ClicheStorm

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Summary

What if your starting Pokémon was a legendary man-eating dragon?

Notes

This fanfic was written before the release of Black/White 2 and completed afterwards, so this may show in some places.

As for the story itself, I was inspired by a joke topic about 'What Not to Write in a Pokémon Fanfic'. It was meant in jest, but I felt like a lot of what was being posted was there because they were awesomely bad ideas that were usually taken up by novice writers who often didn't know what they were getting into. I had written and completed a couple journey-fics before this, so I took an interesting collection of the topic's ideas and tried to make them work. Hope you have fun reading it like I did writing it!
evening, 11/10

The wide screen TV was showing a movie. "I'll turn him into a flea, a harmless little flea! And then, I'll put that flea in a box. And then I'll put that box inside another box, and then mail that box to myself. And when it arrives... AH HA HA HA HA, I'LL SMASH IT WITH A HAMMER! IT'S BRILLIANT, BRILLIANT, BRILLIANT, I TELL YOU! GENIUS, I SAY! ...Or, to save on postage, I'll just poison him with this!"

The girl sitting in the red couch across from the TV chuckled at the sequence. On the back of the couch, a leafy paw patted at the girl's wavy brown hair. She looked up to see the small Pokémon's face looking back at her, so she picked up the Cottonnee and brought her down to her lap. "Hey squirt. What do you think of the name Yzma for a Purrloin?"

In response, the Cottonnee made a face, scrunching up her nose. "Tssillfiss," she rattled, sounding like the wind through leaves.

She patted the Pokémon. "Well, I guess I should see what the Purrloin is like before naming it after a villainess. Oh, but I'm gonna miss you." She hugged the Cottonnee. "Too bad I can't take you along, but that's the League rules."

The Pokémon cooed sadly and nuzzled against her, stirring up some of her herbal scent. According to the rules, when a Trainer registered with the League, he or she could only have one Pokémon to start with. And since she was getting a gift Pokémon from Professor Juniper, she had to turn over her pet to her mother. Of course, there was always talk that one could register with just one, and then receive all the other Pokémon back as 'gifts'. But this Cottonnee had been a house pet for years, so it likely wouldn't make for a good battle Pokémon.

"Hilda, looks like Mary's coming," her mother said from the kitchen.

That was the professor! Hilda got off the couch, still holding onto her Cottonnee. "Great! Do you want to talk with her too?"

Her mother came into the living room, dressed in old house clothes. "If she has some time, of course. Did you get your room cleaned?"

Nodding, she replied, "Yes, and I watered the houseplants and the herb garden, and took care of my other chores." It wouldn't be long before she was free of all that work, able to go wherever she wanted.

"Good," she said with a smile. "It won't be long until you're busy taking care of yourself and your Pokémon. This is wonderful; I'm so glad that you have this opportunity to start off with an official Professor's backing."

"Miss Juniper's cool about that." She patted the Cottonnee again. "And don't you worry, Fluff dear. You get to stay with Mom and be pudgy from her cooking."

The Cottonnee Fluff shook her leaves, amused at that. "Ththillill."

"Yes, you're going to be just fine," she said, taking the Pokémon from her daughter. "I'm sure we can raise enough noise to make up for Hilda's absence."
The girl and the Pokémon laughed. "Oh, good luck with that! You'll need a much louder Pokémon."

When the doorbell rang, Hilda quickly went over to answer it while her mother turned off the TV. The local Pokémon Professor was there, wearing a thin white lab coat as usual (although over a closely-fitted blouse and a dark blue short skirt). "Good evening Leslie, Hilda!" she said cheerily, smiling wide. "Did you get a hold of your friends?"

Hilda nodded. "Of course. They should be over soon."

"Would you like to come in for a little while and talk with them?" Leslie offered.

Mary Juniper shook her head. "Oh no, not tonight. I have to be working on a paper to meet a journal's deadline. I don't want to delay the kids from starting out, though, so I called once I got everything together." She then brought a digital storage device out of her purse, a dense machine encased in tan plastic. "And a one, two, presto!"

After she tapped in a couple of commands, a pink beam of light shot out from the DSD, leaving a box on the doorstep between the three of them. It was done up prettily, in blue wrap and a wide red ribbon. A lacy blue envelope sat just under one of the ribbons on top. Certainly, that gift box would not have fit in her purse, which hung lightly under her left arm.

"Digitalized storage is one of the best inventions around," Juniper said, tucking the DSD back into her purse. "I hope you have a large capacity DSD to take with you; Pokémon care requires a lot of things."

"I do," Hilda said, picking up the box with both hands. It was as wide as her chest, but lighter than it looked. Nothing rattled inside, though.

Juniper then touched her shoulder. "Oh, but you look different today dear. Did you buy some new clothes?"

Glancing at her new t-shirt and knee-length jean shorts, she rolled her eyes. "Yeah, Mom suggested that I get rid of my old wardrobe and get something more suitable for travel. It's not really trendy anymore, but hey."

The two women giggled. "Oh, heavens forbid that a fifteen-year-old girl be made to switch to a practical wardrobe," the Professor teased. "But it looks nice and if the rest is like that, then you should be just fine on the road. Read my note to the others before you open it and be sure to spend one more night at home to get to know your new little partner. And you set out tomorrow; I'll see you then. Now I have to get back to the writing. I'll see you both later."

"Don't be working too late, Mary," Leslie said, waving as the Professor started away.

"See you later!" Hilda called, starting to bring the box in.

But then a boy came running up the dirt pathway up to their house. "Good evening, Professor Juniper!" he called out, hurrying to get there.

She waved. "Good evening, Cheren," she called back. "I'm sorry, but we'll be talking more tomorrow. Hilda's got the Pokémon. Have a good night, all of you!" She then hurried off north to her own place.

As it was a warm autumn evening, Cheren was dressed in lightweight dark jeans and a short sleeved black t-shirt. "Hi Leslie, Hilda," he said, his eyes drawn towards the large box.
"Hi again Cheren," Leslie said, holding the door open while Hilda went inside. "Come on in; Bianca isn't here yet, but I'm sure it won't be long."

"Yeah," he said, stepping into the house. "I would have been here sooner if my Dad wasn't hounding me with advice." He shook his head. "I've read all that stuff dozens of times before in Trainer's guidebooks and magazines. Hey Fluff."

"Thossutthhh," the Cottonnee said from Leslie's arm, greeting the boy with a leaf wave.

"Let's go up to my room," Hilda offered, heading for the stairs. "I'll be back down for my drink in a moment."

"I can get it," Cheren said. "You've got the purple glass as usual, right?"

A couple of minutes later, he came up with a platter with three glasses, three small bowls, a pitcher of lemonade, some slices of banana bread, and some Pokémon treats. "Oh right, it be nice to share with our new Pokémon," Hilda said, having set the gift box on top of a low bookshelf. "You can put it on that table there."

He nodded and put it on her bedside table. "You've cleared your room out, huh?" he asked.

Of course she had. The bookshelf had some books left in it, but it had formerly been packed with stuff. The walls were bare as she'd taken down all her posters. In her closet, there was a bag of her old clothes that were going to be donated while only a few hangers were left on the rod. And only a pair of her plushies remained.

"Yeah," Hilda said, sitting on her bed. The purple blanket and pale green walls remained, but they'd probably stay for her Mom to use as a guest room. "We're going to be away for a long time, and a lot of it was kid stuff. I might even decide to move elsewhere if I can, once I'm old enough for that."

He nodded. "Right, we're not kids anymore. I got rid of a lot of things too." He put his hands in his jean pockets and paced for a bit. "I hope Bianca hasn't spaced out. She did say she was coming right over?"

She laughed. "Oh, be patient. I'm sure she'll be here soon." Although to tell the truth, excitement was running through her veins too. Her first Pokémon as a League Trainer, as well as those of her two best friends, were in that box. And it was just sitting there, with a closed lid, tempting them to open it right away.

Then, light steps hurried up the stairs and down the hall to Hilda's room. A blond girl wearing a green beret came into the room. "I hope you weren't waiting on me too long," Bianca said, smiling. "My pet Lillipup was worrying over me; he doesn't want to see me go."

"Wow, your room looks so empty now," Bianca said, looking around. Then she saw the blue wrapped box. "So they're in there."

"My Cottonnee has been clingy to me all day," Hilda said. "They know we're going."

"Right!" Hilda said, bounding back onto her feet to get to the box. "Professor Juniper said to read the note first."

She picked up the lacy blue envelope. For a moment, she was tempted to open it slowly and tease her friends with it. But it would torment her just as much, so she quickly ran her finger under the seal, then pulled out a folded sheet of paper.
To Hilda, Bianca, and Cheren: Thank you so much for all the help you’ve given me over the past few years. You three have stuck around much longer than other volunteer assistants have (at least from what I hear from my father!). As such, I have decided to make you three official student field researchers and give you what you need to start on the Unova Pokémon League. I’m sure you three will get along marvelously with Pokémon.

Within this box are three special Pokémon. They are natives to Unova, but extremely rare and hard to find, so I want an extended study done on them. Keep them with you, along with a journal to record things that happen, and that will do the trick. I’m sure they will be very useful. Please distribute them fairly amongst yourselves.

Also in this box are the registration forms you need to fill out to become official League participants: the League application form, the request for an advanced Trainer's ID, and the Minor Trainer's Self-Study Application (along with its online courses booklet). You will need to have these all filled out and approved before you reach the first Gym, but if you do so tonight, there shouldn't be an issue. I know it's a lot of paperwork, but the advantages are worth a few minutes of form filling.

Tomorrow morning, you should come by my lab to receive your field researcher equipment. After that, you can head off on your very own journey! -Best wishes, Mary Juniper.'

"Oo, field researchers," Bianca said as Hilda lifted the lid off the box. "How exciting!"

Cheren stepped forward. "So are they the ones we thought?"

Inside the box, Hilda saw three plain Pokéballs sitting in a felt lined holder. There were labels placed under each slot with the names of three Pokémon species. She grinned. "Yup, it's them!"

"Great!" Bianca said, clasping her hands together. "Hilda, you choose first; you deserve it."

The boy nodded agreeably. "Of course."

She pulled the three Pokéballs out, two in one hand, and the third in the other. "Well, there's not much of a choice to make, is there?"

"What do you mean?" the other girl asked, puzzled.

Hilda passed a Pokéball to her. "Well, Bianca wanted Oshawott, so she should get it. And Cheren wanted Tepig, so he should get that one," she handed the other ball to him. "And I wanted Snivy, so it all works out, no arguments about it. Right?"

Cheren smiled. "Of course not. I always knew I wanted a Tepig, after I read up on what little there is." He turned the ball around, examining it.

On the other hand, Bianca squealed. "Yay, that's perfect! I got an osha osha Oshawott!" She soon found the release button and hit it. A red beam of light spilled out, depositing the Pokémon in the middle of the room.

A white and blue otter appeared, quickly turning around to see who was there. On noticing the three of them, it looked puzzled, taking the yellow scallop shell off its belly and holding it in both paws under its chin. "Whuuu?" it asked softly.

The blond girl checked the status screen of the Pokéball, then came over. "It's okay, girl, I'm your new Trainer, Bianca. And these are my best friends, Cheren and Hilda." She picked it up and turned to them. "Say hi to them."
The Oshawott released one paw from the shell to give a small wave, but then backed into Bianca's arms.

"We could have done introductions when they were all out," Cheren said, releasing his Pokémon. He aimed the release beam to appear right near him.

At his ankles, a black and red pig Pokémon appeared, its hooves small and its ears close together due to coming out of a red orb on its head. The Tepig held itself high on all fours and sniffed with its snout. It seemed pleased to be out and smiled up at Cheren.

"He seems to be quite promising," he said, kneeling down to pet his Pokémon.

"Better call mine out then," Hilda said, pressed the release button on hers. She aimed it to come out near her too; being used to using her old Cottonnee's Pokeball, the resistance seemed stiff.

However, no Snivy came from the release beam. Instead, a strange marbled gray rock appeared, floating a foot off the ground. It was about eight inches wide and had a pocked but mostly smooth surface. After a moment, it floated up to three feet off the ground.

"What is that?" Bianca asked, staring at it with her Oshawott. "That's not a Pokémon, it's a, a, a bowling ball."

"Some Pokémon look like strange things," Cheren said, getting up. The Tepig took a few steps closer, trying to sniff it out. "But, I can't recall seeing anything like that before."

"That's weird; I wonder if Juniper got the Pokeballs mixed up." Hilda checked the status screen of the ball. "This says that it's an egg. But, it doesn't say anything else… oh wait, it says… 'WTF'."

"Huh." The Oshawott was shivering, so Bianca patted her. "What's that stand for?"

No one called out the obvious, so Cheren said, "Still, it doesn't look like an egg. Remember when the professor had us watch a few eggs while she went to get some equipment? They didn't look like rocks, and they certainly didn't float like that."

Hilda put one hand around the so-called egg and brought it closer. It felt cold, but from within instead of without. "Right. We'll have to ask the Professor. But, she said she's busy tonight. It'll have to wait until morning." She clasped it in both hands, wondering if she could feel the life within it. "Or maybe it'll hatch tonight. Who knows?"

The grass shifted, rustling against green scales. Not loud; much more noise would be unacceptable. A trio of tail leaves curled up to more closely resembled blades of grass. A pointed snout lifted into the air every now and then, flicking out a black tongue to taste the surroundings. If anyone came close, the Pokémon could go still and remain perfectly hidden. That is, so long as nobody stepped in the wrong place.

It had been a strange deal that had given this freedom, this choice. But before the choice was made, there was something desired. It sat propped against a travel bag, next to a young human with a white cap on. The human was looking at a computer device, not watching his things.

Excellent. The hiding Pokémon slithered closer, and closer. Nine feet… six feet… three feet… now! Snatch the item and bolt for the taller grasses.

In a moment, the human was chasing after. "Stop! Stop you thieving… Pokémon… pant…"
Escape was at hand; victory was claimed.

Since Hilda's Pokéball didn't seem to contain a Pokémon yet, the three friends played with Bianca's and Cheren's Pokémon instead. The two were like complete opposites. Where Tepig was brave, bold, and proud, Oshawott was shy, skittish, and timid. But that worked out just right. Bianca seemed pleased to have a Pokémon to care for, while Cheren was glad to have a confidant partner.

As for Hilda, she didn't know what to think.

She lay on her bed that night, observing the floating egg. Or stone, although it really was like a bowling ball without the finger holds. The lights in her room were out, but a streetlight shone into her window. In that light, the egg seemed to glisten, like a highly polished rock. It was eerie in that way.

When would it hatch? That caused some problems, as Pokémon eggs were said to only hatch when looked after by healthy Pokémon. Her friends had offered to help her catch something to start with, but then they'd be dealing with the limited population around Nuvema. Or perhaps she could take her Cottonee after all. One couldn't register for the League with just an egg, after all.

She had already filled out the forms, save for information on her starting Pokémon. She still wanted to start with the other two tomorrow, although her official acceptance might come later. What would hatch from this egg? And what Pokémon was she going to be starting with? In a way, it would be an awesome statement to fight through the ranks with a common Pokémon.

Hilda fell asleep.

That night was filled with many strange dreams, but they all followed the same patterns. A boy with icy blue eyes would speak to her, asking her questions or ordering her to do things. But, it definitely wasn't Cheren; this boy had no glasses. In the way of dreams, a lot of it didn't make sense because she kept forgetting things.

But one exchange stuck with Hilda. "Would you rather have a world of truth or a world of ideals?" the boy asked.

On considering it, she said, "Well shouldn't the truth be ideal? And it would be really great if the ideal were the truth. And can you really have one without the other? Although it is tough to have both. Or either of them, really. People can lie, and they don't often behave in an ideal manner. So," she grinned, "you ought to try reaching for both, to show them how it's done."

The boy gave her a long hard look at this answer, then said, "But if you were forced to choose one or the other, which would you take?"

"If I were forced to, then I'd look the person forcing me straight in the eyes and say, 'Hey, what's with all the seriousness? Lighten up and enjoy life! Things aren't black and white.' Or I might get mad at them for trying to force a question they clearly don't intend to think about."

"Would you seriously?" the boy asked.

When Hilda woke up, she didn't remember what she had answered to that last question.

morning, 11/11

It was a beautiful fall morning. The leaves still on the trees were bright with color and there was a
perfect blue sky above. Although the wind was starting to take on cold tones, it was nothing a good jacket couldn't remedy. And on that beautiful morning, Hilda found herself faced off against a large man with a noticeable gut. He was a good guy most of the time, but he was irritatingly stubborn on certain issues.

"Bianca is not leaving with you two on some crazy journey," he said gruffly. "Which you two shouldn't even be considering. It's much too dangerous out there. You could get hurt badly out there, and there's all kinds of bad people in the cities. You'll live a much happier and safer life if you just stay here in Nuvema."

"We have our Pokémon with us," Hilda pointed out to her friend's father. He didn't have to know that she had gotten some bowling ball thing which had still been a bowling ball thing when she woke up. "Besides, we're all fifteen. We'll be all right."

"That's still not enough. Now go on back home and take care of your mother."

Cross about his over-protectiveness, she left without a goodbye, heading towards her own house. But Hilda stopped by a tree and hid behind it. This wasn't the first time Bianca's dad had been ridiculous about something. She remembered when they were seven and her friend had come over for her first sleepover. After having him call about eight times that evening, Leslie had slyly unhooked the phone so the girls could have some play and talk time uninterrupted. That had brought him storming to their front door twenty minutes later to make sure everything was all right.

The next person to come by, thankfully, was Cheren. He looked irritated too, although his Tepig was eagerly sniffing around, enjoying the weather. "Oh, hey Hilda," he said.

"Shh!" she replied, putting a finger to her lips. "Bianca's dad is trying to keep her from leaving."

"At this time? But she and I have our Pokémon and everything." He stopped by the tree and gave a hand signal to Tepig to stay nearby. The red pig twitched his ears and looked to them curiously.

Hilda rolled her eyes. "Yeah, but you know him. He thinks walking along the fence by the shoreline is dangerous."

That caused a momentary smile. "Well that's because you insist on walking on top of the fence."

"More fun that way. So what's up with you? Your folks badgering you again?"

Cheren sighed. "Of course they did. They keep treating me like some ten-year-old who's never worked with Pokémon before. I know I've got a lot to learn, but I'm not that ignorant. And this is supposed to be a great day when we start our journey. It shouldn't start out lousy." He paused, then looked to Bianca's house. "So how're we going to draw off the old man?"

At that question, Hilda got that look on her face. The wide grin and excited eyes that said she was considering something bizarre. "First, we need to get a ladder, one that can reach onto their rooftop. We climb up the ladder, bringing with us a bunch of sunflower seeds. Then, we dump the seeds on top of him. Pidoves will smell the seeds and come flocking like mad to get some."

"And then we bring Bianca out the back door while her dad is distracted?" Cheren asked.

She shook her head. "No, that's only the start. Because a mass flock of Pidoves like that is certain to attract Purrloins, who will rush in and add to the chaos. And that'll attract the attention of the Lillipups, and you know how they get when they see a Purrloin. Then we open up the window to Bianca's room, help her climb out with her stuff, and then go back down the ladder and race for the lab before anyone notices."
After a brief chuckle, he teasingly asked, "Well then why don't we just go up on the ladder and let Bianca out the window in the first place? Much simpler."

Hilda stuck her tongue out at him. "And give up a chance to hassle her dad? No way." She looked back towards the back door. "Or, we could just go over to where Bianca and her mom are right now." She left the cover of the tree and walked up to the two of them. Cheren soon followed.

Bianca seemed nervous as she came out. When she saw them, her eyes went wide and she quickly made a gesture to keep quiet. Hilda just smiled and waved. Her friend's mother glanced in the house, then smiled to them. "You'd better hurry on over to Mary's lab," she said. "She's expecting you. And don't worry about Peter; I'll talk with him later."

"Thanks Mom," Bianca said quietly, hugging her. "Goodbye."

"Good luck with your mission," Hilda said teasingly. Talking Peter out of anything was a difficult task.

"We'll all be fine," Cheren said, nodding to her.

"Good luck to all of you," Bianca's mother said, then shut the door softly.

After Bianca called out her Oshawott, the three friends headed north along the path to Professor Juniper's lab. "This has me all nervous," Bianca said, smiling weakly. "Once we leave here, there'll be so many things we can do. I don't know what to start with."

"Well you can start with your Pokémon," Hilda replied. "Are you gonna give Oshawott a nickname?"

That made her happier. "Of course! I thought about it last night and I felt like she should be Suzy. Right sweetie?"

Suzy the Oshawott murmured, "Shawa," and edged closer to Bianca. She took hold of the hem of her skirt and kept up easily.

"We're gonna be okay," Bianca said reassuringly. "I'm afraid Dad gave her a fright this morning. Me too; I didn’t think he’d forbid me to leave the house, much less town."

"At least your Mom is more reasonable," Cheren said. His Tepig nosed his ankle. "I nicknamed mine too; Tepig is now Smoky."

Smoky the Tepig snorted and strutted for a short ways.

Hilda laughed. "His attitude seems like it should belong to a bigger Pokémon."

At the edge of town, they came upon a building that was larger than the houses that made up most of Nuvema Town. From the outside, Juniper's lab and home more closely resembled the latter than the former. It was a wooden structure like the others, and window boxes were overflowing with flowers. But there was a sign outside of the building stating that it was indeed a Pokémon lab. Being familiar with the place, the three friends went on inside.

Inside, there was a living space that appeared quite humble, with simpler furnishings than their own homes. Pictures of various Pokémon decorated the walls. But straight from the entrance, a visitor could also see the advanced and expensive equipment of a Pokémon lab: examination chambers, extra processors for the computer, and a large cabinet that was kept locked most of the time. Mary Juniper was back in the lab space, working at a computer with a pen behind her ear and
sunglasses on top of her head.

She did stop on hearing the door open, looking over to them. "Oh, hey there," she said. "Give me a sec to save this, but come on back." She did so, then closed the document and shut down the computer.

"Good morning Professor," Bianca said as they came back to the lab. "Still working on your paper?"

Juniper got up from her chair to speak with them. "No, I got that finished just in time. But there's always another paper to write." She laughed. "Well, welcome to my lab. I'm Professor Juniper…"

Cheren rolled his eyes. "Professor, we've worked with you for almost five years now."

"Oh, come on," Juniper said playfully. "This is a momentous occasion for you; we ought to formal for once, just for the occasion. So then…" she put on a much too serious face that made Hilda and Bianca giggle. Cheren did crack a smile. "I'm Professor Juniper and I am researching the origins of Pokémon. But I'm sure you didn't come today to hear a lecture. And your Pokémon," she looked down at the Oshawott and Tepig.

Smoky twitched his ears and held himself high, looking right back at her. He was where he had been the whole morning, right at Cheren's ankle. On the other hand, Suzy waved a paw at Juniper, but still clung to Bianca's skirt.

"They certainly look happy," Juniper said. "It seems that you've both bonded well. But Hilda, what about yours?"

"Yeah, there's a problem with that we wanted to ask you about," Hilda said, taking the Pokemon and pressing the release button. Again, the marbled gray orb appeared, floating by her. "This is all I'm getting."

"Oh really?" Juniper came closer and touched it. But she seemed as bewildered as them. "It must have some power, as it's so cold. I've never seen it before; I'm sure I gave you three a Snivy along with those two. May I see that Pokemon?"

"Sure," Hilda said, passing it over. "It looks normal, but the status window says some strange things."

The Professor read the status window, then went to get a reader for more detailed information. "It says you have an egg… but that's not like any egg I've ever seen before."

"Could it be a Pokemon error?" Cheren asked. "I've heard of problems before, but they usually do some horrific things."

"It's been years since there's been a major Pokemon programming error," Juniper said. "According to this data, everything is perfectly fine with this so-called egg. And it's already registered to you. Hmm." She considered it, then handed the ball back. "Well, hold onto it for now and see what comes. You will have to get another Pokemon for your starter, and to help hatch this egg. If I knew what happened to that Snivy, I'd give it to you, but I know I checked it before I put the box into digital storage."

"We can help her catch something, right?" Bianca asked.

She nodded. "Certainly; I don't think there would be a problem with the local Pokemon. You're all right with this, right Hilda?"
"Sure, it's fine," she replied. "Besides, it might be pretty awesome to start with one of them and take it all the way to Victory Road and beyond."

"Now that's the spirit," Juniper said cheerfully. "In fact, I was planning on giving you three some pointers on capturing Pokémon, so we can make getting Hilda a starter that lesson. But first, I said that I wanted to make you my field researchers. And for that, you need something special." She went to a box on the table, then came back with three small devices. "Here you are, your very own Pokedexes."

"Pokedexes?" Bianca asked, looking at her model. It was black with blue raindrops over the cover.

"Yeah, one of the best research devices out there," Cheren said, accepted his black with red flames model. "It gathers lots of raw data on Pokémon and adds it to the Pokémon Encyclopedic Index. Plus, you can use the Pokedex to directly access the Index, which gives you lots of information on any Pokémon you see."

"That's right," Juniper said, handing Hilda one that was black with coiled green ivy. "It will automatically add any Pokémon you encounter to your personal index, plus it will gain even more information with every kind Pokémon you catch or raise. And you three would be the first actual field researchers that have been in Unova too."

"But the Pokedex has been around for several years now," Cheren said. "Why hasn't there been a researcher already?"

The Professor considered her answer for a moment. "For one thing, it's in low production numbers, so be careful not to get it broken. For another, we look for certain qualities in field researchers; they have to be dedicated, hard-working, trustworthy, and able to travel freely. I've observed that all three of you are qualified. I would love to work on it myself, but I just don't have the time to do Pokedex field research and carry on my own studies. So I hope you three can meet many Pokémon and fill out your Pokedex information.

"Although, I don't think that should be the most important thing of your journey." Juniper smiled, looking nostalgic for a moment. "Being out on your own and meeting new friends, both people and Pokémon, this is the perfect time to find out about yourself and what you really want. You'll see things that amaze you and interest you, but there will also be things to challenge you, and different ways to see the world. Yes, this is the time to discover yourself, who you are and what you can be."

"Oo, she's going all serious and philosophical on us," Hilda said jokingly to her friends, nudging Bianca. "So don't fall asleep!"

Juniper laughed. "Okay, but I hope you remember that. Now, do you have your forms filled out? Except for you Hilda, about your starter." When they all three nodded, she picked up a bag that was near her desk. "Great! When you reach Accumula Town, the Pokecenter will be right near the entrance. It's a two story building with an orange room and a bright neon sign, so you can't miss it. Talk to the nurse and see who to turn the forms in to. But let's get out to Route 1, where we'll discuss capturing Pokémon."

"Right behind you," Bianca said cheerily, following after with Suzy. Cheren and Smoky went too. After glancing at the floating orb, Hilda kept it out and left the lab. The icy gray orb followed right after.

Route 1 was a relatively short path between Nuvema and Accumula. Thick woods bordered the west side, while the wide Alma River flowed along the east side. Most days, it was windy and this
one was no exception. Colored leaves drifted through the air while the plants were toughening up in preparation for winter dormancy. The tall grasses where wild Pokémon lurked were still lush and vibrant green, though.

"As I'm sure you know," Professor Juniper said, ignoring the way her lab coat fluttered in the breeze, "wild Pokémon most often hide in grasses like these. You should never enter a patch of grass without a Pokémon of your own, or a Trainer who has them. So in order to catch them, you need to enter such patches."

"That much is obvious," Cheren said. He had a touch of annoyance to his eyes about having such obvious things explained.

Juniper held up a hand. "But it's not quite that simple. You see, many Pokémon will appear to challenge you and make themselves stronger, but not all will want to be captured. If a Pokémon does not want to be captured, then it will resist and break the Pokeball. If it does so, then you had either look for another one of that kind, or attempt to convince it otherwise."

"How do you do that?" Bianca asked. "I mean, the Pokémon don't speak, so they can't say what they want. You can't understand a Pokémon until you've lived with it for a little while."

She nodded. "Correct. When you read or hear about it, catching Pokémon seems easy, but those who've been around know that it's not. If you startle the Pokémon, it will run away. Some can understand your words, while others cannot. You may be able to find out the information to decide what Pokémon to catch, but you will have to figure out on your own how to catch that one. And beware of one thing: the Pokeball registers the Pokémon's original Trainer by the person who first touches it after the Pokémon is locked in. There are some unscrupulous characters that use this, and the fact that they are usually thrown, to snatch Pokeballs before the real owner gets them. Now, let's go out and see if we can find what Pokémon to get Hilda for a starter." Juniper then walked into the grassy patch at the start of Route 1, followed by the other three.

Cheren looked around, but said, "You have to battle the Pokémon you want to catch too. The Pokeball works better if the target is weaker, or under a status effect."

"That doesn't sound nice," Bianca said. "I mean, if you want to be friends, shouldn't you not hurt the Pokémon first?"

"Battling the Pokémon proves your ability to train, which the wild ones will be looking for," Juniper explained. Then she pointed out to a puff of white fur sticking out over the grass. "That's a Patrat; you see many of them around here. Sometimes there's Pidoves and Purrlions, but not much. You're more likely to find Lillipups."

Bianca nodded. "Oh yeah, this is where my mom caught mi… hey, what's that?"

Right then, the other three also saw a flash of green in the grass. A Pokémon soon jumped up out of hiding and grinned at them. It was a green reptilian Pokémon with small limbs, but a large leafy tail. Not only that, but it wore a human-sized brown fedora with a wide brim and a frond from a fern attached to its side. It was comically large on the small Pokémon, threatening to slip over its eyes.

"That is an awesome hat!" Hilda declared, clapping her hands.

"Oh dear," Professor Juniper said, but with an amused smile on her face. "That's definitely the Snivy I was supposed to give you. Except he didn't have the hat." She aimed her Xtransceiver at it, then checked the screen. "He's no longer attached to a Pokeball? But that does mean you can catch
"We can weaken him," Cheren suggested, snapping his fingers. His Tepig came to attention. "Smoky, time to fight. Tackle him."

The pig Pokémon shook itself, then rushed for the Snivy. "Hey you, use Leer!" Hilda called out.

"Hilda," her friend said sternly.

She laughed, but blushed. "Sorry, got caught up in the excitement."

Whether it was because he decided to or because she said it, the Snivy did some hocus pocus with his eyes to get Smoky to lower his defenses. Unfortunately, that got him to sit still long enough for the Tepig to rush into him with his Tackle. The Snivy then jumped at Smoky and wrestled with him for a bit, losing his hat in the process.

"Leer will lower the defense of the target Pokémon," Juniper said. "Tepig's Tail Whip will do the same."

Cheren nodded. "Yes, but for capturing purposes, you don't want to knock the target unconscious."

Seeing both Pokémon separate, both with some scratches or bite marks on them, he said, "Smoky, tackle again and get back for a moment."

"Oh yes, and you'll need these," the professor said, pulling five empty Pokeballs out of her bag and handing them to Hilda. "Since they're empty, press the release button and throw the ball at the target Pokémon. Smoky tackled the Snivy as ordered, then darted aside to get to a position closer to Cheren. "It will ignore any captive Pokémon, but you might accidentally catch a hidden Pokémon instead of the one you're after, if you don't aim your throw right." She then brought out five more for Bianca, then five more for Cheren when he was done battling.

With a soft snort, the Snivy rushed through the grass and tackled the Tepig hard. Smoky squealed as he was thrown onto his side. Then the Grass type panted heavily, watching for what they would do next. Cheren took Smoky's Pokeball. "Return," he said, recalling the Tepig. He checked the status screen. "They're both severely weakened now. You'd better give it a shot before he runs off."

"Right," she said, taking one of the empty Pokeballs in hand. "Hey Snivy, I like your attitude; why don't you come with me?"

With the Tepig gone, he had retrieved his hat to put back on. He did look at her, but then the fedora fell over his face and made it hard to read his expression. But he did stay there.

Hilda touched the one Pokeball attached to her bag's holder. "May as well do it for the show," she said softly, then pointed towards the Snivy, "All right, go go bowling ball!"

Bianca chuckled, but then things got strange again. The stone emitted a bright flash of light; a mass rustling of grass came as the hidden Pokémon audience bolted from the patch of grass to the safety of the trees. While their eyes were still readjusting, the stone vanished, then appeared several feet ahead. Only, it was bigger than before, and growing rapidly. It started taking on a different form, then uncurling into a giant Pokémon. A minute later, there was a massive black dragon standing in the grass of Route 1, with an icy white face mask and long bluish-white wings. Then it made a near-deafening roar, causing the Snivy to turn pale, his tail leaves drooping.

Bianca put her hands up to her mouth. "Oh my gosh!"

"That can't be..." Juniper said, her eyes wide too.
"What is it?" Hilda asked, feeling a chill run down her spine.

"Kyurem…" Cheren said. "But, why?"
Kyurem

morning, 11/11

Kyurem lowered his head, looking down at Snivy that was nearly ten times smaller than himself. Still injured from its battle with Smoky the Tepig, the Snivy was frozen in fright. This was only Route 1; there shouldn't be a giant dragon on it! The actual Pokémon residents of the area watched scared from the trees. For them, it was bad enough when higher level Trainers came down here just to beat up on the weaker creatures.

In the meantime, Hilda checked the Pokeball status screen. It was now filled out, confirming that yes, she now owned a giant Pokémon called Kyurem. And it only had two moves. "It knows Icy Wind and Dragon Rage," she said, breaking the shocked silence.

On hearing that, Cheren's mind broke off of stunned amazement. "Icy Wind would probably KO the Snivy even at full health."

"It's only level one, and those three are level five," she pointed out.

"It would still KO the Snivy," Cheren said firmly.

"As would Dragon Rage," Juniper added. "With fixed damage, it should KO anything native to this route and the next."

Hilda then glanced at one of her empty Pokeballs. "Well then, let's skip the attack. Snivy, are you with us?" She then pressed the release button and threw the ball at the Grass Pokémon.

On hearing that, the Snivy's tail flipped back up. He glanced to her for a moment before the Pokeball's energy absorbed him. The ball dropped into the grass and was lost to sight for a moment, although the shaking betrayed where it was. When that settled down and the Snivy did not reappear, Hilda ran up and fished out the ball. It showed that the Snivy had been captured.

"Got it!" she called out, holding out the ball triumphantly.

Juniper smiled a little. "Well yes, that is how you go about capturing a Pokémon. Good work, especially with talking to it first." Then she turned serious and looked to the dragon. "But still, how did you end up with a Pokémon only known about in legends?"

Hilda came back over to them. "Well he was in the gift box. They saw me take it and call it out."

"And I'm absolutely certain I had recalled the Snivy right before I put those Pokeballs in the box," Juniper said.

A snort came from Kyurem right as he began to glow again. His form shrank down, but not back to the stone orb. Shifting to a more upright stance, the glowing form grew arms and lost its tail and wings. When the glow faded, there was a human boy standing there. Looking around the same age as the new Trainers, he wore black jeans and a loose black shirt. His hair was long and icy blue, going down to his waist in two parts. And he wore a face mask that was the same as his dragon form.

In fact, Hilda realized that it had been the boy who appeared in her dreams last night. He came up to them and said, "I made the switch, exchanging that Snivy for myself."
"You're Kyurem?" Bianca asked. "What are you doing as Hilda's Pokémon?"

He glanced at her with cold blue eyes. "I am Kyurem, of course. I have my reasons for being here." Then he looked to Hilda, not appearing so harsh. "Mistress Hilda, I am here to serve you." He bowed.

"Uh, sure," Hilda said, taken off guard by this. But then she had a thought as to what kind of mischief she could get up to if she had Kyurem's help... she did her best not to grin.

"Oh my, are you the third dragon from the story of Unova's creation?" Juniper asked, sounding excited. "So you know about the time before recorded history?"

"Perhaps," Kyurem said, his voice indicating that he wouldn't say anything more.

"The original dragon of the heroes?" Cheren asked, puzzled. "I heard that Kyurem was the monster of Giant Chasm, an alien Pokémon that ate people and Pokémon."

"Perhaps," he said, exactly the same as before.

"So, which are you?" Hilda asked, wondering if she could get an answer out of him.

"That is unimportant," he replied.

Bianca came up and looked at Kyurem, like she might touch him to see if he was really there. The transformed Pokémon didn't flinch at her approach. "This is strange," she said. "But if you're here to help Hilda, you can't be all bad."

"Maybe a bit cold about it," Juniper said. Then she put her hand on Hilda's shoulder. "Well then, would you keep records on Kyurem too? Just in case he says something interesting."

Hilda nodded. "Sure Professor. And... hey!" She glanced at the Pokeball's status screen again. "Aw man."

"What's wrong?" Bianca asked, with a little concern.

"Hmph." She set the Pokeball back in its holder. "I just realized that I accidentally nicknamed him 'bowling ball'."

The other three just stared at her for a moment. Kyurem did not express disappointment, but he did say, "Yes, yes you did nickname me that."

"There's a Name Rater in Castelia City," Professor Juniper said. "That person can help you change the nickname of most Pokémon you own. Although right now, you three are probably most interested in reaching Accumula Town, and the Striaton City after that. The first Gym you'll reach is there. But my, barely a few minutes into your journey and already unexpected things have happened. Here's to hoping that the rest of your adventures are just as exciting! I've got to get back to my work, but you can reach me from any Pokecenter computer to get your Pokedex rated or get advice. Have a good trip."

"Okay, bye Professor Juniper!" Hilda said, smiling and waving, back to her usual enthusiasm. "Thanks for everything!"

"Oh yes, thanks for all your help," Bianca said. "Good luck with your research."

Cheren nodded. "Yeah, thanks for helping us out."
The young woman smiled at them. "You're welcome, my friends. I mean, field researchers! I'll see you some time later." She then headed back to Nuvema, leaving them to head the other way.

And there they were, finally free from their hometown. They were on their own, without parents to nag them, or chores to do, or the same old schedule to follow. That sense of freedom, it made everything of that moment seem brilliant: the many colored leaves of the autumn trees, the knee-high tough grass the Pokémon hid in, the distant calls of those Pokémon, the partly cloudy blue sky overhead, the rushing river by the roadside. While they had seen this scenery many times before, they were free and it made everything fresh and exciting again.

And what would the future hold for them? They all had Pokémon of their own, and not just the dull pet kind either. No, they were ready to take on the Pokémon League, and thus worlds of possibilities lay ahead! They could accomplish anything if they just set their minds to it. This was a dream come true, and yet only the beginning of a journey that dreams were made of. And who knew what they would say years later, looking back at this moment where it all began?

Bianca put her hand to her chin. "So, um, what do we do now?"

"We prepare to make history!" Hilda shouted, making a grand gesture with her arm (and nearly smacking Cheren in the forehead doing so; fortunately, he habitually ducked when she started talking like that). "We can do anything now that we're in charge of our own destinies."

The other girl smiled. "That is exciting… but what do we do now?"

"Oh, well…" she put her hands on her hips. "Good question."

"We should head to Accumula to turn our registration papers in," Cheren pointed out. "Then we need to wait a day or two to get approval as League contenders. That should give you plenty of time to plot something, Hilda."

"Oh, right!" She took out a potion from the supplies she had packed and used it on her Snivy's Pokeball. Then she released him. "Then let's get going! And you, my little reptilian friend, I am going to nickname you Fedora. If that's okay with you."

The Snivy, who had inexplicably appeared still wearing the brown hat, smiled and hissed an approval of this name choice.

"And we are going to change the world!" she said, pumping her fist into the air. Then she started off north, quickly followed by her friends, Kyurem, and the other Pokémon. "Just don't ask me how, as I'm still working on the details."

"Whatever you wish, Mistress Hilda," Kyurem said.

Bianca laughed. "Oh dear, she's going to turn much more ambitious than usual, Cheren, since she's got a loyal servant boy now. Should we call you Princess Hilda?"

She gave a silly grin. "If you want, especially if that means I get to be a Queen someday and rule the land. Booyah!"

"Whatever you end up doing, I'm sure it will be interesting," Cheren said dryly. "But really, what do you mean to do on your journey?"

Shrugging, Hilda said, "Have fun, meet lots of Pokémon, see the world, that kind of thing. I want to be involved in interesting things. And even instigate some. What about you two?"
"I'm aiming to become the League Champion," Cheren said, smiling to himself. "The best of the best; everyone respects the Champions, as they have proven their ability."

"Oh, you got that right," Bianca said, nodding. "I've heard that the current Champion, Alder, is a wonderful man who treats everyone well. I'd love to meet him. He's kind of got that weird flaming hair thing going on, though, so I dunno if you could call him cute."

Hilda smirked. "With that hair, you can only call him hot!" They both laughed, while Cheren rolled his eyes. "What are you planning to do, Bianca?"

"Oh, uh…" she twisted her green beret. "I'm not really sure yet. I think I ought to start out by doing as the Professor asked and meeting a lot of different Pokémon for the Pokedex. But I don't know which ones I should capture and make my friends. I mean, you probably have your team already plotted out, Cheren."

"Not entirely," he said, in a way that suggested he had a plan in mind. "But I do have a few I'm keeping an eye out for. Also, Pokémon tend to be stronger the longer they train with you, so we should all consider building a team based around our starters." His Tepig squealed in approval.

Then Bianca's face lit up with an idea. "Yeah, but hey, I just thought of something! We ought to take pictures before we get to Accumula. You know, so we have records of our journey every step of the way."

"Yes, pictures!" Hilda said, stopping to find her camera. "I can't believe I forgot about that. We need to get a picture of all three of us starting out."

"But there isn't anyone else on the route right now," Cheren pointed out. "Except Kyurem… uh, would you take some pictures for us?"

"Pardon?" Kyurem asked. "What do you mean by that?"

"Take some pictures with our cameras," Hilda said, pulling out her green one. "You're in human form, so it's pretty easy. Hey, I'll get Bianca and Suzy, and then Cheren and Smoky, and you can watch."

"If that is what you want," he said, looking at the device studiously.

Since they could send pictures between their cameras, the friends decided to just use Hilda's camera. It was a digital, so it really was easy for them. Kyurem wanted to know what all the buttons were for, but since they only needed to set the camera for outdoors photos and hit the shutter button, Hilda told him that she'd show him later. They got Bianca and her Oshawott, then Cheren and his Tepig. After that, Bianca took a picture of Hilda, her Snivy, and Kyurem in his dragon form (although he insisted on using the human form if they were going into town). Then Kyurem got a couple of pictures of Hilda, Bianca, and Cheren without too much trouble.

Then they went back to traveling Route 1 towards Accumula Town.

Accumula was of a completely different character than Nuvema. The latter was always small, embedded in the countryside, and old-fashioned. On the other hand, Accumula was larger, modern, and upscale. There were three levels to it, and all were paved with beautiful white stones. The houses were grand, the shops were trendy, and the apartments were lavish. This place was for the upper class families who worked in Castelia, but wanted to be out of the dense city. As such, it was glamorous.
To Hilda, Bianca, and Cheren, arriving in Accumula Town always felt like something special. Most days they stayed in Nuvema, working on schoolwork, taking care of the lab when Professor Juniper was out, doing things with each other, and helping their families. It was always the same; they knew every square inch of Nuvema by heart. But Accumula Town, that was a special occasion destination. Like shopping for someone's birthday, or a holiday trip, or sometimes even heading to the subway for an even more special destination. Great things were certainly ahead when one or all of them came to Accumula.

It was even more exciting this time, though. They had arrived together, but they could be leaving the town separately. As much as they liked each other, this would be their own personal journey to see the region of Unova and they each had different things they were after. They would set their own paths, decide what to do, and make their own discoveries. It was all a little overwhelming, actually.

Because Bianca had put a lot of effort into convincing her parents, at least her Mom, to let her go, she hadn't really thought of what to do when she got permission. Should she do as Professor Juniper wanted? It seemed only right, since she had given them the opportunity to do this. But then, Juniper had said that they should enjoy themselves, and find out what was really important to them. That didn't help in her dilemma. She had heard of a marvelous career called a Pokémon Coordinator made up of people who made their Pokémon showy and amazing. But, Unova didn't have a Contest Hall group, so that was out. Unless she went to another region, and that seemed like such a huge leap that Bianca felt nervous just considering it. At least here, she could always return home.

Cheren had a plan in mind. He had a structure to it too, knowing already how he would take things, what the steps would be, how much time he needed to invest in training. Of course, he had the clear cut goal of becoming Champion. That was focused, as he usually was, and he was already eager to leave Accumula despite how special it was.

On the other hand, Hilda felt ready to jump into anything. She planned things too, but only for the immediate present and adapted when things started to change. She kept confident and did things. Even after living as her neighbor for all her life, the other two weren't sure how Hilda did it. When they were little, it was usually Hilda who came up with the most fun things to do.

Small goals seemed easier to work with now, like getting official registration in the Pokémon League. On reaching Accumula, the three friends and four Pokémon headed for the large building with the bright neon orange Pokeball sign. The Pokecenters always had the same look so that newcomers could quickly identify them. However, this particular center had toilet paper hanging on its sign and landscaping, while some eggs were on the windows. Probably some immature prank, they thought.

Strangely enough, there weren't any other visitors to the center at the time. The two Pokemart clerks were over talking with the Nurse, one of the guys sitting on the counter. The table near the entrance was missing a couple of chairs; one, clearly broken, was sitting against a wall. On the floor, several tiles were broken or knocked out of place. Pamphlets and papers were strewn all over. It was a disaster area.

"Whoa, what happened here?" Hilda asked. "Looks like some Pokémon used Whirlwind."

"Oh, g-good afternoon," the Nurse said, trying to put her hair back in place. The clerk on the counter hopped off. "Are you Trainers?"

"Yeah, we are," Bianca said. "Um, was there trouble here?"
Looking relieved, one clerk said, "Yes, there was something of a riot. It started with the building getting egged and TP'ed, but then they came in and tore things up."

"Who would do that to a Pokecenter?" Cheren asked in disbelief.

"A number of Accumula residents," the Nurse said. "Look, I'll heal your Pokémon, and they might be able to get you some supplies, but we're going to board up this building and leave once our guard arrives. It doesn't seem safe here anymore."

On seeing their confused expressions, the other clerk said, "There's this group called Team Plasma that's been around the past few months. They've got some weird ideas and they're trying to get people to reject the system of the Pokémon League. A number of people in Accumula are sympathetic to them; they think that because our town doesn't have a Gym, it's become unimportant to the majority of Unova."

"We've tried to be a good influence around here," the Nurse said. "But that dissent has turned the town against us."

"Oh, but that's awful," Bianca said. How could something like that happen? It didn't make sense. "We just left our hometown of Nuvema today on our journey."

"Can you still register us in the League database?" Cheren asked.

The Nurse bowed. "Oh sure, that's still part of my job. Give me your papers along with your starting team and I'll get it in for review. But you'll have to check with the Striaton center for your acceptance."

"Hang on; I've got to finish up mine," Hilda said, searching for her papers and a pen. "Uh, do I put my starter as Kyurem or Snivy?"

"Kyurem?" one of the clerks asked, surprised.

"What is it?" Kyurem asked, causing a double-take as he was in his human form. Then he tapped Hilda when the clerk didn't say anything more. "If you value truth…"

"All right, you then," she said, filling out information on her papers.

"That's new," the Nurse said, handing Bianca back Suzy's Pokeball, then taking Cheren's papers and Smoky's ball. "But, I don't think it breaks any of the rules. It might break the rules of the Battle Subway, but they're a different organization."

"Is it okay with the Snivy too?" she asked. "I caught him after I got Kyurem."

"I'll just not put him into the League database yet," the Nurse replied. "Make sure it gets done in Striaton, though."

"Do you three need to buy any supplies before heading out?" one of the clerks asked. "We've put up the stationary, but we still have some basic Pokeballs and Potions in easy access."

Since they had a few Pokeballs each and they would have to leave Accumula because of the Plasma supporters, they decided to just buy some Potions for the trip to Striaton. Once Hilda had her forms finished up, she handed them and her two team members' Pokeballs for registration. The Nurse glanced over the forms while the healing machine recorded information on her Pokémon and healed them. Then she put the forms in an envelope and put them into an electronic transfer device, which digitalized the item and sent it to the League Headquarters.
"Okay, then all of your forms have been sent out," the Nurse said, handing Hilda back the two balls. "They could be processed and approved by tonight, or up to a week from now, depending on how busy they are. You can wait around Striaton for that, but you can't challenge the Gym until you get your Trainer ID cards. At that point, speak to the Pokemart clerks for your starting gifts." She smiled a bit sadly. "I'd say we hope to see you again, but since we're closing up, it won't be here. Have a safe journey."

On leaving the Pokecenter, they discussed what to do. "If this town is against Trainers for some reason," Cheren said, "we may want to leave separately. I hear Route 2 has several pathways to it, so that'll help."

"But we're all going to end up in Striaton no matter which way we go on Route 2," Bianca pointed out. "So then, why not stick together?"

Their conversation was then strangely interrupted by a pair of bugles playing a melody for attention. Nearby, there was a small grassy park with a bench, a couple of trees, a garden of exotic flowers, all on a raised level of ground. There was a large gathering of people at the lower level, some with cameras, all watching a small but sizable group on the elevated grassy area.

And those people were unusual. They were all dressed exactly the same: full body armor covered by white coats, helmets with chainmail neck and shoulder guards, armored boots, and armored gloves. Standing in a perfect straight line, the two buglers were at either end, blowing their brass instruments, standing before two newly polished stands that held banners. The banners had a distinctive symbol of a black and white shield bearing a blue P, with a zigzag through it.

"Oh cool, historical recreationists," Hilda exclaimed, grinning.

"I hadn't heard there would be a demonstration," Cheren said. "Should we go see what's going on?"

"Sure, sounds fun," Bianca said.

As they went up to the edge of the crowd, the line of recreationists parted, letting through someone who was dressed differently. He had black boots, a gold monocle, and long wavy green hair, but Hilda only briefly noted them. She was fascinated by his cape. It had a large golden jewel-studded collar, more of a sun-symbolic decorative feature than something battle worthy. That held onto a massive, long, thick, violet cape. It obscured his body so well that one couldn't tell if he was skinny or fat. Going down so far that the edges brushed the grass, it had to be heavy.

But the man wore it with no signs of weakness. Indeed, he stood there tall, proud, and confident, shielded by his great cape. It had a mysterious design over it too, trimmed in gold embroidery and covered in thick gold lines that swirled and curved all over. Near his chest, there was a stylized eye design that seemed to be watching the crowd. It was mirrored and inverted on each side.

"Good morning, people of Accumula, and to those watching around Unova," the man said in a gentlemanly voice. Several people in the audience cheered, while the 'knights' behind him kept their line. "Thank you for inviting us here to help spread our message and mission. For those of you who are not aware, we are Team Plasma." He gestured with his right hand towards one banner, spreading his cape. "I am one of the Seven Sages that is most devoted to the cause put forth by our pure and divinely appointed King. I am Ghetsis and today, I am here to bring you word on the cause that we are most driven to fulfill: Pokémon liberation."

"Huh?" Bianca said, along with others in the crowd.

"He's kind of full of himself, don't you think?" Cheren whispered under the cover of the crowd.
But Hilda's eyes were sparkling. "I want that cape," she said, just about drooling.

"The cape?" Bianca asked.

"Shh!" someone nearby hissed as Ghetsis began to speak again.

He paced in front of the crowd while speaking. "Yes, liberation. It has been said that for thousands of years, mankind and Pokémon have lived in harmony, helping each other in the spirit of benevolence. But, is this truly how things are?" Ghetsis faced them, speaking in a stern tone, "Or is it merely a fabrication of us humans, twisting reality into a shape that most benefits us?

"Have any of you here ever spoken to a Pokémon and heard from it precisely what it thinks of us? Some people say that they understand Pokémon without any words, but is this really true? Aren't we just making what makes us most comfortable? We have Pokémon build our homes, do chores, and even battle violently for us. We have them watch our children, even when the youths leave home all alone on a journey among strangers. And does anyone ever ask them if they want to do this?

"But even if you do ask, how can you be certain that you are correctly interpreting their reactions? How well do you really know your own Pokémon? Especially if you are one of those who captures Pokémon and keeps them in their Pokeballs at all times, aside from battles." He swept his arm out, looking angered at this. "Those people are especially terrible and cruel to their Pokémon. Pokémon are meant to be free, not to be held for the whim and amusement of humans. If you care not about your Pokémon, then why do you keep them?

"And even if you do care about them, or even say you love them, why do you keep them? Do you know if they truly love you back? We have worked with Pokémon for thousands of years, it has been said, and yet the scientists say that we still know little about them. Perhaps this is because we've been forcing them into servitude, causing them pain and suffering that goes unnoticed. And when we Sages spent much time studying the personal side of Pokémon, under the guidance of our most blessed King, we have discovered the truth.

"And what we know now is that Pokémon are truly suffering. The ones that live in the wild are fearful of Trainers who come in to beat them senseless all for the benefit of their team. A few brave souls will sacrifice themselves to stand up and face against such tyranny, but these ones are most often captured and forced to commit those terrors themselves. Sometimes even against the family that they were protecting before. And then the captive ones are worked endlessly, many of them never even seeing daylight unless they care called out for battle or work that their Trainer is too lazy to do.

"Some of you may try to say that it has always been cooperation and it is that cooperation that has built our society," Ghetsis swept one arm out, shifting his cape dramatically. "Is that truly necessary? Aren't we the pitiful and terrible ones who will not do the work ourselves? If we want to truly advance and be strong, then we need to weaken our dependency on Pokémon. We need to liberate them in kindness and then rework our lives in diligence so that such slave labor is not necessary. Then the whole world will be in true balance, peace, and righteousness.

"Heed my words, and if you are wise, then release your Pokémon for their own good, and the good of yourselves. Do not stand for this suffering any longer! We of Team Plasma will demonstrate the authenticity of our ways throughout this year, and we will lift the veils of ignorance from the eyes of all of Unova's citizens.

"Thank you for your time." Ghetsis then bowed to a mixture of wild applause, cheering, confusion, and bewilderment from his audience. The two 'knights' on the ends of the lines picked up the
banner stands. Then, in precision movements, the group of Plasma members split up into two lines, and two extras. Ghetsis walked up so that three of his followers were on either side, while the final two took the forward and rear positions.

"That was odd," Hilda said, looking down at her Snivy. He clasped his hat in both paws to look back up at her.

"Is it just bad luck, or are forces trying to conspire against our plans?" Cheren asked, looking to the two girls. "And I think that if we were causing the Pokémon to suffer, people would have figured it out by now. What he was saying, that's just nonsense."

"That seems so worrisome," Bianca said, picking up her Oshawott. "I mean, I was happy to get Suzy, so I would hope she'd be happy with me. I hope we're not making Pokémon suffer."

"Oshda," Suzy said, patting her paw on Bianca's arm, then putting her head down on her chest.

"She seems pretty happy with you," Hilda said.

"At any rate, we had better leave if that's how these people think," Cheren said, lowering his voice as the crowd was dispersing.

"Yeah," Bianca said, sounding disappointed. Maybe because they had talked about splitting up for this. "Oh, but what do you mean by that man's cape, Hilda?"

She grinned and leaned forward, clasping her hands to her chest. "It was so awesome, right? It gave him such a mysterious and regal air, and besides, you don't see anybody dressed like that very often in all seriousness. I want something like that!"

That made Bianca smile again. "Oh, but it looks so heavy. It'd be warm, though, good for winter."

Joking along with them, Cheren crossed his arms over his chest. "I dunno. It is cool and regal, I'll agree with that. But the whole ensemble, what with that weird collar and the monocle, it made him look like a villain from a fantasy video game. You don't want to go around letting people know your intentions of being a villainess, right Hilda?"

She mockingly fumed at him. "Oooo... fine, it does look a bit too villain-type." Then she laughed. "Hey, does that mean we've spotted the uber villain of our story? Then we have our goal: to stop..." she glanced around, "eh, you know, there might still be supporters of them around. If I go yelling that out like usual, they might get mad."

The other girl laughed. "Score a point of wisdom for Hilda!" she said cheerily. "But it's a little early to figure out who the uber villain is, isn't it?"

"Yeah, all they've done is talk about unsettling ideas and inspire the trashing of a Pokecenter. It's bad, but not uber-villain-bad." Cheren dropped his arms then. "Well, I'm going to drop in on another friend here for a bit. I'll see you girls later."

"Oh, and I'd better go ahead to Route 2," Bianca said. "Bye you two."

After they all said their goodbyes, Bianca headed to the northwest to reach the gate tunnel, while Cheren went to some stairs that led to a lower level of town. Hilda stayed where she was a moment, thinking. Kyurem touched his mask and said, "They are trying to disrupt society."

"Was he right or wrong, about Pokémon suffering in captivity?" she asked him. He was a Pokémon himself, so he ought to know.
"Perhaps," he said. "You should find the truth for yourself."

She put her hands on her hips. "Fine, if you're going to be difficult about it." When he narrowed his eyes at her, she smiled. "I'm joking, geez. Are you always serious?"

"Perhaps."

"I see." She looked down at Fedora, who was adjusting his namesake hat. Then she knelt by him. "But you know what? Ghetsis might have looked regal in that cape, but he wasn't wearing a hat. That makes him not awesome enough, because only awesome people wear awesome hats." She tapped her white and pink hat, which had a patch of a Bisharp on it. "Or masks, in Kyurem's case."

At that, Fedora's eyes brightened and he squealed, hopping up to hug her. His hat bumped against her shoulder and got knocked off to the ground. So she picked it up and put it back on his head.

"Someday, we're gonna find a way to get that secured," she told him.

"Wait a minute," someone said, walking closer to them. "I thought… what did you just say, Snivy?"
morning, 11/11

The trees were full of color: orange, red, yellow, violet, even some lingering green. The breeze and the sunbeams mixed to create a relaxing morning. Nearby, a stream passed over its pebbly bed, adding its soft addition to nature's melody. It would have been a great day to spend outside, enjoying the landscape before all the leaves fell, but this wasn't the day for it. There wouldn't be any more days like that, not for some time. Today, he was leaving.

He sat against a stump to be closer to the smaller Pokémon. "It's something I have to do," he said, patting the Lillipup that had settled on his lap. He had to be careful not to touch the burn scars, which would hurt the Pokémon. "I love helping you all, I really do. It's just, in order to truly solve the problem, one has to fix the source, not the results. I want to help all Pokémon and for that…" his hand tensed, causing the puppy Pokémon to look up at him, "I, I have to become one of the Trainers, so that they'll listen to me."

"Won't that make you as bad as them?" the Lillipup asked.

A Deerling by him bumped his head gently. "Don't do it, N. The Trainers are scary people. I don't want you to be scary."

"But I know the flaws in their system," N said. "I won't be one of the scary ones. I refuse to be. I am right in my beliefs, and that will show in how I relate to my team and wild Pokémon. I will be an example for all the others to follow, at least until the time to free all Pokémon comes. And even then, I'll be one of the first to free any Pokémon that I take with me."

He felt a pair of furry paws rest on his head. "Are you going to take some of us with you?" the Zoroark asked. He was the only one of his kin in this area, and he was a lot more eager to battle than the others of this forest.

N glanced back, but didn't shift his position too much. "No, not at first. I don't want to hold onto any of the Pokémon in my team very long, so that they aren't restrained by the Pokeballs for weeks."

"I see," the Zoroark said, disappointed. "That's too bad."

Smiling, he patted the dark Pokémon's paw. "Don't worry. By the time I make it to the last couple of Gyms, I've figured that that strategy won't work out anymore. So I'll come back and see if any of you want to help in the final stages. You're definitely coming along, right?"

The Zoroark finally came into his view, swishing his tail against N's back in approval. "Certainly. I promise."

The Deerling stepped back, nervous. "I'm sorry, N, you're my friend, but I won't be fighting."
"That's fine," he said. "I won't make any of you do something you don't want. I will miss all of you."

"We'll miss you too, N!" the Lillipup said, along with agreement from many others. The puppy even got up to lick his face.

"You should've been a Pokémon too," the Deerling said when things quieted. "Because then you wouldn't have to leave us."

N glanced down the path and spotted two women coming their way. They were still some distance off. "Sometimes I wish I had been one too," he told his friends. "But then I wouldn't be able to help you like this. I think it was meant to be this way, but in order to fulfill my destiny, I need to walk a long and hard path."

The Pokémon had seen the women too and the shy ones were already going back into hiding. "Be careful," the Deerling said, before dashing off to join them.

"Pokémon love you so quick, you should be okay," the Lillipup said, getting off his lap. "Good luck!"

The last Pokémon in the glade with him was the Zoroark. He padded around on all fours before sitting down in front of N. "Kid, you have bright eyes and a pure heart," he said. He glanced back at the women before looking back to him. "That can take you far, but beware."

Nodding, N replied, "I know there's a lot of a danger to a journey; I've read about them…"

"Not about that," he said, flicking his long tail. "You have learned how cruel humans can be, but your kind can also be manipulative." The Zoroark puffed up his chest at this. "My kind is also manipulative. But in the years since I came here as a Zorua, and in all the kindness and love you showed me no matter what happened, I feel now that you deserve my honesty. So here it is: think for yourself."

"Think for myself?" he asked, puzzled. "But I have been all along. I brought together the Sages, and Team Plasma, and then established myself as worthy of being King, all because I want to fix things."

Strangely, the Zoroark seemed disappointed, lowering his head and touching his snout with his paw. "Then do that, and examine your thoughts and ideals more closely. Watch how people react and consider what may happen. Watch how they are. It's not that I don't believe in you, N. It's that the worst dangers are the ones that you do not expect. Disasters do not happen suddenly; they happen when you don't leave the path to them."

"What do you mean by that?" N put his hand on a Rubik's Cube that he had attached to a belt clip. It was something precious to him.

But the Zoroark got up and started away. "If I tell you everything, your mind will grow soft. Find the way of mysteries for yourself." Then he leapt into the trees, following the others.

Examine his thoughts and ideals… N wasn't sure of that, as he had thought and discussed those ideals extensively for the past four years. He wanted to make sure that they would be understood clearly; it was something he had trouble with at first, because no one else in Team Plasma could understand Pokémon like he did. In that, his Sages had helped immensely. With them backing his words, he felt that he could readily attain his goal.

And to watch the others around him, that disasters happen when you don't leave the path to them.
That sounded like a good idea. He had learned that people outside of Plasma told themselves many lies in order to let the enslavement and mistreatment of Pokémon continue. By watching and listening to them, he could find the lies and expose them. He could also figure out the best way to present his ideals to the world so that they would be accepted, no, embraced.

"N!" The blond woman waved to him. "It's almost time for you to go!"

"I'll be right there," he called back, getting up and brushing the dirt off his jeans. He also ran his hand through his ponytail, catching a few bits of wood from the stump. Then he went over to them.

The two of them wore simple dresses; they always wore dresses and were the only people N knew of who wore them at all. That wasn't the only reason they were different from the rest, and from him. When a Pokémon came to this forest that was injured, Anthea would know how to heal it. She was gentle about it too, although N often had to help her calm the Pokémon down. And Concordia usually wasn't out here, as she directed the servants of the castle. She was a strong woman, but knew how to soften her words so that she didn't seem bossy. And together, they were the two servants who answered personally to him. They were his teachers and caretakers.

"I was just saying goodbye to the Pokémon here," he told them. "Some were nervous and didn't want me to go, but others wished me luck."

Concordia smiled. "We thought you'd be out doing that. But you don't want to delay the others. They've got a scheduled appearance in Accumula later this morning." They paused for him, then walked back the way they came.

He nodded. "I know."

"I'll keep watch over your friends here while you're gone," Anthea said. "And here, this is a Fly HM." She handed him a disc-like device in a plastic case. "You can teach it to a Pokémon with wings so you can return here if you want."

He looked at the device, not liking the sound of it. "I wouldn't want to use it on most; they'd be too small to ride."

"Oh no, it doesn't quite work like that," she said, sounding amused. "It's... well, you'd have to see it for yourself. Regular flying, yes, the majority of Flying types couldn't help you. This version of Fly, a small Pokémon could handle transporting a human easy and quick."

"And it gives the Pokémon you teach it to an advantage in the wild when you let it go," Concordia added. "And there's no harm done; it's safe. Otherwise, she wouldn't have kept it."

"I'll trust you on that," N said, putting the case into his bag.

