Rosa…”

She said nothing as she continued to watch him, and a part of him resented her for making this as difficult as it could possibly get. A larger part of him resented himself even more for being such a fucking tool.

“You want a hot chocolate?” he said, gesturing with his crumpled paper cup. “They load it with marshmallows. It’s sweeter than Slurpuff piss, but it’s hot.”

For a moment, while she continued to look at him like she was waiting for something, he was pretty sure she’d tell him to go fuck off.

“Sure,” was all she said as she walked past him and headed for the outdoor stalls the next block over.

Leafeon bounded after her, and Hugh had no choice but to follow. He jogged to catch up, and in silence they waited for the nearest vendor to pour them out two cups of hot chocolate. It tasted less sweet this time around, though Hugh wondered if he was just developing an immunity. A part of him wished the vendor had poured a shot of spirits in his, the way he was doing for some of the other patrons.

He walked with Rosa, their hot chocolates in hand and Leafeon between them, and tried to find the words that were so hard to say.
“Hey, the show’s about to start,” Rosa said suddenly, breaking his train of thought.

Hugh followed her gaze back to the snow stage where the crowd had swelled and the lights had changed. Something was happening by the looks of it.

“You wanna…?” he trailed off and nodded in the direction of the stage.

Rosa said nothing and headed for the stage all the same, and soon they were making their way through the crowd and looking for a place to stand. Rosa weaved through the crowd until she came out on the other side of it entirely. Hugh followed her as she left the street and moved to stand on the snow close to the trees, where fewer people had gathered. The stage was far enough away for Hugh to have to squint to make out the players, and he couldn’t quite see what was happening. Leafeon meowed, and Rosa picked him up to sit on her shoulder and see above everyone’s heads.

And then, he heard singing. It was soft at first, but the crowd quieted and the night winds stilled to make room for the woman’s song. She had a spectral voice, high and haunting. It as a language Hugh did not understand, but there was a sadness in the notes and the way the singer delivered them that filled Hugh with a poignant melancholy and wanting, though he could not say for what. He stared long at the stage and the people moving on it, and though she was small and foggy this far away, he recognized Freya in her flowing white dress and blue diamonds as the songstress.

He couldn’t say how long they stood there in silence, he and Rosa just listening to the music that seemed to reach the stars above. And there were so many stars. Hugh looked up and saw thousands upon thousands of them, as if the sky did not have enough room to fit them all. Aspertia’s northern wilds were free of light pollution and offered incredible night views all year round, but even those could not compare to this. He could see the misty bands of the galaxy, hazy behind the stars like a wending river of light, carrying them at once closer and farther away. Was Vibrava out there looking at the same sky? Was she okay? Was she ever coming back?

He found himself thinking of the day all this had started, when he met Nate at a lake north of Aspertia, and together they visited Hailey’s grave with an offering of her favorite flower and promises of justice for her death. They had gone into the city and out to eat, complained about rent and family and their nonexistent love lives, their biggest concerns at the time before the refugees poured in from Nuvema, before Cheren enlisted them for the trip to Virbank, before he convinced Nate that this was their chance to get out and see something of the world. Just before. Hugh had seen much and more of the world and the people in it since then, and before seemed a very long time ago.

The cold was what alerted him to the tears freezing on his cheeks as he stared up at the endless stars, wondering what lay beyond this world. It was so big, too big for one person with dreams of adventure, an appetite for excitement, a crippling fear of failure.

“Rosa,” he said, so softly he wasn’t sure he’d even spoken aloud.

“Yeah?”

Freya’s song swelled to a high note that rang long and lonely, and tapered off to a haunting echo.

“I’m sorry,” Hugh said. “For all of it, I’m sorry.”

The crowd clapped and cheered and called for an encore, but Rosa remained silent beside him. When he chanced a look at her, she was watching the stage.

“You were drunk,” she said in a tone that said that was that.
“Yeah, I was. And thanks for getting me home. But that’s not what I meant.”

Rosa looked at him, a silent permission to go on. Leafeon’s dark eyes bore into Hugh, unblinking.

“I’m sorry for that, too,” Hugh said. “But that’s not what I meant.”

“Then, what did you mean?”

“You know what.” He hesitated, then added, “N.”

Rosa betrayed nothing in her hooded gaze, but her hand instinctively went to her chest, where Hugh knew N’s pendant still hung, concealed under her clothes and kept close to her heart even after everything.

“What Shauntal said,” Hugh went on, struggling to find the words. “I’m just… I’m sorry.”

“Why should you be sorry?” Rosa said, her voice guarded behind her scarf. “You were right.”

“I wish I wasn’t.”

Rosa frowned, and he waited for her to say something. Instead, she pulled down her scarf and sipped her hot chocolate.

“For so long I wanted someone to blame for my sister… for Hailey’s death,” Hugh said. “It was easy to blame him. It felt good.” The words were coming out now, easily, and he didn’t think about it, didn’t hesitate. They just came pouring out. “All of this, everything I’ve done to get here was for her, and for N, too. I wanted it to be true. I needed it to be true. Not just for Hailey anymore, but for Harrison and Roxie. For Emboar and Nate and Castelia. And for Cheren.” His voice cracked, and he coughed. Hot chocolate sloshed on the snow and steamed at his feet. “But the more I was vindicated, the harder it was to hold on. I’ve done…” He stared at his gloved hands, hands that had hurt and hunted and killed, and still it wasn’t enough. Hailey was never coming back. Harrison and Cheren were never coming back. More would fall, and they would be buried beneath the snow and earth and eventually forgotten. Hugh drew a shaky breath and squeezed his eyes closed to the tears that wanted to fall. “I’ve done so much, and I’ve accomplished so little.”

He clenched his jaw and kept his eyes closed, no longer caring what he looked like in front of her, what she thought, whether she cared. “I wish it wasn’t N,” he said, his voice hitching with emotion. “Fuck, I wish it wasn’t N so it wouldn’t have to be you, either.”

Rosa looked at him with wide eyes and said nothing.

“I lost Cheren,” Hugh said, laughing bitterly. “I lost him. That one’s on me, and we all fucking know it. My pride, my… fucking fury, just…” He’d dropped his hot chocolate cup and clutched his beanie and his hair beneath it. “And you still pulled me outta there, after everything, and I fucking…”

He grinned even as his tears ran hot down his cheeks. The crowd was laughing at some show the players were putting on at the snow stage. Hugh wanted to scream.

“Without Nate, I’m just some angry shit who can’t do anything right. He got so pissed at me for saying that, but I know it’s true. I’ve always known it’s true. Without him, without Hailey, all this, I have nothing. I’m nothing. But you…” He looked at her properly. She was staring at him as taut as a bowstring. “You always had something to keep you going. Something you believed in. Something real and good. And now…”
Rosa looked like she wanted to say something, but she couldn’t quite find the words.

“You don’t deserve it,” Hugh said. “You don’t deserve whatever N did. You deserve to have something to hold onto, something no one can take away from you, least of all me. I don’t have that, but you do. So if it’s N or whatever he stood for, then you deserve to keep that. I’m sorry I tried to take that away from you. I had no goddamned right.”

Rosa was quiet for the longest time, but Hugh had resolved to say his piece and let her have hers. He owed her that much and more, and he would fucking take whatever she had in her like the adult he pretended he was.

Freya was singing again, and the crowd was enchanted. The heady notes made the night air thick and heavy, a cold that reached bone-deep.

“No, you didn’t,” Rosa said as if in a dream, as if the crowd and the festival and Freya’s melancholy song were a world away. “But I already knew that.”

Hugh did not know what to say to that, but he need not say anything as she reached for him and touched his cheek with her gloved hand. The gesture was so tender, so intimately simple, that he hardly remembered to breathe.

“Cheren’s death was not your fault,” she said with the quiet conviction of absolute truth. “You’re not nothing.”

Hugh blinked, but managed little else as he searched her eyes for the lie, finding none.

“Even without your revenge, if you failed and lost everything you’ve been fighting for, you wouldn’t have nothing,” Rosa said. “You have all of us. You have me. You have a life worth living no matter how far you fall. That matters.” She let her hand fall to his shoulder and stepped closer, and he could not look away for fear that she might be a dream, after all. “It matters.”

She didn’t disappear, and Hugh let his eyes drift closed as he hung on her words, felt them, lived them. He didn’t know if they changed anything, but he wanted them to. She, who believed with every fiber of her being, for just a few precious moments made him want to believe. Her hand was warm on his shoulder, and he covered it with his own. And he breathed.

The crowd was clapping again in praise of Freya’s song, and Leafeon meowed and licked Hugh’s cheek where his tears had begun to frost over. Leafeon’s sand paper tongue tickled a little, and Hugh shuddered. It was a strangely pleasant sensation.

He wondered where he and Rosa would go from here. Starting over would never be possible, not after all they had been through, all the bitter enmity and the selfless sacrifice and tragedy. No, they could never go back, he knew that. But perhaps they could go forward, somehow. Maybe not tonight, or tomorrow, but eventually. All Hugh knew was that that moment, her hand on his shoulder and his hand on hers, close enough to feel her heart beat and smell the shampoo in her hair, was a good moment. He had not had many of those lately, not for quite a long time.

When the crowd began to move in dance as a live band took the stage, Hugh and Rosa moved along. They had nowhere in mind to go, not really, but they walked side by side, for once comfortable in the space they shared, in the silence between them.

“How about a picture for the cute couple?” said a photographer with his clunky polaroid camera. He wore a painted cardboard sign over his shoulders that read ‘Make memories, not garbage’, and he carried a basket with all the polaroid printouts people had not wanted to keep.
Hugh and Rosa were taken off guard by the man, who was already angling his camera at them. Hugh frowned and leaned into the frame instinctively, and Rosa pressed against his side awkwardly. The flash went off, blinding, and moments later the polaroid printed out. The photographer shook it out to help it develop, and then he handed it to Rosa.

“Happy Snow Festival!” the photographer said cheerfully before moving on to his next unwitting models.

“That was random,” Rosa said, holding the polaroid out for them both to see.

“Yeah,” Hugh agreed, leaning in to see the developing picture.

It came out not half bad. The photographer got the pretty lanterns in the background casting a warm glow on everything, and colorful strings of lights lit up the storefront behind them. Hugh was hunched over a little and frowning like he couldn’t decide whether to smile or scowl, and Rosa had a half smile that made her seem like she was harboring a secret.

“In case you ever forget you were in Icirrus,” Rosa said, pocketing the picture.

“I don’t think I’ll ever forget this oversized freezer,” Hugh complained, wondering if she was really planning on keeping the polaroid or just stashing it to throw out later.

“Hey, are you hungry?” Hugh ventured. “The food they had earlier looked weird, but I think I smell steak somewhere now…”


“Yeah,” Hugh said, inexplicably relieved that she had agreed. “I’d have another. Pretty sure diabetes isn’t hereditary in my family, so I should be safe.”

Rosa snorted in amusement. “They’re not that sweet.”

“They’re disgustingly sweet.”

“If you want sweet, try the rock candy, over there.” She pointed to a vendor selling the colorful confection on a stick to a group of grabby children. “But I think I’d prefer the steak.”

“Hard pass,” Hugh said. “Steak it is.”

They enjoyed their food on the go with a surprising level of normalcy and even a little conversation. Hugh had his eyes on some of the games and wondered if Rosa would be interested in playing a few. The night was still relatively young, and they had nothing better to do as they made their way north in the direction of the Gym away from the festivities.

But just when he was about to float the idea by her, Rosa and stopped mid-step and turned around. She was looking around for something, or someone. Leafeon had his nose to the air and his hackles raised.

“Uh, Rosa?” Hugh said. “What’s the matter?”

Instead of answering, Rosa took a knee and pulled her gloves off. She placed one hand on Leafeon’s back, the other on the freezing stone and packed snow. “I thought I sensed…”

Before Hugh could question Rosa’s Sylvan spidey senses, she gasped and looked up. Hugh followed her gaze and saw familiar faces approaching. They did not look happy.
“Iris,” Hugh said, surprised to see her.

Iris looked like she was on a war mission with Haxorus at her side dragging some poor man by his ankles. The guy’s face was a bloody ruin, and he looked to be unconscious or quite possibly dead. Haxorus’s tail smacked him around with every step he took.

Benga was with her and shot Hugh and Rosa a look that said ‘Act normal if you don’t wanna end up like that guy.’

Nuria was there, too, and Soriel and Moros, and one other young guy Hugh did not recognize. They all looked rather grim, and absolutely none of them seemed upset by the state of the Haxorus’s human plaything.

“What the hell happened?” Hugh said. He recoiled at the sight of the prisoner’s blood leaving a red smear in the snow behind him as Haxorus dragged him unceremoniously toward the Gym.

“Opelucid happened,” Benga said.

“Drayden happened,” Iris cut in, venom in her voice. “Maybe Brycen will start listening if I offer up a human sacrifice in his name.”

“Wait, what?”

They paused as Rosa and Hugh stood in their path. Hugh’s gaze lingered on the captive man, whose pulpy face had begun to turn purple with the cold and his congealing blood. But the guy he didn’t recognize in Iris’s party drew his attention when he moved. He was not remarkable in any way, average height and build, dressed for the winter in a red ski jacket and an old baseball cap.

“Assassin,” Benga said, the one word explaining it all.

*Shit,* Hugh thought. *Drayden sent a guy to assassinate Iris all the way out here?*

“Luckily, we got a warning just in time,” Nuria said gravely, indicating the mystery guy.

He was accompanied by a Pikachu who rode on his shoulder, and under the bill of his cap, luminous red eyes simmered as if they could see right through Hugh. But before anyone had a chance to say another word, a shadow rose from the man’s shoulders, roiling and distinctly putrid. Hugh stared in horror as the shadow opened two sets of glowing eyes, red and yellow, and grinning mouths. The Ghosts cackled, and the sound came from everywhere at once. Hugh shivered, momentarily paralyzed as the specters bared their rotted teeth at him.

“Ash!” Rosa said, rushing to the stranger’s side.

His Pikachu squealed and leaped into Rosa’s waiting arms like he recognized her, and Rosa caught him easily. Leafeon meowed up at them.

“You know this Medium?” Iris demanded, her eyes narrowed in suspicion.

“Of course,” Rosa said, smiling. “I’m the one who asked him to come all the way from Kanto.” To Ash she said, “I wasn’t sure you would, now that you’re busy being a member of the Elite Four.”

“I heard you have a war to win,” Ash said. “Last I checked, I owe you one of those.”

He smiled, and his Ghosts smiled their ghastly smiles with him.

“So,” Ash said, looking at the faces gathered round. “When do we start?”
We’re back to this fic finally! I’ve been wanting to update this for so long, but I felt it necessary to finish Elephant Graveyard first. If you haven’t read it, I highly encourage you to do so because the events of that fic will play heavily into this one. A lot has happened with Ash that won’t make much sense if you haven’t followed his story through Elephant Graveyard, and he’s here to stay as a major supporting character for the remainder of the story.

There’s quite a lot happening concurrently in Icirrus that Hugh didn’t witness, which we’ll see in subsequent chapters from other character perspectives, similar to the Driftveil chapters. So if it seems like I’m skipping over big events or plot points, don’t worry, I’ll get to them in due course.

Lastly, since it’s unlikely that I’ll manage another update in the next few days, I hope everyone has a happy new year and a chance to celebrate with friends and family! Thanks so much for reading, and please feel free to leave a comment or kudos on your way out.
Iris watched fat snowflakes land in the palm of her gloved hand, fluffy and cold. She was winded and lightheaded after the fall from Skyla’s airplane, though mercifully she’d skipped lunch onboard and had nothing to retch up as she tumbled down and down. Blackthorn was known for its bitterly cold winters, and like the Taki Dynasty Titans who’d taken her in as a girl, she learned to acclimate to the chilling temperatures and harsh mountain weather as well as any of them. Even so, Blackthorn rarely experienced storms and snowfall of this magnitude this early in the season. She could only wonder at what it would be like in the dead of winter, and hoped they would be gone from this place before she found out.

Nearby, Benga was shaking the snow from his hair, and Nuria was bent over in the snow trying her damnedest not to faint. Benga spotted Iris and grinned, approaching.

“Some entrance,” he said, eyes shifty as he scanned their snowy surroundings, ever vigilant in contrast to his superficial nonchalance. “Hey, the welcome party’s here.”

Iris followed his gaze to the approaching people and Pokémon from the direction of the city proper. Skyla had shown her a picture of Brycen at her request back in Mistralton, and Iris picked him out of the group easily enough. More beautiful than handsome, Brycen walked with the poise of a man who fancied himself royalty and ensured no one would forget it. His gleaming white armor was studded with windy swirls of blue diamonds, and even his Beartic’s armor looked worth its weight in gemstones. His Gladiators, Icirrus’s main military force, were equally magnificent in their fur and mail.

“Look at that,” Benga whispered. “Mega Glalie.”

The floating ice skull seemed to be conjuring the storm above, and Iris narrowed her eyes at the supercilious display of power. When Skyla went to greet Brycen first, Iris watched as he touched his bare fingers to her flushed cheek. They were kissed lightly blue with the cold he did not appear to feel.

“Brycen, it’s been a while,” she said, smiling fondly.

“Skyla,” he said, returning little of her warmth. “I see you’ve brought guests.”

Iris felt his eyes sweep over their group. When his gaze alighted on Benga and her, she got a chill that ignited some deep-simmering anger in the pit of her belly. Those haughty blue eyes were as empty and as they were cold, as if they had not the energy nor the interest in what they saw.

“Yup! These are the ones I wrote to you about,” Skyla explained.

“All good things, I hope,” Benga said under his breath.

“Let’s go,” Iris said. She nodded to Nuria, and the rest of her party followed her as she approached. Brycen appeared hardly to notice or care as she drew close.

“Gym Leader Brycen,” Iris said with chilly decorum, “thank you for agreeing to meet with me and my people. I know you’re a very busy man.”
Brycen looked down at her over his nose, and Iris’s fingers twitched. Benga slipped his hand discreetly in hers and gave her something to crush quietly.

“The Halfling Dragon Princess,” Brycen said, hardly bothering to give her a proper look up and down. “You’re…smaller than I imagined you would be.”

It was Benga’s turn to return the crushing squeeze to her fingers. Iris thought of the hidden grotto he’d taken her to back in the Dreamyard so long ago, the beautiful Gardevoir and Gallade waltzing their mating waltz, and smiled demurely.

“Iris Fafnir,” she said, silken steel. “My height is the only thing small about me, I assure you.”

Beside Brycen, a couple of his men shared a chuckle. Brycen’s Beartic growled, and his frozen jowls shook. Brycen himself was a statue, unmoved.

“I see,” he said, gracing her with the barest hint of a dangerous smile. He touched a blue-tinted hand to Mega Glalie, and the beast’s eyes lost their baleful aura. “I find myself quite busy these days, it’s true, but…not so busy as to pass up an opportunity to meet the thorn in Drayden’s side.

As he said the words, the tempest was calmed and the howling winds lost their fervor, leaving only the softly falling snow.

“I trust you and yours won’t mind the cold during your stay. Winter is nearly upon us, and I sense this one will be long and arduous.”

Iris held his gaze. *Perhaps I’ll show you just how sharp a thorn can be.* “I’m counting on it.”

Brycen let his hand fall from Mega Glalie. There was no trace of his smile left. “Well, then,” he said. “Welcome to Icirrus.”

He nodded to his men, took Skyla by the arm, and led the way back toward the city. Iris watched his back a moment. The blue diamonds that encrusted his armor gleamed in the twilight.

“Crystallos,” Nuria said softly as they all followed. “Talk about cold.”

“That guy’s as hard as the diamonds in his designer armor,” Benga said.

“Diamonds are brittle,” Iris said. “Apply the right pressure, and they’ll break the same as glass.”

“Is that what you plan to do?” Nuria asked. “Break him?”

Iris looked up at the glass-topped towers of Icirrus, the City in the Clouds at the top of the world. “Only the part that refuses to bend.”

Iris was given an apartment in the city, an honor not extended to the rest of her party, and she and Benga made haste making themselves presentable for the feast Brycen was hosting in Skyla’s honor. Iris dressed in a warm gown of silk and velvet. It was snow-white slashed with black, giving the illusion of shadows with every step. Her thick shawl was dyed black Flaafy wool, and she wore her hair up in a simple twist to keep it tame. She was finishing the final touch, a string of black pearls around her neck, when Benga came into the bathroom and took the necklace from her to work the clasp himself.

“Looks like the seamstress in Mistralton really came through.”
Iris admired her reflection in the full-length mirror, hardly recognizing herself. The dress was austere yet elegant, armor for the battle that lay ahead. “There’s one final touch.”

He fastened the clasp and retrieved the hammered silver tiara on the marble countertop. Iris watched in the mirror as he nestled it on her head, secured by her thick violet hair. It was simple, even plain, but its silvery sheen was bright when it caught the light, impossible to miss.

Benga moved his hands to her bared shoulders. Unlike Iris he was dressed more casually in leathers and furs for warmth, but he’d armed himself with a dagger at the hip and the usual thong around his shoulders for his Pokéballs to hang conspicuously. If she didn’t know better, at first glance she may have guessed he was just another local Icirran under Brycen’s command, born and bred of iron and ice. She was counting on Benga’s ability to blend in wherever he went to help her tonight and in the difficult days to come.

“There,” he said, admiring her reflection. “You look like a princess.”

His fingers were hot on her chilled skin. His lips were hotter as they kissed her bare neck and shoulders, and he let his hands fall to her waist. Iris could hear her heart pounding in her ears as her body reacted to his touch, but this was not the time. There was much work to be done, and they would both need all their wits about them tonight. She caught his hands in hers, and he held her gaze in the mirror.

“Tonight, I must prove that I’m a queen.”

Benga grinned. “You will. Brycen will be on his knees in no time.”

“We’ll see. He won’t be easy to convince.”

Benga snorted. “Guys like that love to kneel, trust me. Anything to make them feel like they’re a part of something transcendent.”

“Maybe,” Iris said, not entirely convinced, “but it’s a fine line I’ll be walking. I’m coming to him as a Titan of Opelucid. He has no reason to love me or the legacy I represent.”

The woman looking back at her through the mirror looked little like Cadmus, who was often remembered only by his savage moniker, the Dragonsbane. And yet, beyond their differences, there were inescapable similarities, blood ties that bound deeper than bone and longer than the decades past since the civil wars that saw his meteoric rise to power. She could see them the longer she stared, hidden just beneath the surface. They were in the very air around her, and Brycen would feel them, too. And so, she’d decided to emphasize them rather than hide them. If Brycen was the man she had read him to be, it was her only hope of success. That, and an offering he would not be able to refuse.

“Maybe not, but you know how to handle this kinda thing; you’ve been learning how your whole life. Nate hasn’t. Are you really sure about involving him?”

“Men will only kneel to a worthy superior. Nate’s Ignifer, and he’s mine.”

Iris recalled a lonely night in Driftveil, hot from the fires of a hundred burning bodies sacrificed to the heavens. Surrounded by so many sharing the same grief, Iris had seen the scales fall from Nate’s eyes as surely as Dragonite’s rage fell upon the Plasma Frigate. And the next day, she had seen him rise, remade and ready.

“He’s more valuable than you think, and he’s a quick study.”
“If you say so, but remember it’s not me you have to convince.”

Iris fiddled with the freshwater pearls about her neck, wondering. Even if he could play his part, was it right to put so much pressure on Nate? She wanted to trust in him. But would he trust in her? Titans lied, after all. If she were anyone else, she would advise him not to. And even so, perhaps he would do well to keep his distance. The last man who trusted her ended up exiled, his life and legacy stripped from him as if they had never belonged to him at all.

Benga turned her around. Her skirt whispered against the marble tile floor. “Tonight’s just the first blood. No wars were ever won or lost over a single dinner.”

“No, but battles can be. Vanity is a double-edged sword. If I’m not careful, I’ll be the one bleeding.”

“So?” Benga flashed her a devious grin that made her heart flutter. “You’re a Dragon; your blood is your power. That’s what makes you a queen more than anything.”

Despite herself, Iris flushed. He swept her up in a blinding kiss, igniting an ardor in them both as fierce as it was sudden. She buried her fingers in his wild hair, and he pressed himself against her as if she might slip through his fingers like smoke. Their moment of passion was over too soon, but Iris felt it down to her toes, a magic that could raise the dead if she gave over to it. She was more determined than ever to make their time in Icirrus count. Everything depended upon it.