"We'll miss having you around," Anthea said, rubbing a tear out of her eye. "You've always been a wonder as a child, and now you're all grown up, ready to make a change in the world. We're so proud of you."

On some level, N knew that they were complimenting him. Yet, he'd heard those words time and time again: a child wonder, a prodigy, the one who will change the world, so proud of you. Those words, sometimes he had to remind himself that they did have meanings and that they were good. At least, from most humans.

N listened to them chatter while walking with them, talking some on his own. But it seemed like they were discussing nothing. Just amusing anecdotes, or sweet memories from the past. Inside, he was thinking again that he should have been a Pokémon. He was far more comfortable talking with
them than other humans. Around his own kind, he felt like he was missing something, but couldn't identify it. He tried so often to analyze and solve the problem, but the answers he came up with never made sense. Those all had to be false results… he was missing something.

They came upon a large helicopter sitting on open ground. Members of Team Plasma had gathered, talking to each other and getting on board. Just in time. He looked over to the two women. "Goodbye, Athena, Concordia. I might visit if there's time to spare. I trust you to take care of things."

"Of course, N dear," Concordia said, coming closer to him and putting her hand on his shoulder. Feeling uncomfortable, N stepped towards the helicopter. She noticed and briefly looked disappointed in him. That embarrassed him, so he quickly said, "I'd better go; don't want to hold them up." He walked quickly to the helicopter, facing the ground and hoping that he wasn't blushing.

But as soon as he escaped that one potential hug, one of the last soldiers of the group saw him and tried to get a handshake. "Lord N, you are coming with us! It's amazing to meet you in person; I've been fascinated by your philosophy ever since I first read about you and it's changed my life..."

"Leave him be," Ghetsis said from inside, thankfully breaking up that awkward moment for N. "Our Lord has a major task ahead of him and he needs to focus his mind on that."

N nodded. "Yes, I have a lot to do in the near future. But I'm glad that I was able to open your mind to the ideal ways of life." He then stepped up into the helicopter.

It was... crowded, much to his distaste. There were eight Plasma members in full uniform, as well as Ghetsis who was dressed formally in his cape and collar. There were also two members who were in plain clothes like himself, carrying travel bags and quietly talking to each other. In front, there was the pilot, co-pilot, and a strange man in shadowy clothing and thick hair, to the point where nothing could be told about his (or possibly even her) identity. That last was one of the Shadow Triad, and if one was here, the other two might be on board as well. Just not as obviously.

As he was the last to get on, Ghetsis gestured him to sit on the bench beside him. Normally, that was fine. N and the leader of the Sages knew each other best, and Ghetsis was more aware of N's quirks. But he was sitting on the edge of a bench in the front row. And directly next to that empty spot, there was another bench with the two plains clothes members. They were two females that he did not know.

The helicopter door began to shut, so N went to the spot by Ghetsis while the vehicle started up. Okay, the helicopter was a fast way to reach their destination, even if he did not like it. He had flown a few times in such things before and it always unsettled his nerves. The crowd of humans made it that much worse... and the smell. There was something that smelled stale, bitter, and fermented nearby. Smelling it made him want to get as far away from that scent as he could. Looking at where it came from, it seemed to be from the two women by him.

"Most young people who go on a Pokémon journey will take a friend or two along," Ghetsis spoke up. "They don't always stick together, but they tend to keep pace with each other. I'm sending these two out with you to help you fit in better. This is Valerie, and this is Carol."

"Hi N," Valerie said cheerily. She had a perky smile and fidgeted in her seat. "You can call me Val. We can help you with figuring out what to do out there, because the rest of Unova works differently than the castle. But you're super smart, so it shouldn't be that hard for you to catch on."
Carol nodded somberly, flicking back her short hair. "It's a lot more corrupt out there," she said.

"They're also a pair of our best trained martial arts fighters outside of the Triad," Ghetsis said. "They'll be working as your bodyguards in situations that could require such. Now we don't want you three to be associated with Team Plasma in the public's eye, at first. We'll wait until we have all the pieces set up so that no meddling Trainers try interfering with your destiny. Until then, you'll be met with in secret, or one of these two will contact us on your behalf."

Normally, N liked talking, as that solved problems. But this situation had him tense, so he just said, "If that's what would work best."

"This is the beginning of the biggest stage of your plans," he said. "You need to be strong now, and stay strong. Your faith in your ideals will be the foundation for everything you need: courage to carry on in face of adversity, wisdom to avoid mistakes, charisma to inspire those who are blind, everything. You've gotten this far and there is no reason you should fail now. So you don't need to worry, even though we're all depending on you. I have faith in you."

N nodded. It was a great burden that he carried in being the King, but Team Plasma needed him to succeed. All of the Pokémon in the world needed him to succeed, so that they never had to fear humans again. And, along with that, the humans of the world would all be enlightened if... no, when he succeeded here. He would change everything for the better and he knew that he could do it.

But also, Ghetsis was counting on him. N had heard his story many times, about how he had been living a comfortable life of wealth and luxury but had given it all up on the words of a small boy who claimed that he could understand Pokémon. Most people in the world would have thought it make-believe and told him to grow up and pass those fantasies by. But Ghetsis believed, and he was so moved and inspired by the child's wishes for a better world that he gave up all that he could to see to it that the better world came to pass. N may have been a child wonder, an extraordinary person, but without the support and wisdom of Ghetsis, he would have been called a liar instead, possibly insane.

Although he knew all of this was greater than just two people, N felt, but never told, that he needed to succeed for Ghetsis' sake, so that his faith and sacrifice was validated.

After landing northwest of Accumula, Ghetsis gathered his crew to discuss the plan for this appearance one last time. N, Val, and Carol headed out to Route 2. "Striaton is to the north, so we should be headed that way," Carol said.

"I can't take on the Gym yet," N said. "I have to find some Pokémon to help me. And just what are you two wearing?"

"Err, regular clothes?" Val replied, still smiling. "We had to fit in too."

He shook his head. "I know, but that's not what I mean. One or both of you has some perfume or scent on you, and it's atrocious. I'm sorry if that's rude to point out, but it's awfully distracting."

"It's very popular in Kanto," she said. "It's called Veiled Mystique."

Carol nodded. "We both love it; it's such an exotic light perfume."

"So a light perfume is one that doesn't choke others?" N asked.

The two girls laughed. "I suppose that could be said," Val joked.
"What's so funny about that?" N was never sure what to do about people who thought they were funny. Sure, sometimes really clever wordplay or twist of concept could be funny, but it got in the way of intelligent conversation.

They looked at each other, then Val said, "I guess you are right about needing Pokémon first. We'd better spread out for that, so we're not all encountering the same ones. Here, my Lo…"

"Val," Carol said warningly.

She giggled. "Oh right, here N." She gave him a device that looked like a black watch with a large screen. "Sounds so odd after all this time. Anyhow, this is an Xtransceiver, so we can call each other if something happens. I've got our numbers loaded in the address book, so that's easy."

"That's good," he said, putting the Xtransceiver on. "I hope you two are well-prepared for this. Good luck on your searches."

Carol just nodded and headed off towards a grassy meadow. Val waved and said, "Good luck, and be careful!" before running off north

Good, they were gone. N headed east. He wasn't sure why Ghetsis had thought to add them in at this stage. Really, he was perfectly fine with doing this alone and the rational that most teens traveled in groups was weak. Even if he were to travel with someone, he'd want it to be someone he knew and trusted, like Anthea and Concordia, not two random soldiers like Val and Carol. But his caretakers had work to do back at the castle and any other humans he knew were also busy.

He wasn't planning on finding Pokémon first, though. He knew strategically what he should be looking for in his starting Pokémon, and that was readily available on Route 2. No, he wanted to go see Ghetsis' speech. N knew he didn't have to, and it would likely be like others he'd heard. But maybe the Sage was saying something different to them. To blend in, he wanted to know what was being said.

But then… he ran his hand through his hair, thinking. Even in ordinary attire, he was easily recognizable due to his long light green hair. Ghetsis would know that he was in the crowd, and he might not appreciate the delay. Maybe he should buy a hat while waiting on the Plasma group to get to Accumula.

There was one problem with that: N had never been in a store himself. Maybe he should have brought one of the girls along. No, it shouldn't be that complicated. He had read about businesses, bargaining, and trade before, so he could handle it. He went to Accumula.

It wasn't until he was a short distance from the tunnel that he realized something wasn't quite right here. N looked and listened, noticing the quiet. Although the grass looked appropriate, he had not run into any Pokémon on his walk.

Why was that? The Pokémon of the forest would usually come right to him. Even the new ones. Maybe it was because no Pokémon around here knew of him. N felt spooked by the quiet, but it was soon broken by a quick rustling of leaves and running paws. After a few seconds, a violet feline Pokémon burst onto the path. Her fur was puffed out, which only made a certain patch around an old scar stand out all the more. The Purrloin saw him and froze, trying to decide what to do.

"What's frightened you, Purrloin?" N asked, making sure his hands were visible and that he didn't appear threatening. "I'm not going to trouble you."
She stayed tense. "It doesn't matter if I say what; you're human."

"It does matter," he said. She tensed up even more. "I understand you."

Starting to calm down, she glanced back into the trees, then said, "I don't like people with knives." Then she sat down and licked her paw to settle her fur down.

N went to sit by her. "Why did you get attacked with a knife?"

"How should I know?" she replied, then put her paw down. "I had a Trainer for a while, but she kept losing at the Gyms and blaming us. She was unreasonable all the time; I like to be out for stuff other than battles."

"So she struck you because she kept losing?"

The Purrloin flicked her tail. "No. Her loser boyfriend made that scar. She was a loser, but he was worse. Hmph. I just wanted to win one of those Gyms, to show that I wasn't worthless. But… it didn't happen. I got released and was threatened with a knife to scat."

For a few minutes, N let the Purrloin talk about her life. Then he told her of what he meant to do. "I know I want to make sure all Pokémon can be free," he finished up with. "But I think that in order to get respect, I'd best earn badges myself. There is something else I could do, but I want to try the badges first. Would you help me win the Gym in the next town over? I wouldn't keep you longer than that, but you would win one."

She had been attending to her grooming while he spoke, but N could feel that she was listening. The Purrloin took a moment to finish off her cleaning, then looked to him. "You're different, you know. Not just in understanding me, but you're not like the other humans in other ways… I can tell that about you already. Just one Gym, huh?"

He nodded. "Just one."

Flexing one paw to investigate her claws, she replied, "I don't need any more proof than that. Okay then, N, I'll help you. But, will you nickname me?"

"Nickname you? I hadn't thought of that."

She got up and stretched. "Oh, but a nickname is so special. It gives you a distinct identity among your kin, and it always reminds you of the person who gave it to you. And it means that a human saw you as a person too, instead of a tool to use for their own purposes. Sometimes it means that they will always be your friend…” the Purrloin sounded sad at the end, but didn't stay open about it long.

N scratched her head, making her purr. "I see. Well if it is seen that way to Pokémon, then I'd be happy to give you one. But give me a moment to think on it." He pulled out a Pokeball and activated it to capture her. The Purrloin didn't resist. Once the capture was secure, he released her. "Could I call you Pricilla?"

"Do you like it?" the Purrloin asked.

He nodded. "That's why I suggested it, but I want to make sure you like it too."

"If you like it, then I like it." The newly named Pricilla stood up and curled her tail. "So, what do we do now, N?"
Getting up off the ground, he said, "There's a few things that I want to do in Accumula first, but
then we'll head to Striaton where the Gym is. We'll need to start training too… you're the first
Pokémon that I've captured, actually."

"Am I? That makes me very special then." Pricilla seemed pleased.

For the next half hour, N looked around Accumula Town with Pricilla following him. There were
many small stores and brick apartment buildings. There was a little park that had short grass and
only a handful of trees. But, the thing that struck N was that things were not as grand as he was
used to. Sure, he knew castles were normally grand, and he'd only ever seen two buildings in his
life. But things were at such a small scale here. Some of the one-story structures could have fit
inside the major rooms of the castle.

The time was quickly approaching, so N entered one clothing store. It didn't take long for someone
to say, "Lord N? What are you doing here?"

He looked to the counter to see a large middle-aged man in a dark blue polo shirt and tan pants.
"Hmm, have I met you before?"

Shaking his head, the clerk said, "No, not in person. I've seen you before, at the coronation. I'm one
of the financial backers. But I'm honored that you would come by here." He glanced down, seeing
Pricilla looking around. "Erm, but please keep an eye on that Purrloin; I don't want it stealing
merchandise."

"Alright," he looked down to her, "behave yourself in here, please."

"Oh fine," she said, sitting down to clean her paws again.

Then N came up to the counter. "Actually, I wanted to buy a hat so that I wasn't so obvious out
here. I've tried, but if you recognize me, then it's not working as it should."

"I could get you one for nothing, it'd be no trouble."

He waved a hand and shook his head. "No, I'll buy it. I'll need to do that in every other town."

"Right. Well our hats are over in that corner, so see what you like."

N nodded and went over to look, after making sure that Pricilla was going to follow him. There
weren't many hats over there: cloth bucket hats, straw wide-brimmed hats, and baseball caps, that
was it. And they were only in a few colors. Still, what should he choose? He wished he had more
information on the subject of hats. He should have something innocuous, something that would
blend in. But he didn't know what would fit that.

In that case, it was down to what he liked.

He was considering the bucket hats when one of the caps caught his eye. It was black with a dark
gray bill, but what interested him was the yin-yang patch on the front. Instead of just being a
symbol, this one was a stylized depiction of Zekrom and Reshiram, one of a red eye, the other of a
blue eye. N put down the tan bucket and went to check out this black hat further. It was on a
display advertising 'Patch Hats' and, in a plastic bag inside the cap, there was a duplicate of the
dragon patch. Perhaps it was in case of damage.

When he had been learning from the Sages, he heard of many tales of the legendary Pokémon. But
his favorites were always those of Zekrom and Reshiram, in particular the former. If he knew how
to reawaken those legends, N would be greatly tempted to do so. If he had the authority of even
just one of them behind his ideals, then the people of Unova, and even the world, would have to listen. But it should work without them. He and Team Plasma were bringing wisdom to the people, wisdom that they could not afford to ignore.

His thoughts were interrupted when his Purrloin said, "Oh, now that looks so warm and snuggly. I want to nap in that coat."

He looked over to see the violet feline looking up at a thick brown coat with fur trim. "I would rather you not do that," he told her. "The shopkeeper wouldn't be happy with us."

"Pfft. Didn't you hear how he was talking to you?" She walked over to his side. "He would have given you the hat for free. He'd go out of his way to please you. Do people treat you like that often?"

N thought about that. "I don't know," he told her. "I spent more time with Pokémon than humans all my life."

"I'd take advantage of that kind of generosity," she said. "I hardly ever get that kind of treatment."

"It wouldn't be right," N said. He looked at the black hat again and decided to buy it. The storekeeper tried to keep sales tax off the receipt, but N insisted it be done legally. He was then offered a discount because of who he was. At that, Pricilla teased him for insisting on paying more than he needed to, for which N finally agreed and paid the reduced cost.

After placing the extra patch in his bag and clipping off the tags, N put the cap on, securing the back strap under his ponytail. It might not be much, but it could be just enough. He walked outside in time to see the Plasma group setting the stage. Already, people were gathering to watch. N slipped into the crowd; he was naturally tall, but he saw a few other men who were even taller than him.

"Ugh, I don't like these crowds," Pricilla said. "Somebody's gonna step on my paws or tail, I know it."

"I can recall you if that's better," N offered. She agreed to it, so he took her Pokeball and pressed the recall button. "I don't like crowds either."

While waiting on the speech to begin, N listened to the people around him. Some people had heard Plasma's words before, but many had not. And some were even gossiping about unimportant things, like this was any other gathering. He encountered that with Pokémon sometimes, when one of them wanted to relate an important story and others were interested in discussing where ripe berries were. Well this crowd was about to hear something that could change their lives.

Then the bugles sounded, quieting the crowd. Ghetsis came forward with his usual theatrics, introducing himself and Team Plasma to those who hadn't yet heard of their sacred mission. He went into one of his usual speeches meant to break people out of their established beliefs. At a few points, he even mentioned N, although not by name.

Although he'd heard these words many times before, N stayed around and listened. Ghetsis had a way of talking that N found fascinating. The people around him felt the same way, paying the Sage full attention. At times like these, when he knew what was being said, N liked to watch Ghetsis and try to figure out how he commanded people, how he projected a powerful presence. It was regal, appropriate for a king, and so as Plasma's King, he had to figure out how to do the same.

After the speech was over, Ghetsis and the Plasma knights headed back to the helicopter. None of
them showed any signs of noticing N in the crowd. N listened to the dispersing people. "What was that about?" "Isn't he a great speaker?" "I don't wanna hurt my Pokémon, but I'll be sad if she goes." "What on earth are those jokers going on about?" "This is the truth! It'll be all over the world in time, so you have to join now!"

N stayed there, clenching his fist. Some were listening, but others were still uncertain. Why was that? It was plain and simple once you thought about it; even the word 'capture' hinted at Pokémon enslavement. But… maybe it would just take time. They needed to think it over, and then, they would certainly do the right thing. Unless other humans really were more corrupt than he thought, and force would be necessary.

Well, he wasn't going to advance on his goal if he stayed around here. He looked around the plaza one more time. It was mostly empty now, save for a small group on the other side. There was a guy in a strange mask, a girl in a baseball cap, and a Snivy with a fedora a few sizes too big. "Ridiculous," N mumbled, then started to go.

But then the Snivy squealed in glee, forcing N to pay attention to the trio again. "OH MY GOD WOMAN, you are now my favoritest person ever! My hat and I are your loyal friends for-evah!" Then he hugged the crouching girl, excited enough that he knocked his hat off.

"What?" N felt bewildered. Some of his Pokémon friends in the forest said that they liked him, but none had ever said anything like that, in such excitement. And she was the one who must have given him that awful hat. How could he be declaring his eternal loyalty to that girl? Unless he was missing something here. Unable to let it go at that, he went over to the trio. "Wait a minute, I thought… what did you just say, Snivy?"
late morning, 11/11

Hilda got up, letting go of Fedora for the moment. The guy approaching them was tall and lanky, wearing what most teenaged guys would wear. Except maybe the Rubik's Cube on a belt clip and the black baseball cap, those were a little distinctive. And he was obviously another Trainer, with a travel bag at his side and a single Pokeball attached to a team holder.

N gave the Snivy's Trainer a quick glance over. She was wearing a red and white sleeveless shirt with a Pokeball trim around the hemlines, along with knee length shorts. At her side, there was a pink travel bag and two Pokeballs. He also noted her white and pink baseball cap with the Bisharp patch, feeling justified in having gotten this hat as something that could blend in.

Along with her, there was the guy just behind her. He had a white angular mask over his eyes and nose, cunningly made so that his pale blue hair seemed to flow right from the accessory. He also wore black clothing with ragged edges, something he would expect to see on the Shadow Triad, except that this guy was obviously not a member. Perhaps even they could blend in.

"What the **** are you talking about, stickman?" the Snivy asked, flicking his tail in annoyance.

"Did you mean what I said, or what Fedora here said?" the girl asked, puzzled.

"Oh, you don't understand them either? How very sad." He was speaking quickly, barely keeping his words from blurring together. He then looked down at Fedora. "I mean you, Snivy. I heard you shouting from all the way over there, but I never expected to hear a Pokémon say anything like that."

Fedora pushed his hat back, then began speaking in a trill that Hilda couldn't understand. But N could. "What, is this about the swearing again? Dammit, I'll say what I want however the **** I want to say it."

"No, about your Trainer," N said. "Although your swearing is rude."

Waving his paw in a dismissive manner, he said, "Whatever. Look, it was about that Ghetsis guy and she was saying that while his cape was amazing, and I'll agree with that, he wasn't wearing no hat, and that keeps him from being awesome like us hat wearers. But Hilda knows how awesome a hat really is!" He clapped his paws, truly pleased. "She let me keep my hat of absolute ****** coolness and I love her for it. It makes me glad that I decided to go along with her."

To N, this did not fit his idea of how things worked, how people related. Fedora shouldn't be happy to be wearing the hat, or being with this Trainer… or cussing so much. He knew some of the Pokémon in the forest who would cuss in their own ways, but only rarely. Unless the girl was brainwashing him somehow.

Yes, that had to be it. That could be the only way he was acting like this. "So this is all about hats, is it?"

"The hat makes the man," Fedora said with pride, although his fedora then slid over his eyes.

Hilda then laughed. "Hats? Hah, I knew my Pokémon was a hat-lover too. And you must be too, because you have the awesome Patch Hat!"
"The hat?" N touched the brim of his. "I just got it today because I wanted a hat; I didn't really think it was anything special."

She grabbed at his arm, but he stepped out of reach quickly. "Hey, slow down there, boy! There's no need to talk at a million miles an hour."

Oh, that again. N sighed. "It's because I understand Pokémon, Hilda. They speak much more economically than humans, so I have to speak fast to keep up with their conversations. It's hard to slow down from that. Oh, and the Snivy there told me your name."

"And I'm Fedora," the Snivy said, finally managing to tilt his hat back. "I'm darn proud of my name, ******, and you'd better remember to use it next time."

"You ought to teach him better manners," N added.

"Hey, I just caught him a few hours ago. If he has a potty mouth, I can't know it and it wasn't influenced by me. Anywho, about your hat: did it come with an extra patch?"

"Hmm, oh yes, it did." He opened up his bag and soon found it. "Why?"

Hilda grinned and clapped her hands together. "Yes, that's awesome! You have a really rare Patch Hat, you know. They released the Reshiram and Zekrom patch a month ago, but in limited numbers and although I kept checking, I could never find it. And you found a starting cap with two! Hey, do you want to trade for another patch? I've got a big collection and I really want that one." She brought out a DSD from her bag and recalled a large green folder from it.

"This is a collection piece?" N asked. It seemed strange.

"Oh yes, since the patches are interchangeable, you can have one basic cap, and change it every day with a different patch. I could give you one of my duplicate rares for that one." She flipped the folder open and went through plastic pockets, all filled with hat patches. "Like the special holographic Rayquaza."

He peered over, interested. "Do you have one of just Zekrom?"

"Yeah, but those are pretty common; you can probably find one if you go right back into the store. I do have the dueling Haxorus patch." Hilda decided to flip through until he saw something. "And so who are you?"

"My name is N," he said. "Is there a Zoroark?"

Smiling because he'd hit on a nice one (although nowhere near as rare as the Reshiram and Zekrom), she flipped a few pages quickly. "Oh yeah, I do have a rare version of that one I'm willing to let go! Here, this is the one with the badass pose." She pulled out a duplicate of the alternate Zoroark patch. "So will you trade with me, N?"

The patch in question was neat, N had to admit. It reminded him of his friend back in the forest. So he nodded and handed over the extra one of his. "Sure."

"Excellent, thank you so much!" Hilda said, taking that one and handing him hers. She went to the back to find an empty slot to slip it into, then put the folder back in storage. "If you get into the Patch Hats, there's a really awesome fan club online where you can get special offers and learn about limited editions. If not, it's still fun to have around."

N looked at her, knowing that he had wanted to berate her for putting her Snivy in that oversized
hat. But then, he seemed to like it. Trying to find a way to bring it up again, he asked, "So were you listening to that speech? It has some ideas that I think you should really consider."

"I was more mesmerized by his cape than anything," Hilda said, briefly getting a glazed look in her eyes. That puzzled N, even more so when it broke and she laughed. "Hah, I was listening, but I think he's trying to confuse people. I don't know what he means to do, but he's certainly got something up his sleeve. Or cape, something."

By that point, the other guy had managed to slip over close to N. He looked up to the young man with intense blue eyes. "You smell interesting."

N looked confused again. Hilda sighed. "Kyurem, don't eat him. We don't want trouble this soon after starting."

"Fine." Kyurem stayed there, still staring at N. "But who are you really?"

N looked at this strange boy. He was named Kyurem, after the legendary dragon? While it was strange, maybe people did respect the legendaries like that. Or disrespect, really. "I already told you, I'm N."

"That is an odd name," Hilda said. She wondered what kind of parents he had that would force him to live with that. "Oh, but you know what happens when two Trainers meet?"

He was puzzled. Was this a test? "I'm not really sure. This is my first day starting out."

"Mine too!" She giggled. "Well sort of. No, we battle!"

Taking Pricilla's Pokeball in hand, he prepared himself. Okay, this was what he would be doing from here on out… as much as he hated the idea of forcing Pokémon to battle. The Sages said that people wouldn't listen to a 'nobody', so he had to prove himself in this barbaric manner. "Right, that is what Trainers do. All right, I'd like to hear our Pokémon in battle. Pricilla, come back out." He released the Purrloin.

"Figures," Pricilla said, but she didn't seem disappointed.

Fedora jumped up. "Finally, you guys were talking way too much. I want in on this."

Kyurem raised his eyebrows to this, but then walked out of the way of the battle. Noticing that, Hilda snapped her fingers. "Okay, Fedora, you're up." Kyurem was still at a much lower level, and she didn't want to overpower this N guy too much if it was his first Pokémon battle, which it seemed to be. "And let's go! Use Leer."

"Hang on, Fedora," Hilda said, "Leer and then attack."

He had really wanted to attack that dumb cat for knocking his hat off, but he took the orders in trust that she must have known what she was asking for. "Hmph, you're just jealous that you're not naturally suave."
The Purrloin scratched him again. "You seem to be the one getting beat up, though." But right as she finished speaking, Fedora tackled her hard enough to force her onto the ground. She got back up and pounced on him, causing them to wrestle.

Look at the status screen of the ball, N said, "Can you try Assist?"

"I would advise against that," Kyurem said. "It only works if you have another Pokémon on your team."

"Yeah, he'd know what he's talking about," Hilda said, then snapped to her Pokémon. "Get outta that and tackle again."

The Snivy threw the Purrloin off him. "Gotcha." Then he rushed at her and tackled, this time knocking her out. As she vanished, he grabbed his hat and put it on with a flourish. "And that's how it gets done, ****."

N was caught in a state of shock. His first battle as a Trainer and he'd lost? But, he was supposed to be the one who understood Pokémon, not the others who could not hear the words. "So there's more I need to learn," he said, clasping the ball. "But there's more you need to learn too. If you don't find a way to understand your Pokémon, you're going to end up hurting them." Then he left for the Pokecenter.

After watching him go, Hilda looked to Kyurem. "See, that's a reason you could help me by translating."

"Sorry, mistress," he said in a polite tone. "But you should find ways to do that yourself."

"Hmph. Well, we'd better get a move on to Striaton so that we can train near a center that's going to stay open. And I ought to use you on the way. Do you need to go back to Pokémon form for that?"

He nodded. "Yes, but I'll transform when needed."

With that settled, Hilda headed on to the exit of Accumula.

Why did that Snivy like something that made it look ridiculous? Why would he love someone who couldn't understand him? And why couldn't letting a Pokémon do what it would do naturally work in a battle? With his head a blur of questions, N entered the Pokecenter.

He looked around at the wrecked state of the inside. Everything all torn up inside, the vandalism outside… this was a place of healing, so what had caused such destruction? To the side, he could see one of the Gym Leaders, Burgh, helping some clerks pack up boxes for digital storage. The nurse was still in back, doing something with the computers. "What happened in here?" he asked as he approached the nurse's desk.

She turned around. "Oh, hello. I'm sorry about the state our building is in; we've had a bit of a riot in here thanks to those Team Plasma folks. Do you want me to heal your Pokémon? I can still get that done."

"Yes please." But, Plasma had been responsible for this? He thought that they weren't supposed to be using force. He handed over Pricilla's ball and tried to think of what questions wouldn't give him away. "Why would anyone wreck a Pokecenter?"

"Someone must know, but I really don't," she replied, placing the Pokeball inside a machine and setting it to run. "At any rate, we're leaving Accumula, possibly for good. A lot of people around
here like Plasma, so it's been really tense for any Trainers that happen to come through, and for us
working here. If they'll do this, they could escalate to more dangerous demonstrations, so the
League is moving us out until repairs and apologies are made."

Although he wanted to argue that Plasma wouldn't, he was supposed to be incognito now. He
thanked her for healing the Purrloin, then headed out the west exit of Accumula. Since the crowd
was gone, he released Pricilla and let her walk alongside him. This issue of the ruined Pokecenter
remained on his mind. In a way, it was preferable to thinking about Hilda and her Pokémon. There
had to be some trickery going on with her.

"Oh, N! There you are."

Startled out of his thoughts, N looked up to see Val and Carol coming up to him. They both seemed
worried. "We hadn't seen you for a while," the latter said, shifting her pink hair back.

"I had to go into Accumula to heal the Pokémon I got," he told them. "But it's a wreck; we ought to
move up towards Striaton to continue. There's also something about it that I need to talk with you
about," he lowered his voice at the last sentence, as there were several people, including an
attendant, who were hanging out in the tunnel.

"The Pokecenter is a wreck?" Val asked as they went onto Route 2. "What happened to it?"

"Apparently, the vandals were connected to Team Plasma," he said. "And we weren't supposed to
be acknowledged by the public until the rally for this morning got put on the internet and
broadcast. I definitely know that we're supposed to be a non-violent revolution except as a last
resort. They're even going to close up the Accumula center until an apology is issued, and that's
going to be bad publicity for us. I want to find out who's responsible for this. If it's not our group,
then we ought to turn the real culprits over to the police in order to clear our name. If it is someone
in our group, they need to be reminded of patience and non-violence. If we just go around forcing
everyone to do things with violence, then we will be fought against. Non-violence will force them
to struggle with their weak arguments of friendship and tradition."

For a moment, the two of them were quiet. N turned back to them and saw that they were puzzled.
"You want us to find out what happened to the Pokecenter? You saw it yourself," Val finally said.

It took a moment, but N remembered that humans typically talked slower than he did. And it
always seemed like they listened slower too. If he was going to be a great leader, he needed to find
some way to force himself to slow down when talking to them. He gave it a try, but it felt
unnatural. "No, get in contact with the other members of Plasma and have them find out who is
responsible for the trashing of the Accumula Pokecenter. If it's not members of Plasma, they
should be turned in to the police so that we aren't blamed for the violence. If it is a member or a
group from Plasma, then they need to be reminded that we aren't using violence just yet, or ever if
things work out right."

"Oh I see, that's a great idea," Val said, nodding. "We'll pass the word along, right Carol?"

"Right," she said, calm as usual. "Some newer members may be too enthusiastic."

"But we should stick together. What did you catch, N?"

He looked around, realizing that his Pokémon friend wasn't obviously around. "Ah, a Purrloin. She
was right with me. Pricilla, where are you?"

To his call, she emerged from behind a bush. Although she came to him, she gave the two girls a
wide berth. "Sorry… gack… but those two humans reek! That is worse than the smell of Repel, ugh. I don't like them. Do we have to travel with them?"

"She doesn't like your perfume either," N told them. "Apparently you smell worse than Repel to Pokémon. So really, you shouldn't be wearing it because you're not going to be able to catch anything with it hanging to you."

"Does it?" Val frowned. "That could be why we've had trouble."

And if it was going to make his Pokémon friend (and himself) uncomfortable, that was another reason for them to travel separately. "Listen, I know you mean well, but I'll be fine on my own. I don't want to make my friends unhappy, so we'll be going ahead. It's not much use training around here if the Pokecenter is closed." He walked faster to get by them.

"But N, we're supposed to help you," Val said, in a slightly whiny voice.

"I hardly know you," he said. "And you hardly know me. If I run into trouble, I can speak with the local Pokémon and get myself out. I know you're not in this for the badges and the Gyms and unless you can prove yourself helpful, I can handle things on my own."

He and Pricilla kept moving ahead, despite their protests. The Purrloin seemed amused. "You have to put your underlings in line."

"Normally I don't have to deal with them," he replied.

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afternoon, 11/11

Route 2 wasn't as solid as Route 1 was. 2 split off into many different narrow paths, although all eventually led up to Striaton. On her way there, Hilda battled with Kyurem in areas that were large enough for him, and Fedora in areas that weren't. The Snivy had no problems with any of the Pokémon along the way, and while Kyurem started weaker than everything else, his two moves did knock out everything on the way in one blow. That is, when they could find wild Pokémon bold enough to battle them.

Even with strong skills, sometimes another Pokémon was quicker than Kyurem and got a strong hit on him. Hilda used up her last Potion to fix up the dragon while he was still in his normal form. "According to the town map, we should be on the last stretch before Striaton," she said. She patted his black hide. "I can get more later. How're you feeling?"

He made a huffing sound, then turned into a human again. After adjusting his shirt, he said, "Quite well, considering that I started all over again. With the technology your people have, battles could carry on for quite some time." Then he gave a smile; strangely, it was unnerving, the kind one would expect from a Pokémon an entire town called a true monster.

Trying to put it out of her mind, she said, "They can. Well it's getting late. Let's avoid what battles we can."

Kyurem turned serious again. "As you wish, mistress."

Fedora made a chittering sound at him, which the dragon replied to with an almost snarl.

In time, signs of the next town began to appear through the trees. Hilda hurried on ahead, but it quickly became apparent that there was a group of people ahead. Trainers who would want a battle? She could manage, but she couldn't heal until town. Hopefully they wouldn't stop her from
She spotted Bianca at the edge of the crowd, holding onto her Oshawott. Oddly enough, it seemed like there were mostly girls in the group. Her friend looked interested in what was going on, but nervous about going up to whatever the big deal was. Hilda went over to her. "Hey there. What's going on?"

She looked surprised, then smiled. "Oh, hi Hilda. Look, Hilbert's here."

"Oh, him?" Hilda felt excited. Hilbert was a living superstar, one of the more famous Pokémon Trainers who was challenging the League right now. Whenever he was in a Gym battle, people always said he put on a great show. And Hilda wanted to be able to do the same.

And yes, there he was! He had a mullet of brown hair, although he mostly covered it up with a Patch Hat that had an Archeops on it. He wore a blue jacket that had more patches and buttons sewn all over it, not just from Unova but from far away regions like Hoenn and Johto. At the moment, he was talking to the crowd of girls (only a couple of other guys, though) about his travels. "Yeah, I've been traveling the world since I was ten," he said, all casual like it was simple to accomplish such a thing. "But I always love returning to Unova. This is my homeland and I hope to get the honor of being named Champion of this League. I'll take that over being Champion of any other place." He gave a confident smile with perfectly white teeth and, at that moment, the air around him seemed to sparkle.

The other girls in the audience squealed and complimented him.

"I hear that he's wealthy from all the traveling and battling he does," Bianca whispered to Hilda. "And that the Kanto-Johto League did try to get him to aim for being their joint Champion. That takes sixteen badges though; he's amazing."

"Yeah," she agreed. She knelt down to pick up Fedora so he could see too. When she looked to Kyurem, though, he was staring at Hilbert in a weird way. "What's the matter?"

"Hm?" Bianca asked, then noticed she was asking it of Kyurem.

The transformed Pokémon studied the boy for a while longer. Then he turned to them. "I knew something was happening in the land. But I'm not finding what I expected. What I'm finding is… strange. I don't know what to make of it."

"Care to explain yourself?" Hilda asked in a teasing manner.

He looked to her, then shook his head. "Not yet."

"Hey, you two lovely ladies," Hilbert said, coming through the crowd towards them.

Bianca's eyes went wide while Suzy shrunk back in her arms. "Huh, us?"

The famed Trainer smiled confidently as he came to them; his other admirers moved aside, jealous of them but still hoping to get his attention if they pretended not to be. "Yeah, you two. As you may know, I am the brightest star of the League challengers, Hilbert Godfrey." He made a motion like he was tipping his hat. "And you two seem to be Trainers that I haven't heard of yet. Are you also aspiring for stardom and glory?"

"Um, uh, not really," Bianca said, at a loss of what to say.

So Hilda spoke up for her. "Not exactly. I'm Hilda, and this is one of my best friends, Bianca. We
just started out on our journey this morning. Heck, we haven't even gotten our League IDs yet since the Striaton Pokedocent got closed down."

He raised an eyebrow at that. "Did it? How odd. But at least I know not to waste time around there. At any rate, would you two like to battle?"

"Battle?" Bianca asked. "But, we just started out, and you've been to all sorts of regions."

"Yeah, isn't that just being a bully?" Hilda added. Even if she did have Kyurem on hand. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed that he was slipping out of the crowd's view. As for the crowd, they seemed puzzled that anyone would reject a battle offer from their idol.

"Certainly not," Hilbert said, radiating innocence in a way that could only be described with purple prose. "It's part of the honor of the Pokémon Trainer; you'll take on any challenge given to you. It's like what the elders of the Dragon Clan in Blackthorn say: you shouldn't care if the Pokémon is weak or strong, or if a Trainer is weak or strong. An honorable Trainer should do their best with the Pokémon they love."

"I suppose there is a noble challenge to it, if you twist it about like that," Hilda said, although she was clenching her fist. "But there's also a stupid challenge to it. Someone's who's had, what, eight, nine years of experience in Pokémon training and battling going against someone who had just started out? What challenge is in it for you, and what point is there for us? The Gym Leaders at least balance battles out to make a fair challenge."

He nodded. "You have a point, mademoiselle. In that way, it is a bit stupid. So then, I'll battle the both of you, with just one Pokémon that I'm still working on. That would balance out the fairness, wouldn't you think?"

"That does sound nicer," Bianca said, putting Suzy down, then patting her head to reassure her.

"Sure, if you want," Hilda answered as Fedora jumped down onto the ground on his own. She looked to her friend and winked at her. "Let's do this, Fedora."

As the crowd backed off, Bianca tapped her holder. "Okay, go Lassie!" Then she summoned out a Lillipup while her Oshawott hopped out of the battle area. Oo, she was getting sneaky, Hilda thought.

"Interesting," Hilbert said, then frowned at the Snivy. Somehow, the air seemed to turn darker when he did. "Hey wait… that hat…"

Fedora snickered and tapped the fern attached to it.

"It's awesome, right?" Hilda said, grinning.

His cool image cracked enough to show anger. "That's my hat! That fool Pokémon stole it from me yesterday when I was on Route 1." A number of his fans gasped and backed away.

"He had it when I caught him," Hilda said. "And weren't we going to battle?"

Cooling down for a bit, Hilbert's confident mask returned. "Right, but afterwards, we're going to have to talk about that hat. Anyhow, I'm a man of my word and I'll only call one. Go Gigalith!"

A giant four-legged boulder of a Pokémon appeared, its red eyes glowering down at the two smaller Pokémon before it. The red crystals on its back glittered in the sunlight, contrasting with its dark blue hide. After a second, it snorted as if it saw this as nothing special or troublesome.
He talks of being fair and then pulls out a Gigalith, Hilda thought in annoyance. But a good portion of her was impressed somehow that he had a powerful Pokémon like that. It was only natural given his experience. And why was she feeling like she wanted to follow him around like the other girls did?

On one hand, she recalled Grass moves being effective against Rock types, and Fedora had learned Vine Whip now. On the other hand, she wasn't sure how powerful that Pokémon had to get to evolve into Gigalith form. It might be able to withstand Vine Whip (and probably could). In that case, the best thing might be to weaken it first. "Fedora, use Leer."

Hilbert waved his hand dismissively. "Rock Throw, Gigalith."

Bianca looked nervous. "Um, use Tackle, Lassie."

Surprisingly, both the Lillipup and the Snivy were able to move before the Gigalith. But the body tackle didn't seem to do much, as compared to when it summoned a rain of stones to fall on the two of them. The two Pokémon fainted immediately; the fedora disappeared along with Fedora.

While Bianca encouraged her spooked Oshawott to join the fight, Hilda glanced to where she had last seen the blue haired boy-dragon. He was gone now. Good. She pressed the button on his Pokeball. "All right, you're up Kyurem."

Suzy had just managed to get her courage to come into the battle area when the large black dragon appeared beside her and roared. The Oshawott froze in place. "He's on our side, Suzy," Bianca said quickly.

On the other side, Hilbert looked rattled. "What, you have Kyurem? Now what about calling in a legendary Pokémon is fair?"

"Oh, but he just hatched this morning," Bianca said. "In a way. He's low leveled."

"Hmm…" he got that smile again. "Gigalith, Stone Edge on the dragon."

"Kyurem, use Icy Wind," Hilda said. If it stayed slow, then they might have a chance.

"Suzy, use Water Gun," Bianca said, more of a gentle suggestion than an order.

The dragon went first, calling in a snowy frigid wind to strike the Gigalith. Then Suzy followed up with a small orb of water fired at it. Finally, the Gigalith stomped a foot on the ground and called up a giant spike of stone from underneath Kyurem, knocking him out. The Oshawott lost her nerve and tried to use another Water Gun, but ended up drenching one of Hilbert's fan girls instead. A Rock Throw from the Gigalith knocked her out.

Hilbert recalled his Pokémon and tilted his hat again. "You're lucky to have fought me, you know," he said. "Now, about that hat of mine."

"It's not here now," Hilda pointed out. "I have to go to the Pokecenter to revive Fedora first."

evening, 11/11

Fedora lounged on a throw pillow of the hotel room's couch. On looking at his hat, sitting on the couch arm, he felt satisfied with how the day had gone. Mostly. Losing that battle to the Gigalith had been awful, but at least he still had the fern fedora. Hilbert had tried and tried to take the hat back, but every time the Snivy retreated to his Pokeball, the hat went with him. The nurse
explained that the hat had somehow gotten digitalized along with him when he was captured. Apparently, items could do that if the Pokémon in question identified itself with the item.

And Fedora thought he looked awesome with the hat.

On the other end of the couch, Kyurem was sitting in his human form. That dragon still scared Fedora, although he buried that deep within his mind so that it didn't show. He was sitting there perfectly still, except for his chest moving with every breath and his eyes blinking occasionally. But in those eyes, there was a hunger and desire for violence and blood. Even if he was 'weakened', the Snivy felt like the dragon could raze this whole town and slaughter everything alive in it, overnight. That is, if Hilda told him to do so.

Why did his human have such authority over Kyurem? Fedora wasn't sure why. He had first met Kyurem as a voice, offering him freedom from Juniper's Pokeball if they swapped places. At the time, he'd been okay with that; he wasn't too keen about being given to some stranger for research. And then he'd met the dragon face to face and realized just what kind of power he'd made a deal with. Kyurem was a god in Pokémon form. Somehow, Hilda had control over him that went beyond a Pokeball's normal mechanizations. What kind of deal had she made to get it?

Hilda's authority was the only reason Fedora felt like he could relax near Kyurem. At least, relax about not being eaten immediately. Something was going on now and his new friend and Trainer was at the center of it. He would have to do his best to help her through it.

The girl herself was fiddling with her Xtransceiver. It made a ringing sound a few times before it clicked. "Hello, Hilda!"

"Hi Mom!" she said happily, sitting on the bed. "How's it going?"

"All right; getting used to the quiet." They laughed. "So how's it going with you?"

"Awesome! I had the most amazing day."

It certainly had been amazing, Fedora thought. He curled up on the pillow and soon fell asleep listening to them talk.
morning, 11/12

Striaton was a place like Accumula, where people who worked in Castelia lived to get out of the city. But it was more of a middle class setting as opposed to the upper class finery of Accumula. While there were many apartment buildings and a few homes, they were more generic and plain, made of dark colored stones. Only a few streets were paved and an abandoned factory area was located to the northeast. In Striaton itself, there was the Gym, a Trainers School, a Pokecenter, and a public formal garden.

In the morning, Hilda found both of her best friends and convinced them to go out to a diner for breakfast together. One of the dining options was the Gym itself, oddly enough, but it wasn't open that morning. They went to one that had been made out of an old train car instead. "Oo, they have French toast," Hilda said, looking through the menu.

"You can even get it with strawberries, so it's kind of healthy," Bianca said jokingly before taking a drink of water.

"Everything's cooked," Kyurem said in disappointment.

"The salads and fruit bowls aren't," Cheren pointed out, then quickly patted at a purple paw reaching onto the table. The Purrloin he had caught yesterday afternoon was trying to steal his spoon.

The dragon boy made a disgusted face at that suggestion. "Unacceptable."

The waitress, dressed in a red striped jacket and short striped skirt, stopped by their table. "Good morning, I'll be your server today. What can I get you kids?"

As Cheren indicated for the girls to go first, Bianca said, "I'd like an apple flapjack stack, please, with a berry and nut bowl, and Pup's Breakfast Biscuits for my Pokémon."

"I'll have a strawberry French toast platter, with extra strawberries if that's okay, and a Pokémon's berry and nut bowl," she glanced at Kyurem, who was hiding his face behind his menu and grumbling about bloodless meats. "He's shy; could you get him a sausage, ham, and bacon platter?"

"Sure enough," the waitress said.

"I'll have the country breakfast plate 3, with two fried eggs," Cheren said. "And two Pokémon berry and nut bowls."

The waitress recited their orders back, then went to pass it on to the cooks. "Gosh, just feeding our Pokémon is going to be expensive," Bianca said. "Especially since they're going to be battling and we need to keep them in top condition."

"Once we're registered in the League, we'll get some compensation from them," Cheren said. "Right now, we'll have to be careful. Speaking of which, have either of you gotten your IDs yet?"

They both shook their heads. "Nah, the nurse said it's still in review," Hilda said.

"Do you think it has something to do with the Elite 4 challenge being shut down temporarily?"
Bianca asked. "Because Alder lost one of his Pokémon to an infected injury just last week and the news reporters have said he's in no condition to give interviews or act as League Champion."

"That would be horrible," Cheren said. "But that could have something to do with the delay."

"Not much we can do about that but be patient," Hilda said. She glanced off to the grill area, where the short order cooks were telling jokes and laughing while working. They seemed to be busy.

Cheren opened his bag and brought out a pamphlet. "Even so, I think I've found a way to pass some time. See? The Trainers School here in town is offering a special two week session, starting today."

"Today?" Bianca asked. "But, uh…"

"There's still time to register," he said as Hilda picked up the paper to read. "The classes don't start until nine, so as long as we get out of here in decent time, we should still be able to join in."

Skimming over the info, Hilda noticed the session was made up of three classes, six days a week, for two weeks. "We do have to get two credits in Pokémon studies for our self study allowance," she thought aloud. "And doing this would get us the year's requirement. Seems like we could even have time to train our Pokémon for the Gym while we're at it." Fedora and Smoky gave their approvals to that idea, while Suzy was trying very hard to ignore Kyurem's presence. The Lillipup and Purrloin were busy making faces at each other under the table.

"That would be nice to get out of the way," Bianca said, patting her Oshawott to reassure the Pokémon.

They chatted about the classes and Pokémon while they were waiting, and between bites when they got their meals. Kyurem glowered at the plate of meats for a little bit, but reluctantly tried them to eat something. Although clumsy with his fork, he somehow managed to finish off his breakfast first. "Did you like your cooked meats?" Hilda said teasingly.

"The ham and sausage were acceptable," he said. "But the bacon was wonderful. I might make an exception for cooked meats if they are bacon."

They laughed at this. "There was a neighbor of ours who said she was a vegetarian, except for bacon," Bianca said.

When everyone was done with breakfast, the group headed out to the Trainers School. It was a large three story building which stood out as it was made of wood and brightly painted with red, brown, and yellow. There were a number of teenagers outside, but the three friends and their Pokémon were able to get inside easily.

There was a receptionist desk near the entrance, but a sign by one of the hallways pointed them to Room 15 for school and class registration. There was a small sitting area in a cluster of offices, but no one was sitting there. Good sign, or bad? Whichever it was, Cheren knocked on Room 15's door.

"Come in," a woman said. She was dressed in a business jacket, a straight skirt, and black rimmed glasses. "How may I help you?"

"We'd like to register for one of the two week sessions, if there's still room," Cheren said.

"Hold on, I think…" she checked something on her computer. "We only have openings for three more students in just one of the sessions that start today. You'd have to wait two weeks if all four of you wanted to join in."
That was a moment of confusion, but then Kyurem put his hand on Hilda's shoulder. "Don't worry about me," he said. "I'm her bodyguard, not a student."

She gave him a look. "I see. Unusual, but all right. As I've said, most of the spots are filled up, so if you want in on this session, you'll be taking the Traveler session, consisting of one general studies credit, Camping and Travels, and two Pokémon studies credits, Battles 3 and Pokémon Grooming. I just need to check your school records to make sure you've covered Battles 1 and 2 previously. May I have your IDs, whether League or general?"

"We've just got general IDs for now," Hilda said taking out hers to hand over. "That sounds like a good set."

"Yeah, that could be good," Bianca said. Cheren thought it over, then nodded.

The school counselor, as she turned out to be, got the three of them registered for the session. They had some time to make sure they had their basic school supplies before classes started, so they headed out to a nearby store the counselor recommended. On exiting the building, both of Hilda's friends spoke up.

"Pokémon grooming?" Cheren asked, not thinking much of the subject.

"Battles 3?" Bianca asked, intimidated. "I barely passed Battles 2 and I think I only did because I got lucky in the final test battle."

Hilda grinned. "Well that was the only session they had open. I'm sure it will all be useful."

"You don't have a problem with it?" Cheren asked.

She shook her head. "I was considering it, because the Camping class will be practical. We'll have to battle anyhow in the League, so another class will help."

"I guess," Bianca said, resigning herself to it.

"We can help you with it," Cheren offered. He and Hilda had both aced the previous two levels of Battles class, so neither of them was nervous about 3.

"As for the Grooming class, that'll be fun," Hilda continued. "And it could help build trust with the Pokémon we catch, since I'm sure they'll like it." She glanced at Kyurem.

He frowned. "Don't even try."

"Most of them, I suppose," she admitted. "Besides, you might impress some girls by how well-kept and nice your Pokémon are." Hilda elbowed Cheren. "That'd be good, huh?"

As Bianca giggled, Cheren shrugged. "That could be a plus, although yes, gaining trust would be a good thing. I just hope it doesn't turn out to be some fashion contest thing."

The teacher of Battles 3 was a short slim man, with a noticeable bald spot and round sunglasses tucked into his shirt pocket. He didn't seem intimidating until he picked up a heavy metal rod and banged it on the floor to get the attention of the class. "All right students, welcome to Battles 3," he said in an unwelcoming voice. "I want you to know that as this is a cram session, there is no slack for foolishness or laziness. You must pay attention, do homework immediately, and be ready for battle. I am Mr. Tailor and you will address me as sir. Now when I call your name, tell me what Pokémon you have at this time and be snappy about it."
As students answered (quite a few of them nervously), Mr. Tailor gave a dismissive assessment of each. When one student named a team full of Grass types, he was particularly critical of having a mono-type team. He said to Cheren's Tepig and Purrloin, "One's slow and the other is frail. You're not going to get far against the fast and strong teams many Trainers have."

To Bianca's Oshawott and Lillipup, "One's a common type and the other's common overall. People know how to fight them and won't find you too hard to beat.

And then to Hilda's Kyurem and Snivy, "It's not in your interests to lie; what is your team?"

"Exactly what I said, sir," she replied, then pointed to the human form Kyurem sitting in a chair by the wall. "Ask him."

Eying the teacher, Kyurem flicked his hand out and summoned a blade of blue ice. "Believe her or I'll eat your hand," he threatened.

"That's really not necessary," she told him.

After giving them both a sharp glare, Mr. Tailor sniffed. "Well you'd need a legendary to back up a Snivy. A limited move pool and poor typing will get it killed before it can put a dent in most opponents."

Fedora made a rude gesture at the teacher, but Hilda tapped his shoulder.

The next teacher was a lady with graying curly hair and lots of large jewelry. Her bracelets jangled together and her earrings swung as she introduced herself. "I'm Mrs. White and I'll be teaching Pokémon Grooming. I'm going to teach you how to keep your Pokémon looking and feeling their best! As you may know, a happy and loyal Pokémon will do their absolute best for you, and grooming is a wonderful way to strengthen your friendship with your team."

Although she seemed much nicer than Mr. Tailor, it wasn't long after class started that she started handing out a large stack of papers for references and homework. The staples were barely holding on and Hilda's folder for this class was soon bulging. Wasn't grooming supposed to be simple?

"Now one of the first things you must do is determine the characteristics of your Pokémon to know how to best groom them," she said, pulling down a massive chart over the chalkboard. "Pokémon come in many forms and there is a lot to consider. For instance, you three, in the front row."

Hilda, Cheren, and Bianca glanced at each other as Mrs. White came to their table.

"You have five different Pokémon here," she said, as Kyurem was still in human form at the side of the room. "And each of them has different needs." She started down the row. "This Snivy is a reptile and a Grass type. It will shed its scales regularly, so you'll need a buffing cloth to help peel off any dead scales that don't come off naturally, and it will need sunbathing time every day to keep in optimal health.

"This Oshawott is a Water type mammal with fine hairs. It will need moisturizers if you are going to be in a dry environment, but time in the water will suffice otherwise. Otherwise, it should be fairly easy to groom. On the other hand, this Lillipup is a Normal type mammal with thick fur, which will eventually get long. It will need to be bathed regularly, especially if it has dandruff problems, and it will need daily brushing. It's not too bad now, but later evolutions will require an undercoat brush, a stiff brush for the long hairs, and possibly a comb to work out knots. Get it used to this right away so that it doesn't fuss much later.
"And then this Purrloin is a Dark type mammal with short fur. Now a Purrloin itself will keep its own grooming, but you should still get a soft short fur brush to use; it will love it, so it's a great way of bonding. Also, you'll need to watch for dandruff and bath it if this is a problem."

"That could be trouble, bathing a Purrloin," Cheren said. The Purrloin in question was cleaning his ears.

Mrs. White shrugged. "Start early to get it used to it, or use a foaming shampoo. And then this Tepig," she patted Smoky, getting him to look up at her. "This one might fool you. It's a Fire type mammal with a few short tough hairs. Brushes are not needed, but what do you think of moisturizers?"

The boy looked puzzled. "He's a Fire type, so no?"

"Incorrect," she said. "This Tepig will need moisturizing lotion applied daily to look at its best. You see, a mammal's skin cells need to keep some moisture; otherwise, it gets dry, cracked, and flaky. And because it's a Fire type, its skin will dry out faster than usual. So to keep it looking nice, use lotion. Check the booklet under skin care for more details about what kinds to use and what to avoid so that you don't accidentally burn yourself doing so."

For the last class, the students met with the teacher outside on Route 2. "This way, we can have lessons in the proper environment," he explained. He was a man with glossy black hair, a beard, and something like a military uniform. "I am Mr. Smith, but you may call me George. Now a few of our classes are going to be held overnight for the camping section, so we're not as compressed and hurry-along as the other two classes you're taking this session. But you should still pay attention if you are going to be travelers, as this may be some of the most important information you learn in these two weeks."

The autumn wind was blowing hard that afternoon, so the students kept any loose papers in their folders and did their best to keep any from flying away. Sometimes other Trainers came by and looked, but as they were in class, they weren't allowed to have battles with those outside the class. But no matter how much the wind blew, George didn't have any trouble making himself heard over it.

"Good to see some of you having your Pokémon out," he said. Pointing to his Emolga, he went on, "When traveling in unfamiliar areas, or familiar ones where wild Pokémon are, it is best to have one of your Pokémon out along with you, maybe two. The Pokémon love this for one, and for another, they'll be able to spot threats and trouble before you can. Also, I've found that if you're walking in a grassy area with a well-trained Pokémon, the wild Pokémon that come to you tend to be stronger and tougher. I think this is because the wild ones can see what you're capable of and figure that you're a good challenge."

The cram session was going to be tough, but it would be worth the time and effort.

afternoon, 11/13

On the west side of Striaton, there was a formal public garden. A tiered fountain stood in the center, surrounded by many man-made streams that outline pathways. Short flowering hedges were kept in straight lines, while a number of taller bushes were shaped to resemble Pidoves. At the north end of this garden, a trellis tunnel covered in pink climbing roses led to Route 3.

In front of that tunnel, there was an old man who blocked the way. "I'm sorry, but the next route is
long and dangerous to someone who doesn't have any Gym Badges. Why don't you go to the
Dreamyard? That's a good place for beginners."

"I'll be fine," N said. Of all the obstacles he had imagined, he had not thought that a stubborn old
man would be one of them. "I plan on training my Pokémon friend on Route 3, so the tougher
fights are exactly what I'm looking for."

"No, it's too tough," the old man said. "Go back east."

"It's okay!" another voice said behind N. He glanced back at the black-haired girl. "We're going
together, so there's no need to worry."

Them. At least Val and Carol weren't wearing that hideous perfume today, N thought. And if going
with them was what it would take to get on Route 3, he'd have to live with it. "Yes, they're with
me."

"I suppose that's okay," the old man said, moving aside. "But be careful, or you might lose an ear
to a wild Pokémon."

"Thanks, old man!" Val said cheerily as she followed N though the rose tunnel. "Lose an ear? How
weird."

"If he treated Pokémon well, then they wouldn't hurt him," N said. "Did you pass on the questions I
had about the Accumula Pokecenter?"

"What? Oh right, that. Yeah, we did. Zigzolin said that he would look into it. The news program
said that it was a small group of vandals that were supporting Plasma."

"Didn't say they were our people," Carol said calmly. "Not that I'd trust them."

The path north stopped a short ways past the route's start and headed directly west. Although the
old man had said it was dangerous, there wasn't any grass here. But there was a pair of buildings
nearby, painted in bright colors with white fences around their lands. A number of small children
and small Pokémon played together behind the fences. N walked with the two girls along the route.
"But the ignorant masses do trust the news media and will believe what they're told. They haven't
been told the truth yet. So we must make sure that they won't see us as bad people when we're
heading for the ideals that are the best for everyone."

"Yes, of course," Val agreed, then recited from one of the major books, "We seek to bring out the
best of both Pokémon and humans, to create peace and perfect harmony between them and to bring
to an end the corruptive and abusive relationship they currently hold."

The sound of laughter and cheering came from the other side of the fence. The two with him would
just hear barking, but N clearly heard, "I got the ball! I got the ball! Play with me some more!"

"I want the ball!" a little boy called, then cheered as the ball was thrown.

"The illusions society creates are very strong," Carol said. "They will fool themselves into thinking
that the wrong things are right."

"We've seen past the illusions," N said. It was still recitation, but it was good for blocking out the
distracting illusions coming from the playground. Then he broke it to say, "Don't worry; I have
faith in the hidden truth and in the gods. We'll set things right."
On one of the nights the Travels and Camping class spent on an overnight study, Hilbert showed up again. Hilda, Bianca, and Cheren were working on getting a fire started. "You know, it'd be faster if you use matches, or your Pokémon," he said.

Hilda glanced up at him; he smiled with a bit of that strange sparkle to him. "Can't," she said. "Our teacher says that we can't have dinner tonight unless we can cook it over a fire we made without Pokémon assistance." They even had to keep a bucket of river water nearby rather than asking Bianca's Oshawott to put out any escaping flames.

"And this will work," Cheren said, watching the sparks created. Some of them caught onto the brown leaves, causing a few flames and a thin curl of smoke. "There we go!"

"Oh, I hope it sticks," Bianca said. "What are you doing here, Hilbert?"

Cheren looked up in interest on realizing who the other boy was. Hilbert crossed his arms over his chest. "I was just over at the Gym," he said. "It changed hands while I was gone, so I had to challenge it again to keep my Unova badges. And I hear that the Opulucid Gym has a new Leader too, although since the old one is there, that badge is still valid. I might try to challenge the new one. So I thought you two were starting your journey. Why're you in class?"

At that point, Fedora came up and made a chuckling sound while tipping his hat up. Hilbert briefly frowned at him, but was back to smiles at the three other humans.

"It counts towards our high school credits," Hilda answered. "Plus we've done some camping before, but always near home and with other people."

"It's worth the delay," Cheren added.

"And we can't battle while in class, so don't try that tricky honor business on us," Hilda said teasingly.

"Well that's a pity," he said, adjusting his Patch Hat. "I didn't need a class to learn how to camp. I learned it all on my own, the hard way. Just wait until that night when an unexpected rainstorm comes in and collapses your tent on top of you. There's no other awakening like that," he grinned.

"Certainly not, but one you want to avoid," George said, coming over. "Say, are you that famous world traveler, Hilbert?"

"That's my name," he said proudly. "I've been in more places all around the world than most people twice my age."

Their teacher looked excited. "Yes, I've heard of you through the Hiker's Guild! It's an honor to have you here. Do you want to talk with the Travels and Camping class here?"

He shrugged. "Sure, why not? If you'd love to hear me, then I'd love to talk."

"Thank you, that's great!" George then looked down at the progress of the campfire. "Good work on getting it started; keep at it. Say Hilbert, did you ever get to climb Mt Coronet?"

"Of course, it was wonderful," the teen said, walking off with the teacher.

"Why do I feel like I both admire him and am annoyed by him?" Cheren asked.
"I don't know," Bianca said. "I kind of feel the same way. He was great before we met him, and then he beat both me and Hilda with a Gigalith."

She nodded. "Yeah, all because of some Trainer's honor about never declining a fight. That's why I told him that we can't fight in class. But looking at him now," she glanced over to where he was charming the teacher, a couple of their classmates, and some of his usual fan girl followers, "I think that he's got a secret and I think I know what it is."

"Oh, what's that?" Bianca asked, interested to know what she'd come up with now.

Hilda brought a finger up to her lips to indicate the secrecy, then held her hand up to say, "He's a Twilight vampire."

"A vampire?" Cheren asked. "But it's still daylight out."

"You never did read Twilight, did you?" Bianca said. "Those vampires can be out in the day."

"And they sparkle," Hilda said. "Although it's their skin that does it, while he makes the air sparkle. But it could be a diversion to throw people off. And most vampires are very charming, even when you know they're dangerous."

Although he'd been quiet for most of the class, Kyurem spoke up. "He smells different. Would you like me to bite him and find out?"

"Not unless he bites first," Hilda said.

"But then it would be too late," Bianca said. Realizing what she said, she put a hand to her chin. "I mean, it's not nice to bite people, however you put it."

"I don't know if I'd want to eat him," Kyurem went on. "He doesn't smell appetizing. But if he causes trouble, I'll do it."

"When has eating people ever solved anything?" Cheren asked, looking sickened.

"It solved a lot of my problems," the dragon boy answered. "Mostly hunger, but other problems too."

Hilda grinned. "Can't argue that, huh?"

afternoon, 11/16

The autumn winds nipped at his exposed skin, but he barely noticed. N was at battle. Over the past few days, he'd gotten acclimated to the fighting. He still didn't like it, but he wasn't losing his focus if he lost. "Pidove, use Peck," he said.

His second friend, who had insisted on not being nicknamed, flapped his gray wings, then dove down toward the Pansage they were fighting to peck at the green monkey. The little boy held down his yellow hat, but was grinning like a maniac. "Grassy, use Hyper Beam!"

"Do what now?" the Pansage asked, then yelped as he tried to avoid Pidove's attack

"Your Pokémon doesn't know Hyper Beam," N said. "I don't know if he can know it. Ask him to use a move he can use."

"I don't know what he knows," the boy admitted. "I just like saying it. If he can't, then... I'm Hyper
"Beam!" The preschooler then yelled and rushed off down the route. A daycare worker shouted at him and started to chase him down.

"Not again," the Pansage groaned. "Look, sorry, can I take a rain check? I gotta run."

"Go ahead," N said.

"Thanks, man." Grassy then rushed off after the kid, to help the daycare worker.

"I should have known better than to assume that a child like that was mature and intelligent enough to battle properly," he said, deciding to head down the route instead of hanging around the daycares.

Pidove flew alongside him; Pricilla had asked to go off on her own for a little while, and N let her after she promised not to steal stuff from the daycares. The gray bird didn't seem that happy at the moment. "We weren't the ones who abandoned the battle, so it wasn't our loss," he said. "It was still an idiotic battle."

"I'm sorry about that."

The bird flew ahead. "I'm not with you to make friends, I told you that," he said. "I like that you're up front about everything; means I don't have to waste time and get my heart broken again by some idiot human."

Watching him fly off to the treetops, N felt concerned. He would rather speak with Pidove and find out what was bothering him. Obviously something bad had happened to him in the past, but he didn't want to talk about it. Not talking about that kind of thing rarely worked to solve the problem. But he also knew from experience that if a Pokémon wasn't ready to talk about something with him, they wouldn't. The best he could do now was to be kind and offer immediate help.

But, he wouldn't be keeping the Pokémon for long. N considered sending Pidove to Concordia. While she couldn't understand them like he could, she did remarkably well. Pricilla seemed adjusted to her situation, although she'd probably avoid the routes once he let her go. He would miss these friends, but it was important to the cause that he go with the plan.

As he continued west, he came across an unusual sight. He'd met with groups along the route over the past week, but it had always been two or three at a time. This was a group of nearly twenty people, along with Val and Carol. A Plasma gathering? No, the other teenagers there didn't seem like they would be in the team. The center of attention seemed to be a brown-haired boy who was talking about Pokémon battles.

"What's going on?" N asked Carol quietly.

"Shh," she said dismissively, still listening.

"Nah, it can take a month or so to properly train a Pokémon," the boy said, with a smug air that was somehow interesting. "And that's without considering evolution or other members of your team. Then you can have them in storage for a while if you don't need it for a set of battles. But when you do need a Pokémon that you've had in storage, you should take it out at least a week before, so that you can get used to it again and make sure it's in good shape. It does no harm, really."

What he was saying was absolute nonsense. N knew that. The Storage boxes were something that he wanted to have abolished when he had the right authority. Then why was he intrigued by this boy rather than angered at him? He wasn't even a person of great looks, at least classically, but something about his voice made him compelling. Or maybe something else. N did not like it, and
yet he was thinking about staying around like the rest to listen.

Winning his willpower for the moment, he stepped away from the group without being noticed. There was a Gigalith nearby which did truly interest N. He hadn't seen a Pokémon like him before. "Who is that boy?" he asked, careful not to draw attention from the crowd.

"Oh, that's my master Hilbert speaking," the blue Pokémon said. "Unless you mean one of the other guys."

"No, I mean him, Hilbert," N said. "Does he always get this kind of audience?"

"Yeah always." The Gigalith looked at Hilbert, seeming pleased. "But how could he not? I mean, look at him! At first he doesn't seem like anything special, but the more time you spend around him and the more you listen, the more fascinating he becomes. He sparkles when he smiles even, really. He's wonderful and I'm glad that I'm his Pokémon. I just wish he'd use me to fight more. I can be really impressive when I win fights. I haven't lost in years. Hilbert hasn't lost ever. I hope I can stay with him forever."

Strange, he didn't ask about N understanding Pokémon. That usually caused questions. "Why? He was just saying that he put Pokémon he wasn't using into storage. That's terrible."

"I don't care. I'll be patient if he does that. So long as I get to stay in his company, it's fine." The Gigalith shifted its feet then. "Although, some of the guys in storage say they don't like Hilbert. They're convincing, but once I came back out, I saw how wonderful he was again. So I'm doing all I can to impress him so that he doesn't put me back. But I will be stoic if he does."

"I don't think it's fine," N said, but looked back at Hilbert. He could understand how Ghetsis could be intriguing, because he was a great man who knew how to talk to people. As for Hilbert, one part of N's mind said that he was probably another terrible Trainer, while another part was inexplicably drawn to stay with this crowd and follow Hilbert in whatever he was doing.

One of the girls managed to get to the center of the group; she was unique in having bright pink hair with dozens of small blue ribbons attached to her ponytails. "Hilbert, will you marry me?" she asked, eager and excited.

He held his hands up. "Now, now, aren't you being too forward? I know I'm amazing to all of you, but I'm not ready to settle down to that kind of commitment yet. Besides, I don't know much about you."

"But I know everything about you," she insisted. "I've been following you ever since Hoenn; don't you remember me? I know all your favorite snack foods, and all of the Pokémon that you've ever used, and all about your greatest battles, and what kind of shampoo you use, and everything. I know exactly what you need in a wife and I'll be the best one ever."

Hilbert's confident look dropped for a bit as he looked disturbed. "Oh well… that has been a long time, hasn't it?" Then he seemed to get back into his groove. "As I said, I'm not ready yet. And I don't know who I'll marry, or even date at this point. I was thinking about it."

A number of the girls piped up, saying that they'd love to go on a date with him… and they tried not to fight with each other. The ribbon girl out-shouted them all by saying, "I'LL GO OUT WITH YOU! When do you want to meet?"

"Give me some time," he said. "And I'm on a search for the eternal truth, so it's only a thought. I don't have much time."
"The eternal truth?" N asked aloud, getting their attention.

"Well yes, of course," Hilbert said, coming over to him.

"Yay, he's coming closer!" the Gigalith said, making his crystals glimmer.

Hilbert was smiling, although he had a predatory look in his eyes, pouncing on an opportunity. "I might be speaking a little grandiose, but yeah, I'm always looking for truth. It's never good enough to hear about something from someone else. I have to go see it for myself, or speak to someone who was involved." He turned back to the group. "That's why I was in Hoenn, actually; I wanted to speak to someone who was really involved in that Magma and Aqua mess way back when. Anyhow, it's been wonderful talking with you all, but I've got to get back to my training. I'm sure I'll see you around, but I need to be alone with my Pokémon now." Then he quickly added in a low voice, "Thanks man; the loonies are always hardest to shake," then walked off, snapping his fingers.

Cheering again, the Gigalith followed along. The group seemed disappointed, but went off on their own activities. N stayed there for a moment longer. "Does he mean Reshiram?" he asked quietly, thinking aloud. "There are always two; perhaps he's the other." N clenched his fist. "Then I need to work hard to oppose someone like him."
morning, 11/17

At the end of their first week of the cram session, the three friends came to the Pokecenter early in the morning. There weren't many people in there, so they were able to see the nurse quickly. "We were supposed to have received our League IDs by now," Cheren said to her. "Have they come through yet?"

"I think so," she said. "I know we received some late last night; wait a moment, please." She went over to a cabinet, unlocked it, then brought out some boxes to search. "The league has been occupied with problems related to what's been going on with Alder, so it's been taking longer for some things to get through. Ah, here we go." She put some of the boxes on a counter, then brought one over. "I have an ID for Cheren… and Bianca… hmm…” Her friends took their new IDs while Hilda leaned on the counter. But the nurse shook her head. "Sorry, looks like Hilda doesn't have one here. Let me check the network."

"We turned our forms in at the same time," Bianca said.

"Normally you would have gotten them back in three or four days," the nurse said, looking at the screen. "This says that your application is still under review. It doesn't have the usual error flags, so you must have had the form completed right. But it doesn't say why it hasn't been accepted yet."

"Maybe they didn't have time," Hilda said. "Aw phooey."

"I'll make a note here to contact you when it does come in," the nurse said. "May I check your Xtransceiver number?"

After giving that, the three of them went over to the Pokemart counter. "That's too bad," Bianca said to Hilda. "I wonder what's the problem."

She shrugged. "Eh, I'll wait and see what happens. Maybe I'll write them a letter if it takes too much longer."

The Pokemart counter being in a Pokecenter was a marketing experiment that had started up in Unova a few years back; it had become so successful that independent Pokemarts were almost nonexistent in the region. Bins that sat on shelves under the counter and on the walls held commonly sold goods, while the backroom held a large DSD which could store or transfer goods that the marts didn't hold in stock. That way, one could get nearly anything Pokémon related from a mart.

Behind the counter, there was a young woman in a striped blue shop apron. "Good morning, welcome to the Pokemart," she said cheerily, setting down a cup from a nearby coffee shop. "How may I help you?"

"We just got our League ID cards and we're here to pick up the starting packages," Cheren said, putting his card on the counter. After a moment, Bianca did too. "Just the two of us for now."

"That's great," the shop girl said, starting to bring up something on the central screen. "All right, so you'll have a debit account with the League system now, which you can use with your cards. It starts out with 1000 Poke in it, which you can add to by winning battles or transferring from another account. Also, if you lose a battle, some money will come out of your account to help pay the victor, but it's never allowed to fall under 100 Poke. As for the starter packages themselves,
you will receive one Premier Ball, which is a specialty commemorative model, as well as four Pokeballs, a random accessory, three random berries, and your choice of a Badge Box."

She then caused the central monitor to swivel up and around so that they could see and use it. It was set to display various Badge Boxes. Around the edges, there were tabs for various options, like different materials, patterns, or colors.

"Your free Badge Box may total up to 2500 Poke," the clerk said, indicating an estimated value line, "and if the cost goes over that, you'll need to pay for the rest."

"Okay," Bianca said. The estimated costs of some seemed decently below that allowance. "Should we still go to the Gym today?"

"That's fine with me," Hilda said. Not only had they planned on this today, but it might be better to observe the battles first.

evening, 11/17

The Striaton Gym doubled as a restaurant during its open hours. In the center, there was a large open square that served as a battle area; shield generators around the edge ensured that guests did not get hit by Pokémon attacks. All around the edge were square wooden tables set up nicely with white tablecloths, various centerpieces, elegant silverware, and pretty plates and cups. It was classy, but not too expensive and formal.

It was already mostly full when they arrived, noisy with chatter and laughter. A waiter dressed in black greeted them at the door. "Good evening, and welcome to Striaton Gym and Restaurant. How many are in your party?"

"Four, please," Bianca said, including Kyurem who was gazing over the crowd like an assassin could be lurking there.

The waiter nodded. "Yes, we have a table you could take. Are any of you planning on challenging the Leaders? We only have two slots left open for this time slot."

"That's good," Cheren said, bringing out his League ID card. "There's only two of us eligible right now."

Bianca shuffled through her purse looking for hers. "Um, yeah. I'll go ahead and try."

"Very good," the waiter said, taking the two IDs. "I'll register you and bring the cards back to the table. Follow me." He also grabbed four menus and led them to a place near the northeast corner.

After a little while of checking the menus, Bianca lowered hers. "Oh my, I'm not sure I'll be able to eat much. I mean, it's my first Gym battle; I'm so nervous."

Cheren shrugged. "Well it is our first Gym," he said, dismissive rather than concerned. "We've probably faced more challenging battles in class here."

"I don't know," Bianca said, biting her lip. "I mean, the Gym Leaders have to be really good Trainers to get the position. I know this Gym is new compared to the others, but still…"

"Hello," a young woman said, stopping by their table. She wore a cute orange dress with a white apron. "I'm Tia, and I'll be your waitress this evening. Here's your ID cards back," she passed them over. "Bianca, you're in the first slot, and Cheren, you're in the second. I'll come over and give you
a heads up five minutes beforehand, alright?"

"S-sure," Bianca said. "I didn't expect to be going first."

"It runs by challenge order," Tia explained. "We have three of you for your first badge, someone for a second, and someone else for a sixth. Have you decided on what you'll be ordering tonight?"

"Do your steaks come rare enough to be warm and bloody all the way through?" Kyurem asked, causing the others to feel squeamish.

"Err, no sir," Tia said, her face paling a bit as she tried to smile through nervousness. "We can't do that due to food safety guidelines."

"Worthless," he grumbled, looking back at the menu.

"They have sushi," Hilda pointed out, directing him to that part of the menu.

"What soups do you have today?" Bianca asked.

"Today, it's tomato basil, chicken and rice, and French onion." She paused, then added, "And the specialty tea we have today is a lovely hibiscus chamomile blend, along with our usual favorites like the classic black. Our Leaders are excellent tea masters, and on Sundays, we have tea ceremonies that you can reserve a seat for. But there's no battling during that time."

"That still sounds interesting," Bianca said.

After making their orders, the three friends talked for a while. Hilda and Cheren were mostly trying to encourage Bianca. "I hope no one laughs at me," she said.

"If they do, we'll beat 'em up," Hilda offered.

"I don't think anyone would be so rude," Cheren said. "And if they were, I'm sure the staff would make them leave."

Tia then came up to their table, carrying two trays and followed by a man who didn't seem to be part of the Gym staff. "And here's your food," the waitress said, passing out plates. "Also, this is Master Grimsley of the Elite 4; he's requested to join your table for this evening."

"Grimsley?" Bianca asked, sounding awestruck.

"Certainly," the man said. He was dressed in fine clothing, from the dark violet jacket to the yellow silk scarf to the diamond decorated wristwatch. "I hope I'm not interrupting anything special, but I'll cover your dinner tabs in exchange."

Cheren nodded, seeming more polite than usual due to having someone so important drop in on them. "Thank you, that's quite generous of you."

"It's no trouble," Grimsley said, then quickly gave Tia his order before pulling over another chair to sit at their table. "I came to Striaton looking for you, Miss Hilda," he said, looking to her. "I was going to wait at the Pokecenter and send a messenger to you, but I had a hunch you might be here instead."

"Is this about my ID application?" she asked. That was the only reason she could think of why a member of the Elite 4 would be looking for her.

He nodded, then pulled a card out of his pocket. "Yes, and I have your card right here. The
application was filled out satisfactorily, but still, it was quite unusual. I don't believe I've ever heard of a Trainer audacious enough to claim a legendary Pokémon as her starter."

"Hang around her long enough and you'll believe it," Cheren said jokingly.

Hilda laughed. "Well it's true," she said, then pointed her fork at the blue haired 'boy'. "This is Kyurem, and these two are my friends Bianca and Cheren.

Grimsley nodded to them. "It's a pleasure to meet young Trainers at the start of their careers." Then he looked at Kyurem. "And you, you're the Pokémon?"

"This form is more convenient for being indoors," Kyurem explained. "If it's proof you're after, I could make it snow, but I doubt that would be appreciated in this place. Here." He picked up his glass of water; as he did so, ice crystals grew rapidly up the empty sides, then outward to form precarious frost.

Touching the frost lightly, Grimsley looked thoughtful. "I see. Why are you here? History shows that the legendary Pokémon tend to stay hidden from the rest of the world unless there is trouble lurking around. That goes especially for you and your siblings; you three never show up except during a time of change."

"I have my reasons," Kyurem said. "And don't try to bug me about it anymore. She won't let me eat people and I've been surrounded by lots of tasty beings. It puts me in a bad mood."

"Err, yeah, and that is all he'll say," Hilda added. "Except that it's to protect me for one reason or another."

Grimsley looked a little uneasy when the dragon had been talking about eating people, but perhaps knowing that Hilda wasn't letting him eat people made things seem safe. "Hmm. If that's so, then I'll just warn the others to keep alert. In that case, Hilda, there's nothing in the rules or anywhere that would keep you out of the Pokémon League for owning a legendary Pokémon and using it in battle. We primarily wanted to ascertain the truth of this situation. Here you are." He passed over the card in his hand. "And I apologize on behalf of the League for any troubles that this delay has caused."

"Nothing major," Hilda replied, taking the card from him. "It might be late, but hey, we got to meet you early. That's cool."

A few minutes later, the waitress came back with Grimsley's food. She also tapped Bianca on the shoulder. "This is your warning, miss; we'll be starting the battles shortly. You'll be going directly after her, sir."

"Oh right, thanks," Bianca said. Cheren nodded to acknowledge his placement. "I hope it goes well."

"You've got a good pair of Pokémon," Hilda said. "And we'll be cheering for you."

Grimsley looked over the battle square in the center. "I've wanted to come out and see this Gym in action myself," he said. "It's a novel concept they brought forward, quite clever."

Then the lights in the restaurant dimmed while the lights over the center square brightened, causing a quieting of the conversations going on at the tables. A small hum started up in the center as the shield generators were activated, but not fully turned on. Then three young men came into the battle square. Dressed much like the male waiter who had greeted them, they looked remarkably alike save for the ways their hair was colored and styled. The blue-haired one held onto
a computer tablet, while the green-haired one carried in a black case which he set off to the side of their entrance.

Which left the red-haired one to come to the center of the square. "Welcome guests, to the Striaton Gym!" he said, followed by some applause. "I am Chili, and with me are my brothers Cress," he indicated the blue-haired one, who nodded, "and Cilan," he indicated the green-haired one, who gave a small bow. "We are the owners of this fine restaurant as well as the Leaders of this Gym. We hope that you've enjoyed your evening with us so far."

"Why did they make it a restaurant anyhow?" Bianca whispered.

"It helps fund the upkeep of the Gym," Grimsley answered quietly. "Lots of expenses involved, including care of the Pokémon, all the safety features, and the required equipment. And they've done remarkably well; enough that they've started to support some of the other Gyms which don't have a steady source of income."

"And now it is time for what you've all been waiting for," Chili said, smiling widely. "The time for our challengers to come forth and see if they have what it takes to earn the Trio Badge!" More enthusiastic clapping came to that announcement. "We have a full roster of five contenders tonight, and we're expecting some exciting action. One thing I should explain before we get started is that when your name is called, please come up the challengers stairs on the opposite side. Otherwise, you'll get a shocking encounter with the battle square shield." Amid the few laughs, he turned to his brothers. "Now who is up first for tonight?"

Cress glanced at the tablet, then announced, "Miss Bianca Waverly from Nuvema Town."

Bianca got up from her seat and gave a nervous wave to her friends as she went over to the three shallow steps that led up into the battle square. Hilda waited for some of the applause to die down to shout out, "Go for it, girl!"

Once she was inside, there was a glimmer as the protective shields sealed shut. Cress and Chili stepped back, although the latter said, "And your opponent in this Gym battle will be Cilan."

The green-haired member of the triplets stepped forward and shook hands with her. "Yes, good evening," he said politely, shaking her hand. "So, erm, do you have anything to say before our battle?"

"Uh, I dunno," she said, smiling nervously. "My Pokémon and I are going to do our best, I suppose."

"That's great," the Leader said (although Hilda noticed that he seemed to be almost as nervous about being in front of an audience as Bianca was about her first Gym Battle). "In that case, best of luck to you. Well then, let's get to it."

In the back of the battle square, Chili rolled his eyes, then called out, "Each opponent needs to declare how many Pokémon he or she has."

"Two," Cilan said, seeming a bit embarrassed that he'd forgotten that part.

"Two," Bianca echoed, finding the spot where she was supposed to stand.

"Then get ready!" Chili called out as Bianca pulled a Pokeball out of her bag; Cilan took one out of his apron pocket. The redhead held a hand up. "Set… and battle!"

Both Cilan and Bianca called out their first Pokémon, with both sides choosing a Lillipup. Cilan's
pup pricked his ears up and yapped, wagging his tail, while Bianca's waved her forepaw. "Seems like a friendly match already," Cress commented in amusement.

"Focus yourself," Cilan called to his Pokémon.

"Um, tackle him Lassie," Bianca said, sounding hopeful.

Cilan's Lillipup hopped in place, still yapping. And yet, a brown glow began to build around him, indicating that his actions were in no way random. Lassie scampered over and barreled into the other Lillipup, only knocking him back a bit.

"Not yet," Cilan said, "once more, then attack."

Lassie hopped back, then tackled once more. Still, the other Lillipup stayed on his paws, waiting until that glow was a stage stronger. Then he launched himself at Lassie, causing her to yip in surprise before she was knocked to the ground, defeated. Looking startled, Bianca recalled her Lillipup, then swapped for the other Pokéball she had. "O-okay, go Suzy!" She released her Oshawott. The Pokémon tried to take a brave stance, but she still seemed nervous. "Use Water Gun when he's in range."

In the meantime, Cilan called his Lillipup back to his side to use a spray potion on him. As he was next to his Trainer, any trained Pokémon wouldn't attack until he was safely away from the human. "Good boy; attack again."

Since the Lillipup wouldn't attack when near his Trainer either, he rushed away from Cilan, heading for Suzy. The Oshawott produced a water bullet which hit the Lillipup directly, but didn't stop him. She fell to his tackle attack as well, leaving Bianca without any useable Pokémon. "And the winner is Cilan," Chili called out, stepping forward.

"It was a good try," Cilan said, trying to sound helpful. "Come back any time to re-challenge me." He then touched something on his collar. It must have been a microphone as he said something to Bianca that didn't get broadcast to the speakers.

Stepping out of the challenger's microphone range, Bianca said something and nodded, passing her two Pokéballs off to Cilan. A couple of minutes later, she was back to their table. "It was nice that they offered to heal my Pokémon," she said, sounding disappointed. "But I didn't even get past his first Pokémon."

"A lot of people fail this Gym on their first try," Grimsley said. "Other Gyms too. That's still no reason to give up."

"I'll try again," she said. "Maybe I ought to finish the battle class first."

"You'll get the badge," Hilda said in encouragement. "After all, if he started with a Lillipup too, it's got to be a great Pokémon."

"I suppose so."

After the three leaders had made some quiet exchanges, Chili came back towards the center. "And now, our next challenger?"

Cilan had the tablet now, and called out, "Mr. Cheren Flint from Nuvema Town."

"Good luck," Bianca said under the applause as Cheren got up from his seat. He smiled back before he went to the battle square.
Again, Hilda waited until things quieted before calling out her encouragement. "Knock 'em out, bro!"

Chili smiled more at that, then gestured to one of his brothers. "And your opponent for this Gym will be Cress."

"Oh, so they take turns," Bianca said quietly as the blue haired brother stepped forward to shake hands with his challenger.

"Sort of," Grimsley said, but didn't explain further.

"It seems that we have some friends who started from the same town tonight," Cress said. "Do you have anything to say before the battle?"

"No, I'm ready to take you on," Cheren said, confident.

Cress nodded. "Well said. Now," he stepped back to his position, "declare your Pokémon. I have two."

"I have two," Cheren said, moving to the challenger's spot.

"Then get ready," Chili called out from the back. "Set… and battle!"

Cress released his first Pokémon, which turned out to also be a Lillipup. On the other side, Cheren called out his Tepig. Smoky let out puffs of white smoke from his nostrils to show off, while the Lillipup barked sharply to make her prowess known. The Leader quickly called out, "Power up."

"Smoky, Ember then tackle," Cheren said.

With a snort, the Tepig spat out a small fireball while the Lillipup followed the same strategy as the other one. But instead of the power move done twice, Cress had the Lillipup make a tackle of her own. The two Pokémon ran right for each other, but the Lillipup move aside at the last moment to tackle the Tepig in the side. Smoky managed to scramble back from the hit and made his own tackle, knocking the Lillipup back a foot and knocking her out.

Cress then released his second Pokémon, a short monkey with blue fur and a funny tuft on top of his head. "Panpour, Water Gun," the Leader said.

Cheren looked like he was thinking quickly to figure out what to do. But not quick enough; the Panpour shot a water ball similar to what the Oshawott did earlier, causing Smoky to collapse. Hilda figured that he was probably tense and focused with that KO. Cheren then brought out his second Pokeball, releasing his Purrloin. "Shadeclaw, scratch it."

In comparison, the Gym Leader took hardly any time to think on strategy. "Again."

The Purrloin swished his tail, then ran up to his opponent in a zigzag manner. After rubbing his chin, the Panpour shot a Water Gun at Purrloin's face when he was less than a foot away. The feline Pokémon yelped in surprise, but was knocked out when he hit the floor. Chili again called out, "And the winner is Cress."

Cress nodded to Cheren. "You've got a good start on training, but this may have been a bit too early. Come again to challenge me when you practice some more." He then made the same offer to revive and heal his Pokémon before returning to his seat.

"Wow, this really is tough," Bianca said, still looking at Cheren.
"Those guys are awesome," Hilda said. "They don't look the part of tough Trainers, but dang, they have a winning formula all right."

Grimsley nodded. "Oh trust me, some of the biggest surprises in Pokémon matches come from people who look unassuming and teams that don't seem special on the surface. One of my toughest matches came from a guy who had no traditional advantages to his team, like superior typing or the like. It got down to the wire for both of us."

"I plan on being memorable for having flair," Hilda said, grinning.

"I'd just be happy with a couple of badges, to help with traded Pokémon if I get some," Bianca replied.

At that point, Cheren came back to their table. "That was disappointing," he said as he sat down. "It's much different being put under the spotlight like that, with an audience and knowing that all battles are recorded."

"They are?" Bianca asked, sounding self-conscious.

"Yeah, but you have to give permission before they can be viewed by the general public," he said.

"Well our challengers haven't had much luck tonight," Chili said from the battle square. "Who's next on the roster?"

Cilan checked the tablet and announced, "N Harmonia of the Sarasota Forest."

Him? Hilda sat up. "I know him! I battled him a week back."

"Really?" Bianca looked back over to the battle square to see the green-haired boy walking up the steps. "Hey, he's cute."

"He started on the same day we did," she said. "So it might not turn out so well for him." Still she may as well show some support, even if she didn't know N as well as her friends. So she gave him a loud whistle.

N looked surprised to hear that, especially when Chili said, "Well it seems our dedicated cheering section approves."

"Yeah!" Hilda shouted, causing some laughter around the room.

"And your opponent will be, myself," Chili said. He offered to shake hands, but N didn't take him up on it. "Well then, anything you wish to say first?"

"I don't like how you're making a show of this," N said. He was talking noticeably slower than last time; maybe he was making himself do so. "It's quite inconsiderate, desensitizing violence to the people."

In the back of the square, Cilan and Cress glanced at each other, as if unnerved by having a critical Trainer come in. Chili didn't let it get to him, at least on the surface. "Well a good Trainer and Pokémon will do well under pressure," he replied. "If you're going to prove your ability, then you may as well do so in the public eye. So, are you ready? Declare your Pokémon. I have two."

N took a deep breath, then said, "I have two."

Cress spoke up since Chili was the one battling. "Then get ready… set, and battle!"
"I wonder what his parents were thinking when they named him N," Cheren said as Chili sent out a Lillipup and N his Purrloin. "It seems like something that would be surefire tease-bait."

"Maybe they were trying to balance out his lengthy surname," Hilda said.

Like his brothers, Chili had his Lillipup use that power up move. N had ordered his Purrloin to use Sand Attack (something which made Cheren mouth something, then check his Pokedex about his own Purrloin). Once the Pokémon actually got into attacking, the Lillipup was quite strong, but also completely missing the Purrloin. She leapt around her opponent while attacking with her claws, seeming to have a grand time of it. It took a long time, especially since Chili healed the Lillipup once. After several minutes, the Purrloin came out the victor of that match.

Chili recalled his fallen Pokémon, then called out a red monkey Pokémon with a curly tuft. "Pansear, power up."

N took advantage of the KO to switch out his Purrloin for a Pidove. "Pidove, Fly," he ordered.

Obediently, the gray bird hopped up off the floor and beat his small wings furiously. After a second, he shot straight up into the air with a pale blue sphere of energy surrounding him. The Pidove then vanished into the glow shortly before he would have crashed into the ceiling.

This move actually got the Gym Leader looking worried. Chili stepped back, then called out, "Move, Pansear! And get ready to attack."

Making an 'ook' sound in agreement, the Pansear began hopping about erratically around the battle square, taking care not to get too close to any of the four humans. Then the pale blue glow reappeared, bringing with it the Pidove who slammed right into the Pansear. A large gust of wind spread out from the attack, causing the competitors' clothes to flap and the protective shield to glisten as it kept the energy from escaping. Once the view cleared up, the monkey Pokémon was no longer in the square and the pigeon Pokémon was landing in the center, unharmed.

Cress stepped forward. "And the winner of this round is our challenger, N," he said, causing applause to follow. Hilda cheered for him, joined in by Bianca, but it seemed like they were the only ones doing so with enthusiasm.

"Well done," Chili said, smiling. Cilan came up quietly and passed him a small serving tray. "For your efforts, you have earned the Trio Badge!" He passed over a small item that glinted gold under the lights, but it was hard to see from the tables. "And please take this gift TM from us to you. Congratulations on your first League victory."

"It is the Pokémon's victory, not mine," N said, right before he turned and left the battle square.

"Cute, but a little serious," Bianca said.

"That was cheap," Cheren said. "With a Pidove that knows Fly, he could have won with just that one Pokémon."

"It is a winning strategy," Grimsley said. "But yes, a cheap one."

Walking back to Route 3, N kept his head down, avoiding looking at anyone passing by. He wanted some time alone. But even with the darkening sky overhead, there was always someone else walking along. At the fork in the route, he glanced south and saw three other teenagers with some Pokémon, chatting and laughing. Looking to the east, there was no one. He went east.
Down the path, he came across a waist-high ledge leading up to a grassy plot. It was easy to climb up onto the ledge, then look around in the fading light. There didn't seem to be any people around. Strangely, there didn't seem to be many Pokémon either, despite being the ideal spot for them to hang out. He wasn't sure why; the books often said that it was easy to find Pokémon, but hard to catch them. He had no trouble convincing them to come with him, but finding them was difficult.

He had the spot he wanted, so N sat down on the ledge. Looking past a line of trees, he could see a lake softly rippling under the autumn breeze. A few brown leaves drifted down around him, but the deciduous trees were nearly entirely bare. At least the natural world was still beautiful. He wasn't so sure about cities.

Although he had won his first Gym battle, N felt troubled. He was supposed to be finding evidence of the carelessness and cruelty of humans towards Pokémon. Instead, he found people who seemed to love Pokémon and Pokémon that seemed to love people. Perhaps a good percentage of them were influenced by cultural stasis, acting out the love because that is what they expected. They would see how much better things were when the situation was set right.

And yet, when he thought of that girl Hilda and her Snivy Fedora, he was still finding it hard to prove insincere. The same with others. For every bad case like the Hyper Beam kid and his Pansage, there was a good case. There was also what he had just witnessed over dinner: Gym Pokémon who were proud to act as a test to others, Trainer Pokémon who willingly gave their all for the honor of their person, and even a pair of Pokémon in the audience who had been excited to follow all the battles.

There was also the very first match of the evening, Cilan's Lillipup against that one girl's Lillipup. When N closed his eyes, he could see and hear them again in his mind. The male had gotten excited. "Sis! Good to see you again! And you got a Trainer, excellent!"

And the female had waved. "Hi bro! And yeah, I've got the sweetest Trainer you'll ever meet, and she takes me to class, and she gave me a nickname! I'm Lassie now!"

"Wow, you did awesome! But it's my duty to fight you with all my might. I'm sorry; I still love you as part of my litter."

"I know; I'll do my best. I love you too, bro."

Feeling a chill, N opened his eyes and looked up at the sky. A few stars were starting to appear. He used to love coming out late to observe the night sky. But now, his mind was on the 'pups. They had been part of the same family, the same litter. They loved each other and seemed to be proud of each other's position. Despite that, they had no qualms about battling each other. The male had even apologized again when he had knocked his sister out, but he didn't sound distraught.

Did they actually like the current system?

It still wasn't right! N was becoming convinced that there had to be an element of brainwashing somewhere. Maybe with the Pokecenters. League Trainers would bring their Pokémon there every day, possibly even multiple times a day. For the next Gym, he would try avoiding the Pokecenter and heal his team in other ways.

Which reminded him... it was time to let go. He took out the two Pokeballs he had, called out the two Pokémon, then brought a black tool out of his bag. When Pokémon were captured, they were converted to a digital form. To be released, they had to be converted back safely. While a Storage Box program could do so, he despised that technology on principle. One of the Sages had thus gotten him this instead, a Pokémon converter. "Thank you for your assistance," N said. "It's time
for me to release you back into the wild."

"Good, I've been waiting for this," the Pidove said.

Pricilla lowered her ears. "Right," she said, oddly reluctant.

N took the Pidove's Pokeball and put it into the converter. The machine asked him twice if he was certain that he wanted to let this Pokémon go. Why would it do that? Releases would be the main purpose of this tool. Once it accepted the command, a white glow appeared around the Pidove. The status screen of the Pokeball went staticy, then turned black. The Pidove appeared again, now free.

After testing his wings and getting into the air, the Pidove said, "Right, well thanks for keeping your word. Have a good trip." He then flew off across the lake, using Fly to go faster than he could previously.

"I don't know about this," Pricilla said, coming closer to him. "I like traveling with you, and I know you won't hurt me. I can keep helping you, N."

He shook his head. "Sorry, but I can't compromise my principles. Keeping you in a Pokeball will come to hurt you over time, and I don't want to do that. I also don't want to restrain your freedom, which all beings deserve. This is better for everyone."

"But I like you," she said, getting nervous as he picked up her Pokeball. "We can be friends."

"We are friends," he said.

"Well yeah, but we can be better friends if I stay with you," the Purrloin said hurriedly. "And I'm your starter Pokémon, remember? Everybody says that League starters are always special and many of them stay with their Trainers their whole lives. I wanted to be special."

Her pleas pierced through his heart. Friends were treasures, precious to everyone. And while he couldn't quite relate to wanting to be special (as he'd always been special), N remembered reading some stories where someone wanted to be someone special and either did great things or ended up in ruin, depending on how far they were taken by vice. If it would make her happier, then maybe he ought to keep her.

No. That wasn't in the plans and he had to be firm. "You are someone special," N said. "And I'll always remember you as my starter, and my friend. But I'm working for the liberation of all Pokémon. I can't be a hypocrite and keep some, no matter how much I love them." He put the Pokeball in the tool and started up the release process.

She mewed in a begging tone. "Please? I want to stay with you."

'Do you really want to let this Pokémon go?' the screen of the tool asked him.

N hesitated. Why was this tough on him and her? She should be happy to be let go. He pressed on the confirm button. "It's for the good of everyone, even the both of us."

When the glow faded, Pricilla's ears and tail were twitching like she couldn't decide if she was angry or devastated. "Wh-why?" she stammered out, but then bolted before he could answer.

Feeling like he'd done something rotten, N tried to clear his mind. It didn't work too well, as he kept thinking to what he'd heard people and Pokémon saying this past week. He put the tool back in his bag, then lay down on the ground. With the dark green of the grass waving in and out of his vision, he could see the stars clearly at this time. They were twinkling up there like they did every
night. And yet, he found himself wondering what the stars were thinking about what they had seen him do.

"I did the right thing; I shouldn't feel guilty about it." He spoke quietly, even though he knew hardly anyone else was around.

The stars watched him back.

Sighing, N put his hands under his head. "This wasn't supposed to be a difficult thing to do."

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Pricilla growled into the grasses as she slowed down. She knew that he'd said it would just be one Gym battle. And yet, somehow she'd deluded herself into thinking that maybe he would change his mind. He nearly had, she was pretty sure. But N was sticking to his word no matter what anyone else said. She should just forget about him, and go back to being just another Purrloin.

But she had been special there, for a while. He had even given her a name, which was better than what her last Trainer had done. And…

That smell…

Pricilla stopped, lowering her stance in the grass. There was that smell again, that awful Repel-like scent that accompanied those two stinky girls who tried to tag along with N. What was that? She lurked closer to the edge of the grass nearest the scent, trying to find it. It was somewhere, in the trees.

And back there, she spotted her. The one called Carol, who had the ghostly pink hair and always wore those weird black skirts. Skirts that hid the fact that she carried two large knives on her person at all times.

How many times had she seen them, staying just beyond where N would notice them? Pricilla lowered her ears, extending her claws for a moment. Any time she was allowed to roam around while practicing, she always found her or Val around. And they were always stinky, even if they had gotten better at hiding it from N.

Wait a moment… N hardly ever ran into wild Pokémon. She had done all her training with him against captive Pokémon. And those girls always smelled that way. Keeping the wild Pokémon away from N? Why?

It really wasn't her concern anymore, Pricilla thought. N had released her and she didn't owe him anything. Yet another thought said that she did like him and she still wanted to help him. Even if she couldn't be by his side anymore?

Not wanting to run into Carol and her knives, Pricilla went back another way, ending up near N. Moving silently, she managed not to get his notice. He was talking again, but to himself. "I have to figure out what's brainwashing these Pokémon," he was saying. "I hope it's not the Pokeballs; I'd have to drop out of the League if it were that, and that would set us back so far. They all think this is normal, when it's unnatural and unhealthy. I was the only one who noticed at one time, and now so many know this truth. I can't give up now. This all has to be a test of my faith. It's not wrong if I'm doing it for the right reasons."

Pricilla listened, calming down. Maybe she was meant to stay with N, if hearing his voice relaxed her like this. But also, she remembered her first Trainer talking like this at times. She did that when she was doing something that made her feel guilty or that she knew was wrong, while trying to convince herself that she was in the right.
She was his starter Pokémon, and she'd make sure he was safe. Even if he would never notice her doing so.
One place in Striaton which was widely acclaimed as a great place for young or novice Trainers was the Dreamyard. It was an overgrown wreck of an old factory. Along with patches of tall grass, there were stone walls with gaping holes and collapsed sections. Giant machines had been left to rust, their original purposes undecipherable. In one area, there was a standing stairway with a precarious walkway over the ground. Old empty steel drums were gathered around, becoming places for plants and kids to climb on.

In short, it was awesome.

Hilda was hanging out with some locals, some just kids, but some teens older than her. Since her camping class didn't have an evening session today, she was left with an open evening. She was listening to tales about the Gym. "So they choose which guy to send against you based on your starting Pokémon?" she asked.

"That's right," one young woman said. "And if you haven't gotten any Pokémon to cover that weakness, then you're out of luck. It's been catching a lot of people by surprise, since they try training only types they like, ignoring the build-up of shared weaknesses. All too many people forget about strategy, which is why they don't advance far."

"But it's hard finding a variety of types around here," one guy said. "Especially ones that would be good against any of the triplets. I've been trying to go with a neutral type match-up, but mine aren't strong enough yet."

That was something she had to consider. Hilda had been thinking about how she needed another Pokémon anyhow. In her battles class, the final exam would consist of battles against her classmates, possibly against her teacher. He said that she couldn't use Kyurem for that, even if he was around the same level as all of the other class Pokémon now. When the dragon had glowered at him, Mr. Tailor had insisted it was because he didn't want Hilda to start relying on one overly powerful Pokémon at this early stage. That had gotten Kyurem to reluctantly agree.

As the group drifted apart, she found the dragon leaning against the wall in his human form, observing all that was going on. "Hey Kyurem," she said, getting him to look at her, "it seems like this Gym picks who you face based on starters. I'm not too familiar with dragons, so which one would you have the most trouble against? Chili's got Fire types, Cress has Water types, and Cilan has Grass types."

"The Fire one," he answered promptly. "Dragons will naturally resist all three of those types, but being part Ice, I don't resist Fire as well."

She nodded. "Okay then, we have to plan for Chili… which would be bad for Fedora as well. I could get Ground, Water… I think Rock? Or was it Flying?"

"Rock. Pardon me for asking, but may I go hunting tonight?"

"Hunting?"

Kyurem frowned. "I'm a predator. Having cooked meat is passable, but being too long without it when awake is making me irritable. Especially when I'm using this form for long periods of time."
"Oh sorry. Do you want to stay in your Pokeball more often?"

"I'm protecting you and that would get in the way. Still, I am under your command. May I go?"

He made sense, but there were other reasons to consider. "The thing is, as your Trainer, I am responsible for your actions to an extent. If you go around killing people, I'm going to get into a lot of trouble."

With a look of annoyance, he nodded. "I know. Sometimes I think it would be better to return things to wilderness. In that time, nobody cared if I went out and killed someone for my meals; they only cared if I was hunting them or their close kin, if they were intelligent enough to recognize kin. All this civilization and its civil responsibilities are chains on the wild spirit." Then he closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "But I know that the chains are there for the protection of everyone, to make things fair and just. It's just not easy on a being like me."

"Well I know I don't want you killing somebody because you're irritated," she said, scratching her head. "All right, look: if you can keep from being caught, then sure, you can go somewhere and hunt. Preferably away from towns and routes where most people will be."

"As you wish," he said, pushing himself off the wall. "I will be able to locate you easily after I'm done. Just don't do anything reckless while I'm gone. Thank you." He then walked off into the trees.

Hilda smirked. "My Mom would say good luck getting me not to be reckless," she said under her breath. Then she looked around and shouted, "Fedora!"

There was a trilling sound as the green lizard rushed out of the tall grass to come to her side. He grinned as he looked up to her. Under his neck, there was a pale green elastic band that held his hat more securely on his head. Mrs. White had recommended this, as the elastic would safely stretch when he evolved.

Patting his hat, she smiled back. "Hey buddy. Kyurem's off hunting something, so we've got to find our new team member. Since we have to fight Fire, a Pidove might work. But I'd rather pick up a Water type, actually. At any rate, I know the place to start looking for both. Come on." Then she headed east to leave the Dreamyard.

At the whole other end of town, there was a public garden. It was an impressive place, nearly as big as the main part of Striaton. In the center, there was a large fountain shooting up water in a lovely spout. All around it, there were winding pathways between narrow pools of water. Spots with benches and flowerbeds were scattered around, and bushes formed beautiful hedges. Some of those bushes were even carved into Pokémon shapes, mostly Pidoves, but at least one that looked more like a Pikachu. To the north, there was a white trellis archway with flowering vines growing all over it.

She was interested in the pools of water. In the clear water, there were metallic flashes as beautiful carp swam around. Various other fishes swam in there, but the carp were most noticeable, as were the Basculin. While the carp were ordinary fish, the Basculin were Pokémon. They could be identified readily with their large shapes and red stripes. And they were said to be quite the fighters among the Water type.

Hilda knelt down and touched the water's surface. It was warm. "I wonder how deep this is," she said, mostly to herself. Then she took off her sandals and put them aside. While her mother thought she had talked her into a more reasonable wardrobe for traveling, Hilda was wearing her short shorts today. The nights were starting to cool off and it wouldn't be much longer until it was too
cold to wear this kind of thing. Now barefoot, she dropped down into the water.

As the fish scattered, her feet touched the smooth rock bed when the water came up to her mid-thigh. Pokémon would be braver than animals, and they might come to investigate a human in their waters. Now just so long as some stuffy caretaker didn't come and yell at her for wading, she would be fine.

Fedora made a questioning noise as he stayed on the shore. He didn't look too eager to join her in the water.

"I've heard that underwater Pokémon can fight above water, if they choose to do so," she told him. "I'm hoping I can lure one out to capture."

Before that happened, though, a different kind of Pokémon swam up to her. The Panpour's head emerged from the water; it treaded there while it looked at her. "Ook?" it asked.

Hilda smiled. "Well hi there. Oh, what's this?" She touched the Panpour's left arm where she saw something odd. A wide bracelet was there; it had writing on it, but being partly in the water, Hilda could only make out one word. "Juliet? You must belong to somebody."

Juliet, if that was her name, touched Hilda's arm and gave her wide puppy eyes.

"Sorry, girl," she said. "I'm looking for wild Pokémon right now. Go on back home."

"Hof." She ducked back into the water and swam off.

Not long after the monkey had left, one of the Basculin came up to her. Hilda put her hand on the water's surface, wondering how to get it at surface level. It might not be able to hear her so well right now. Thankfully, the Basculin surfaced to check out her fingers. It started to nip at her, so she drew her hand back.

"Hi there," she said. "Want to battle? I'm looking for new teammates."

It splashed the surface, but stayed there. She guessed that was an agreement, especially when it rushed and leapt out of the water at Fedora. Reacting more than anything, the Snivy made a vine appear and whipped the fish with it. That knocked the Basculin out in one blow.

"That doesn't really help," Hilda said, reaching out to pick up the wild Pokémon. Its scales were coated in some kind of film, keeping them from being rough to the touch. Seeing another Basculin swimming up, she placed the unconscious one in the water. The other Basculin managed to pull it away into a tunnel not visible from the surface.

The next Basculin brave enough to battle them came up. Hilda had Fedora tackle it instead. However, that knocked it out too, as well as the next two. But instead of discouraging the other Basculin, this seemed to attract them instead. Fedora seemed happy with this.

"We need to catch one," she reminded him. Which meant she had to find one strong enough to handle his attacks. But if it was true that some wild Pokémon were attracted to strong Trainers, these wins might just bring one out that would.

Without warning, a battle that had nothing to do with them erupted in the water a short distance from where Hilda was. The Basculin were fighting with each other? Why? Knowing that Pokémon usually didn't attack humans, Hilda waded over there.

One of the Basculin shot towards her. At least, it looked like a Basculin. It had the same body
shape, the same green scales, and the same bony fin. But it had blue stripes along its top instead of red. It came right up to her, using her presence to dissuade the others. It looked injured.

Well, this solved the problem of Fedora knocking them all out. She pulled out an empty Pokéball. "Hey, you want to come with me instead?"

The Basculin came closer, so she activated the Pokéball and dropped it into the water. The blue stripe Basculin was absorbed into the ball. When she saw a glow from the status screen, she reached down and picked it out of the water. It, a male, was hers.

Climbing out of the pool, she considered what to do. Fedora was peering into the pool, as if daring another Basculin to come out and attack him. Hilda wanted to know why this one looked different. It didn't have the same characteristics one saw in shiny specimens. Then again, it had been in the water and she wasn't sure.

Near another pool, she saw a man who was fishing in the water. That seemed a decent resource, she thought. If he was a local, then he would probably know the Basculins pretty well. Hilda walked over to him, waving. "Hey, mister! Can I ask you something?"

He jolted as if he'd just been asleep. The fisherman looked up, shifting his tan hat up to see her. "Oh, er, yes miss. What is it?"

"I got this Basculin that looks funny," she said, calling out her new Pokémon. He appeared, interestingly, in a bubble of water that floated in midair. "Is that normal? I mean, the color. I know the bubble thing is good."

The fisherman's eyes widened. He got up to look at the Pokémon closer. Figuring the Basculin could use a healing, Hilda brought out a Potion and sprayed it on him.

"This is an uncommon form of Basculin," the fisherman finally said. "Most of the ones around here are the red stripe variety, but there's also this blue stripe."

"Very creatively named," she said sarcastically.

He shrugged. "I know. It's just like the red ones around here, with a blue stripe instead of red. But then, I've been fishing for a blue stripe Basculin for three months now, as a present for my wife. She wants one for a pet around the house, since we have a little pool just big enough for one Pokémon this size. May I buy it off you for 4000 Poke?"

The offer surprised her. "Really?"

"I'll buy it for 5000, but I can't do much more," he added, mistaking her question.

"Uh, sure," she said. That was much more than the Pokéball cost, anyhow. "Just one thing; let me ask him." She touched the Basculin, getting it to turn to her. "I'm in the Pokémon League, so I'd be training you to battle. Do you want to be a battler with me, or go with him to be a house pet for his wife?"

The Pokémon looked between the two of them. "Can they understand us?" the fisherman asked.

"I think so," she said. Then the Basculin swam towards the fisherman's side, taking its bubble of water with it. "Okay, I understand," she told him. "Do you need me to nickname him?"

The fisherman shook his head. "It's not necessary; I'll be adjusting the Pokéball to mark it as a gift Pokémon. Here, I'll show you how to do that." He came over and showed her how to access that
option with the Pokeball's status screen. It would null the Original Trainer data for the Pokeball, putting it into a neutral state until it was set to gift mode, where the next person who touched it would have their DNA recorded as the OT data. After that explanation, the fisherman paid her the 5000 Poke and left with the blue stripe Basculin.

At her side, Fedora chirped at her.

"Well that was a slight waste of time," Hilda said, now that the fisherman was gone. "Then again, I think I've found a nice side source of income."

There was a splash nearby. Looking down, she saw that it was the Panpour again. "Cha?"

"What's up with you?" Hilda asked. "Are you one of the Gym's Pokémon?"

Juliet shook her head, then climbed out onto land. "Ook." She held up her left arm and touched the bracelet.

Since she seemed insistent, Hilda knelt down to read it. After wiping the water off, the text was fairly clear. 'My name is Juliet, and I belong to Laura in Nacrene.' Such nametags had been a common practice before Pokeballs were widespread; Hilda had heard about it from her grandmother. Some people still used them for decorative purposes.

"Are you lost then?" Hilda asked. "Nacrene's some distance from Striaton."

Juliet nodded. That was the advantage of a primate Pokémon; its non-verbal communication was close to humans. And for those raised by humans, it would be identical.

"I see." She got up, but held out her hand to the Panpour. "Well I'll take you to the Pokecenter, okay? We'll see if your Trainer is around there."

Looking happy, Juliet took Hilda's hand and walked along with her and Fedora back to the center.

Afternoon, 11/19

The area south of Nacrene was a bit marshy, with areas of shallow but muddy water around. N had good waterproof boots on, but he still didn't like the feel of ground that one sank in a little with every step. However, it seemed like that was a good environment for some Pokémon. That was why he had come here, but he hadn't realized how soggy the ground was. Now he was crouching on what he knew was good solid ground, observing the watery surface ahead of him.

The wind was causing ripples across the surface, but there didn't seem to be any disruptions. No areas where the water flowed around a hidden Pokémon, no bubbles of something that breathed, no splashes. Nothing. There seemed to be no Pokémon in that part of marsh. Resigning himself to not catching anything more around here, he got up and looked to where his current Pokémon were.

As the HM Fly was a potent move, he had picked up another Pidove. This one wanted a nickname, so N was calling him Peter. And earlier this morning, he had encountered a Timburr which was unfortunately missing much of its right ear. He had wanted a tough sounding nickname, so N was calling him Scar. "Peter, Scar, I don't think there's any wild Pokémon around here," he told them.

"Now that's just not right," Scar said, partly leaning on his large log. "Normally there's so many Pokémon around here, it's impossible to be alone unless you enter the forest proper. Not that it matters; you get good fighting out of it."
"They'll attack you for any reason they can find," Peter said, fluffing his gray feathers up defensively. "Even if you just fly by not meaning no harm. And the Trainers will fight each other if they so much as make eye contact."

"Cause fights are fun," the Timburr said, grinning. He had an attitude like the Zoroark N knew.

"I don't think so," the Pidove said, keeping away from Scar.

N came between the two of them. "Here now, let's not argue," he said calmly. "If you don't want to fight, Peter, I'll have you assist or observe Scar so you don't need to be involved. But to win the next Gym, you both need to be stronger, or I need to find a third Pokémon."

"You can find one of the Throh or Sawk around here," Scar said. "Or, you normally could find them. But then this Gym here will be a piece of cake. I've already been in there; I could handle it myself, but she has this hideously strong Watchog that we'll need to counter."

"They'll be in the grassy areas, correct?" If they were, that was a relief. He wouldn't have to go into the muddy area.

"Yeah, but you can find the strongest chaps over that way," he said, pointing to the southeast past the nearby marsh. "In the darker green grass."

And starting with a stronger Pokémon would mean less time fighting. For that, he could walk around the marsh. "All right, thanks. We'll go over there."

Around half of the trees in this area were still green, thick pines and cedars that would always be green. Because of that, N didn't see the next Trainer until he was only a few feet from him. "Oh you," the guy said, walking over. Peter flew into one of the trees, hoping to hide out of another battle. "I recognize the hair, but I don't remember much more about you."

"You were Hilbert, right? We only spoke for a couple of minutes. I'm N."

Hilbert gave him that questioning look that N was getting used to. It seemed everyone outside of Team Plasma thought that he had a strange name. But then he smiled, giving off that strange aura sparkle he had. "Ah. I do meet a lot of people in my travels, can't be bothered to learn all of you. Hey, if you were hoping to challenge me to a thrilling battle, I'm afraid I'll have to deny it right now. I'm trying not to attract attention to myself at the moment."

For a moment, N felt indignant that Hilbert would brush him off like this. But something about the teen convinced N that it was okay. Besides, he wasn't going to force a battle on N; knowing that he had a Gigalith, N could only imagine that it would end badly for his two friends.

"I see," N replied. "Why're you hiding?"

Hilbert flicked his brown hair back, even though his hat was holding it in place. "Well the thing is, I'm just so fabulous and interesting that sometimes it's a curse. I attract attention whenever I walk through a town, or even on a route that seems quiet. I get crowds without trying. However, I'm doing some research and I don't need the distraction. So if you don't mind," he walked back to where he had a camp set up. Hilbert had a laptop computer set up on a rock, near a log which acted as a seat.

N considered going on to the area of darker grass, but something popped into his mind. "Is this about your search for the truth?" he asked.

"Yes, exactly," he said, sitting down. "I'm normally interested in the truth of any situations I read
about, something I picked up from my uncle. But in running around trying to track down people, I've come to realize that many delays I have are due to liars, or people who don't tell me everything. I've tried to use Psychic Pokémon to help cover what my own psychic powers won't tell me, but even there I can be lied to. After considering things, I've decided to go after a Pokémon that no one could lie to."

N knew who he was talking about before he even mentioned Pokémon. "You mean Reshiram?"

Hilbert nodded. "You're a sharp one, N. Yeah, I'm looking for Reshiram. It's not easy finding a legendary Pokémon, but with faith and determination, it can be done."

"Of course," he agreed. He was leery for a moment more about talking about this outside of Plasma, but he decided to try. "I have considered trying to find Zekrom myself."

That really got his attention. "You are? Well that's great! I don't often meet someone else interested in this. Some people dismiss it as legend, and others simply think it's out of their reach. In that case, I don't mind if you stay here a while to talk." Hilbert invited him to sit down too.

"I'm gonna go practice with my log," Scar said, then walked off muttering about talkers. Peter was probably hiding in the tree still.

Knowing that his Pokémon would be fine on their own, N sat by Hilbert. "How are you doing on finding the Pokémon?"

"I've got some leads," Hilbert said, checking on how a download was progressing. "It seems that Reshiram and Zekrom are most often awakened or rested at Dragonspiral Tower. When they or Kyurem are near or in the tower, the entrance is available to those who have the soul of a hero. That's specifically what the carvings say, 'available', not open. And it seems that the way makes sure that the person is qualified. Even if you can get in, that doesn't mean that you are a hero, just that you could be one."

"No one's been able to enter for years," N said. Perhaps the world no longer had heroes, even those that were only potentials.

"Yes, so I think that the twins are no longer in that area," Hilbert said, coming up with his own conclusion. "They were last recorded as going into hibernation. Someone took them out of the Tower; finding where they were put is a massive puzzle and I think I know who, it's just where… and Kyurem, he was in hibernation, but I fought him about a week and a half ago."

"You fought Kyurem?" N asked, shocked. "But, if you've encountered Kyurem, why didn't you ask him if he get you into Dragonspiral to make sure?"

He shrugged. "I couldn't; he was owned by some cute girl and we got into an argument about my other hat." He looked briefly annoyed, but smoothed it over. "She is in the League, so she's bound to be in Icirrus at some point. It's just finding out when she'll be there. At any rate, that's not reliable. My leads right now are a pair of reports, one from a miner in Clay's employment who reports finding a black stone that caused sparks, the other from an archeologist who found a white stone that was unusually hot. What's online isn't specific. Someone's got this hushed up, but they're not doing a good job of it. I've gotten the names of the two individuals who've found those stones, and now I'm figuring out where they live."

"That does sound promising." N wondered if his researchers in Plasma had noticed this. And if he informed Ghetsis of Hilbert's work, could they use his research, or even convince him to their side? It would be difficult, as Hilbert was apparently famous as a world traveling Trainer. But if he was
interested in the truth, then he wouldn't be able to ignore their philosophy. "Could you keep me informed about your progress?"

"I suppose, but how could you help me?" Hilbert asked. "I appreciate someone on a quest like mine, but I don't do things for free. Lots of people would pay me whatever I asked for my assistance."

That puzzled N. He knew shopkeepers asked for fees, because that was what was expected from the business of selling things. Lawyers and architects asked for fees too, because what they did required training, so not everyone could do what they could. But researching on the computer? He wasn't sure if there was anything special about Hilbert that made that fair. Yet he was special somehow.

Then a sound distracted him from deciding what to do. It was the voice of a small Pokémon, probably a Water type, crying out weakly. "Ugh... Anyone...? Help?"

Getting up quickly, N tried to figure out where it was. "Where is that coming from?"

"I dunno. I thought it was finally over with."

"That's an injured Pokémon," N snapped, heading over to the darker grass area. It was somewhere over here. "You should have checked it out and helped it instead of just ignoring it. I'd think that someone who took care of Pokémon would know that."

Hilbert got up and came after him. "Well how was I supposed to figure that out from a faint sound? I thought all the Pokémon were just sleeping today, since there's nothing around. And you might want to call yours back; it's still dangerous here."

Ignoring him, N walked through the patch of tall grass, listening. "Who are you, Pokémon?" he asked, calming his voice so he didn't scare it.

"Huh? Up... here."

N looked up into the trees and spotted a Tympole in one of the barren trees. Since the Pokémon was out of reach, he grabbed hold of a sturdy branch and pulled himself up into the tree. The Tympole's skin had large patches of crusty blood. It didn't seem like any of the branches were piercing him, but this definitely wasn't good for a Pokémon that would prefer being wet. "Don't panic, Tympole. I'm here to help you."

The small amphibian looked at him as he searched for a potion, hopefully a strong one. "Thanks."

"Wait, you can understand Pokémon?" Hilbert asked from the ground.

"Yes." He found a Super Potion, then sprayed it on some of the wounds. He would need a good cleaning too. For now, he carefully picked the Tympole up, cradled him in one arm, then started back down the tree. He kept talking to Hilbert as he did so. "I've always been able to, but I haven't been able to find anyone else who can. Still, the cry of a creature who needs help should be recognizable even if you don't know the exact meaning."

"Not if it's one you don't know," Hilbert said. "Are you taking it to the Pokecenter?"

"No, I can take care of him," he said. Besides he was still seeing if the centers were brainwashing Pokémon by keeping his away from their machines.

"It's probably better for a professional to take care of him... you want me to get some medicines?"
If you can understand Pokémon, then I could use your help." He smiled, making that weird sparkly aura. "I'd be happy to tell you anything I find out in exchange."

For a moment, he was tempted. But no, N's focus had to be on the injured Pokémon now. The Tympole needed the help more than any of them. Besides, Hilbert had outright said that he had psychic powers. Perhaps he was using them to make himself and anything he offered more alluring. In that case, never mind what goals he had in mind, even if they were as lofty as becoming a hero. One could not tell what lay beneath that sparkly mask.

"No," N said, making sure to sound sharp about it. "You're not even concerned about him, just about your own goals. I don't need the help of someone as manipulative, vain, and self-centered as you are."

"What?" Hilbert said, angered at the words. He grabbed N's arm, forcing him to face him. And when they made eye contact, Hilbert nearly succeeded in intimidating him though sheer force of will. "How dare you insult me like that? I'm famous the world over and you, you're a nobody."

"So you think," N countered. "And I dare to because it's the truth. That's what you want, isn't it?" As soon as Hilbert let him go, he headed north, back to the road that led to town. Even if he wasn't going to a Pokecenter, going to an inn would help with caring for the Tympole.

As he passed by, Peter the Pidove came out of hiding and flew alongside him. "Wow, he's monstrously scary when angry," the bird commented. "I hope you never battle him."

"Right," N agreed.

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Evening, 11/19

A black haired woman appeared in the frame of the Xtranceiver. "Yes, this is Laura. Who is this?"

Good, it seemed to be the right number. Hilda was sitting on a chair in her hotel room, just a generic seat that could have used more padding. "I'm Hilda," she answered. "I'm a Trainer who's currently in Striaton, and I think I've found your Panpour."

Gasping, she put her hand to her chest. "What, you found Juliet?"

Juliet climbed into Hilda's lap, eyes wide. "Eek?"

"I think so." Since her watch phone was on one arm, she tried to pull the Panpour around to face the screen. "This her? No, girl, look at the screen there."

"Juliet?" Laura asked.

The Panpour finally noticed the familiar face and squealed. She put her face right up next to the watch, probably giving her owner a nice close up of her forehead and eyes. Grinning at Laura's laugh, Hilda felt like seeing that excitement was worth it.

"I love you too, dear, but could you please sit back so I can see Miss Hilda?" Laura said. Once Juliet sat down, happily watching the exchange, Laura continued. "Thanks for finding her. I was afraid that something terrible had happened to her after those people stole her."

"She was stolen from you?" Hilda asked. "Who'd do that?"

"Some self-righteous extremists calling themselves Team Plasma. A couple of them challenged me
and a friend to a Doubles battle and when they won, they demanded that we turn our Pokémon over to be liberated, so they said." She shook her head. "I didn't know what else to do. Their Pokémon were still conscious and there was this look in their eyes that said they'd do anything those nutcases told them to, even attack a human. I only had Juliet with me that day; if I had all my Pokémon then, we might have beaten them."

Across the room, Kyurem looked towards her at the mention of Plasma. Fedora was lounging in a patch of sunlight on the shelf, apparently not interested in anything else. "What did the police do about it?" Hilda asked. "I found her in the gardens of Striaton."

"I'm not sure what they were doing," Laura said. "Plasma's been doing all these speeches and TV programs about philosophical revelations from their mysterious King, and they seem to be well funded. Individually, they don't seem like much, but I've overheard an officer mention that investigating them would be like poking a stick into a hive of territorial wasps. And we had a really hard time describing the thieves to the police, because their armor uniforms make them all look alike. They can't be arrested just for wearing it." She sighed. "I'm just glad she's safe."

"I've been watching out for her the past couple of hours," Hilda said. "I had to recapture her because she'd been released from her Pokeball, but she has her ID bracelet and we could track you down that way." And if Plasma had Pokémon thieves employed, ID tags suddenly seemed like a brilliant idea. "I can just gift her to you when I make it to Nacrene, then."

"That's be great, Hilda. I can give you a reward for her return; I don't have a lot of money to spare, but I'm a breeder and I can help you with that if you'd like."

"Actually, I was thinking about it. See, I'm enrolled in a cram course right now, so I can't leave until the end of the week. But how about this: in exchange for returning Juliet to you, may I borrow her to challenge the Gym here? She'd be a really big help in getting my first badge."

Laura nodded. "Oh sure, that should be fine. If it's your first badge, then it won't be too hard for her. Are you okay with that, Juliet?"

The Panpour nodded, seeming happy to go along with the plan.

"Great, then I'll try to make it to Nacrene around Sunday or Monday," Hilda said. "I'll take good care of Juliet in the meantime, promise."

"Good, and thank you so much." Laura smiled, but seemed a little teary-eyed out of relief. "I've raised her since she was an egg and I've been so worried this past week. It's good that she found a kind person like you. Call me back when you get into Nacrene and I'll meet you somewhere."

After the conversation ended, Juliet squealed happily again and hugged Hilda. Chuckling, the girl picked the monkey up and got out of the chair. "Well, seems like I'll be trying out the Gym with the three of you this Friday. I hope you guys, and gal, are ready for a busy day."

Fedora tipped his hat up, but then went back to lounging.

"It'll be nothing," Kyurem said, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed over his chest. "So those Plasma knights stole Pokémon for liberation?"

"Well it seems like they just released her in a place where she couldn't find her way back on her own," Hilda said. "Still, it seems rotten, especially coming from a group trying to paint themselves as having the higher moral ground."

"It may make sense from their perspective."
Hilda stopped in front of him. The Panpour put an arm around her shoulder to look at the dragon. "How does that make sense?"

"From their perspective," he repeated. "This is just a theory. We need to observe them more. If they are a danger to Unova, or to you, then they will have to be dealt with using extreme prejudice."

"Hey I'm not here to cause trouble," she said, then thought about it. "Not on a large scale, anyhow. I didn't leave home for a crusade."

"Sometimes you don't get a choice when it comes to war."

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night, 11/19

Late at night, N went into the bathroom of his rented hotel room. The injured Tympole was in the bathtub; he had been resting, but woke up as the human sat on the edge of the tub. After cleaning him in there (and then cleaning the tub), N had filled it with a shallow amount of water, then let the Pokémon rest in there. There was a large bruise and several cuts on his body, as well as a hole in his tail, but he looked like he could recover well overnight.

But it was always better to check. "How are you doing?" N asked, rubbing the Pokémon in an uninjured spot.

"I've been better," he said, quiet and using only small motions. "But I'll be okay, I think. Thank you; you saved my life."

"I'm glad you're safe," N said, smiling. "Do you have any bad pains right now?"

"Not anymore. I just feel tired."

He nodded. "Resting is the best thing for you right now. But how did you end up in a tree?"

"Um, my last Trainer released me, but he didn't do it right," the Tympole said. "I think so, anyhow. All I know was that it hurt, a lot. He didn't want to get caught with a badly injured Pokémon, so he told his Braviary to drop me off somewhere. That bird was as bad as he was and put me in the tree; he was laughing as he flew away."

"That's horrible. I'm on a mission to stop people like him. I can't stand to see Pokémon get hurt."

"Are you?" he asked.

N nodded and began telling him about his plans.
For the final exam of their Battles 3 class, the students met in the school's gymnasium. It was a large but plain room, with wood paneling for a floor. The basketball hoops and other equipment had been put up for the test, although one set of bleachers was pulled out for another class and any visitors to watch. For the test, each student had to participate in two battles using at most two Pokémon. And Mr. Tailor had seen it fit to pit Hilda, Bianca, and Cheren against each other for their test.

Hilda and Bianca came up first. The latter fiddled with her blond hair as she came up to her position. "Okay, um, we're all going back to the Gym again tomorrow, huh? So, don't hold back on me."