The feast was a lavish spectacle. The food and drink flowed freely, and the guests helped themselves both to refreshment and entertainment wherever it was to be had. Above, millions of lights in the glass shimmered in the style of the northern lights, magnificent to behold. Iris was given a place at Brycen’s own table on the dais at the front of the dining hall. When she walked in, the conversation around her hushed as people looked up from their drinks to watch her pass.

Benga parted from her as they entered and melted into the crowd, leaving her to her task as he tended to his.

She spotted the faces of Skyla’s Valkyries among Brycen’s Gladiators, Icirran locals important enough to have earned invitations to this dinner, and some familiar faces from her own party peppered throughout. Rosa nodded to her as she passed, a silent encouragement. She felt eyes on her figure, some impassive, others curious, and still others full of contempt. The question was, where did the majority lie? And what would it take to make them see things her way?

Her gaze fell on the person she’d been looking for among the crowd, and paused before him with a hand extended. Nate rose from the place he’d taken at a communal table next to Soriel. Lampent hung dormant at his hip. To Nate’s credit, he didn’t question her in front of everyone and simply took her arm.

“Tonight,” Iris said softly so only he could hear over the din of conversation that picked up in their wake, “I want you to speak for me. You know what’s at stake with Brycen.”

“You…” he faltered. “Iris, I’m not sure.”

“I am.” She tightened her grip on his arm. “You asked for my help in Driftveil, so I faced Clay for you. Tonight, I need you to face Brycen for me.”

“Of course I wanna help you, but this… I’m not like you. I’m just me.”

“Yes, and that makes you uniquely qualified. I have every confidence in you for this task.”

She felt his eyes on her profile, but she kept her chin up and her steps measured and unhurried, for
a queen was never in a hurry and never late. He wanted to say something, but he thought better of it.

Together, they walked to the dais and took seats as directed by an usher. Iris noticed that Brycen sat in the tallest seat at the center, and Skyla sat in a place of honor to his left. Both were dressed as befit their stations in pure white and silver for Brycen, muted blues and greys for Skyla. She was smiling with her hand on his and whispering something to him when Iris and Nate approached, and Brycen appeared to be listening attentively. Iris noticed their exchange, and the way Brycen’s expression hardened with glacial reserve when his gaze alighted on Iris and Nate.

On Brycen’s right sat a woman who looked like she could have been his twin. Her long white hair was twisted in a thick fishtail braid, and she wore a satin lilac gown that must have done little to stave off the chill. Another Crystallot, if Iris had to guess. She rose when Iris and Nate approached and took a seat farther down on the dais. She curtsied politely, but Iris could not read her blank look.

Iris was given the seat on Brycen’s right where she had been, a level below him. The obvious slight sent a spike of anger down her spine. At least Iris had read him right, if nothing else. She nudged Nate to the seat directly next to it. Others took their places at the table, including Skyla’s right-hand-man and commander of her Valkyries, the willowy Chase. Yancy was also seated at the dais, though she was several seats down on the far end.

“My lady,” Brycen said to Iris. “You look stunning.”

Iris dipped her head respectfully and hid her annoyance with his deliberate choice of title with a slight smile. Her silver tiara flashed bright in the light. “Thank you. You do me and my people a great honor by hosting us.” To Skyla she said, “Gym Leader Skyla, thank you for escorting me here to Icirrus. You have my gratitude.”

Skyla smiled brightly. “No problem, Iris. I’m really happy to have an excuse to make the trip up here myself, to be honest. Brycen and I don’t get to see each other super often, you know?”

“I can understand the feeling,” Iris said.

Brycen watched their exchange like he wanted to say something, but he remained silent.

“Gym Leader Brycen,” Iris said, “I’d like to present my associate, Nate of Aspertia City. We only met recently, but I’ve come to hold Nate in the highest regard.”

If Nate was surprised by her praise, he did a decent job of going with the flow. He got up from his chair and held out his hand for Brycen to shake. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, sir.”

Brycen took his hand and shook it. Something passed between them in that moment, flashing bright and gone in an instant. Brycen retracted his hand quickly and flexed his fingers as though burned. “…Yes, a pleasure.”

The pleasure’s all mine, Iris thought as Nate took his seat again and Brycen’s gaze lingered on him just a moment too long.

Dinner was served, and the server filled her goblet with a wine so pale it could have been water, but it was strong and as crisp as a winter morning. Benga was down below charming Brycen’s Gladiators with his infectious storytelling, her shadow partner in their shared endeavor.

Iris soon learned that the statuesque Crystallot woman who’d been with Brycen before was in fact his younger sister, Freya. She was reticent throughout the dinner, content to listen to the
conversing around her as she sipped watered wine. Her sheer blue eyes were glassy and intense as they observed all around her without letting her gaze linger and draw attention. Iris did her best not to look in Freya’s direction for too long, lest she pique the woman’s subtle attention further.

_Benga was right_, she thought, wondering at the strange team Brycen and Freya made. _Tonight is the first blood. But whose?_

Not five minutes after they’d all exchanged the customary pleasantries and introductions, Brycen began asking Nate questions.

“Aspertia City, you say?” He focused on aerating his wine as if the conversation were merely a passing distraction and not the center of his attention. “You’ve traveled quite a long way.”

“I think it feels farther given everything that’s happened. I was in Castelia when Opelucid and Nimbasa invaded. It was horrible.”

“Castelia, yes… The Volucris put on a good show, I’m told. But in the end, even an army of Bugs is nothing against ravenous Dragons.” Brycen sipped his wine, his eyes shifting briefly to Iris and back, though she forced herself not to acknowledge him.

“And what about you?” Brycen continued. “Skyla’s told me about your Gym Leader’s passing. My condolences.”

Nate nodded. “Yeah, in the attack on Driftveil. Thank you. Cheren was a great Gym Leader, and a great man.”

“I wouldn’t know, having never met him myself.”

“Cheren’s the reason I left Aspertia at all, actually,” Nate said, shifting in his seat. “He needed help, and I said yes.”

“How magnanimous of you. I would not expect an Ignifer to be so…amenable.”

Nate looked at him. “I’m always amenable to just causes and the brave people who lead them.”

Brycen sat back in his high chair looking down on Nate and entwined his fingers. “I see.”

Iris sipped of her wine.

“My late father, Sygurd, said something similar to me once, many years ago,” Brycen said, “about Champion Alder, of all people. I was only a young boy during the civil wars, though I’ll never forget the sight of him in his golden armor astride that monstrous Mega Charizard. The two of them were the sun made steel; they cut through stone and flesh alike in their burning fury, sparing none. His power was…a radiant terror to behold.”

Brycen pondered that thought, his gaze unfocused as he saw a vision of memory long past. It lit up his empty gaze like a flush of animation, but Iris thought he looked all the more fiendish for it.

At length Brycen continued, “My father always spoke highly of his honor and sense of justice even though they were on opposing sides.”

Iris knew the history of the civil wars, how Alder, then Virbank’s Gym Leader, was pitted against the upper West Tine cities to beat back their southern encroachment. There was something extremely unsettling, however, about the way Brycen spoke of Alder with almost poetic reverence. She could not quite place what it was.
“I assume you’re familiar with the history of the Burning, Nate?” Brycen said after a moment’s pensive silence.

Nate nodded. “Generally, yes.”

“A grievous tragedy. It was Champion Alder who aided my father when the Dragon Riders laid waste to the trade routes between Mistralton and Driftveil. Gym Leader Gawain received the injuries that disabled him and later led to his premature death when King Cadmus rained Dragonfire on the Celestial Tower. The devastation was so terrible that it brought two enemies together against the greater threat. I’m told it was a spectacular sight, fire and ice united against the Dragonsbane himself.” Brycen smiled wistfully, and Iris shivered. “I wish I could have seen it.”

“Fire and ice united, what poetic justice,” Iris said, steeling her nerve and smiling softly. “Perhaps one day soon you’ll get your wish.”

Brycen looked at Iris, his gaze undivided but unreadable. “Soon,” he repeated in a voice as soft and smooth as hoarfrost. “Yes… Winter is my time, after all.”

“Let’s make a toast,” said Nate, raising his glass. “To fire and ice.”

Iris raised her glass to Brycen.

Skyla did the same. “Fire and ice,” she said, grinning.

Others at the table raised their glasses in turn, all of them waiting. Finally, Brycen raised his own wine goblet, his glacial stare moving from Nate to Iris. “Fire and ice.”

Iris drank with the rest of them, feeling the wine light a fire within that boiled her blood. The war still lay ahead, but at least she had not fallen in the first battle. There was much work yet to do, but for the first time since she arrived in this dreary winter wasteland, Iris saw a hope of victory on favorable terms.

Brycen turned to Skyla, who directed his attention to Yancy farther down and beckoned her to come and introduce herself. Iris set down her wine goblet slowly to give her time to collect herself. Beside her, Nate smiled as he struck up a conversation with Chase and another Valkyrie. Iris was drawn into conversation with an old woman named Auda who introduced herself as a member of the Icirrus Elder Council. Auda was happy to tell Iris all about her life in Icirrus, how the city had changed so much in her seventy-four years of life, and where Iris could get the most delicious Yache berry tarts in town at a little-known cafe that always baked them fresh in the mornings.

The rest of the night would be filled with polite conversation, drinking, and even dancing. At one point, Benga partnered with a little girl of eight who was overjoyed to be twirled around like a princess basking in the glow of admiration and attention. Her mother, a high-ranking Gladiators, flushed with joy at her daughter’s pleasure and introduced Benga to some of her colleagues, all Gladiators themselves. Iris was constantly amazed at Benga’s energy and success with so many strangers in such a short amount of time. Skyla was regaling Yancy with stories about her childhood with Elesa, and Brycen listened patiently and even contributed a bit while Skyla gesticulated and laughed brightly.

By the time the feast ended and the guests began to retire, it was well past midnight and Iris was exhausted. She found Benga, or perhaps he found her, and together they made their way back to their shared apartment in the city, braving wind and snow. They were both freezing by the time they made it inside and locked the door behind them. Benga got to work on a fire in the hearth while Iris went to the bedroom with plans to shed her heavy dress and run a hot bath. She did not
get far when Benga followed her to the bedroom and wrapped his arms around her.

“So?” he said against the shell of her ear as he tugged at the laces on the back of her dress. “Do I get a full report?”

Iris leaned into his touch. He smelled of mulled wine and smoke. “I should be asking you that.”

The fire crackled and slowly filled the room with savory heat and a subtle glow. She could feel him grin against her neck.

“They’re a frigid bunch at first blush, the Crystallos.” Benga slowly pulled the ribbons from the back of her dress and loosened the bodice. “But call me optimistic.”

“Optimistic?”

“Opelucid’s whatever, but from what I heard, nobody’s happy about the shit that went down in Driftveil. And Castelia, well, you know what they say about the big ones falling hardest. The Icirrans’re scared. Can’t say I blame ‘em.”

He was kissing her neck and running his fingers down her bared spine. The dress hung on her shoulders, precarious. Iris shivered.

“Opelucid can’t be ‘whatever’ to them,” Iris insisted.

Benga spun her around. His hands were hot on her skin. “They’re ‘whatever’ to me right now, to be honest.”

His fingers hooked under the dress’s long sleeves, and with a gentle tug, the garment pooled on the throw rug on the floor about Iris’s feet, leaving her in only her underwear, the heavy pearls around her neck, and the silver tiara in her hair. The soft glow of the firelight cast bars of bronze and gold on her silhouette, and the look in Benga’s gaze sent ribbons of heat down her spine despite the chill of night.

“Hold that thought,” he said hoarsely, reaching for her.

She pushed him back until he fell on the fur-lined bed. “Don’t tell me what to do.”

Deft fingers undid buttons and belts, and soon he was as bare as she was. Iris drew the dagger he’d worn to the feast, flipped it in her fingers, and found a home for it in the wooden bed post. Something shifted between them, and he flipped them over. The fur blankets were soft on her back as she sank into the folds and he loomed over her. There was nothing separating them now but skin. His hands painted lines of heat over her body, and Iris closed her eyes and tried to block out everything but the feeling.

Her tiara’s silver sheen reflected back in Benga’s eyes. The thought was enough to awaken something carnal and proud within, and she buried her fingers in his hair. His kiss was as heady and strong as the wine she’d had at the feast. It was soon over as she pushed him down the length of her, past her belly and her hips, and he tasted her as he went.

Iris lay back on the bed, enamored of warmth, from the fire and the furs and Benga himself. It was everywhere, every inch of her, in his broad hands, that roguish look in his eye when he caught a glimpse of her above him, in his clever tongue. Iris fisted her long loose hair, blind to everything but the raw feeling, lost within it.
Iris’s first official meeting with Brycen happened at the Icirrus City Gym on the top floor, with only a glass ceiling between the attendees and the grey sky above. It was not snowing, and so Iris had a clear view of the surrounding mountains and the mineworkers walking up and down the switchbacked paths like so many Durant scuttling to and from their mounds, hard at work. The center of the meeting room was occupied by a huge oaken table carved in the shape of the Trident and its surrounding waters. It was an old map, hand-carved and painted in deep blues, greens, and greys to denote the various cities and landmarks.

Iris took the seat overlooking Adria, with Nuria on her right and Benga on her left. Nate was present as well, though his inclusion was more for appearances’ sake today. Moros and Soriel stood behind her, armed and armored as they kept a close vigil over their shared charge. Brycen sat across from Iris at the head of the room over the part of the map that included the upper West Tine cities. Freya, Auda, and some others Iris recognized from the feast as members of the Icirrus Elder Council flanked him well into the lower West Tine territories. Skyla sat with Chase and Yancy over the northern edge of the map, where the Darkwood sprawled far beyond Opelucid and Vertress into the untamed wilds.

“So,” Brycen said, and all eyes turned to him, “shall we begin?”

“Yes,” Iris said.

“Then, allow me to get right to the point. What do you offer?”

*Offer?* Iris thought, trying to ignore the hot spike of anger at his gall. *Does he think I’m some pandering beggar?* And yet, she held her tongue to the biting retort that wanted to put him in his place. Brycen had the leverage in their situation, she knew. Icirrus was considered impregnable, and Brycen had no reason to stand against Drayden…or so he would have her believe. Perhaps the woman who had landed in Humilau would have been floundering in the deep, but the woman sitting opposite Brycen now could walk on water.

“I offer you a future,” Iris said. “A future of our making. Together, we can reshape not just the upper West Tine, but all of Unova.”

Freya beside Brycen was a statue, unmoving and unreadable, and her gaze seemed to chill the room. Iris resisted the urge to shiver, but only barely.

“A future,” Brycen repeated slowly. “What lovely platitudes. But why should I require your involvement at all? Icirrus has been prosperous and safe for many years without you, my lady.”

Iris twitched at the diminutive title. He was doing it on purpose, but there was little she could do about it. She was no more his queen than Drayden was his king.

“Oh course,” Iris said gently. “Until the attack on Driftveil.”

“I thank you for your assistance in Driftveil, of course, but the threat has abated, and Clay has told me of his reservations about you, Halfling Dragon Princess.”

“Hey, those halfling roots’re the reason Humilau’s backing us,” Benga said, leaning across the table like he might leap up and crawl over it at any moment to claw at Brycen. “It’s not like this is a lost cause we’re proposing here.”
Brycen’s unblinking blue eyes drifted to Benga, reptilian in their unbroken stare. “Benga, was it…? Champion Alder’s progeny, after a fact.”

Benga stood up. The chair screeched over the stone floor behind him, excruciatingly loud. “I heard you were impressed with my gramps once. I was, too. But he’s a has-been and a drunk, a relic of the past who won’t be swooping in to help when the shit hits the Rotom fan this time, believe me.” Benga flattened his hands on the table and leaned over, getting a good look at Brycen, Freya, and the Elder Council gathered around them. “But Iris is here, and she’s your best bet for the storm coming at us all sooner or later. C’mon, Brycen, you’re a smart guy—you *know* you can’t hide here forever while the rest of Unova goes to hell under the Neos and Opelucid. And if you don’t know, well, all I can say is: Castelia.”

“It’s true,” Nuria said suddenly, emboldened. “Humilau stands with Iris in this fight. See here.” She showed the room the Wave Badge to prove her status as Marlon’s emissary. “And I saw Castelia’s ruins with my own eyes. The Dragons and their Neo allies are strong, but Syreni and Crystallos are an unbeatable team together. *We can win.*”

Brycen looked at the Wave Badge, but he did not seem moved. “There’s nothing to win when the fight isn’t mine.”

“Isn’t it?” Iris said. “I’m half a foreigner in this land after so many years in exile, and I can’t claim your years of leadership experience. So please correct my misunderstanding: I was under the impression that the Triumvirs acted in concert. That you support each other…and you have to defer to each other when you’re outvoted.”

Brycen was silent, but Freya actually smiled. Somehow, Iris did not think this a good reaction.

“Aye, they do,” said Auda, the elder Iris had spoken with at the feast. Then, she had been all smiles and fond memories, but now she was as hard as iron as she shrewdly observed Iris and her people as one might a poisonous snake. “You may have Gym Leader Skyla convinced, but one isn’t enough. Gym Leader Clay hasn’t given you his support. The only one outvoted here appears to be you, my dear.”

“I wonder.” Iris leaned casually over the table and clasped her hands over Humilau City. “How much will you miss the Yache berry tarts you’ve loved since you were a girl when Neo Team Plasma invades?”

Auda pressed her veined lips together in a frown, but she said no more. Iris looked at the other members of the Elder Council around the table, letting her gaze linger on each of them in turn.

“How long until your diamond mines fill Neo Team Plasma’s coffers instead of your own? How long will your children be free to choose their destinies free of fanatical indoctrination? How long will your Pokémon remain with you before they’re liberated and turned into grotesque monsters through Neo Team Plasma’s horrific Chimera experiments?”

“We did not come here to be threatened,” said another Elder, an old man with a hump in his back and a sour look about him.

Iris turned to him. “I haven’t come here to threaten you. I’ve come because Opelucid and their Neo allies are the threat, I need your help. I’m offering you my help in return.”

“A Titan who wants to help,” said a gravelly voice in the corner. “Can’t say I ever believed it was possible, but I’m an open-minded kind of guy.”
All eyes turned to him, and Iris was shocked that she hadn’t noticed such a large man earlier. He had to be at least seven feet tall, and he had a presence about him that reminded Iris of hunger, somehow. Like a wolf stalking prey far more powerful than he, and yet once he sank his teeth in, he would not let go. Silver bells tinkled in his thick dreads with every movement, and his breath misted as he spoke, icy cold.

“General Trygg,” Brycen said coldly. “By all means, do elaborate.”

General, Iris thought, understanding. But why would he help me?

Trygg’s dark gaze met Iris’s, and he grinned salaciously. His teeth were too white against his charcoal skin, and Iris was once again reminded of a hungry wolf looking for something soft and warm to sink his teeth into.

“I heard about you,” Trygg said with a deep rumbling that sounded like crunching ice. “And your Dragonite. Heard it was a sight to see, the way you smashed the Neos in Driftveil.”

Iris remembered it well, but she glared up at Trygg, joyless. “The only sight to see that night was the pain and suffering of hundreds of innocent Driftveilers who lost their lives for no reason.”

“No reason,” Trygg echoed. “The most dangerous enemy we got is the one who don’t give you a reason. Sygurd said that to me the last time innocent Driftveilers lost their lives for no reason.”

Something in Brycen snapped, and for the first time since she’d met him, Iris saw his expression warp with emotion. “General, I’m sure you’re not here to lecture me on how to lead my people,” he said, like a petulant child freshly scolded in front of his friends.

“You’re my Gym Leader,” Trygg said patiently, with the measured calm of one used to the whimsical vanity of the ruling class. “My sword is yours to command, like it was your father’s before you. So command me. The day I let a Titan fight my battles for me is the day I lose the right to face you.”

“I agree with General Trygg,” said Skyla. “It should have been us to push Neo Team Plasma out of our land, not Iris. She did what we were unprepared to do, and for that I know we’re all grateful; next time, it’ll be my Flyers to sink their ships, my steel to defend our people.”

Benga was staring openly, and Iris had to catch herself from letting her mouth hang open at this unexpected show of support. Brycen, it seemed, was just as surprised as she was, and his pale cheeks flushed with rare heat at Trygg’s and Skyla’s open opposition to him. The Elders seated about him looked around at each other, equal parts confused and affronted, and every one of them listening carefully.

“You’re right, General Trygg,” said Freya. Her voice was muted but somehow piercing, a freezing wind whistling high in the mountains and echoing for miles of stark nothingness. “Neo Team Plasma is a proven threat to the upper West Tine…but Opelucid is not.” Freya looked at Iris. “Whatever alleged threat Opelucid poses to any of us…only exists so long as you do. Your clash of crowns is with Drayden; it has naught to do with us.”

Iris stared, completely taken aback. She had not expected much from Brycen’s waif-like sister, least of all this.

Emboldened by Freya’s words, Brycen recovered his composure and confidence and had the gall to smirk. “My sister speaks truly. Let us presume for a moment that Opelucid and Neo Team Plasma are allied in some way. Let us further presume that all of us gathered here today combine our
strength, and together we successfully march on the Heart Tine to lay waste to Opelucid and Drayden. What happens next?

“My fellow Triumvirs and I will have transported the bulk of our military forces to the Heart Tine to fight. We will have left our homes and our people unguarded against Neo Team Plasma, whose presence only continues to grow and expand. Our diamond mines would not be out of reach of their coffers, and our children would no longer be safe from their fanatical indoctrination, as you’ve so eloquently presaged.” Brycen gestured at Iris in a show of mock deference. “Perhaps you would have your crown, but the rest of us would have nothing but ashes and blood.”

Iris felt all the eyes in the room on her. “That’s not,” Iris stammered. “What I mean is, that’s not how it would happen.”

“So Opelucid isn’t your priority?” Freya asked.

“Of course it is,” Iris said automatically. “I came here for Opelucid, but—”

“But you needed soldiers for your war, so you bargained with the pain of Neo Team Plasma’s victims,” Brycen interjected. “Given the followers you’ve gathered, Gym Leader Cheren’s death was particularly fruitful for you, as was Gym Leader Elesa’s marriage.”

Iris began to shake, nonplussed. “That is not what happened.”

“Yes, it is,” Freya said stiffly. “You served one of your key players to my brother at the banquet as if he were another delectable dish to whet the appetite. Fire and ice, it would have been a passably strategic move if it was not so transparently disingenuous.”

No, Iris wanted to say. That isn’t what happened…

Except it is, a treacherous voice whispered in the back of her mind. She had played Nate like a sacrificial pawn, and Brycen had eaten it up. Iris stared at Freya in her mounting fury. Was this all her? Was she the neck twisting the head as it suited her? Was this how everything fell apart?

“I meant what I said,” Nate said, an edge to his tone Iris had not heard before. “There was nothing disingenuous about it.”

“It’s not your words I suspect,” Brycen said. “It’s hers. After all, Titans lie. Just as Cadmus lied to his allies and murdered hundreds in the Burning. A senseless massacre perpetrated on a whim. Why do you think Champion Alder came to us, his enemy, for help?”

“I’m not my father,” Iris said.

“The Dragonsbane,” Brycen said venomously. That infernal curse hung over the room like a foul stench. “I remember him well. My people remember him, too. Tell me, Halfing Dragon Princess: why would I ever command my Gladiators to fight for the daughter of the man who slew their kith and kin, burned their allies in their homes, and murdered their children who happened to be in his way?”

Beside Iris, Benga’s teeth were bared as he, too, fought to restrain himself through the shock of this sudden turn in the negotiations. Nuria could only stare, open-mouthed and wide-eyed like a frightened Deerling. Iris felt a familiar surge of rage at the true and tried insult to her parentage. Hurricane winds roared and clamored within like demons, begging for release. Brycen looked at her smugly, knowingly, for they both knew she was trapped now. Trapped by a legacy that both denied her by rights and defined her by birth. There was no renouncing one without the other, no escaping this skin.
And he would never understand. He would never have to try, born and bred as he was for power and privilege. Him, perched on his throne in gleaming armor and dappled in diamonds, every inch sculpted to fit the crown that had always been desperately out of reach to her.