Hilda nodded. "All right, let's do our best."

At the side, the teacher grabbed a whistle that hung around his neck. "Okay, competitors ready...." After looking to them both, he blew the whistle to begin the match.

Throughout the class, Mr. Tailor had spoken about the need for prediction, knowing what Pokémon were capable of and preparing for the worst. It was difficult to keep track of all the possibilities for all Pokémon, especially when the Pokedex project was incomplete. But there was an advantage to this fight in that both girls knew exactly what Pokémon the other had. That made prediction simple; not having Kyurem available for this, Hilda called on Fedora.

Bianca, on the other hand, did all right on written tests; in battle, she often let her nerves get to her. She called on Suzy, then quickly realized why that was a bad idea on seeing the Snivy. Guessing that she would swap over to her Lillipup, Hilda called out, "Get to that sunny spot and try Growth now."

Fedora had learned a couple of moves over the two week class, Growth being the newest one. He was still figuring it out, so it was marked in gray on the Poke-check app she'd installed on her Xtransciever. While Bianca recalled the Oshawott, Fedora ran over to a spot of sunlight on the gym floor. The boosting skill would work out of light, but being there might make things easier. A green glow appeared around him, especially at his leafy tail. From the look of it, it seemed to be successful.

Then the Lillipup was out, wagging her tail. "Lassie, tackle him," Bianca ordered. The 'pup barked in agreement and rushed over to the spot of light.

"Weave and do the same," Hilda said.

Dropping down to all fours, the Snivy faced down Lassie, then dashed off in a curve. This forced the Lillipup out of her straight line rush, making it so that her tackle was not as strong as his. But Lillipups were surprisingly tough Pokémon and it took another tackle from Fedora to knock Lassie out. Bianca was then forced to send her Oshawott back out; Suzy fell quickly to the Growth boosted Vine Whip Fedora used.

Mr. Tailor blew the whistle again. "This match goes to Hilda," he announced. "Give me a minute to write down notes and Leon and Terry go next." But first, he picked two Revive crystals from a bin and handed them to Bianca.
Hilda used a Potion on Fedora, then walked over to the bleachers with Bianca. "Sorry about that," she said.

Shaking her head, Bianca said, "Oh, no, it's fine. I did ask that you not hold back. Besides, it's like Mr. Tailor says: having someone let you win is a meaningless victory. I just have to figure out how to help my Pokémon win. Or even if I like battles in the first place." She frowned, considering that. "The Pokémon at least seem to enjoy it, but I don't know about me."

"After this class, you can do what you want," Hilda said. "There's nothing that says you have to keep battling; you could work on the Pokedex for Juniper."

"Maybe."

A couple of battles later, Bianca went against Cheren, losing that battle too. "You need to calm down and focus before a battle," he said when they were back in the bleachers. "You'd do well if you did that; you've got good Pokémon."

"I can try," she said. To change the subject away from her, she then asked, "So you two are going last, huh? I heard one of the other girls say that it was only right to pair the best two students of the class together."

"I don't know where they got that idea," Hilda said jokingly. "I take to battles like a goofball."

Cheren nudged her. "A goofball that's beat everybody in class, except for me."

"Yeah, whatever," she said. Then she grinned. "Besides, I know what Pokémon you have, and I know that you know what Pokémon I have, so I know what you'd start with because you'd know what I'd start with."

"I know that you know that I know that," Cheren replied. "But I also know that you don't know something about my team, and I'm going to use that to pick the winning strategy."

"What if I know that something that you think that I don't know?" she said, poking him in the arm. "And what if I know that you don't know something about my team, and I'll win because of that?"

"I know that you're probably bluffing to hide the fact that you don't know," he said, poking her back. "And I'm sure that you know that I know that you're also doing it for a joke."

"Excuse me," someone said from just behind them, "but I'm confused."

"Did you know that?" Hilda asked Cheren.

"I knew that," he said. "But did you know that?"

Bianca turned partly and said, "Oh, it's simple. See, I know that she knows that he knows what she knows and he knows that she knows what he knows, and they know that I know, so they know that they don't have to explain anything."

"All right!" Hilda said, giving Bianca a hi-five. "You the boss."

She smiled. "Thanks!"

"I think I get it," another person behind them said.

"Then you know too much," both Hilda and Cheren said. They looked at each other, then burst into laughter.
"Quiet down over there," Mr. Tailor warned.

Once all their classmates were through, Hilda and Cheren came into the battle area. Some of their classmates started talking with each other, debating on which one of the two would win this time. So of course Hilda wasn't going to back down from a chance to do some grandstanding. She grabbed one of the two Pokeballs and held it in a fist towards her best friend. "All right, let's get down to a real battle," she said. "You, me, our Pokémon, right here and now, no interruptions, to decide who's the best. For today."

Cheren smirked and returned the challenge by pointing at her. "You're on! I have the plans and the power to take you down. You'll get no quarter this round."

"And neither will you," she said, but grinned at the end of it.

Their teacher gave them both a warning look. "And if we're done with the over-the-top drama…"

"Are we ever?" Hilda asked cheerfully, getting some laughs from the audience.

"I suppose that would be too much to ask," Mr. Tailor said, with a light tone of disapproval. "Competitors ready…" he looked at them a half minute longer, then blew the whistle.

Both opponents released their Pokémon at the same time, resulting in Juliet the Panpour facing off against Shadeclaw the Purrloin. Hilda tightened her grip on the Pokeball. Thinking quickly, she called out, "Juliet, Double Team."

Simultaneously, Cheren said, "Shadeclaw, Sand Attack."

The Purrloin summoned up a curse of sand to make it harder for Juliet to aim, while she focused inward and produced three images that looked just like her, to confuse him. Hilda grinned while Cheren bit his lip. Because they were planning on challenging the Gym tomorrow, she knew that he would want to practice the Sand Attack strategy that had worked for N last week. And she had successfully kept him from knowing that Juliet knew an unusual move.

"All right, go Water Gun," Hilda ordered, getting an 'okay' sign from all four of the Panpour images in front of her. In the meantime, Cheren had his Purrloin use Assist; this got Shadeclaw to summon a fireball to counter the water ball being hurled at him. The fireball destroyed one of the images. Juliet jumped around with her two images, then used Water Gun again to knock Shadeclaw out.

Cheren recalled the Purrloin to call out his Tepig. "Smoky, tackle that one," he called, pointing out one of the Panpours.

Without hesitation, Smoky dashed for and tackled that one, his tiny hooves clattering against the wooden floor. Cheren had managed to pick out Juliet's real self rather than her images. But then the Tepig found himself hit immediately with a Water Gun. It seemed to wear him down a lot, but not knock him out. In fact, he had time to bite down on an Oran berry that had been tied around one of his forelegs. "Get him for that," Hilda said.

Encouraged by that, Juliet frowned and began a flurry of light punches. According to the teacher, this was Fury Swipes, a low powered attack that hit many times. This was enough to knock Smoky out despite his attempt to heal himself. But when Hilda checked the Panpour's health on her Xtranceiever app, she was close to passing out herself.

Mr. Tailor blew his whistle again. "And the winner is Hilda," he said, amid cheers from the audience. "I'll have your reviews in a few minutes."
After Cheren got his Pokémon revived and Hilda healed up Juliet, they went back over to where Bianca was sitting on the bleachers. "When did Juliet learn Double Team?" he asked.

"Oh, she's known it since I met her," Hilda said teasingly. "I was just waiting for the right moment to use it. But I knew you'd try Sand Attack."

Bianca giggled. "Seems like she beat you out in the knowledge guessing game."

"For this round," Cheren said, but then he smiled and winked.

Then Mr. Tailor had his reviews for all of the students of Battles 3. "Well Hilda, beneath the frivolous surface you project, you seem to have great potential. But you're not going to earn respect if people can't take you seriously. You pass the class."

"Thanks, sour puss," she said brightly, causing some laughs from the semester students.

He gave her a look that said he was glad he wouldn't have to deal with her any longer. Then he turned to Cheren with a slight smile. "Cheren, you also have great potential and you could easily go far within the Pokémon League. You have an excellent grasp on the theory and mechanics of battles, perhaps even more than some of the regular students." He gave a glance up to a few who were higher up on the bleachers. "You pass the class, outstanding job."

He gave a nod of acknowledgment. "Thank you, sir."

On Bianca's turn, Tailor was back to being serious. "Bianca, you show good knowledge and are earnest in things. But you need to be calmer and more collected in battle. Don't get flustered and leave your Pokémon hanging. But you do pass the class."

She shrunk back some. "Yes sir," she said quietly.

As he moved on to other students, Hilda slipped over and tugged at Bianca. "Hey, at least the battle class is over now. I'm sure you'll do much better on the other final exams."

She smiled a little at that. "Sure, I know. But I still need to get better for my Pokémon." She put her hand to her lips, concerned.

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Afternoon, 11/28

Although it doubled as a restaurant, the Striaton Gym was like any other in that other Trainers would come to learn from the Leaders. And these Gym Trainers were available for challengers to fight, if they wanted. Since some of the Gym Trainers were also restaurant employees, this was best done in between meal times. Hilda spent much of Saturday battling the Gym Trainers.

She even found and battled the waitress that they had met last week. "Wow, I think you're ready for this Gym," Tia said. "It shouldn't be too hard for you."

"Not unless I make it harder," Hilda said. "Oh, and the uniform is so cute!"

"Isn't it?" Tia patted the skirt of her orange dress. Over it was a white apron, with pockets for a notepad and Pokeballs. "It's much better than some other work uniforms I've had."

Grinning, Hilda nodded. "Sure. Hey, may I borrow one of them to wear for tonight?"

She looked puzzled. "Why? Aren't you challenging the Gym?"
"Yeah, but I always believe in dressing for the occasion. It's more fun that way."

"It would be. But I don't know…" Tia scratched her head. "I think we might have a dress your size, but they're provided for workers."

Hilda was a bit disappointed, because she hadn't had time to think of what to wear for the Gym battle. And she had to make it interesting, if only for her own entertainment. "Please? I can do some work if that'll help."

Tia smiled. "Oh, that should be acceptable. Actually, one of the other waitresses is out tonight, so the extra help would be great. Do you have any nicer shoes and socks though? Black shoes would be better, and white socks."

"Yeah, I've got some other pairs," Hilda said. "So may I wear the uniform?"

"Sure," Tia said. "Come on in back and we'll find you one."

"Yay, thanks!" She gave the actual waitress a quick hug, then followed her into the work area.

After getting their Pokémon healed up from their battle, Tia brought her into the supply closet where the uniforms were kept. After finding one of the right size, Hilda changed out of her jeans and t-shirt into the aproned dress, then switched her sneakers and regular socks for some pretty black leather shoes and lacy socks. The rules for waiters and waitresses said that they couldn't wear hats, so she had to put her Patch hat away in favor of a white hair band that would keep her brown hair away from her face. She also had to put her Xtranceiever away, so she turned it off and put it in her bag.

Tia had spoken with a few other members of the staff, but not with the Leaders. Since Hilda was more or less volunteering and the staff had extensive guidelines to keep, there wasn't much she could actually do. "You can help set the tables," Tia said, passing her a small booklet. "It's all been cleaned from the lunch period, so they need tablecloths, silverware and napkin bundles, placemats, and centerpieces. This will give you the guidelines and quantities for a Saturday dinner; start by making up the bundles and centerpieces. Just remember to keep the flower vase displays simple, all right?"

"All right," Hilda said. "Where's the stuff kept?"

Several minutes later, Kyurem walked into the Gym. He had asked to go out hunting again. "What are you doing?" he asked, stopping by the table.

"Working," she replied, picking out the right utensils and putting them into cloth napkins. "I wanted a uniform and they said I had to work to borrow it."

"Why?"

"It's for fun, of course." She hummed a bit, then added, "So you ready for tonight? And still willing?"

He nodded. "It is acceptable. Then this uniform must be you working in every detail to impress the most people."

"Of course. I want to be memorable."

"Why?"
Hilda looked up at him. "You know, you hardly give me any answers, so why should I give them to you?"

"I will tell you if it becomes vital," he said. "I need to assess you to know how to do my job, so it would be in your best interest to answer me."

"What is your job?" she tried.

"To protect you."

"Why?"

"It is not vital at this time to know why. Why do you want to be memorable?"

She stuck her tongue out at him, then shook her head. "Why not? There's lots of people in the Pokémon League, hoping to become famous. But they don't do anything to make them stand out. They're not interesting to watch. I want to be interesting, and to make this fun for everyone. Even if it means doing some little chore to set things up."

He nodded, then turned when another door opened. Cilan came through, looking bothered. Not long after, Cress came in too and talked quietly with his brother. Hilda could faintly hear some words, but decided it wasn't polite to listen in at that moment. She kept working at the silverware and napkin bundles. While it seemed like a simple chore, there were a lot of them that needed making. And then there were the centerpieces.

"Well you two are new faces around here," Cress said, after he and Cilan had come over to the table Hilda was working at. "Are you a new worker or volunteer?"

She looked up and smiled at them. "I'm a volunteer, just for tonight. Hi, I'm Hilda."

"Ah, well good to meet you, Hilda." Cress shook her hand, then introduced himself and his brother. "We have some time, so we'll handle the centerpieces."

"Well you're the bosses," Hilda said. "By the way, the quiet guy over here is the legendary dragon Kyurem. He doesn't talk much."

"We heard that he was around," Cilan said, curious. "Lots of people are wondering why."

"Don't ask," Kyurem replied.

Hilda shrugged. "Like I said, he doesn't talk much."

"So are you going challenge us tonight?" Cilan asked.

"Yeah," she said. "And I'm going to be really daring about it."

"Oh really?" Cress asked, amused. "And how's that?"

She told them.

The two brothers looked to each other. "Well I suppose there's nothing saying we can't," Cilan said.

"I love that idea," Cress said. "I always thought it would be a nice option for those who already had the badge. But that will make things much more difficult on your end, Hilda."
"That's why I'm doing it," she said. "I'm sure we can manage."

Cilan picked up a red poppy that was with the flowers, and said, "Hey let's not tell Chili. I'd like to see how he reacts to that."

Cress grinned. "Sure thing."

Keeping at her work, Hilda said, "You seem a lot chattier here than you are during the battles, Cilan."

"Oh, well," he blushed a bit, "I get stage fright. Some nights worse than others."

"Yet he seems to be a tougher fight when he's nervous," Cress said, setting up another poppy in a vase. "His Pokémon pick up on it and really get defensive."

"I'm working on it."

"You both have strange eyes," Kyurem said, looking at the two Leaders.

"Yeah, we know," Cress said. Then he came over to Hilda's table. "Excuse me; I'm going to take a couple of those napkins for displays."

"Sure," she said, glancing up at him. It wasn't easy to see, but he did have strange eyes: black with streaks of gold.

"Some Pokémon have eyes like this, but we don't know why we have them," Cilan said.

"I might be able to tell why if I had a taste of your blood," Kyurem offered.

"Kyurem, don't freak people out," Hilda said in warning.

"I've already eaten," he said. "I have suspicions, but I need to confirm them before I state them."

Cilan looked distinctly nervous, while Cress shook his head. "Er, no, that's fine. It's just a cosmetic thing, so it's nothing to be concerned about."

Later that evening, Hilda was given the job of door greeter. She had to welcome people, give them menus, get them a table of the right size without overworking a particular waiter or waitress, and register challengers in the Gym's computer. The last step turned out to be vital, as this determined which of the three brothers the challenger would face and what order the challengers went in. There were five slots open tonight and they filled up quickly.

Fortunately, Cheren and Bianca got in early enough to secure spots. They came in with Professor Juniper and two other women. "What are you doing working here?" Bianca asked as she passed over her ID card. "Did you decide to be a Gym Trainer instead?"

"No, but it's all part of the plan," Hilda said, putting a finger to her lips. "Doing my research on my opponents."

"Well that's one way to do it," Juniper said. "Oh, this is Hilda, my other field researcher. Hilda, these are two friends of mine from college, Fennel and Amanita. They work in Pokémon psychology and computer technology respectively."

"Hello, nice to meet you," Fennel said, shaking her hand. She was a tall woman with long black hair and thin-framed glasses. "We've heard some interesting things about you."
"And I'm sure you haven't heard most of it," Hilda said, shaking Amanita's hand before getting some menus. "Come on, I'll take you to a table. If it's all right, I'll have Kyurem sit with you, but I'll be working so I won't be."

"That's fine as long as he stays quiet," Bianca said. "Sometimes he says, well, disturbing things."

"He isn't human," Hilda pointed out.

Since she had taken a break before the doors opened, Hilda kept working until all tables were filled. Then she was set to dish washing for a few minutes until Tia came and told her that she needed to get ready for her match. Hilda dried off, then went over to her friends' table to get Kyurem.

Then the three brothers came out on stage, Chili giving pretty much the same speech as last time. "All right, then who's our first challenger?" he asked Cress.

He checked the tablet, then smiled a little as he said, "Miss Hilda Medley from Nuvema Town."

"All right, let's go for it," she said to Kyurem. He nodded.

"This is gonna be exciting," Bianca said, waving to them.

Hilda went up the steps into the battle area. It was warmer in the center due to the lights that were focused on this spot. Waving her hand back to the dragon boy following her, she said, "He's with me." She spotted two x marks on the floor, indicting the positions. She stopped at one while Kyurem stayed just behind her.

"Of course," Cress said.

Chili glanced at his brothers, giving them a 'what do you know that I don't' look. When they just smiled, he turned back to Hilda and said, "All right. And your opponent for tonight will be…"

"Hold on a moment," Hilda said, stopping him with a gesture. "See, I know how you work things around here, and it's a nice system. But the thing is, I have an unusual starter. I started my journey with Kyurem, the legendary dragon of the Great Crater."

Whispering started around the room. Kyurem's white mask shone under the stage lights. Behind Chili, Cress gave a knowing wink. Chili himself looked interested in what she was saying.

Hilda crossed her arms over her chest. "As it is, his level is in the teens, but he's still more powerful than ordinary Pokémon. That means that the usual fight will be much too easy. I won't like that, and you won't like that, so here's my challenge. I'm gonna take on all three of you, in a Triples battle. How's that sound to you?"

"Well that's…" Chili thought for a second, "unusual."

"There's nothing in the rules that says we can't turn down a challenge like that," Cilan said, stepping forward.

Chili glanced at this brothers, giving them a 'what do you know that I don't' look. When they just smiled, he turned back to Hilda and said, "All right. And your opponent for tonight will be…"

"Hold on a moment," Hilda said, stopping him with a gesture. "See, I know how you work things around here, and it's a nice system. But the thing is, I have an unusual starter. I started my journey with Kyurem, the legendary dragon of the Great Crater."

Whispering started around the room. Kyurem's white mask shone under the stage lights. Behind Chili, Cress gave a knowing wink. Chili himself looked interested in what she was saying.

Hilda crossed her arms over her chest. "As it is, his level is in the teens, but he's still more powerful than ordinary Pokémon. That means that the usual fight will be much too easy. I won't like that, and you won't like that, so here's my challenge. I'm gonna take on all three of you, in a Triples battle. How's that sound to you?"

"Well that's…" Chili thought for a second, "unusual."

"There's nothing in the rules that says we can't turn down a challenge like that," Cilan said, stepping forward.

Chili stepped forward too. "We've done this a lot. We may as well show our unity as brothers… although this might prove that you've overestimated your abilities, Hilda."

"So it seems that you will be getting what you asked for," Chili said, grinning. Cheers came up from the audience. "Then you will face all three of us at once. Now, declare your Pokémon; we have six."
Hilda grinned back. This was going to be great. "Three, and you're going down." That got more cheers.

"Then let's get this show going," Chili said, taking one of his Pokeballs in hand. "Ready... and battle!" He released his Lillipup, soon followed by two more from his brothers. Chili’s Pokémon took center point.

"Kyurem, go!" Hilda called, grabbing her other two Pokeballs, releasing Fedora and Juliet at the same time.

Nodding, Kyurem turned into a white glow and moved in front of her, taking the center point position. He reformed into his dragon form, roaring once he fully appeared. The Lillipups stiffened at this, but the Snivy and Panpour were expecting that.

There were some quick unspoken signs between the brothers. "Power up," Cilan said.

"Help Louie," Cress said right after, right as Cilan's 'pup started yapping and building that brown glow.

"Get the dragon," Chili then finished, as Cress' 'pup hopped closer Chili's.

"Get the right one," Hilda told Kyurem. "And you two, get ready as planned."

Kyurem used Dragon Rage against Cilan's Lillipup, knocking him out immediately with a blast of violet energy. The other two Lillipups rushed at him, but only Chili's actually tackled the dragon; the other one seemed to be using Helping Hand to increase his partner's damage. While the focus was on the large dragon in the center of the battle square, Fedora and Juliet moved back towards the corners. The former used Growth while the latter prepared Double Team, but kept the images barely overlapping herself.

"Again," both Chili and Cress said, getting their Lillipups to repeat the assisted tackle.

Cilan recalled his fallen Pokémon and replaced him with a Pansage. "Spook the dragon," he ordered.

"Ice the monkey," Hilda called.

Withstanding the second tackle, Kyurem sent a glittering gust of Icy Wind at the Pansage. The green furred monkey had been preparing to do something, but the Ice attack was too much for it to handle. With the second knock out, Cilan was out of the battle. But it wasn't about getting rid of the easier opponent; for what Hilda had planned, Cilan's Pokémon would be the harder set if left to last.

As Cilan bowed out of the fight, Chili and Cress glanced at each other. "Keep at it," Chili said, ordering both Lillipups to follow the same Helping Hand to tackle tactic.

Good. "You okay, Kyurem?" She got a wing twitch and low hiss in response, something she'd figured out was an affirmative response. "Now the left one."

As stoic as usual, Kyurem lifted his head and blasted Cress' Lillipup with Dragon Rage, knocking it out. The last Lillipup kept coming and tackled him. The dragon growled, but found himself out of energy and fell unconscious. Quickly, Hilda recalled him. He wouldn't like being seen long like that.

Amid calls from the audience, Chili said, "Now you've lost your power player." Cress released his
Panpour during that lull.

"Exactly as planned," Hilda said, confident. "Juliet, cover! Fedora, blitz the other Panpour!"

While Kyurem had been taking up much of the attention, Hilda's other two Pokémon had been quietly boosting themselves. Juliet unleashed nine images of herself, four of which quickly appeared at the Snivy's side. With a bright green glow around him, Fedora zipped across the battle stage and lashed out at Cress' Panpour with Vine Whip. The blow was powerful enough to knock the monkey back several feet to pass out at his Trainer's feet.

Cress recalled his Pokémon and backed out, leaving Chili alone as she would have faced him normally. The look on his face was serious; he knew not to mess around now, even with Kyurem out of the fight. Since it was technically a Triples match, he released his Pansear. "Louie, help out; incinerate the Snivy."

"Keep cover," Hilda told Juliet. "Fedora, hit the 'pup!"

Juliet moved herself and her images around, keeping the situation confusing. Fedora launched himself into the last Lillipup hat first, also knocking it out in one blow. The Pansear attempted to breathe fire at him, but the attack struck two of the Panpour images and demolished them instead. Even though it was two to one now, there was still a chance that the Leaders could win.

So she wasn't going to risk it. "Okay, both of you, Water Gun and whip!"

"Flame on the spot!" Chili called.

In response, the Pansear used Incinerate again, but in a way that put a circle of flames around himself. Fedora saw this, then leapt over the flames and landed on the Pansear's head. He flipped up in time for Juliet to blast the red monkey with Water Gun, then used his tail as a whip on the way down. Bouncing back off their opponent Pokémon's head, he landed in a dramatic pose as the Pansear fainted.

"Oh wow," Cilan said, barely audible over the cheering of the audience. "Now there's something we don't see every day."

"Really spectacular, as we hoped for," Cress added.

After recalling his Pansear, Chili nodded and held his hand up, getting the audience to calm down some. "Yes, for a novice in the League to defeat all three of us… Hilda, you've earned our respect. Well done." Then all three of them bowed at the same time.

"It's cause my Pokémon are awesome!" she said, clapping a few times.

Cilan passed off the badge to Chili, who came over and handed it to her. "Yes, and for their fine efforts, and your own, we are proud to award you the Trio Badge. Show it off with pride."

Taking it, she saw that it had a gold rectangular frame around three equal gems of red, blue, and green. A simple design, but one that meant so much. "Of course," she called out, then stepped back and held it up with a V sign. "To victory!"

Cheering themselves, Fedora and Juliet mimicked the sign. The audience heartily approved of this.
It was dark and cool when Hilda left the Gym. She had changed back to her regular clothes and gave the waitress uniform back. Despite the long day, she was still excited after her win and awake enough to want to find something to do. But probably not battling, as Fedora and Juliet seemed tired. She recalled them both and walked out with just Kyurem.

"Someone's out there," he said, putting his hand on her shoulder.

"Yeah, it's a town," Hilda said. "Unless you're sensing murderous intent, I don't think it's worrisome."

"Things are more serious than you realize," Kyurem said, looking both into the shadows and up into the sky.

"I might if you would tell me things."

"Not yet." He let her go for the time being. "It seems to just be your friends."

"That's what I would have guessed." Walking along the side of the building, she came out of the alley and saw her friends with Juniper and her friends. Hilda hurried up to reach them. "Hey, sorry if I kept you waiting."

"It's no trouble," Juniper said. "You certainly won your badge with flair; congratulations."

She accepted a small hug from her. "Of course I would; I don't work without flair. I heard Cheren won too. Good going!"

"You were a tough act to follow," he said. "But I did well enough."

"No, you did great," Bianca said, smiling. "I didn't do so well, though. Cilan beat me again."

"That was a close match," Fennel said. "At the end there, it could have gone either way."

She shrugged. "Maybe. I might try getting another Pokémon; that would help, right?"

"It should, at least in terms of numbers," Hilda said.

"That could be all you need," Juniper said. "It's been nice seeing you all again, but I've got to bike back to Nuvema before it gets too late. If you three have some time tonight, though, Fennel was saying she could use some help from some Trainers."

Cheren declined to help, saying that he'd been busy all day; he certainly looked tired. On the other hand, Bianca seemed just as alert as Hilda felt. After saying good night to Juniper, the two girls stayed with Fennel and Amanita. "So what do you need help with?" Bianca asked.

"We want to find a Pokémon, but our own haven't fought wild battles in so long," Amanita said, shifting her glasses back. "Have you heard of a Munna or Musharna?"

"I've heard that one of the Elite 4 has one," Bianca said. "I don't really remember it all that well."

"I've heard of it, but can't think of it right off," Hilda said. "Is it rare?"
"Uncommon, but sneaky," Kyurem stated. "Quite tasty too."

Fennel looked briefly horrified. "Oh, no, we're not out to eat one! Although, the first part was right. Munna looks like a pink piglet, actually, with purple flower-spots. It's a Psychic type and often gets around by hovering."

Bianca smiled. "Aw, that sounds cute. Are they around here?"

Nodding, Fennel explained, "And they're best found at night too. They're an evolution line and people have reported seeing them at the Dreamyard. You could catch one if you want," she glanced at Kyurem, "just don't eat it. But we're more interested in a material that they can make, the Dream Mist."

"Dream Mist allows them to form images of what they see in dreams," Amanita said. "Or even in our thoughts, if it's a strong enough individual. We've had a theory that it could be used to share dreams."

"And we have a few devices that are working!" Fennel said, beaming with excitement. "However, we've run out of the Dream Mist material that we used throughout our testing and we haven't heard back from our original contributor. Would you go into the Dreamyard and look for some Dream Mist for us?"

"Sure, that sounds fine," Bianca said. "But how are we supposed to gather the Mist if it's, well, mist?"

While Amanita dug out a glass bottle with a cork, Fennel said, "The Pokémon can manipulate it. And they're pretty smart, so you should be able to ask them for it. But the Pokémon that can be found easiest are those that want to battle Trainers; it's not easy to ask while the Pokémon is looking to attack."

"Oh yes, that is trouble," Bianca said. "Are you okay with that, Hilda?"

"Sure," she said, taking the bottle. "Let's go find that Pokémon!"

Ten minutes later, Hilda, Bianca, and Kyurem were walking along the ruined walls of the Dreamyard, the Lillipup Lassie trotting along at their side. There were several lights around, but the remaining rubble made strange shadows everywhere. Small noises filled the air, from Pokémon calling to each other to feet snapping twigs, crushing leaves, and shifting rocks. While the largest gap was overtaken with thick bushes, they managed to roll an oil drum aside to get into the grassier part of the ruin.

"This place is spooky at night," Bianca said quietly.

"Well someone else is here," Hilda pointed out, judging by the footsteps at the far end of the area. "It can't be that dangerous." Then she gripped Bianca's shoulder. "But now that I've said that…"

"We're going to run into a guy wearing a hockey mask that's going to start stalking us in our dreams until he eventually kills us in our sleep?" Bianca asked, shivering but smiling a bit. "Well as fun as scary movies are to watch, I'd rather be pulled into a romance. Like when the girl starts out on her journey, meets a sweet guy early on and travels with him, then there's the rival who's a handsome bad boy and the heroine has to chose between the two… that would be wonderful."

"Isn't that the one where the girl starts off with her childhood best friend who's a guy?" Hilda asked.
"Sometimes, but," she shrugged, "well it's just, we've all known each other since we were really little. Cheren's like our brother and it just doesn't seem right to go out with him."

She nodded. "I think you're right. I'm pretty sure he feels the same way." Hilda put her hand to her chin, thinking. "Of course... there's always the horror romance where the girl is stalked by a creepy guy who offers to help her become a Pokémon master, because he has an obsessive crush on her. So he makes sure that she always wins, no matter what he has to do."

Bianca shuddered. "No, I'd rather not be a part of that one. I know I'm having trouble, but if my team and I are going to win, I want it to be because we deserve it."

"Good point."

"Ooo, I was in the RPG online once where... aaahhh!" Out of the blue, a rock came flying at the girls and hit Bianca in the shoulder. This was soon followed by a pink blur in the air as a Pokémon came flying at them. The Munna (for it fit Fennel's description) gave off a feeling of fear and bewilderment, but on seeing them, seemed to sense something about them. Because of this, it soon was between them, just behind Bianca.

Charging after the Munna were a pair of Plasma members, out in their knightly suits despite the darkness. The first one stopped at seeing the Munna with the girls, but the second one collided noisily right into him. "Hey, watch it," the first said.

"You watch it," the other said, then saw them. "And just what are you two doing with that Munna?"

"We have no idea," Hilda said. "What're you two doing chasing it around and throwing rocks at it?"

"That's none of your business," one said.

But the other blurted out, "We're going to catch it to become one of our allies."

The first one jabbed his partner with his elbow in the stomach. "You **** idiot, we're not supposed to talk about team business with outsiders."

"Well she asked."

"Wait a minute," Bianca said, rubbing her shoulder. "I thought you guys were out for Pokémon liberation."

"Of course we are," the first one said. "We're going to educate you poor fools about the sins you have committed against Pokémon by holding them captive."

"And you're going to do that by capturing a wild Pokémon?" Hilda asked. "And catch it by terrorizing it?"

"That Munna is going to be an ally," he insisted. "That's different. We will use its powers to show dreams to make people aware of what Pokémon really think about them."

"I wouldn't pick up an ally by throwing rocks," Bianca said. At her feet, Lassie stepped forward, growling.

"And it might just show people how you treated it instead," Hilda said.
"No it won't," the Plasma grunt said. "Anyhow, it's our ally and you aren't going to steal it away from us. Patrat, attack!" He released two Patrats, while his partner fumbled around with his own Pokeball.

"Kyurem, get 'em!" Hilda called out in reply.

In a flash of light, Kyurem transformed into his dragon form. As he roared, the other grunt managed to release a Purrloin. The three Plasma Pokémon stared at the legend, fur all puffed up in fright. Even if they couldn't understand them, the Pokémon were clearly asking if the Plasma pair was kidding about attacking this dragon. Kyurem snorted, then darted forward and snatched up the closer of the two grunts by clamping his jaws over his head and picking him up off the ground.

"That's not what I meant," Hilda said, indignantly putting her hands on her hips. "I wouldn't mind if you ate a jerk like him, but I need to have plausible deniability in case someone tries to sue me. Put him down."

Kyurem shifted his head to look back at her, grumbling.

"And don't talk with your mouth full," Hilda countered. "Go on; put him down or I'm not getting you bacon for breakfast."

He narrowed his eyes at her, but then spat the man out onto the ground. By the lights overhead, they could see that he was covered in spit and probably bleeding from where the dragon's teeth had made contact. "You ******** ********!" the man said, sputtering. "How dare you deny the natural instincts of your Pokémon?"

All three of the Plasma Pokémon went wide-eyed at this. They stepped back behind the two men, not wanting to become targets of a carnivorous Pokémon. On the other side, Kyurem gave a throaty chuckle.

"Um, he was trying to eat you alive," Bianca said, clasping the handle of her bag. "She just spared your life."

"Doesn't matter; we'll punish you for your cruelty. Patrats… where are you, Patrats?"

The two Patrats looked at each other, not wanting to speak up.

"How pathetic," another man said. The two grunts paled as, inexplicably, Ghetsis stepped out of the darkness. The look in his eyes was like a steel blade, ready to cut straight to the problem. "Do you truly understand what we mean to achieve? Or are you just posers trying to make up for a natural ineptitude?"

"Whaa, Ghetsis?" the second grunt asked. "Wha-what are you doing here?"

Then Ghetsis vanished, only to appear closer to them. "Spot check." Then he vanished and appeared on the other side. "I think you need a reminder of what you're supposed to be doing. Get out of this place and speak with your supervisor. I will ask about this later."

"Y-yes sir! We don't mean to disobey, sir!" The two grunts then rushed off back to Striaton, stumbling over the overgrown bush along the way.

Hilda clenched her fist, but then the Munna came out in front of them, happy as can be. "Squeee!"

Ghetsis nodded, then disintegrated into a mass of pink smoke. Something else then came out of the dark, a larger version of the Munna that was wrapped in that pink smoke. Having dealt with the
Plasma grunts, the Musharna came up to the Munna and nudged it. "Wurra."

"Warru," it said, sounding sad. The older Pokémon looked at the two girls, then left with the Munna.

But it left behind the pink puff of mist, hanging in the air as ethereal as a Ghost's aura.

"Is that the Dream Mist?" Bianca asked, going up to it. "I don't know how we're supposed to bottle it."

"I dunno either, but let's try," Hilda said. She took the cork out of the bottle and held it up to the pink mist. Perhaps the Pokémon was close enough to affect it; whatever reason there was, the mist got sucked into the bottle, filling it with bright pink. From there, it was simple to stick the cork back in, just in case. "I hope that's enough for them; let's go back."

Looking uncertain, Bianca put her hand to her cheek. "Um, you go on ahead and give it to them. I'm going to look for that Pokémon. It might be too scared to come with me, but there might be another. I thought it was cute."

Hilda nodded. "All right then. Good luck!"

Back in Striaton, Hilda went to the address Amanita had given her. It was the second floor suite of an apartment near the Gym. Inside, the apartment was a mess. Kind of like Juniper's when she was busy, Hilda thought. There were papers strewn everywhere, with many different machines trying to stay out of the way against the wall. "Sorry about this mess," Fennel said. "But there's lots of things to do. Did you get the Dream Mist already?"

"Yeah," Hilda said, passing over the bottle of pink mist.

"Great!" Fennel looked over the bottle with a kid's glee. "And it looks great; must have come from a powerful individual. Hang on a sec and I'll get a battery." She went over to a drawer and began looking through it.

Amanita looked up from the computer she was busy at. "Great work; you must be good with Pokémon. We thought it might take a couple of hours."

"There was a bit of trouble, but nothing we couldn't handle," Hilda said. "What're you working at?"

"Maintenance on the Storage Block program," she said. "I'm the Unova administrator."

"So you're taking care of the Pokémon?" She came over, curious.

"More or less," she said, turning back to the computer. "The Pokémon that are stored digitally are kept in stasis, so not much needs to be done."

"Like hibernation?" Kyurem asked.

"Stronger than that, I think." An alert came up, which she frowned at. "Sorry, I need to get cracking at this. We've had someone try to break in."

"Thieves trying to steal Pokémon?" That seemed troubling; it made her second guess storing Pokémon.

"It doesn't come up often, but someone's trying. I won't let them."

"Got it!" Fennel said, coming back over without the bottle. Instead, she was putting an odd square
battery (which was glowing pink) into a device, which looked like a bracelet. A second one was also in her hand. "Here, have this. It's our Dream Connector."

"I thought you said it wasn't available yet," Hilda said.

"Not to the general public," she said. "But Dream Mist is potent stuff and that bottle you got can power about thirty Connector pairs for five years. They're mostly for researchers and Pokémon psychologists, but I'd like to know what a Trainer would do with it. It's valuable, but so is Mist from a wild Musharna. Just send me emails about how it's working and any issues that come up."

"Great, thanks!" Hilda took the Dream Connectors. She wasn't sure what to do with them yet, but they would help in understanding Pokémon.

"And there's one thing you should know," Fennel said. "A few times during testing, we ended up bringing items out of dreams and into reality. Two berries and a White Herb, actually. We're not sure how it works exactly, but we have theories about a Dream Realm."

"Like the Alternate Realm that Giratina was locked into?" Hilda asked. "I thought that was just sci-fi and mythic stuff."

"It may all be real," she said. "We don't always get items, but that may happen. They seem to be harmless, but I thought you should know." They talked for a little longer before Hilda left to get an inn room for the night.

Once she was set up in a room, Hilda took out the Connector. She had to wear one of the bracelets; it was adjustable enough that she could get it secured. Then she considered who she'd want to try it with. She wasn't going to keep Juliet much longer, but she didn't know what her owner would think.

Fedora might be interesting.

But then, there was Kyurem. "Want to be my test subject for the Dream Connecter?" she asked, handing the other bracelet to him.

From his initial look, she couldn't tell what he thought of it. "Why me?"

"You've invaded my dreams already," she reminded him. "It's only fair."

For a moment, he stared at her. Then he took it. "Fine."

It was cold, like ice brushing against her skin, but surprisingly it wasn't dark. The air was gray, like an overcast winter day. Despite the cloudy sky, there wasn't any rain or snow fall. There was snow everywhere on the ground and on trees, a few inches deep. The scent of cedar trees was faint, as was any sound from the forest. Honestly, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to call it the dead of winter.

It wasn't surprising for Kyurem's dream, Hilda felt. What was surprising was the first Pokémon she saw on becoming aware of the dream. Not Kyurem, but a Minccino. The gray furred Pokémon was digging around in the snow, brushing aside large swaths with her tail, then digging if something caught her eye. But she looked disappointed at digging up a reddish pebble. Tossing it aside, she kept looking.

"Hey Minccino," Hilda said, getting her attention. "Lost something?"
Her large ears pricked up, then she looked. On seeing a human, she seemed to forget her item and became curious. She came over and sniffed at her feet, then her hands when Hilda knelt down.

"Strange finding a Pokémon like you here," Hilda said. "I wouldn't have expected Kyurem to be dreaming about a cute Pokémon around. Unless it's a general place that we're in."

"Kuuu," the Minccino said. Then she hopped off and started searching again.

After looking around and not seeing Kyurem immediately, Hilda went over to where the Minccino was searching. "What'd you lose?" she asked, not really expecting an answer she could understand.

"Kruu chi cha," the Pokémon replied. "Shaa shuru cha."

Hilda brushed some cold but dry snow aside. Underneath, there was a spot of yellow. She pulled it out, strangely enough finding a yellow daisy there. There was even a little comb attached to it, something that would stick in fur. "Wouldn't expect to see this under the snow."

"Cosh sha!" the Minccino exclaimed, coming over and waving her paw and patting her head. She wanted it.

"Oh, this is it?" Hilda put the daisy comb in the Minccino's fur. As it was thick, it stayed easily. "Cute."

"Cha pa." The Pokémon bowed, then held a paw up. "Mi cho?"

"I'm looking for Kyurem," Hilda said, taking the paw. "Do you know where he is?"

"Ku re!" At hearing that, the Minccino hopped off along the tree line. She paused a moment, waiting.

Hilda got up and followed. "Okay, I'm right after you."

It didn't take long for the Minccino and Hilda to find Kyurem then. He was in his dragon form, but mostly within the trees so that it was difficult to see him. For a moment, she thought the smaller Pokémon would take off once they found him. Instead, the Minccino chirped happily and ran right up to Kyurem, hopping up and hugging his face. "Ke cha!"

Kyurem replied with a surprisingly gentle and soft rumble. And then he spoke, "Hello to you, Mimi."

"Hi Kyurem," Hilda said, coming over and finding a rock to sit on. "You know her?"

"There's a few Pokémon that have managed to earn my trust," he said. "She's one, from a long time ago."

"Ah. I found her over there, looking for her flower." She leaned against a tree and found that it wasn't a bad spot to sit. In front of them, there was a dip in the ground, a large crater. The snow all over the ground was pristine and fresh, with only her and Mimi's footprints showing. And even those were rapidly vanishing, leaving a perfect white coating over everything. For an ice Pokémon, this would be a beautiful and homey place. "So are you going to explain what you're doing with me?" Hilda asked. Mimi had dropped back to the ground and came back over to her, crawling into her lap.

"What makes you think that I would?" he asked.
"Well we're in a dream, just the two of us and those in your memory." She rubbed the Minccino's head. "There's nobody to overhear us, unless either of us sleep talks or something."

"True." He didn't say anything for a minute. Since he did that quite a bit, Hilda started playing with Mimi, teasingly tapping her nose. "I suppose it would be safe."

"I can keep a secret," Hilda insisted. "Even if I make a lot of noise normally, I know when to keep quiet."

"Hmm. Let me see if I can show you something." He closed his eyes and lowered his head.

For a little while, the snow covered crater remained. Then things grew fuzzy. The snowy crater returned, but it was very different. The forest that had been around them, including the tree she had been sitting against, was burned down to the ground. Most were black stumps, but a few had been split and ripped apart, like lightning had shattered them. Hilda had to sit up quickly before she fell over.

Kyurem opened his eyes, then nodded towards the southeast. "Look over that way. What's there?"

After looking, she said, "Doesn't look like anything. Everything's been torched or wrecked."

"Lacunosa should be that way," he explained. "And it should be obvious with all the trees gone. It's got tall white walls and buildings that tower over that. But it wasn't there when I woke up."

"I haven't heard of anything happening to Laconusa," Hilda said.

"That's because it hasn't happened yet. At this time, while we are sleeping after a long day, I am here, in hibernation under the ground. But for my waking self, I am from about a year in advance."

"You're from the future?"

"That's what I just said."

Hilda nodded. "I know, but it's weird to think about. How did you do that?"

"I had help from..." he paused, considering it. "A peer. I asked to be sent back to reverse this destruction. And for that, I need to protect you."

She raised an eyebrow. "And how does protecting me prevent this?" she gestured to the burnt down forest.

"Part of the problem is that I do not know exactly why that is so," Kyurem said. "When I woke up, I knew that something terrible had happened even before I came above ground. It took me some time to accept it, but Zekrom and Reshiram were dead."

"Dead? But they're immortal spirits. You're not supposed to die."

"Right, we're not supposed to. But they did. The three of us... I knew because my soul felt the deaths. I was enraged, of course, but when I came looking for who was responsible, I found that the entire region of Unova was in shambles. Wiped out just like it is here. And the power of that destruction is much like theirs. And much of it is not.

"I found some other immortal spirits and asked what they knew. But there wasn't much; the humans didn't understand it either. What we could find out is that heroes chosen and recognized by my siblings had come into power. They fought bitterly, unlike any before them. In that fighting,
they caused the destruction of Unova, unintentionally. They were fairly certain of that, the other legends. But in figuring out what had caused them to clash so violently, we could only discover that your death had been a major trigger."

Hearing that caused a momentary queasiness in Hilda. "Then I'm supposed to die within the year?"

"I'm going to make sure you survive," Kyurem said emphatically. "But I must also figure out who the chosen heroes are and what we can do to defuse the situation before it explodes and leads to this." He then reverted the crater woods to its undisturbed peaceful form.

"Huh. Then we have to figure out who would call them and what kind of problems are about."

"Plasma worries me," he said. "They take things out of context, and to extremes. That leads to trouble. But I've also seen strange signs around, which I don't know how to interpret." He twitched his wings, flicking some snow aside. "At least Zekrom and Reshiram are safe at this time. They are in hibernation, but because of that, they won't know what the danger is. They tend to follow the lead of their human partner. With what they do, it's good. But with what could happen, it has me concerned."

"Plasma could be trouble. But given the ones I've met so far, especially earlier tonight, I don't think they would qualify as heroes."

"True." He leaned over and nudged her shoulder. "You don't seem too bothered by learning that you might die in the near future."

"Well all of us are going to die sometime," Hilda said. "Maybe even you immortals. That's why I believe in living life now and enjoying things while you can."

"Why do you believe that?"

"That's what Pop said, especially once he got cancer."

"It's because your father died."

Hilda shrugged. "Well not my father, exactly. Pop was actually my uncle; he lived with me and Mom up until two years ago, when he passed away."

"Then who is your father?"

"I dunno. But Mom says he's a jerk, so I don't mind much. Pop was around."

"Kuu cha shi," the Minccino said, patting Hilda's nose.

She patted her back. "Yeah, he was cool."

Kyurem sniffed. "She actually said 'just like me'."

While the rest of the conversation might have been interesting, the dream ended there.

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Morning, 11/29

Even though it had been over two weeks now, he still wasn't sure what exactly he needed to do. Kyurem knew that he was needed to protect his homeland, and he knew that Hilda was a key part of that. How or why she was so important was still unknown. She didn't seem devoted to any particular cause and didn't have any real plans or goals. She was just a mass of potential, energy,
and weirdness that was making her way through Unova.

Then again, that made him the best choice for being her guardian.

Maybe not the perfect choice, he reflected as he started to wake up. He usually wasn't picked out for this kind of role and he could only think of one other time when he'd guarded someone. And that had not ended well. He was nil, the empty circle. He was better suited for demolishing a stagnant state and returning it to zero, to be rebuilt by his siblings. However, the current state of Unova was far from stagnant. It was in the midst of a challenge and potential change.

And that came from Team Plasma. Kyurem wasn't about to back them in any manner. Once he had learned of their presence through Ghetsis in Accumula, he could readily see how they were a possible threat to Unova. But there were so many other things that were uncertain now which could be threats. He definitely wasn't seeing the full picture yet. Hopefully he would in time.

"Kyurem?" a girl's voice called to him.

It was morning. He supposed that Hilda would be moving on to the next town now. Not bothering to reply, he opened his eyes and sat up. Sleeping in a bed like a human had been odd at first, but he needed to be ready at all times.

"Kyurem!" All of a sudden, a bundle of gray fur came leaping at him, grabbing hold of his chest... in a hug? Startled, he got hold of the Minccino nuzzling against him. "You look funny as a human! But I got to be here, yay!"

She had a yellow daisy hair clip near her ear, even. "Mimi?" Kyurem asked, feeling shocked.

"No way, is she really that Minccino from last night?" Hilda asked, coming out of the bathroom. "She was here when I woke up and has been trying to poke you awake.

The Minccino glanced at her, but soon was looking up to him, a smile on her face. "Yeah, it's me!" she said in her usual perky way. "I knew you were going on a big adventure with lots of danger, but I wished and wished really hard that I could come with you this time. Especially when she came to our home; she's a nice human, I can tell already. And then, I met this really pretty bird lady Pokémon, and she said she would help me go to where you always went. And here I am now!" She hugged him again. "I'm so happy; I get to adventure with Daddy!"

It had to be Mimi. No other Pokémon would talk to him that way. Hugging her back, he said, "It must have been Cresselia."

Over on the windowsill, Fedora tilted his hat back. "Really? ****, I wouldn't have taken you to be the father to that cutie."

"Watch your language," Kyurem said, making sure to speak in Pokémon language. "She might be adopted, but she is my daughter."

"Yeesh," the Snivy said, hiding back under his hat.

Mimi dropped back into Kyurem's lap. "Oh, and, and, the bird lady had a message for you! She told me to tell you, um, that they're all concerned about this, and others may support you too in your mission. Cause they don't want the bad things to happen."

Most likely, they were concerned about the potential deaths of his siblings, afraid for themselves if the knowledge to kill an immortal got into mortal minds. But it brought Mimi back to him, so Kyurem didn't even feel his usual indifference. He'd have to speak with Cresselia about this at
some time. "I see."

Hilda came over with a black Pokeball in hand. "She even came with this; she's already captured. Since she's your friend," Fedora snickered at this, "do you mind her being along on the team?"

"I don't mind," Kyurem said, not even sparing a doubt for it. "It's... good to see her like this."
It was a cold morning that Sunday when Hilda left Striaton along Route 3. The overcast sky threatened rain later, along with an all day chill. Dressed in a pink and orange sweater and heavy jeans, she didn't find it too bad. Kyurem found it perfectly comfortable, despite wearing only those thin black clothes, and Mimi had her thick fur already. Juliet and Fedora opted to stay in their Pokeballs, though.

"Winter's not that far off," Hilda said. "I wonder if it's going to snow. Sometimes it does early."

"Not cold enough for that," Kyurem said. "But I can make it so."

She smiled. 'That'd be neat, but no. Wait for a more dramatic time to change the weather. As for the plans for today, we'll spend this morning training, but after lunch, I've got a job for us to do. Hopefully the rain holds off. We should still be able to make Nacrene by this evening to meet up with Laura. But we'll see.'

"Chi sha riii," Mimi said, sounding like she couldn't wait to show off what she could do.

"Oh, look who's up ahead," Hilda said, spotting a black haired boy at a crossing in the route. "Hey boogerface!"

"Whaddya want, clown?" Cheren called back, but grinned and waved. "Morning Hilda!"

"Good morning!" She and her Pokémon came up to him. "How's it going?"

"Not bad. I already caught a new Pokémon this morning." He looked down at the gray Minccino, puzzled. "Where did you pick up her?"

"Mi cha!" she said cheerily, waving.

"In my dreams," Hilda said. "Her name's Mimi."

Cheren raised an eyebrow at this. "No seriously, where did you find a Minccino around here? Juniper said that she had to go to another city to catch hers."

"Technically, it was my dream," Kyurem said.

Hilda nodded. "Remember when Fennel and Amanita wanted help last night? They made this device that lets people who wear these bracelets share dreams. Even a human and Pokémon can do this. Fennel did say that they've gotten items before, but I haven't told them about her yet."

He scratched his head. "Really? Huh, who knew?"

"Bet you're regretting not helping last night," she teased him. "Though I don't know if Bianca got one too."

Cheren shrugged. "I would have fallen asleep if I'd stayed up much longer. Anyhow, I'm focusing on the next Gym now. They're going to get progressively more difficult, so we've got to get things in gear. I heard there was a cave... whoa!" He grabbed Hilda and pulled her aside, just as a pair of Plasma knights went running by.
"Hey, watch where you're going, punks!" Hilda yelled after them. "Thanks, bro."

"That was close," he said. "They nearly ran into you. I wonder what… Bianca?"

Hilda stepped back from Cheren and turned to see her other friend running up with a younger girl running alongside her. "Oh, hi guys," Bianca said, almost out of breath. "Wow they run fast. Did you see where those Plasma guys went?"

"They went further east, but that's a dead end," Cheren said. "Why're you running after them?"

"Cause they had my Sewaddle, and, and…" the girl sniffed, rubbing tears from her eyes.

"Oh, it was awful!" Bianca said. "Those bullies beat this girl in a Pokémon battle, and then they took her Pokémon right from her. I was going to get them, but we ran all the way from Striaton," she took a deep breath.

"Well don't worry, we'll get them," Cheren said. "You stay with the girl; come on Hilda!"

"Right after ya!" she said, running with him down the route. Mimi and Kyurem were able to keep up.

After running a mile along a lake, they came to a rock face blocking the path. To the north, there was a cave entrance. There was a Plasma knight standing there, but they couldn't tell if it was one of the pair they were looking for. They glanced at each other and silently agreed to check it out anyhow.

"Halt!" the guard said to them as they approached. He even held his hand up and looked stern. "We are conducting private business here, so Wellspring Cavern is off-limits to the public."

"Never let that stop us before," Hilda said.

"We're here because someone in your group stole a Pokémon from a little girl," Cheren explained. "We're going to take it back."

He shook his head. "We don't steal. That is unthinkable. But we are liberating Pokémon from foolish Trainers. There is a difference."

"Yeah right," Hilda said. "You took what isn't yours, and that's stealing."

"You are fools to think that you can own Pokémon," the Plasma guard said. A second one came to the entrance, watching them. "Pokémon are their own creatures and don't deserve to be held captive against their will. We keep Pokémon as our equals and allies. Everyone else doesn't deserve to be with them."

"Most of them aren't being held against their will," Cheren said. "And we're not going to leave without that girl's friend. You guys made her really upset."

"But children are some of the worst offenders among so-called Trainers," the other guard said, joining in on the conversation. "If they aren't mature enough to take care of themselves, then they are not mature enough to take care of another living being. That's the word that came down from our King last week and we're enforcing it."

"That still doesn't give you the right to steal the Pokémon," Cheren said.

"Then we'll make you see our way," the first guard said, taking a Pokedex and releasing a Lillipup.
"If you lose, then we're freeing your Pokémon too."

"Yeah right," Hilda said. Before long, she was set up with Mimi against the first guard while Cheren took on the second. The Minccino was all pumped up and excited. Out of the corner of her eye, Hilda saw that Kyurem looked a bit concerned about Mimi. So she had to focus and reassure him that they'd be all right. "Okay girl, tickle it!"

"Chi chi!" Mimi chirped, bounding over and grabbing the Lillipup out of its attempt to tackle her. There was a scuffle between them, but the Minccino got out of it unharmed. On the other hand, the Lillipup looked confused and uncertain about what was going on.

"Come on, we have to win, for our King!" the knight said to the Lillipup. "Defeat that mangy furball."

"Si na," she said indignantly. Kyurem just glowered at the man, making him shiver.

"Now don't be insulting Pokémon," Hilda chided him. "Mimi, beat up the 'pup."

The Lillipup shook his head, then barked and ran at Mimi again. She met with him and began repeatedly slapping the 'pup in the face. Not once did she let him retaliate and he collapsed into unconsciousness at the end of the Doubleslap assault. Mimi twirled around and winked at the knight before running back to Hilda's side.

Although the guard made to release another Pokémon (he had four, Hilda noted by the holder he had), a female knight came out of the cave and interrupted them. "What's going on out here? You're making such a racket."

"These teens are accusing us of being thieves," the first guard said. "We were going to stop them and free their Pokémon."

"You are a bunch of thieves," Cheren said, with his Tepig snorting in agreement. "Stubborn ones too."

She shook her head. "Trainers like them will never see the right way of things. Defeat them and take their Pokémon."

"You will not do that," Kyurem said, growling. He came forward and summoned his ice blade to make his point. The air even seemed to get a few degrees colder.

"And what gives any of you the right to stop us?" the female knight asked.

A yelp came from just behind her as another male knight came into the daylight. "Aaah, that…"

"What is it?" she snapped.

"That's Kyurem!" he said, staggering back into the cave.

"That's right," Hilda said when he just nodded. "Give us back that girl's Sewaddle."

"Give back all of the Pokémon that you've taken," Kyurem corrected.

The female knight sputtered, while the three guys seemed uncertain. "But, but you… why are you with these two?"

"I have chosen to go with her," he said, indicating Hilda. "And she is worthy. You, on the other
hand, are most likely not."
"Of course not," the first guard said. "But our King is, you'll see!"

"We're following our orders," the female said, trying to save some face. "But if you insist, we can get that Sewaddle and then you can leave…"

"Hey!" Another female knight came out. "The, ah… what's going on out here?" She looked nervously at the ice sword.

"What is it?" she demanded, barely keeping herself from adding that knight's name in front of outsiders.

"The, uh, Pokémon we were, um, examining for health reasons, they're gone. The bag is gone."

Kyurem snorted. "You can't even take care of the ones you have."

"I don't know what happened," the second female knight said, flustered.

The apparent leader of the group seemed frustrated, but wary of Kyurem. She took something from her pocket and made it click. "In that case… let's go!" A cloud of white smoke soon filled the air, irritating their lungs and making them cough. But when the smoke cleared, the Plasma members were gone.

"Where'd those cowards go?" Cheren asked.

Hilda looked around, but didn't see any sign of them. "I dunno, but I'd rather have the ninja knights on my side. Anyhow, what about the stolen Pokémon?" She stepped into the cave, hoping that the Plasma knights hadn't been lying about leaving them behind.

The dirt floor of the cave was disturbed with many footprints. Whatever they had been doing here, Plasma hadn't left behind any litter or clues about what it was. There were electric lights on the walls, dim blue ones so that there was enough for humans to see by, but not so much light that it disturbed the native Pokémon. Several large flat rocks made platforms and ledges, while the sound of slow-running water and droplets was beyond that.

"You'd think that they were never here, except for the footprints," Cheren said, shifting his glasses back.

"And unless they were bluffing us, they don't know what happened either." Hilda put her hands on her hips and looked around. Then she shouted, "Hey, anybody in here seen some stolen Pokémon? We were gonna take them back home."

"Turrrriii," a rattling call came from a platform. A dark Rock Pokémon with a single yellow 'eye' looked at them, but didn't offer any help.

There was a scuffling sound from the ground ahead. Then a whirl of dust kicked up, obscuring a movement of blue. In seconds, it died down, revealing a large burlap sack that hadn't been there before. The dirt below it looked a bit messy, but no different than the rest.

Hilda went over to the bag. "What was that about?" she wondered aloud, kneeling down to open the bag. Inside, there were around three dozen Pokéballs, mostly the red and white models, but a few others were mixed in. "These should be the Pokémon, though," she added, picking one up. Its status screen was active, showing that a Vullaby was inside.
"That was probably a Drilbur," Cheren said, coming over. "I've read that they like to give people common gemstones while remaining unseen." He bowed his head. "Thanks Drilbur, wherever you are."

"Yeah, thanks!" She picked up the heavy sack. "Let's get this back to Striaton."

On the way back to town, they found Bianca and the girl still at the crossroads of Route 3. She said that her Pokémon was inside a Love Ball, so it was easy to pick out the pink with red hearts one from the rest. She was so delighted that she immediately called out her Pokémon. At first, it seemed like there was just a small bundles of leaves on the ground. "Chloe!" the girl called, picking up the shivering Pokémon.

"Pik?" A little yellow face peeked out of the leaves, looking up to see who was picking her up. Then she peeped and nuzzled against her Trainer's chin, happy to see her again.

"Thanks, you guys," the girl said, smiling and keeping her Pokémon close. "But I don't have anything to pay you back with."

"Don't worry about it," Hilda said. "But if you could, would you show us where the police station is in Striaton so that we can get the rest of these Pokémon back?"

"Sure," she said. "It's near my home, but I was in the gardens when they took her."

"Then let's get you and the rest of these Pokémon back home," Bianca said, patting the girl on the back. "Just remember to tell your friends not to accept challenges from those Plasma people, okay?"

"That's probably the safest course of action," Cheren said.

The three friends saw the little girl back home first, then walked south of her apartment building to reach the police station. Even though it was only mid-morning, the building seemed oddly quiet. There was a police car and a pair of bikes parked nearby, with slots indicating that at least four policemen were out on bike patrol. Inside, the first area seemed open and inviting, but there hardly seemed to be any work going on.

There was a receptionist and the police chief there, along with the three Gym Leaders. Neither side seemed too happy with the other. Feeling that she didn't want to tick off either the police or the League staff, Hilda tried to be polite. "Excuse me, but we have a bunch of stolen Pokémon here that need to get back to…"

"So you're the ones stealing the Pokémon?" the police chief interrupted. "Don't think you can get off the hook with this feeble attempt to make things right."

"I don't think these kids are the thieves," Cress said firmly. "They've been around for the past two weeks, yes, but their behavior has been exemplary."

"We got them back from the thieves of Team Plasma," Cheren added, frowning at the accusation. "And if it wasn't for the assistance of some wild Pokémon, we wouldn't have gotten them all back. We brought them here to get them returned to their proper owners."

"Yeah, so you ought to be looking to arrest the Plasma members," Hilda said. "There were three men and two women that we saw, and they…"

"Nonsense," the chief said. "Plasma might be attracting extremists, but they're not involved with illegal behaviors."
"That's who we fought to get these Pokémon back," she told him. Hilda glanced at the burlap sack, but it had no markings to prove that.

"And that is who people are reporting stealing their Pokémon," Chili said. "They are unmistakable."

The police chief shook his head. "Then they are imposters. Since you've gone out of your way to bring the lost Pokémon here, we'll…"

"We'll handle returning them," Cress said, holding a hand up to the chief.

When the chief glared at them, Cilan added, "Well it is within our authority to handle crimes against Pokémon, according to global agreements and rules within the greater Pokémon League Council."

Chili nodded and waved to them. "Let's head for the Pokécenter; they'll have the best records for getting all the Pokémon back in the right hands."

"What was that about?" Bianca asked as they left the building.

"Officially, we probably shouldn't say anything," Cilan said when his two brothers didn't seem sure how to respond.

"What about unofficially?" Hilda said, wondering if they would explain.

"We're not exactly sure what's been going on," Chili said. "We managed to recover a pair of stolen Pokémon earlier this week and we turned those in."

"But they never got returned to their Trainer," Cress said, troubled by it. "We know that others in the police force have been working against Plasma in what ways they can, but that isn't the only worrisome thing that the chief here has done."

"There's no certain proof of things yet," Chili finished. "We'll do what we can to keep things going smoothly, including getting these Pokémon back."

The next two hours pretty crazy, what with checking all the stolen Pokéballs for ID info, calling up the Trainers, and meeting with the people who could come by the center that morning. It made for a lot of happy people and Pokémon, though. According to the center records, none of the Trainers were abusive or neglectful. Only Plasma seemed to think that way.

Then Cress brought the three of them together and gave them envelopes. "I'm sure you've heard plenty of gratitude this morning, but thanks again for your efforts in getting these Pokémon back. I made a call over to a breeder in Nacrene who does work for the League and made arrangements for you three to get a free gift Pokémon from her. Be careful around Team Plasma in the future; we're not sure what they're capable of, but things don't look good."

At a quarter after one, Hilda and Kyurem back near the daycares on Route 3. But instead of passing by, they walked up to the two buildings. On the right, there was a Pokémon daycare where Pokémon were cared for if their Trainers had to be away. And on the left, there was a daycare for human children, to watch over them when their parents were working, usually in Castelia. They needed to be in the left one for the afternoon's job.

As it was Sunday, only a few children were here. Most were just coming outside then, out to run around the playground with Pokémon, either their own or ones that lived at the daycares. Hilda
found one of the teachers and, after passing over the job notice, was taken to one four year old boy who was standing off to the side. "Hilda, this is Keith," the teacher said. "He's been tested for psychic powers and came up as a strong one. Keith, this is Hilda, the Trainer's who's going to help you catch your first Pokémon."

"Hi Keith," Hilda said, smiling and offering to shake hands with him.

He looked at her warily, but then shook her hand. "Um, hi. Why does your Pokémon have a hat?"

"Sniii," Fedora said, standing up proudly. It was warmer now, so he wanted to walk out with them.

"Because he wants to wear one," Hilda said.

"Keith's parents want him to have a Psychic Pokémon to help him learn his abilities," the teacher said, after giving the Snivy a puzzled look. "They don't have much time, but the best thing to do is go east to Wellspring Cave. There's Woobats in there; it's early for them to be up and about outside, but you might find some inside the first chamber."

She nodded. "All right, I was there just this morning. Do you need to get anything before we go, Keith?"

"Um, I have some Pokeballs," he said, then went inside to find them.

Keith didn't want to talk much at first. On the way, Hilda spoke instead, telling him a story of when she, Bianca, and Cheren had gone exploring some caves along the beaches near Nuvema. There were usually a few Woobats in there, but her hometown didn't have a large population of them. "What do you think of Woobats?" she asked, trying to get him involved.

"Um…" he shifted his large blue jacket, one that was marked with the daycare's name on the back. "I hope I find a nice one."

"We'll do our best to get one like that," she said.

Then he looked up at Kyurem, who had been quiet as usual. "You're not human."

"No I'm not," he replied.

"That's Kyurem," Hilda said. "He's a dragon Pokémon, but he's pretending to be a human to fit in."

Keith brought his hand up and waved it in a circle, still looking at the dragon boy. "He has a big aura, with, um, stars. Lots of them. Most people, and Pokémon, and, um, animals and stuff, they don't have stars."

"You may not see someone with an aura like mine ever again," Kyurem said. "It's rare."

"Um, but…" Keith looked down, "Um, I saw two others with stars in their auras. They weren't human either, I think."

Kyurem frowned. "Other legends walking among the people? I haven't heard about that."

"But you'd know them if you saw them?" Hilda asked.

"I don't see auras," he said. "But I can recognize others by their scent if I've encountered them before."

Keith then looked back up at her. "I know a good story too. But I wasn't in it."
"Do you want to tell it?" she asked. "I'd like to hear it if you don't mind."

Smiling a bit finally, he said, "Okay. So, um, there were these two brothers, once upon a time, and they were really good and wanted to stop people from fighting and being mean to each other. Their father told them that they had to have power in order to get people to listen, and so they got the power of legend to help them. But, their father was evil and he wanted to be even more powerful by stealing what they had, so he made the two brothers mad at each other and they fought one time, only they were really really good and so they stopped fighting and went back to helping people, and they made the whole Unova region and people were happy because of it, and, um…” he paused, blushing. "Um, I'm not so good at telling stories."

"But that is a really good story," Hilda said. The story of how Unova came about was well known, interesting to many people. Although, "I don't think I had heard about the brothers' father being involved before."

"A lot of details got lost over the passage of time," Kyurem said.

Keith then tugged at her hand. "But, um, I heard my Dad say that history repeats itself a lot cause people forget that it did happen before and make the same mistake. You should remember that story, cause, um, history is happening again, and, it might be important."

Hilda smiled at him. "Sure thing. I wouldn't want to ignore the word of a psychic, even a young one."

"Um, thanks. I don't really know what it all means, though. I just notice stuff that other people don't, and I don't know what it's about. I hope my Woobat knows more."

"I hope so too." She pointed off to the north. "The entrance is not that far now; we'll go in and start looking."

Back inside Wellspring Cave, it seemed more active than it had been in the morning. The little Rock types, the Roggenrolas, were walking about the area, watching them but wary of both Fedora and Juliet (when the Panpour came out to help search too). A dust cloud from a Drilbur appeared once, but all that came of it was a pale green gem that Keith noted to have a weak Grass type aura to it. He didn't want it, so Hilda kept the Grass Gem for later.

A wide patch of dark water blocked off their access to deeper parts of the cave, especially since Hilda couldn't tell how deep the pool was. But back past the raised platforms, they found a group of Woobats huddled on the ceiling. Occasionally, one or two fluttered away into the darkness.

"Okay Keith, I think the best way to catch a Pokémon is to talk to it and ask if it wants to come," Hilda said. "So you call over to them and tell them why you came here."

"But what if they want to fight?" Keith asked.

"My Pokémon will help," she said, getting nods from Juliet, Mimi, and Fedora. "Not Kyurem, though; he'd probably freeze this whole cavern over."

"That would take more energy then is worth for the task at hand," he said. "But I could."

"That would help us cross the pool," she said.

"Um, that's okay," Keith said. "I'll try asking. Um…” he let go of her hand and looked up at the group of fuzzy bats on the ceiling. "Um, Woobat? I'm looking for someone to help with my powers, so, um, if you could help…”
All at once, the Woobat group came off the ceiling and flew all over the cavern. It was confusing, as the flutter of leathery wings was all around them. But as most of them settled off in distant corners, one Woobat was flying over the pool close to them. "Wooo ooo?"

"Can you help Keith figure out what the things he sees means?" Hilda asked the Pokémon.

"Chi chi chit." It bobbed around in the air, but with its closed eyes and large heart snout, it was hard to tell what it meant.

The young boy held his hand up to the Pokémon, first looking puzzled, then happy. "I think he wants to be my friend!"

"That's great," she said. "But come out from over the water, Woobat, so I don't have to send Juliet after the Pokeball."

A minute later, Keith had caught the male Woobat and nicknamed him Buddy. The job was worth 6000 Poke, which Hilda felt was a good exchange.

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Route 3 was longer than it seemed, thanks to having to walk most of the way around a large lake, then crossing a low bridge before the water fed into the quick moving river. Between the morning rescue operation, the Pokémon catching with Keith, a lengthy call with her Mom about the Gym battle, and fighting other Trainers along the way, it was dusk by the time Hilda reached the bridge. The sun was setting in a brilliant orange and yellow glow over the treetops, while small portions of mist came off the glowing lake surface. There were some crickets chirping, hidden in the grass, but the cooling air contributed to a hushed atmosphere.

Hilda and the three regular Pokémon with her were feeling worn down after the long day; the Pokémon were all in their Pokeballs, resting already. Kyurem was being unreadable, walking alongside her across the lake. Even with the sweater, she felt the cool moist air on her skin. A mug of hot cocoa would be nice now. Or hot apple cider. She wondered if it was the right time for that and if any cafes in Nacrene or Castelia would serve it. Things would probably get better once they got away from the lake, so she led the way in a quick walk.

About halfway across, a third set of footsteps began across the wooden bridge. She and Kyurem looked ahead to see a guy at the Nacrene edge, waving over to them. "Hello there, Hilda, right? Funny that I should run into you tonight."

Him again. Hilda wondered how well he did with teasing. "Whaddya want with me, vamp?" she called back.

Hilbert came over to meet them on the way, smiling. "Now that is uncalled for. I haven't tried seducing you, so why call me a vamp?"

"Because you're a vampire, duh," she replied. "I don't have the means yet to prove that without killing you, but I will, mark my words."

"Now that's just silly. See?" On getting a few feet from them, he slid back his upper lip and ran a finger across his top teeth. "Perfectly normal teeth here. What would make you think that?"

"Because you're interesting and infuriating at the same time." Hilda kept walking, forcing the other two to follow along. "And you lure so many girls around you; that's just not normal."

Hilbert chuckled. "Well I can't argue against that, but I don't think it proves your case. Anyhow, I wanted to talk with you again."
"No," she said quickly.

Puzzled, he asked, "No what?"

"You're not getting Fedora's fedora back. He loves that thing and is too awesome to be without it."

This time, he waved a hand. "Oh, no, not that. I can get another one and there isn't much point in fussing about it much longer. No, I wanted to talk to you about your battle in Striaton Gym yesterday. I saw it earlier today and I was impressed. You don't often find a new League contender that can put on a show like that. You do have Kyurem here," he waved towards the dragon boy, "but it was more than that. The fact that you were willing to sacrifice your 'strong' member to make a winning strategy work, few people can handle doing that, and do that with style."

"I made sure it was okay with him first."

Without warning, Kyurem brought out an ice blade and very nearly struck Hilbert in the chest with it. Both of the teens had to stop with that out. "Just what do you want with her?" he said, growling at the end of his question.

"Whoa, chill that temper, Kyurem," Hilda said. "What's with the threat?"

"I only had an offer…" Hilbert started to say.

"He's using Attract," Kyurem stated. "Not only that, but he is getting around the usual gender rules. You are a dangerous man, Hilbert."

She looked at Hilbert. "You can use Attract?"

That succeeded in ruffling him, getting him to back off and sputter. "But, I, that's nonsense! I've tested positive for psychic abilities, true, but only on a human level. There's no way I could use a Pokémon move like that."

"I know," Kyurem said. "Yet you are doing just that." He put the blade down at his side. "Speak your piece, but don't try my patience."

"You have got one hell of a bodyguard, Hilda," Hilbert stated, looking at Kyurem a moment longer. Then he turned to her and smiled, sparkling a bit. "Well I think you'll be an interesting person to follow, but the Pokémon League has many surprises along the way. I thought…"

"You're still doing it," Kyurem warned.

"Well I don't know how to stop it then," he replied. "But Hilda, I thought I'd offer to come along with you and teach you some of the tricks of the trade. You know, to get you that extra edge. I think it would be worthwhile for both of us if we traveled together."

He was offering to travel with her, and teach her some of what he knew? It was a tempting offer. But then, knowing that he was somehow using Attract put Hilda on guard. She had noticed it before, she realized. Having a reason why he affected her feelings made it easier to resist the attempt. "That's nice, but no thanks," she said, heading back towards Nacrene.

Sounding genuinely surprised, Hilbert tried to get ahead of her and asked, "Why not? You could get done with the League months quicker with my help."

Hilda pointed at him. "Well for one thing, you haven't beaten the Unova League yet, or any League for that matter. You've just been going here and there, not finishing what you start. For
another thing, I don't want to have to deal with your rabid fan girls."

"Now wait a…"

"HILBERT!" As they got to the end of the bridge, a girl with pink hair and an excessive amount of ribbons bounded over to him. "I've found you again! Now can we talk, huh, just us two?"

"Exactly," Hilda said, continuing on.

'Uh, I was talking with her," Hilbert tried to say, giving them a pleading look not to be left alone with that girl.

"That's the trouble with power you can't control," Kyurem said, hinting at an unseen smirk.

"Are you his girlfriend?" the other girl demanded to know.

Smiling cheerily, Hilda said, "Nope! I don't want to spend the time to find something to impress him that much with, like a shiny Pokémon. I'm fine with being single."

She looked between them. "Really? That's what it would take?"

"Well what do you expect from a guy who can attract every girl who so much as sets eyes him?" she asked, enjoying teasing them both. "Most guys have to give the girl gifts to get attention, but it's the other way around with Hilbert."

The pink haired girl backed up, looking uncertain. "Um, well then… uh, I'll see you later!" She ran off back to Nacrene.

Hilbert put his hands over his face, sighing in relief. "Oh thank the gods. She's been a nuisance for days. I owe you one."

"Thanks, I'll keep that in mind," Hilda said as if it were a threat. "But I'm still declining the traveling offer. If you don't mind, I've got business to attend to in Nacrene. See ya around!" Then she hurried off towards town.

In an old warehouse on the east edge of Nacrene, Hilda met with Juliet's owner Laura. The place itself was quite lively, with almost a dozen Pokémon coming in to welcome the Panpour back home. It was a fairly clean place, with a fenced in yard and barn right next to it. But on close look, one noticed the new-looking locks and security cameras around. With this many Pokémon around, she wasn't going to risk another theft.

"Pokémon come and go around here, but Juliet is one who always stays," Laura said, silently getting after a Pansear trying to creep onto a table. "She's one of my darlings."

"She was a great help with class and the Gym," Hilda said. Then she grinned. "So does she have a Romeo around?"

Laura giggled. "I do have a Romeo here, but she actually likes Lear better. Go figure; Pokémon aren't quite that literary. Oh, and I heard from Cress about you."

"Yeah, me and my friends busted another Plasma theft," she said, finding the envelope easily in one of her bag's pockets.

"Yes, I've met the other two already. You're all good people; I let them have a Pansear and Pansage that were particularly promising. But I have another one that I think will help you well. Olette!
Come here, girl."

There was a click and a rustle before a gray-black Pokémon came out from under a table. Despite having long claws, she didn't tear the tablecloth as she moved it aside. She then looked up at them, not shy but calm and curious.

Laura scratched the Pokémon's head. "This Drilbur was from someone who wanted to get a special move, but she ended up with something else and the Trainer took her brother and not her. Olette's a quiet one, but I can tell that she has a lot of potential for battling. I'd normally ask a higher price on her, but given that you've returned Juliet to me and helped so many people in Striaton, I'm fine with giving her over to you."

"Thanks." She held her hand out to the Drilbur. "Hey Olette! I'm a bit kooky and Kyurem here is much too serious. But if you can deal with that, we should have a great time together."

Olette sniffed the air and pricked her ears, waving a paw trying to find her hand. Apparently, a Drilbur's sight wasn't the greatest. But she managed to clasp Hilda's hand and smile in response.
morning, 12/3

_Nacrene Historical Research Museum and Pokémon League Gym_

_Museum Hours: 7:30 AM – 11:30 PM, all days except Monday_

_Gym Hours: 1:00 PM – 5:00 PM, all days except Sunday and Monday_

_Research Library hours: 7:30 AM – 11:00 PM, all days except Monday_

_To challenge the Gym Leader, please call for a reservation. If you need the library during Gym hours, please be aware that there will be Pokémon battles going on in that facility. Fossil Pokémon revival is available; please speak to the archeology tech on duty for more information._

On rechecking that information, N highlighted the Gym's number on his phone and called it. It was a damp morning, with fog hanging around the trees and in the streets. Down near his feet, the Tympole hopped about in puddles. N had come up with the nickname Lucky for him, and the Tympole seemed happy with it.

Lucky had recovered well; there was still that hole in his tail, but that would go away upon evolution. He was doing well enough that he was play-pretending. "Don't taunt me, because I'm the mighty Kyogre!" he squealed. Then he wiggled in preparation. "And, tidal wave!" He leapt into another puddle and caused a large splash over the sidewalk and N's shoes.

"Isn't Kyogre's rival a Ground Pokémon?" N asked him. The phone was still ringing.

Lucky flipped his tail in the water, disappointed. "Oh yeah, so she won't like me much. But I'll get strong and prove myself worthy. I'll make it so that I can defeat Groudon!" He then set off pretending to do just that.

At the same time, the phone call connected. N spoke with the receptionist and set up an appointment to challenge the Gym that afternoon. While he was on the phone, he noticed Val approaching him. She was dressed differently than usual, in a beret, pom-pom scarf, poncho, and pants that were in a multitude of colors. Normally, she was in t-shirts and blue jeans. Lucky hopped over closer to N when she came, uncertainty radiating in his posture.

"Good morning, N," she said cheerfully when he closed his cell phone. "How're things going?"

"On schedule," he replied. "What are you doing dressed like that?"

She picked one end of the scarf and twirled the pom-pom around. "I like blending into a place, and this city tends to attract artists. Could I hang out with you today?"

He shrugged. "Why? I'll just be training until it's time to enter the Gym. I don't need someone else around for that."

Giving him puppy-dog eyes, Val pouted. "Aw, but we never get to hang out with you. We're supposed to be traveling with you, but you keep brushing us off."

He didn't see why he might need or want them around, and they had traveled together for some times. But Ghetsis had trusted them enough to send, so it couldn't hurt. "All right, but I don't know
how interesting the Gym will be for you."

She grinned. "Great, thanks! I actually saw some people a little ways from here you might want to talk to. It's some Trainers who might benefit from your philosophy, but won't listen to it from those obviously from Plasma."

Wouldn't listen? N wasn't sure why that would be, but it would be better to ask those Trainers directly. He followed Val to the southern part of Nacrene, where old railroad tracks lay covered in weeds and gravel. Lucky wasn't fast in hopping over land, so N picked him up and carried him along the way. Away from some of the warehouses, a group of teenagers and Pokémon were gathered around talking. From the uniforms they wore, they seemed to be students waiting for the right time to head to class.

Near one of the boys, a Whimsicott was crouched down with his tail fluffed up around him, a sign of annoyance. "I don't want to do that," he said.

The boy frowned at the Pokémon. "Come on, you did the trick yesterday. Don't be a lazy bum."

"I only did it to stop you from being mean, but you won't do that now," the Whimsicott said.

"I told you that he's a dumb Pokémon," another boy said.

"He might be, but he's not as dumb as yours."

The other boy's Whirlipede muttered, "Just ignore them," and kept shuffling around some pebbles.

N came into the group, feeling angered but working to keep calm. "Your Whimsicott doesn't want to do as you ask, because you're mean to him."

Clenching his first, the boy asked, "Oh yeah? And why would you know anything about my Pokémon? You're not the one who has to deal with him all day."

"Eep," Lucky said, trying to secure himself better in N's arm. "He's a mean one."

"I can understand what Pokémon say," N told them.

Some of the quieter members looked interested at this revelation, but the two arguing boys didn't look impressed. "Oh please, you're just some con artist like those Plasma junkies," the second said.

"More likely he's some escaped schizo from the nuthouse," the first said, smirking. "Pokémon are just like the dumb animals; they can't think at all."

The Whimsicott came out of his annoyed posture to look over at N. "Hey, if you can understand me, then tell this idiot Gerald to shut the **** up."

N shook his head to the Pokémon. "I'm not using that kind of language," he said. "Gerald, he just told you, in a rather crude manner, to shut up."

Both the Whimsicott and the Whirlipede started laughing at that, along with one of the girls. Gerald started to turn pink. "What? Oh, now you're just lucky and rude."

"I'm Lucky, but I'm not rude," the Tympole said, squirming. N put him down.

"Can you guess my name?" one of the girls piped up.

The Lilligant by her side waved her leaf arms. "Oo, oo, she's Amy! And I'm Annie!"
"Annie says that your name is Amy," N said.

Amy squealed. "Oh wow, that is so cool!"

"You're just easily impressed," Gerald said, frowning. "And even if you really did understand Pokémon, it would be worthless."

"No, it helps him understand what Pokémon really feel about us," Val said, leaning in closer to him but thankfully not touching.

"It's nice that somebody can understand us," the Whimsicott said, at the same time. He checked over his tail fluff. "I'd tell him a nasty thing or two, if I could, or try to get out of this."

"If you could hear your Whimsicott, then you'd know that he doesn't want to be with you," N told Gerald. "He'd rather be released, and I would say that no Pokémon deserves to be held in captivity."

"All right!" the Whimsicott said, with a sign of agreement from the Whirlipede.

But the Lilligant and others didn't like that so much. "But, but I want to stay with her!" Annie said. "I love my girl."

"You're just jealous of my Pokémon," Gerald said. "Or you've been listening to those Plasma losers. Nobody's hurting the Pokémon just keeping them; it's nonsense."

"It only seems that way," N said. "There's a subtle element of brainwashing going on that keeps Pokémon contented to stay in Pokeballs, as well as propaganda to make you think you're doing the right thing. But you're not. You're being cruel in being demanding, not considering your Pokémon's feelings."

"Am I brainwashed?" Annie the Lilligant asked, with her Trainer quietly wondering the same thing.

"Well if you feel that way, then why do you have Pokémon," the other boy said sharply, his fist clenching up.

"I don't keep them for long," N explained. "I'm out to get my ideas heard, by going along with the League and becoming known. And I'm seeing a lot of the problems first hand, in people like you."

"I bet guys like you are just trying to convince others to release their Pokémon so you can catch stronger ones yourself. Well you don't fool me, jerk!" He then ran at N, to punch him.

Val slipped in the way and grabbed the boy by the throat. With both of her hands on his neck, she managed to keep him still. "Nu-uh, let's not get violent today," Val said, in her usual sweet voice. "You're trying to hide the fact that your Pokémon won't help you out. You should really be a dear and let him go, m'kay? Now let's play nice." She then let go of him.

Gasping, Gerald dropped to the ground. His Whimsicott laughed at him, but the other kids stepped back, not wanting to incur Val's retribution. After an awkward moment of silence, a bell began ringing down the street. "Oh, that's the school bell," one of the girls said. "Uh, we gotta go... bye!"

As the other kids left, recalling their Pokémon with them, Gerald got back up. "You two..." He looked at them, still angry but not wanting to get choked again. Then he recalled his Whimsicott and took off for the school building.

"You might have killed him there and gotten us in deep trouble," N said, irritated at Val.
"No, I was half an inch or half a minute from that," Val said, toying with her scarf again. Then she laughed. "It's a joke, don't worry. I know what I'm doing. But one of my priorities is your safety, my liege."

"I don't think that would have been serious," N said. Pokémon took hits a lot and recovered just fine, so while it would hurt, he'd be able to take a punch.

She pouted. "Oh, I'm sorry. I don't mean to come off as overprotective, but I really don't want to see you get hurt, N. You're so sweet and smart; he didn't have a right to start arguing with you."

"I hope I at least gave them something to think about," he said.

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Afternoon, 12/3

With the defeat of the Watchog, the room went quiet. At this point, only the panting of Lucky the Tympole could be heard. He was no longer hopping in place like he had earlier. He was mostly still on the floor instead, taking deep breaths. "I, I did it," Lucky said, amazed at himself.

N knelt down and patted him. "Yes, you did a good job." It had been a close call, though. Peter had defeated the Herdier, but then got knocked out by Retaliate. Scar had made a good first hit, but then the Watchog had been successful with Hypnosis. That left Lucky to finish the Watchog off, and the Tympole wasn't conscious by much.

"It looks like you and your Pokémon care very much for each other," the Gym Leader Lenora said. "That gave you the push to win, so great job. In recognition of your efforts, here is your second badge." Smiling, she handed over the small piece of metal when he stood up.

And it was just a piece of metal, a symbol, one won through violence. N had tried to keep up with potions through the battle, but seeing them get beaten down like that, he could imagine the pain they were in. Especially with the Pidove; his nerves had flinched in sympathy when Peter hit that wall. These badges were supposed to give authority to the Trainer who had them. But was it worth the price?

"Lenora, may I ask you something?" N said. When she nodded, he asked, "Why do you do this? You take care of lots of Pokémon, only to see them suffer in battle, and you're supposed to reward the Trainer who has Pokémon that can knock them all out. It just doesn't seem right."

Strangely, she gave him a warm smile and patted his shoulder (unknowingly making him flinch inside). "It's not that harsh, young man. Pokémon are resilient creatures, and they'd fight anyways. It's in their instincts. We just give them productive ways to use that energy and make sure they really don't cause serious harm to each other. And when your friendship with Pokémon grows deep, they'll forgive you for losses. I make sure all of mine stay healthy and happy, and they give me their loyalty and affection in return."

"Honey?" A short but neatly dressed man came into the room. "Sorry to interrupt, but Hilbert's come by again. He wants to talk with us about one of the stones on display."

Lenora brightened at that. "Really? It's been a while since I've gotten to speak with him. Oh N, here's your other rewards for defeating this Gym. Feel free to stay around the museum to study and observe our artifacts." Then she left with her husband, talking animatedly with him up the stairs.

N took the items, shoved them in his bag, then pulled out a Super Potion for Lucky. Why would she assume that he didn't know what Pokémon felt? Maybe the battle hadn't been long enough for her to see that he could understand them. Even so, the ignorance of the four Gym Leaders he had
met so far was infuriating. They were supposed to be the authorities on Pokémon, but the way they treated battles... N just couldn't understand it. Fighting with all one's skill in training Pokémon, but honoring those who defeated them? And she hadn't even healed her Pokémon before leaving to meet with Hilbert! Did she really care?

No, no she couldn't care about them. But no one questioned her because she was an authority, someone with the power of a title. They all listened to her instead. Maybe he really needed power to be heard.

Lucky shook himself when the potion took effect. "I did really great, right?" the Tympole asked. "I thought I was going to faint, but I made it so that I didn't, and then I beat him."

N smiled and scratched the Pokémon's chin. "Yes, you did great. I may never meet a Tympole as great as you are ever again." He then picked Lucky up, making him squeal happily. Somehow just that little action made them both happy. But N was soon preoccupied with those thoughts again.

Alone in Lenora's office (as it seemed like), N took a look around before she came back. At the back of the room, there was a desk; a computer was on. Looking at the screen, she had been composing an email before he came in to challenge her. N's eyes fell on the line, 'They are causing a lot of trouble, but Plasma has no real authority to speak of. They don't have a clear argument either, as Ghetsis uses scare tactics and pompous actions to bolster up the nonsense they're spreading. Especially with having a King that understands Pokémon; it all sounds so mythic, doesn't it? We need to find ways to undercut their popularity and keep them from getting the power to enforce their warped views.'

"They don't understand us, so they pretend they have the moral high ground," N muttered, heading out of the room. After seeing that, he had no desire to contact Lenora ever again.

"They don't understand what?" Lucky asked.

"Team Plasma's ideals and truth," he replied. "I'm going to send you back so I can heal the other two."

"Okay," Lucky said, recalling himself instead.

As he walked back through the library portion of the building, N used a Revive on Scar and Peter's Pokeballs, then a Super Potion on each. The Pokemart counters wouldn't sell him these things, but Val had managed to get some for him. On his way out, he spotted Lenora and her husband talking with Hilbert and a boy in a strange mask. N didn't bother to listen in and left the building. Now he had to release his Pokémon again. Going down to the field southwest of town sounded best, as they were all three familiar with the area. If only there was a stream to release Lucky in to, as he would have the hardest time getting away from other Trainers.

Next thing N knew, he was knocked down on his rear, his chest hurting some from someone running right smack into him. Right next to him was a girl with large brown hair, looking confused herself. But then she looked at him and smiled. "Oh, hi N! Sorry about that; I was playing football with my Pokémon and didn't see you there." She got up and offered him a hand up.

Ignoring the hand, he got up himself. "I wasn't paying much attention where I was going myself. But why are you playing a game, Hilda? Shouldn't you be training for the League?"

She shook her head. "Nah, we had a long day yesterday, so I'm letting everyone take a break. You got the ball, Olette?"
A Drilbur tossed the foam football to Hilda. "You get so excited," she said in a soft voice.

"Miss, you haven't seen anything yet," the Snivy said, hopping over. He still had that silly-looking hat on, which he tipped up to N. "Hey there, it's the *** screwball again."

"Honestly, you should teach him better manners if you mean to keep him," N said, frowning at Fedora.

"Was that a bad thing to say?" a Minccino asked, coming over too. The Drilbur nodded. "My Daddy says don't say bad things."

"I've been trying, but I can't tell," Hilda said. "So what're you doing here? Challenged the Gym?"

He nodded. "Yes, and I got the badge."

Strangely, she clapped. "Awesome! You're going at this way faster than me. Keep at this rate and you'll be Champion well before spring comes."

Why was she excited about that? It had nothing to do with her. "Thanks, but it's a little early to be thinking that far ahead. I'll just move on to the next Gym."

"Aw, just like that?" Before he could get away, she grabbed at his sleeve. "Come on, you ought to treat your Pokémon after that! I saw a cute little cafe at the edge of town; you ought to go there and buy treats for them." When he slipped out of her grasp, she added, "I'll come with you. Let's go!"

N thought about leaving, but then the Snivy snickered. "Aw, are you afraid of cute but crazy girls? Didn't take you for such a rude loner."

"I would love a treat for a celebration," the Minccino squealed.

Maybe they would like it. Technically, he was thanking them by letting them go once he was ready to move on. "Are you sure you shouldn't be working on training?" N asked, walking after Hilda who had already started off down the stony street.

"Don't want to overwork them or me," she said, grinning. "And it sounds like you could use some relaxing time too. What do you do for fun?"

"Fun?" He never got much free time, in between studying, guiding Team Plasma, and now Pokémon training. "I guess I go out in the wilderness and talk with the Pokémon there. I like puzzles too."

"What kind of puzzles?" Hilda asked, slowing a bit so they were walking side by side. "Like jigsaw or crossword, or Sudoku?"

"Math and engineering puzzles," N said. "Why are you asking all these questions, and going to a cafe with me?"

She laughed. "Well why not? We're Patch Hat buddies, right?" She tapped her hat, showing that she was wearing the Reshiram and Zekrom patch today. "We could be like friendly rivals too. Wouldn't that be awesome?"

He held his hands up, trying to figure that one out. "Wait, that doesn't make sense. Friendly and rival don't go together, as they stand for different ideas."

"Not really," she said, shrugging. "A friendly rival is someone you compete with, so you strive to
keep up with or ahead of them, but you still treat them nice and have fun. I've already got one with Cheren, but it's always more fun to have more friends. So anything you want to ask me?"

N was at a loss. He knew how to converse with others in Plasma, but general small talk with an outsider? Chit-chat was unimportant, or so he had thought. Now caught up in it, what should he say? "I don't really know you…"

"So," she said, teasing. "Get to know me. What do you want to know?"

Maybe this was something he needed, experience in dealing with these kinds of people. He asked her the first question that came to mind. "What kind of ideals do you follow?"

Raising her eyebrows, she looked at him for a second, then scratched her head when she saw that he was serious. "I dunno. I don't really think about that kind of thing. Why have your head in the clouds thinking about what could be when you can be in the moment, enjoying life? Maybe I favor spontaneity, like today." She laughed.

"It's not really fulfilling to live day by day, is it?" N asked. "Don't you have a goal, like defeating the League and becoming the next Champion?" It was the first thing he could think of; that was what League Trainers wanted.

Hilda shrugged. "That'd be nice, but I wouldn't be too heartbroken if I didn't make it. I do want to see the world, so maybe that. If it happens, it does; if not, I'm sure it'll be because something else interesting came up."

"Do you ever settle down on a definite answer?" She was speaking a lot of maybes and not picking one option. Indecision led to stagnation, possibly ruin.

"Sometimes," she said, then pointed to a brick patio. Various tables sat under decorative umbrellas. "There it is! The sign says Pokémon welcome, so they should have some kind of treat available."

They went inside to find a two level cafe; a large wall of windows on the west wall showed a magnificent view over Pinwheel Forest. There were a few people inside, with many open tables to sit at. Reading over the menu on the wall, it seemed that this place served mostly drinks, with a few items from a nearby bakery. N wasn't sure what most of the menu meant, but the server was able to recommend some drinks based on the kind of Pokémon his team was made up of. When he didn't order anything for himself, Hilda ordered something for him, herself, and her Pokémon, paying for that bill.

"You didn't have to buy me something," N said as he went down the stairs. The tables down there seemed to offer the better view of the forest.

"I did cause I wanted to," she replied, following him with her three Pokémon. "And we're here to celebrate your win, right? So you ought to have a treat too."

"It's only the second badge, nothing special." He found a round table and released Lucky again.

"But that means that you're a quarter of the way done," Hilda said, sitting down there. "And in such a short time too. You're doing awesome. Hi there cutie," she said the last part to the Tympole and poked his forehead, making Lucky look at her curiously.

Wasn't it early to really know how he was doing? But just from the look on her face, it seemed to be genuine praise. Releasing his other two, he sat down at the table with the rest. "I guess so. Guys, I brought you out to thank you for helping me. We'll get some treats in a few minutes."
Peter's eyes went wide. "Really? Oh gosh, that'd be great! Thanks!"

"We're just here to hang out," Fedora said, settling himself near the window to sun.

"Well if it ain't something I can get in the wild, I can live with it," Scar said, sitting in one of the chairs but keeping his log close.

"Where's your Purrloin?" Hilda asked. "She was pretty cool at the Gym."

At that question, N felt that misplaced guilt again. How was Pricilla doing? No, he was doing the right thing. "I released her and that Pidove after we won. That was the agreement we had."

She looked surprised. "Really? That's too bad. You're not even keeping one around as a buddy?"

"Oh yeah, same thing with us," Peter said, then fluffed his wings in a show of nervousness.

"Dude, what if you find out you like the weirdo in that time?" Fedora said, leaving his window for the tabletop. "Then you're screwed."

"Well it seemed okay at the time," Lucky said.

Something wasn't right, a quiet thought said in N's mind. But he shut it and the Pokémon's conversation out quickly. Outside forces were conspiring against him. "It's better to keep them from being captive long. If I could, I wouldn't even capture them. I'm making a point in the League, though, and for that, I can't avoid catching them." N shook his head. "But as it seems, that may not be enough. If things keep going the way that are, I may need to get the support of the legendary dragon Zekrom."

"Zekrom, huh?" For a moment, Hilda seemed serious.

And then a server came up to them. "I've got your orders right here," he said, passing out the drinks or snacks, including, "And a root beer float for the both of you," he said, setting down tall glasses of dark creamy drink in front of them.

"Thanks, man," Hilda said, smiling at him and taking a straw.

"Root beer float?" N asked, looking suspiciously at the beverage in front of him. The very bottom of it was black, while the top was capped with a brown foam. Globs of white floated in the middle, while moisture coated the outside.

"Yeah," she said, carefully taking one end of the paper sleeve off the straw. Then she blew the rest at N so that it hit his forehead.

He wasn't sure whether to be mad or not. "What was that for?"

Hilda giggled. "Geez, lighten up. You ever do that?"

"Well, no," N said, taking the cover off his straw in a neat fashion. "But I didn't think you were old enough to order beer."

Unexpectedly, this caused another fit of laughter from her. "It's root beer, not beer. Totally different; no alcohol for one thing."

"And what's the float part of it?" he asked, tapping the side of the glass here one of the globs was.

"Vanilla ice cream," she said, then looked at him. "What, you've seriously never had root beer or
"No," he said, feeling self-conscious because she talked of them as normal things. "It's a dessert thing, right? I always avoided that kind of thing, and sweets. It's rather worthless in terms of food."

"Well no wonder you're so serious," she said, rolling her eyes. "That's the point of a treat, right? To be an indulgence for something that just tastes good. At least give it a try."

She had bought it for him, so it would be a waste to not try it. It was cold, both stronger and sweeter than he had expected it to be. But creamy with a spice, or some kind of taste he wasn't familiar with. While N liked it, he didn't think he'd tell anyone else. It wasn't acceptable… but it was just food, or a drink, wasn't it? Then it wasn't important in the grand scheme of things.

They ended up talking about their Pokémon, as that was the easiest common point between them. Then someone familiar came down the stairs. N looked over at the strange masked boy and realized he'd been he one with Hilda the other day, and Hilbert earlier this morning.

But from where she was, Hilda couldn't see him. "Well I caught a Basculin once, but a fisherman wanted to buy it off me. And I helped a kid catch his first Pokémon, a Woobat. That was fun."

Wait… N looked back at Hilda. She had sold a Pokémon to someone? That struck N as terribly thoughtless and cruel. It was bad enough to capture Pokémon for use, but to sell them? This League was truly embracing Pokémon slavery.

Before he could properly get mad, though, the Minccino at the table noticed the strange boy and squealed. "Daddy, you're back!"

That threw him right out of anger into confusion. "Daddy?"

Hilda blinked. "Huh, your dad?" She looked back and smiled. "Oh, hey Kyurem."

He caught Mimi as she ran up to him. He was smiling in a strange toothy manner. "Hilda."

"Oooo, what have you been up to now?" she asked, in a mockingly mad voice.

"Pardon?" He sat down in the chair Mimi had been using.

She poked him. "You don't smile like that unless you're up to something. Who'd you eat this time?"

The boy then leaned over and whispered something to her. Hilda briefly looked serious again, then whispered back. Something was going on, but he couldn't hear what.

"Kyurem?" N asked, hardly aware that he was doing so aloud. "That's really Kyurem?"

"Sure is," Fedora said. "Make him mad and he'll freeze you solid and eat you."

"He doesn't eat everybody," Mimi said defensively.

The Snivy pulled his hat over his head. "Aw, don't ruin my fun."

"Yeah, this is Kyurem," Hilda said, leaning forward on the table. "He's my starter Pokémon, not Fedora."

His eyes were like ice and that mask might have been directly attached to his head. Still, it didn't make sense. "Really Kyurem, the legendary dragon? Why do you reduce yourself to look like a human?"
By now, that smile had disappeared, replaced with an unreadable stony expression. "I need to be near her as much as I can," he said. "Except in hunting and scouting out an area. It's more convenient to be like this."

"Wow, he gave you a straight answer!" Hilda said, amused. "Yeah, with all the buildings sized for humans, he couldn't manage to be around if he were in his true dragon form."

"But why her?" N asked. Hilda didn't seem like someone who would attract a legendary Pokémon's attention.

"You don't need to know," the dragon boy answered. Then his eyes appeared sharper. "But I do need to know something from you. What do you want from all this?"

"What do I want?" N echoed. "I want to know the truth about the ideals that Pokémon hold. I want to know how they feel about being held in captivity in Pokeballs. I don't want them to be hurt, but no… not many others are speaking up on their behalf. I want to show that it doesn't have to be this way, but it seems no one is going to listen unless I have the right authority."

By this point, he was speaking loud enough for the whole cafe to hear. Some of the other patrons looked to their group curiously, wondering what the fuss was all about. Others hunched over and grumbled about interruptions to the peace.

"And I will get that authority, no matter what it takes to get it. I will find the right way, and teach everyone what they're doing wrong. And I hope you aren't around to ruin things." N got up from his seat, picking up his Tympole from the table. "Don't let yourself be fooled by the illusions, Hilda. You seem nice enough, but if you don't think what you're doing carefully, you'll end up hurting the Pokémon you love." Then he left the cafe, calling his Pokémon to come after him.

Peter flew alongside him. "Whoa, are you… mad?" the Pidove asked.

N took a deep breath as he opened the door for Peter and Scar. Back outside. "Probably," he said. "I just don't know what to think about her. Too much conflicting information, and yet where she's wrong…" that really made mad. Selling Pokémon… but then why did the group with her seem affectionate and friendly? They should be afraid that she would get rid of them too, just for money. Yet she'd been playing with them, and bought a drink for him to celebrate his team's win… and Kyurem choosing to be with her. Many people were simple and N could quickly judge them good or bad. Hilda… was both?

"She seems nice," Lucky said after he'd been quiet for a while. "She took you out on a date."

That caused N to stop in the middle of the road to Pinwheel Forest. "She what?" he asked, startled.

"Oh yeah, she did," Peter said cheerfully. "She took you somewhere and bought you something. We were all there, but you were the only two actual humans. That's still a date, right? I used to watch couples go on walks in the forest. They seemed so happy."

"Don't look at me," Scar said, starting to toss his log up to catch. "I don't know how your kind goes about courtship rituals."

N felt his stomach squirm. Was that a date? And what did it mean if it got out that he, Plasma's King, had gone on a date with a person who might be their enemy? No, was their enemy, as she was a League challenger, Pokémon Trainer, and so on. "I don't really know that either," he admitted.

"Oh N!"
He cringed at the voice and looked down at Lucky. The Tympole looked concerned, but uncertain of what to do. And then Val and Carol came up on either side of him.

"There you are," Carol said. "We lost track of where you were. Don't sneak off on us like that."

"What happened?" Val leaned over and tried to look him in the face. "Why're you turning red, huh?"

"Just leave me alone," he snapped at her. "I, I'm not sure what happened." When they still tried to follow him, he held his free hand out to them. "Go; I need to say goodbye to these Pokémon."

"What?" Peter asked. "But we were doing so well together."

Thankfully, the two girls went back to town. The Timburr nodded. "Yeah, that was the arrangement," he reminded the others. "We do this one Gym and then we get let go."

"Right," N said, glad to find firmer ground to talk about.

"Bu-bu-but…" Lucky started sobbing, putting his face against N's shirt.

"But I feel braver around you," the Pidove said, cooing sadly. "I'm getting better! I want to stay with you, and Lucky too."

N closed his eyes. He had avoided using the Pokecenter at all with these three, hoping to break them out of the brainwashing cycle. That should have made things easier than last time when Pricilla tried to talk him out of releasing her. But now, it was two of them who didn't want to be let go.

Down near the swampy area, he determined that Lucky was afraid of being hurt again, like the last time he had been released. That got Peter panicky, so N took out the release device and let go of Scar first. In good nature, the Timburr saluted him, then walked off into the woods. Despite that, the Tympole was still crying and Peter was flitting about anxiously.

Was he hurting them by letting them go?

No. He was preventing hurting them worse. If he kept them, he would be putting them through more battles. They'd win some, but they'd also lose some and the Pokémon would be knocked out. And that still made N feel horrible about doing this.

And idea came to him. It was sneaky, maybe underhanded. But he had to keep his word. It was time to test Anthea's words. "Peter, could you use Fly to get me back to my home?"

Seeming relieved, the gray bird bobbed up and down. "Yeah, I can do that! Just keep the location in your mind, okay? I'll have us there real quick." Peter then began to glow light blue before he shot into the sky.

N watched him as the small bird rose up, then looped back down towards him. Holding onto Lucky, he braced himself as Peter rushed for him. The blue light then surrounded N; a sense of vertigo and movement like a helicopter taking off washed through his mind. "What's going on?" Lucky asked, his sobbing slowing down.

After looking around him, N said, "We're flying along with Peter. But, I don't know how he shrunk us."

And that's exactly what seemed to have occurred. N found himself standing on the Pidove's back,
just behind his head. The landscape around the blurred by, trees and grass rushing underneath.
Despite the obvious speed, neither N nor Lucky felt any movement of air. Or Peter himself, as N
found out when he knelt down and tried to touch the feathers he was standing on. It seemed to be a
solid floor with definite but invisible edges.

"You're in a little pocket of air outside normal space," Peter said, his words coming from all around
them. "At least, that's what the disc thing said to me. That's how I can find a place that you know
that I've never been there. You can see the area, right?"

"Yes," N said. Lucky was shaking, so he kept hold on him. "But it will be further north."

"I know. I hope you like the ride!"

While it was a little unnerving, N knew that Peter wouldn't hurt them. So he tried to calm Lucky
down until the right forest came into view. After another disorienting moment, N appeared outside
of the building that Anthea used to heal Pokémon. Peter appeared out of his Fly glow a moment
later, looking proud of himself.

He would release Lucky here, and leave him with Anthea. N trusted her to look after him and help
him become part of the forest population. After that, he would have Peter return him to Nacrene
and release him there, with the offer to fly back here for safety. That solved everything, it seemed.
He would keep his word to respect and release them, but would know that they would be safe from
recapture.

Even so, the tears on his shirt hammered irrational guilt back into his heart.
A Day in the Life of a Superstar

One reason that people said they liked about training Pokémon was that it made them feel special. Pokémon grew close to humans quickly and they watched good Trainers with adoring eyes, loving them. With that acknowledgment, anyone could feel on top of the world, like they were something special. The love of a Pokémon was pure and simple.

On the other hand, he got that look of adoration every single day, everywhere he looked, from everyone. And why shouldn't they adore and admire him? Hilbert was the brightest shining star that walked the lands, or so he felt.

Well, nearly everyone adored him. While some had said that they both admired and hated him for defeating them, there was one, no, were two that resisted him somehow. At least among humans. At first it was that strange N guy who seemed like he'd been charmed, but then had gone into a fit of anger about that Pokémon. Then it was Hilda, who had managed to brush him off and refuse his generous offer. It was strange, after years of people eager to help him out and get his attention.

Perhaps he was getting complacent. It had been some time since he'd dealt with a stubborn person. That meant that he had to hone his skills again. Fortunately, it wasn't that hard to do.

Browsing in a gift shop, he could sense the people around him. Hilbert had psychic abilities, but he couldn't tell exactly where the people were. No, his powers told him what people wanted. An older woman wanted a toy for a grandchild. A young man was debating on whether he wanted to save money or buy a CD. And several people wanted to talk to him and get his acknowledgment.

Hilbert smiled as he brushed away a strand of brown hair from his eyes. People wanted him. When they felt that way, he could get them to do nearly anything he asked. A lot of them wanted certain things, but he kept that for special occasions. A few years back, his psychic adviser had warned him that knowing such things could make him feel uncomfortable. Hilbert didn't see it that way, though. He felt like the warm glow of their thoughts was constantly surrounding him with light.

And Kyurem had said that it was due to some permanent Attract state on him. Hilbert still thought that was ridiculous. Over time, he had come to accept that he was simply that interesting to people. And so he paid attention to his admirers and made them happy. Nothing wrong with that.

Ah, there was something useful. On the shelf at eye level, there was a display box with assorted bags. They were richly colored velvet, with silver or gold cords keeping them shut. According to the sign, these were Mystery Stone Grab Bags. Inside each, there were six rocks. At least two in each bag were guaranteed to be Pokémon enhancers, which could then be made into accessories. It could be an Everstone, or it could be an elemental gem. It might even be an evolution stone.

That would be the ticket. Direct sales of evolutions stones were tightly controlled, thanks to an incident with an immature Pokémon being evolved straight into its strongest form and wreaking havoc in a small village. Several had wound up dead. But enterprising businesses found ways to get around the laws, including this chance item, which had the bonus of a gamble. They would only have to sell one bag with an evolution stone to be honest about their advertising.

Hilbert reached into the box and began touching the bags. He wanted something to get himself in good favor with Hilda, and Kyurem through her. While he had hopes of entering Dragonspiral on his own, she was certain to get inside as Kyurem had chosen to go with her. Sending her in first
would prove that the tower was accessible at this time. Plus, if things turned sour, he'd rather have the two of them on his side.

Now, to figure out which bag contained an item that Hilda would want. He closed his eyes and focused on remembering her. She had been tough to read; lots of impulses ran through her mind and made enough noise to block out deeper desires. Even so, she was impish, cheerful, and playful. And she cared about her Pokémon, so she would want what would help them.

He felt a tingle in his hand when he touched one bag. Grabbing it, he opened his eyes and found a velvet blue bag in his hand. Thanks to a plastic clamp on the drawstring, it couldn't be opened in the store. But his instinct told him that this was the one, with the stones she would most want. It cost 2000 Poke.

Checking his watch, he noted that it was almost three in the afternoon. Perfect. He went to the counter and put the bag there. "Good afternoon, miss," he said, smiling his brightest.

She had wanted something interesting to happen, but once she looked into his eyes, her wants quickly changed. "Oh, ar-are you Hilbert?" she asked, star struck.

"Yes, indeed," he said.

A few witty exchanges later and he was paying a discounted price for the bag of rocks, even though the sale on such things wasn't due to start for a few hours. That was one of the many awesome things about himself, that he could get special treatment anywhere. Hilbert tried not to abuse it, but when people gave it to you without even being asked, well, you couldn't really say no, right?

Now that he had the gift, he had to find Hilda and get into her good graces. And Kyurem too. If they were on his side, then getting to Reshiram would be easier.

He went back into the museum and looked around. Ah, there was the man he'd been looking for: a pale-skinned kind of mousy little man who didn't stand out in a crowd. Andrew was said to be a brilliant man, though, and when one did get him to talking, he was enthusiastic about the subjects he loved. Most of the museum's visitors were surprised to learn that he was the museum director.

Right now, he wanted something new for the museum, something to draw in crowds separate from regulars and Gym challengers. Excellent. Smiling to himself, Hilbert walked up to him. "Andrew! It's been a while."

He perked up when he recognized him. "Oh, Hilbert! It has been a while." They shook hands. "How can I help you today? Or are you just stopping in for a visit?"

"I do have something to ask of you," he said, smiling brightly. It was amazing what could be accomplished if you just smiled while asking. "Back when I was still traveling through Unova, I came across a fossil which seemed to be that of a Lillipup. But on getting it examined by a fossil expert, it seems it isn't so. What I have is a fossilized ancestor to the Lillipup line."

"Really? That's quite interesting. I've heard of a few samples; may I see it?"

"Sure thing," he said, bringing out his electronic storage device to bring it out. "Actually, I was thinking about offering it in a trade to the museum. While it is a fascinating thing to have, your museum has something that pertains to a line of research I am pursuing. It's something I can't get any other way." He caused the fossil to appear on the floor; much of it was stuck in a large rock, but the skull poked out of the main rock.
Andrew knelt down and looked at it, an internal argument between wanting this and not wanting to give up a part of the museum's collection going on in his head. "Oh yes, I see, the structure's aren't quite that of a modern Lillipup. And if you chipped away at the rock, there might even be a full skeleton here. And it would be great for the Gym… what piece did you have in mind for trading?"

Still smiling, Hilbert said, "The Light Stone that was found in Desert Resort. I know that you haven't uncovered much about it, but I have a hunch that it has something to do with Reshiram. But if I'm going to prove anything, I need to have it."

"We haven't found much out about the Light Stone," Andrew said. He called over one of the guards and had him put the canine Pokémon fossil off to the side. Then they started walking over to the exhibit with that item. "Then again… let me ask my wife, okay? She deals with a lot of our fossils."

Hilbert nodded. He trusted that they wouldn't go stealing the fossil from him. Only rarely had he encountered someone trying to outright steal from him, and he had easily caught on thanks to sensing their desires. "All right. I'm going to look at the stone again, so I'll be over there."

The display itself was right near the stairs that led up to the Gym's entrance. Andrew paused on the stairs when he saw a guy with long pale blue hair standing right by the Light Stone, past the velvet rope barrier. "Excuse me young fellow, but you aren't supposed to be behind the lines."

"Are you going to make me back off?" he replied with almost a feral growl behind his words.

Hilbert recognized that tone and voice. "Andrew, that's Kyurem in human form. I wouldn't provoke him."

The director gaped for a bit. "Really? I had heard there was a Trainer with Kyurem around, but we weren't expecting to see her this early."

"You won't," Kyurem said, still looking as the white stone.

"Well then… sorry. Please don't damage anything." Andrew then hurried up the stairs.

Hilbert went over to the display, but stayed on the other side of the rope. The Light Stone was sitting on a violet cushion: it was a mottled white with bits of gray, looking like any ordinary stone. But there was a beauty to it, a shine that most rocks didn't have. By the stand, Kyurem was poking at it.

"Is that actually Reshiram?" Hilbert asked. He was another legendary dragon, so he had to know.

"What makes you think that?" Kyurem asked without turning his gaze away.

"Reports say that when it was found, it was warm like it had been sitting in a fire, when it obviously hadn't been. And really, a white stone with mysterious power that no one today can identify? Seems like the kind of thing you legends would do."

"Hmph." He leaned closer to the rock and seemed to be focusing deep within it, sniffing the air, as if he could see something that others wouldn't. Chances were, he could.

"I mean to reawaken Reshiram," Hilbert said, trying to find something to impress the dragon with. It was so hard to read him, almost as bad as trying to read the wants of a dark or steel type Pokémon. "I want to know the truth of many things, and I want everyone to realize just how important it is. When people are lying, it makes me feel annoyed."
Oddly, Kyurem stopped right as he mentioned wanting to awaken Reshiram. Then he straightened up and walked to where their faces were not even a foot apart. "Is that your intention?" he asked sternly, his eyes harsh like staring into a blizzard's blur.

For a moment, he was intimidated. But Hilbert quickly got his metal footing back (it helped to take a step back). "Yes, that's it," he said. "I want more people to value truth, and stop lying to me."

Kyurem stayed there quietly, then asked, "How far are you willing to take that?"

"As far as I need to?" he answered. "What're you asking that for? Do you test your sibling's heroes?"

"Sometimes." His eyes went over to the stairs, then he stepped over the rope.

"Hilbert, good to see you again!" Lenora said, coming down the stairs with her husband. "How have you been doing?"

He turned to them and smiled. "Just great," he said. "It's wonderful to be back in my homeland again. Are you still giving Trainers a rough time?"

"Of course. So I hear you're interested in trading your fossil for this Light Stone."

He nodded. "Yes; I think it is connected to Reshiram, so I…"

"It is Reshiram," Kyurem said, interrupting without a thought.

Andrew's eyes seemed to pop out of his head; Lenora was more puzzled. "That's actually the legendary dragon of truth?"

"If he says so, I'd believe it," Hilbert said. "This is the human form of Kyurem. He's traveling with one of my fri…" a snarl from Kyurem stopped him, "well I would like to be friends. Acquaintances right now. No sure why he's in here by himself."

The dragon boy didn't bother to answer.

"From the sounds of that growl and the looks in his eyes, I'm sure he is Kyurem," Lenora said, more subdued now. She put her hand to her chin. "And if that is actually Reshiram in the stone there, we really don't have the right to have it out on display."

Just then, Hilbert caught a glance of N coming down the stairs and walking off towards the exit quickly. He looked irritated, so Hilbert figured he'd better not bother him right now. Turning his attention back to Lenora and Andrew, he said, "I want to prove myself worthy of Reshiram. I know that I'm already a celebrity all over the world, but not all of it was by my own efforts. I want to really prove myself here."

"Is that so?" Then Lenora smiled. "I'm sure that if anyone in this day and age could awaken Reshiram, it would be you. Right dear?"

Andrew nodded. "Of course. We'll take your trade, then. Thanks so much for the new fossil; where is it?"

After showing off the Pokémon fossil to Lenora and chatting with them a while, Hilbert went back and claimed the Light Stone. There was a feeling of warmth to it despite being here in the climate controlled museum. Yet it seemed oddly heavy and… not potent enough. Hilbert couldn't feel much off it. He wondered about it as he carried it out of the museum.
Then Kyurem startled him by saying, "He is deeply asleep."

Thankfully, he didn't drop the stone. It was rather heavy, like a bowling ball. "Oh, I guess. Should I wait on trying to awaken him, then?"

"Maybe." Kyurem followed him down into the street. "Do you want to prove your devotion to the truth?"

Stopping there, Hilbert turned to the dragon boy. "Do I what?"

"Do you want to prove your devotion to the truth?" Kyurem repeated.

"I have been proving it all along," Hilbert said. "I traveled clear to Hoenn to get some answers to nagging questions. I admit, it was a beautiful place, but that wasn't my main concern. And I…"

"Answer the question, yes or no," he said sternly.

"Geez, I was," Hilbert said. "Yes, I do. And I will."

Kyurem then reached over and put his hand on the Light Stone. "We shall see. He may be deep asleep, but I should be able to reach him." He put his other hand on the stone and focused on it. A breeze stirred up around them, making their hair flutter.

Then there was a flash of pale blue. Lines appeared beneath their feet, forming a circle with strange letters inside. In the large inner section of the rune circle, there was a constellation of stars. "What the heck is that?" he asked.

"My sign," Kyurem said; his mask gleamed, almost glowing. "Every legendary Pokémon has a unique one. They appear when we tap into our true divine powers."

Then the Light Stone grew noticeably warm, like a pan almost too hot to touch. A secondary rune circle appeared overlapping Kyurem's, a fiery red one with a similar but different constellation. For a moment, Hilbert felt like he might burst into flames right there in the middle of Nacrene.

But it faded rapidly, along with the two rune circles. Kyurem then took his hands off the stone, which was cooling back down. "There. It is done."

"Was that the flames of truth?" Hilbert asked. "The ones that will torch any lie? I'm not afraid of that."

"It wasn't that," Kyurem said, smiling. But he had an unnerving smile, showing inhuman teeth. "We will see if you can endure a true trial of truth." Then he turned and headed off, showing no signs that he might say anything more.

Although Hilbert was pretty sure he could complete any mystical trial that came with this, Kyurem's smile made him worried.

Hilbert walked along the road to Pinwheel Forest, thinking. Reshiram's stone was now in his bag, weighing him down but that didn't matter. While he couldn't put his finger on it, something wasn't right with today.

Glancing up, he saw a pair of teen girls walking his way. Oh right, he hadn't gotten much time to talk to the fans today. Maybe that would cheer him up. "Good evening," he said, smiling his brightest for them.
They looked to him and he knew that they didn't want to be disturbed. What? "Good evening," one said with brisk politeness. The other girl whispered something to her and they laughed as they walked by.

For a moment, he frowned. This wasn't right. He put the frown off to try again, turned back to them. "That's it, huh?"

"Um, yeah," the other girl said, wondering why he was bothering.

He put his hand to his chest. It was dim, so maybe they didn't see it. "But I'm Hilbert, world-famous Trainer. You don't just run into people like me every day."

For a second, the two girls seemed interested. But they quickly lost it, strangely. "Nah, you can't be him," one said. "He has nice brown hair that..." she faltered as she noticed his was right, but then went on, "and he has this wonderful smile where his eyes shine."

He smiled for them.

"And Hilbert has this sparkle to him," the other said, quickly covering. "He makes anything amazing. But you're not him. Bye!"

"Loser," the other girl said, and they headed into town, soon laughing again. Possibly about him.

Loser? He wasn't a loser. He was Hilbert! But how could they not recognize him? Because he had no sparkle? That didn't make sense. Unless Kyurem had been right about the Attract thing. He still wasn't sure how that would work, especially the part about crossing gender lines. Sure everybody had liked him before, but he wasn't manipulating any of them to do so. They liked him because he was so likable and great.

Maybe a lot of people were just having a bad day, he thought. A good number of them had seemed grumpy or annoyed. Normally, he could cheer them right up just by smiling, but it wasn't working this evening. It must have been a really lousy day. Well, it was still overcast.

"Hilbert!" There was a crash from the trees and a pink haired girl came out onto the path. "Great, it's just you and me right now! You don't know how long I've been waiting for this meeting." She had a dreamy look in her eyes and she wanted to claim him for her own.

Of all the attention he'd gotten, the only desires that really bothered him were the ones from nutcases like this. They desired to possess him like some kind of doll; they had weird obsessive dreams that he sometimes got glimpses of. He got rid of most of them, but this girl was being stubborn.

"It's you, uh..." but as much as he felt freaked out about what she desired to do with him (oh gosh, the ribbons kind of scared him after he'd see that one image...), she was the only one giving him positive attention this evening.

She laughed. "Oh, haven't I told you my name yet? How silly of me. Well," she stuck what she thought was an elegant lady-like pose, but with her cupcake lolita type outfit, it just looked goofy, "I'm Hope For Celestial Harmony Everlasting Virtuous, but my friends call me Banshee because despite my darling angelic appearance, I'm really a dark and moody artist deep inside." Then she smiled all perky and not-so-bright.

"Right, Banshee," Hilbert said. "How... appropriate."

"Isn't it?" She seemed happy. "I still haven't got a gift Pokémon for you, but I'll have a wonderful
one sometime soon, the best Pokémon you've ever seen. My love will lead me on my way!"

"If you say so," Hilbert said. "But you kind of creep me out."

"It's all a part of my charm," she said, trying to lean closer to him. Then she frowned. "Hey, something's different about you."

'I've been trying to figure that out myself," he said, then thought to add, "but it's none of your concern. I'll..."

"Oh my gosh, you've lost your bishie sparkle!" she declared, looking shocked. "Who would dare do that to you?"

"I had a bishie sparkle?" he asked. How in the world did this girl think?

She held her hands up and turned them to fists. "How terrible! It's the most heinous crime I've ever heard of! Someone particularly devious is behind all this, mark my words. All we'll get down to the bottom of it!" She then grabbed his hand and held it up with her's. "And we will go on an epic romantic adventure to restore you to your former shining glory, and then we'll be wed in the marriage of the century!"

"Uh, we're not dating," he told her, getting his arm back. "Look, you..."

"Oh yeah, I haven't won your affections yet," Banshee said. "Well don't worry, object of my affection! I will get a magnificent gift for you and find out what happened to your bishie sparkle. Buh-bye! I'll be dreaming of you." She then ran off into Nacrene.

"Geez, I pity whoever gets her attention in there," Hilbert said, shuddering. He then continued his walk.

Outside of Pinwheel Forest, there was a marshy area that was a good spot for training and catching Pokémon. Hilbert decided to go there, even though his Pokémon were rather stronger than the locals. Hilda was right; there was the fact that he hadn't earned all of Unova's badges yet. There was Clay and Skyla left for him to beat before he could challenge the Champion. They shouldn't be too hard at this stage.

Up ahead, he saw Kyurem again, looking up a tree. Hilbert followed his gaze and saw Hilda and a Minccino high up in that tree; the girl looking off to the east with a telescope. "Nope, they're still there," Hilda said, putting the scope away. "Darn; we really do need to train more. Oh, hi Hilbert!"

She and the Pokémon began descending the branches.

"Hello Hilda," he said, waving up to her. "What are you up to up there?"

"Spying on some really good Trainers." The Minccino hopped down and went over to Kyurem's side, but Hilda was still coming down. "We went up to see some Challenge Rock up there and they challenged up. Those guys were good; I lost against all three of them. We have our work cut out for us if we're going to beat them." She swung a bit too far trying to get her footing and nearly slipped.

"Be careful doing that," Kyurem said.

She just laughed, though. "I haven't fallen down yet." She then hopped down the last six feet to the ground. Brushing off bits of tree from her clothes, she went on, "Course, they had full teams of six, which I don't. Still, I should have been able to do better. But we'll do it! Beat them and Lenora, with style!"
"Ko cha!" the Minccino echoed, pumping a fisted paw into the air.

"I'm sure you will," Hilbert said, knowing that's what she would want to hear. But it was still hard getting a read on her desires. She seemed to be good just having the attention, but most people wanted something more. "Oh, I found something at a store I think you'll like. Maybe you'll rethink going with me." He brought out the blue velvet bag and tossed it over to her.

Catching it easily, she looked over it. "Okay. We'll I'll take the bribe, but no guarantee that I'll change my mind. How are you doing with your trial?"

His trial? Oh, the one for Reshiram. "I'm not really sure what it's doing yet, but I have noticed some changes. How did you know about it?"

"Kyurem told me, duh." She paused, turning to the southwest. "Hey, do you hear that?"

"What…?" then Hilbert did hear something. A faint thump, rhythmic. Almost like a drum. Then another joined in. "Huh, that's weird."

"I wanna see what it is," Hilda said, then took off for the south. Her Pokémon followed after, along with Hilbert a little later. Maybe if he stuck around her, she would get to want him to do so.

There were several of the drumming sounds when they finally came to the field of dark green grass. And there were drums, four rather large ones sitting on the ground being played by Timburrs. Nearby, there were a few more Timburrs, but more of Sawks and Throhs. The Pokémon had gathered apparently to show off to one another, as they posed and flexed in time to the drum beats.

"Hey, it's like some kind of dance session," Hilda said quietly. "I wonder where they got the drums from? Do you think they saved up money for them, or just stole them from a passing drum line?"

He shrugged. "Who knows? But actually, if you want an edge over Lenora, more than just having Kyurem with you, one of these Pokémon would work."

She rolled her eyes. "Well duh, that's just basic strategy. Still…” she looked at them, then grabbed Hilbert's hand and waved to the Pokémon. "Hey can we join you guys!"

"What… me too?" he asked.

She didn't answer, but the Pokémon did. A couple looked skeptical, but the others seemed humored by the offer. A Throh came over and waved them into the group, so Hilda dragged Hilbert into it.

Okay, Hilbert didn't mind showing off, but usually he was the center of attention for such things. There was no center of attention here. All of the Pokémon were trying to show dominance over the others, while Hilda was just having fun trying to mimic their actions. And there was no way a regular human could compete with a show of muscles from a Fighting Pokémon.

He played along until one of the Timburr clapped him on the back, knocking him over. This caused nearly all of them to laugh, which stung more than the actual hit did. Getting back onto his feet, Hilbert left the dance group. Hilda teased him, but it was getting dark anyhow. It'd be better to head back into town.

But Kyurem spoke up as he walked by. "The truth will hurt."

"What does this have to do with the truth?" Hilbert asked, annoyed now.
The dragon boy twisted his fingers, making a ball of ice appear. He then played with it idly. "How have things been for you since we met last?"

He stopped there, crossing his arms over his chest. "Not that great; everybody seems to be having a bad day."

"Why would you say that?"

"They just are. People aren't paying much attention to me, except one crazy girl whom I'd rather not."

Nodding, Kyurem tossed the ice ball up a little. "They aren't." It was a simple statement of fact.

"What did you do to me?" Hilbert asked, trying to be mad, but Kyurem didn't seem to be taunting him.

"We turned off your Attract state," he replied, emphasizing the 'we'. "People will see you as any other person, not as someone they are inexplicably attracted to. They will see you in truth."

Hilbert gave him a skeptical look. "I don't see how that's much of a trial."

A half-smile appeared on Kyurem's face. "It will be."

Then there was a yelp of pain that got both of their attentions. Not too far away, Hilda was on the ground; a Sawk who looked darker colored than the rest was nearby, looking shocked and concerned. The others had stopped showing off too. Kyurem bolted over there and encased one of Hilda's legs completely in ice. Then he gave a vicious snarl that sounded like it should not have been possible with a human's vocal cords.

"Ooo taicha chu tahga!" the particular Sawk said, frightened to death and dropping onto its knees. It held its hands up and its eyes were wide. From that, Hilbert felt fairly certain that Kyurem had threatened to kill in revenge. "Necha dena torsu, dehra ku e ku-re."

Kyurem glowered at the Sawk, then knelt down by Hilda. "He says it was an accident and apologizes for breaking your leg," he said. "And that he would serve us in penance. Should we have mercy on him?"

Hilbert could feel the hush there as all of the Pokémon no longer felt like playful competitions. The one Sawk did want to apologize, but that was nearly eclipsed by a bigger desire not to get eaten, now that he realized who the strange boy was. And from Kyurem, he felt a desire for punishment of the guilty party, merciless no matter if it were an accident or not. The feel of that made Hilbert shiver; it seemed clearer than ever before that this was the legendary Pokémon who would destroy the whole land to be rid of all corruption.

Fortunately, Hilda wasn't so vengeful even though she was the injured party. "Sure, that... that's fine. Ugh, well now I can't feel my leg, but I'm not going to be able to move."