It wasn’t Brycen she saw anymore, but Drayden. She could see him so clearly sitting across from her, her father’s sword across his lap, those merciless greedy eyes upon her. And her shaking in a rage below, tugging in vain on shackles she could not see and could not break no matter how powerful she became, how far she traveled, how many she recruited. All of it, all this time, all her efforts had brought her far, but never far enough. An entire world lay between them, a chasm deep and dark no amount of blood and bones could fill.

So why try? Iris threw open the gates and let her gale demons possess her. She rose from her chair abruptly, her fists balled and her sharp teeth bared.

“You wouldn’t, because you’re a vainglorious fool! Yes, the Burning was a horrific war crime, but I had nothing to do with it! My father is as dead as yours, and I’m so tired of shouldering the blame for his sins!”

Iris’s fingers itched, and she appeased them by gripping the pommel of her sword. She imagined the sleek steel slipping against the leather sheath, clean and sharp. She slammed her other hand on the table so hard that the slap echoed and made those nearest to her jump in their seats.

“I am not my father,” Iris seethed. “And you clearly aren’t yours, either. He wouldn’t have sat here with his head up his ass while his enemies closed in around him like a coward.”

Brycen lost his temper to match hers, and he shot out of his chair. Where his hands touched the table, frost spread and froze northern Unova from the Moor of Icirrus to Opelucid, quickly creeping south and east like a pale shadow quickly covering the continent. Those seated around the table scrambled out of their chairs and yanked back their hands in haste, fearful of the freezing blight.

“Get out,” Brycen boomed. “Get out, I said!”

“With pleasure,” Iris said, turning and marching out of the room without waiting.

It was unbearable remaining in Icirrus after Iris stormed out of the Gym. She had to get away, if only for a little while, but she did not want to admit defeat. If she left, she would lose any chance of winning the upper West Tine Gym Leaders to her cause, which was not an option. But her raging fury did not abate, not even a little, and she could no longer remain cloistered in her room while Benga and Nuria and all the others worried about what the fallout with Brycen would mean for their cause. Iris did not want to deal with any of it.

So she dressed in the warmest clothing she had, grabbed her Pokéballs, and announced the next morning that she was going to Dragonspiral Tower.

“Iris, look, yesterday was a shit show, I know. I was there,” Benga said calmly. “But running away from this isn’t a good plan. Take it from someone’s who’s tried to run from shit all his life—it’s doesn’t work.”

“I’m not running,” Iris said, thrumming with anger that had dug its claws in and would not let go. “I need some air.”
“Okay, I get that, but Dragonspiral Tower’s abandoned. Has been for hundreds of years.”

“Perfect. No one will bother me there.”

“I’m coming with you.”

“No,” Iris snapped at him more harshly than he deserved. More gently she added, “I mean, I know you’re trying to help, but I need to be alone for now.”

Benga took a deep breath and took her hands in his. This close, she could feel his heat radiating. “Iris, listen to me. What Brycen said…”

“I don’t want to talk about it.” Iris pulled away and headed for the door to pull on her snow boots.

Benga followed and began to dress for the cold weather. “I’m walking you out.”

Iris finished dressing in silence, made sure she had all her Pokéballs, and headed outside. Soriel, Moros, and Nuria were gathered in the hall with a couple of the Adriati sailors, and they looked to be in the midst of heated argument. All discussion ceased when they saw Iris and Benga emerge from their lodgings.

“Iris,” Nuria said, her voice tense. “Listen, we need to talk about—”

“Not now, Nuria,” Iris said, barreling past her to the street.

“What? Hey!” Nuria ran after her. In Adriati she said, “Iris, what the hell? We need a new plan to get Brycen to listen. That was a dick move he pulled yesterday, but I know we can convince him if we just try—”

Iris ignored her and tossed out Dragonite’s Pokéball. The behemoth king Dragon coalesced in a bath of white light and landed in the street, scaring the daylights out of the people out on their early morning coffee runs. One couple actually turned and ran at the sight of the huge Dragon, and a child somewhere screamed. Iris ignored them all and climbed on Dragonite’s back.

“Princess!” Soriel said. “Where are you going?”

“Brycen said to get out, so I’m taking the hint,” Iris said.

Dragonite bared his teeth and snarled at all the onlookers.

“Good Groudon!” Moros exclaimed when Dragonite’s tail nearly clipped him and he jumped a foot in the air to get out of range.

“Iris,” Benga said, laying a hand on Dragonite’s flank. “C’mon, don’t shut us out.”

Iris looked down on him, and her heart hurt to see him looking so helpless there. He deserved an explanation, time to work through this together, but she didn’t have the energy for it. She squeezed Dragonite’s sides in a silent command, and the Dragon roared. Benga scrambled backwards, and Iris lowered her flight goggles as Dragonite spread his great blue wings and took to the sky. Soon, the snow globe world fell below her, infinitesimally small, and she was soaring.

It was a beautifully clear day, pristine and cold. Her earmuffs did little to block out the high winds as Dragonite soared among the snowy peaks. He was warm beneath her, his molten scales drinking the morning sunlight.

Dragonspiral Tower loomed ahead, white spire twisting out of the mountainside many miles north.
Ice crusted the crumbling ruins at its summit, but the stone facade had weathered the centuries stubbornly. Dragonite glided to the top and touched down among the ruins hard, his long talons cutting through the stone and grinding them to a halt.

Iris dismounted in silence. The once-magnificent acropolis was now nothing but crumbling pillars, the roof they support long ago turned to dust. One day, all of this would be dust, just like the people who built it.

A statue stood tall in the center of the ruined acropolis, its features smoothed and eroded from centuries of exposure. Iris could make out veins of pale marble among the stone. It had two lumps on its back, wings perhaps. A Dragon, the keeper of this ancient tower, no doubt. She stared up at its featureless face, too tall to reach, and imagined that snarling maw as it might have once looked, teeth sharpened in frightening detail, gemstone eyes, a crown of horns.

Dragonite sniffed the statue, which was nearly as tall as he was, and bared his teeth. Up here, the winds were strangely muted. Iris felt their bite, but they seemed to hush as they passed through this long forgotten place, as if afraid to disturb whatever lingered here among the rubble.

“If it’s light you desire, ascend to the highest of the high,” Iris whispered the lyrical rhyme her mother used to recite.

Dragonspiral Tower was the tallest manmade structure in all of Unova. The highest of the high, and built by Dragons, her ancestors, millennia ago. Perhaps the old nursery rhyme had been inspired by this place. Perhaps once it had meant something, the warning Sonora had always hinted at when she wanted to remind Iris to tread carefully among the Blackthorn Titans, to not draw too much attention. There would be time for glory one day, but the girl who dared to climb too high too fast would only have farther to fall.

Iris looked east over the edge of the tower and across the mountains. Beyond, the Moor of Icirrus spanned the foothills where the Twist Mountains gave way to the western strait separating the upper West and Heart Tines of the Trident. And just beyond that, she could see the black shadow of the Darkwood on the horizon. Opelucid lay nestled somewhere among those shadowed canopies.

Iris breathed through her scarf, and the razor-thin winter air burned going down. She gasped as she looked over the edge of the tower. A few steps, and she would fall to her death. She tried to imagine what it would be like. Nothing glamorous, just a red smear on the white snow and frozen black rock. Her body would quickly be buried with the next snowfall, or perhaps picked apart by starving scavengers on the lookout for a free meal. Her blood would freeze as it poured out of her, steaming and turning to crystals, rubies scattered in the ice.

What would they say when they found her remains?

Here lies Iris, the Dragon Queen.

Here lies Iris, bastard daughter of Cadmus, the Dragonsbane and Scourge of the West, bearer of the cursed mark of nid.

Here lies Iris, usurper and warmonger.

Here lies Iris.

Here lies Iris...

A sudden surge of vertigo made her jump, and she stumbled backwards. Dragonite’s snout caught
her before she could fall back, and shaking, she wrapped her arms around him. He rumbled low and throaty, so very loud in the eerie quiet of this high and lonely place. If she fell, no one would be here to see it. She was alone up here, surrounded by stone crumbling to dust, just as the bones of those who had built it had turned to dust too long ago to survive in recent memory. Only their ghosts haunted this place now, and even those fell silent as Iris lingered among them.

“You cannot be a queen so long as your father’s ghost sits the throne you seek.”

Caitlin’s prophetic warning thundered in her ears, so loud it filled the sky. Was this what she had meant? Would Iris forever live surrounded by the ghosts of her past? Would she forever carry the blame for their deeds? Was she chasing her father’s legacy, or was it chasing her? Who was she without it?

Who am I without him?

“Iris,” Nate called to her softly.

He was standing far enough away behind her so as not to provoke Dragonite. Others had come with him—Benga and Volcarona, Soriel and Charizard, even Nuria and Yancy were there, far below in the snow with a small entourage of Skyla’s Flyers and faces she could not make out. She had been up here far longer than she’d realized.

“I came here to be alone,” Iris said. Her lungs burned with the cold. She had not realized just how deeply the chill had wormed its way under her skin, into her bones. She shivered, and Dragonite growled a warning.

Nate had Lampent with him. The curious Ghost hovered about him like a personal night light.

“Yeah, Benga told me. It’s just…you’re standing really close to the edge there.”

The precipice loomed a couple feet in front of Iris, the remains of an almost completely crumbled pillar nothing but a pile of rubble about to roll off. Iris stared at the rocks, unmoved. “I have Dragonite. He’ll catch me if…”

If I fall.

It was a long, long way to the humble ground below, and Iris had never been so high before. She thought of Drayden then as she remembered him, youthful and strapping with big hands and a stern jaw made for frowning. She imagined him up here, silent and austere as the desolate mountains. She could imagine him standing here in her place as if he were as much a part of it as the ruins. It would suit him, cold and high and solitary, the maddening loneliness. A Dragon perched at the apex of the world, a king on his throne.

How did he do it? How was he still doing it after all this time? How had any of them done it? She did not know, but she did know that he would not fall. The whole tower would sooner crumble beneath his feet.

“Look, I wanted to tell you that Brycen was wrong. You gave me your word that you’d help, and you have. You are. That’s enough for me, and for Yancy and the others, too.”

Iris looked at him with pity. “Oh, Nate. Haven’t you heard? Titans lie.”

“People lie. Titans or Ignifers or whoever, people lie. But you didn’t.”

She could have laughed at him for his naivety, but instead she held her tongue for her own. How was it so easy for him to dismiss centuries of prejudice and misguided fear when she could not
even reconcile being her father’s daughter?

*Of course he can,* she thought. *That’s why I chose him.*

“I trust you,” Nate said. He offered her his hand, gloveless despite the cold.

Iris felt her throat twist with the sudden urge to weep at the sight of him like that, though she could not begin to understand why. He was so patient and calm that Iris found it difficult to hold onto her anger around him. She had noticed it before when she exiled Belaron, the serenity he exuded perhaps without even meaning to. “You don’t even know me.”

*I…I don’t even know me.*

“You saved me when I didn’t know how to save myself. That’s all I need to know.”

In the light of Lampent’s purple haze, Iris was reminded of how Nate had looked the night of the Driftveil pyre, bathed in the light of a hundred burning souls. Half a Ghost himself, she had never seen a man so hollow and haunted both by what he had seen and by the way it destroyed the people he loved. But now, in the light of day, he was alive and alight with… With what, she could not name. There was a brightness about him, a vibrant spark of life that defied this ancient, ruined place.

Iris took his hand then without thinking, and gasped at heat he exuded. All of a sudden, the bone-numbing chill receded from her like a shadow flees the morning sun, and she could breathe. Nate smiled, and Lampent twirled his arms around, juggling indigo will-o’-wisps like he could not have been happier.

Dragonite reared up suddenly, spread his wings, and belted a roar that filled the vast sky and seemed to shake the foundations beneath their feet. Iris shielded her eyes from the light cascading off Dragonite’s scales like liquid sunshine. The sight of him so tall and fierce lifted her, as if she were the one with wings roaring her power to the heavens and beyond.

All around them, the other Dragons echoed Dragonite’s cry, from Benga’s Zweilous and Noivern to Soriel’s Charizard. Their voices rose in dissonant harmony, so loud, demanding fealty from the sun and sky themselves.

“Wow,” Nate said, looking up at Dragonite. “Dragons really are something else.”

Iris set her jaw. “Yeah.”

But was it enough? Was she enough? She didn’t know. All she knew was that up here at the highest of the high with the world waiting below, she wanted to believe.

Benga and Soriel soon rejoined them, and Nate said he wanted to climb down to meet Yancy and Nuria and the others who were climbing the tower together.

“Thanks for the lift, man,” he said to Benga.

“Don’t sweat it. But when your Larvesta finally emerges from her cocoon, you ’n me’re havin’ a proper race,” Benga said with a grin.

Nate parted from them, and Iris watched him go. As soon as they broke contact, the cold began to sink its teeth into her once again. If possible, she was colder now than she’d been before.

“Well, the only thing colder than this place is the shit-all welcome waitin’ for us back in Icirrus,”
Soriel griped, huddling close to Charizard to absorb as much of his warmth as she could through her furs and armor.

“Hey,” Benga said, “you okay, Iris? Nate said he needed to tell you something, and he wouldn’t take no for an answer.”

Zweilous was with him and energetic as usual as she picked up chunks of rubble and crunched them to bits. Her two heads fought over the choicest rocks.

“I’m…” Iris began.

Benga was bundled up from head to toe to stave off the cold, but his eyes smoldered with all the words he wouldn’t say in front of Soriel. She could see the worry in them, worry for her, for their cause, for what would come next. She wanted to tell him it would all be okay, that they would get through this, and for a moment with Nate and Dragonite and the world stretching infinitely below, she believed it. But that moment had passed. Reality was no pretty dream, and Nate’s trust, Marlon’s pledge, and Benga’s love…they would not be enough on their own.

The sun was hanging low over the storied peaks. Soon, it would be dark again. Iris was no closer to the truth Nate so fiercely believed in.

“I’m sorry,” she said to Benga and Soriel. “I just… I need a little more time.”

“Iris,” Benga said, but he didn’t try to stop her when she returned to Dragonite and climbed on his back.

“I hear you,” she said. “I’ll come back. I promise.”

With that, Dragonite took to the skies again, leaving the Dragons Spiral Tower to shrink behind them. Benga’s Noivern soared with them, screeching and zipping faster than Dragonite could ever hope to move, but he soon broke from them as they soared ever east over the Moor of Icirrus after the dying sun. Iris wondered if they flew forever, would they catch up to it? Perhaps there was a world beyond this one where the sun never set. It was a place where winter never came, and Dragons ruled the seas and skies uncontested, together.

But Brycen was right about one thing, at least: winter was coming, and it was coming with a vengeance. Many would perish, young and old, human and Pokémon, nobles and little girls with no place in this world. In the eyes of death, they were all the same.

*But I didn’t come here to die,* Iris thought as Dragonite weaved among the snowy peaks, his shadow cast long and black over the twilit snows. *I came here to conquer.*

She wondered what it would be like simply to fly to Opelucid now, to storm the city with Dragonite, surprising everyone in their beds. One unexpected Draco Meteor, and Dragonsong Castle would be nothing but dust and memories. If she couldn’t take the city, then she could destroy it, end the Fafnir line once and for all, and Cadmus’s bloody goddamned legacy along with it.

It would die with her, and with Drayden. They were the only ones left now that the Red Plague had taken all the rest. Iris remembered his young sons, Aeron and Aedon. They rarely played with Iris when she was visiting her father, likely forbidden to be in Iris’s presence by their parents. She was base-born, the living proof of her father’s cardinal wrong, a blight on the family’s honor and traditions that had sustained them for millennia.

But children know little of history and nothing of hatred, and they found each other, as children are
wont to do. They were sweet boys without a care in the world and a love of mischief they shared with their cousin. Iris could not recall their faces, but she remembered their laughter when she snuck Razz berry cakes from the kitchens for them to share.

They were gone now, just as Cadmus was gone, and Sonora, and Belaron, and everyone from her life before. But even if they were gone, they did not have to be forgotten. They could live on, the cute cousins with sticky fingers, the father with a secret smile for her eyes only, the mother who had risked everything for love, and even the knight who had been the first one to pledge his loyalty to her cause. They would all live on through Iris.

Only Drayden stood in her way. Only the antediluvian old man sitting on his Dragon throne, who would dare to silence her, tear her limb from limb, lock her in a dark place to be forgotten, all for daring to challenge him.

They’re all the same, Iris thought, picturing Brycen in his princely silk and silver, Clay surrounded by his fortress of stone and steel, even Skyla, fickle as the wind. They all underestimate me.

Iris recalled that night in Driftveil when Dragonite destroyed the Plasma Frigate. She had been blinded with rage and grief over Benga’s fall, so desperately afraid she might lose him, the first person she had met who believed in her, challenged her, made her better. It had been easy, that violence, killing flies with a swatter. They did not know how easy it had been for her, or what she could have done without the fear for Benga’s life holding her back. They had no earthly idea what the daughter of Cadmus, the Dragonsbane, could really do.

“Dragonite!” Iris shouted, feeling the burning rage warm her frozen lungs and electrify her nerves.

Dragonite puffed out his ample chest and spread his leathern wings, rising high over Moor of Icirrus and the frothing sea shore. In the twilight, he was a smoldering sun flare drawing out the last of the sun’s rays. Beyond the sea, farther east, Iris knew Opelucid lay quiet, unawares, too far to see in the darkness with the naked eye. The thought of Drayden warm in his bed sent her blood to boiling. She dug her mittened fingers into the scales on Dragonite’s neck.

“Draco Meteor!” she commanded.

Dragonite roared, deafening, and let loose an incandescent barrage of light and smoke and sound. The darkling sky erupted with bright light, momentarily blinding, and then it began to fall. Concentrated meteors of raw draconian energy gained size and speed as they fell back to earth and smashed shore and sea alike. The waters churned and the moors split and cracked, devastated by Dragonite’s pitiless rage.

Iris watched the falling stars, at once vindicated and humbled. It was beautiful, she thought, watching the terrible destruction below, spears of fire and light tearing the foundations of the world. Beautiful and deadly, like any true Dragon. It was in her blood, and no one would ever take that away from her. If she was doomed to answer for the sins of her father, then she sure as hell would take the rest of what his legacy offered along with it.

Icirrus was alive with music and dancing when Iris finally made her way back that night. She was alone, having left Benga and the others back at Dragonspiral Tower, and as she wandered through the crowd gathered for what she learned was some kind of Snow Festival, she began to miss his company.
Wrapped up in furs and a scarf twice as long as she was tall, Iris was unrecognizable to her fellow street-goers happily enjoying the hot chocolate, pungent fermented Wishiwashi, and winter-themed games. A group of high school-aged kids posed together for a photograph, all of them squishing together along with a particularly photogenic Vanillite. They were laughing and roughhousing, having a great time just being together. A quiet couple, two middle-aged men holding hands, shared a kiss when they thought no one was watching and smiled tenderly to each other. An old woman was sitting on a stool telling a story to a gaggle of small children hanging on her every word. Iris watched them all, their shared moments of joy and intimacy, and she envied them. Not because she knew this would not last, but because they didn’t.

It was a full moon tonight, and its light cast a hazy glow over the snow and ice sculptures, lending the scene a Fey quality that only added to the magic of the festival. The glass-topped buildings, snow-covered peaks, and a woman’s high melancholy voice were almost enough to convince Iris that she might fall back in the fable, even just for a little while.

When Iris wandered closer to the stage to get a look at the singer, she saw that it was Freya, and the frail illusion shattered before it could truly set. She was beautiful, of course, perfectly suited for this atmosphere in her satin and blue diamonds and ice. And her voice was a dream, high and haunting. Those gathered were completely spellbound. Some wept quietly to themselves, transported to foggy memories upon the notes that blended and rose together like mist off water. Iris could not stand to listen any longer, and so she turned and headed back the way she’d come.

But with every step she took, she felt the weight of reality bearing down, sinking her boots deeper into the snow.

_I have to talk to Brycen, _she admitted to herself. _I have to fix this._

She did not have the faintest idea of how she would do that, but she knew she had to do it. She had cost everyone his buy-in with her outburst, and justified or not, she was in no position to pick and choose her allies. If she did not win over Brycen, she would not win the upper West Tine at all. As far as she had come, as strong as she was, she was only one woman. Even a Dragon cannot stand against an entire army alone.

But how could she convince a man who had no reason to trust her? Whatever benefit of the doubt he may have given her was gone now, and Iris doubted there was any salvaging it. Maybe the answer lay with Skyla? She was Brycen’s equal, a Triumvir in her own right, but Skyla had been largely unhelpful in their last meeting as Brycen and Freya unleashed blow after vicious blow in perfect sync. Had she made a mistake bringing Nate in so soon? Perhaps if she had waited, had Benga at her side at the banquet instead…

It was no use dwelling on possibilities past, though. She needed a fresh strategy, one that they were not expecting, something that would force them to acknowledge the urgency of their shared situation, but she had no idea where to begin.

Vendors hawked and hollered as she passed. Some offered the foul-smelling fermented fish the Icirrans were so fond of, but Iris could not stomach the stench. She tried some hot chocolate, hoping for something to warm her up, but it was so sweet that she could not manage more than a couple sips. She wondered if she should simply return to her apartment. Benga might already be there, or Nuria. It would be good to see their familiar faces after swimming in this sea of strangers. Iris resolved to do just that when another vendor got her attention.

“Belue berry wine, mulled and hot!” he offered to passing festival-goers. “Rest your feet and warm your tired bones!”
Iris paused to observe briefly, though she had no intention of purchasing anything. Her lingering was her downfall, however, as the vendor spotted her watching and smelled a potential customer.

“Pretty lady, come and have a taste, I beg you!” he said, smiling. His cheeks were as red and shiny and Cheri berries, either from the cold or too many self-serving free samples. “A hot cup, or a whole flagon to share with your lover, yes?”

Iris made a face. “Thanks, I’m okay, I was just passing by.”

“Oh, but I must insist! Please, you must smell this heaven.”

Before she could do anything about it, he was standing in front of her with a clay jug and shoving it in her face. The smell of cardamom and nutmeg, cinnamon and cloves was heady and strong. Iris felt the smell trickle down her throat to her lungs, spicy and sweet at the same time. It was heavenly, indeed.

The vendor grinned happily, perhaps seeing her hesitation now that she’d had a sample of his wares. He was a thin man, probably, but covered in so many layers of clothing that he looked as doughy as a Walrein, and with the whiskers to match. His hair was grey, and he had laughing lines around his eyes. His accent was hard to place, and Iris was not overly familiar with the various Unovan lilts and twangs that scattered the vast continent. Her best guess was lower East Tine, but he just as easily could have been a foreigner for all she knew.

“Here, I shall pour you a cup,” he offered, “on the house.”

“Really, I’m not interested.”

But he had already gotten a clay cup for her and poured out a few fingers of the thick concoction. The Belue berry wine was a blue so dark is was nearly black, and syrupy. Under the moonlight, it appeared as thick and dark as blood.

“After a hard day, we deserve a nice break,” said the vendor.

Iris hesitated. He had already poured her the cup, though, and perhaps one wouldn’t hurt. It promised to warm her up better than the hot chocolate had, too. Relenting, she nodded and pulled down her scarf.

“Thank you,” she said. “That’s very kind of you.”

Iris took a sip and tasted the wine’s savory sweet heat. It was as delicious as it smelled, and she could not help the small smile of satisfaction.

“You like it?” the vendor asked.

“It’s perfect for the cold,” she allowed.

He beamed at her.

“Iris, hey!”

Iris turned at the sound of Nuria’s voice. She was a block away with Benga, Soriel, and Moros weaving through the crowd to catch up to Iris. The sight of them together warmed her more than the wine did. She owed them an apology, she decided. She was supposed to be their leader, their princess, the face of their cause. She could not wallow in self-pity when they had worked so hard to get her this far.
Iris waved them over, thinking perhaps she might purchase some of the mulled wine for them all. Iris was about to ask the vendor to bring her a flagon, when she turned back to him and found him close enough to smell the wine stink on his breath. He grabbed her wrist in an ironclad grip, and Iris was so startled that she dropped the clay cup. It shattered on the packed snow and ice, and the wine spattered glossy black at her feet.

*What are you doing?* she wanted to say, but the words caught in her throat. He was suddenly much larger than her, stronger, transformed. There was no trace of the kindly wine merchant left in those deadened black eyes.