Relieved to be forgiven, the Sawk gently picked Hilda up and said something in a comforting tone. He'd take her wherever she needed to go. Kyurem accepted this quietly, but there was still a smoldering desire for vengeance.

"I can show you guys where the hospital is," Hilbert said, and led them back to Nacrene.
morning, 12/4

The Throh tried to stomp on him, but Fedora skipped aside and sent a leaf tornado after him. "Why don't you just stick to the weakling Tympoles?" the Throh taunted. "You can't hope to best me!"

"I'm doing well enough that I don't need to hope for it," he taunted right back.

"Don't give up!" Hilda called from the outside of the grassy patch. She was keeping further away from battles than usual and he was trying to keep it that way. If things got rowdy, she wouldn't be able to get away as fast with those crutches.

The Throh managed to kick him finally, but Fedora would keep tough. He tackled the fighter, then struck with his leaves right where he had hit previously. While it was a little effective, this guy was taking hits like a sponge. The Throh laughed.

"Hilda!" Cheren called out, but Fedora didn't let himself get distracted. As he dodged another hit, he heard the boy say, "What happened to you?"

"Morning Cheren!" Hilda said back. "I tried to dance with some Pokémon and ended up with my leg broken. They've got tough competition out here… Fedora, give Growth another shot!"

That probably was the smart thing, the Snivy thought as he still just long enough to activate another boost of Growth. If he wasn't doing enough damage, he needed to increase his potential damage output. While it did leave him open for another hit, he could soak up some damage too. But not much more.

"Are you sure you should be out here with a broken leg?" the boy asked, concerned. "It can't be easy with those crutches in this marshy area."

"A little thing like that isn't gonna stop me," she said. "It's tough, but I'm tougher."

Fedora smiled a bit before he went in for another tackle. It was like that with him too. While this match was tough, he'd be tougher. It was cold, so he kept moving to keep moving. But he needed to get even better. When the whole team failed yesterday against those guys by the Challenge Rock, Fedora resolve that he wasn't going to fail like that again. There had been one time when he'd been knocked out in one blow, just one! So he was going to fight these tougher Pokémon so that he could be even better.

"Healing them like this is tricky," Hilda said, then whistled. "Fedora, over here, quick."

Fedora stuck his tongue out at the Throh before rushing back over to his Trainer. The Throh snorted and took the time to increase his attack power. Once over there, Kyurem gave him the Super Potion spray instead of Hilda. Then Fedora rushed back over to tackle his opponent.

"You couldn't beat me without that," the Throh said, bunching his fist up to punch.

"No, it just would have been closer," the Snivy replied, sending a Leaf Tornado at the spot he'd tackled. That dropped the Throh to the ground. He was able to get back up, but scowled as he retreated. "If you try me again, I'll thrash you twice as much!"

And he was pretty certain of that. Fedora felt full of life and energy today, like he could get
stronger any minute now. Like all he had to do was wish for it…

Fedora considered it. At one time, he would have been Hilda's starting Pokémon. But he hadn't been sure of it. Not wanting to get stuck with a dumb kid, he'd taken Kyurem's offer immediately. But now that he knew that Hilda was a kindred spirit to him, he had some regret for doing so. He couldn't be Hilda's starter now. But if he worked for it, he could prove himself valuable enough to keep in the party. He could prove that he was awesome too!

It was his choice in the end, his wish. Fedora wanted to be a permanent part of Hilda's team, helping her to win. So he closed his eyes and made that wish. "I wish for the power to help my friend."

Despite him being in a marsh, a scent like wild grasslands came to him. 'For your loyalty and effort, your wish is granted.'

And so he was allowed to evolve into a Servine.

Afternoon, 12/5

There were Pokémon in Pinwheel Forest. N could hear their distant calls. Most often, it was territory declarations, but sometimes bits of news came by. Signs of frost were around for the nights ahead. It was time for last minute checks to burrows and homes before hunkering down for the winter.

But although he heard them, he wasn't seeing any. That was troublesome. Down the path, there was a bridge that led into the largest city in Unova, Castelia. While he was interested in seeing the bridge for himself, N wasn't looking forward to being in the city. The descriptions he read of the crowds, the noise, the air pollution, the trash, and the violence let him know that he would not like that place. But one of the Gyms was in Castelia, so he had to prepare in Pinwheel Forest if he wanted to quickly get in and out of the city.

N was wondering if he should come back another day when he heard hooves fighting to get through the undergrowth. A moment later, a Zebstrika hurdled over a fence and onto the road. The short mane on its head had all kinds of bramble in it, indicating that the Pokémon had been running through the forest for quite some time. It stopped on seeing him, then snorted. "I hate you."

N wasn't used to a Pokémon treating him in that way. "It's okay. I don't mean to hurt you."

"You lie! You all lie! I'll destroy you all!" Then it charged up energy and sent a bolt of electricity flying at him.

It barely missed N as he stepped away. He put his hands up, open. "Calm down. I might be able to help. There's no reason to destroy all..." he felt a tingle, so got out of the way of another bolt attack, "people."

But even as he talked to it, there was a growing feeling inside that something wasn't right here. The Zebstrika wasn't normal. But how? It looked like any other Zebstrika, but its actions definitely weren't right. And it was dangerous. Disliking the action but seeing no other choice, N grabbed an Ultra Ball out of his bag, activated it, and threw it at the strange Zebstrika. There was an odd flash and a loud snap as it absorbed the Pokémon.

The Purrloin went still. But before he could go and get it, a purple flash emerged from the bushes. A Purrloin was there, next to the Ultra Ball. She had an old scar along her side, one made by a knife. After looking at him, she snatched the ball in her teeth and ran off down a path with it.
"Pricilla?" N said, then began running after her. "Pricilla! Come back here with that."

But she kept running, just ahead of him. She sped up whenever he did, making sure that he couldn't catch her. N rushed through the tall grass, hoping that she didn't go off somewhere that he couldn't follow.

Thankfully, she didn't. "This isn't a game!" N called out. "I know it's you. Can't we talk about this?"

Then she turned left and went through a large log. It was hollow, fallen from a tree so large that he could run through comfortably despite how tall he was. Something odd happened then. For a moment, N felt as though he was running in a dream. It was all so clear and yet unreal. Like some kind of power was trying to clamp down on him. Everything slowed and he wondered what was going on.

They emerged from the tunnel, still running. Things went back to normal, although a feeling of power remained. They came out to an open meadow; a large tree trunk sat in the middle of the meadow, looking like it could have made the tunnel when it fell. But where was the rest of that tree? The space between the tunnel and the stump was perfectly clear, save for low grass and wildflowers.

Pricilla stopped there, dropping the ball but putting a paw on it. "I'm not talking to you," she said haughtily.

"What's going on?" N asked, kneeling down to be closer to her level. "Is something bothering you?"

She turned her head away.

Before he could keep talking to her, a bellowing call filled the air. The power he had felt intensified. When they both looked to the source, there was a strange Pokémon there. It looked somewhat like the Sawsbucks, but with horns tilted back and grass green fur. It held itself with royal pride, for good reason. Although it took a second, N recognized who the Pokémon was.

"Virizion?" he said, somewhat in awe. "It's an honor…"

"Silence, human, unless I let you speak," Virizion ordered, in the kind of tone that demanded obedience. She walked over to them. "Your kind is not to be here. You should not have been able to enter. How did you manage to do this?"

"I don't know," N said. So this must be a sacred space. "I followed her."

"I'm not from around here," Pricilla said. "How was I supposed to know it was forbidden?"

Virizion stopped and looked down at them. "It doesn't matter. What does matter is that you are here now, where you're not supposed to be. State your true name and the reason you are wearing the Black King's stone."

The Black King's stone? N put his hand on the black rock on his cord necklace. She recognized it? So it was real. With that in mind, he said, "I am King Natural Harmonia Gropius, leader of Team Plasma and seeker of Zekrom, normally called N. I sought the black King's stone in the royal palace under the waters of Undella Bay and claimed it honorably."

Virizion stared into N's eyes. He was still on his knees, as he probably should be. Then, the legendary Pokémon straightened up. "Well then. I am Virizion, guardian of Pinwheel Forest and
loyal knight to the Pokémon royalty of Unova, Zekrom and Reshiram. I keep this space secret so
that the humans cannot find it, so that Pokémon can choose to live apart from them safely."

N felt a surge of curiosity and validation. "Truly? I am working towards separating all Pokémon
and humans. I believe that things will work out better that way for both sides."

Virizion looked at him a bit longer, then said, "You would be the one to do so, as you can speak to
and understand both sides. Tell me more of what you mean to do and why you still use their
Pokeballs."

Pricilla had taken her paw off the Pokeball, so N took it (and received a paw bat for it). Then he
got up and followed Virizion over to the stump. As he told her of his plans, Pokémon began to
emerge from the forest into the clearing. Knowing that he could understand them, they lost their
shyness and came up to them. Pricilla came to sit near N, but stayed with her back to him, letting
him know that she was still mad for some reason.

After telling much of his plans, N thought of something to ask. "On my quest through Unova, I
have encountered Kyurem in a human's form. He seems to have chosen a girl to follow, but I don't
recall him choosing heroes in legends."

"That's because he doesn't," Virizion said. "Kyurem is a force of destruction and annihilation.
When he is awake, terrible times accompany him. The winters are long and harsh and the summers
are not as hot as they should be. He doesn't discriminate because he will ruin everything. It clears
the land of corruption, but even us knights believe that he goes much too far in doing so. If he
appears with anyone, it is with a person that could bring great destruction to both humans and
Pokémon. If he is out and around at this time, I will have to tell my Pokémon here to dig their
burrows deeper and be ready for hard times ahead. He is the reason why the land around the
western palace is harsh desert, and why the eastern palace you went to is under many waves."

"The western palace?" N asked. "We had only found evidence of the palace in Undella."

Currently lying on the stump with her feet under her body, Virizion said, "There were two palaces
for the two heroes. But when the civilizations that made those palaces fell to Kyurem's brutality,
many things about them were forgotten. The western palace lies in the desert that is past the city
across the river. It may do you good to search for it and spend some time there, even if you found
the King's rock of the eastern palace."

"It could. Thank you." He was sitting against the stump like he used to back home, with various
Pokémon gathered around him and Virizion. There were a great many there: Petilils and Cottonees,
a few Minccinos, an Unfezent, some of the pan-monkey Pokémon, a couple of Audino, and even
some strangers like a Tynamo, an Axew, a Beheeym and a Solosis. While some were still wary,
others had come right up near him in curiosity.

And one other. Virizion turned her attention to Pricilla. "And what are you doing here, Purrloin, in
drawing a human into our sacred space?"

She looked up to the legend, but kept her back to N. "I told you, I didn't know what this place was.
I just saw that it was a quiet space separate from the main path. I was trying to get him to be alone
with me."

"But you said you didn't want to talk with me," N reminded her.

"Do you know how felines work?" the Beheeym asked, slightly amused. "They are contrary like
that."
"I was the first Pokémon he had on his journey," she told Virizion. "His starter, which is something special in case you recluses didn't know. But in line with his philosophy, he let me go after I helped defeat the first Gym. I've been following him, though, because I want to make sure that he's okay."

"I've heard enough to know that the starter is considered special," Virizion said. "What did you want to tell him?"

"I'm not telling him," she said, flicking her tail.

N nearly said something, but then the Beheeym said, "You can tell Virizion instead."

"I guess I could," Pricilla said, looking over her claws on one paw. "It's about the fact that he has run into almost no wild Pokémon this whole time he's been traveling. He's run into a few, but so few that he's caught them all and still had very small teams. It's because of those two stinky girls that follow him around."

"What, Val and Carol?" N asked.

Pricilla flicked her ears, but that was the only sign that she gave of listening to him. "You spend long enough around them and you don't notice the stink, but when new Pokémon come across him, they smell it and keep far far away from those girls. And at least one of them has always been nearby him. The stinky ones also keep knives on them too. I hate knives. And they're scary enough that if they do run into any Pokémon, the 'mons don't dare tell him about it even though they don't understand us. I was the same way, but I don't care about them now. They can threaten me all they want, but I'll keep just out of reach."

"Why would they want to drive Pokémon away from someone who is trying to help Pokémon, who is their king?" Virizion asked.

"Beats me," Pricilla said. "But they are. Just today, they made sure that nobody but that Zebstrika dared approach him. That is, until I slipped by the stinky ones and got his attention. I had to get him away immediately, though, so that they didn't try to stop us. But with all they're doing, it's obvious that they intend to control which Pokémon that he meets."

Virizion nodded. "That is bizarre. Thanks for telling me. But what he does with this information is up to him."

"I know. I'll stay to the shadows and watch, but I'm mad at him right now. I'm not going to tell you why that is, though." She then turned her attention to cleaning, signaling that she was through talking.

"Things may not be as you see them, N," Virizion said. "Observe the path before you carefully and make sure to choose the right way. But it is up to you."

He was mystified by all that was being said; Virizion's words reminded him of his Zoroark friend's words before he left. But he would make sure to talk to Carol and Val, at least about their perfume and about the knives. "I have spent much study and thought on the path I'm on. I'm sure it's the right one. There's things trying to distract me from it, though."

Like with Hilda and Kyurem, N thought. Knowing that Kyurem was definitely a force of destruction made it easier to decide what Hilda was. She would be a person with a potential for great destruction and an opponent to the ideals of Team Plasma. He would have to deal with her at some time. And as a proven King and potential hero to Zekrom, he would have to do everything he could to avert the catastrophe that Kyurem was most likely planning for. There was corruption in
the world, but if they did things the dragon's way, then it would be the innocent Pokémon who would most suffer.

"Virizion, can N stay for a little while longer with us?" one of the Audino asked.

"We can tolerate his presence for some more time," the legend said, staying where she was. "Is there something you had in mind?"

"Um, I was just curious about him." The Audino came over to him, her pink curls bouncing. "How did you get to understand us like one of us?"

N smiled gently to her and reached over to her. "I was raised by Pokémon when I was very young. There was even a Darmanitan that I called Mother, for she adopted me and watched after me the most. Learning to speak like a human was my second language."

The Audino seemed to trust him, and let him scratch her head. "Wow. You're nicer than other humans I've met. Your heart beats so pretty. Hey, if you lived with Pokémon before, can you sing like us?" Many of the other Pokémon in the meadow perked up at that. "We all like singing."

Nodding, he said, "Of course I can. At least, I can sound like you. Did you want to sing something?"

"Oh, yes!" the Audino said, getting some chuckles from Virizion and others chimed in too. "Can we sing the Lunar Lullaby?"

"Yeah, that's a good one," he said, thinking about it fondly. "You start."

Looking quite pleased and clasping her hands together, the Audino began singing. Once he heard the notes she used, N started singing along, as well as several other Pokémon in the group. There weren't really words to the Pokémon songs, at least not words that could be written down easily. But this was his first language and he knew exactly how they were supposed to sound.

Singing that song reminded him of his Darmanitan 'mother'. It was the first song he had known, as she sang it for him when he was supposed to be sleeping. In those days, he didn't really know that he was any different from the Pokémon of Sarasota Forest. He hadn't met another human until he was close to five years old and his mother insisted that he know how to talk to his own kind. In some ways, he wished he could go back to that kind of life.

He stopped singing after a while, partly because the memories of that transition time were jarring against the soothing harmony of the Lunar Lullaby. He glanced around and noticed that many of the Pokémon in the meadow were asleep now, including Pricilla. Despite her claim to be mad at him, she was lying with her front half on his lap, quiet and content there.

Seeing that, N smiled and felt grateful for her, as well as a bit guilty still. The constant argument that the guilt was misplaced was soon dropped, though, as the notes of the remaining singers continued on. While this was a lovely tune, it was also the tune used in sleep inducing moves like Sing and Grass Whistle. Even if there wasn't any power behind it, if the Lunar Lullaby went on long enough, most Pokémon would fall asleep.

And he had always been the same way. N closed his eyes, considering that he might want to leave soon. But once he closed them, sleep was so easy to fall into. His head drooped and then he was gone away into dreams like the rest of them.

Years ago…
Darcy was quite the unique Pokémon in that she could actually read the human language. She was often seen as the smartest Pokémon in the forest because of that. Although, she was uncomfortable in being acknowledged like that as she had learned thanks to a thoughtless owner that had suppressed her fire powers and left her shut in an apartment for most hours of the day. Reading the magazines, newspapers, and books that were around were often the only things that kept her from being bored out of her mind.

Although the Darmanitan wouldn't tell him about those things at that time. He was four years old and to him, the important things about Darcy's ability were that she had read his name off a bracelet on his wrist when she had found him as a baby and that she knew about human things. "Why do I have to wear clothes?" N asked, trying to figure out how the pants worked.

"Because you don't have fur or scales, or other things Pokémon have," she told him. "It's what humans do and we're going to take you into town today."

That made him excited, so he agreed to put the clothes on.

…

There was a fair going on in Opulucid that day, which was a frightening thing to a four year old used to the woods. The streets were all hard, with grassy plots much more orderly and sanitary than what grew wild in the forest, and there were all those buildings around. Worse than that, the streets were crowded with people, many of them much taller and bigger than him. He was supposed to be learning how to talk like humans, but there was so much talk around him that it was bewildering. And then he'd lost track of Darcy. N tried calling out for her, but his voice was lost in the chaos. Another child came rushing through the crowd and barreled into him, knocking him to the ground. He burst into tears, not knowing what else to do.

A man picked him up to put him back on his feet, but that only scared him more. Even more so when a woman picked him up and tried to reassure him with a hug. They were speaking in gentle tones, but the sudden capture and the woman's overly powerful perfume was just more chaos that N wasn't used to.

After a moment, they brought him over to a tent out of the way of much of the fair-goers. They even gave him a hot dog and a bottle of apple juice. But since he didn't know how to talk like them and his name bracelet had long since grown too small, he didn't have any way of helping them. But Darcy did manage to pick up his scent and find him there.

"I want to go home," he told her, starting to cry again.

"Okay, we can go back," the Darmanitan said. "I'm sorry; I didn't expect there to be so many people today."

…

It was definitely him, the man from the fair. N watched him as he met with people, talking with them. Although he had different clothes, the man had long light green hair that was much like his own. And he had the same kind of voice. He'd been here for several days now, by the human-made gate, opening and closing it. N wondered why he did that.

But, he needed to learn to speak to humans. Darcy had said so. N waited for the man to take a break for lunch, and then came up to him. "Hi," he said. He'd been practicing a few words that he knew meanings for, and that's what humans said to greet each other.
The man looked to him curiously, then smiled. "Hi. Aren't you the lost kid from the fair? Where do you live?"

"The forest," he said, pointing there. But he only knew how to say it like Darcy did, so it came out like, "Ah huu tcha."

And that was how he first met Ghetsis.

…

They had pricked his finger to take some blood and then stuck a needle in his arm to put something in his body. Ghetsis had said that the inoculations were necessary, but it was scary. What was it going to do? He tried to squirm out of the nurse's grasp.

"Don't cry now," Ghetsis said. "You're a good boy, so you don't need to fuss."

"Sorry," he said, trying to force back his fright and let the nurse put a bandage on the spot where he'd been inoculated.

The man who'd taken his blood came back into the room. "Ghetsis, something's come up on the blood tests."

"Is it something wrong?" he asked. Hearing that, N felt nervous. Was he sick? This was supposed to be a place for sick people to stay, and with all the needles, pokes, and questions so far, he did not want to be here for much longer.

He shook his head. "Not necessarily, but it will affect your request for legal guardianship over the child. You're N's father."

"I wasn't aware that I had any children," he said. "But that's good news."

"Darcy says I don't have parents," N said.

"You have one now," the doctor said.

A little later when they left the hospital, Ghetsis told him, "It is unexpected news, but… I don't feel like I'm worthy to be called a father. Just keep calling me Ghetsis, N."

"Okay," the child said.

Over the many years that N had known Ghetsis, he saw no problem with not calling him father or Dad, or any of that. But he'd seen several children now calling their parents Mom or Dad, staying or clinging close to them and smiling. And the parents smiled back. It made N wonder if his relationship with Ghetsis was too formal, or cold. Thinking on it made him feel cold.

No, wait, it wasn't the thoughts. He was cold. And damp, with the smell of dirt and frost close by. N opened his eyes and found himself looking across many blades of grass with tiny white ice crystals on them. It was the first frost and here he was lying on the ground not fully dressed for this weather. He had a coat on, but his ears, hands, and feet were starting to hurt with the cold.

He forced himself to at least sit up. Groggy and still tired, he dug through his bag and found gloves, a scarf, and a hat, all dark green with a white trim to match his winter coat. He also noticed that Pricilla was by him, curled up with her tail tip in front of her nose. But there were no other Pokémon.
He wasn't even in the sacred meadow of Virizion anymore. He was lying by the side of the road that went through Pinwheel Forest. Shivering, he wondered where the nearest warm place would be. Nacrene was down a winding road and would take some time to reach.

Also shivering, Pricilla started to wake up at his movement. "Uuuh, I was warm by you…"

"Sorry," he said, checking his phone for the time. Not even midnight. "I…" he looked back down at her and really couldn't stomach the thought of leaving her out here in the cold, "We need to get somewhere else to sleep. This is going to end up being a hard frost."

N slipped his bag's handles over one shoulder, then picked the Purrloin up, causing her to grumble some more. He went north along the road, away from Nacrene. At the end of the path, he found what he was hoping for: a gatehouse that was closed against the cold, but not locked up.

Inside, it was quiet. The electronic bulletin and the touch screen computer guide below it were both still on, along with the lights. But there were no other travelers here, or even an attendant. It was warm, though, so he put Pricilla on one of the cushioned seats, then went to lay on one of the couches himself.

It wasn't long before Pricilla had left the chair in favor of his couch, but N didn't care and was soon fast asleep again.
morning, 12/6

The ground was white with frost that morning, with the sky being an uninspiring pale gray. In the past, Hilda would have preferred to make this kind of day a movie day. It would be cold all day, but there wouldn't be snow to play in. But she was a Trainer now, so she was up while the frost was still visible and heading out towards Pinwheel Forest.

"Well one thing this frost is good for is making it easier to get around here with my crutches," she told Kyurem. "But are you sure you want to keep walking around like that?"

"It's still a little warm for my tastes," he said, still wearing his ragged looking black shirt and pants.

"Because it's above freezing?"

"Precisely."

"But you know that people are going to stare because it's almost freezing and you're around here with exposed skin." Hilda herself was dressed up in a long red coat with white trim, heavy pants that were red with white snowflakes below the ankles, a good white boot on her one good foot, white gloves, and a candy-cane striped hat with a red and white pompom on top.

"It doesn't seem to be stopping them," Kyurem stated, pointing ahead.

In the lower part of the marshes, Hilda spotted the three Trainers who had beaten her team the other day. They were, oddly enough, dressed in martial arts gis and no shoes, running around with a good number of their Pokémon. When they lapped close, they paused near her.

"Hey there, miss!" one of the two guys said. "What happened to your leg?"

She grinned. "I tried to dance with some Pokémon and had an epic fail at it. What are you up to being barefoot during a frost?"

"We're out training ourselves and our Pokémon," he said.

"We're part of the bare feet movement too," the girl said. "We never wear shoes; it's more natural that way. People get too soft relying on small things, so we're out to be tough doing things the old fashioned way."

"Well not entirely too old-fashioned."

Hilda nodded. "I suppose if I were out running around too, I wouldn't mind it for a little while. But can't right now. Say, if you don't mind me prying, how do you train your Pokémon up? You all beat me the other day, but I'm not gonna give up. I'll switch my tactics if I have to, though."

"Well we are probably more advanced than you. You'll get here in time."

"Hey, we should tell her anyhow," the girl said.

"Why? It's our secret teachings."

She laughed at him. "Yah, it's not that big of a secret. Besides, I think she's hardcore enough, coming out here to train her team when she can't get around easy."
"Well if you want to, go for it." The two guys then took off with their Pokémon, leaving the girl, a
Timburr, and a Sawk.

"Yeah, well you're just a special breed of lazy!" she called after them. Then she turned to her and
smiled. "Hi, I'm Jackie, proud to call myself a battle girl."

Hilda shifted her grip so she could shake hands with Jackie. "Hi, I'm Hilda, a crazy twit."

Jackie laughed. "Well, everyone's a bit crazy, some of us just more than others. Who's your
friend?"

"He's my bodyguard, Kyurem the legendary dragon."

"You don't seem too suspicious," he said, refusing to shake hands.

Hilda winked at Jackie. "Hey, I think he likes you."

"Aw, that's sweet," she said, smiling like she didn't really believe that was Kyurem. "Anyhow,
about how we train our Pokémon, we use the EV method. It's not usually taught in the public
school courses because it's a theory that's only been around for the past two decades. But the proof
of it is starting to show in those of us who have been using it for some time."

"It's not some kind of method based on performance enhancers, is it?" Hilda asked, concerned.
"Because it takes a lot of money to get the reliable stuff."

She shook her head. "No, although some people do use the vitamin pills. Me and the guys, we
prefer more natural ways of it. Like making sure they have less processed foods. But the basics of
it are, well, really basic. Most people figure they can raise their Pokémon just by battling them a
lot. And that will make them stronger. The trouble is, it won't always make them more effective.
You know about stats, right?"

"Yeah, I recently got out of a battles 3 class, which was getting into that," Hilda said.

"Well the EV, or Effort Value method, is about training Pokémon in specific stats." She pointed
over to where her friends were off running. "It's the old basics of exercises, but viewed in a
scientific way. You can have them train up movement speed by running, then physical strength by
lifting and throwing rocks. That's what we train our Pokémon with, since most of them are
Fighters. But I also like to train mine in dodging, like playing dodge ball or shooting a foam ball
from a toy gun at them."

"That is pretty basic, but a good idea," Hilda said. And it might be easier and more reliable then
hunting down battles all the time.

Jackie nodded. "Yeah, but it builds a good base for further training. And if you want to really tweak
the system, you can apply the EV theory to the battles you face too. Pokémon and people become
stronger by facing resistance, you know. With that in mind, you choose that battle that would give
the most resistance to the stat you want to train. Like if you want to train a Pokémon to be tougher
with physical defense, then find a Sawk around here. They hit hard. If you want to train physical
attack, fight the Throh, because they're naturally tough."

"Huh, and you'd fight a fast Pokémon with a Pokémon you want to be fast?"

"Right. Don't always go for the easy fights; the ones that force your team to be challenged will
teach them more than the ones they can win easily." Then Jackie winked. "But we're still ahead of
you. You can try having your Pokémon exercise around here today. I'll let the guys know not to
bother you for a fight."

"Sure, thanks." When Jackie went off to keep running, Hilda turned to Kyurem. "We should give that a try. But they all have mono-type teams and similar Pokémon, so it's easier on them. You guys are all mixed up."

"As you wish," Kyurem said.

She raised an eyebrow at him. "And you're not going to help with any suggestions?"

"Perhaps."

"Hoo boy, and here I thought you might be getting out of that. Well fine then. I'll figure this out." Hilda then considered the Pokémon she had before calling them out to give them exercises to try out.

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Afternoon, 12/8

The Gigalith glowered at him. A few minutes ago, it had been giving off a desire to help him in any way it could. At some point during this battle, that desire had faded, only to be replaced with a desire not to do as asked.

Hilbert tried to ignore it, but the dislike was coming off so strongly that he knew this Pokémon too no longer liked him. "What is it?" he asked, feeling mad. "We've fought against odds like this before, and worse. We can do it:"

But that didn't help. The Jellicent that his opponent was fighting with was focused on winning. The jellyfish wanted greatly to win and please his Trainer. While the Gigalith was being strangely uncooperative, the Jellicent was able to blast him with water and knock him out. Sturdy didn't even help as the Jellicent had already done some damage.

"Hah, I won!" the younger boy said, jumping up and pumping his fist in the air. "You're nowhere near as tough as you talk."

"I'm having a bad day, all right?" Hilbert snapped. As he adjusted his hat, he heard his watch beep. Some of his money had been transferred over to the winning Trainer's account. "What is wrong with everybody?" he said to himself.

The boy blew a raspberry at him. "Sore loser! I'm going to be more famous than you someday." Then he ran off.

Resisting the urge to chase after him and beat him up personally, Hilbert revived and fully healed up his Pokémon. Then he released the six of them: the Gigalith, plus a Bouffalant, a Haxorus, a Scolipede, a Bisharp, and a Sawsbuck. "Okay, what the heck was that all about?" he demanded of them. "That was the first match I ever lost and that's because all of you suddenly decided to be idiots! Why weren't you listening to me? That should have been an easy win."

He knew he wouldn't get a response he could understand, but he hoped that would get them to stop fooling around and act like the trained Pokémon they were. But the responses he got were still unsettling. The Bisharp ran one of its blades over another, making a sharp tone of warning. The Haxorus and Scolipede both hissed, while the Bouffalant snorted angrily. The Sawsbuck reared up and looked for a moment like he might smash his horns into Hilbert. And the Gigalith just glowered, making the red crystals on its back shimmer.
And Hilbert realized that he could sense something other then desires; he could sense hatred. It was not very strong from any of them, so he wasn't in danger. But it was there all the same, an ember that suddenly flared up when exposed to fresh air. Something had caused all six of these Pokémon to hate him.

It was a smothering darkness when he was used to being surrounded by the light of admiration. Hilbert could feel the color draining out of his face. "Ah, um… okay, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have yelled at you."

The Bisharp ran his blades together again. If he did the wrong thing, the restraint that keeping them from attacking him go away entirely.

On feeling that, Hilbert recalled the Bisharp in a burst of fright. He then recalled the rest of them, getting them away from him. But he could still sense those flickers of hate within the Pokéballs. His breath appeared in the chilly air rapidly. This, this wasn't right.

He looked around, but no lights of admiration appeared to his senses. There were some strong desires around, but none were directed towards him, not even a little. Instead of that, he was getting ignored and looked over, like he was any other person.

Had Kyurem and Reshiram really done something serious to him?

Wanting to believe that this was all a fluke, Hilbert headed for a cafe nearby. He needed something to be normal. As it was mid-morning, there weren't many people around. There was a young woman working at the counter, whistling a happy tune. That was better. Maybe things would be normal in talking to her.

"Hi, welcome!" she said cheerily. "What would you like this morning?"

No recognition. "Um," he glanced at the menu, "a hot mocha latte, that'll do. Small."

"Okay, then, it'll be 285, please. Is something the matter?" And even though she asked, there was a clear desire from her not to have her own good day ruined by having some guy come in and throw his troubles on her.

That hit him like a slap to the face and for a moment, Hilbert wasn't sure what to say. He got out the money to cover for it, but right then, he was tempted to tell her no. But if this was a trial to get the approval of Reshiram, he couldn't do that. "It's been a bad day already," he eventually said as he passed over the Poké. "I won't bother you with it, though."

"Oh, well I hope things get better for you." Once she took the money and registered the sale, she went about to fixing up his drink. And she was back to whistling before long.

Once he had his drink, he went over to a small table and sat there. This did not seem real; he didn't want it to be real. People had admired him his whole life like it was the most natural thing in the world. Now his own Pokémon hated him and the barista didn't want to be bothered by him. Had all that admiration been a lie?

And what about his Pokémon? They weren't going to cooperate, he could tell that already. Maybe it was time he let those six go, either be releasing them into the wild or seeing if anyone wanted to adopt them. Hilbert had plenty of other Pokémon in his Storage Boxes, so surely there would be some to like him still.

Yes, that was the thing to do. He sipped at his mocha and checked his computer to see about building another team. If he got clear of the ones who hated him, he'd feel a lot better and things
could turn right around.

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**Evening, 12/8**

N was having difficulty preparing for the Castelia Gym. The Zebstrika was powerful, he could tell that. But no matter what he tried, he was the worst behaved Pokémon N had ever dealt with. Many had acted out because they had been treated badly in the past. Back then, he occasionally got nipped at, sometimes drawing blood. The Zebstrika had nearly hit N in the head with his hoof.

"Zebstrika!" N said sharply. "Not me. Don't kick me."

He snorted, but stayed on all fours this time. "I hate you."

He took a deep breath, then said, "I'm aware of that. We've been working together for nearly two weeks now and I've heard not much more out of you than that. But I want to help you."

The Zebstrika lowered his head, cautious but finally showing some interest. "You understand that?"

"Yes, I do. I understand what you Pokémon are saying." Since he seemed to be calming down finally, N asked, "What's happened to you? I haven't met such a spiteful Pokémon before."

"I'm not going to be a victim anymore," the Zebstrika said. "I'm not going to suffer. I'm going to fight back against all of the evil in the world. And everybody is evil. I'm evil. That's why I suffered. But I won't. I won't take it anymore!"

That was odd. N tried to reach out to him, but that only made the Zebstrika tense. "What made you think that way?"

"I don't know. The hate made me forget. But I will find the source of all hate someday and kill it."

"That's a..." N wasn't sure he should be saying it, but tried anyway, "an admirable quest. I'll let you get back to it. But first, would you help me defeat the Gym in Castelia City?"

The Zebstrika stomped a hoof down. "Fine. But you mess up and I will kill you."

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**afternoon, 12/17**

Castelia City made N nervous. The buildings towered overhead, clustered together in tight groups. Although he'd been here for half an hour heading for the Gym, he still hadn't seen any plants aside from small flowers in boxes. The ground was entirely covered in concrete. There was exhaust from machines hanging in the air as well as the harsh tang of heavy chemical cleaners. And there were so many people, on bikes, on trolleys, on foot, talking, walking, running, calling, laughing, shouting...

There was just the one Gym here, he told himself. He could get in there, beat the Leader, then leave this place and never come back. If he could have gotten away with coming when fewer people were around, he would have done it. But this Gym had erratic and unreliable hours. N knew it would be open this afternoon, so he had to come now.

Finally, he arrived at the Gym. It was crammed in between buildings well over twice its height, making the traditional facade look out of place with the glass faced walls around it. And this was supposed to be the Bug Gym, he thought as he entered. If it were the Steel Gym, then he could understand its placement. A Bug Gym ought to be in a more natural place.
He was met at the door by a guy dressed as an orange and purple jester. "Good afternoon; welcome to Castelia Gym," he said cheerily. "Are you here for a challenge?"

"Yes," N said, passing over his ID and the Zebstrika's Pokeball. Even though he'd run into two other Pokémon that would have been great for this Gym, the presence of the spiteful Pokémon had scared them off.

"Alrighty, we'll go check on this one." The clown whirled off to a desk where he placed the Pokeball in a machine to check on it.

Why did he act like that? N wondered about it. It seemed unprofessional. Then again, he wasn't sure why the worker would be dressed as a clown. He had heard that this Leader was considered an eccentric artist. For instance, the wall just ahead of them seemed to be coated in oozing honey.

"Hmm?" the clown looked surprised. "Did you really catch this Pokémon in Pinwheel?"

He nodded. "Is that odd to find there?"

"Wee-ell, that's not quite it. Sure, I haven't seen a Zebstrika in the forest, but this Pokémon is flagged as a Shadow."

N went over and looked at the display screen. "What's that mean?"

"It's cursed with a kind of battle madness. There was a large outbreak of them in another region several years ago, but a few have shown up in the past year. And, I'm afraid that you can't compete in the Gyms with a Shadow. One of the known ways of creating them involves terrible abuse, so they're not psychologically stable enough to battle with safely."

The information that he couldn't participate today was just a blip compared to the concern the rest of that statement caused. How had this cursed Zebstrika ended up in Pinwheel Forest? And who had cursed it? It was a horrible thing to do, something that must have been more evil that N knew of. But he couldn't be mad at the clown. "I see. What should I do with him? He has been difficult to work with, but I didn't know what was wrong."

The clown handed the card and Pokeball back over. "Best thing to do is get in contact with the Orre Pokémon Research Lab. They have the most experience with the Shadows and will be able to tell you how to handle it. They should also be able to take it from you if that's too much, though. Purifying a Shadow takes a dedicated effort."

Given what he knew, he should be able to pass it along to Anthea and tell her about how to handle it. This set him two weeks back, but he did want to see the Zebstrika healed of its curse. "Okay, thanks."

As he left the Gym he encountered Carol on the sidewalk. She was in her usual attire, this day a black frilled dress with lots of lace, white kid gloves, and black mary-jane shoes. "Good afternoon," she said. "I was going to watch you in the Gym today. Is something the matter?"

"I can't compete with the Pokémon I have," he said, heading down the sidewalk. She walked alongside him. And with her dress' wide skirt, people were stepping aside to give them room; that was good. "It's a Shadow Pokémon."

"That's curious. I wonder what it's doing here."

N took a deep breath and, just past the horrible city smells, he could tell that she was wearing that perfume again. "And why are you and Val keeping wild Pokémon away from me?"
"Pardon?" She sounded like she had no clue what he was talking about.

"I heard about it from one of them," he said, not wanting to give Pricilla herself away. "You two are still wearing that Veiled Mystic or whatever that Pokémon don't like, and then you are apparently hanging around me constantly even though I don't see you. That's keeping me from finding wild Pokémon and it's not helping me at all." Someone gave him an odd look, making N self-conscious. "Anyhow, let's get to the bridge and then talk about this."

Skyarrow Bridge was a marvel. It had a clean white beauty to it, with an airy atmosphere, yet it was engineered to distribute the weight of it not just safely, but deceptively. From looking at specs for it, N knew it was immensely heavy. It only looked gracefully weightless. Sometimes he thought that if he hadn't come into this destiny, he would have wanted to study engineering to create works of art like this, without imposing on the environment.

As they walked up the stairs to the main walkway, N pulled out the Ultra Ball and handed it over. "Here, this is the Shadow cursed Zebstrika. Get him to Anthea and tell her to get it to someone who can pay attention to it for purification."

"As you wish," she said, taking it and placing it in her purse.

"I would like to see him free someday," N admitted, "but as he is now, he's reckless, a danger to himself and others. Now, why are you two keeping Pokémon from me?"

She made an apologetic bow. "I'm sorry, my lord. We weren't aware that our fashions and behaviors were blocking your progress. We will work to correct that issue."

"Good. Well with you here with me, I won't be finding many Pokémon back in Pin…wheel…" he stopped and looked up, seeing a movement of red and brown jumping from cable to cable on the suspension bridge.

"What kind of Pokémon is that?" Carol asked calmly, watching the jumping creature as well.

"I don't know…" he saw the figure cling to one of the cables nearby, then slide down it. "Wait back here; I'll go speak with it."

"Very well." She even took a step back to watch from there.

N met with it as it leapt off the cable and onto the walkway. It was about three foot tall, although much of its height was taken up in tall triangular ears. With a thick winter coat and human-like hands, it would have been perfectly fine in its romp on the bridge. "Righteous timing dude," the tan Pokémon said. "I thought it'd be the time to meet up with ya."

"You were looking for me?" N asked, puzzled. "I'm not quite sure who or what you are."

He scampered over and hopped onto the ledge by him. "Not surprised at that, N. I am the one and only Victini, the lucky Pokémon of victory!" He made a pair of V signs with his hands, grinning. "I got sent to you."

The Pokémon of victory? Sure, N knew of this legend, but he didn't expect to just run into him. "Victini? But, why? And who sent you? You're not the kind of Pokémon that's just out there waiting to be found. You only appear to those who quest for you or who are… worthy…" was that possible? Did Virizion arrange for this, to show support of his mission without leaving her forest?

"Dude, does it matter?" Victini asked, tilting his head. "I'm here."
"Yes, you are." Then N smiled. This had to be a good omen. "Since you are here, would you help me to defeat the Gym in this city? It's for the sake of my mission."

"Groovy." Then Victini whipped out a pair of sunglasses from thin air and put them on. "Let's rock that Gym!"
Miscellaneous Bones

afternoon, 12/21

For training today, Hilda had decided to go into Pinwheel Forest itself. It had been two and a half weeks since she broke her leg; the doctor said the cast could come off in another two weeks. She had told her that she could go exploring around as long as she was careful. As long as she stuck to dirt paths, at least, she found it not too hard to get around.

"This place is kind of barren," Hilda said, watching tiny snowflakes start to appear. "I know it's cold, but you'd think there'd be Pokémon around."

"It's the winter equinox," Kyurem noted. "Many are in hibernation."

"I guess. It'll make the training go slower. Still, there should still be a few hardy souls around." She paused and looked at one of the giant stumps that seemed to be everywhere. "You know, this spot seems awfully familiar."

"Does it?"

"Yes… look!" She felt for a secure spot to put her left crutch down on, then pointed to a muddy mark on the trunk. "Yeah, this is where I fought that Pansear with Olette. I didn't notice we were going in circles."

He came over and looked at it. "Hmm. Seems so. I wouldn't say that we're lost, though."

"And how's that?"

He pointed to the southeast. "Nacrene is that way."

Looking that way, Hilda could only see leafless trees and bushes. No path. "Yeah, but how are we supposed to get there when I'm not supposed to go off the path?"

He looked her in the eyes, neutral as always. "What will you do?"

For a moment, she glared at him. Then she sighed and headed north. "Is this another test? Well whatever you're thinking, I think I saw a path heading east this way. If all else fails, I can always get a ranger's attention." She thought for a moment, then began singing loudly as she moved along the path.

Kyurem followed just after her, silent, but he did sometimes reach out and touch tree branches, adding more frost to them. If nightfall were approaching, then he'd be more active for the sake of her safety. But for now, he still needed to observe how she did things.

"Ain't nothing to it," Victini said, slipping out his sunglasses again now that the battle was over.

"Good work Victini," N said, smiling. After spending a few days with the legend, he decided to try the Castelia Gym with just him. And it worked out nicely.

"Yes, that was a marvel of a battle," the Gym Leader Burgh said. "The field was fairly equal for us and you pulled ahead well. And to acknowledge your skill, here is the Insect Badge." He passed over a wing-like badge.
Nodding, N took it and the other rewards. Still, something had been bothering him. "If you don't mind me asking something…"

"Go ahead," Burgh said, interested.

He put the badge in his box while talking, "I heard that as an artist, you try to paint things from the viewpoint of Pokémon. But how can you be sure you've got it right?"

He brightened as the subject was of great interest to him. "Oh, well that's just my imagination at work. I've always wondered about it, how it is to be something different than human and how that would affect how I saw the world. It only fascinated me more when I learned, as a child, that Pokémon often have different eyes than we do, seeing things truly differently. Especially in the complex eyes of Bug types. They see movement and light better than us, and their interpretation of colors is very different. Some people wouldn't expect an artist to be following biology journals, but I do, keeping an eye out for any on the senses. Then I try to reproduce that on paper."

From that answer, N was mildly impressed. "It is good that you follow science," he said. "But I think you've got it all wrong."

"Why's that?" Burgh asked, uncertain now.

N indicated one of the areas below. "I don't think you really get Pokémon and their interests. I understand their language and know what they mean. And I'm quite sure that they, especially the Bug types you have, wouldn't be interested in vases and bottles, like those still life paintings over there, or the landscapes over there. No, if Pokémon could paint and draw, they'd be more likely to draw where to find berries and food, flowers that had good pollen in them, and maybe other Pokémon to say, 'this kind is friendly' and 'this kind is trouble'."

"Really?"

N nodded. "That's what they talk about most of the time."

Burgh put his hand to his chin. "When you say it, it does make sense. I'm not sure how to portray that, I mean, if there was..." then he waved his hand. "Oh, sorry, I don't mean to bore you. Congratulations again, and good luck on your travels." Before long, he was back to musing, taking out a small pad of paper and jotting something down.

As N left, he wasn't sure if that had the effect he meant it to. Probably he should have said something more than just about the art, something more of how Pokémon didn't like being confined and forced to battle. But if Burgh was serious about considering it, maybe he would come to the right conclusions himself. After all, the words of Ghetsis and Plasma were getting out to the public now. Surely that would help change his ideas.

Victini walked right by his side as they left the Gym. "Using a person's interests to get a message across is a nice idea," he said. "But then you've got to worry about having your real message drowned out or watered down."

"I guess," N said. "I'm still working at it. I want to get as good as Ghetsis is."

"Keep at it. Hey, I've done something for you today. Would you mind doing something for me?"

He looked down at the Pokémon, but Victini was more focused on getting through the crowd without getting stepped on. "I was going to set you free again."

His ears flicked. "I know, but something other than that. I want you to do something that interests
me."

It couldn't hurt, could it? "Sure, if that's what you want."

"Ha-hah, awesome! Come on, we've got to catch the boat! I hope they have enough for an extra."

"A boat?" N asked, but Victini started to hurry ahead, forcing him to do the same.

Hilbert was back in the museum, looking over a display of stone tablets. His old Pokémon fossil wasn't on display yet; presumably they were cleaning it up for better looks. Andrew had greeted him warmly, but over the course of their conversation, he seemed to become uncertain. "Has something changed about you?" he asked. "You don't seem as bright and confident as usual."

"Yeah, something's changed," he admitted. "I agreed to take on a trial for Reshiram's approval, but… it's not what I expected it to be. It sounded so easy that I thought it was a joke, but it's really not."

"A lot of things are more difficult than the surface suggests," the museum director said. He turned around and gestured at a large dragon fossil that dominated this room. "Like this skeleton. It doesn't sound hard to put it back together the way it naturally is formed, but it is. You're only given a pile of bones, which may not all be there, and none are labeled. And then some fossils get mixed up with each other… but you keep at it and you get rewarded with this glorious sight." He turned to Hilbert and smiled. "Your trial might end in you becoming a better person for it."

A while ago, he would have said there was no earthly way he could get better than he was. Now, he nodded. "I hope so too, or that I figure some way to control it… hey, what's with all the Plasma knights?"

"Hmm?" They looked around the room, seeing about a dozen of the armor-clad men and women milling about the display. Andrew clutched his clipboard close. "Oh dear. I hope they're not here to make trouble. Lenora would want to know… excuse me." He went off up the stairs to reach the Gym area.

Hilbert watched them, but they seemed to be doing nothing with purpose. A few stayed looking at exhibits, not moving on, while another paced around, observing the large dragon skeleton. And yet another moved between the groups, making short exchanges of words before moving on. They were up to something, but what? They wanted to help their King, but even knowing that desire couldn't tell Hilbert what their plan was.

The one pacing around looked up the stairs, then grinned. "Nice timing, director and Leader," she said. The others began to converge to the center of the room as Lenora and Andrew came down the stairs. "And good to know that we have an audience for our show. I always wanted to be a magician, so here you go. I hope we see more of the Plasma knights?"

The one knight then threw something at the ground, which burst into a huge cloud of tan smoke that filled the room. Unable to see anything, Hilbert put his hand over his face and tried to keep from sneezing. There was the sound of flapping wings, then a rush of feet leaving the room. Then even that noise was blocked out by a combination of the smoke alarm and the ventilation system kicking into overdrive.

"Stay here a bit," he heard Lenora say. The smoke was already clearing, so Hilbert was fine doing so.

As it did, it became clear that there was no fire, just the spent smoke bomb. Nothing in the room
seemed to be broken. But on looking at the dragon fossil, he noticed that its head was now missing. "Hey, they stole the skull!" Hilbert said.

"What?" Lenora asked, angered. "We'd best go quickly and catch up. Come on Hilbert; honey, you make sure the museum's okay!" And she was already through the door.

Hilbert ran after her. "All right!" Maybe a bit of daring would get him admiration again.

Right outside the museum, there was a small crowd of people who had left and people who had gathered to see what the fuss was about. In another part of town, a siren rang out from the fire station. One member of the crowd stood out: the Castelia Gym leader Burgh. "Oh, Lenora? What's..?"

"Did you see which way those Plasma knights ran off to?" she interrupted him. "They stole the skull to our best exhibit!"

"Oh, they went that way, towards the forest," Burgh said. When they went back to running, he came after them. "Want some help?"

"Thanks, that's much appreciated," Lenora said. "Can't waste time."

They got to the entrance to the forest and heard that the grunts had indeed gone in there. But past that, the witness didn't know which path they took. Quickly, Lenora sent Burgh off to the other exit, leading to the bridge to Castelia, while she sent Hilbert into the wilderness path. Hopefully, the thick forest would help trap the grunts in here.

It was the first day of winter; the waters were not yet freezing, but they were close and there was a light snow falling. Yet here he was, dressed in a black body suit that had a skull and crossbones figure on it, his hair soaked, out on the shore waters. All because Victini wanted to take him surfing.

Although technically, it was just body-boarding, not surfing. N really wasn't finding this enjoyable. "How can you like this?" he asked while sitting on the board and waiting on the waves to be right. "You have thick fur and you're a Fire type. I would think you'd want to stay away from the ocean."

"It's the thrill of it," Victini said, standing on the end of the board without any sign of discomfort. "Getting soaked to the bone is a drag, but when you get going smooth and work with the waves, that's groovy, best feeling in the world. That makes the dunkings all worth it."

N clenched the side of the board; it was so cold. "The end victory makes the troubles worthwhile, huh?"

"Exactly," the Pokémon said. "The fun too, and the dudes I hang out with, they make it all better. Oh, try that one!" He pointed out to a roll that indicated an incoming wave.

Going back over the procedure he'd been given, N got the board ready to catch the wave. This time, he managed to stick with it and for that time, it was amazing that the two of them could get control over the wave with so little. But then the water decided to flip his board over again, leaving him to swim back to shore.

At least that time Victini didn't ask him to go out and try again. N went back to the bathroom in the ferry house to get out of that wetsuit and take a quick shower to get rid of the salt water. Then he changed back to his regular clothes, went to return the supplies to the surfers he'd borrowed them from, and got a hot tea from a coffee shop stand. Victini kept running the hand dryers to dry off; he
joined N with his fur puffed up in static.

The tan Pokémon just grinned, though. "Don't I look sexy?" he asked, making a spin around the small table.

"You look like a puffball," N said. "Hang on." He searched in his bag until he came up with a brush to fix the fly-aways.

"Aw, thanks," Victini said, cooperating by holding still. "So what're you going to do after all this?"

"Once I get through Castelia again, I'm going to go into Desert Resort. Virizion recommended that."

He pricked his ears up. "Oh yeah? That'll be rad. But no, what I meant was, what're you doing after all this? After you win the Championship and get people to let go of their Pokémon? Cause you'd have to do that too, right?"

"That is the plan," N said. It was the plan; it was the right thing to do. He tried to keep that thought foremost despite an unsettling worry that started knotting up his insides.

Victini turned his head slightly so that he was looking up at N's face. "And then people and Pokémon would live all apart, huh? I'd stick with the Pokémon all the time, and you'd be with other humans all the time. So fewer people and Pokémon get hurt."

"Yeah, that's why," he said. That was why… but on hearing Victini say it that way, it hit him like never before. He'd be with the other humans. He'd never see his Pokémon friends again, never speak with or sing with them again. And he'd be stuck in cities! All the natural places would be left to the Pokémon and he'd be in these crowded streets of concrete and glass for the rest of his life. That wasn't what he…

No, it didn't matter what he wanted. N clenched the brush; he had to remember that. The alternative, Pokémon continuing to remain in servitude and mistreatment at the hands of careless humans, that was much worse. Making things right was worth the sacrifices.

"What are you going to do then?" Victini asked in a softer tone, putting his paw on N's hand.

"I have to focus on getting there," N said, going back to brushing Victini's fur down. "I'll handle that when the time comes."

"All right, if that's what you want. But you're gonna want more human friends when you get there, I'd think. Hey, if you want that, then you ought to come back to Castelia in four days. Before eight in the morning, at the subway station. Yeah, that'll do." He made a pleased swish of his tail.

Puzzled, N asked, "Why, what's so important about four days from now?"

He laughed. "Oh, you'll see." Then he slipped out of N's reach and off the table. "Well you've done what I wanted and let me go; my work here is done. I'll go report to Lady Zekrom about this."

N got out of his chair. "Wait, Zekrom? Victini?"

"Stay chill, dude!" He then rushed out of the ferry station in a blur, gone before N could take a step after him.

Not seeing a chance in catching up, N dropped back into the chair. So he had been working for Zekrom. Could Victini sense his doubts? That would be a disaster. There was still time, right? He
could settle those doubts and increase his focus on his goals for Team Plasma. By the time he made it to Icirrus, surely he'd be ready to be a true hero.

But didn't his goal mean leaving behind Zekrom as well?

"I think we're making progress!" Hilda said as she followed the path through Pinwheel Forest. "No longer going in circles now."

"If you say so," Kyurem said, following just behind her.

"And that makes it true." She looked over to the side, where Fedora was now walking with her. His hat fit better as he was a Servine, which let her see his eyes half closed. "You doing all right, Fedora? You look sleepy."

"Sssiissssll," he replied, making sure to look wide-eyed and awake. It didn't work so well.

"He is a cold blooded reptile that can't shiver," Kyurem said. "He'd normally be hibernating."

To that, Fedora threw a fit. "Krishshkii!" he replied, hopping in his gait. But it didn't last long; his tail drooped, but he made himself walk on.

"Stubborn."

"Well I don't want to make you sick," Hilda said, feeling worried. "Maybe I ought to get you a coat. Would that keep you warm enough?"

He made a quiet hiss, although Hilda couldn't tell what he would mean by that.

"Do you know if any of the rest of the team should be hibernating?" she asked Kyurem.

"They should be fine. I've seen their kind in winters before."

Then it was just Fedora she had to worry about. Things just wouldn't be the same without Fedora around. And yet, Hilda could see how he wouldn't be as effective in winter, especially if Kyurem was going to be a constant presence. And he could get sick. In that case, it might be better to have her Mom or Professor Juniper take care of him until spring came.

They came to an opening in the forest and found a strange man there. He was dressed in long orange robes and had an odd hat; it made him look like some member of the Catholic clergy. Having seen no other human for several hours, Hilda felt glad. "Hey there, man! Kind of cold to be larping, huh?"

"Excuse me?" he asked. "What do you mean?"

She stopped at a point ten feet from him, where the ground felt sturdy enough to support her crutches. "Live action role playing, duh. You don't see people dressed up like you standing around in the forest without reason."

Shaking his head, he said, "I'm here to meet with someone. It's of no concern to you."

"You sure?" she said teasingly. "Anyhow, I'm lost; do you know the way out of here?"

He nodded and pointed off another path. "Yes, that's a more or less straight shot to the main path. You can find your way from there. Although, there's a ledge that could be tough to take with a cast."
"Oh joy. Thanks anyhow. I'll get down there one way or another."

"Sage Gorm!" With only that as a warning, a woman dressed in the Plasma armor ran into the clearing. She was carrying something large in her arms, but Hilda didn't get a clear look at it. "We got the dragon skull, but we're being pursued. The others stayed to stall them."

At that, the robed man looked irritated. "I told you to check the research before you did this. This skull isn't what we need; it's worthless to our plans."

"What? But, but you said that this was rare and…"

While Gorm took the skull and berated the female knight, Hilda glanced over at Kyurem. "Looks like they're stealing bones now. Wonder what for."

Kyurem narrowed his eyes at the Plasma members. "I can make a solid guess. May I eat them?"

"Not in front of me, gross."

"Otherwise?"

"Go for it. We can fight 'em do you think?"

"Certainly." He tensed, gathering energy and forming a strange starry crest on the ground beneath his feet. Then he swept his hand through the air as if he were slashing it without his sword. Immediately, tall ice crystals burst out of the ground, surrounding them in a large circle. While they could see through barrier, it was clear that they weren't getting out easily.

The knight and the sage looked startled. "Wh-what is the meaning of this?" Gorm demanded.

"You have disturbed the remains of the dead," Kyurem said sharply. Fedora tried to hiss, but was nowhere near as menacing. "And we met her at Wellspring Cave with a load of stolen Pokémon. Just who do you think you are?"

While the knight turned pale, the sage held his hand up for her to remain quiet. He stepped forward. "I am Sage Gorm of Team Plasma. There are seven of us sages, including the one who gathered us, Ghetsis, all bound to serve the blessed King. We are here to change the world by any means necessary. For the sake of solving the great injustices of the world, we will even take abused Pokémon from their thoughtless owners by force. You young Trainers don't see what is wrong with what you are doing, but you should. It will become clear in days to come; Ghetsis will change this land through words alone! Now, who are you to think that you can intimidate us?"

Kyurem frowned, but Hilda whistled. "Nice speech! You been practicing?" Gorm glowered at her.

But then the dragon boy began to speak. "There is only one of me. I am Kyurem, the one who scour the land of Unova clean of corruption with the sharp winds of winter. It is impossible to find mercy from me if you have gone against the laws of the land. You may have a beautiful philosophy behind your words, but you have the ugly callousness of thieves behind your actions. Perhaps the greed of thieves as well. For that, I find you guilty. You had best be glad that I have a Trainer who finds the mercy to spare your lives despite your sins." There was a growl beneath his words that made it fairly clear how inhuman he truly was.

Hilda smiled. "I think he's got you beat, Gorm. Would you give back that skull?" While she wasn't sure what happened, she had a good idea of where it was supposed to be.

Giving a brief glance at the woman, he replied, "By the ice that surrounds us, I'll believe that you're
Kyurem for now. Still, your idea of justice is too harsh. She may be foolish, but I'm not leaving one of our followers to face you. You'll regret going against us." He then took a Pokéball from a pocket in his robes and called out a blue Frillish.

"Going the old-fashioned way to prove your new-fangled ideas?" Hilda taunted. She took Fedora's Pokéball to recall him, but he came onto the battlefield and prepared to fight. "Fedora?"

While he huffed and seemed like he wouldn't move, Kyurem came a step closer to her. "It's going to be just as hard on the opponent. He's best against it, so leave him."

She nodded in thanks. "All right then. Keep lively, Fedora, and seed it!"

Gorm had given his orders while Hilda was dealing with her Pokémon; his Frillish was gathering some violet glow. Fedora gathered his forepaws, then flung small seeds at the Frillish. The jellyfish then sent the orb at him, where it began whirling around his head. For the next couple of minutes, the Servine kept trying to fight off the light instead of the Frillish; Gorm just had his Pokémon keep using Absorb, although the Leech Seed kept it evened out. When Fedora managed to get a Leaf Tornado to hit his opponent (partly by luck), the Frillish used Recover.

The battle thus went nowhere until Fedora managed to shake the light off. He followed through with a Leaf Tornado, but he was already slower than he had been at the start of the battle. On the other side, the Frillish seemed tired too, closing its eyes a bit too long when it was ordered to use Confuse Ray again. Fedora managed to be quicker with another whirl of leaves, knocking the Frillish out.

"Fedora, you're stepping out," Hilda said, recalling him to his Pokéball. "Kyurem?"

He nodded and transformed to his normal form. In the meantime, Gorm had called out a Blitzle. It acted startled when faced up against the dragon, but its Trainer said, "Stand your ground and use Swagger."

"Use Ancient Power," Hilda said, hoping that Kyurem could do so before the Blitzle went. Not so, as the Pokémon stomped its hoof down and snorted in a prideful manner. Kyurem roared and summoned half a dozen large stones to hurl at his opponent. The Blitzle was knocked out immediately (as was the female knight), but Hilda recalled Kyurem to his Pokéball. At the moment, it didn't seem like a good idea to have him out in an enclosed area while enraged and confused.

"Power alone will not get you what you want," Gorm said, calling out a strange muddy-colored Pokemon that looked like a flat fish. That was a Stunfisk, right? "History has proven this time and again."

Hilda just smirked. "Luckily, I have more than power on my side," she said as she called out Olette.

"Let's not… have any… more battles…"

Hilbert ran through the woods, following where the Plasma knights had gone. He'd run into five of them along this path, but none had the skull. All they were doing was trying to slow him down. And if he ran into another fight, then he'd be stopped right there, most likely. It had happened yet again: the fourth team he'd put together after getting the Light Stone had started to hate him, not wanting to obey his orders. They had done enough to win against the one or two Pokémon teams the Plasma knights had. If he ran into another battle, he felt like he couldn't rely on them.

It was aggravating. At this rate, he was going to clear out all of his Storage Boxes in letting the
ones that hated him go. He considered that he could work to get their respect again. But when faced by one that hated him, he completely lost his nerve. What had he done to deserve this? He'd trained them to be stronger and spent some time with them. It had seemed like enough before.

Back when Attract made everyone like him.

Before he could get far with that thought, he had to slow down as he encountered a wall of solid glass. No, not glass; a touch proved that it was ice. Past the ice barrier, he saw Hilda and Kyurem, with the latter in his dragon form. Across the field from them, there was a female Plasma knight knocked out on the ground, a man with a large mustache and a strange sage-like outfit, and a Beeheym. Kyurem sent a blast of violet energy across the field, knocking out the Beeheym with Dragon Rage.

"I'm surprised that a Pokémon liberator like you would have a full team," Hilda said. "But you chose to do things this way. Are you going to give up that skull now?"

Hilbert was bewildered for a moment. She had a broken leg! How did she catch up to the thief before he did? Unless… she probably had been here when the theft happened. The man walked over to her and passed over the skull. "Very well. It wouldn't have helped us much anyhow. But your time with your Pokémon is limited. Before you know it, we will have all Pokémon taken away from their Trainers."

"Right now, you're going to find yourself in serious trouble," Hilbert heard Lenora say. There was a flash from Kyurem and the ice wall shattered. On another path into the clearing, Lenora and Burgh were there blocking the way out. "We're going to take you in and make you take responsibility for the actions of your followers."

Hilbert stayed where he was, to keep this path blocked (at least, visibly). Strangely, the sage, if he was that, did not look bothered. "Don't bother; we'll deal with this problem. Enjoy your position, Gym Leaders, while you have it."

Then there was a loud snap and a bright flash of white light. Hilbert cringed, trying to shield his eyes until it was dimmed. When it cleared, the knight and the sage were gone. But Hilda was still there. Kyurem grunted, then shifted to his human form.

"How are they getting away so fast?" Lenora asked as she came into the opening, Burgh beside her.

"They've learned from ninjas," Hilda said, rubbing her eyes with one hand. "Does this skull belong to you?"

"Yes, it belongs to the museum," Lenora said, taking the skull from Hilda when she offered it. "Thanks for getting it back, miss."

"No problem." She blinked, then grinned. "Boy, am I glad to see you all. I've been lost in these dang woods for hours. Hey Hilbert."

"Hey there," he said, nodding. "You probably already recognize the Gym Leaders, Lenora and Burg. This is Hilda."

"So you're Kyurem's Trainer," Lenora said, shaking hands with Hilda. "Good to meet you."

"You too. He's not always helpful, but it's good when he does."

"It's not too surprising that you'd get lost in here," Burgh said when he shook hands with her.
"There are ways to tell where you are along the paths, but it's confusing at first. Still, you and your Pokémon put on quite a battle there."

Lenora nodded. "Yes, we only got here when you were against that Blitzle, but it was impressive. Look, I need to get back to the museum to settle things; it had already built up to a large fuss when we left. Could you stop by later on today, Hilda? Just tell the receptionist that I asked for you."

"Oh sure. I'm sure Hilbert can help me out of here." She grinned at him.

She seemed to want to cause trouble. "What are you planning?" he asked, trying not to be worried.

"You'll find out."

The two Leaders then laughed and headed back out to the main path quickly. "By the way, what were you doing in my town, Burgh?" Lenora asked.

"The usual," he said. "I had an interesting challenger come into the Gym this morning; he gave me some things to think on, but I'm not sure about…" his voice quieted, the sound partly absorbed in the trees around them.

"What was that about?" Hilda asked, adjusting her bag before heading off in that direction. "I started talking to that guy, Sage Gorm, and then that knight ran in with the skull."

"They took the skull from the dragon fossil in the museum," Hilbert explained. "But Lenora and I were there when they did, so we pursued them out here, with Burgh joining us on the way. I've been running through these woods, fighting with the other Plasma knights. It's lame that they just took off like that. Was that guy really named Gorn?"

She shook her head. "Gorm, not Gorn. Kyurem thinks that Plasma is trouble, and I do too. So when we found out that they'd been stealing things again, we decided to take them on. Although that fight was longer than I expected. He really knows how to drag things out. At least it seems that the way I'm training my team is working out."

"It didn't help that every single one of his Pokémon could inflict confusion," Kyurem said, sounding annoyed.

"Yeah, sorry I kept recalling you like that," she said.

"It was safer."

A short distance out of the field, there was a two foot ledge drop. Hilbert was going to offer to help her down, but she called out her Sawk and the Pokémon carried her down the ledge. Hilbert took her crutches and followed them down. "There's going to be another one further down the path," he told them.

"All right," she said. "You mind taking me that way, Lance? We'll get you all healed up when we're back in Nacrene."

The Sawk glanced at Kyurem, then agreed to take her that way.

"Are you doing all right getting around?" Hilbert asked, feeling a bit useless. Sure he'd defeated a few of the knights, but it hadn't accomplished much. Hilda had done more for getting the skull back promptly and she hadn't even been there. Really, he could have not been there and it would have ended the same way (Kyurem could carry the crutches, at least as a human).
Hilda rolled her eyes. "Well if I'm getting lost in the middle of the woods, I'm doing pretty well in getting around. I don't think the painkillers are affecting me that much; I'm weird even without them. Though, if I beat that guy, I'm thinking that I want to try out the Nacrene Gym now. But I've seen pictures at that place, and they have some steep stairs, right?"

Thinking back over the building, he nodded. "I didn't notice anything particular at the time, but those could be tricky for you to navigate."

"I'll talk with Lenora about that later," she said.

It was an hour later, but Hilda and Hilbert came into the museum and asked to see Lenora. A few spectators were around, asking about what had gone on earlier and if things were safe. The museum had a closed sign on the door, although they were allowed in when they asked about the Leader. Inside, there were some police officers searching around the main display area for clues to the identities of the Plasma knights. Andrew was up on a ladder checking out the still headless statue, seeing if there was damage. Lenora wasn't there at first, but she came shortly after they asked about her.

"On behalf of the museum, I want to thank you both for helping to get back the skull so quickly," she said. "From the looks of it, we'll be closed down for the rest of today, but we can open back up tomorrow with everything in place. That may not have happened if you hadn't helped."

"Glad to help, Lenora," Hilda said cheerily. She noticed that Hilbert just nodded; he was a lot quieter today than he'd been in the past, like he wasn't sure what he should be doing.

"And it seems that you have defeated one of the leaders of Team Plasma. That's quite an accomplishment for a young Trainer. In honor of that deed, and your selfless actions, I've decided that you deserve to have this." She then passed over a small white box with the Gym's badge taped on top.

"Whoa, seriously?" Hilda accepted it, and the badge did seem to be the authentic Basic Badge. "But I haven't even participated in any battles in here."

Lenora chuckled. "I've been battling for many years and I know happy Pokémon when I see them. Your team followed your words because they respect you, and you directed them effectively against another skilled Trainer. I'm especially familiar with the Minccino line and yours looks to be shaping up into a great fighter. I'm glad to give this to you for your reward on getting the skull back. Although if you don't mind a bit of advice, you could focus on the Sawk for a little while to improve him; he seems nervous."

It was because Kyurem had scared him so badly that night she had gotten Lance, Hilda knew that. "All right, I'll work with him for a couple of days." She handed the box to Kyurem for now, as she'd rather sit down to get those things dealt with. "But even though I have the badge now, can I still challenge you to a battle? Just to know that I would have gotten it anyhow."

Nodding, she said, "Of course, if you'd like. I'll meet you outside then."

"Great!" She then looked to Hilbert. "You gonna hang around?"

"Oh, um, no thanks," he said. "I, I need to deal with my own team. I'll see you around." Then he hurried out before she could change his mind.

"I hope he's okay," Hilda said, starting to head outside herself. "You think I scared him off?"
"Perhaps," Kyurem said. "What were you planning on doing to him?"

After giggling, she whispered, "Nothing but make him worry about what I was going to do."
A Black Ferry

morning, 12/22

The streets of Nacrene were slushy that morning, mixed with wet snow and a salt mixture to keep ice from forming. Past the streets, there was a light dusting of white from the snows of yesterday. Kyurem stepped ahead and opened the door to one of the converted warehouses. "Thanks," Hilda said as she went inside. After doing her best to knock the slush off her boot, she looked around until she spotted her friends talking at a nearby table. "Hey, good morning Bianca, Cheren!"

"Good morning!" Bianca said, among a few echoing calls from the Pokémon around the table. "Oh gosh, it seems like such a long time since we've been together like this."

"It's only been two or three weeks," Cheren said, passing his menu over to Hilda. "But a lot has gone on."

Hilda sat down on the bench before letting other members of her team out. "I'm glad to see you guys again. Especially you, Bianca. How have you been doing?"

"I'm doing all right," she said, smiling but not as much as she usually did. "I finally beat Cilan in battle a couple of days ago. He was really great about it too, telling everybody there that I had been working so hard for that victory and not giving up on it. He even said that he was proud of me for it, so that was really nice."

"That's awesome of him, but you don't sound too excited about it. Come on, you won!" Hilda patted Bianca's arm.

She blushed. "Yeah, me and my Pokémon have been working hard. But I'm just not doing that well compared to you two. I mean, Cheren's got his Basic Badge now."

"I hadn't heard about that," Hilda said. "How'd that go down?"

"It was close," he said. "Got it early yesterday afternoon, but then there was that uproar about a theft in the museum, so my victory wasn't up long on the gym's website before it got lost. But I did see that you were involved somehow."

"It was a total accident, but yeah, my team kicked ass against a Sage from Plasma," Hilda said. Then she told them about what had happened yesterday.

Bianca was wide-eyed by the end of the tale. "Oh wow… you did amazing Hilda! Did you beat Lenora then?"

She nodded. "Yeah, we did. After that earlier battle, it wasn't that much of a challenge… well they did have quite a kick with that Retaliate move. But you did good too."

Nervous, Bianca shifted her beret. "Well I don't know. I'm not too good with battling. I was thinking of stopping with the League, actually. At least until I get better."

They got interrupted briefly by the other breakfast orders coming in. The waiter took Hilda's order, then left them to get back to their talk. "What are you going to do if you do stop?" Cheren asked Bianca.

She sighed. "I don't know. My dad would like it if I came back home, but we've been looking
forward to this for so long. I don't really want to stop traveling. But I don't know what to do if I'm not going to participate in the League. I do like working with my Pokémon though. Look, see? Suzy used to be so shy, but I've gotten her to be braver, right dear?" She rubbed the head of her starter Pokémon.

Having evolved, the Dewott was sitting on the bench next to Bianca. She was still toying with her scalchops, but she wasn't trying to hide away from the group. Suzy murmured something fondly in response to the head rub.

"There's lots of other things you can do with Pokémon," Cheren said. "Did you look into the Daycare Center? I think you could do well at something like that."

"Maybe." Bianca frowned, causing Suzy to look up at her in concern. "It'd be nice to work with those Pokémon, but it doesn't really jump out at me."

"Why don't you travel with me for a little while?" Hilda offered. "I'm heading up to Castelia after breakfast to check things out. Might even get some Christmas shopping in at the stores there. It's gonna be awesome."

"Sure, that'd be good if you don't mind me tagging along," she said, looking a little cheered up. "I hear the decorations there are amazing every year. Some have come up here, but still, it's not Castelia."

"Cool. We'll make sure to make it memorable," then she laughed.

Cheren rolled his eyes. "Ah, well if I hear of things exploding, I'll know you two are probably involved." The two girls laughed at him.

"Oh, where's Fedora?" Bianca said after a moment. "He's such a funny little guy."

"He's not quite so little now," Hilda said. "I'm letting him sleep. He's supposed to be hibernating at this time, so I may have to take him off my team for winter."

"That's too bad," Bianca said, worried. "But yeah, he shouldn't be actively battling if the cold is going to work against him."

"He didn't want to yesterday, but he wasn't having any luck fighting it off last night. I'm sure my Mom will look after him." She thought of something and hit the table. "Oh yeah! If you're going to come along with me, Bianca, then you'd better know that I have a stalker."

"Do you?" she asked, raising her eyebrows. "Is he cute?"

"You could say that," Hilda said. "It's Hilbert."

Bianca squeaked and looked surprised. "What, him?"

"That annoying pretty boy?" Cheren asked.

Hilda nodded. "Yeah him, because I said that I didn't want to be traveling with him. He doesn't take rejection too well, I guess. Oh, but Kyurem says that he actually had some kind of Attract effect on him and that's why he was so interesting. That's been taken care of, though."

"A human with Attract? That's so weird."

"That's impossible," Cheren said. "Sure, some people have strange abilities, but it's never on a level
that Pokémon can do naturally."

"It's true," Kyurem said.

Hilda leaned over a little closer to Bianca and said, "Although if I had a say in the matter, I'd rather be stalked by N because he's cuter. Not by a lot though; he's kind of a stick in the mud."

Bianca giggled. "Yeah, you were telling me that you met him at the cafe the other day. Have you seen him again?"

"Not since then, no. It's a pity. What do you think of them, Cheren?"

Sighing over-dramatically, he said, "Do you two have to involve me in your girl talk?"

They just laughed at him. "Well you are our brother," Hilda said teasingly.

"Yeah, like the sacred swordsman, we swore that," Bianca said.

He held up a hand. "I know; I wouldn't forget about that. There's just some things I don't feel comfortable talking about, like how attractive some guy is. So just don't ask, unless you're actually asking about a girl."

"Oh, you silly," Bianca said.

"More like we all silly," Hilda said. "And you know that if you said you'd like some girl that we'd whip up some crazy plot to hook you up with her."

"Only if I knew that she wouldn't be scared off by you two," he said, but smiled and eventually laughed.

Cheren had planned on training in Pinwheel Forest, leaving Hilda and Bianca to find their own way to Castelia City. If things had worked out right, they would have liked to race across Skyarrow Bridge. It was such a grand and large bridge that it only seemed right to enter Castelia by running across the bridge walkway. But with her broken leg, Hilda wasn't going to be running any time soon. At the end of the paved Pinwheel path, they came to a station that had stairs leading up to the bridge and a ramp leading down to the old ferry docks.

"How much will the ferry tickets cost?" Bianca asked, looking around the docks for a sign.

"League Trainers get free passage across the river," Hilda said. "I called them last night and unless you want to go to Liberty Island or somewhere else, we won't have to pay so long as we show our IDs. And even if you drop out, the card's good for a whole year."

"That's good." They looked around the dock, which was strangely quiet. There was only a single boat in at the time, one that was painted entirely in matte black. Bianca put her hand to her chin. "Huh. Do you think they're not as active because of the bridge?"

"Could be."

"Hey, you three!" A large man on the black ferry waved at them. "Hurry up and get on; we're leaving soon."

"Uh, okay!" Bianca called back. "Unless we want to wait?"

"Eh, let's go now," Hilda said. The two girls and Kyurem headed for the boat.
Shortly after they departed, three other young people ran down the ramp. "I can't believe you made us so late!" one of the girls said.

"It wasn't my fault," the one guy said. "But they should be… uh-oh."

The three of them looked around, but the only boat there was the black ferry in the distance. "Was that supposed to be our ride?"

"Dang it, we were supposed to reach the training for Team Plasma today. I couldn't get a hold of the recruiter. What now?"

The guy held up his hands. "Hey, don't blame me."

The first sign of trouble came when the captain said, "I wasn't told I'd be picking up a handicapped person."

"It's only temporary," Hilda said, bluffing away any concern. Bianca bit her lip and Kyurem sat up straight, even more attentive.

"True," the captain agreed. He was steering the vessel and seemed to be the only crewman on deck. "Shouldn't cause much trouble during your training period, but will it come off after that?"

"Probably. What's training going to be like?"

"That depends on what the Sages think you'd be good at. Don't worry; Team Plasma has a place for just about anybody." Someone came in over a radio and the captain started talking there.

Bianca leaned over and whispered, "Team Plasma? We're in trouble."

"Shh," Hilda said, more to Kyurem who was starting to growl. "We do need to get off this boat. But, we might learn something interesting if we play along for a bit. It depends on…" she leaned forward and called out, "Hey man, where are we going exactly?"

"Can't tell you exactly yet," the captain said. "But we're going to stop by Liberty Island first; we might end up there for a while. Take those papers over there and read them." He pointed them out to some papers that were held down with some thick rope.

"Okay," Bianca said, going up to get some of the papers. She passed sheets to Hilda and Kyurem.

Unfortunately, the papers were taken up by strange charts, lines and checks after numbers. Only a few parts were understandable. Hilda's first paper said, 'Subject E: Success, shifts- moderate, lost-located, progress: insufficient data.' The next said, 'Subject F: Success, shifts-high, dead.' Peeking at Bianca's paper, there was 'Subject R: Success, shifts- high, watched, progress: exemplary.'

"Um, sir?" Bianca asked. "Why were we given genetics charts?"

"So that's what happened to my reports," another man said, cold and sharp, yet not yelling. "I thought I told you to be careful with my papers."

"You shouldn't have mixed them up with the novice leaflets," the captain argued back.

"I'm sure that even you could tell the difference between them?" He took the papers from the three of them. "I apologize for the mix-up. This ended up being the most convenient time to pick all of us up, it seems."
"Looks like it," Hilda said. "Who are you?"

He smiled. "Don't get too attached to identities." He was a thin pale skinned man, wearing light brown sunglasses and a large long ash-gray overcoat. Most noticeably, his black hair was streaked with grays and whites, with strands messily going in all directions, even partly over his left eye. "Most of us never let our names out to outsiders. But you'll be one of us soon. I'm Dr. Umber, a genetic researcher. Although," he patted Bianca on the shoulder, "it is impressive that a young lady like yourself can identify a genetic chart based on site."

She blushed. "Oh, I've seen them, in biology class, and that's what they looked most like."

"Hmm. Still, I wouldn't be surprised if you turned up as a new assistant to our branch. It would be good to have a young sharp mind around again." He sat down on the bench beside her.

Bianca glanced nervously at Hilda. She took her friend's hand and squeezed it, showing her support. If they were stopping by Liberty Island, that gave them a window to get away in. But while they were here, they might as well try to find something out. "Maybe. Excuse me, but what were those charts about?"

Shaking his head, Umber said, "It's an old project, but being on-going, I can't reveal much on it. It's something I've been working on since before Plasma started supporting me, nearly thirty years ago."

"Gosh, really?" It helped that Bianca did seem to be genuinely curious about this. "It must be a big study to go on that long."

And it helped that Umber was pleased with the attention, proud of his work. "Yes, very big... and very important too. It has the potential for great change in the world, but I must be patient. I think it won't be long now until undeniable proof appears in one of the subjects. Maybe by then, you'll know more about it. Ah, here we go. These are the papers you'll need." He passed over some papers that had the symbol of Team Plasma on them. "It's good to see the group flourishing. When I joined, there were barely two dozen of us."

"Have you gotten to meet the King?" Hilda asked. "I was listening to Ghetsis the other day and he was so amazing. I would think that the King could only be more amazing to get such respect from a man like him."

"Yes, the King is an amazing person. I've spoken to him several times and I always get the impression that he's a person who should be part of an old legend, someone you wouldn't believe to exist if you'd never met him. It's very... inspiring to be around him." He smiled in a fond manner.

"Will we get to meet him?"

Umber shrugged. "Maybe, maybe not. Plasma's quite large these days, plus he's on a vital mission for the sake of everyone. Many have been asking to see him and I believe they may get him to make a speech in days to come, to raise morale for everyone."

"Doctor, we're coming up on Liberty Island," the captain said. "Are we going to be here long? We need to get the recruits up to the reception hall on time."

"It might, or might not," Umber said. "It depends on how cooperative things are. I have to see how the situation is. I'll call you if I think it could take longer than half an hour. Just tell them to send someone else to pick me up."

"You'd better call if you have to take more than fifteen," he left off, mumbling something probably
Umber just chuckled. "Relax; it's not good for your blood pressure to be so angry." Then, for some reason, he patted Bianca's shoulder. "You young folk do your best during the testing. I'll be keeping an eye out for you." Then he got up and headed over to leave the boat.

Once he was looking away, Bianca shuddered, "Ugh, creepy old man. I hope I never see him again."

"I agree," Hilda said. "Eat him sometime, Kyurem."

"As you wish," he said, smiling a little.

The captain did some checking of things in the pilot area, then opened up a door in the floor to go below deck. Kyurem got up and went to the dock to watch for Umber and anyone else suspicious. When he waved to them, the two girls got up and left the ship as quickly and quietly as they could manage.

Liberty Island was a small one, with some rough sand beaches, the ferry station, a garden, and a tall stone tower. Again, there were no other ferries there. But there were other people who didn't seem to be in Team Plasma, including a small group of surfers who were using wetsuits to avoid the chill. The girls quickly decided to head for the ferry station, along a wooden pathway over the sand.

"Man, I've wanted to learn how to surf," Hilda said.

"In this weather?" Bianca asked, disagreeing. "I couldn't stand the cold water."

"Maybe not in winter." She looked over the surfers, some on shore and some out on the water. But one of them looked odd. "Hey… look at that! They've got a Pokémon out surfing with them."

"Hmm?" Bianca looked out and soon spotted the furry Pokémon out riding the waves on a short board. She laughed. "Oh wow! That's so cute. It looks like it's having fun."

"So there are others active at this time," Kyurem said, sounding like he was satisfied with learning that.

"Others?" Bianca asked. "You mean other legendaries?"

He nodded. "That would be Victini, the herald of victory. I've only met his past incarnations in combat, so I don't know how he is from day to day."

"He seems to be quite playful to me," Hilda said, watching Victini coast onto the sand gracefully.

Then, he flung his board over to the group on shore and dashed across the sands on all fours. He ended up six feet in front of them, standing up on the sand. "Coo chu pa ka fre ki sho tu, ku re?" he said, in a blur of sound that seemed almost constant.

"I am not here to make trouble," Kyurem replied. "I'm keeping them out of trouble."

Victini grinned and winked, then started chattering away as fast as ever.

Kyurem crossed his arms over his chest. "They're asleep… possibly… a little over a month… yes, both… I don't have to answer that… it's your choice… why?"

At that point, Victini took on a serious expression and began explaining something slower, even
using gestures. But it was hard to figure what he meant, at least to Hilda and Bianca. It was something about the ferry station, or involving it.

And that got a serious response from Kyurem, as he bowed his head, thinking. "I see. I know of him, but I didn't know that. If that's so, are you sure about doing this?"

Victini grinned again. "Tchi."

"It'll be interesting to watch, at least."

"What are you two talking about?" Hilda asked.

"It's not important at this time for you to know," Kyurem replied. "Except one thing. Bianca, he wants to challenge you to a battle and see how your Pokémon are doing."

Bianca's eyes went wide. "What, me? Why me? I'm not so good at battles."

"Hey, he's the herald of victory," Hilda said with a grin. "My team's doing all right in that regards; maybe he wants to help you out."

Victini seemed to laugh and waved at Bianca to try.

"Try to catch him," Kyurem said, walking a little further down the walkway to be out of the way.

"O-okay," Bianca said, pulling a Pokeball out of her purse and calling out her Dewott. "Suzy, use your shell attack."

The Dewott looked surprised to see Victini there, doubly so when he pulled a pair of sunglasses out of thin air and put them on. Then she got serious about the battle, taking her scalchops off her hips… just in time to get knocked back a foot by a massive wave Victini had summoned. Suzy got her footing back and leapt across the sands, slashing at Victini and hitting him hard. Victini asked something, which Suzy gave a cautious answer to.

"Whoa, looks like he knows Surf!" Hilda said. "Although he doesn't look the sort."

"It's certainly a new trick," Kyurem said.

Both Pokémon in the fight looked battered just from that one exchange. Bianca recalled Suzy, then released her Munna. "Don't fret, Timmy, use yawn."

Victini then sent a small burst of fire at the Munna, but succumbed and fell asleep a short time later. Bianca then searched out an empty Pokeball, activated it, then threw it at Victini. While it bounced and rolled across the sand, it stayed shut and eventually went still. "Wurrra!" Timmy said, pleased.

For a moment, it looked like Bianca didn't believe what had happened. Then she smiled wide and ran onto the sand to get the ball. "Hey, I got Victini! Oh my gosh, I don't believe it!"

"Well you'd better," Hilda said. "That's great!"

"That was quite lucky," someone said from a short distance behind Hilda. Kyurem growled and when the two girls turned around, they saw Dr. Umber standing there. "You must not be the recruits we were meant to pick up today."

"We got on your ship by accident," Hilda said. "But we aren't going to be joining Plasma at any time soon, no thank you."
"I'll have to speak with someone about checking IDs next time," he said, not angry but somehow unnerving with his calm demeanor. "You've gotten a rare Pokémon there, young lady. Could I buy it off you for a million Poke?" When she didn't immediately answer, he said, "I could do two million."

"Cuuso," Timmy said, not sounding too friendly towards Dr. Umber.

Bianca clutched Victini's Pokedex close. "Um, no, I won't be selling him. He wanted to come with me, I'm sure."

He shrugged. "If that's what you want. But I will remember this." He gave a toothy smile, then walked back to the docks with a quick pace.

Umber walked down further into the castle. It looked as though this place was complete. Pity there wasn't a way to test the mechanisms before they were needed. While it had worked in the experiment stage, the full project was a wholly different scale. But once it emerged, there was no way to hide it from the eyes of Unova again.

Giving a friendly wave to the guards, he entered one of the offices. "Ghetsis, you've done much too well with the boy," he said.

Looking up from a book he was reading, Ghetsis raised an eyebrow. He was dressed down from how most people saw him. Then again, most Plasma members wouldn't dare just walk in. They weren't allowed. "Have you met him on the road?"

He shook his head and dropped down in a chair. "No, but I got word from Carol that he had captured Victini. Victini of all Pokémon, and then he let him go after beating Castelia Gym. I didn't think there was anyone who truly believed in the power of the legends that would do such a thing."

Ghetsis smiled. "He's doing what he's meant to do. Did you go after Victini?"

"Of course. But by the time I caught up to him, he'd been captured by another Trainer. Intelligent young woman, but she probably won't be letting him go any time soon. I didn't need him, but still, having Victini on our side would have been an advantage."

He nodded. "No big loss; I don't think that shifts power too much. Do you have the proposal and budget projections on the fossil project?"

"Right here." He pulled out a thick folder and passed it over. "Can we get this by N?"

"If he starts asking questions, let me handle it." He opened the folder and began glancing over the files. "You wanted to stop the Shadows?"

The scientist nodded. "The situation about the Pokémon can be replicated, but the situation with the populous can't be replicated here in Unova. It could be made to work, but it's too much of a risk and expensive besides. Can we pull the ones out there and pass them out of our hands?"

"Very well, I'll put that order through. And the other project you lost; have you found them?"

"All of them," Umber said. "But just because I've found them won't make it any easier to test the theory." He started explaining what was going on with them. Ghetsis was his key financial backer, so he had to have the man's favor.
Home for the Holiday

morning, 12/25

It was a chilly Christmas morning, with light snow dusted over everything. Castelia was actually quiet. After several days of bustling crowds and continual noise, it was peaceful with only a few people walking on the streets. The lights had gone out, but tinsel, garland, ribbons, and bells were everywhere, with candles still in many windows. The three friends and one guardian walked along the streets, headed for the subway station.

"My Dad's not going to be home for today," Bianca said. "It's weird, though. I should miss him; he always made colored popcorn balls on Christmas, remember? But I'm kind of glad he won't be there, so he won't bother me about being out here with you guys."

"Does he call you and try to make you come back home?" Hilda asked.

She shook her head. "No. Whenever I call Mom, he makes a point to say in the background that he's not talking to me until I decide to come back home. I wish he wouldn't make such a fuss about this."

"Yeah, he needs to give that up already." Then Hilda winked. "I do hope that he's left some popcorn balls for us. Those things are good."

Cheren put his hand to his chin. "We need to put together a plan to make him see that this is better for you. Maybe you can leave some photos of what you're doing."

"Only if we can put in subliminal messages," Hilda quickly said.

That made Bianca smile. "We might need that. What about you guys? Anyone else coming to the party?"

"I was hoping to trap a certain pair to come along," Hilda said. "But I haven't seen them in the past few days and I don't have phone numbers for either of them."

"You think it wouldn't be hard to get numbers from a couple of guys who seem interested in you," Cheren said jokingly.

"I know!"

"I think my siblings are going to be there," Cheren said, his mood turning downcast. "My sister's got her new baby and you know how my brother is."

"Quite the show-stealer he is," Hilda said, nodding. "But you've been doing good on the road, so you have something to brag back about."

"I don't know if that would be enough," Cheren said.

Bianca then tapped Hilda's shoulder. "Hey, there's one of the guys now," she said in a loud whisper.

And close to the subway station entrance, there was Hilbert, walking out from a side street. He hadn't noticed them yet, looking down at the ground and somehow seeming gloomier than Cheren. "Geez, what's with everybody having the blues on Christmas?" she asked of her two friends, then
called out, "Hey Hilbert! What's up?"

Jumping at the call, he turned to them, then put his hand to his head. "Oh, hey Hilda. It's nothing you need to worry about. Nothing much is going on."

"What, a famous guy like you doing nothing on Christmas?"

She had meant it as a joke, but he winced. "Yeah. As I said, don't worry about it."

"But something's the matter with you," Bianca said. "What is it?"

When he didn't reply, Hilda said, "Well if you ain't doing nothing today, you wanna come with us? We're going to a Christmas party and I'm sure we can fit in an extra person."

"You sure about it? I wouldn't want to intrude."

"I'm sure it'll be fine," Cheren said. "Although your attitude seems to have changed sharply, for the better."

"Has it?" Hilbert shrugged. "It's… stuff. I guess I could come along, thanks."

Hilda grinned. "Awesome! It'll be fun, but we have to catch a train to Accumula to go down Route 1. They don't have a station in Nuvema, after all."

They headed down the escalators, then headed off to the ticket booth to check on times. It was quiet down here too; everyone seemed to be home. Strangely enough, they found N there. With a Darumaka sitting by his side, he seemed uncomfortable and uncertain of how to leave a conversation where the ticket seller was droning on about some story involving a drum line waiting for a subway train.

"I think I have to buy a ticket," Hilbert said. "I'll go talk with him." He then went up and interrupted the ticket seller, allowing N to back off.

At least until Hilda said, "Morning, N! Whatcha up to? Going home?"

Looking at them, he seemed briefly worried. But then the Darumaka said something that made him relax. "No, I'm not. Why would you think that?" He then patted the Pokémon's up-reached hand. "Sort of, I guess; it's complicated."

"Well you're in a subway station today," Hilda said.

Bianca smiled. "Yeah, and if anybody wasn't home, then they'd be heading home, like we are."

Somehow, N still had a total blank look on his face. "Why would that be? I don't think there's any law requiring that."

Much as they might have tried not to, the three of them laughed. "Of course's there's no law," Hilda said. "But it's Christmas, you know?"

He was still drawing a blank.

"You do know that, right?" Hilda asked. "It's one of the biggest holidays of the year."

"I've noticed all those decorations and some talk about something coming up," N said, starting to speak quickly again and looking nervous. "But I didn't think anything of it. I hadn't known of it until a few days ago."
"Oh, so your family doesn't celebrate Christmas?" Bianca asked. "It's a little odd that you wouldn't have heard about it, but it's okay. You can still go home for the day and be with your family and friends back home."

"I can't really do that," N said, starting to say something more, but then quickly changing it to, "because I, well, I'm not supposed to waste time, but Victini suggested that I, er, it's…"

"You've spoken to Victini?" Cheren asked, surprised.

"Really? That's funny!" Bianca took a Pokeball out of her bag and released Victini. "I just met him a few days ago. He's a sweetie, isn't he?"

N was actually left speechless for a moment, staring at Victini. The tan legend chuckled, snapped his fingers, and said, "Chi ka re da na!"

"But I let you go just a few days ago," N said. "What're you doing with her?" Victini gave a rapid-fire response, which only confused him. "A party?"

"Oh yeah, you want to come with us if you're not going to go back home?" Hilda asked, interrupting. "We're going to a Christmas party. Even if you don't celebrate the holiday, you can at least work on your socializing skills with other people."

Victini chuckled at that and wagged a finger at N teasingly. That made him blush. "I… I suppose I could try. At least figure out what this holiday of yours is all about."

Cheren glanced at Hilda, who was already looking mischievous. "If you're going to explain things to him, at least be nice for once and don't make it crazier than it really is."

"Aw, but that's so ordinary," Hilda complained. Then she laughed at herself. "Although for your sake, N, I suppose I could try that."

"The fares are free today," Hilbert said, coming back to the group while giving N a cautious look. "And the next train for Accumula should be here in eight minutes."

"That's fine," Hilda said. "Cause we've got to teach N here some things about holidays."

The subway ride to Accumula didn't take long, but it was close to eleven by the time the group reached Nuvema. Part of it was because Hilda wasn't supposed to walk too fast with her crutches (although she claimed that she could) and partly because they talked all the way down there. Hilbert even brought up some of why he was bummed that day by the time they reached Nuvema. "I used to go home at Village Bridge to see my Uncle Giallo around Christmas," he said. "But he told me he was busy this year and couldn't meet with me, even though I've come back for longer than usual."

"Wait, Giallo's your uncle?" N asked, one of the few things he'd contributed to the conversations. "He has that crinkly-curl dark blond hair and he's kind of short?"

Hilbert nodded while he activated his Xtransiever to find a picture. "Sounds about right. Do you know him?"

After looking at the screen, N nodded. "Yes, I know him quite well. He taught me about mythology and the legendary Pokémon."

For a moment, Hilbert looked at the phone fondly, then closed it down. "Me too. Huh, I knew he did some tutoring for other kids, but didn't think that he would've taught you. Small world. He's
really passionate about it."

"That was the great thing about him," N said. "He could tell the stories much better than anyone else, and he knew so many."

Hilbert finally smiled at that. "Yeah, he has this huge collection of books to find such obscure items. He told the best ones about Reshiram and Zekrom, though."

"That was where he was the best."

"I don't recall him telling much about Kyurem, though."

Kyurem shrugged. "Not as many stories to go around."

"You do tend to turn up as a force of darkness and destruction often," N said, sounding wary but curious.

"There is such a thing as necessary evil," he said, not caring that it might sound bad. "Not this time."

"Here's the place," Hilda said abruptly. "This is Cheren's house, cause it's the biggest place to have lots of people over." Cheren went ahead and opened up the door for them.

Bianca's mother met them at the door. "Welcome back, and merry Christmas!" she said, inviting them in and hugging Bianca when she came by.

"Hi Mom," Bianca said, smiling. "It smells wonderful in here."

"Lunch is still getting prepared," she said. "But come on in and join us. There's a group already playing Scattergories if you want to join in."

Before long, the three of them were being welcomed back, and introducing the others who had come with them. The house was already filled with people, causing the party to split up into different rooms. But the hosts tried to make sure no one got left out of the cheer and chatter.

And it wasn't just the number of people at the party, but the number of Pokémon. Bianca's mother had brought her old Lillipup over, so now both him and her new Lillipup Lassie were playing together. Suzy was a bit overwhelmed by all the people and stayed close to Bianca, while Victini found the top of a recliner a good spot to lounge and observe the party. Her Munna Timmy was quite excited, checking out everyone who was there and everything that was around. It seemed like most everyone was having a good time.

Setting a folding chair down in place, Bianca glanced at the two long and one card tables that had been set out. "Mom, do we need any more chairs?"

"Put that one closer to the corner, for Becky," she said, then looked around counting. "It seems that should do. Do we have everything in from the kitchen, Leslie?"

Once all the dishes were set out on the table, Cheren was sent to get people from other rooms to come in for lunch. Bianca went to sit by her mother, soon having her younger sister take the chair on her other side. "I found a nice monkey," she said, letting the Pansear sit beside her.

Bianca laughed. "Yes, he is a nice Pokémon. Now you behave yourself Flicker."

"Ook ka," the Pansear said giving a thumbs up sign.
Once everyone was at the table, Cheren's father offered a prayer over the meal. Then the food was served, which led to a lot of plate passing and moving around in order to get everyone what they wanted. There were all sorts of things there to choose from: ham, smoked turkey, mashed potatoes, baked sweet potatoes, jasmine rice, green bean casserole, spiced apples, fruit salad, rolls, and even a pimento salad (which Bianca didn't like, but some of the others there really liked it). There was a lot of talking over the meal, sometimes several conversations going on at once. Being back home made Bianca happy. Still, she still wanted to see the rest of Unova before she settled on what to do.

Over most of lunch, she ignored thinking of those things and played with her sister and her Pokémon. As everyone was finishing off their plates, Bianca's sister said, "'scuze me, I have to go." She left her chair and went to the bathroom. Without even hesitating, the Pansear went after her.

"Flicker and Lauren seem to be getting along really well already," Bianca commented to her mother.

"Yes, I've noticed," she said. "She's liked Fire types for a long time, you know."

"Yeah. Hey, would it be all right if I gave Flicker to her? Because I've got Victini now and the two of them seem to really like each other. I wouldn't want to give you much trouble with another Pokémon."

"Is Flicker well-behaved?"

"Pretty much, yeah. He was raised by a breeder, so he's used to people."

"I think we could handle a second Pokémon. I'm sure the Lillipup will like the company. Thanks for doing this; it's generous of you."

"It's okay, he's a good Pokémon, but if Lauren really likes him, it may be better like that. And I hadn't really gotten her a Christmas present; I was just going to give her some money."

"I'm sure she'll take good care of him." Then she chuckled. "It'd be good for her to learn that responsibility. So how are your preparations going for the next Gym?"

Bianca blushed. "Um, not so good. I mean, I took so long to beat the first one, even though I should have had an advantage with my team. I don't want to stop my journey just yet, but I don't know if I'll keep with the League."

Her mother patted her hand. "It's all right, dear. I'm sure you and your Pokémon gave it your best shot. Why, I can see how happy they are and know that you're doing well. You decide what you want to do."

Feeling relieved, she smiled. "Thanks Mom. I'll keep doing my best."

Across the table, she noticed that N was watching them with an odd look to his face. But before she could ask him what he was thinking about, Lauren and Flicker came back. "Hey sis, can I ask you something?"

Cheren glanced over and saw his parents kissing under the mistletoe. Rolling his eyes, he turned his attention back to the conversation between his older brother and sister. "No, I think it's a good idea to have us out there," his brother said. "A lot of the places that we're getting sent out to are the long and winding areas, like Twist Mountain, or other toughies like Desert Resort. Having trained doctors out there can help with Trainers who get into trouble and don't want to send out their badly injured Pokémon."
"But a decent Trainer will be prepared for that kind of place," she replied. "Anyone with any sense would bring Repels, Revives, and Potions in case of trouble."

"Well not everyone has the sense we do," he said

"And the Pokemarts won't let you buy a lot of things until you have the right amount of badges," Cheren said. Not being able to buy Revives was frustrating when it came to training. The further out areas would have more powerful Pokémon to fight. But when one got into trouble there, one would have to run all the way back into town to get Pokémon fixed up, unless a nurse or doctor who know what to do was nearby.

His brother smiled. "Well if I see you out on the road on those days, I'll know to help you."

Although he felt offended by the statement, Cheren didn't say anything. Maybe he didn't mean it to come out that way. Or maybe he did; he had always tormented him when they were younger, for being a weak little kid. If they did meet out on the road, Cheren wanted to prove that he didn't need his brother's help, even if he was a doctor.

"Well that's nice for you to do for your brother," their mom said, coming over and patting Cheren on the head. But her attention was more on his brother. "So how's that girlfriend of yours? Are you brave enough to ask her?"

Cheren bit his lip and glanced over at Smokey. As much as he should like being home, Cheren was already wishing that the day would be over and done with. He had always been the 'unexpected gift', which to him meant that he hadn't been wanted at the time. Not only that, but his parents spent so much more attention on his older siblings than him. Yet he wasn't looking forward to getting their attention when he was older, when they'd probably be pressuring him to get married and have kids too.

A tap on his shoulder brought his attention to Kyurem, who had walked up silently behind him. "You are to distract Hilbert."

"Huh?" He glanced around and spotted the other boy leaning against the wall, right where the mistletoe had been placed. "What for?" he whispered back.

"Hilda said just do it," he replied.

Well if it was Hilda's idea, it had to lead to something interesting. He looked back over and said, "Hey Hilbert, want to play a game? We've got all sorts in the cabinet here."

Hilbert looked over. "Game? What exactly do you got?"

"Let me see." He got up and went to check the board and card games they had, although he was fairly certain there wouldn't be anything new.

Just then, Bianca came up behind Hilbert and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. While he was looking surprised at that, she ran into the room laughing, with Hilda following behind her. The two girls then took seats at the end of the table. "Yeah, let's play a game!" Hilda said. "How about Pictionary?"

"Hey, what was that for?" Hilbert asked, sounding confused.

Bianca and Hilda giggled. "Well you were standing under the mistletoe," Bianca said, between laughs.
"And I know you were trying to get one from me, so I won't do it," Hilda said, mockingly shaking her fist in the air. "Not gonna reward your stalker behavior, after all. But come over here and play a game with us. N, where are you? We're gonna play a game!"

"Do you need me to drag him in here?" Cheren offered, putting the Pictionary box on the table.

"You might have to," she said.

There were a lot of human and Pokémon in this house. If he had his way, N would only be talking with the Pokémon… no, if he had his way, he wouldn't even be here. But Victini kept teasing him when he tried to get into conversations with the Pokémon. N felt obligated to try talking with the other humans.

This party was so different than he was used to. There was no schedule; it was so informal, with everyone apparently wearing normal clothes, or holiday related ones. There were a few taking pictures of things that didn't seem important, like when he and the other young people had been playing Pictionary. That had been an interesting experience, trying to relate ideas with only pictures, but it was just play. Things happened when people decided to do them; sometimes they just wanted to talk.

And there were some things that he knew were probably wrong, or were definitely wrong. Like all these Pokémon being inside. The little girl had taken a liking to tying ribbons on the Pokémon, decorating them for no good reason. And there had been some accidents, like one of the Lillipups trying to jump onto the couch as someone was trying to sit in it, and occasional bumping into others. His Darumaka had been tense about all the people, so N was keeping her away by letting her stay outside. Really, all of the Pokémon should have been left outside.

And yet the Pokémon were having fun. There had been the home-bound Pokémon who were delighted to see their people friends back, and they seemed healthy and happy unlike Darcy had ended up. There had also been that moment of pure delight when the one girl Bianca had passed down her Pansear to her younger sister. True, that Pokémon would no longer be in battles, but to be handed over like an item like that…

No… the way Bianca and Lauren had been wasn't like passing an item around. It was more like sharing a friend. But that wasn't right; he had thought people were ignorant to the feelings of Pokémon, but these people seemed to respect them.

The people here were different. Or were they? N didn't really know how normal people lived, he realized. Even this house wasn't what he expected. There were all kinds of pictures on the wall, images of past memories. There were items given some prominence in where they were placed, but he couldn't see what was so important about them (like a little ceramic Mareep on a lace doily, on a prominent shelf with pictures). And the people here were so close, happy to just be together.

He was interrupted in his thoughts by one of the women there. "Oh, could you hold onto Maria for a minute, please? I need to get something."

"O-okay," N said, without thinking on it much. He was then handed the baby, a girl who was wearing a little red dress and a pink cap.

"Here, like this," the mother said, adjusting how he was holding the baby. "That's better. Thanks." She then went over to a large bag and began rummaging through it.

N wasn't sure what to do. He'd encountered baby Pokémon plenty of times, but they were often up
on their feet within a few hours or days. From what he had studied, humans spent a lot longer being dependent like this. Sleepily, the baby girl looked up at him, but decided it wasn't worth a fuss and closed her eyes again. "Why do you want me to hold her?" N asked. There was a baby seat nearby.

"She falls asleep better when someone's holding onto her," the woman said. "And she should have a nap now and take a break from all the people and noise around. Otherwise, she'll be cranky tonight."

"Does that bother you?" he asked.

"It makes me cranky too," she said. But when she stood back up, strapping what seemed to be a small radio to her belt, she was smiling. "But you learn to deal with it. I'm learning that a baby might be a lot of work, but she's a blessing that I treasure and love. Okay, I'll take her back now, and get her upstairs where it's quieter." She took her baby back and began humming to her as she went up the stairs.

A baby is a blessing to treasure and love…

…Ghetsis wasn't paying attention to him, which N didn't like. But he was six now, and he shouldn't whine or fuss or otherwise he'd have to be punished for being bad again. He looked around and noticed a pair of kids down the aisle, picking up something from the shelf. It was a toy bulldozer, painted bright yellow. The kids pleaded to buy the toy, but their father said no. The bulldozer was put back, although one boy made it clear that he was disappointed.

And there were other people talking about other things. N closed his eyes; he didn't like too much going on at once. When he managed to put them out of mind, he opened his eyes again and looked at the aisle. There were a lot of toys there, things that looked interesting but maybe not useful.

"Now there's an interesting thing to see," Ghetsis said, startling N. He watched as he took one of the toys off a display rack. "A Rubik's Cube with a belt clip. A practical way to keep it around, I suppose."

"What is it?" N asked, interested because he was interested in it.

"It's a puzzle. You turn the rows and columns so that each side is the same color. It's tougher than it looks, but experts can really make a cube seem to fly. It's an amazing thing to see. Did you want it?"

Something that could impress Ghetsis? N nodded. "Yes please." And it was the first toy that had ever been bought for him.

…N ran over to Ghetsis, showing off the Rubik's Cube, which had all the sides the right colors. "Look, I did it!"

He glanced at it and gave a slight nod. "Good, but we need to speak about your education. You have great talents, but you must hone them properly."

Although he felt a bit disappointed in the lack of a reaction, he nodded. Maybe he had to be able to solve the cube several times, to prove that he really could do it.

…He was thirteen, sitting at a school desk while Ghetsis gave him a lecture about royalty. At his side, he wore the Rubik's Cube. His hands shifted it around, solving the puzzle, undoing it, making even rows. He had said that he was impressed by experts at it. But he never made a comment on how well N could manipulate it. It really wasn't important, yet it was so frustrating. Almost enough
to get angry over.

Ghetsis hit his desk hard with a heavy book. "Are you paying attention?" he asked sternly.

He was caught for a moment between anger and shame.

Leaning closer, Ghetsis said, "You owe it to yourself to do the best that you possibly can. And it's not just us involved in this effort now. There are people and Pokémon who know of your mission and support it fully. They're all depending on you. Do you know how disappointed they'll be if you fail because you faltered in your attention at this early stage? They would be disgusted at your insincerity. You don't want that, do you?"

N let go of the Rubik's Cube. "No, I don't."

... He needed to calm down, but being in a house full of mostly strangers wasn't going to help. N left the living room and looked around the hall until he spotted an unoccupied bedroom. Hopefully they didn't mind him coming in here for a few minutes. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he closed his eyes and tried to refocus his thoughts. He wasn't going to cry; that was a weakness he had grown out of at an early age.

"Is something the matter, N?" a woman asked him.

He looked over and saw a brown-haired woman in the doorway. That, that had been Hilda's mother, right? They certainly looked alike. What was her name? It didn't really matter. "Don't worry about it," he said. "I have trouble getting overwhelmed around a lot of people at times."

"Ah." She shut the door, but instead of leaving him alone, she came into the room and sat near him. "Are you sure that's it? You looked pretty upset when you came in here." When he didn't initially say anything, she said, "I won't tell anyone if you don't want me to, promise."

"It doesn't concern you," he said. "And even if it did, I don't know how to explain it."

"I'm making myself concerned," she said, in the same kind of friendly defiance her daughter had. "Try."

His mind didn't want him to say anything, but it was also fighting against feelings that were stronger than he had expected. "Well it's just seeing all of you here, as family and friends, and the way you act around each other. I, I was told I was special, but I didn't think anything was unusual about it because I just was, but then seeing how other people are and how they relate, like Bianca and her mother, I heard them talking about how she wasn't doing well in the League but her Mom said it was okay and that she should do what she wants, and to keep calling home every week. I, my father and I haven't really talked since I started the League, about the same time they did, and I hardly knew Christmas even existed until this morning because we never celebrated things like that. He isn't bad, he just tells me to do my best no matter what."

He was probably talking too fast again. But worse than that, his eyes were getting teary. N tried to rub them out of his eyes, but it wasn't really helping. His mind tried to regain discipline. This once, though, it wasn't working. And it didn't help that when she put her hand on his shoulder, it was like a relief to have someone listening to something he didn't usually voice.

"I have to succeed, or I'm worthless."
Hilda and her mother were back in their house briefly. It was getting dark, so Fluff the Petilil was dozing in her usual box. In a spare room, Fedora was out hard, asleep. His chest expanded in a slow steady rhythm, but he didn't move otherwise. Hilda reached down from the chair and petted him. "Yeah, he's been like this for the past few days. Juniper said that it was a normal hibernation, though. Thanks for looking after him."

Her Mom smiled. "No problem. I just make sure there's water nearby if he stirs, right?"

"Yup, and you may need to give him some food the first couple of times. He was sunning and eating quite a bit, but I don't know if it's enough."

"Sure. Are you kids headed back to Castelia tonight?"

"Yeah, the weather's still tolerable. Not that we don't love you guys, but got to get back to training and stuff tomorrow."

She nodded. "I understand; I've done it all before, remember?"

"Like a billion stories," Hilda said, laughing.

Leslie chuckled, then turned oddly serious. "Oh, one of your friends left Nuvema already, N."

Puzzled at that, Hilda tried to recall the last she'd seen of him. He had been talking with Cheren's sister and holding onto the baby, but then she'd gotten into a conversation with Cheren and his family. "He did? Did he say why?"

"He's just not used to crowds, as you know," she answered. Then she came over and helped Hilda out of the chair. "But now that I've met them, I think that was a good idea you had, bringing those two boys over and being friendly with them. They could both use a good friend about now. Just be careful about getting too close to one unless you know the other won't be jealous about it."

With the encouragement from her mother, Hilda made her way over to where Hilbert was standing, by the fence at the edge of town that stood over a cliff. "Admiring the town?" she asked.

"Hmm?" He turned to see who it was, then shrugged. "Kind of. Reminds me of my home some, the style of houses and how small it is. Although nowhere near as compact. I was watching Kyurem too."

"What's he up to?" Hilda said, looking where he had been looking. Kyurem was down on the small riverbank at the base of the cliff. He was in dragon form crouched down with his wings close in, looking to the small island that blocked Nuvema from being on the ocean shore.

"I dunno," Hilbert said. "But based on what I can sense from him, just enjoying the weather. It's getting near freezing."

"Of course he likes that."

"Yeah." He seemed uncertain, then turned back to her. "Do you mind if I talk to you about something?"

"Nah, what's on your mind?"

"I… you just want to help me?"

Hilda felt puzzled at that sudden shift. "Yeah. I didn't say anything, but if you just want to talk, I
got nothing pressing to do. Except if you take too long and we have to set out for Accumula."

Hilbert bowed his head. "It's my power, sensing what people want. It's just that I don't often run
into a simple want like that, unless it's something basic to life like wanting to eat or sleep. Thanks.
It's about your Pokémon. How do you get them to like you and be happy like they are?"

She thought about that for a moment. "Can't really say what it is. I try to have them out with me a
lot, not just Kyurem. I do train them, but I make it fun like playing football with them. And I keep
up on their grooming. Mimi has to be brushed every night, but Olette's good with an occasional nail
care if she gets to roll in the dirt a bit. Lance is touchy, though, and doesn't let me groom him; he
seems happier when I set up a bathtub of water for him and leave him to take care of himself.
Kyurem's the same way, except I don't know if he takes baths or not. Probably in the rivers while
he's off somewhere else."

"Then you spend a lot of time on them?" Hilbert asked.

"Yeah." She chuckled a bit. " Might even spoil them a bit, I guess."

He shook his head. "I wouldn't say that."

"Why're you asking that? I mean, you've been taking care of Pokémon for nearly ten years, right?"

"Just about." He shifted his posture nervously. "That's what they tell you: take care of your
Pokémon and they'll grow to love you. It worked for me for years. I thought I was doing all that I
was supposed to, training them well, helping them win battles, giving them breaks, having them
out occasionally. I was doing just fine, I thought."

"You didn't have any of your Pokémon out at the party," Hilda said. "Not that I noticed, anyhow.
There were a lot, but even N had that cute little Darumaka out for a short time."

His face went red at that. "Uh, yeah… but I couldn't really do that. I mean… before I met you, I
had over two hundred Pokémon."

"Whoa, that many? I didn't take you for a hoarder."

"Well they were in the computer Storage Boxes most of the time," he said, although that didn't
help his anxiety about something. Being wrong? "And I thought that was the mark of a great
Trainer, you know. Make a lot of Pokémon happy and powerful, be known for being able to use
just about any Pokémon out there. I did have a lot. Now I'm down to ten, and two eggs."

"Downsizing is all right," Hilda said. "Plus now those Pokémon can be out doing things too."

He looked away and didn't speak for a moment. When he did he sounded ashamed. "I didn't mean
do it that way. I, I had to. Once that Attract state was broken, they all started hating me. I could
get them to work with me for a few minutes, but then… it was like they were waking up from
some kind of dream. I didn't realize that I could also sense hate until I felt it from them. Maybe I
am a wimp, but I just couldn't face them when that hate was there. I gave them all away: no trades,
no money, just transferred them over to an adoption agency."

"That's not exactly being a wimp," Hilda said. "Passing on a Pokémon if the only problem is that it
dislikes you isn't bad."

"Maybe. But I don't have much hope for the other ten being any better. And those eggs, I can't
even remember what kind of Pokémon they came from. I don't know what to do now."
"Maybe try spoiling yours a little bit." Hilda considered what she might be able to do to help. Perhaps… "Hey were you still looking to travel with me? Bianca's traveling with me too, but if you don't mind hanging around two girls, it should be fine."

He looked skeptical at that. "Are you sure? You said no before."

"That's cause you were a jerk back then. But you did have reason to believe you were that great, even if it wasn't that good. You're kind of all right now, and I know we aren't going to be crowded out by a bunch of your fans."

He finally smiled a little at that. "I guess. I don't know, let me think about it. But thanks."

"No problem."
Dreams of Reshiram

As useful as the Dream Connector had sounded, actually using it wasn't turning out much beyond the first dream Hilda had seen. The dreams of Pokémon were pretty basic: Fedora was usually in a sunny meadow, Mimi would be in the same snowy forest, Olette was usually in a cave, but sometimes in a home, and Lance was in a forest. There would be other Pokémon around, but none had followed Hilda and her Pokémon out of the dream world. Sometimes she got berries, which was handy. And using it on consecutive nights left her and the Pokémon feeling tired in the morning. Hilda wasn't using it that often because of that.

But this once…

She was in the Sawk's forest, questioning him and trying to find out what he liked other than fighting. She thought it would go a long ways towards making him less nervous. While she was trying to explain how to juggle (even though she hadn't done so much), the sky went dark. Snow started to fall as the air turned frigid. And all the forest Pokémon that had been around fled.

"What's up with this?" Hilda asked, glancing over at Lance.

He had changed, though; he had grown much smaller, shorter than Mimi. He clamped onto Hilda's leg as a familiar roar filled the air. And for the first time, she got a strong and clear thought from the dreaming Pokémon.

I must stay, for my honor. But once I leave, he will kill me.

Afternoon, 12/30

The first few days in Desert Resort had not been fruitful for N. He'd only picked up the Darumaka, a female he named Daisy; she reminded him a little of Darcy at first, but Daisy was more fretful and couldn't read. Now he was back, trying to build up a team to fight the next Gym with. It was going to be a tough one and he needed several Pokémon to assist him.

Wearing a bandanna around his face to block out the constantly blowing sand, N continued walking. What was Virizion wanting him to find out here? There was supposed to be a palace somewhere out here, but he had yet to see any signs of it. "Do you know where the palace might be?" N asked Daisy, holding her in one arm.

She had one of her arms latched onto his shoulder, to look around. "I think it's by the sleeping guardians," she said, pointing off to the north. "I didn't go there much because the Sandiles are really territorial and they'll bite anyone who gets too close."

"All right. I'd like to get a Sandile's help, though. I hope it's okay."

"Um, if you can get it to follow you, I guess it's okay." She pulled in closer to him. "But it's strange that it's so quiet. Usually there's all kinds of Pokémon and humans around."

It was tough to take a deep breath around here; he hoped it wasn't Val and Carol intentionally working against him. "Do you have any idea of why that is? Don't be afraid to tell me anything."

"I don't know for sure, but something poisonous has been around. Some of the sands are toxic and they're not supposed to be."
"Poisonous?" That was odd. Then again, some Poison types could affect their environment.

"It has a bitter scent." She tensed at the sound of his Xtransciver. "What's that?"

"Don't worry, it's just my phone," he said, putting her down so he could check the screen. Was Ghetsis finally getting in contact with him? Or was it Val or Carol? He didn't recognize the number, but put it through.

And Hilda popped up on the screen; the background indicated that she was somewhere in Castelia City. "Oh, hi! I did get you!"

"How did you get my number?" N asked, concerned and puzzled.

She shook her head. "No, that's not how you go about answering a phone call. You say hi back, or 'good afternoon' or 'good' whatever-time-it-is. Or if you don't know the person, ask who they are. Geez, I've got a lot to teach you, don't I?"

"I guess," N said, not sure what else to say.

"Okay, let's try this again. Hi, N!"

Figuring he should play along or the conversation wouldn't go anywhere, he said, "Hi Hilda. How did you get my phone number?"

"Better," she said, smiling. "I got it at the Christmas party, when you had it off your wrist for a little while. I was darn lucky to catch it then, since I didn't get to ask for it directly. But I had to get it, cause otherwise I never hear from you unless I run into you out of luck. So how are you doing? What's with the bandit mask?"

"It's not a bandit mask," N said, touching the bandanna. "I'm doing okay, but I'm in Desert Resort and the sandstorm doesn't seem to end. It's actually slow today, but otherwise I'd be breathing in sand all the time."

"Ick, but nice idea. I'll have to remember it when I get to that area."

"Why are you calling me? This phone is for…"

"That's a good question to ask," Hilda interrupted with, "but if you're going to be a polite conversationalist, you should ask how I'm doing back before you get to that."

What was with this lesson in politeness? It was unexpected. And yet, not a waste of time even though he wouldn't get many random calls like this. "Fine. How are you doing?"

She smiled. "I'm good. Been training up my team; Castelia has a lot of good Trainers around, even if you have to hunt down for matches."

"I wouldn't know," he told her. "I hardly spent any time in there."

"What? But it's such an exciting place! Me and my best friend Bianca have been exploring it and there's so many things to do. We're thinking about checking out a museum in a little while."

"I don't like cities. They're too crowded and unnatural."

"If that's how you feel about them, I could see why. So what were you going to ask about earlier?"

Noticing movement, he glanced down to see that Daisy was taking a few steps around, looking.
She seemed okay, though. "I was asking why you were calling me. I didn't get this phone just to chat with people."

"Oh, is it a business phone?"

"Not exactly." Technically, Ghetsis could call him on Plasma business. But it had been mostly for if he needed to contact Val or Carol, and he declined to use it for that.

"Well then isn't a phone for chatting purposes?" She chuckled. "I just wanted to check up on you. You seem like you could be a pretty cool friend to have around, but since I hardly run into you, I had to get some way of contacting you. Make sure you haven't hurt yourself or something."

"That's it?"

"That's it."

It was odd. Usually if people came to talk to him, or he went to talk to someone, there was a reason beyond 'just check up on you'. N might have blown it off as silly, but really, it did make him feel happy that she cared enough to do that. But what did that mean for the ones who weren't calling him? "I see. Thanks."

"No problem," she said. "Just make sure to add my number to your set's memory, so you can call me up any time you want to chat with somebody."

Someone said something just outside of Hilda's Xtransiever, causing her to look away from the camera.

"Okay!" she said to whoever had spoken to her. Then she looked back to the screen. "Sorry N, I've got to be going. And next time I call, there'll be a little test on small talk. How's that sound?"

A test on something as unimportant as small talk. He found himself chuckling over that. "All right. I suppose I say goodbye now?"

She grinned. "Talk to you later!" Then she disconnected.

"Was that your human friend?" Daisy asked, coming back up to him.

"I guess so," he said, smiling behind the bandanna. The call had been a good thing after all.

Somehow, Daisy picked up on his mood lifting and smiled back. "That's nice. Oh, and there's someone up there you might want to meet." She pointed up into the air, at a dark shadow among the moving sand.

N moved towards the shadow, soon picking out large wings surrounding a spherical body. It was mostly black, but bright vibrant colors seemed painted on with stripes and dots. "What kind of Pokémon is that?" he asked, not recognizing it.

"That's one of the Sigilyph," Daisy said, keeping close to his heels. "They're really smart. It should know about the palace. But, they're kind of weird."

"But if it knows, it would help." N continued on until he was a few feet from the flying Pokémon. "Good afternoon, Sigilyph."

The flying orb turned to him, three eyes observing him. "Ah, good afternoon, your majesty. We were not expecting a visit from the Black King. Do you understand my speech? I am afraid that
there is no translation unit in operation at this time."

He nodded. "I understand you. I was sent here by Virizion. Can you tell me where the palace is?"

"Yes, it lies at the end of this road," the Sigilyph said, turning to the north.

Looking down, N only saw sand. "The road?"

"Yes, the road," it said patiently. "I am patrolling the streets of this city to keep it safe. You'll want to open your eyes to see it at its best."

Bewildered, he said, "My eyes are open."

The Sigilyph clicked, then drifted closer. "You have the proper eyes, but your mind is shut to them. It is curious, but feels like a simple problem to address. Do you mind?"

He was still uncertain what was going on, but felt curious. "No, go ahead."

"Very well. Close your physical eyes and try to empty your mind. Do not panic when I touch your mind; I mean you no harm."

N followed the instructions, soon feeling feathers brush against his forehead. And then he felt a presence which was much like when a Ghost Pokémon touched his skin, as something passing right through his body. For a moment, he wanted to fight back against the incoming presence. But he felt certain that this Pokémon didn't intend to hurt him. He held back on resisting.

And then images of a city filled his mind, seen as clearly as he saw Castelia with his physical eyes. This city was old and new, though: buildings were made of large stone blocks, in architectural styles not used for centuries. Right below his feet, there was a paved road, running north and south as straight as an arrow. Along the sides, there were large concrete pots that held berry bushes, flowering and fruiting at all stages. There were people too, walking by him, away from him, through him. They were talking and going about their normal business, without the sands that flew in the air.

"This is our city, home of the White King," the Sigilyph said. "The city of Shira."

"This is amazing," N said, glancing at some kids running along the street, playing with a ball and a pair of Darumakas.

"I don't see any city," Daisy said, putting a paw on his shoe.

"It's right here," the Sigilyph said.

N turned back to the Sigilyph and, unexpectedly, the scene shifted. The Sigilyph bowed meekly before Reshiram, trembling. The great white dragon lowered his head and said, "It is over; Shira is no more." And then the scene changed back to the busy city. N put his hand to his head, feeling disoriented. "What was that I just saw?"

The Sigilyph flapped its wings a bit quicker, impressed. "Oh! I cannot see what you did, but I saw what it was. Your eyes can see into possibility, what may happen in the future."

"Into the future?" N opened his eyes, leading to a peculiar phenomenon. He still saw the old city of Shira, with its peoples, Pokémon, and plants. But he also saw Desert Resort, with its sand and little else.
"Even we cannot do that," the Sigilyph said. "And we were meant to see beyond illusion and into the truth."

"Are you? I think you're seeing into the past; there isn't a city here in the present."

"That's what I was trying to say," Daisy said. Then she added with a tug to his pants, "I told you they were weird."

The Sigilyph twisted its eyestalk, in a negative manner. "That can't be. My purpose, passed down from my ancestors who were built here, is to patrol the city streets and keep it safe. Many generations of my family have done so. It remains."

"It's a ghost city," N said. He didn't like to see the Pokémon fooling itself. "Open your physical eyes and see for yourself."

"It is here," it insisted, but it did shift the eyes on its body. Once it did, though, it started moving jerkily, panicking. "What, what is this? But the city has always been here; we were taught not to rely on physical eyes for illusions but... this is too big for an illusion. When did the city become nothing but a memory?" By now, it was crying.

Feeling rotten for having done that to the Pokémon, N clasped one of its clawed feet. "I'm sorry, Sigilyph. I wasn't thinking."

"No, if this is the truth..." the Sigilyph sounded uncertain, but then he stiffened. When he spoke again, he sounded more hopeful. "Oh, the master has returned. I could ask him." It clenched his hand, then let go and flew off to the southeast.

Curious again, N and Daisy followed. It was odd at first, walking in the desert and the ghost city at once. At least the Sigilyph was flying around the images of buildings still. Two streets over, they found Hilbert looking over the sands. He wore a blue scarf to keep the sand away from his face.

"Hello?" the Sigilyph said, getting Hilbert's attention. "I felt Lord Reshiram here. Maybe it's just his power on this boy."

"He can't understand you," N said to the Sigilyph. "Hello Hilbert. What are you doing here?"

Scratching his head, Hilbert didn't look too confident. "I don't really know, to be honest. I never liked this place, but the past few days I've just felt drawn here."

"He has the proper eyes too," the Sigilyph said. "His are open."

Nodding, N went over to Hilbert. "You don't like this place because of the ghost city."

Startled, Hilbert looked right at him. "That's right. You can see it too? I've never met anyone else who could."

He started to say something, but then an image flashed across his mind. **Hilbert was on the bridge between Nimbasa and Black City, on the edge, his short hair drifting in the wind. Feeling the dark of ignorance and the chill of hatred around him, he couldn't remember when he'd last seen the light. And to find out that his quest to awaken Reshiram was a waste of time because he wasn't worthy, he felt like he was a waste of time. There seemed to be no reason left to go on.**

That image chilled N into silence.

Hilbert hadn't noticed, looking back at the images around them. "I never wanted to say anything
about it in case people thought I was crazy. Uncle Giallo thought I was making stuff up, so I figured it was better not to say anything than to be seen as lying. But in my travels, I've found other places like this. There aren't many, to be honest. They tend to appear in ruins, or in places of great power.

Uneasy about the vision but wanting to say something, he said, "I didn't see it until a few minutes ago when this Sigilyph opened my eyes, or so it said."

"Oh, your mind's eye? Maybe you have some latent psychic powers too." He paused. "Although it's kind of weird that you could understand Pokémon if your powers were asleep."

"I have been getting glimpse of the future because of that too."

"The possible future," the Sigilyph said.

"Possible future?"

Hilbert glanced between them. "Huh, that's interesting. I've always been able to sense what people want. Being able to see a possible future would be handy too. You could change things if you didn't like what you saw."

"Change things," N said, thinking. He looked back to Hilbert and there was something else. "You see?" N said, pausing in the halls of his castle, turning to Hilbert. "It's a worthy sacrifice and we can make it happen. But I believe we need your help. Please join me." And Hilbert considered him, smiled, and shook his hand.

"If you could figure that kind of power out," Hilbert said.

While he wasn't sure what the meaning of Hilbert's light was, if making an alliance with him would help things to their ultimate goal, then N felt it was worth a try. "Actually, this Sigilyph said that it senses Reshiram's power with you."

"Really? Well I did get the Light Stone." He opened up his bag and pulled out a large round white stone. "It hasn't been… whoa, it's actually hot now." Hilbert held it up gingerly, but then the stone itself lifted off his hands. A pink blush began to appear on its surface.

"Ah, Lord Reshiram, you're hibernating," the Sigilyph said.

"This is weird," Daisy said, gripping N's leg tightly.

"I haven't seen it do this before," Hilbert said.

"This place is Shira, the city of Reshiram and the White King," N told him, picking his Darumaka up to reassure her. "Perhaps having the stone has drawn you here."

"Wait, this is Shira?" Hilbert said, surprised. "So the palace would be here?"

He nodded. "Yes, I was going there myself, actually. Out of curiosity. The Sigilyph knows where it is. Would you mind coming with us? Maybe it will help you figure out what to do next."

"Yeah." Then he smiled, seeming relieved. "Sure, if you don't mind. Actually, I would like to work with you some. I, I've come to realize that I've been doing things the wrong way, with Pokémon, but I'm not sure what's right. You must know a lot about them, being able to understand them."

N smiled back. This was working out well. If he did things right, he could save Hilbert's life before
he got that desperate and gain him as a valuable ally. "Sure, I'll help how I can." He then offered to shake hands with him on that, and it was accepted.

**You are holding the hand of your brother.**

Brother? N looked into Hilbert's face and saw that he had a look of shock as well. Letting go of his hand, he said, "Well, the palace is in the north. Let's go to get out of this sand."