A flash of steel in the moonlight in his left hand, and Iris felt the fear cut faster and deeper than any blade. This was how she would die then, cold among strangers, defeated.

“Long live King Drayden,” the merchant assassin said as he prepared to slip the stiletto in between her ribs.

Like a talisman, those words awakened something primal and powerful in Iris. She found a strength she did not know she had, a burst of adrenaline and elemental fury that summoned a hurricane within the likes of which she had never known. She bared her teeth, grabbed the stiletto, and held on as hard as she could. The steel kissed her fingers through her mitten, fiery hot and slick now with her blood that fell to the ground and blended with the spilled wine. She pushed back against him, and it bought her a precious couple seconds as he hesitated.

But he was a professional, and it was nothing to twist her arm harder to hold her still. To the people around them, it must have appeared that they were embracing like old friends huddling for warmth from the cold. Iris let out a primal gasping sigh of effort as she lurched away from him, desperate to get out of his hold, but he would not let go. She heard the rip of fabric as the stiletto searched for her skin.

“Iris!” Benga shouted. He was too far away, unaware of the danger she was in and too late to stop it.

And suddenly, the assassin stopped his assault and dropped the knife. Iris had no time to react when his hardened gaze warped in what she could only imagine was indescribable agony. His eyes rolled back in their sockets, as white and round as the moon above, and his jaw rattled, lips curled back like a hissing cat. He seized, unable to control himself as he stumbled backwards. The snow beneath his feet grew damp and steamed as he pissed himself.

Iris clutched her bloody hand, stunned into silence and unable to move, until she saw... *something* overtake him. Shadowy tendrils appeared from nowhere at all and crept over his shoulders like fingers. They crawled up his neck over his cold-reddened cheeks, and they cracked the skin as if they had been swimming just beneath it. Blood spilled down his face and neck, and still he could not scream.

Iris, however, regained herself and tossed out Haxorus’s Pokéball. The golden Dragon appeared in all his armored glory, smelled blood, and snarled, ready for a fight. The people nearest to them began to notice what was happening and scrambled to get away from Haxorus, shouting.

“Yveltal take me!” Soriel swore, drawing her sword.

She and the others had finally made it to Iris, and Benga was quick to release Sceptile. The giant lizard hissed and aligned himself with Haxorus, claws clicking as if he could not wait to rip something apart. But there was no need. The assassin fell to his knees, and the snow around him turned black as if with rot. Above him rose a shadow with a pair of baleful yellow eyes, giggling.
Haxorus roared and slammed his tail, breaking the packed snow and ice as if it were glass.

“What in holy hell is that?!” Moros said, also drawing his sword.

Haxorus lunged at the shadow. It receded, and Haxorus fell upon the convulsing body of the would-be assassin. He was vomiting a concoction of bile and blood into the black snow, still alive.

“Fantasma,” Nuria said in Adriati, her fear palpable.

“A Ghost,” Benga said. “Don’t need to know a word of Adriati to know that.”

Iris watched the Ghost hovering in the darkness as it slowly regained its form. A Ghost, she thought, remembering the fear she had felt upon meeting Nate’s Lampent for the first time. But this was a different kind of monster entirely, one without solid shape or corporeal presence on this plane, as unconquerable as a flickering flame. Iris clutched Haxorus’s Pokéball in her bleeding hand, torn between fear and fury.

“Assassin,” she said, her voice strained. “Drayden sent him.”

At this, Benga frosted over with a fury all his own. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

“Princess, you’re hurt!” Moros said, distraught.

The Ghost regained its misty shape, one Iris recognized as the entity Mismagius. She had never seen one in person, though few ever had. The Ghosts without solid form were said to be unable to leave sacred ground without the help of a Medium. The sight of her form sent those who witnessed the transformation reeling back in fright. The sidewalk soon cleared as people ran from the unknown spirit and the seizing body she and Haxorus faced off over.

A Pikachu came running, chittering and excited and completely unafraid of Mismagius and Haxorus. Unbelievably, he dug his little paws into the snow and began to spark as if to challenge Haxorus in defense of Mismagius.

“Assassin? So that’s why you were so interested,” said a voice Iris did not recognize, belonging to a man just as unknown to her. “Some things never change.”

He emerged from the gloom, vespertine, until Iris realized the haze was him. It cloaked him like a second skin and rose from him like fire, and the moonlight could not touch him. Red eyes cackled above him, and every step he took bled the snow underfoot black.

“You’re a Medium,” Iris said, understanding. His Ghosts were the reason she was still alive.

He stopped and looked at her with ghastly violet eyes. “...And you’re a Titan,” he said in a voice that seemed not to suit him, deep and distant, as if he were speaking to her through a wall, or through the lips of another. “I’d know those bloody wings anywhere.” He looked to Iris’s companions and frowned as he settled on Benga. “Two of you...”

The shadow cloaking him fell about him and took the shape of a Gengar, who stuck his rotten tongue out at Haxorus. Without the spectral aura, the man seemed to lose years as the moon brightened his face and illuminated his naturally red eyes. He wore a ratty red cap and a matching parka. He was disheveled and a little dirty, like he hadn’t properly bathed in days. Over his back he carried an old knapsack that had seen better times.

The assassin heaved on the ground, and Iris remembered her anger. Whoever this Medium was, he could wait. She marched up to the assassin, looming over him and shaking. One of his eyes had
swollen shut, and he was only half conscious. She had the sudden violent urge to sink her fingers into his good eye and dig in until she hit the bone. Perhaps he saw something of her hateful rage, because he closed his eye and tried to turn his face from her. Iris would not have it.

She bent down and grabbed him by the collar. “Look at me!” she hissed in his face.

He opened his eye and looked at her, but there was no fear there; only bitterness.

“Kill me,” he said in a broken whisper.

It was tempting. Tearing this man apart would be the release she wanted. He was here and at her mercy, and it would be so easy. But Iris had not come this far because she took the easy way out. She studied the assassin’s pulpy face, thinking.

“No one commands me.”

The assassin grinned despite the pain it clearly cause him to do so. “Then you’re fucked.”

Iris bared her teeth in a sneer. “The only ones who’re fucked are you and your pretender king.”

He spit blood and bile in her face, heaving. “No, little princess. My failure means Drayden gets his alliance.”

“Alliance?” Iris said. “What are you talking about?”

The assassin laughed, wheezing. “You don’t stand a chance against Neo Team Plasma. So just do us both a favor and get it over with. Better you than him.”

Iris reeled at the revelations that should have been so obvious to her from the beginning. She almost laughed at her own naivety. But then she remembered that this man had dared raise his blade against her. She dropped him roughly on the ground. “Haxorus, bring him.”

Haxorus lumbered to obey. The assassin made a feeble attempt to crawl away, but the big Dragon got him by the ankle and yanked him along after him, dragging his face through the snow and leaving a trail of blood in his wake.

“As for you,” Iris said, turning to her savior. His Ghosts hovered about him, and she dared not tread closer. “I don’t know where you came from or why, but I would be dead if you hadn’t stopped him. So, thank you.”

“You can thank me by pointing me in the direction of the Gym,” he said.

Perhaps she imagined it, but Iris got the strange impression that he was as wary of her as she was of him. She smiled bitterly. “What a coincidence: I’m headed there now myself.”

“Iris, you’re bleeding,” Benga said.

“I fought off an assassin.”

“Here.” Moros ripped a strip of leather from his jerkin. “To staunch the bleeding for now.”

Iris allowed him to wrap up her hand after discarding her ruined mitten. She barely felt the sting, too high on anger and adrenaline.

“You got a name, hero?” Soriel asked the Medium.
He grinned. “Hero works.”

Iris didn’t hang around to hear more of the conversation and took off toward the Gym with Haxorus in tow. Benga was right beside her, and Nuria hurried along with them. Soriel, Moros, and the Medium trailed behind.

People stopped to stare as they passed, but no one dared to intervene. Whether that was Haxorus’s and Sceptile’s doing, or the Ghosts that followed them, Iris could not say. Outside the Gym, Hugh and Rosa were waiting.

“What the hell happened?” Hugh said when they approached.

“Opelucid happened,” Benga said.

“Drayden happened,” Iris said poisonously, still reeling from the encounter. “Maybe Brycen will start listening if I offer up a human sacrifice in his name.”

“Wait, what?” Hugh said.

“Assassin,” Benga said.

Iris saw the horror twist Hugh’s normally sullen face, the shock as he stared down at the man Haxorus was dragging behind him.

“Luckily, we got a warning just in time.” Nuria indicated the Medium, who had followed them all the way here.

“Ash!” Rosa said, rushing to meet him. Pikachu squealed and leaped into Rosa’s arms, recognizing her.

Iris was immediately suspicious. “You know this Medium?”

“Of course, I’m the one who asked him to come all the way from Kanto. I wasn’t sure you would,” Rosa said to Ash, “now that you’re busy being a member of the Elite Four.”

Iris forgot her anger, the assassin, all of it as she heard only those two words: Elite Four.

“I heard you have a war to win,” Ash said. “Last I checked, I owe you one of those.” His Gengar cackled maniacally and merged with him again. His red eyes bled to indigo once more. “So, when do we start?”

“Right now,” Iris said, mind racing as she weighed all her new information and a strategy began to form. She looked at all the faces gathered around her, waiting. “I’m going to get us the alliance we all came here to secure, no matter what it takes.”

She headed for the Gym, more determined than she had ever been before.

Chapter End Notes

I’m consistently blown away by the support for this fic. Thank you everyone who continues to read and support through comments, kudos, and messages! So sorry for the delay between updates. My real life job keeps me super busy, so it’s tough to find
consistent time to write fic. But we’ll get through this eventually, I promise! :)
The day was brilliant and bright, and as Yancy flew with Skyla’s Skarmory through the snowy Twist Mountains, she was breathless at the sight of such raw, undisturbed beauty. She was reminded of the Rendez-View Ferris Wheel back in Nimbasa City, the view from the top at night with the stars at her feet. She wasn’t floating now, but flying, and the sky was so sheer and the air was so thin that she hardly believed even stars could live so high up off the ground.

An entire entourage accompanied Yancy on this glorious afternoon to Dragonspiral Tower far to the north of Icirrus City. Skyla’s people had provided Flyers for anyone who wanted to visit the ancient landmark, and Yancy was surprised by how many had turned out, both from Skyla’s camp and Brycen’s. But the more peaks Yancy and Skarmory passed, the more Yancy understood that this was not a path often trod, not even by those who lived in these mountains. In fact, when she’d landed in the snow at the base of the twisting, white spire, Yancy wondered if humans had set foot here at all in the last century.

Skarmory crowed and fluffed her sharp feathers to shake them of snow dust, and Emolga tried her best to emulate the larger Flyer. She sneezed and released a mild static shock that Yancy felt to her toes. The others touched down around Yancy, but Benga’s Volcarona headed for the roof of the tower, along with the rest of Iris’s people. Yancy watched as the enormous Bug disappeared from sight far above, taking Nate and Benga with him.

“Where’s your other half?” Skyla asked.

Yancy jumped and nearly fell over, but Skyla steadied her with a hand on her back.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to scare you!” Skyla said with a smile.

“No, that’s okay, it wasn’t you so much as that.” Yancy traced the height of the tower with her eyes slowly, the vertigo playing tricks. From this angle, it almost looked like the tower was leaning and would come crashing down upon her at any moment.

“Mm, it’s a sight, isn’t it? Wait’ll you see the view from up top! Come on, we can go up together if you want.”

Yancy shook her head. “Maybe later. Nate wanted to talk to Iris about something. I guess she’s been pretty shaken up after her meeting with Brycen the other day…”

Skyla looked up toward the top of the tower, her cheeks flushed prettily from the cold.

“Everything’s pretty shaken up after that meeting.”

“What about you? Are you…shaken?”

Skyla smiled like she had a secret. “You say that like it’s a bad thing. In my experience, you Walkers need a little shaking every now and then. You’re so focused on watching your feet that you miss what you’re about to run into.”

Yancy thought about that, but try as she might, she couldn’t quite figure out if Skyla had a point or not.
“Ma’am,” said Chase, approaching. “I’ve been assured that the tower is structurally sound. Some of the Icirrans have agreed to lead a group to the top, if you’d like to accompany them?”

Skyla shrugged. “Eh, climbing’s not really my thing. I’ll wait until Iris is finished up top, and then I’ll take the direct route.” To Yancy she said, “You’re welcome to hang on to Skarm for the trip back to Icirrus, ‘kay?”

“We’re climbing to the top, everyone,” announced one of the Gladiators, an older woman Yancy had seen dancing with Benga at the welcome dinner. “If anyone would like to join the group, now’s the time. Just watch your step.”

Yancy thought about joining the group, but she’d promised Nate she’d wait for him, so she lingered outside with Emolga shivering in the collar of her jacket and Skarmory cleaning his silver feathers.

Chase and some of the other Valkyries were helping people dismount, including some of the Gladiators Yancy recognized from the welcome dinner her first night here. There were Icirran civilians among them, too, excited for the chance to climb Dragonspiral Tower for themselves. A pair of women, sisters from the similar look of them, had a camera and a white Vulpix with them who looked very happy to model for every picture snapped. Watching them reminded her of her own sister.

Gozen would probably have complained about coming here. Too fucking cold, she would have protested, or Who climbs stairs just because they’re there? Yancy could hear the eye-roll in her voice. The thought brought a sad smile to her face.

What are you doing now, Gozen? What’s Elesa doing?

They would be together. At least, Yancy hoped they were. Unless Drayden had ruined that, too. It was so hard, not knowing. It was even worse than it would have been to know something was wrong. The waiting, the uncertainty, and now Brycen’s intransigence were just…hard. Yancy looked up at Dragonspiral Tower again, and the longer she stared, the dizzier she felt. Skyla was right about that, at least. Any moment, it seemed, the very earth would shake and split and swallow Yancy up, as though she had never been there at all.

Under her layers of winter clothing, Yancy’s mittened hand found a familiar lump around her neck and clutched it. Elesa’s pearl necklace had not left her person since that fateful last night in Nimbasa. Yancy drew what small comfort she could from it, the only thing she had to remember where she’d come from, why she was here at all. Elesa was counting on her, trusted her. If the ground deigned to fall away beneath her feet, then Yancy would simply have to learn to fly.

“Hey, you waited,” said Nate.

He was windswept and flushed from the cold and the trip back to the ground courtesy of Skyla’s Braviary, but gloveless and hatless, as though he barely felt it at all. He was smiling, and it was contagious.

“Of course, I said I would.”

The sight of her smile made him smile more. “You’re gonna love the view up top. It’s like looking down on a whole new world.” He held his arm out for her. “Shall we, my lady?”

Yancy laughed and took his arm. “We shall, good sir.”

Emolga squeaked happily and soon jumped to snuggle in Nate’s scarf, where it was considerably
warmer. Yancy, too, found herself leaning closer to Nate.

“How are you so warm when it’s so cold out here?” she said as they walked into the tower together.

Nate shrugged. “I guess I always run a little warm. It’s an Ignifer thing.”

Lampent was awake and hovered after them, curious about this abandoned tower and the shadows that danced on the walls as they passed. Inside, some of the other visitors were milling around the ground floor admiring an ancient, white marble statue of a man. He was missing his left arm and shoulder, as well as his nose. But there was a crown on his head, and he stood tall and proud.

“King Drayce, the Sunset Dragon,” Yancy read the metal plaque at the base of the statue.

“Benga was telling me that thousands of years ago, the Fafnir Dynasty controlled most of Unova. The kings and queens who ruled out here were the Sunset Dragons, and the ones out east were the Sunrise Dragons. It was the Age of Kings.”

Yancy smiled wryly. “Not the most creative name, but I guess it’s easy to remember.” She looked up at the broken statue. “I wonder if King Drayce was the first Sunset Dragon?”

“I guess,” Nate said. “That, or maybe he did something important enough to get him his own statue.”

Yancy studied the plaque, wondering. It was a shame that there wasn’t any more information. How strange to be remembered in stone but forgotten in every other way. This man had led a life, once. Maybe he’d fought in a great war and won. Or maybe he’d lost. Maybe he’d had a family, maybe he’d loved, fiercely or violently or tenderly. Yancy didn’t know, but looking upon his face and not knowing filled her with a strange, sad emptiness.

The other visitors were taking pictures and chatting, while a few brave souls had already begun the trek to the top. Yancy pulled Nate to the stairs, and they began to climb together. Nate held Lampent up to light their way.

“So, everything okay with Iris?” Yancy asked.

Nate sighed. “No. But I guess I shouldn’t have thought it would be after what happened with Brycen. She’s just…”

“Just?”

“I don’t know. It’s like, she’s this princess, this leader, and she’s taking on a lot by herself. But seeing the way things went down with Brycen, the way she is now, it just… It makes me so angry, you know?”

“Angry with Iris?”

“No. Or, I guess, yeah, a little? More than that, I’m angry about this situation. I just wanna help her, and I know, I know she wants to help us, too, no matter what she says about Drayden and Opelucid. What Brycen said about her…” Nate hardened his gaze and stared resolutely ahead. “He’s dead wrong about her.”

Yancy wasn’t so sure. Skyla had told her a little about what had transpired in the meeting, how Iris and Brycen both lost their tempers. Brycen came off as so calm and calculating, and Iris had proven herself a capable leader when it counted, even inspiring at times. But she was only human, just a
girl with still so much to learn. Yancy wondered what Elesa would think of Iris.

“You’re so sure about her,” Yancy said. “Not that that’s bad, it’s just that most people aren’t that sure about anything.”

They came upon a gap in the stairs where the stone had crumbled, leaving a sheer drop down to the bottom that promised certain death. Yancy jumped the crag easily and held out a hand for Nate to help him across, which he gratefully accepted.

“Thanks,” he said. “And about Iris... I told you about meeting Champion Alder on our way here, right?”

“Yeah, I remember. He refused to join you guys in Virbank City. I think Hugh said something about how he was a drunk.” Yancy frowned. “It’s kind of sad.”

“It is.”

“What does that have to do with Iris?”

Nate didn’t answer her right away. They continued to climb, passing through rooms with broken furniture, windows that used to be paneled but now only let in the cold, shadows on the stone walls where once colorful tapestries used to hang. Yancy shivered, wondering how many people had been here before her, how many had died here. An age long since past, taking with it the names and faces of those who now walked these halls only as spirits, or not at all.

“When I was a kid, I used to dream about meeting Champion Alder one day,” Nate said. “He was a hero. Not like the fairytales with knights and princesses, but a real hero who put the good of others before himself. The Gym Leaders named him Champion because of what he did in the civil wars, all the lives he saved on both sides. He saw people and Pokémon suffering, and he did what he could to stop it. I just thought, you know, maybe in some small way, I could be like that, too. Even if I could only help one person, why couldn’t I be like him?

“But then I met him, and, well, you know the rest. I know he had a hard life, so I don’t really hold it against him, but I can’t help but feel pretty disappointed about it all.”

“I think that’s normal,” Yancy said, clutching his arm tighter to comfort him. “It’s okay to feel sad about it. It doesn’t change all the good he did in the past. You can still look up to that Alder.”

“You’re right, Yancy. I know you’re right. And when I met Iris, when I saw her and Dragonite save Driftveil, and when she spared Syr Belaron even after what he did, I thought, wow, she’s got it. What Alder used to have, she’s got it. She fucking breathes it. It’s not just power, it’s compassion, too. Bravery and mercy. And the others see it, too. How can you not?”

“You can’t,” Yancy agreed. She would never forget the way Iris had single-handedly convinced Gym Leader Clay to give them a second chance when Yancy was resigned to inevitable defeat. “I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for Iris.”

“She’s not perfect, and I know she made a mistake with Brycen. But I also know she can fix it if she puts her mind to it.”

Yancy smiled. “You have a lot of faith in her.”

“She earned it,” he said, and Yancy believed that he believed that with every fiber of his being. “I know she can do this. I just hope she knows it, too.”
“Lead? Hey, I might be biased, but I’d say you’ve done a pretty good job yourself, considering.”

Nate smiled for her, but it didn’t reach his eyes. He was not over Cheren’s death, and possibly never would be. She couldn’t blame him for that.

“Thanks,” he said. “But I’m not a leader, not really. I’m just doing my best.”

“Well, that’s all anybody can do.” She smiled and booped Emolga on the nose. “Don’t sell yourself short, Nate. You have a lot more in common with Iris than you might think.”

“You’re not so bad yourself, you know. If I ever get the chance to meet Elesa, she’s gonna get sick of all the awesome things I have to say about you.”

Yancy blushed. “I haven’t done much.”

“You have. You’ve done so much.”

Yancy was suddenly very aware of just how warm Nate was next to her. They were coming up on another floor at the top of the narrow, winding staircase, and he stopped them just before the top, letting the rest of the group go on ahead past the landing and on to the next floor without them. He wouldn’t stop looking at her.

“You’re always thinking about other people. You’ve done so much. For Iris back in Driftveil, and Rosa when we found out about N.” He was facing her directly now and brought his hand to her hair, curled his fingers around it. She shivered, feeling his warmth even through her hair. “And for me.”

Yancy swallowed hard. He was very close now, almost too close, and yet not close enough. Her hands found the ends of his scarf and held on. His laughter was a low tremble that she felt more than heard.

“I love your hair,” he confessed, twirling the curls of her side ponytail between his fingers.

Yancy felt his heat in the ends of her bubblegum pink hair, in her hands on his shoulders, in Elesa’s necklace pulsating like a sun against her skin. She hardly heard him with the way her heart was pounding in her ears. He was so close, so achingly close.

“The highest of the high,” came a man’s voice from the landing just above. “They say an ancient Dragon kept a vigil here over the realm of men, many years ago.”

Yancy and Nate jumped and pulled apart. Yancy flushed Tamato berry-red like she’d been caught naked and turned to see their audience of one. She didn’t recognize him, but he was older than Nate and her, probably one of the local Icirrans who’d come along with their group. His brown hair was a mess and stuck out under his blue beanie like he’d meant for it to look like that. He wore a roguish grin that made up for his stocky frame, short for a man. His dark eyes were alight with laughter, and something else Yancy couldn’t place, something bright, like whatever lit him up came from someplace deep within.

“There’s still a ways to go,” the man said. “You’re not giving up now, are you?”

“Hey,” Nate said awkwardly. “Didn’t think anyone was in here.”

“You should continue to the top,” the man said. There was something strange about this voice, at once gruff and gravelly, but also distant, like an echo or a dream. This place did strange things to sound. “Or stay below. The choice is yours, but you can’t linger here in between.”
“We were just taking a break,” Yancy said, unsure why she felt compelled to explain herself to this man she didn’t even know. Something about his stare made her self-conscious, exposed, like he would know if she lied or embellished. It shouldn’t have bothered her, but it did.

“Is it much further to the top?” Nate asked.

The man smiled, but it wasn’t a happy smile. “No, but the journey won’t be easy. The hardest part is always the last. Make your choice and never waver, no matter how hard the road becomes.”

Yancy stared at the strange man, and the longer she looked, the more she thought there was something familiar about him, though she couldn’t place him.

“Sure, okay,” Nate said. “We’ll be right up.”

The man continued to smile, and the longer he held it, the sadder Yancy felt. He reminded her of someone posing for a photograph, waiting for the flash and trying to hold on to that expression of human emotion, losing more of it—and more of himself—with every passing second.

“I’ll be waiting for you,” the man said before showing them his back.

He was already gone before Yancy realized she hadn’t even asked for his name or how he knew them. She felt even sillier now. She must have met him at the welcome dinner and simply forgotten him.

“Well,” Nate said. “That was…”

“ Weird?” Yancy said.

“Kind of, yeah. I feel like I know that guy from somewhere, but I can’t remember.”

“Me too. I feel kind of bad. I’m usually not this bad with names.”

Nate shrugged. “Well, we can ask him at the top, I guess. No hard feelings.”

He didn’t look convinced, but he took her hand all the same and led her to the next flight of crumbling stairs. They continued their climb, but didn’t run in to the man again, who should have been just ahead of them. And when they came out on the top, there was no sign of him anywhere. It was as if he’d vanished without a trace.

But Yancy soon forgot about him when she took in the view. It was spectacular, unlike anything she ever could have imagined existed in all the world. A great statue was erected in the center of the acropolis, once covered by a domed roof that had long ago succumbed to the harsh elements. It was a Dragon, perhaps the one the man they’d met below talked about, an old myth relegated to history. Even so, it was magnificent, nearly as tall as Iris’s Dragonite. And over the edge, the world sprawled at Yancy’s feet.

“Wow,” Yancy said, breathless. “I can’t believe this place is even real.”

Nate stood next to her as they gazed at the world below, so far away, like gods looking down on their work contemplating what to build next. “Yeah. There’s nothing like this in Aspertia City.”

*There’s nothing like this in all the world.*

Yancy marveled at the time and skill it must have taken to construct this tower thousands of years ago. It must have been even more spectacular then at the height of its glory, when kings and
queens walked these halls and Dragons ruled the skies. A different world, a different time.

What did Iris feel when she stood up here?

Perhaps Yancy would never know, never truly understand. She was, after all, just a pleb who had never left home before now, uninitiated in the ways of the world and those who ruled it. People like Iris or Skyla or Brycen had their armies, their politics, their ambitions, their legacies. Things Yancy would never have. But standing here at the edge of the world, where she might reach up and touch the proverbial firmament with her fingertips, she envied them not at all.

That’s not me, she thought, startled at the conviction of her thoughts. That’s not the life I want.

She wanted to spar with Gozen until they were too tired to stand. She wanted to talk with Elesa late into the night and watch her slowly soften in the way she only ever did with the very few people she trusted implicitly. She wanted to walk the streets of Nimbasa, train with her fellow Rain Warriors, ride the Rendez-View Ferris Wheel at night with a boy she liked.

So far away, so high up with the entire world at her feet, and all Yancy wanted to do was go home. She took Nate’s hand in hers.

“We’re going to stop Neo Team Plasma,” she said. “We’ll get Brycen and Clay to come around, and together we’ll stop them. Opelucid, too. We’re going to win. We have to. There’s no in-between.”

He squeezed her hand back, and she felt a rush of warmth so intense that for a moment, she was sure not even the threat of winter could humble her.

“Yeah,” he said with quiet conviction. “We will. There’s no in-between.”

Emolga squeaked excitedly from Nate’s scarf. Together, they watched the sun set from the top of the highest tower in the world, her hand clutching Elesa’s necklace and Nate’s hand clutching hers, both so warm that she forgot what it felt like to be cold at all. And for just a little while, Yancy fancied herself a queen holding hands with her sunset king, and she was invincible.

Yancy and Nate returned to Icirrus once the sun had set. The Snow Festival was happening tonight, and despite the troubles between Brycen and Iris, she was looking forward to the festivities. She’d promised Rosa they would spend time together enjoying the festival, and she was keen to get back.

She wondered if Hugh had taken her advice and talked to Rosa about their troubles. He was such a stubborn man, and so angry. It made Yancy sad to watch him sink deeper into himself, unable to let go of the pain of losing his sister so tragically. Perhaps he thought the pain was all he had left of her. Yancy couldn’t blame him, but she hoped he would find a way to live on in spite of the tragedies of his past. He and Rosa had more in common than either would probably ever admit, though Yancy knew it was a lost cause to try telling either of them that. Still, she couldn’t help but hope for the best. If they could just find a way to appreciate what they had in common rather than hang on to what divided them, it could make all the difference.

Rosa and Hugh were on her mind when she landed back in Icirrus with Nate, Skyla, and the rest of the visitors to Dragonspiral Tower. The Snow Festival was well underway. The main street was packed with people enjoying the festivities, and someone was singing the most hauntingly beautiful song Yancy had ever heard. The stars were brilliant, the night was clear, and next to Nate she wasn’t the least bit cold.
“Hey, you wanna check out some of the games?” Nate offered, already taking her by the hand and leading her away.

Yes, Yancy was about to say when a commotion down the street grabbed everyone’s attention. People were dispersing as if to get away from something. Yancy caught bits and pieces of their conversations as they passed.

“Haxorus?” she said. “A body?”

“Iris,” Nate said, pale. “Damnit. C’mon, let’s check it out.”

Skyla had the same idea, and so Yancy and Nate fell in with her and her Valkyries, and together they quickly made their way to the Icirrus City Gym, where sure enough, Iris’s company was there with Haxorus, Benga’s Sceptile, Hugh and Rosa, and a man Yancy did not know.

“I heard you have a war to win,” said the stranger. “When do we start?”

Nate’s Lampent came to life all of a sudden, having slept for the whole flight back. He exploded with indigo light and yanked at Nate’s belt, where he’d been secured for their trip. Nate swore and tried to yank Lampent back. But Yancy was too busy staring at the stranger to pay Lampent much mind. His shadow, or what she’d imagined to be his shadow, moved of its own accord and merged with him. He began to shimmer indigo, as if he’d grown a second skin, and his red eyes bled to purple. Laughter echoed from all around, a thousand disembodied voices, none of which Yancy could single out. They all seemed to blend together, and they all came from him.

“Right now,” Iris said, her anger palpable. “I’m going to get us the alliance we all came here to secure, no matter what it takes.”

She turned toward the Gym, and Haxorus followed. It was just then that Yancy noticed the body he was dragging, and the blood it trailed in its wake in the snow.

“I guess we’re late to the party, and not in the fashionable sense,” Skyla said grimly. Beside her, Chase was staring in horror at the bloody snow.

“Nate, Yancy,” Rosa said, relieved. “Good timing.”

“What the hell’s going on?” Nate said.

“Either the best thing, or the fucking worst,” Hugh said. “Iris’s on the warpath. That guy just tried to assassinate her. He stopped it.”

Hugh indicated the man Yancy didn’t know. The shadow that inhabited him reminded her of fire almost, otherworldly and creepy. Just looking at him like that made her shiver, all Nate’s warmth forgotten.

“Assassinate?” Skyla said. “Here? Who was it? Opelucid?”

Rosa nodded. “Yeah, but they used a Neo to do it.”

“You,” Nate said. “You stopped it?”

The stranger grinned. “Not me, Mismagius.”

Upon hearing her name, Mismagius emerged from his shoulders in a swathe of darkness, and Yancy knew intuitively that she was looking at a Ghost. But unlike Lampent, who was corporeal
and even cute, this was an honest Ghost, a spirit with no body and no presence other than the chill on the back of her neck.

Lampent was less afraid and broke away from Nate’s hold to examine his fellow Ghost and the man who hosted her.

“Lampent, hey!” Nate said.

“Whoa, hey little guy,” the stranger said, grinning and genuinely intrigued. Lampent dangled a will-o-wisp in one of his feelers, and the stranger moved to take it.

“No, don’t!” Yancy said before she could stop herself.

But the stranger accepted the spectral flame and bounced it on his palm like a toy. “Don’t what?”

Yancy could not believe it. If she had tried to handle Lampent’s Ghost fire, it could have done worse than just burn her.

“Holy crap,” Nate said. “Another Medium.”

“This is Ash,” Rosa said. “Ash Ketchum. He’s a friend from Kanto, one of their Elite Four. He came to help.”

*Elite Four?* Yancy did not even know what to say to that. She’d heard of the so-called Elite Four, strong Pokémon trainers to whom even the toughest Gym Leaders answered. But Ash seemed young. He couldn’t have been any older than she was, perhaps even younger.

*But he’s a Medium,* she reminded herself. *He’s so much more than me.*

The haze obscuring him gathered and emerged as yet another Ghost with laughing red eyes and rotted teeth. He stuck his blackened tongue out at Lampent like a mischievous child, and Lampent spooked and floated back to Nate’s side.

“Gengar, cut it out,” Ash chided his Ghost.

“Oh wow, an Elite Four from Kanto! How delightfully random!” Skyla gushed. “I’m Skyla, the Mistralton City Gym Leader. You can hear the rest of the introductions on the way. We kinda need to go after Iris before she accosts Brycen with that body Haxorus is dragging around. She’s, like, not the *greatest* at keeping her temper around him. Chase, let’s go.”

Skyla was already heading inside after Iris and her people before Ash had a chance to respond. Chase and the rest of her entourage were right behind her.

“Why do I have a bad fucking feeling about what’s about to happen?” Hugh said.

“We better go,” Rosa said. “Ash, sorry, I’ll have to fill you in later.”

Ash shrugged, and Gengar shrugged dramatically along with him. “Hey, I’m just along for the ride.”

His Pikachu squeaked and crawled onto his shoulder, where he caught sight of Yancy’s Emolga and sparked curiously. Emolga, shy, burrowed deeper into Nate’s scarf to hide.

Soon enough, Yancy found herself in a large meeting room with the most extraordinary table in the center. It was carved in the shape of Unova, hand-painted and intricately detailed in such a way that Yancy imagined it must have taken months, perhaps years to complete it. Brycen and Freya
were the last to arrive a good fifteen minutes later, along with General Trygg, a handful of other Gladiators, and two of the members of Icirrus’s elder council. One of them, Auda, was busy eating a berry tart and looked determined to enjoy it no matter what the situation was.

“What is the meaning of this?” Brycen demanded. “The Snow Festival is a cherished tradition in —”

Haxorus growled and dropped the body he’d been dragging on the table. Snow and blood mixed and began to run red rivers through Castelia City.

“I’m sorry, but this can’t wait,” Iris said.

“How dare you bring such a beast into our Gym!” said the elder councilman, an old man with a snow-white beard and suspicious eyes. “This is highly inappropriate.”

Haxorus turned on the old man and dripped drool on the table. The old man recoiled and covered his heart in fright. Iris quickly recalled Haxorus, but Brycen had recovered from the initial shock of the situation and turned his cold fury on Iris.

“I told you to get out,” he said, eerily soft. “And yet, here you are again.”

Yancy shivered at the sound of his voice, like a dagger ripping through the finest silk.

“If you still want me gone after I tell you about the latest attack from Opelucid and Neo Team Plasma, then come tomorrow you’ll never see me again,” Iris said. “But as I said, this is too important and can’t wait.”

Brycen looked personally offended, but surprisingly it was Auda, the old councilwoman, who wiped the crumbs from her lips and spoke. “Well, I would certainly like to know why you’ve brought a corpse to this unscheduled meeting.”

“Ain’t no corpse,” said Trygg, who dragged the body toward him across the table and examined the bloody face. “Passed out cold.” He grinned. “I’ll wake him up.”

While Trygg was busy muscling the limp body into a chair, everyone naturally spread out around the table in their respective groups. Yancy found herself in between Nate and Benga, the latter of whom was strangely quiet, though only barely. Benga looked ready to spring across the table at Brycen and his people, a rubber band wound too taut and ready to snap at the slightest pressure.

“Well?” Brycen said, taking his seat at the head of the table. “You’ve been granted a limited audience. I suggest you use your time wisely.”

Iris placed her hands on the table, one of which Yancy noticed was bloody with a fresh wound hastily wrapped in a leather strip. She left a bloody handprint off the coast of Nuvema Town.

“First, I would like to formally apologize for the way our last meeting ended. I behaved poorly.” Iris spoke slowly and deliberately, as if it took every ounce of concentration she had to get the words out. “I had no right to speak to you so rudely, and I apologize for my disrespect. I was wrong to lose my temper.”

Brycen looked like he did not believe a word Iris said. At length, he frosted over and sat back in his chair. “I accept your apology, and I trust it won’t happen again.”

Yancy bristled at his patronizing tone. He hadn’t even bothered to offer his own apology. Iris, however, smiled politely and took it in stride. She betrayed no hint of the offense. Benga was less
concerned with appearances and power plays. He clenched his fists so hard under the table that Yancy worried he might draw blood.

“It won’t,” Iris said. “As for him,” she indicated the chair where Trygg had the unconscious man and was attempting, unsuccessfully, to revive him. “He was sent by Drayden to assassinate me.”

At this, Freya broke her dispassionate stare and betrayed her genuine shock, if only for a moment.

“Just now? At the festival?” Auda asked, her craggy face wrinkled in a deep-set frown. “Are you all right?”

It was Iris’s turn to show her surprise, but she nodded. “A little shaken, but I’ll survive. Thank you.”

Auda peered at her curiously. “How would an Opelucidian assassin have even made it past our boarders?”

“He isn’t Opelucidian at all; he’s with Neo Team Plasma.”

Auda’s frown soured further, her appetite lost as she set down her half finished tart.

“How can you be certain?” Brycen challenged. “Men will say anything under duress. From the state of this man, I wonder if it was your questions he answered or your Dragon’s.”

“I’m not asking you to take my word for it. Ask him yourself.”

Brycen looked at her long and hard, searching for the cracks that weren’t there. “I intend to, that is, if he can still speak without his face.”

“He’s gonna have to sleep it off,” Trygg said, wagging the assassin’s bloody chin in his thick fingers. “The hell did you do to him?”

“That’s my fault. I’ll wake him up,” said Ash, emerging from his place on the wall in the back, where he’d been lingering out of sight.

“How’s that, boy?” Trygg asked.

Gengar and Mismagius emerged from Ash’s shoulders once more, and the room filled with the sound of Gengar’s sinister chuckling and the faintly foul stench of decomposition. Before Trygg could do anything about it, Gengar had assumed his corporeal shape, hopped onto the assassin’s lap, and licked his face.

Suddenly, the the assassin jerked awake as though roused from a deep sleep and looked around, disoriented. He began babbling nonsensically and clutched his ruined face. Yancy could not stand to look upon him for long. Assassin or not, his pain and fear brought her no joy.

“Good Groudon,” Auda swore.

Gengar materialized on the table, and where his shadowy feet touched the assassin’s drying blood, it charred and turned to ash as though burned away.

“Gengar, c’mon buddy, this isn’t our show,” said Ash.

Gengar frowned dramatically, almost comically, but he reluctantly went back to Ash.

“A Medium,” Brycen said. “Foreign and young, but I’ve met Ecruteak City’s Gym Leader, and
you’re not him. Which means…you must be Ash Ketchum, the second Medium.”

The way Brycen said it, it didn’t sound like an accomplishment Ash should have been proud of.

“What is a foreign Elite Four with no ties to Unova doing in Icirrus unannounced?” Freya asked.

Ash grinned. “Actually, I’m looking for—”

“He’s here exclusively in his personal capacity.” Iris interrupted. “The powers that be in Kanto and Johto have nothing to do with Unova’s affairs.”

“Smart,” Yancy whispered.

Next to her, Nate shot her a curious glance. “What is?”

“Iris isn’t a foreigner, but not everyone sees it that way,” Yancy said, careful to keep her voice down. “I’d want to distance myself from any ties to Johto in her position, too.”

Nate frowned, considering as he listened to Iris convince Freya and Brycen that Ash was only here as a personal favor to Rosa. “Hey, you know a lot about this stuff, huh?”

“Years of watching Elesa play the same game.”

A game.

It felt strange to call it that, to trivialize what was truly at stake here. It felt wrong, in a way. Yancy wondered when she had started to see it like that.

“Is that so,” Brycen said, hardly convinced. “How fortuitous for you.”

Meanwhile, Trygg had managed to calm the assassin down and explain where he was.

“Look at me,” Trygg said. “I hear you traveled a long way to see the Dragon Princess. That true?”

The look in the assassin’s bloodshot eyes sent Yancy’s heart pounding uncomfortably.

“Crystallos protecting Titans?” He smiled, revealing bloody teeth. “The world really has gone mad.”

“Oh, you haven’t seen mad, you filth,” Moros said out of turn rather uncharacteristically. Soriel looked at him like he’d grown another head.

“Aye, filth, you’re not wrong. Everywhere I turn lately, there’s nothin’ but filth.”

“Tell them,” Iris said. “Tell them what you told me, and I’ll give you what you want. Your death will be clean and painless, you have my word.”

The assassin spit bloody mucus at Trygg’s feet, his mangled face made uglier and meaner as he sneered. “Fuck your word, Titan.”

Trygg grabbed him by the collar and lifted him bodily out of the chair. Trygg was a big man, bigger than most, and the assassin dangled in his hands like a doll. His clothes and skin frosted over where Trygg’s touch froze him. “If it’s death you want, look no further. I promise, you got no reason to doubt my word.”

The assassin showed no fear, though, and he hardly struggled. Yancy found herself inexplicably
embarrassed just watching this. What had this man experienced to rob him of all fear and respect for his own mortality?

“A man who don’t fear death fears somethin’ worse,” Trygg said, studying his captive. “Or someone.”

“Just get it over with already,” the assassin said. “Death don’t scare me.”

“I’m not in the habit of killing my captives,” Brycen said. “If you won’t speak, then I’ll throw you in the ice cells, where you can reflect on your appalling choices.”

At this, the assassin paled with true fear. “No, not that. Don’t keep me here, just… Just kill me now.”

“You mean to give me orders?” Brycen said.

“I’m beggin’ you. If you don’t, he’ll find me. There’s no place safe for me now s’long as I’m alive.”

“Drayden won’t find you here,” Brycen said. “No one will.”

“He’s not talking about Drayden,” Iris said. “I told you, he’s a Neo.”

“Then who?”

“Ghetsis,” Rosa spoke up. “You’re talking about Ghetsis, aren’t you?”

Trygg set the assassin down in his chair, where he shrank in on himself, shaking from the cold of Trygg’s touch and his terror.

“Ghetsis,” Iris said. “I know that name. Gym Leader Marlon mentioned him to me when I landed in Humilau. The leader of Neo Team Plasma?”

“Shh!” the assassin hissed. “Don’t speak his name out loud.” His swollen eyes shifted around the room as though searching for something. “The shadows, they’ll hear. They’ll tell him. They serve him, the Reaper…”

“Reaper?” Ash said. “I don’t know this Ghetsis guy, but I know Reapers. They don’t talk to shadows.”

The assassin covered his ears and trembled in his chair.

“Not like this,” Rosa said. “Ghetsis is over 300 years old, apparently. It’s not common knowledge, but it’s true. Shauntal told us.”

“Shauntal?” Ash said, suddenly very interested. “Hey, you don’t mean the Medium who’s s’posed to live here, do you?”

“Yeah, why?”

“That doesn’t matter right now,” Iris snapped, ending their tangent as swiftly as it had begun. “What matters is that the man behind Neo Team Plasma isn’t a man at all, but a monster.”

“A cannibal,” Trygg spat. “Yveltal take me, how the fuck did we miss that?”

“That man,” Iris pointed to the assassin as she addressed Brycen, “is a Neo. But he was sent here
on Drayden’s orders to kill me. You wanted proof that they’re working together? Here it is. We do have a common enemy, and now more than ever we need to work together to stop them, or the next assassin may have a different target in mind.’’

Trygg shook the assassin until he stopped his trembling and glared him right in the eye. “Speak up, you. Is the Dragon King in bed with the Neos or not?”

“Yes,” the assassin said, broken. “My failure will seal the alliance.”

Iris went very still. “So that’s it, your failure… You failed on purpose, didn’t you? If you’d truly wanted to kill me, you would’ve poisoned the wine. But you waited until my companions could see us, could help me…”

The assassin’s silence spoke volumes. He had begun to weep quietly. “Please,” he pleaded once more. “Give me a natural death before he finds me.”

“Absolutely not,” Brycen said. “Guards, take him to the ice cells to await further—”

Snap.

Yancy gasped at the sound of the assassin’s neck cracking in Trygg’s deceptively nimble hands. He slumped in his chair, lifeless.

“Sorry, Brycen,” Trygg said, “but no man, no matter how rotten, deserves a Reaper’s kiss.”

Brycen made no effort to hide his fury. Even so, when he spoke, it was with the deathly calm of a cold snap. “Dispose of the body. I’ll deal with your insubordination later, General.”

Yancy was not sad to see the assassin’s body depart on the shoulders of several of Brycen’s Gym guards and Trygg himself. As far as she was concerned, Trygg had made the right choice, as difficult as it had been to watch.

“Brycen,” Skyla spoke for the first time. “Iris is right. You have your proof now. It’s time take action. I’ll send a plane for Clay. He should really be here.”

“No,” Brycen said. “He’s needed in Driftveil, and you’re needed back in Mistralton. If war is coming, then we need to be prepared to defend ourselves.”

“Are you serious?” Hugh said. “Did you hear a word that dude said?”

Brycen turned his frigid gaze on Hugh, and Yancy could have sworn the temperature in the room dropped. “Excuse you.”

“Brycen, please,” Iris said before Hugh could make things worse. “Listen to me—”

“I am done listening.” He rose, and at his full height all in white, he towered over Iris. “I’ve heard your story, and I’ve made my decision. We didn’t have any problems with Opelucid or Neo Team Plasma until you arrived. Frankly, allying myself with you would put Icirrus directly in Drayden’s path. If this is how he treats a usurper, then I can only imagine how he would treat her allies.”

*He’s afraid*, Yancy realized. *Why didn’t I see it before?*

But then, who wouldn’t be in his position, with so much at stake? But Brycen was a Gym Leader. He didn’t have the luxury of letting fear guide his hand when he had so many depending on him to keep them safe.
“I came to Unova to take back Opelucid,” Iris said, fighting to keep her emotions in check. “I don’t deny it. But that’s my fight, and I’m not asking you to make it yours. What I’m asking for is—”

“Cannon fodder,” Brycen said. “Just say it. You want my Gladiators in your vanguard to soak up the worst Neo Team Plasma has to throw at you.”

“That’s not—”

“And Skyla, what do you imagine your role in all this is? Your Valkyries are the only deployment of trained Flyers in all of Unova with the numbers and skill to face the Dragon Riders, but not without a heavy price. How will your Braviary fare against a Salamence three times his size?”

Skyla tried to say something, but he spoke over her.

“And Clay’s Phalanx, the ultimate defense. He’s fond of boasting that not even Dragons can break it. You mean to test that theory in the most literal sense.”

“I promise you, that’s not my—” Iris began.

“Do not interrupt me. You’re quite bold to come here the way you have, making demands of me. You may have a Titan king’s blood in your veins, but that doesn’t change the truth of what you really are.”

“Shit,” Nate whispered, tense. “Not again.”

Yancy did not trust her voice to answer him.

“Iris,” Nuria said, a hand on her shoulder to stay whatever visceral reaction was sure to come. She muttered something in Adriati that Yancy could not understand.

Brycen smiled, but for all his aristocratic grace, there was nothing graceful about it. “And there it is.”

Iris put up a hand for Nuria to be silent. “Go ahead,” Iris said, “say it. From the moment we met, we both know you’ve wanted to. Now’s your chance.”

Yancy set her jaw so tightly she began to shake.

“Brycen,” Freya said softly, entreated.

Brycen spared his willowy sister a look that promised an unpleasant conversation later, but that was all she got from him.

“Iris Fafnir. I’ve heard you claim that name as your own, but we both know that isn’t who you really are. You’re the product of an illicit affair between a weak king and an ambitious thrall. You were raised by foreigners, and you dare to return a conqueror. Just look at you: you’ll never be accepted in Opelucid. I doubt they would even recognize you as one of their own.”

He looked at Iris then, but he didn’t really recognize her. At least, not the way a human recognizes a fellow human. He wasn’t quite looking so much as scrutinizing, the way one might scrutinize a particularly stubborn splinter that wouldn’t come out, or the sticky remains of an insect smeared over the heel of one’s shoe.

“There is no Iris Fafnir,” Brycen said. “You’re just Iris and nothing else.”

Nuria made no secret of her outrage. Even Iris, who had somehow managed to keep her calm until
now, began to lose the careful façade as her emotions clawed their way to the surface.

Freya rose and touched a hand to her brother’s shoulder, delicate as a flower. “You’ve made your point, but cruelty is beneath you, Brother.”

Brycen didn’t take his eyes off Iris. “I don’t say these things to be cruel, it’s simply the truth. And I can see by the look on your face that you’ve always known that. Opelucid would sooner give me a crown than you.”

Yancy could not help herself. She knew she was staring at Brycen, at Iris, waiting for something to pop. Waiting and watching, almost voyeuristically so. She felt sick with dread as those few seconds stretched, like skin pulling at the stitches barely keeping the raw ruin hidden.

“Okay,” Iris said. “Are you finished?”

Brycen only grew angrier at Iris’s nonchalance, but Freya attempted to intervene once again.

“Yes,” Freya said. “I think—”

“I am most certainly not finished,” Brycen talked over her to be heard.

“Yeah, you are,” Benga said, standing. “And you know what? Iris was right about you before: you are a vainglorious fool. What kinda narcissistic hate fantasy are you living in to shit on someone who’s just trying to help you do your goddamned job?”

“How dare you speak to me like that!” Brycen bellowed.

“No, how dare you!”

Benga climbed up on the table, tore his jacket off, and then his shirt and undershirt, until his bare skin was exposed for all to see. A collective hush descended as though all the air had left the room. Even the smell of the space seemed to change, damp and stifling. Yancy choked at the sight of two thick, jagged scars that reached through him, belly to back. They parted like a pair of bubbled lips, pinkish and shiny, frozen mid-scream. In the oppressive silence, Yancy could almost hear them.

“Mega Sceptile gave me these back in Driftveil,” Benga said, “when the Neos broke through my control and forced him to Dual Chop himself. They broke through our Mega Evolution bond, the strongest bond between a Tamer and Pokémon. Not even the best Titans can do that.”

Yancy could not help the tears that burned her eyes as she was transported back to that harrowing night in Driftveil. She could see oily, black smoke rising from the Colosseum ruins, hear Dragonite’s melancholy roar, feel the soft give of bodies under Rapidash’s hooves, too numerous and cluttered to step around them in the hurry. So many bodies, just people-sacks punctured and bleeding, their pain lingering around them like a foul stench for the living to soak up as they passed.

She remembered Benga in his bed, eyes closed and breathing deeply, almost serene as he slept. He’d been covered in a white sheet up to his chin, covered in white bandages under that, just completely covered, like if she couldn’t see his pain then it couldn’t be real. And it wasn’t real for her, for anyone who didn’t see, didn’t stop to feel and remember and grieve. Just a body in a bed, no different from a body on the ground, broken and bleeding, eyes closed to the pain that existed now only for those who stopped to look, like Yancy didn’t.

But she was looking now, feeling now, remembering what a part of her had known all along. They were all looking now. It was right there in front of them, among them, that foul stench that haunted
those who remained.

“Take a good look,” Benga said through gritted teeth. “This is what we’re up against, every single one of us. This is your fucking proof, Brycen.” His voice cracked, betraying him.

Brycen said nothing, for once cowed into silence and unable to avert his eyes. Freya beside him, however, shook with barely concealed fury. Her small fists glistened with new-formed frost that crept up her wrists.

Iris climbed onto the table, picked up Benga’s jacket, and covered him with it. She took his face in her hands, and though she said nothing, something passed between her and Benga that slowly brought him back. He let her lead him back down to the floor, where Soriel took him from her.

“I had no idea,” Skyla said. She sniffled loudly and rubbed at her watering eyes. “When you brought me the EM wave transmitter, I had no idea…”

“We’re done here,” Iris said in a tone that sounded more like a threat than a promise.

“Wait just a minute,” Auda said. “This technology, it can really override the bond of Mega Evolution? And the Neos have shared it with Opelucid?”

“It’s called Chimera,” Skyla said. “I think? Something like that.”

“Wait, Chimera did this?” Ash said.

“I said, we’re done here,” Iris said louder. “We’re leaving Icirrus at first light. This was a mistake.”

“Iris, wait,” Skyla said.

“No, I’m done waiting,” Iris said. “Gym Leader Clay made it very clear: he would only help if we could convince both of you, and we’ve failed to do that. So we’re done here.” To the rest of the room’s occupants she said, “But I’m not done. I’ll stand against and Opelucid and Neo Team Plasma and anyone else they have in their pockets, and so will Humilau. Anyone who wants to join us, I welcome you with open arms. If not, then this is where we part ways.”

With that, Iris marched out of the room. The rest of her core party followed.

“Fuck this,” Hugh said, going after Iris. Rosa was right behind him.

Ash lingered a moment, but he soon headed out after them, too. Nate and Yancy brought up the rear, and Skyla watched her go. It was almost enough to make her stop and turn back.

Am I doing the right thing?

She thought of Elesa, her mission, why she’d come here. But as soon as she had the thought, she knew she’d chosen right. If she wanted to help Nimbasa, then only Iris could make that happen now. Iris was the only one who seemed to care.

“This is crazy,” Nate said as they jogged to catch up with the group’s fast pace. “I can’t believe that just happened.”

“I know,” Yancy said, unsure what else to say.

When they caught up to the group, they had stopped just outside the Gym. It was very late, and the Snow Festival was coming to an end as people packed up the stalls and retreated inside to their homes.
“We have to go back in there,” Benga said. “How could you just turn them down like that?”

“We’re not going back,” Iris said. “It’s done. Brycen made it clear he’s not changing his mind, and that’s it.”

“But we have Skyla! We can convince him.”

“We can’t. We tried, and we can’t.”

“He’s an imperious prick, and believe me, any other day I’d be first in line for a shot at him, but I was getting through to him, I know it!”

“It’s too late for that, Benga. I said no.” Iris’s voice rose as her temper flared.

“This isn’t just about you! You can’t just decide things for everybody—”

“I won’t use you as a cheap political machination!” Iris shouted in a rage. “Your pain isn’t a bargaining chip, and your life isn’t a pawn on a chess board!”

“That’s my choice to make,” he said, too stunned to hold on to his anger. “It’s only pain. I’d go through it again for you.”

“But I won’t! Your life is so much more important to me than Drayden’s, or the Neos’, or anyone’s.” Iris turned on the group gathered around her. “That goes for all of you. You know what you’re doing being here, what it costs. But there’s one price I’m not willing to pay, no matter the stakes.

“I won’t demand your lives or your dignity in return for my vow. I’m not your princess or your queen. I’m not a lot of things, and I may never be anything, just…just Iris. This isn’t about me.” Her dark eyes glistened with unshed tears as she shook with the force of her emotions, surprised by her own fervor. “This isn’t about me,” she said again, a strange, dream-like quality to her voice that hadn’t been there before, almost revelatory. “None of us…we didn’t get this far alone.”

Yancy felt the sudden and inexplicable urge to weep then, though not for herself. She thought of Elesa leaning over her on her last night in Nimbasa, silhouetted in the darkness to hide her fear as she whispered secrets and sent Yancy away. Elesa had spared her one fate in favor of another, one that was not just hers but all of theirs now.

“That’s my decision,” Iris said. “All I ask is that you respect it.”

“I have no problem with your decision, so allow me to give you mine,” said Freya.

She was standing outside of the Gym, alone and still in her festival dress. Under the starlight, she glowed silver bright, more fey than femme. Yancy almost didn’t believe she was human, except for the heartbreaking look on her face.

“I’m afraid. We all are. None more so than my brother,” she said, an ardor to her voice that had not been there before. “But even so, I want to help.”

Yancy clutched Elesa’s pearl necklace like it might disappear. She couldn’t breathe, afraid to hope but daring to, anyway.

“And I’d like your help in return,” Freya went on. She spread her arms, all but bare under her sheer silk and blue diamonds. “Please, stay. We cannot face what’s coming alone.”
Nate’s hand found Yancy’s and held on tight. No one said a word, waiting to see what Iris would do.

“I don’t speak for them,” Iris said at length. “But I’ll stay. I may be a Titan, but I don’t go back on my word.”

Freya nodded. “I believe you.”

“I’ll stay,” Benga said. “But I have a condition: Brycen has to apologize.”

“You shall have it,” Freya said with such fierce conviction that there was no doubt in Yancy’s mind that they would.

“I will stay,” Nuria said. “But I need no apology from you. I know my worth and my purpose, and no one can tell me otherwise.”

Freya nodded respectfully. “I don’t doubt it.”

“I’m staying,” Rosa said.

“Me, too,” Hugh said. “Let’s finish this once and for all.”

“I’ll stay,” Nate said. He cast Yancy a glance askance, smiling softly.

“And me,” Yancy said. “But I… I have a condition, too.”

“What’s that?” Freya asked.

Yancy swallowed, steeling her nerve. “I want… I need to get a message to Gym Leader Elesa. I know it’s risky, but I have to tell her what’s happened. I have to give her hope that we’re coming.”

“Elesa? She’s at Dragonsong Castle, alone in a pit of vipers.” Freya studied her the way a statue might study a museum patron. Yancy forced herself not to squirm under Freya’s cold scrutiny. “It’s risky, yes…but not impossible. I’ll see to it myself.”

Yancy released the breath she didn’t know she’d been holding. The rest of their group quickly added their voices, until it became clear that this was real, it was happening, they had won Icirrus.

*Which means we’ll get Driftveil, too. All three Triumvirs, plus Humilau and Iris herself…*

For the first time since she’d left Nimbasa, the impossible mandate Elesa had given her did not seem so impossible. And if Freya could get a message to her, something to reassure Elesa that she was not alone, that she was not forgotten… Yancy pulled Elesa’s pearl necklace out and held it close, wishing upon it like a star that Elesa would feel her thoughts, her happiness, wherever she was tonight.

Yancy smiled through her tears, and when Nate picked her up in a celebratory hug, she laughed through them, too. Elesa’s necklace hummed with warmth in her fingers.

*I’m coming, Elesa. And I’m bringing hope with me.*
Thank you so much to my friend Secretie, who beta’d this chapter and was invaluable in her insights and thoughtful commentary as I navigate the morass of Themes ‘n Shit that make this fic what it is.
The cold raised goosebumps on Elesa’s bare flesh, but she stood still, hardly feeling the chill. The fire in the hearth had long died to embers, and only a single candle offered light in the gloom. Its flickering flame painted ghoulish shadows over her bare shoulders, her chest, her legs. Her long, black hair, normally brushed to gleaming, hung limply just past her waist, her only cover save for the shadows.

She’d been standing here for what felt like hours, alone in her bedroom in front of a full-length mirror. Water from her bath had long since dried up on her skin and left it feeling itchy and taut. She traced the flickering shadows that carved dark crags in her skin. Her fingers were clumsy as they moved, bloated and unfamiliar. She rubbed the gooseflesh on her arm, poked at her left breast and winced at the dull, aching soreness. The curve of her belly protruded just enough to notice, though it would have been undetectable under layers of fine silk and velvet.

She tapped it. Softly at first, and then again, harder. Her nail left a deep imprint in the chilled skin, but it would soon fade. She dug her nail in again, deeper this time. The gooseflesh flushed pink under the pressure, and she pressed harder still. A trickle of blood ran down her finger to the floor and smeared her skin. She hadn’t even felt the skin puncture.

Fingers without feeling, skin without shape. Bones and muscle and blood, all wrapped up in a skin sack to keep them together. All she was missing was a bright, red bow. The longer she looked at her body in the mirror, the more she saw the pieces of it. It was swollen ankles, chapped lips, a rounded belly, coarse dark hair—parts of a whole that didn’t fit together, that didn’t belong together.

A thin trickle of blood dribbled down her belly to the crease separating groin from thigh. Elesa followed the path of red as if it were a crack in the ceiling plaster, observed only because there was nothing else to look at. Vaguely, she thought about wiping herself up, cleaning the smear on the floor, but her pieces didn’t move to obey the thought. They just stood there, shamefully exposed, but that was a ridiculous thought. A body did not feel shame, so why would she?

“She’s bleeding!” gasped Sheera, Elesa’s personal handmaid. “Queen Elesa, you’re bleeding!”

Sheera threw open the armoire, grabbed a green shawl, and covered Elesa’s naked body with it.

“You’re cold as ice,” Sheera fussed. “How long have you been standing there? You poor thing. I’ll get a fresh fire going just as soon as we get you cleaned up.”

Elesa said nothing as Sheera directed her to the bathroom, ran the hot water, and began wiping up the blood. She applied disinfectant to the wound, but it was small and had already stopped bleeding.

Sheera shook her head. “You must be very careful, Your Majesty. Your body isn’t just yours
anymore, you know. You must think of the baby.”

Elesa stared at Sheera as she meticulously concentrated on completing her task efficiently and quickly. There was genuine concern in her eyes, narrowed in focus, but Elesa felt nothing at all watching her. Not pain, or anger, or grief, just nothing at all.

“There, that’s better. Now, we must get you warmed up. Why don’t you choose a dress while I see to the fire?

Sheera was already leading her back to the bedroom and settling her in front of the armoire before Elesa had a chance to respond. She was gone to tend to the hearth just as quickly, leaving Elesa to stare at the selection of dresses and gowns. Just one of the opulent dresses was worth more than Sheera’s annual salary, and Elesa had more than twenty in this armoire alone.

Elesa touched a yellow silk dress, long-sleeved and studded with a waterfall of black seed pearls. She remembered the day she’d received it as a birthday gift from her grandmother, Elya. A custom order from a famous tailor in Lumiose City, Elesa had fallen in love with it at first sight and wore it for the rest of the celebration, a vision in thunderstorm yellow. It was the last birthday Elya had been alive to see. Elesa ran her fingers over the skirt. The pearls were smooth and cool under her fingertips, black rain on lightning.

“Did you choose a dress?” asked Sheera as she stoked the fire.

Elesa let her hand fall. “No. I’ll retire for the evening. I’m tired.”

“Oh? Are you unwell? King Drayden was expecting you for dinner this evening, but if you’re not up to it…”

“I’m tired,” Elesa said. “Please give the king my sincerest apologies.”

“I, well,” Sheera hedged. “A-At least you must eat something. May I bring you anything?”

“I’m not hungry.”

“Then… Then at least for the baby’s sake—”

“That will be all, Sheera, thank you.”

Elesa could feel Sheera’s eyes on her back, but at length the handmaid relented. “Of course, my queen. Please let me know if I can be of any further assistance.”

Elesa was alone again, and none would disturb her now. At least, not for a little while. Sheera would be back first thing in the morning, and the morning after that, and the morning after that. Drayden wouldn’t accept Elesa’s excuses forever. The small council would send for her, require her blessing for whatever course of action they deemed necessary for Nimbasa. All of them would return, day after day, demanding a more pieces of her for some purpose or another.

Elesa dropped the shawl Sheera had wrapped her in and climbed into bed. It was early, only just past sunset, but she pulled the covers over her and stared up at the dark ceiling. She was tired, that at least had not been a lie.

It was quiet here, so quiet. The fire popped in the hearth, but the oppressive silence drowned it out before long. She could hardly even hear herself breathing. Was she even breathing? She saw the rise and fall of her chest, tasted the air on her tongue—smoke, wood, winter—but she couldn’t hear it. She couldn’t hear it.
Under the covers, her fingers that weren’t hers ran over the small mound of her belly. She felt nothing there, not a heartbeat, not a kick, nothing at all. There was no flesh-peeling wound, no blood, no scar there. Why was there no scar?

Elesa closed her eyes and counted her breaths, in and out, in and out, in and out. Maybe if she counted high enough, she could wake up. Maybe it would become second nature, an involuntary response she didn’t have to concentrate on to keep going. She counted and counted, waiting. And waiting.

Until Sheera returned, the sun at her back. It was a new day.

“Good morning, Queen Elesa. I hope you’re feeling better.” Sheera smiled at her, sweet. “Why don’t you choose a dress while I make up the bed?”

Elesa stared again at the armoire filled to bursting with so many pretty dresses.

“Maybe, I could help you choose? If it pleases Your Majesty,” Sheera said.

Elesa looked at the demure handmaid. She was blushing, eyes lowered and second-guessing herself around her mercurial mistress. Elesa lay back on the pillow, closed her eyes, and breathed in.

In and out, in and out.

“That would be fine, Sheera. Thank you,” she said.

Sheera shuffled to stand upright. “O-Oh! Right, yes, very good. Um, let’s see…” She gingerly ran her hands over the many exquisite dresses, as if they might dissipate into smoke at the slightest disturbance. “Oh…”

Sheera selected a dress, the yellow with the black pearls Elesa had been contemplating last night. “You look beautiful in yellow, Your Majesty. If I may?"

You may not, Elesa wanted to say. The sight of Sheera handling that particular dress filled her with a sudden flash flood of fury that startled her awake. It was as transient as it was intense, and Elesa sucked in a sharp breath that she felt down to her toes.

“Queen Elesa?” Sheera said, less confident. “I… I could choose another one, if you prefer?”

“No,” Elesa said a bit more forcefully than she had intended. She forced herself to pause and take a breath. “No, I’ll wear that one. It’s fine.”

Sheera smiled. “Wonderful! I’ll set it aside for you, just here. Um, your breakfast will be ready shortly. Will you take it in the sitting room?”

While Sheera fixed her hair in a thick fishtail braid, Elesa dressed and ate mechanically. She wondered how long it would be before these actions, too, would become reactions to the life around her.

“There, all done,” Sheera said, her pride evident. “You look very beautiful. But of course, you always look beautiful!”

Elesa stared at her reflection in the mirror Sheera held up for her. In Nimbasa, she rarely wore such fine dresses unless it was an occasion. But in Opelucid, it seemed that getting out of bed in the morning was occasion enough to look her best. And yet, the longer Elesa looked, the harder it was to remember the powerful feeling she’d felt the first time she’d worn this dress.
“Thank you,” she said without thinking, turning away from the mirror.

“Ah, one more thing,” Sheera said. “His Majesty King Drayden is away and will not be able to join you for dinner this evening.”

“Away? Where?”

“I don’t know, my queen,” Sheera demurred. “But I was told he would be away for some time on business.”

Elesa’s expression darkened. Drayden’s “business” could mean any number of things, none of them at all palatable. But what could she do? Even with Drayden himself gone, that still left his Dragon Riders and Ridder Knights, the castle guards, and the many eyes watching her, waiting for her to give them something to whisper to Ryon, that obsequious lap dog of his. Elesa knew Sheera was only one of many who reported on her movements and behavior. Hardly anywhere in these walls was safe from prying eyes and ears.

“I see,” Elesa said. “In that case, I’ll take my usual walk around the castle grounds.”

“A wonderful idea. Shall I send for an escort?”

“That won’t be necessary. I don’t have any intention of leaving the grounds.”

*So you need not send me a watchdog.*

Sheera nodded and Elesa took her leave in her heavy dress and her thick braid and her low heels, each step a high tap on the stone hallway floor. She made her way to the training grounds in the southern courtyard that opened up into the Lostlorn Forest beyond the southern wall. The gate was open this morning to allow for Ridder Knights, castle guards, and common militia men to come and go from their exercises and drills. Every day they trained for the battle that loomed ahead. Elesa watched them from a balcony, where two more castle guards dressed in austere black and white uniforms stood watch at the door and over Elesa herself.

She had to admire the soldiers’ dedication, if nothing else. They were at it every day from dawn to dusk ever since she’d arrived here months ago. It felt longer than that. Ever since Elesa found out that Drayden had impregnated her, she had come out here to watch them train for an hour or two every morning.

But it was not the Opelucidian soldiers she came for. Among their ranks, she spotted faces she knew as well as her own exchanging blows and words alike. The Nimbasan Gym trainers and soldiers she had brought with her had been integrated among Drayden’s men, his idea.

“They should build camaraderie with my men, learn the city and how we defend it,” he had reasoned.

A logical position, and one uniquely beneficial to him in that it deprived Elesa of unfettered access to her most loyal Nimbasan guards. Her dark eyes scanned the bodies below until she found the one she was looking for. Gozen’s bright aqua hair was impossible to miss among the black and white of the Opelucidian soldiers. She was sparring with a Ridder Knight and getting the better of him. Elesa watched as she backed him into a corner with her blunted training sword, whirling and twirling like the Knight was clearly unused to dealing with. They laughed together about something as they crossed blades in a temporary ceasefire, though Elesa could not make out their words. The sound of Gozen’s laughter filled her with a strange kind of melancholy she felt under her nails like a splinter. What could Gozen have to laugh about with a Ridder Knight? What could
he have possibly said to elicit such a response now, in this place, surrounded by these people, so far away from home?

Elesa turned on her heel and abruptly left, unable to watch any longer. She wandered the castle without any particular destination in mind. She had spent many a day exploring Dragonsong Castle, but it was a sprawling labyrinth of halls that seemed to stretch on endlessly, a thousand rooms with a thousand purposes, and towers that loomed over the rest of the city like swords thrust toward the heavens and waiting to fall.

One such tower, the West Tower, was one she had traversed before. It was used as temporary quarters for foreign officials and visitors, but now there was only one foreigner occupying its highest and largest room. Elesa paused at the mouth of the stairwell, where a castle guard was stationed in gleaming black and white armor and a longsword at his hip.

“Your Majesty,” the guard greeted politely. He was blond and blue-eyed like any other local Opelucidians, and so straight-backed that it was a wonder he hadn’t snapped in two.

She lingered, though she could not imagine why. There was nothing for her here. And yet, her feet carried her to the stairs all the same. The guard stepped in front of her to block her way.

“A thousand pardons, my queen,” he stumbled over his words, “but you can’t—that is, no one is allowed past this point.”

Elesa frowned at him and his weak challenge. There was no reason she should bother with him, and yet she was already rising to his resistance.

“What’s your name, guard?”

“My… My name?”

“Your name, yes. You have one of those, don’t you?”

“I—Yes, of course. It’s Dag.”

“Dag,” Elesa said. “You’re telling me no one is allowed up there? Not even the king?”

“The king? Of course he’s allowed—he’s the king.”

“Yes, and I’m the queen. His equal and closest ally.”

Dag looked at her with his mouth agape. “You are, that’s true, but…”

His resistance puzzled and annoyed her. It was a matter of principle now. She stepped closer to him, and he flushed with discomfort. “I’m going up.”

“Y-Yes, Your Majesty,” he muttered, but she was already blowing past him. “Wait! I, uh, I’ll escort you—”

A flash of light cut him off as Manectric appeared at Elesa’s heels and cast a warning look back at him.

“I have my own escort, thank you,” Elesa said, gathering her skirts and beginning the long climb to the top.

Dag stared at his feet, defeated, while Manectric trotted upstairs after Elesa. It was a long trek in a gown and heels, but the higher Elesa climbed, the more determined she was to confront the one
confined to this tower cell. She thought less about why and more about when, frustrated at just how many steps there were in this monolithic tower seemingly going to waste without anyone occupying its many vacant rooms.

Manectric was silent at her heels, but he knew his part well and waited patiently in front of the door to the highest tower cell. As Elesa’s oldest Pokémon, he had been with her the longest of her three and was the most well-behaved no matter the situation. She laid a hand on his mane, his natural static as soothing as any tender caress. Elesa opened the door and let herself inside.

It was a spacious room and well-furnished for an extended stay that almost made the hike up worth the trouble. Windows offered an unparalleled view of the city below and the misty Twist Mountains far to the west. A fire crackled in the hearth and filled the space with homey warmth. A man sat by the window away from the fire surrounded by pages of parchment. They were scribbled all over with the faces of people. He looked up from his work when Elesa entered and set down the charcoal stick with which he had been sketching. His fingers were black to the knuckles from his efforts.

“Gym Leader Elesa,” he said, as though he had been expecting her.

Elesa stilled at the title. It had been some time since anyone had addressed her like that, and so she returned the courtesy. “Gym Leader Burgh. I see you’re keeping busy.”

Burgh looked an absolute fright. His eyes were ringed with dark circles that rivaled his coal-smeared fingers. His brown hair was getting long and hung limp over his shoulders, unwashed and listless, though Elesa knew he had more important things to worry about than his hair. He was thin, painfully so. His clothes hung on his frame like they might slip off his shoulders if he so much as turned around.

“Drayden was kind enough to provide me with some means of entertainment to pass the time,” Burgh said dryly.

Manectric sauntered into the room and sniffed at some of Burgh’s discarded sketches on the floor. Burgh eyed him, but he did not seem alarmed at Manectric’s presence.

“One of many comforts you’ve been provided, I see,” Elesa said, stepping inside and running her fingers over the back of a wine red chaise lounge.

“A gilded cage is still a cage,” Burgh said bluntly. “You should know.”

Elesa froze and fixed him with a mighty glare. “I’m the queen. I’m not locked away in some forgotten tower.”

Burgh said nothing to that and went back to his sketches. “Why are you here? I’m sure it’s not to have a nice chat, so out with it already. Can’t imagine what a man in my current position could have to offer you, though.”

Elesa looked at him, really looked at him. He truly looked awful, like he should have died years ago. Ryon had reported that Burgh was terminally ill, and that only his Volucris blood had kept him alive this long. She wondered what that must be like, to know death was close, but not so close as to relinquish oneself to it. It must be agony.

“Perhaps I simply wanted to see you,” Elesa said. “I may have no love for you or Castelia City, but you’re lucky to be here instead of under Neo Team Plasma’s care. I wouldn’t wish that on anyone.”

Burgh set down his charcoal and looked up at her. “No.”
“No?”

“You didn’t come here to say that.”

Elesa frowned. She didn’t like his tone of voice. “Oh, really? Then what?”

“You came here to gloat.”

“I did not.”

His sunken gaze burned into her. That was a strange word to describe it, but it was all she could think of when he fixed his full attention on her. “Yes, you did. You think that because my city was invaded and I’m confined to this room that you’ve somehow won.”

“I have won,” Elesa said. “Any fool could see that.”

“You’re the biggest fool of all.”

Elesa was growing angry now. Who the hell did he think he was? She advanced toward him. “Be very careful how you speak to me.”

Manectric began to spark, sensing the rising tension in the room. He leveled Burgh with a warning glare, but Burgh remained seated and still, completely unthreatening. He began to laugh, an ugly sound, throaty and wheezy like an old man.

“You really are in denial, aren’t you? You truly believe you’re a queen.”

Elesa’s glare matched her pet’s. “I’m warning you, Volucris.”

“Don’t waste your breath, Fulmen,” Burgh spat. “I’m acutely aware of my position in all this. Perhaps it’s me who ought to be warning you before it’s too late, though I doubt you would hear me as you are now.”

“That’s enough. You’re a prisoner here. Your city has fallen, and your resistance with it. You’re in no position to—”

“But you are?” He was looking up at her as she towered over him, Manectric at her side. He looked so feeble from this angle, and yet he showed her no fear at all. “Ah, I see what’s going on here. You’re finally beaten, aren’t you? What was the final straw, hm? What did Drayden do to cow you into submission? It must have been something horrific if you’re intimidating a wasted man who probably won’t live long enough to see the other side of these walls just to salvage some shred of agency—”

Elesa slapped him hard, the sound of flesh smacking flesh loud in the spacious room. She was breathing hard and shaking with the force of her anger and the sting in her hand and a shame so deep and ugly that it only fueled her anger even more. Burgh stared at the fire, his sallow cheek flushed red, but he didn’t look back at her, and that enraged her more even than his words had.

In a flourish of yellow silk and static, Elesa turned on her heel and marched out of the room with Manectric. She slammed the door behind her. Burgh did not once turn to watch her leave.

When Elesa made it back to her room, her rage had dulled to a simmering boil easy to conceal from any who might be watching, but she felt its burn no less. Sheera and two other handmaids were
tidying up her suite when she arrived.

“Out,” Elesa commanded, kicking off her heels.

“Queen Elesa,” Sheera said, “may I serve—”

“I said, out!” Elesa whirled, one hand on Manectric and the other extended. Sparks danced in between her long fingers, itching to jump.

Sheera dropped the tray and tea set she’d been holding in a fright and stumbled out of the room. The other two handmaids had already bolted. Tea and shards of porcelain lay sprawled on the marble floor of the sitting room, but Elesa could not be bothered to care. With a grunt of effort, she slammed her electrified hand onto a glass end table. A hundred little lightning bolts cracked the glass and popped the lightbulb in the lamp that sat upon it. A black char mark spread out from the table’s four legs like the floor had split open beneath it.

“Consider me dazzled,” said Rayanna, rising from the sofa behind Elesa.

Elesa turned, surprised. She had not even noticed Rayanna’s presence when she’d stormed in here, her fury had been all-consuming. “What are you doing here?”

Manectric trotted to greet her, and Rayanna patted his head. She often dropped by for tea or drinks, and always for gossip. Manectric had taken a liking to her as her visits became commonplace ever since Elesa had arrived in Opelucid.

“Waiting for you, of course,” Rayanna said, stopping a healthy distance from Elesa. “Drayden’s out of town, so I thought I would visit you.”

Rayanna’s visits had waned noticeably since Elesa’s condition became known. She suspected Drayden had something to do with it, that bastard. First Gozen and her soldiers, and then Rayanna. It was him, Elesa was sure of it. He was trying to keep her isolated, afraid. Afraid of him. And goddamnit, it was working.

“You really are in denial, aren’t you? You truly believe you’re a queen.”

She was a queen, damnit. A queen and a Gym Leader and a Fulmen from a line that traced back to the founding of Unova.

And she was afraid of him.

“Elesa?” Rayanna moved closer. Her purple eyes, normally sly and shrewd, were narrowed with genuine concern. Genuine? There was no telling with Rayanna. She was as knowable as a shadow having spent her entire life at court playing the game of kings and queens. “Forget the tea. I’ll send for some wine for us. Come, I’ve missed you.”

Elesa just stared at her. She remembered the first night she’d met Rayanna, those laughing purple eyes, hands that couldn’t seem to keep to themselves, a sly tongue made for sharing secrets. The kind of woman who wasn’t meant to be trusted, but who made it so tempting to try.

“You’re the biggest fool of all,” the memory of Burgh’s taunts haunted her.

He’s the fool, Elesa thought bitterly. He’s the prisoner, not me. He was beaten, not me.

She was free to go where she pleased, do as she pleased. No one, not even Drayden, could cow her.
“Listen, Elesa,” Rayanna said, her voice low and hard the way it only got when they were alone with no one watching. “I found the handmaid who switched your pills. The order came from Drayden directly, just like we suspected. We still have time, but it won’t last long. You need a plan for after the baby is born—”

The mention of her forced pregnancy snapped something in Elesa, something desperate and volatile that wanted to sink its teeth into something just to feel solid. Elesa closed the distance between Rayanna and herself, took Rayanna’s face in her still sparkling hands, and kissed her full on the mouth.

Rayanna was caught off-guard, but Elesa didn’t give her a chance to back out and pushed her down to the sofa, where they landed together. She pulled Rayanna’s thick braid like a rope and ran her other hand down the bodice of her blue dress. It didn’t take long for Rayanna to respond to her touch, and she returned Elesa’s kiss with a surprising passion. Her fingers found the laces securing Elesa’s dress and began to unravel them hastily. She tried to say something, but it only came out in a gasping breath as Elesa kissed her to the point of devouring.

*I’m the queen. I will never be cowed,* she thought, her body electric as she felt Rayanna melt under her touch. Rayanna moaned into their kiss, and Elesa felt powerful, mighty as she stole this moment for herself, for the both of them, and no one could stop them—stop her. No one would dare.

She pulled at Rayanna’s skirt, searching for the opening at the bottom, finding none. Damn women’s clothing, always so cumbersome—even their dresses were a kind of shackle. Rayanna’s fingers moved to help her, but they were clumsy with passion. Frustrated, Elesa ripped the silken fabric outright, and Rayanna tried to pull back, startled.

“Elesa, wait—”

Elesa silenced her with another bruising kiss, unwilling to let go. She imagined Drayden looming over her in his bed, those cold eyes unfeeling, unseeing but not blind, no, he saw exactly the mess he made of her. Pieces taken and rearranged, some gone forever, crushed beneath the weight of him over her, inside her, rewriting her until she no longer recognized the girl before. Where had she gone?

*Gone.*

Rayanna pushed back again. “Wait a minute, something’s wrong.”

But all little girls wake up one day to find themselves gone—high born or low, Tamer or pleb, piece by piece. Even queens.

Especially queens.

Elesa’s body protested violently at the thought.

*No, not me. Not yet. I’m still—*

She tried to pull Rayanna into another kiss, desperate, but this time Rayanna found her strength and pushed back with force. Elesa rolled off the sofa entirely and landed on the floor, her dress loose around her shoulders and threatening to slip off if she didn’t hold it up.

Rayanna was breathing hard and her eyes were dark, but not with desire. There was fear there, primal and suspicious, a fear Elesa knew all too well. She suddenly had the delusional urge to claw out her own eyes so she would not have to see such a look on Rayanna’s face.
“Elesa,” Rayanna said, out of breath and clutching her skirt tightly around her. “We can’t do this. You’re not yourself right now.”

The shock of Rayanna’s fear soon gave way to that horrible shame that had followed Elesa from Burgh’s room like a ball and chain. It had grown into a beast she could no longer ignore or control, and with it came all her anger and self-loathing and a visceral fear she could not bear to hold on to any longer. She scrambled to her feet, her hair a tousled mess and her dress wrinkled.

“Not myself?” she said defensively. “I’m standing right here.”

Rayanna remained seated and calm, but that fear still lingered about her like a bad smell. “I can see you’re extremely upset. I don’t think this is the right time to—”

“So you’re rejecting me?”

Rayanna looked affronted. “No, but—”

“But you don’t want me.”

“Of course I want you! Are you blind? I’ve wanted you since that first night when you arrived in Opelucid, but not like this. You’re not yourself.”

Elesa’s knuckles cracked as electricity jumped in between her fingers threateningly. “This is me, Rayanna. This is who I am. I don’t take orders from you or Drayden or anyone. If you don’t like it, then you can get the hell out.”

“No, it goddamn isn’t you,” Rayanna said a little more forcefully. “You haven’t been yourself for weeks, not since we found out Drayden tricked you into this pregnancy—”

“Get out!” Elesa shouted, unable to listen to another word. She couldn’t stand to look at Rayanna anymore. “Get out, now!”

Rayanna got up. The fear was gone, but the sadness that remained was worse. Elesa could not bear to see her looking like that. Rayanna looked like she wanted to say something more, but she just turned and left. Elesa listened to the sharp tap of her heels that carried her out, until not even an echo was left of her.

Elesa was now truly left alone.

Elesa lay in bed that night unable to sleep even with Emolga curled up on the pillow next to her head. Her eyes were dry as a bone, and yet she couldn’t shake the feeling that crying might release this awful energy that had been building up inside her for weeks. But that was a stupid thought. Crying would not get her out of this abysmal situation any more than wishing upon a star would.

Drayden was gone somewhere, and no one would tell her where or for how long. Perhaps he was meeting with Ghetsis again, or stalking his bastard niece wherever she might be. Elesa hated that even in his absence, her thoughts were consumed by Drayden. Not even her mind was truly safe from his hold.

The longer she lay in bed thinking about him, the angrier she became. Everything here, from the sheets in her bed to her flesh and bone body, was under his control. It was true what they said about Titans and their insatiable need to control everything and everyone around them. He had his
Dragons, his palace, his soldiers and hers, and he had Elesa herself. At least, until the baby was born and he no longer needed her body to be its vessel. Perhaps Burgh wasn’t the only one who would not live to see the other side of these walls again.

Elesa was so angry at him for putting her in this situation against her knowledge and will. She was angry at Sheera, a wolf in sheep’s skin pretending to help—it would not have surprised her if she was the handmaid Rayanna had identified as the one who had sabotaged Elesa’s pregnancy medication. She was angry at Gozen for not being here, even though she’d sworn to protect Elesa at all costs. She was angry at Burgh for denying the crown Drayden had given her, at Rayanna for denying the passion Drayden had robbed of her. What was left of her? What remained but pieces that no longer fit together, no longer obeyed her? Not a queen, not a woman, not even a real person anymore.

“I did this,” she whispered to the shadows in a voice so meek and small, she wondered if even that was still hers. “It’s my fault. I did it all.”

Marrying Drayden, cementing an alliance with Opelucid, coming here, sending Yancy away, even the pregnancy. If only she’d been more careful, more prepared, perhaps she would not have been fooled. It was her fault she’d been made the victim, for as all little girls eventually learn, in this world the victims are always the ones to blame for their own misfortune.

Elesa choked on a tight knot in her throat. Her hand found the gentle mound of her belly, still and soft in these early months. This thing growing inside her, it wasn’t hers. It would never be hers so long as she remained here. She didn’t want it, had never wanted it, but it was coming and there was nothing she could do to stop it. What would she do? What could she do? What was even the point?

She closed her eyes and breathed through the knot in her throat, but the tears never came.

Burgh was standing by the window and looking out toward the Moor of Icirrus and the Twist Mountains far to the west when Elesa came to him later that week. He didn’t look surprised to see her, but Elesa doubted anything could surprise him these days given his dismal situation. He simply did not have the energy.

He said nothing. Manectric curled up by the fireplace to nap, and Elesa hovered by the doorway, hesitating. When it became clear that Burgh would not initiate anything with her, she closed the door behind her and stepped inside.

Burgh’s charcoal sketches were scattered across the coffee table by the fireplace, many of them smeared with black fingerprints where he’d handled them carelessly. Elesa studied the topmost ones. They were all of people, each face different. Some were old, others young. Men and women, some fair and some not. A few were detailed so precisely and with such care that they looked lifelike. It was as if Burgh had been looking right at them when he’d sketched their pictures, recalling every detail with a precision only the intimacy of close acquaintance could replicate. Elesa picked up one of the sketches of a middle aged man and marveled at the skill.

“Who are all these people?” she asked.

Burgh looked back at her, and for the longest time he simply watched her, perhaps debating whether or not he should indulge her with conversation at all. At length, he went back to looking out the window. “They’re Castelians.”
Elesa picked up a few more sketches. Each of them was clearly of a different person, and there had to be over a fifty here. “There are so many.”

“Castelia has a large population.”

“You drew them all from memory. The detail in some of these is incredible.”

Burgh tensed. “I make it a point never to forget a face.”

Elesa set down the pictures and stared down at them, no longer able to see the artistic talent that had captured them, but instead the faces themselves, faces that belonged to real people, captured with such care, such intimacy… Remarkable.

They were all dead, she knew in that moment. Every one of them. This was the only place they continued to exist now, in black and white, every wrinkle and freckle and scar rendered with painstaking care. Elesa turned from them, but she could feel their charcoal eyes on her as if they could truly see her.

“What do you want, Elesa?” Burgh said.

He sounded so tired, so beaten, like he could not have cared what her answer would be one way or another. If he hadn’t been standing right there, she might have imagined that he’d said anything at all.

“You must be going crazy locked up alone in here,” Elesa said. “I imagine you don’t get many visitors.”

Burgh turned to face her. He wore a green cardigan three sizes too big on him. It hung down almost to his knees. “I’m not a social person. I don’t crave conversation the way others do.”

The way he said it, the way he looked at her, told her he wasn’t a man to swallow flattery or bullshit. Perhaps he simply didn’t care to try, or maybe that was just the kind of man he was. Either way, it was what she had been hoping to find here now that she finally knew—and accepted—what she was looking for.

“You’re not what I expected,” Elesa said, meaning it. “Elya told me stories about your uncle, Artie, and a few about you.” She looked him over, taking her time. “You’re not what I expected.”

“Come now,” he said, smiling in a way that made her want to look away. “Give me a little credit. I can be every bit the vermin your grandmother considered me to be.”

Elesa did not return his cold smile. “It wasn’t personal, my decision to cease all trade. It was just business.”

“Of course. My decision to harvest Thunderstones from the Relic Desert was also purely business.”

“You robbed my people of millions.”

“And your draconian policies denied my people light and warmth,” Burgh said, venom in his voice and his smile gone. “You knew exactly what you were doing. With the Neos in Nacrene, you knew exactly where this was going.”

Elesa felt her anger blossom. “And you knew the price of your pillaging. Your Sand Sleepers murdered my Nimbasan miners. They weren’t fighters, they were just doing their jobs. Hundreds of them, and they didn’t have to die.”
“Half my city didn’t have to die!” Burgh shouted. “But they did when the Neos and Opelucid invaded. That was you, Elesa. You handed Drayden the keys to your kingdom. He never would have crossed the Relic Desert if it wasn’t for you.”

“His Dragon Riders never needed my help or my permission!” Elesa shouted right back. “Do you honestly think I had a choice? You think he would have turned back and gone home to Opelucid, thanks but no thanks, no harm done? My city was in his direct line of fire, not yours. It still is, and so am I.”

Burgh was looking at her like she was the vilest, most abhorrent creature he had ever laid eyes on. “So you sacrifice thousands of innocent Castelians just to get your crown? Did you even lose any sleep over it? Did you once stop to consider the cost?!”

“What would you have done in my position? Drayden shows up unannounced with his entire fleet of Dragon Riders and a platoon of Ridder Knights at your door, and you’re telling me you would have done it differently? He would have razed Nimbasa to the ground!”

“Yes, just like he did to Castelia,” Burgh spat. “For your information, I would’ve done it differently. I would have stood up to him, given him the fight of his life if it meant I could save innocent lives.”

Elesa could have laughed at his naivety if it wasn’t so goddamned sad. “And how many innocent lives would have been lost to your hubris in the process? Castelia has the numbers, but Nimbasa doesn’t. He would have crushed us, and he would have teamed up with the Neos to come after you, anyway. At least this way, Nimbasa was spared.”

“Of course, and you got your shining crown, too. What a fortuitous turn for you.”

Elesa was so angry she could have spit. Just looking at him brought it all back, everything that had kept her up at night, silenced her these past agonizing weeks. She saw Rayanna’s fear of her, Gozen’s frustration, her own deadened reflection. And she saw Drayden looming over her.

“All child is a blessing, isn’t that right, my love?”

Elesa clutched her belly, wishing she could sink her fingers through that unknown flesh and burn it all away.

“I have no crown,” she said through gritted teeth. “I have no title, no power, no—no choice.” She dug her fingers in through the bodice of her jade green dress, and Burgh’s hollow eyes were inevitably drawn to the movement. “I have nothing.”

She couldn’t say when the tears had finally come. After weeks of barren nothingness, she barely felt them at all. They sparked and evaporated on her cheeks into static.

“I’m a queen of nothing,” she said, shuddering and shaking as she finally spoke that horrible truth she’d known ever since the day she’d found out about Drayden’s heinous trick. Her hand shook as she pressed it against her belly, wondering how much harder she would have to push to feel anything at all. “So you were right, we are the same. The only difference is I chose this, and you didn’t.”

Burgh stared openly at her, and it was fascinating to watch the transformation in his empty eyes that had thought they’d seen enough horror and hardship. Something in him changed, subtly, but it was there.

“Elesa, I…”
She couldn’t bear to be here a moment longer, and so she dashed out. Manectric bolted after her. Dag the guard nearly fell over when she blew past him without slowing.

“Queen Elesa!” he called after her in alarm.

But she was gone around the corner before he could hope to follow.

The days blurred together into weeks, and still Drayden was away. Elesa had taken to holing up in her suite, refusing any and all visitors, including her handmaids. Gozen tried to see her at one point in a rare break from the intense training drills the Ridder Knights had her doing, but Elesa could not bear to have Gozen see her like this, as much as she missed the company of the one person here she should have been able to trust.

She hadn’t bathed in days, hadn’t slept properly in weeks, had barely touched any of the food they sent up to her. She spent her days alone and in silence. Not even her Pokémon could lift her spirits, though Emolga never tired of trying.

Rayanna had come knocking, entreating Elesa to talk to her, to just let her in, they didn’t even have to talk about anything, just sit together. Elesa couldn’t face her after their last parting. The shame was crippling to the point that she could hardly muster the energy to get out of bed most days. And every day, though logically it could not have been possible over such a relatively short amount of time, she imagined that her belly grew a little more.

She wondered what the child would be like when it was born. A Fulmen, most likely. Her ancestral line had an unusually high instance of full-blooded Fulmen births compared to other Tamer families. Ever since the time of her mythical ancestor, the sorceress Elysanna, Fulmen in Elesa’s family had skewed female and powerful. Perhaps this child would be another daughter, the next in the line of strong Nimbasan Fulmen.

But it wouldn’t be. No, it would be Opelucidian like its father. Fulmen or not, this child would never be Elesa’s even if she wanted it. It would be a stranger to her, if she survived long enough for it to remember her. That thought made her laugh one night as she was watching the sun set over the Twist Mountains from her balcony in nothing but a bathrobe. There was a frost, but she didn’t care about the cold or the effect it might have on her or the unborn child slowly morphing her body from the inside out. She was barefoot and shivering, her breath misting and her long hair a tangle, but she didn’t care as she leaned over the balcony and watched the darkness devour the last of the light.

She never knew her own mother, who had died shortly after she was born. Her father had been a nobody, just some man her mother had loved for a night and taken a piece of home without knowing it. Elya had raised her to be a woman, a Fulmen, a Gym Leader. Everything Elesa was now was in large part due to the woman who had raised her. Who would raise her child? What kind of life would it lead? Would she be around to see it? Did she even care?

As she stared into the gloomy distance, a strange light suddenly lit up the night sky and outlined
the Twist Mountains in a brilliant orange flash. As soon as it faded, another took its place, and another and another, until they blended into a continuous downward fall. Elesa watched, her thoughts forgotten, as she took in the bizarre meteor shower far to the west, mysteriously concentrated over only a couple miles of the Twist Mountains. What kind of power could summon a meteor shower over a specific area at will?

Down below, she could see the many lights of Opelucid City’s locals tucked safely in their warm homes for the night, and wondered if they could see it, too. Were children watching with their plump faces pressed against the window, eyes round as saucers with wonder and awe, wishing on the falling stars for their hearts’ most secret desires?

The thought stirred an old memory long buried from a lifetime ago. She had been just a girl, eleven or so, and she was with Skyla at Mistraltion’s Star Tower. It was the best place to watch the grand meteor shower, and they had stayed up all night to catch it. Elesa would never forget Skyla’s wonder at the thought of so many stars falling from millions of miles away, flying faster than even a Crobat, each one unique, each one alive for only a moment before burning to ash.

Elesa had made a hundred wishes that night. The meteors fell so fast and so numerous that she couldn’t keep up or think of more wishes. They lit up the sky like the dawn, and Elesa fancied catching a handful of them, little star lights that could glitter in her palm when it was dark. It was a night when anything had seemed possible, a night filled with wonderment and love, just two little girls sharing a little magic together.

Elesa flexed her palm, and sparks danced in her fingers, magic she carried with her everywhere she went now. The strange meteors continued to fall in the distance, and there was something beautifully violent about them, passionately angry, if meteors could be angry. She wondered if she should wish upon one, a passing puerile fancy, but as she considered what she would even wish for if she was indulging such a childish whim, the last of them died down. The Twist Mountains were once again plunged into darkness, and the only light left was the one sparkling in her hand.

In darkness she stood there, freezing as the frost slowly coated the stone balcony railing and dew froze around her toes. She had missed her chance for wishing, but she was no longer a little girl with no recourse but to wish upon a falling star for things to change. If anything was to change, she would have to change it herself. And yet…

Elesa squeezed her fist, killing the sparks and absorbing them back into her flesh. She pressed her fist to her lips and closed her eyes, and she wished dearly upon the light she carried with her everywhere she went.

“Q-Queen Elesa!” Dag stammered when he saw her marching purposefully toward him dressed in a heavy black gown slashed with gold, her hair wavy and loose behind her. “You’re back. I was sure you would stay away since it’s been so long…”

“Step aside, Dag,” Elesa said. “I’m going up.”

Manectric beside her sparked for good measure, and Dag was easily bullied aside.

“Your Majesty, um, General Caelith asked me to, um, let her know if you, that is, if you came back —”

“Then you shouldn’t keep the good general waiting.”
“Ah, well, I-I can’t leave the prisoner unguarded…”

“Then I suggest you figure out how to be in two places at once.”

Dag stared after her, red in the face with embarrassment, but Elesa was already climbing the stairs. It was easy to pretend she didn’t understand why she’d come back, or why Burgh specifically, but she’d known all along in spite of her pride. And after the last time, she was certain Burgh understood, too. If Caelith was watching her, then she would have to use her time wisely.

Burgh was hunched over his sketches in front of the hearth when she threw open the door and let herself in without waiting to be invited. He took one look at her and got up, charcoal in one hand and a half-finished sketch in the other. Elesa looked at the drawing in his hand, a woman that was vaguely familiar. She stepped closer and saw the rest of the sketches on the table, most of them new since the last time she’d been here.

They were all of her. Faces, busts, full-body sketches, some with Manectric at her side, all in black and white. In some her face was twisted in anger, in others she was quietly displeased, a few showed her tears. She had not been expecting that, and she did not know what to say.

“I wasn’t sure you would come back,” Burgh said hoarsely.

“I wasn’t sure I would come back,” Elesa said.

They stood there in silence for a moment, and Elesa noticed how his gaze drifted to her belly. Without meaning to, she stiffened. But he didn’t waver, didn’t ask. There was little more words could say that he hadn’t already gathered, and he wasn’t here for her sob story when he had his own to keep him up at night.

Elesa was grateful for his tacit understanding of her trauma, and respected his refusal not to let it excuse her.

“Why are you here?” he asked, as he asked her every time she came here.

“To apologize,” Elesa said, shaking with how straight she was standing. “And for the truth.”

“The truth.”

“I realized it’s why I came here in the first place. We’re both prisoners here, though our cages are different.” She squeezed her fists, but she would not crumble before him. She owed them both that much, at least. “The truth is, neither of us will probably survive this. So…”

He waited for her to find the right words. He was strangely patient, this man living on borrowed time. How sad, how fitting.

“I like conversation,” Elesa said, remembering what he’d said about never needing conversation. It wasn’t a lie. Of all the people in these castle walls, only Burgh deserved the truth. Like her, he had nothing left to lose.

He took the half-finished picture of her in both hands and studied it. “You have a face that wants painting. You’re physically beautiful, but many people are. There’s something else, something vulnerable that draws the eye.” He looked up at her. “You try so hard to hide it. I think that’s why.”

Elesa did not know what to say to that. “You’re more poet than Gym Leader.”
“No,” he said sadly. “Words have always failed me, I’m afraid.”

Elesa nodded like this made perfect sense, and in a way it did. This was a man who had fought with his very life for the people he had sworn to protect, all while fighting for his own life against the tide of nature. He had suffered, it was plain to see. He was still suffering, and yet he’d clung to life all the same. Elesa wasn’t sure there were enough words to capture that feeling of fierce, undying loyalty.

“I apologize,” Elesa said, “for the way I spoke to you before. And for Castelia. I…made a mistake.”

_I made a mistake._

Had she ever spoken such words aloud to a stranger before? Hardly even to an intimate. And yet, she knew them to be true. She had made a mistake, and it had cost so many people and Pokémon their lives.

“I thought I could control him,” she said softly, as if to speak any louder might summon the man himself to this spot to smite her. “I thought I could move him.”

“Yes,” Burgh said, and though he was looking at her, he seemed to be seeing someone else. “But in the end, there’s no moving him from the path he’s chosen, is there?”

What little was left of Elesa’s heart wrenched, physically painful, and she clutched her chest. “No, there isn’t.”

“No,” Burgh echoed her. At length, he seemed to remember she was there in the room with him, and he blinked. “You were doing what you could to protect Nimbasa. Perhaps, in your position, I may have made the same decision.”

“I should have stood up to him,” Elesa said more to herself than to him. “His Dragon Riders have the skies, but I have thunder and lightning. I should have stood up to him.”

“If you had, Nimbasa would have been crushed along with Castelia.” He said it not to comfort her, but simply to state the fact.

But Elesa would not accept this. “I was weak. I made a choice, and it was the wrong one.”

“Wrong or right, it’s in the past.” He averted his gaze. “We can’t change what’s happened, no matter how much we wish for it.”

Elesa looked at her hand and thought about the wish she’d made on the light that was a part of her. _Give me strength. Give me the strength to move forward…somehow._

“I don’t know what to do,” Elesa confided in a strange, soft voice that didn’t feel like hers.

Burgh looked at her, but he had no answers for her. “Neither do I.”

It was absurd, really. After all this time, they were finally together having an honest conversation, everything laid bare, and it was too late. Perhaps she deserved this, too. She touched her belly self-consciously, and Burgh noticed.

“I apologize, too,” Burgh said. “That… That isn’t your fault, it’s entirely his.”

Elesa almost came undone right then. She had not known how much she had needed to hear those
words. She had made mistakes, but this was not one of them. This was not her fault, and it was not her reward. She would not carry the blame for it, no matter how easy it was to believe she must. She let her hand fall, and Manectric licked it affectionately.

“Thank you,” she said, meaning it.

An uncomfortable silence stretched between them, and considering what she knew about Burgh, he was not about to break it first.

“So we’re both waiting in limbo with nowhere to go,” Elesa said. “I don’t know what to do with myself these days.”

“Yes,” Burgh said. “I…have coffee. The guard, Dag, brought it for me upon request. It’s terrible,” he added quickly, lest she get the wrong impression. “An insult to my Castelian palette, to be honest, but it’s something.”

It was something. Elesa nodded. “I would love a cup.”

Burgh shrugged awkwardly, and he went to prepare the bad coffee.

“I used to visit Castelia undercover,” Elesa revealed, nursing her coffee. If nothing else, it served to warm her fingers. “The casinos. I love to gamble.”

“You know, that doesn’t surprise me at all,” Burgh said. He sat cross-legged on the loveseat across from her with a quilt over his lap. He was practically swimming in his baggy clothes and the huge quilt over his knees. Even his coffee mug was big for him. He sipped it with both hands. “You seem like the type to bet big and win big.”

“I am. Or, I was.” The coffee was bitter and strong, but Elesa drank it gratefully. It was good to have something go down hot. “I’ve been on a grand losing spree lately, as you can see.”

“What are you going to do when the baby is born?”

“Deliver it.”

“I meant afterwards.”

“I don’t know if I’ll live that long.”

He looked at her with that creepy, sunken stare he had. “I doubt that.”

“You don’t know Drayden. I didn’t, either.”

*But now I know better.*

“Indulge me, then.”

Elesa shrugged. “I haven’t thought about it. I never wanted a child. Eventually maybe, but not this one. I never wanted this one.”

Burgh just nodded, and she was grateful for it. He didn’t try to convince her to want it, tell her how to think, or anything at all. It was not his place, and in that moment, she could have kissed him for being a decent goddamned human being.
But he also didn’t refute her. She was having this baby, they both knew that. To do anything else would be to seal Nimbasa’s fate.

“I heard an interesting story about your ancestor, Elysanna,” Burgh said. “Apparently, she had seven children. All daughters, all Fulmen.”

“I guess some women hear the call of motherhood.”

“I guess. But either way, the stories say she was the strongest Fulmen who ever lived, so she was doing something right.”

“Good for her,” Elesa deadpanned.

“You don’t sound like a believer.”

“I’m not. I’m sure some version of Elysanna lived, or else I wouldn’t be here. But the stories about her are difficult to swallow. I’m sure you can understand, since you seem to be familiar with them.”

“I’m familiar with them.”

Elesa waited for him to elaborate, but he merely sipped his coffee. She snorted in a very unladylike manner. “I get it. You actually believe them. Somehow, that doesn’t surprise me.”

“It doesn’t?”

“Not at all. You’re an artist. You would find meaning in the fantastic and the magical. I suppose someone should.”

“But not you.”

“Not me.”

He said nothing to that, and Elesa could not help herself—she was curious. “I used to be, though.”

“Oh?”

“As a child. I was obsessed with Elysanna and her mythos. I must have read every book in the Nimbasa University library about her. Some of the lore was in code and even required a Thunderstone lens to read properly, as if the secrets hidden within were too dangerous for our modern, cynical world.”

She did little to hide her true feelings on the subject, and Burgh watched her thoughtfully.

“What kinds of secrets?” he asked.

“Oh, you know, sealing souls, reanimating the dead, the usual.” When he didn’t react, Elesa smiled wryly. “It’s a story. A myth, really. I’m sure Elysanna was powerful, but she was as human as you or me, not some sorceress.”

“So you don’t believe in myths and magic.”

“Do you?”

Burgh set down his coffee mug and folded his spindly hands over his lap. “You can redirect electricity through your body at will. I’m terminally ill with a disease that should’ve killed me years ago. If that’s not magic, then what is it?”
“That’s hardly the same thing.” But even as she said it, she felt herself shudder hearing him admit out loud that he was going to die. He said it so nonchalantly, and on some level it made her angry. No one should ever be so resigned to their own mortality no matter how bleak the circumstances.

No matter the circumstances.

She fist her skirt, and static jumped from her fingers over the heavy black velvet.

“Elysanna sealed the souls of Reshiram and Zekrom,” Elesa said. “The two halves of the Original Dragon. The story goes that she preserved their souls so that they would live on after their bodies withered and died.”

“There are many stories about the Hero Twins and their Dragons,” Burgh said. “The Adriati have their own myth, and even the Kalosians.”

“The Kalosians?”

“Yes, the story of the Hero Twins—the true story, I think—comes from Kalos. They fought in the Great Kalosian War, and when Yveltal itself stole all life from the world, they were among those who were reborn. An original Reaper and Magus pair, or so the story goes.”

“Yes…I remember now. They came to Unova after the war as conquerers. The Adriati say they assumed the forms of Dragons—Reshiram and Zekrom—and destroyed anyone who stood in their path.”

“That, or they somehow tamed Reshiram and Zekrom. Either way, Elysanna was a part of their story. The end of it, at least.”

Elesa petted Manectric where he sat on the sofa curled up next to her. “If Elysanna lived, she was just a normal Fulmen, like me. She couldn’t summon a maelstrom in the palm of her hand or seal souls. People love a good story, that’s all.”

“He always loved a good story,” Burgh said softly at length. “Sometimes I think he spent his whole life searching for any story other than the one he was in.”

“Who’re you talking about?”

Burgh looked up at her as though he’d forgotten she was there for a moment. “He’s a Magus, N. A true Magus.” He shook his head and laughed a little. “I don’t know why I’m telling you all this. I suppose there’s no one else to tell anymore.”

Elesa stared at him. “N, as in, the previous leader of Team Plasma? A Magus? I don’t—”

“He is,” Burgh insisted, as certain as he was sitting across from her. “He’s a true Magus. I didn’t realize it at first, but his scent was different. We Volucris can smell pheromones. You could no sooner conceal your Fulmen nature from me than you could conceal Manectric in your skirts. I knew he was different, but I didn’t know how at first.”

Elesa did not know what to make of that. He at least seemed to believe it, and who was she to argue with that? She decided to humor him. “A living Magus. How?”

“I don’t know, but he can see things.” Burgh rubbed his temples as if searching for the right words to describe whatever memory he was reliving. “He can look at you, and he knows you, everything about you: fear, loss, desire, love. It’s all bared raw before him. There’s no lying to him. He has a rare gift, a beautiful gift.”
Something about the way Burgh said it made Elesa desperately sad for him. He spoke like one who had lost the thing that made him feel alive, human. Seeing the way memories of N haunted what little was left of his life made her believe he truly had. “You loved him,” she said.

But he didn’t love you, not in the same way.

The look on his face confirmed it all. “I’ve given Team Plasma amnesty since their early days. Castelia would always be a sanctuary for N’s true followers, I swore to him. I’ve never gone back on my word.”

It was strange, and a little tragic, she thought. Just days ago, she had loathed Burgh as the arbiter of Castelia’s crimes against Nimbasan citizens and an obstacle on the road to a unified Heart Tine. Now, he was the only person in the world with whom she could have an honest conversation from a place of mutual understanding and empathy. They were quite the pair, Tamers raised on power and privilege, reduced to highborn hostages in their own skin with no future to look forward to except their own inevitable demises.

“You talk about him like he’s still here,” Elesa said.

“He is, somewhere.”

“Of course.”

“No, I’m serious. He’s still out there.”

Elesa was taken aback at his ardor. “N died in Vertress City. It was a freak storm. It was all over the news last year.”

“He didn’t die. He’s still alive, and Zekrom is with him.”

“Okay. In that case, maybe he can fly here and relieve Drayden of his castle.”

Burgh did not so much as crack a smile. He fixed her with a haunted stare that chilled her to the bone. “He’s alive, Elesa, and so is Zekrom. They’re as real as you or me, and they’re still out there somewhere.”

Elesa fiddled with her collar, but there was no necklace there to distract her fingers. “I believe that you believe that.”

Burgh leaned over his knees. “Why did you come here?”

His question caught her off guard.

“For the truth,” he answered for her. “You came here because this is the only place left where you don’t have to lie or be lied to. Dead men tell no tales, right?”

Elesa honestly did no know what to say to that. He truly believed N was alive, and that he had summoned the legendary Dragon, Zekrom. It was beyond reason.

“I have proof,” he insisted. “My sister, Vivian, she’s—she was with the man who challenged N. She was at Vertress when it burned. She witnessed it all. N murdered the woman he loved to summon Zekrom from the Dark Stone. Even the Light Stone is real. She saw it with her own eyes: it devoured her partner when he tried to use it to summon Reshiram. He didn’t make the proper sacrifice, and so it rejected him.”
“He couldn’t do it,” Burgh said, more to himself than to Elesa. “Whatever he did, it wasn’t enough. Reshiram consumed him, body and soul, and N and Zekrom disappeared. And Vivian, she… She came back to Castelia with this unbelievable story, claiming she had the Light Stone and she had to save Hilbert somehow. I didn’t understand. N was…” He rubbed his face in his hands and sat like that a while, his face covered. “She was so determined to find a way to save Hilbert, but the Neos murdered her not long after that. Just random, wrong place at the wrong time.” Burgh wasn’t even looking at her anymore. “I never found out what happened to the Light Stone. I’ve never told anyone that story.”

Elesa had no words for him. She didn’t trust her voice to speak after all that she’d just heard, after seeing his raw emotions bared before her with nothing left to lose. It terrified her to the core.

“I met Vivian,” she said at length. “She came to Nimbasa looking for me.”

Burgh looked up at her. “Why would she do that?”

There was a hint of hostility in his tone, almost accusatory, though she supposed she didn’t blame him considering their longstanding animosity. Elesa did not really know what had possessed Vivian, sister to the man who had been Elesa’s primary political adversary since she became Gym Leader, to seek her out. Perhaps it had been that touch of lunacy that had convinced Elesa to hear her out. It would make for a good story later, if nothing else.

“She came to return something to me.” Elesa touched her neck. Her fingers were shaking, and she could not quite believe she was speaking these words aloud to Burgh, of all people. But he as right—they were both one foot in the grave as it was, and secrets seemed like such a tiresome triviality. “Something that had once belonged to my family many years ago.”

Understanding dawned on Burgh as his gaze lingered on her neck. “You’re serious… The Light Stone—she gave it to you? And you didn’t try to use it against me?”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” Elesa hissed. “I told you, I don’t believe in these fairytales.”

“Are you sure you just couldn’t figure out how to use it?”

Elesa glared at him. “I never tried. I may have had intentions against Castelia, but they concerned warfare between soldiers, not a total annihilation of your city and every man, woman, and child in it.”

They faced off, and for a moment Elesa wondered if their precarious truce had shattered. Burgh eventually leaned back in his chair and rubbed his temples as if to relieve a migraine.

“No,” he said at length. “I don’t think even you would go that far. But Drayden might.”

“It doesn’t matter what Drayden would or would not do. He doesn’t have the option.”

“Elesa, what did you do?” Burgh said, very serious. “Where is the Light Stone?”

Before Elesa could respond, the door slammed open and Caelith marched inside with two castle guards carrying halberds. Dag, looking out of breath and a little fearful, followed them like a kicked puppy too beaten to protest. He shot Elesa an apologetic look, though she suspected he was more concerned with his own skin than with hers.

“Your Majesty,” Caelith said through her teeth. “I hear you’ve taken to socializing with the king’s
personal hostage. I’m afraid I can’t allow this to go on. You’ll have to come with me at once.”

Elesa rose, and Manectric rose with her. He bared his serrated teeth at Caelith, but she was completely unconcerned with him. The red veins around her eyes pulsed threateningly.

“General Caelith, I had no idea you were so attuned to my comings and goings. Are you still in charge of the Dragon Riders, or have you delegated all your responsibilities to Thorys to have so much free time?” Elesa said.

Caelith’s expression turned from its usual implacable severity to downright venomous. The engorged veins around her mouth wriggled as she pinched her lips in displeasure. “The Dragon Riders are mine to command and no one else’s.”

“Then perhaps you should be commanding them now instead of wasting your valuable time checking up on me.”

Caelith looked ready to spit. “I wouldn’t need to check up on you if you didn’t insist on snooping about like a wayward child.”

Elesa narrowed her eyes and advanced on Caelith. “I am the queen. If I choose to interrogate a prisoner, then that’s my right, especially with the king away.”

“Oh? Then by all means, please share what you discovered. I’ll be happy to send along a message to the king.”

Elesa smiled coyly. “No need. I didn’t find out anything useful.” She looked back at Burgh. “Dead men tell no tales, you know.”

He held her gaze, but he said nothing. There was nothing else she could do, and so she turned to leave. Dag scrambled to get out of her way and mumbled some miserable apology. She ignored him and descended the stairs in as dignified a manner as she could, Manectric right behind her.

Elesa wasn’t followed outright, and once she was behind her closed door, she sank to the floor, her heavy skirt pooling around her. The apartment was wide and high-ceilinged and white, oppressively so. She had never felt so small. Manectric whined and licked her hand.

What am I going to do?

Talking with Burgh had been a welcome balm after months feeling trapped in her own skin. That bridge was surely burned now that Caelith had found out about their meetings. She doubted she would get another chance to speak to Burgh alone.

Why was she following me?

It made no sense. The most successful spies were the ones no one was looking for: a handmaid, a serving boy, a butler. But Caelith was a respected general in Drayden’s military with better things to do than follow around Elesa, who undoubtedly already had a number of spies reporting on her movements. The only thing that made sense was that Drayden had personally ordered Caelith to watch Elesa, or at least made Elesa think Caelith was watching her. But why? Caelith clearly was not happy about it. Could Elesa use that somehow?

Manectric’s ears perked up, and soon after there was a knock on the door.
“Queen Elesa? It’s Rayanna Regnbage. I need your royal seal to approve a payment for a Thunderstone shipment from Nimbasa City.”

Elesa tensed. She had not seen Rayanna since they’d been alone together and Elesa had initiated something she’d come to regret deeply. Just hearing Rayanna’s voice through the door awakened the shame and self-loathing borne of their interrupted tryst. She felt it as a physical manifestation, her palms clammy and her stomach churning with budding nausea.

*I’ve made so many mistakes.*

“Queen Elesa? I’m afraid it’s urgent, and with King Drayden still away, I can only turn to you.”

What was Rayanna doing? Before, she had tried inviting Elesa to tea or to play cards, or even to town to peruse the local meat markets, anything to get her alone and away from prying ears. Now she wanted to talk business? Elesa got up and rested her hands on the door, debating.

“It won’t take long,” Rayanna said, her tone all business. “I would come back later, but it can’t wait.”

Elesa took a quick turn around her suite, and once she was satisfied that Sheera or any other handmaid was not furtively cleaning, she opened the door for Rayanna. The sight of her brought an aching heat to her cheeks. Those violet eyes were bewitching even in their austerity, and her chestnut hair hung in its usual hangman’s noose of a braid over her shoulder. Rayana did not so much as smile.

“Your Majesty,” she said. “May I come in?”

Elesa stepped aside for her.

“As I said, we’re expecting a fresh shipment of refined Thunderstones next week,” Rayanna said, riffling through some papers she’d brought with her. “I’ll need to go through the details with you and get your seal of approval before Nimbasa will release the shipment to our care.”

Elesa closed and locked the door and followed Rayanna deeper into her suite. They sat down opposite each other across a coffee table, and Rayanna laid out some papers for Elesa to review.

“If you’ll just take a look at these here,” she indicated the middle stack. “Please read through them carefully.”

“Rayanna,” Elesa began even as she flipped through some of the papers. When had the treasury ever needed a royal seal of approval for something as simple as a transfer of goods? “The last time you were here—”

“Yes, thank you for the tea and your company,” Rayanna said, never breaking her professional tone. “Please, there will be time for socializing later. I need you to look over the documentation.”

Elesa was becoming frustrated. She had never known Rayanna to prioritize business over pleasure, at least not when it concerned her. Rayanna was always looking for excuses to delegate her duties wherever possible. But Rayanna was watching her with a hard look Elesa did not recognize. Uncomfortable, she returned her attention to the papers and skimmed them with disinterest. Toward the bottom of the pile was a document that was smaller in size than those around it, rumpled from use, and written in a different hand than the others. Elesa squinted at it, but as soon as she’d skimmed the first line, she stopped and snatched it up. It was not long, only a few lines of writing, but it conveyed more than anything Elesa could have hoped for.
“You can see that this is an urgent matter,” Rayanna said. “I felt it necessary to bring it to your attention as soon as my trusted people intercepted it. Shipments of this size and value must be handled with care.”

*Yancy,* Elesa thought, unable to believe her eyes as she read the note in a hand she recognized. *This is from Yancy.*

She was in Icirrus, and she was with Iris Fafnir, the would-be usurper. Drayden’s assassination attempt had failed, and his alliance with Neo Team Plasma was now known to all. Yancy had joined forces with Iris’s people, and they weren’t alone. Icirrus and Mistralton stood with them, Yancy reported, and Driftveil would soon follow suit. They were building an army across the mountains, and they were coming here next.

“*Skyla sends her best,*” Yancy wrote. “*I’ll see you soon.*”

“And please be careful, Your Majesty,” Rayanna said. “Those are my only copies, so I can’t afford to let anything happen to them.”

Elesa’s hands shook. She looked up at Rayanna, who was now smiling like a Delcatty who’d gotten the cream. “You came straight to me with these?”

“Of course, you’re the queen, and I’m your loyal servant.”

*Why?* Elesa wanted to ask. *Why would you risk your life, your fortune, your family’s name for treason? For me?*

But instead, she rose and tossed Yancy’s letter in the fire. Rayanna rose and stood next to her, and together they watched the yellowed parchment curl and blacken to dust.

“How?” Elesa asked.

“You know me, I’m always making friends in high places. Even the chilliest kind.”

*The Crystallos,* Elesa thought. Rayanna’s connections must have been far-reaching indeed to encompass even Icirrus. The Crystallos were no friends to Dragons, but there were few things precious Opelucidian opals could not buy, and Rayanna’s family controlled them all.

“I’ll never underestimate the value of your friendship ever again,” Elesa said. “Still, why would you risk yourself like this? You’re not the philanthropic type.”

“Not at all, and I have everything a girl could ever want. Well, almost.” Rayanna’s hand brushed against hers, and the fire danced in her eyes. “Or maybe I’m just bored. You know how I love a challenge.”

“All the same, I feel it’s incumbent on me to warn you that this challenge will be greater than any either of us has faced before. A…shipment this large carries a certain risk of loss.”

“I know the risks, and I’ve picked a side. You won’t make me regret it, will you? I might become quite cross with you.”

She would be more than cross if Drayden found out about their conspiring before Yancy and her new friends made it here. Suddenly, everything had changed. Elesa had been hardly human this morning, and now there was an army coming for her. She was not forgotten. Nimbasa was not forgotten. And Yveltal take her if she so much as dared to think it, but there was a glimmer of hope on the horizon.
Elesa took Rayanna’s hand in hers gently. Her fingers were warm from the fire. “Rayanna,” she whispered, so softly that the crackling fire nearly drowned her out, “forgive me…please. I was not myself.”

“And now?” Rayanna whispered back.

Elesa wasn’t sure who she was now. The girl was gone, shattered and pieced back together in the shape of a queen, molded by the hands of others. And yet, she was still here standing. The fight was not yet over.

“I don’t know,” she said truthfully, “but…I’ll let you know.” She squeezed Rayanna’s hand. It was a promise she intended to keep, somehow.

“So, what’s next?”

Yancy was alive and building an army. It was the best news Elesa had received since that fateful night when she’d sent Yancy away with nothing but the promise of her faith and trust, and it had paid off. Of course it had paid off—Yancy was loyal and steadfast, and nothing could stand in her way, not even Elesa herself. It was why she had chosen Yancy for this mission over anyone else. And if Yancy was alive and well, then that meant she still had the pearl necklace Elesa had entrusted to her for safekeeping.

Elesa stared at the dancing flames and touched her bare neck where the pearl had stayed ever since the day a desperate Volucris woman had come to her, haunted by memories of monsters and myths and the men who dared to control them.

“Keep it safe,” Vivian had entreated her. “I’ll find a way to free Hilbert from it if it takes me the rest of my life, I swear I will. But until then, you’re the one who has to keep it safe, just like Elysanna did.”

And safe it would stay. So long as the Light Stone remained with Yancy, it would be far from Drayden or Ghetsis or anyone else who might get it into their head that any sacrifice was worth a chance at summoning a legend. For the meantime, that was Yancy’s battle. Elesa had her own battles to win right here behind these castle walls, and she knew just where to start.

“Next, we build an army of our own,” Elesa said.

Chapter End Notes

So I’ve been busy with work and my current Miraculous Ladybug obsession. I haven’t forgotten about this fic or you lovely readers, though! I hope you all enjoyed this chapter. I have some big things planned for Team Elesa, aka the Disney Princess we all deserve. Big shout out to Secretie for being an absolutely fantastic beta reader and challenging me to do better at every turn. Thank you so much!!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!