"Yeah," Hilbert said. The Sigilyph flew ahead of them; N let Daisy back down to walk alongside them as they followed the strange bird. "Hey N, how old are you?"

"I'm nineteen."

"I'm nineteen too. And... well I'm not sure exactly, but the doctors think that my birthday was May 4th."

Was that real? "My birthday is May 4th too. I was raised by Pokémon in Sarasota Forest, but my adopted mother Darcy could read human language, and that's what the bracelet on me said when she found me as an infant."

"You were found like that?" Hilbert asked, in disbelief. "Giallo found me in Sarasota Forest when I was about a week old, but I didn't have anything to identify who I was with. He adopted me."

"So we're the same age, and probably the same birthday, and found at the same time in the same place, but by two different... and we both seem to have some kind of psychic ability."

"Are we really twins?" Hilbert asked. "I mean, it sounds so weird, the kind of thing that might happen in legends and myths, so it shouldn't be really happening. But then, it just matches up too well. And right then, when we shook hands... I somehow knew that was the truth."

"I did too," N said. There was an awkward silence until he added, "Well I'm not really good at small talk. Hilda's tried to force me to practice."

Hilbert chuckled. "She would."

"But if we are brothers, we probably should know more about each other." Although, maybe he shouldn't reveal his being the King of Team Plasma just yet. But they did talk on the way to the remains of the palace.

After several minutes, they came upon the entrance. There wasn't much there: about a dozen domed statues that seemed to be of Darmanitans, and a stone staircase going down below the sand. And as they stood there, the pink blush on the Light Stone turned into fiery tendrils of red on its surface.

"Reshiram's chambers are deep inside," the Sigilyph said. "I have visited down there before, but many strong Pokémon are also below."

"I can talk them out of attacking us," N said. "If him having Reshiram with him doesn't deter them."

"True."

"Does the Pokémon know which way to go in here?" Hilbert asked. "It might be dark."

N was about to say that the Sigilyph could, but then he recalled when he'd been sent to the Eastern
Palace. For that mission, he had taken only one Pokémon, a Basculin to help him navigate the underwater passages. When down there, he had to solve riddles to get down to the right level. "There might be guides on the walls."

"But I can," the Sigilyph said, but then flew aside as Hilbert went ahead, looking at a wall.

"Let him," N whispered to the Pokémon.

Hilbert looked up at the stone wall, putting his hand on some carvings. "Hey, you're right. Wow, is this old runic text? Oddly phrased." He looked down the hall, then pointed off behind a wall. "There should be a staircase or something over that way."

The way down was rough. In some areas, there were staircases made of worn stone. In other areas, there was nothing but a hole in the ground, leading to a sand sinkhole that they had to drop down into. And if they moved in the wrong way, the sinkholes would pull them down to the next level (and likely the wrong area) anyhow. N could figure out the riddles, having done a similar task. But he let Hilbert lead the way.

"It is sad, when you think about it," Hilbert said, looking around a large room after they had dropped down into it. "This place is beautiful in the ghosted vision, but an absolute sandy wreck in real vision."

N nodded in agreement. This room was carpeted with sand, at least a foot deep outside of the piles here and there. And the paintings on the walls were faded. But in seeing the past, this room was made of polished white stones, lit by way of sunlight streaming in through many air tunnels above. Torches as well as a large fire pit added more light and warmth, enough that large tropical plants were able to thrive in pots down here. Much of the space was open, but what few furnishings were here were grand, fit for royalty.

The Sigilyph flitted around for a moment, then came back to them. "This is the chamber where Reshiram and his chosen hero, the White King, would come to pray and speak in private. We Sigilyph were allowed in here as servants of them, as well as a few others, but for most people, they had to have an audience aboveground, often in the gardens."

After relating that to Hilbert, N said, "Do you think you can contact Reshiram here?"

"Maybe," he said. Hilbert clasped the floating Light Stone in both of his hands. In that moment, reality itself seemed to ripple and change.

The Sigilyph recognized the shift; it was used by the elders of his kind to introduce the young ones to their master, Reshiram, when he wasn't in the waking world. Except this time felt different. There was a feeling of this being not a memory, but something real. The vision of sand and ruin vanished entirely.

The two humans definitely noticed the shift, but didn't know what to make of it. "What just happened there?" Hilbert asked.

"I don't know," N said.

"You've been moved into a world of dreams," a third voice speaking the human tongue said. "I apologize, but that is the easiest way for us to speak at this time."

And that speaker was Reshiram himself, sitting on the ground with his wings tucked close to his sides. He dominated the room, as it was sized for his proportions, not humans. The Sigilyph felt a
strong sense of awe. This wasn't the memory of Reshiram that was used to teach, but the actual yang dragon in person. He didn't think any active Sigilyph had been able to meet the master, even just in dreams.

"Reshiram… thanks for meeting…” Hilbert glanced at the others, "with us. Although I'm not sure why I came here."

"I thought the time was right," Reshiram said. "We were not aware that there were those seeking us until Kyurem contacted us about it before he sought his ward."

"You weren't?" N asked, clasping the stone on his necklace. "But I had rightfully claimed the Black King Stone."

The dragon nodded. "She said that while she had not noticed it, she believes that it was done properly. You are both going through trials to see if you are worthy. You may recognize some of the tests, but you won't be able to notice all of them. However, we require another month of observation before judgment can be made. I cannot keep you here long, but I will answer what questions I am willing to while you are here."

While Hilbert seemed uncertain, N stepped forward. "Where can I find the hibernating form of Zekrom, the Dark Stone?"

"She lies within a deep cavern on Twist Mountain. If you can get her soon, you should even though you will have to wait. However, be aware that you will be the only one who can take hold of her, even in the limited capacity we have in hibernation."

He bowed to the dragon. "Thank you. And these things I've been seeing today, of possible futures, are they…?"

"Possible futures," Reshiram said, not letting him finish the question. "Perhaps truth, perhaps not. Beware of acting rashly based on what you see, for you will not be able to see the full situation."

"I'll try." N then looked to Hilbert.

Hilbert was nervous, being put in the spotlight like that. "I'm just not sure what to do now," he finally said. "It seems like everything I knew was turned upside down by all this."

To that, Reshiram ducked his head down and nudged Hilbert. "You were living with subtle lies, as the people around you were influenced by false emotions. You may have believed in truth, but you were living with a skewed vision of truth. Having such illusions break is hard, but it will be for the best."

The Sigilyph wondered if it would be the same way with him. He was still having a hard time believing that he had been fooled by a memory of the city. In all that he was taught, his kind honored truth in accordance to their master. How could they have lived with a subtle lie for so many generations?

"I just thought it was normal," Hilbert said defensively. "I'd like to continue seeking your way, but I don't know if I should."

"You are living under truth now. Spend some time considering what you truly want, and find your own truth." Reshiram straightened back up. "This kind of quest is never easy. And Sigilyph."

The Pokémon tensed, then flew closer. "I, I'm sorry, Lord Reshiram. This city somehow died and we never noticed. I have taken on my ancestral duty to protect Shira, but failed it before I was
hatched.” He bowed, tilting his body forward humbly.

Lowering his head to be on eye level, Reshiram said, "It is over; Shira is no more. It only exists as a memory within my power. But do not fret. Your kind has always been loyal and hardworking."

The Sigilyph looked up to the dragon. "What should I do now, master?"

Reshiram motioned towards the two humans; N and Hilbert had started talking to each other again. "I want you to follow N," the dragon said softly.

"N?" He looked down at the green haired young man. "But he follows Zekrom. Shouldn't I work with the one following you?"

"Not in this case. Both of them, they need balance. I can tell that much. Besides, Hilbert has had his illusions broken; he must rebuild. N still lives in a web of illusions, and his are far stronger. Since you cannot patrol the city, these are your new orders: follow N and help him in every way that you can."

They were orders, sacred orders direct from his master. The Sigilyph nodded. "Yes, my lord. I will do so."

"Good." Then he spoke up again. "And so the dream breaks. Hilbert, look to your feet."

And reality shifted once again. When Hilbert did as asked, he found the White King Stone buried in the sand.
morning, 1/8

Christmas had passed by. So had the end of a year And Castelia was back in action, with its citizens braving slushy or icy streets to get to work, get to school, get to home, get to a bar, a shop, an art gallery, lots of places. There were crowds by day and crowds by night. If one were inclined to avoid such action, there was always the forest to the south, or one of the small shops hidden away on the side streets. It was a city of opportunity, people said, the backbone of Unova's economy.

Near the northern exit of Castelia, Hilbert was sitting on a bench. In his lap, there was a white egg about a foot tall and six inches across. Its shell was flecked with pale green, but that was no indication of what Pokémon was inside it. At one time, he had tried out being a breeder, sometimes swapping eggs with others. Was this from one of his old Pokémon, or from another person's? And how was he supposed to hatch it? Eggs could go dormant from an amazingly long time, only coming back when another Pokémon was nearby.

But all of his Pokémon were gone and he was left with just two eggs. In his bag, the Light Stone had reverted back to its lukewarm white state, now that he was no longer near Shira. He also had the White King Stone in there, as he wasn't sure if he deserved to have it or not. He could admit to himself that he needed to start all over again, reconsidering the process of caring for Pokémon. How was he supposed to start over with two eggs? Three if you counted Reshiram in hibernation.

He closed his eyes and leaned back. What to do… maybe he should travel with Hilda and Bianca. Would being near their Pokémon be enough? Or maybe he could talk one of them into helping him catch something around here. What kind of Pokémon were near Castelia anyhow? The online Pokedex for the Unova region was in a pitiful state, unfortunately. Hilbert had seen it as too much trouble back when he had a chance to do it.

Or maybe he could go with N. It was still something of a shock to realize that he had a brother. But in the time he had spent with him, he noticed that N was difficult to work with. He was so focused and driven; after getting the Sigilyph, he had soon caught two other Pokémon to work with. He had even forgotten about picking up the Dark Stone in Twist Mountain, as he was thinking on his team for the Nimbasa Gym. Not only that, but he was obviously more comfortable around Pokémon than humans. He talked freely to them, but got hesitant and awkward speaking to Hilbert. Hilbert didn't even think that N had noticed when he had left. What had made him that way?

Also, he could try to get in contact with his uncle. It was strange; usually he got a hold of Giallo after trying a few times. Sometimes he was so absorbed in study that he wouldn't notice phone calls. But it had been weeks now that Hilbert had been trying to call him and Giallo never replied. Maybe something had happened to him? Hilbert hoped not; he would have liked to return to Village Bridge, but he had no Pokémon to Fly with, there was no subway station there, and the town was surrounded by strong Pokémon.

Then his senses picked up on something that broke his concentration. Someone had seen him, and wanted him. She wanted to possess him and was willing to do whatever it took to do so.

Startled alert, he opened his eyes and looked around. He recalled the egg back to its Pokeball; safer if he had to move quick. There were many people, so he might be able to make it through the crowd. No, there she was, coming right up to him. Banshee barreled through a couple who were out on a walk, carrying a squirming tarp bag over her shoulder. "Sorry!" she shouted at them. Then
her attention was on him and she grinned like a wolf. "Hi Hilbert! Good thing I found you so
quick."

"What do you want, Banshee?" he asked, although he knew the answer perhaps better than she did.

"I want to give you a present," she said, now using a sing-song voice. "I looked all over Unova,
and I finally found a Pokémon perfect for you! Here." She let go of two corners of the tarp.

A small Litwick tumbled out, ended up on its side, then frantically flopped until it flipped itself
upright. It had a dazzling blue flame above its waxy white body, different from the usual violet.
Eyes darting around until it found her, the Litwick squeaked in fright and hopped off under the
bench. It wanted nothing more than to get away from Banshee.

"Hey, come back here!" Banshee demanded, lunging forward.

"Stop it," Hilbert said, getting up and grabbing her shoulders. "What the heck were you thinking,
capturing a Pokémon in a bag and then packing it around who knows how long?"

"It's a gift for you," she stated, oblivious to doing any wrong. "It's a shiny one. Got lucky there,
and…"

"I don't care about that," he snapped. "You're not in love with me, you're obsessed and in love with
the idea of being my girlfriend. I don't want that. Leave me be and go find someone else to obsess
over."

Briefly, she looked shocked at his anger. Then she narrowed her eyes. "I am not obsessed! I am
your most devoted fan, following you across the ocean, going where you're going, making sure
everyone else sees how wonderful you are even though you've lost your sparkle. And what of those
other girls, hm? They abandoned you, but I haven't. I deserve your love more than anyone else in
the whole wide world. And you're going to realize that one of these days." She then stormed off,
grumbling to herself.

"No you don't," Hilbert said, even though she probably couldn't hear him. But now that she was
gone, what had happened to that Pokémon? "Litwick?" He crouched down and looked under the
bench.

There was no Pokémon there. However, there was an alleyway behind the bench. Hilbert headed
down that alley, searching. He wished briefly that he could sense better than just desire and hate;
there were a lot of those emotions in this city, probably many others too. Continuing on, he tried
looking and sensing.

Then he picked up a sharp desire to be safe, to be home, to be away from the scary girl. That had to
be it. "Litwick? Where are you?" He took a few more steps. "It's okay, she's gone. I won't hurt
you."

He saw a sliver of white and a black eye peer out at him from behind a trash bin. It ducked back, so
he came over to it and crouched down again. Shyly leaning away from him, the Litwick had large
milky tears coming from its eyes. Its body looked roughed up and dirty. He tried to recall where
they were found; he was fairly certain it wasn't anywhere near here. Some tower, but not
Dragonspiral…

"It's okay. She's gone." It was weird dealing with a timid Pokémon. He was used to them quickly
warming up to him. If he was there, he could cheer people and Pokémon up with just a smile. But
when he smiled now, the Litwick stayed uncertain and intimidated. Then again, maybe it would be
better to start over like this. He checked his travel bag, pulling out a hand wipe packet. It wasn't much, but it had to do. "Here, I'll," he spotted something. "Oh wait, that's flammable."

The Litwick sniffled, still watching him warily. He eventually did find non-flammable wipes, in his dsd along with other Pokémon care items he had accumulated but rarely used. With that, he did his best to wipe the dust and dirt off the Litwick's body. That seemed to calm it down so that it was no longer crying, but it still didn't seem certain of trusting him.

"I don't want to leave you alone out here in an unfamiliar city," Hilbert aid. "Here, let me at least take you to the Pokecenter, make sure you're really okay."

Reluctant but seeming to find him less scary than the city, the Litwick allowed him to pick it up. The candle Pokémon sat on his arm, watching the people around them, worrying that the pink-haired girl might appear again. Hilbert hoped that she wouldn't, but was starting to fear if she did.

Down the street, he came across the central plaza of Castelia. It was quite crowded, with people all around the fountain. On the other side, he could see Hilda battling the Pokémon of a break-dancing troupe, a Pan-trio against her Drilbur, Sawk, and Mincinco. Although weak against two of the monkeys, Olette had the middle point position; with a shift in her paws, she caused a massive slide of rocks to fall on their opponents, knocking into them hard. It looked like Hilda was off her crutches too, although the crowd made it hard to tell.

"Hey, is that a shiny Litwick?" a guy about his age came up to him, followed by another carrying a small digital camera. "Where'd you pick that one up?"

"It probably came from Celestial Tower," Hilbert said. That was halfway across Unova, though. Hopefully Banshee took the subway instead of trekking all the way here with the Litwick in the bag. "And technically, it's not mine. Who are you?"

Grinning proudly, he said, "I'm the Traveling Ace Trainer, also known as Ramble. I run the best webcast Pokémon show out there, Wilderness Trails Tracker. And I'm poised to start a televised version of it someday soon."

'Did I come across as such an annoying boaster?' Hilbert wondered, but kept that to himself. Instead, he said, "I hadn't heard of that one."

"That's a pity. You ought to take a look at an episode or two. We're doing a survey of interesting Pokémon to track down in the wild, but the Pokedex project is horribly behind here. Is Celestial Tower nearby?"

He shook his head. "No. But how'd you know it was a shiny Pokémon if you don't know where Celestial is?"

"Seen 'em around, but this isn't my home region. So if it's not technically yours, are you looking to get it a home?"

"I might take it in myself; it depends. I can handle it."

"All right. Thanks for your time, now if you'll excuse us, we've got lots more to film." He waved at the cameraman and headed off to talk with others.

"Not used to being brushed off like that," Hilbert said quietly.

"Shushu," the Litwick whispered.
And then he felt that someone was happy to see him, but not as scary as Banshee. He turned and saw Hilda moving through the crowd towards him. "Hey, it's the fallen star!" she said cheerily, with just a metal brace on her leg. "How're you and that cutie in your arms doing?"

"The Litwick is spooked, but it's calmer," he said. "I," he glanced around, but no one was really paying them attention in the crowd. "I might've hit rock bottom now. All my Pokémon gone now, except two eggs. Maybe this one too."

She nodded. "That stinks. But hey, if that's true, then there's nowhere to go but up. Just make sure to really pay attention to your Pokémon this time."

"Right. So did you beat them? I didn't get the watch the full fight."

"Yup. Even got some ideas for making battles more stylish from them. Mimi ought to take right to it, but it might be tough with the others. We're making good progress and I might take on the Gym this evening. Or maybe go back to that one company; they got some good Trainers working there. But Kyurem's off again, so I have to wait on him."

"Where does he go?"

She held a hand up. "Don't ask; that's the deal."

"Correct," Kyurem said, appearing without warning from the crowd. He held up something, offering it to Hilda. "Here, have a present."

Hilda stared at the item a moment, a large hefty cloak of red and gold, in odd yet distinctive patterns. Then she took it with a huge grin on her face. "Oh my gosh… did you kill Ghetsis?"

He shook his head. "Someone else does his laundering."

"Should've guessed; this thing's probably dry clean only. Thanks Rei!" She opened it up, looking into it. "Oh hey, it has straps to keep it in place."

"Rei?" Hilbert asked, looking at Kyurem puzzled.

Hilda nodded. "That's Kyurem's new nickname. I took him by a naming guru earlier this morning."

"It's better than the last one," Kyurem said, with a subtle hint not to ask what the old nickname had been.

"Yeah. Too bad Unholy Avenger of Winter was too long to fit." By then, she had wrapped cloak around her shoulders. The cloak engulfed her, with the last few inches dragging on the ground. "What do you think?"

"It might be okay if it was fitted better on you," Hilbert said. "It overtakes you now."

She flipped one edge of it aside to get her hand out of it. "Yeah. Still, this is so cool. Maybe I could get it cut up and made into a dress. There should be enough material."

"You sure you want to be connected to Plasma that way?" he asked. It didn't seem to make sense, but she seemed to be having fun with it.

"That could be a hindrance," Kyurem agreed.

"True. Or, I could have fun with it." She thought for a moment, then, making her voice deeper than usual, she shouted out, "Team Plasma is going to take over all of Unova because y'all are soft-
hearted idiots!"

That led to a pause in the crowded plaza. Hilbert put an arm closer to the Litwick defensively, but he was more worried for Hilda. All around him, the people were not sure if they should be insulted or not because of what she had just yelled.

Smiling confidently, Hilda put on a pompous air, with her visible hand on the cloak. "And because I am such a handsome devil and evil genius that none of you can resist my intentionally flawed words."

That brought some laughter, and a relief in the crowd to know that this was meant to be funny rather than insulting. Encouraged by that, Hilda went closer to the fountain, to where a box platform was. It had been in use by a judge who watched over battles, but the man wanted to see where this would lead and stepped aside without a word. Hilbert moved in closer, as both he and the Litwick were also curious.

The box platform wasn't big enough to pace on like Ghetsis usually did, but Hilda didn't seem bothered, leaning partly on the podium there so there wasn't as much weight on her braced leg. She continued on in her attempt to mimic Ghetsis' voice. "The plan is so simple that you aren't going to see it until it has flown right by your eyes! You remember back in your school days, don't you? There was always that kid, or maybe kids, that didn't want to take up Pokémon battling because the Pokémon got hurt. And deep in your heart, you felt the same way, didn't you? You don't like seeing a Pokémon that you've raised and cared for hurt to the point of being knocked out, even though they do so willingly in order to help you in the ways they know how. You just didn't speak these worries as Pokémon battles are so common in our culture.

"So when I come along and tell you that the Pokémon are really afraid and upset and angry and hateful because of this, you want to believe in it. You want to ignore the signs that a Pokémon who truly loves their Trainer will put forth all of their effort to help them, and that a Pokémon who dislikes their Trainer will not listen to orders and refuse to battle. And you will do this because you love Pokémon and you don't want to hurt them."

Hilbert felt a twist in his stomach on hearing that. He wasn't doing things right; hearing this just reminded him of how he'd been more concerned with his own winning image when he had battled in the past. But she seemed to have a point about how using people's sympathy must be part of Plasma's manipulations.

And the whole crowd wanted to listen to her, illuminating her in a light that only he could see. She was bold and a little crazy in that way. Even when he had been popular, he wouldn't have gone for this, dressing in an oversized cloak and mocking a criminal organization in public, in such a large crowd, with absolutely no preparation. It was enough that he soon forgot his unease and was listening to her in wonder. Perhaps like his followers had listened to him, only without the unnatural attraction?

Enjoying the show, Hilda stayed in character as a mock Ghetsis. "In loving Pokémon and not wanting them hurt, you will hear my words and feel guilty for doing such terrible things to your friends. And you will let them go. It seems such a simple solution, even if it hurts to say goodbye. To keep them from hurting, you will let them go even if they come to tears over saying goodbye, even if they beg you with wide eyes and mournful cries not to break your friendship to them. You will do this because it seems like the right thing to do.

"But you will be playing right into my hands!" She made a gloating chuckle that got more laughs from the audience. "For you see, we of Team Plasma will keep our own Pokémon, even as we tell you to let yours go. We will tell you to do one thing while we do another, and in a year's time, we
will be the only ones in Unova to have Pokémon. And you know what will happen then? All
Pokeballs outside of our possession will be destroyed, all remaining Trainers will be persecuted
until they quit or die. And then we will rule Unova because none of you will be able to fight back!
And in this way, we shall proceed to take over the rest of the world!” Then she gave a full blown
evil laugh, which got cheers and clapping from the crowd. Finally, she winked at the crowd and
tapped her head. "And now you know," she said in her normal voice. "And knowing is half the
battle. Remember, listen to your heart and do what you feel is true!" Then she stepped off the box
platform to full applause and whistles from everyone in the crowd.

Except Hilbert. Partly because he still had the Litwick in his arms, and partly because he felt
amazed. "She really is kinda crazy," he said softly. "But… incredible."

And then she was by him again, rubbing her throat. "I think I hurt my voice or something doing
that; don't mind if I go hoarse. How'd I do?"

"Everyone loved it," Hilbert told her. "I'd say that was spot on."

"Good."

"You are going to attract hatred from Plasma for doing that," Kyurem stated.

She just shrugged. "Eh, we've probably got them mad for everything else we've done to them. You
have a problem with it?"

"You're making my job tougher." But then his expression softened a little. "It was good for the
public to hear such a thing. Too bad it couldn't have been to more."

"There might be more that will hear it in time," Hilbert told them. "There was a webcast crew
around and it might have been recorded."

Hilda grinned. "I hope so. Now didn't you need to get that Litwick to the Pokecenter?"

Finding himself blushing, Hilbert stepped back. "Oh, yes, I do need to get that taken care of. It was
good seeing you, Hilda."

"You too, Hilbert!" Then she went off into the crowd after something else, Kyurem following
behind her. "And make sure to nickname the Litwick, okay?"

"O-okay!" he called back, then headed off down the street. "Though I haven't nicknamed any other
Pokémon."

The Litwick looked up at him, interested in the nickname. But it still seemed uncertain of him.

"What kind of name would you like?" he asked. "I mean, I can't really understand you… not even
sure if you're a boy or girl, or something. But I can feel what you want if it's clear enough."

From the Litwick, he got a strong desire to go home. But just under that, it seemed to want a name.
Something elegant… and feminine.

"Elegant and feminine," Hilbert said. That wasn't something he thought of as his style, but that's
what the Pokémon wanted. He thought about it while walking down the crowded streets, until a
few came up in his mind. "How about Madeline?"

That got a strong positive response. She wanted that name. "Muusha."
"Okay then, I'll tell them that you're Madeline." He paused, then added, "I could use your help, if you're willing. But if you want to go back home, I can see what can be arranged."

In the end, Madeline decided to go with him, at least until she found her way back home again.

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Early afternoon, 1/8

On her way out of the store, Hilda opened the bag and got out a piece of hard candy. "It might have been a mistake to imitate that man," she said, her voice hoarse. "I did not expect it to hurt my throat that much." She took off the wrapper and popped the candy into her mouth.

"People might say you're missing the point there," Kyurem said.

"I'd make a comeback, but," she rubbed her neck. Definitely didn't want to talk too much right now. That might put off her Gym challenge. Maybe she'd go to a different sort of gym and have her Pokémon all work out.

"Arf!" A Herdier wearing a green paisley scarf came out of the crowd, approaching them. She whined and made antsy steps with her paws.

"Lassie?" Hilda asked, recognizing the scarf. "What happened? Did Timmy fall down the well?"

She started barking repeatedly, pricking her ears and hopping up on her back legs.

"Timmy was kidnapped by Plasma," Kyurem said. "She ran off and left Bianca in pursuit, but then she lost the man and is worried about both of them."

Oh, Timmy the Munna was in trouble. "I see. Would you take me to Bianca, then?"

Lassie barked, then headed off towards the docks. Down there, the chilly wind was more noticeable as it was coming straight off the sea water. Bianca was standing near the middles of the main dock, downcast and clasping her hands together. With her was a short dark skinned girl who had purple hair that managed to be bigger than Hilda's. The Herdier ran over to Bianca and whined in worry.

"Lassie, you came back," Bianca said, torn between relief and concern. She dropped down to hug her Pokémon.

"Hey, did you happen to see any other Pokémon wandering around?" the girl asked.

"Nah, just her. I'm her friend, Hilda; what's going on?"

She nodded and shook hands with her. "Oh good. I'm Iris, Drayden's apprentice. Something awful just happened…"

"Iris!" The three girls looked up to see Burgh running up to them, his coat sitting crookedly on his left shoulder. It was an interesting coat, made up of many strips of various blues and greens stitched together in a nice shading effect. "I came as soon as I could. What exactly happened?"

Clenching the handle of a large bag hanging off her shoulder, Iris said, "I came down here to do some shopping and I met this girl here, Bianca. And while we were talking, this man from Plasma just ran right up to us and snatched one of her Pokeballs right out of her hand!"

"He took my Munna, Timmy," Bianca said, rubbing her reddish eyes. "And then Lassie here took off after him, but she came back with Hilda. It was just all so sudden and I couldn't do anything
"I see," Burgh said, straightening his coat. "And it wasn't that long ago? If we knew where he went, this would be the best time to get him and your Pokémon back."

Lassie barked several times. And in this case, Kyurem felt it was best for a direct interpretation. "She pursued him to a building which he entered, but it was guarded so she didn't want to go in alone."

"Huh?" Iris said, looking bewildered at him.

Burgh just nodded. "All right, thanks Kyurem. Miss Bianca, would you mind if I borrow your Herdier for a little while so she can show me where he went?"

"Oh, th-that's fine," she said, taking out a Pokeball, checking it, then handing it over.

After taking it, he then turned to her. "Hilda, I've seen how good you are. Would you come help out? I've got a fresh team of Pokémon with me, but in this case, better safe than sorry."

"I'll come," she said. "Not exactly on top of my game with my voice, but we'll do our best."

Iris then took Bianca's free hand. "Don't worry! I'll be your bodyguard for today. I'll make sure nothing else happens to you."

"You'll be safe with her," Burgh said. "Let's go, Hilda; show us where to go, Lassie."

"Right on," she said. The Herdier took off wagging her tail, and they followed.

Hilda knew that the Plasma knight must have gone west, as she had been that way when she was at the store. What was unexpected was when Lassie led them to an office building that was directly across from the Gym. It looked perfectly normal on the outside, but just past the door, there was a pair of Plasma knights standing and watching.

Burgh nodded, then headed in right through the doors. "What is the meaning of this?" he demanded of the two knights there.

Jumping to attention, the two looked shocked. One even stepped back quick enough to crash into the inner entryway. "Wait, Burgh?"

"What are you doing here?" the other asked.

"Do you have an issue with your new neighbors dropping by to say hello?" he asked. Hilda smiled at that while Lassie barked at them. "I have issues with neighbors who are known to have committed crimes relating to Pokémon. We're here after a stolen Munna and we're not leaving until we get him back."

"You're not supposed to enter this place without permission," a knight said, taking hold of a Pokeball.

"You loony," Hilda said. "We're between a pair of doors and there's four of us. You have a Pokémon attack us and it's likely you'll get hit too. Why don't we settle this inside?"

"That would be the solution," Burgh agreed before they could think twice. "Unless you want to make a commotion out on the street and draw people's attention to this place."

Caught by that reasoning, the two door guards relented and brought them into the lobby. It was
much like many other lobbies in Castelia: tiled floor, a reception desk, a small sitting area, all in a 
large open space. Even so, it seemed sparse and unused; a real estate sign was sitting on one of the 
tables. There was another man in the room, at the receptionist counter. He was wearing large 
clerical robes like Gorm had been, only his hat was sitting on the counter at the moment. That 
made it easier to see his wavy black hair and a scarred cut out of one ear. When he didn't say 
anything, the two door guards tried to battle Hilda and Burgh, and were quickly defeated by Lassie, 
Mimi, and a Scolipede.

The two knights weren't sure what to do after losing; the sage came out from behind the 
receptionist area. "What brings the local Gym Leader in here, may I ask?"

Hilda thought he looked familiar, but she was pretty sure this wasn't Gorm. Burgh answered, "I've 
come here because of the theft of a Munna from a young lady in this city, by one of your knights. 
The League isn't going to be welcoming with you people after all else that you've done. For now, 
I'll leave once we have the stolen Pokémon. But I will have the police investigating the matter too."

"Is that all?" he asked, possibly stalling for time. Hilda glanced around the room, wondering why 
he'd want that. Kyurem also seemed to be wary, but then again, that was how he was a lot.

Burgh kept eye contact with the Sage, leaving his Scolipede out; it had begun to sniff around. "You 
seem to be one of the leaders. Good, because there's been something that's been bugging me for a 
while now. What would you say the guiding principle of Team Plasma is? Because your words are 
thoughtful, but your actions suggest that you're simply taking what you want from people."

"I suppose it wouldn't make much sense seen from the outside," the sage said. "But you are right. I 
am Sage Rood. About our mission…"

On hearing the name, Hilda looked back at Rood closely. Yes, that large nick out of his ear should 
have been obvious. "Wait, Rood? Dad, what are you doing here?"

Rood seemed to be as thrown by this as the others in the room. It took his attention away from 
Burgh and onto her. "Hilda?" he asked, a little confused. When she nodded, he came closer to them. 
"I thought you seemed familiar somehow. I haven't seen you since you were a baby, but you have 
grown to be much like your mother."

It was strange; she'd known her father had run out on his family, but she wouldn't have guessed that 
he'd still be here in Unova, or be in Team Plasma. Hilda went over to him, noted that he wasn't 
much taller than she was, and then punched him in the face. "Yeah, well Mom said if I ever met 
you, to give you that for her."

Behind her, Kyurem barely stifled a laugh.

Rood quickly stepped back, putting his hands over his nose. "Did she?" he asked in a muffled 
voice, sounding like he'd partly expected that.

The elevator in back of the room then dinged, opening its doors to reveal Ghetsis and a third sage. 
For a moment, the room was quiet. Hilda glanced over to Burgh and Kyurem; both of them seemed 
serious, as they couldn't be sure how many of the other Sages were skilled Trainers like Gorm. 
And the two in the elevator had definitely not been expecting a scene like this, with the two guards 
staying back and looking crestfallen, Rood still holding onto his nose in pain, and the outsiders 
looking back warily.

Ghetsis was the first to compose himself; he stepped into the lobby with the attitude that he owned 
everything there. "My word, if it isn't the Gym Leader, Burgh. What an unexpected occasion." He
spoke with a mix of heavy politeness and light sarcasm, as if even the Leader was beneath him.

"Your people did call a lot of attention to yourselves," Burgh replied. "Between your location and thievery."

"And what did I tell you, Bronius?" Ghetsis said, glancing back at the man who had come out of the elevator with him.

Bronius glanced aside, his ears turning red in embarrassment. "I thought it would be ironic, to have a working base so close to one of their Gyms."

"Indeed," Ghetsis said, somehow putting a lot of meaning, mostly disapproval, in that one word. "No matter, we already have an exceptional base of operations. What's going on down here anyhow?"

"Family disagreement," Rood said, pulling his hand away a couple of inches before putting it back. "Excuse me; I'm bleeding." He then went back to the receptionist area and went through a door there.

"Hmm." He looked at Hilda. On impulse, she stuck her tongue out at him. Childish, but she didn't care. But his attention went to Burgh. "Well I've been meaning to have an audience with one of you anyways. I'm sure we're all familiar with the legend of the founding of the Unova region."

"Since before most of us could speak," Burgh replied.

"Agreed. Then I don't have to say much: the legendary dragon twins appeared in front of two heroes who sought a way to unite a world torn apart by war and conflict. Together, they united the hearts of the people and thus Unova was created. And once again, we're living in a world of conflict, division, and corruption. We of Team Plasma intend to bring back a hero and dragon to Unova once again! If we can win the peoples' hearts and minds, then we can easily create the world that everyone deserves, one of true peace and no conflict."

Hilda might have liked to argue that, but her throat still hurt and Burgh spoke up in response first. "But does that mean no freedom as well?" he asked. "Honestly, there's something in what you're saying all the time that I just don't understand. Here in Castelia, we have many different people from many different places. They all have different lifestyles, dreams, ways of thinking. But we all still get along. And, one thing that we all seem to have in common is that we all care about Pokémon. Even if people have never met, they can always talk about Pokémon and get to know each other that way."

"Have you really been listening?" Ghetsis asked. But he wasn't quite as aggressive with this. He even seemed interested, like an Ace Trainer caught off guard by an underestimated opponent. "The friendship between people and Pokémon can be very touching. But there are too many fools in the world to simply trust things to continue as they are."

Meanwhile, Hilda felt someone touch her hand. She glanced over to see that Rood had returned to the room, holding a washcloth to his nose. Without a word, he passed her a Pokedex. Hilda checked and saw that it was indeed Timmy the Munna. Briefly, she wondered why he would do that. Maybe he'd changed in the past fifteen years or so. She smiled at him and nodded.

"I've been listening since you gave that speech in Accumula," Burgh said, keeping the main focus of attention away from that little gesture. "I was there. I had to rethink even my relationship with Pokémon, and for that, I thank you. At the time, I made a promise to myself, that I would dedicate myself to Pokémon even stronger than before! And it didn't help your case that I was in Accumula..."
because the Pokecenter had been vandalized in the name of Team Plasma. What you're actually doing, won't that strengthen the bonds between people and Pokémon? At any rate, Castelia City won't be following your lead at any time. We celebrate our diversity."

Ghetsis looked at him for a moment. Then he laughed. "You're a hard one to figure out, a little more intelligent that I expected. I like that. Very well! We will submit to your opinion and be on our way. Farewell." He snapped his fingers and there was a flash of light.

And then they were gone. This time, Kyurem was rigid, like something had surprised him even though he had seen this trick before.

"Again?" Burgh asked, concerned. "They're gone, but what about the stolen Pokémon?"

Hilda showed him the Pokeball she had. "Rood gave Timmy back to me," she said. "But if they had any others, I don't know. I hope they're okay."

"That's one good thing." He rubbed his forehead, pacing a few steps. "They can't have been here for long; this building was on the market a couple of days ago. I'd better ask around and see if anything else had happened." He then turned to Hilda. "I hope I'm not being rude, but about your father, do you know much about him?"

She shook her head. "Not really. I only recognized him from pictures as he left when I was really young."

"Hmm. Would your mother be willing to speak with us? We in the Unova League have been doing as much research as we can on them."

"Maybe. I'll call and ask."

Burgh smiled. "Great, thank you. I'll give you my number in case she will come. And we'd better get over to your friend Bianca soon."

When they got back to the docks, it seemed as though Iris was coaching Bianca through her battle anxiety, as Victini, Suzy, and a strange like Dragon Pokémon were out, with the Dewott fighting a wild Tranquill. Hilda released Timmy; the Munna looked about in confusion, then squealed on seeing Bianca and rushed over to her. Yelping in excitement, Bianca hurried over and hugged him when they met, saying that she was glad to see him again and sorry to have lost him. Timmy just seemed happy to be with her again.
Family Matters

evening, 1/8

The Castelia Gym was designed to be like a honeycomb, with hexagon shaped rooms and brown walls with a waxy glaze. Instead of doors, there were strange curtains that seemed to be thick membranes of golden honey. Hilda put her hand on one; it wasn't sticky, but stretchy and resistant. If pressed against in the right way, it parted easily.

"It's so much more attractive than the Gym that was here in my day," Leslie said, coming through the curtain behind her. "It was Steel-type back then, and the Leader had no imagination whatever, I swear."

"I don't think Burgh is lacking that," Hilda whispered loudly. Her voice was getting weaker through the day and her throat hurt now. She was trying not to talk, but that wasn't easy when she always talked.

Off in the northwest room, they found the wall the receptionist had told them about. It looked like a dead end, but a sliding panel on the side revealed the edge of a door, which could then be pulled open. The Gym lost the honeycomb motif past that room, as this led to the Pokémon stables, the classrooms, and their destination, Burgh's office.

He greeted them at the (regular) door. "Good evening, Hilda, Mrs. Medley… and Kyurem. Thank you for agreeing to come speak with us, and so quickly too."

"It's no trouble," she said. "And please, call me Leslie." She and her daughter sat down in some extra chairs, but Kyurem was more comfortable going over to a corner and standing there, watching quietly.

Also in the room, there was a Sewaddle on Burgh's desk, Iris sitting with her Dragon lying at her feet (Hilda had learned that it was a Deino), and Cress sitting by the window, where a Simipour of his was peeking out to watch people walking outside. Burgh had pulled his chair out from behind the desk, so he could sit with the rest of them. But he did keep a computer tablet in his hands. "Well as you may have heard, we've been researching Team Plasma, as they are a threat to the League. And it turns out that your ex-husband Rood is one of their Sages."

Leslie nodded. "I don't actually know about Team Plasma beyond what's public. But I'll tell you some about Rood, if that helps."

"We're hoping it gives us a better picture of what the leaders of Plasma might be like," Cress said.

"Would you like to just tell us, or answer questions?" Burgh asked.

"I can tell you about him," she said, bowing her head briefly. "I met Rood on the road when we were both in the League; it was around Celestial Tower. We were both seventeen at the time, and making slow progress. But in truth, Rood was an excellent Trainer; he was considered a strong contender for Champion, back when Vanessa was standing Champion. He was just in college at the time as well.

"And he was doing well there too," she said, leaning back and recalling those days. "He could never settle on anything, though. He studied architecture for a while, then art history, then philosophy, then politics… I ended up quitting the League and going to business school for a two year degree, but he never finished the League or college. He had enough credits to graduate in
either language arts or psychology, while he also had the eight badges and had beaten three of the Elite Four in exhibition matches. I did manage to get him to settle on one thing, and we got married when he turned twenty."

Iris and Hilda laughed, while Cress chuckled. Burgh smiled as he made notes. "Then he was highly educated. It matches what Ghetsis has said."

"Educated and intelligent," Leslie agreed. "But lacking a little in common sense. I kept telling him to just graduate, as his tuition bills and loans were piling up. Rood kept saying that he didn't feel ready, the same thing he said about heading to Victory Road. And then something terrible happened: our Pokémon all got killed by Bloodwraith."

"By what?" Iris asked, shivering.

"It was a computer virus that infected Pokeballs," Cress explained. "Back then, there were only the basic reds, and they weren't as secure as modern balls. It was first only known as the Wraith virus, something that its creator only meant to damage a few, in an overblown revenge. But then it went epidemic within days, corrupting Pokeball data wherever it appeared. It got renamed Bloodwraith when over three thousand Pokémon died of it in one day, and many more were left with crippling handicaps. I only know what I've heard, and it happened before you were born Iris."

"That was a horrible time," Burgh said, grimacing. "One of my Pokémon was left permanently blind and deaf from it, and she was the lucky one."

"That's awful," Iris said, sounding hurt. "And you guys lost all of them?"

Leslie nodded. "Many people did, and there was a time of about three years when nobody wanted to train or capture Pokémon in case Bloodwraith was still active. That time changed Rood; as flaky as he could be sometimes, he really loved his Pokémon and devoted a lot of time to keeping them happy and strong. He quit the League and school out of depression. And then that cult popped up in the aftermath of Bloodwraith, the Green Earth Fellowship. Rood was introduced to them through his friend Bronius and got entangled in them almost immediately."

"Oh, GrEF, we should have considered them," Burgh said.

"What were they like?" Cress asked.

"They were like Plasma in that they advocated keeping humans and Pokémon separate," he answered. "However, they didn't force it on people outside their group. And they mostly kept to themselves."

Leslie frowned. "But they did push their members to turn over all their worldly possessions over to GrEF's leaders. Rood tried to convince me to join, but Hilda had recently been born and I was concerned about being able to raise her properly in a group like that. Then he went and sold our house in Driftveil without informing me at all that it was on the market, taking that money to move to GrEF's camp. I had to file for divorce then, so that I didn't get saddled with trying to cover his school loans when I'd suddenly found the two of us homeless. I moved in with my brother in Nuvema, and I haven't heard from Rood since."

"A lot of people disappeared into GrEF," Burgh said. "You mentioned Bronius; he's another of Plasma Sages. How well did you know him?"

"Enough that I didn't like him even before GrEF," she said. "He was a college friend of Rood's, graduated in Advertising and another media degree. Said he was going to work in television
producing, but then started doing stand-up comedy. I saw him as a bad influence, as he'd take Rood out to spend nights in bars and who knows where else. I know he was already one of the higher ups in GrEF when Rood joined; might have been in on the scamming part too. Rood actually believed, but Bronius seemed too slick when talking about it."

"In that case, we'd better check up on GrEF," Cress said. "Plasma could be an outgrowth of them, or they took advantage of the cult falling apart to claim members."

Burgh nodded. "Yes; I'll definitely talk with Clay and Drayden, as they should know more. Knowing this about two of their leaders..." he looked over to Leslie and Hilda. "And another thing we have to discuss is what Plasma may do about the both of you. If it was just about your ex-husband, then it wouldn't be much to worry about. But Hilda's had enough run-ins with Plasma that they would definitely mark her as an enemy. It could be dangerous to both of you."

"I was just trying to do what's right," Hilda said, in her loud whisper. It seemed the others had heard her well enough.

"That's fine, but you're making yourself a target," Cress said.

"And we're worried about what they mean to do," Iris added.

Burgh nodded and put his tablet down in his lap. "Yes. We've decided not to reveal everything to the public yet; there's still too much that we don't know. But as you're already involved, we here and the other Gym Leaders have decided to tell you some of our information. Don't speak of it with others, though."

"We understand," Leslie said, while Hilda nodded.

Since he seemed to be leading the meeting, Burgh went ahead with the explanation. "We have strong suspicions for who the King of Plasma is. It's mainly circumstantial evidence, but no one fits better. And from what we've observed of him and Team Plasma, they seem to be making a strong attempt at recreating circumstances of various Unova myths."

"It's all over their imagery and speeches and such," Iris said. "Even their uniforms."

"Reminiscent of the uniforms of the soldiers of the hometown of the twin heroes," Burgh said. "One of the parts is lacking, though: they have a single King, not twins. This apparent oversight tells us there are things they have going on that are not in plain sight. Again, we have suspicions about the twin, but even less is certain around him."

"And then you pop up as a third wheel, Hilda," Cress said. "A descendant of one of the Sages, apparently chosen by Kyurem. That does not fit the myths they're trying to recreate. So even if you hadn't fought and defeated another Sage, and made fun of Plasma publicly in what is quickly becoming a popular web video..."

At that, Iris snickered and Burgh smiled. So this morning's events had gotten recorded and posted. Hilda grinned while Leslie had a 'what did she do this time?' look on her face.

Cress smiled briefly, but went on, "You'd likely still have been a target of theirs, either for conversion or elimination. You do have Kyurem guarding you, but we'd like to make sure that you're safe. As for how likely Plasma is to get their wish to awaken the twin dragons, we're not sure."

"Their King probably can," Burgh said. "I'd believe that of him. If the calling had to do anything with the rest of Plasma, probably not."
"That is quite possible," Kyurem said from his corner.

"What would you want her to do?" Leslie asked. "Leave the region?"

"That would get both of you out of their reach, if you went with her," Burgh said. "But it is up to you."

"Hmm." She looked to Hilda. "What do you think?"

Hilda had been thinking about it while they were talking, as she wasn't supposed to be talking much. But this did require her input. And… she cracked a grin. "What if we turned their myths against them?" she asked.

"Just what do you have in mind?" her mother asked, but she seemed as curious as she was concerned.

"You heard him," she replied. "I'm already messing with their plans just by existing. Ghetsis said they want to capture the hearts and minds of Unova's people, apparently by using our myths. But if I get the public's attention by using mythic imagery as well, then I might just get enough attention that people would get upset if anything happened to me. Then they couldn't attack me without turning the public against them, and they'd have to keep with the myths which we can predict."

"Can you do that?" Iris asked. "I mean, there isn't as much stuff associated with Kyurem as there is with Reshiram and Zekrom, except the occasional razing of corrupt civilizations."

"I have Kyurem with me," Hilda said. "We can make stuff up as we go along and because he's with me, it will make that stuff part of his myth."

"That is possible," Kyurem said.

"Will you two do that, then?" Burgh asked.

"If he wants to," Hilda said. "It'll be fun."

Kyurem leaned back into the corner when everyone's attention went to him. "Sometimes prey will run and hide. But sometimes, you come across one who grows bright plumage and shows it off with seemingly no regards to safety. Yet the predator is less likely to go after the one of bright plumage, for that one must be strong in order to live like that, not worth the effort to hunt down. Very well. I would say that you need to be very showy in order for that to work. However, I feel that you won't lack for showiness."

"You got that right," Hilda said, glad for his agreement.

"That's an interesting way to put it," Cress said.

"Yes, but…" Burgh put his hand to his chin. "Hilda, you must have been in Castelia for a while now, yet I haven't seen you in the Gym. But your voice seems to be failing."

She nodded. "And if it goes entirely tomorrow, I'm definitely not going to be able to challenge you."

"Oh yeah, that would be so hard," Iris said.

Burgh looked thoughtful, then picked up his tablet to check on something. On getting that done, he smiled. "Well if you feel confident in your team and only your voice is holding you back now, may
I suggest a date and time for you to come here? To make it as showy as possible?" He tossed the tablet over to her. "The public can't miss you after this."

Catching the tablet, she turned it around so she could read the posting. It was about the official Unova Pokémon League battle show, which played clips of prominent challengers, or even full battles. What he wanted her to see was a scheduled live battle session that was occurring a week from now. This happened sometimes, and usually featured high level challengers that were popular with the public. This show was scheduled to take place in Burgh's Gym.

"You'd be on your third challenge, right?" he asked. After she confirmed that and handed back his tablet, he said, "Normally, they wouldn't take that level for the live show; they're hoping to get one of the national Aces in a victory here. But I'm sure the fact that you're battling with Kyurem will convince them to add your match to the show."

"And she normally asks for harder challenges," Cress said. "She did that with us and Lenora, remember?"

"There is that too," Burgh said, smiling. "Will that do?"

"Yeah, that's awesome," Hilda said, excited. "I'll try to have my voice back to normal then."

"You might try to stop talking from now on," Leslie said, affectionately chiding her. "I'll try to get the word out and get interest stirred in the match. Thank you for letting us in on this. It's better to know such things."

"No, thank you for agreeing to speak with us," Burgh said, getting up and shaking her hand. "We've got some new leads and insight from your testimony. And take care of yourself, Hilda. I'll be seeing you in the Gym a few days from now."

Hilda grinned and shook his hand.

After some pleasantries, Kyurem, Hilda, and Leslie went back through the Gym to leave. But her mother took her hand. "You know, if you're going to make a showy impression at a special occasion, then you ought to be dressed for it. Do you have something suitable?"

Right! While she had some interesting pieces stored away digitally, if she was going to try pulling of being mythic, there wasn't much. Hilda shook her head.

That made Leslie grin. "In that case, maybe I ought to spend the night and part of tomorrow here with you. We'll go shopping for something that will make you really shine!"

Happy to hear that, Hilda nodded enthusiastically, making her mother laugh.

Late afternoon, 1/8

Rood had his nose bandaged up; it had broken, but the doctor didn't think it was severe. Things were just going to be inconvenient for now. To be honest, he should have expected that. There had been many times when he had regretted what he'd done. But on knowing that it was his daughter, he had let his guard down.

Things were turning out more complicated that he thought this meeting would be, though. "She's the one with Kyurem?"

Ghetsis nodded. "He was that masked boy that was there, the one who didn't say anything. She was
the one who defeated Gorm, and one of the kids who messed up operations in Striaton."

She had defeated Gorm. As much as he shouldn't be, he felt proud of her for managing that. She hadn't started training that long ago, and yet she'd pulled off that. But he shouldn't be thinking of her as his daughter when she could be the team's enemy. It made Rood feel uncomfortable, like an outsider. "She seems to be becoming a large obstacle."

"Exactly," Ghetsis said. "And I don't want you letting personal issues interfere with our schedule; it will only set you up for disappointment if you get attached to her."

"I won't." He could still remember when GrEF had started falling apart. He had let personal interest decide over group interest, and that had only made the end of it all more miserable. This time, he was in an official leadership position rather than just having a lot of popularity behind him. Rood didn't want to see the group burn in the same way through something he was responsible for.

"Good. I've started a background check on her, to find out why she has Kyurem and what can be done about it. Now there was another thing…" he checked over some papers. "Why was there a double fee on dry cleaning charges?"

"What?" Rood asked, puzzled at the statement. Ghetsis passed the paper over and indeed, there was a double charge from the cleaners. From this morning, even. "I'm not sure. But there are different times. Was it an accident?"

"I hoped you would know more about that. It has to do with a video that appeared on the web before our run-in with…"

At that point, the door opened unexpectedly. Ghetsis narrowed his eyes, but quickly changed his expression to one of surprise. Rood turned around and saw N coming in; a Sigilyph was flying just behind him, meeping and looking around nervously. "Ghetsis, I've been trying to get a hold of you for several days now," he said, a little angered but more concerned. "It's important."

"Have you?" he asked. "That's odd. Is your Xtransciever working?"

"Yes." He looked down at Rood and nodded. "Hello."

What was he doing here? "Hello again, N," he replied.

"What about Valerie and Carol?" Ghetsis asked.

Facing Ghetsis again, N's expression darkened. "I told them to leave me alone. They were keeping wild Pokémon away from me."

"Why would they do that?" Rood asked, honestly confused. The two girls were supposed to be assisting and protecting the King, not hindering his mission.

"I don't know, but even after I told them what the problem was, they wouldn't give it up. But this isn't about that. I need to get into Twist Mountain."

"You've been working around Nimbasa City, if I'm correct?" Ghetsis asked. "Twist Mountain is still some ways off on your progress."

"And it's a confusing place with powerful Pokémon," Rood said. It had been bad enough back in the days when he had been a League Trainer and they had continued digging all these years. "It's more dangerous than most locations in Unova."
"I can handle it," N said. "But I haven't been there and it was hard to tell Rune here how to find it. Zekrom is there and once I get there, I can find her hibernating form."

"Are you certain of that?" Ghetsis asked, glancing at his desk, probably looking for files. "We've been researching the matter and haven't narrowed it down that much."

N nodded. "I'm certain. I heard it from Reshiram, who I met through Hilbert who's seeking the white dragon. It took place in the dream world, but I remember it exactly and I know it's truth."

"From Reshiram?" Rood asked. It was amazing, he thought, that N had managed to already meet with one of the legendary dragons that was hibernating. True, it wasn't the dragon they were trying to awaken, but it was a promising sign. "Then it probably is correct."

"Right," Ghetsis said, thinking.

N leaned over and put a hand on the desk. "And that's not it. Hilbert is my twin brother. This Sigilyph awakened some psychic powers in me that I wasn't aware of, and we both knew it. That was likely how I managed to meet with Reshiram, as the two of us were connected. But I want to make sure that I'm right, so I need to go to Twist Mountain as suggested. And Reshiram did say that I should find her as soon as I can, even though they've asked for at least another month of observation before making a decision."

"We shouldn't ignore this," Ghetsis said. "Rood, you've been to that location. Would you accompany him there?"

Standing up, he nodded. "Yes sir. If you don't mind waiting a few minutes, N, I need to go change from this uniform. And you should get your heavier winter gear, including shoes for ice. It'll be harsh in there."

"Thanks," N said. "I'll meet you at the upper entrance."

As Rood left the office, N and Ghetsis had started talking. To get N through a place like Twist Mountain was quite an undertaking. Rood stopped by the supply area to pick up strong potions, revives, Ice Heals, and a number of other medicines. He had a Pokémon team himself, and they might be able to get a lower level team like N would have through the mountain. But it was better to be prepared. Then he went back to his room to dress warmly, including heavy jeans, tall boots with ice treads, a heavy water-resistant overcoat, and a hat with a face cover. Twist Mountain was usually a place to avoid in winter.

He ended up meeting N going up the stairs; he was wearing his own hooded coat and boots, but holding onto his scarf and twisting it around his hands. The young man nodded at him, then picked up his pace in climbing the stairs. Behind him, his Sigilyph was still flying close.

"Odd to see a Pokémon in here," Rood commented.

"I couldn't convince him to stay away," N said, as the Sigilyph clucked. "Rune doesn't even like this castle, but he insists he needs to stay near me because he doesn't like it."

"Some Pokémon are protective like that." Mentally running through his own team and what he remembered being in the mountain, he added, "What Pokémon do you have at the moment?"

N stopped fiddling with his scarf to tap his fingers as he listed his. "Well there's Rune here, and Daisy; she's a Darumaka. And then Sal the Sandile; I was surprised to find that he wasn't too bright, especially when Krookodiles I've met are really cunning, but it seems like they get smarter as they evolve. Then there's Kimi the Scraggy."
So he was nicknaming his Pokémon? It made Rood feel better, since he had done that for his own team. He wasn't supposed to, he had thought, but old habits had returned when he was given them. If N was doing so, then it had to be all right. "Good. Most of them should be okay, but don't bring out Sal. He'll be all right in the desert area and indoors, but if you bring him into a frigid and snowy place like where we're going, it'll trigger a hibernation period in him and then he shouldn't be brought into battle for a couple of months."

"I see." After a moment of quiet, he went back to fiddling with his scarf.

"Is something else bothering you?" Rood asked, worried. He had always thought that it was a huge responsibility on N's shoulders to be leading Plasma. At first, Rood had nearly left when he'd come and found that they were being led by an eleven year old boy. But N had turned out to be so extraordinary.

"This mission is turning out a lot more difficult that I expected it to," N said. "I knew that things were going to be different out there, and that the battles would be hard and Pokémon would get hurt. I've managed to tolerate it just enough so that I can get through the mission and set things right. But then there's stuff that I didn't expect to be so hard. Like releasing Pokémon. I tell them what I mean to do when I add them to my team, but once the Gym is defeated and it's time to let them go, some of them get really upset. I even feel guilty about it, even knowing that I should be glad to have them free. It's almost like they would choose to remain with a Trainer over being free."

That had been a pitfall that Rood had worried about himself, although he'd never brought it up. He knew how easy it was to get attached to Pokémon, and N felt so strongly for Pokémon already. If he was having doubts in Plasma's core beliefs, then maybe… no, it had to be right. The group had come together for the sake of Pokémon and he didn't want to disappoint everyone.

"I suppose if you've grown a friendship with them, then they're afraid that the friendship will end," Rood said. "Everyone's used to the way things are, even if it's a disguise for the real problem."

"That would be it. I have met some interesting Pokémon doing this."

"Really?" With a bit more prodding, N started talking about them. That seemed to cheer him up.

To get to Twist Mountain, Rood brought out his Swoobat and had him lead the way, while N and his Sigilyph Rune followed along. At the mountain's western entrance, Rood snapped his hat's face-cover up, while N wrapped his scarf around so that it could cover his lower face and let him have his hood up. They went inside, with Rune and the Swoobat Seth following along.

Years of being used for mining left Twist Mountain's walls and floor chiseled almost smooth. Winter winds blew through the tunnels, leaving ice on every surface. It gave the tunnels a gleaming beauty, although one had to tolerate below freezing temperatures to appreciate it. There were still Pokémon here, ones that did not mind the ice. The rough conditions led to tougher than usual Pokémon.

They came to the first split, which ran ahead, right, and left. "Most of these tunnels end up going in circles and spirals," Rood said.

"Do you sense Zekrom?" N asked, looking to Rune.

The Sigilyph flew forward a little, its eyestalk twisting about. He clicked, then meeped and flew to the right. After a long tunnel, there was a turn to the left that led outside, into the interior of the mountain. But in the tunnel there, they encountered a Boldore and a Cryogonal Pokémon that
seemed to be fighting.

"I'll handle this," N said, heading right for them.

"Be careful," Rood said. Wild Pokémon in areas like this would be more aggressive than usual.

Although he nodded, he didn't falter or look nervous. Instead, N went over and greeted the two Pokémon politely. The two Pokémon had hostile stances and expressions until N proved to them that he could speak with them. Then they were both surprised, eventually responding to him in reverence. That was always one of the most amazing things about N, the way in which Pokémon reacted to him.

And there was, in that moment, something simply awe inspiring. The late afternoon sun came down into the mountain, bouncing off into the snow and into these tunnels. N had unconsciously stepped into those sunbeams, putting him in a golden glow. It stuck into Rood's mind and made words slip into poetry there. As it wouldn't be easy to write with winter gloves on, he tried to grasp onto those words and hold them. He wrote poetry frequently and wanted to have something to present to his King. It wasn't easy to get those poems as good as he wanted, though.

The two wild Pokémon suspended their feud, moving elsewhere so that they could pass. On seeing that, Rood felt a little sheepish for over-preparing. He had expected hard battles against these Pokémon, but N was able to simply talk them into moving aside. The two of them and their Pokémon then went into the interior of Twist Mountain.

At one time long ago, this had been a volcano. After its last big explosion, the top two-thirds of the mountain had collapsed inward, leading to a tall rim, open sky, and a crater interior. People had come in to excavate valuable minerals and stones, eventually forming a pit several stories deep. Today, the sunlight gleamed off of piles of deep snow and large formations of icicles. Icicles. Rood reached out and put his hand around one; the tips of his fingers could not reach the tip of his thumb. "You know, when the icicles get this large, they say that it's a sign of Kyurem's winter."

"A winter made more harsh because Kyurem is awake?" N asked, looking at Rood.

"That's right." He looked back as N was still staring right at him. "Is something odd about this?"

N finally blinked, now curious. "You're Hilda's father?"

Where had that come from? Rood felt a flutter of nervousness as he replied, "Yes, if it's Hilda Medley you're talking about. Did Ghetsis tell you?"

He shook his head. "No, I just saw it. You may fight her in a Pokémon battle in the future."

"I thought that might happen," he said. "But how did you see that?"

"I can see possible futures." He looked over the long steep slope of snow that led down to the lowest level of the mine, then pointed out a path. "Here, that's the way to go and not fall through all the snow." N then led the way down, explaining what exactly had happened between him, Rune, and Hilbert in the Desert Resort. Or rather, the lost city of Shira.

For all of his life, Rood wanted to believe that there could be a person with great destiny who would change the world for the better. He might have hoped for it to be himself when he was young, but that never panned out. And once tragedy struck in the form of Bloodwraith, he thought that the best way to find a purpose in his life was to find someone with a destiny like that and help
them. It would be something amazing to be a part of.

He had only found hope and disappointment in that so far. Maybe this person was the one, he would think, only to have nothing happen, or things would get worse. He had even been concerned about Plasma to some degree, as certain questions kept coming up. It had always been N who convinced him to stay, though. Now, N was telling him things that only seemed to happen in stories: two strangers who meet and have strangely similar lives, finding a lost city that was there all along, speaking with a being who had helped to create the whole region of Unova. If anyone could have a destiny to change the world, Rood felt, no, knew that it was the young man he was following now.

"I think it could be important to convince Hilbert to join us," N said as they walked into a tunnel in the deepest part of the open mine. "I mean, people will listen when I call on Zekrom. But if Hilbert has Reshiram and he's with us, then even more people will agree with our message and stop hurting Pokémon. Ghetsis thought it would be a waste of time, though. He told me I should be more focused on my mission and that I should have had the Nimbasa Gym badge by now. He wouldn't even answer why he was hardly contacting me." He shook his head. "I'm not entirely sure what to do, to be honest. He makes sense, but…" he seemed to struggle to find the words, but couldn't come up with anything.

Rood clasped N's shoulder. "I think you should do what you feel is important. Maybe it will slow things down, but I agree that having Hilbert as an ally could be a help. And remember this: whatever happens in the future, I will be on your side."

N smiled. "I will. Thank you, Rood. I'd like to try getting Hilda to see the right way of things too, but she'll be even harder to convince."

"Do you know her well?" As much as he wasn't supposed to be attached to her, he was still curious about how his daughter had turned out.

"She made me become her friend, more or less," N said, although he seemed glad about it. "She's not like anyone else I know. Sometimes I think that she's really going about things the wrong way. And yet, her Pokémon seem to love her so much. Apparently her Servine fought against hibernation because he didn't want to leave her team. Then I'm not sure what to think about her." He paused in the conversation, as they came across a tunnel entrance that was blocked off with a single strand of caution tape.

"Is that where we need to go?" Rood asked.

N nodded and went over to a sign. "'High electrical danger; beware.' That may be Zekrom." He ducked under the tape to get by it.

If it was electrical, that meant trouble. Rood recalled his Swoobat, then convinced N to do the same for the Sigilyph. Past a short dark tunnel, they came upon a large room. Strangely enough, it was filled with giant ice crystals and even colder than in the outer mine. Near the largest crystal, there was a black stone that floated three feet off the floor. Blue glows shimmered across its surface; every few seconds, an arc of electricity shot out between the stone and nearby crystals.

N didn't seem to be afraid of it, though. "This is a place of power, even if it's not of her type," he said as he walked down the slopes to get to the floating stone.

From the prickles on his skin that weren't caused by the cold, Rood had to agree. "Good luck."

But that wish may have been unnecessary. The stone calmed down even as N approached it, not
sparking quite as much. Once he put his hands on it, the static in the room decreased greatly. When they got back outside, the black stone had already lost its blue glow and ability to float. Rood still had no doubt that it was truly Zekrom.

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Morning, 1/9

As they walked down the subway stairs, Leslie gripped Hilda's arm. "Well good luck with your Gym challenge later this week. And try not to get hurt again."

Hilda nodded, but that made it the right time to bring something else up. She pulled out a notepad and began writing something out. When her mother came back with a train ticket, she passed the note over. It read, 'I know you've already got Fluff and Fedora with you, but I'd like to send you back home with my Sawk Lance too. He can keep you safe if Plasma decides to cause trouble for you too. Besides, he would be happier that way too, I think. He feels like he owes me for accidentally breaking my leg a while ago, but he's terrified of Kyurem, so it's like he's forced to work with the team and is unhappy over that. You should tell him that he can repay his debt by working to protect you instead.'

On reading it, Leslie asked, "Are you sure about that? You'd only have three active Pokémon on your team then."

Hilda nodded. Between Kyurem, Mimi, and Olette, taking on the Bug Gym shouldn't be too bad even if she raised the challenge level as usual.

Her mother then smiled and hugged her. "Thank you, dear. That certainly does make me feel more secure. I mean, Fedora's in no state to battle and Fluff would need a lot of work to get to a good level. Let's talk to him." Hilda arranged the gifting status on the Pokeball, then passed it to Leslie so it could register her as the current Trainer. Then she released the Sawk. "Hi Lance. I'm Hilda's mother, Leslie, if you remember me from a little while ago. She's sending you with me so that I can be protected; we think Team Plasma might try to cause trouble, or even attack me. But I'm sure if a strong and loyal Pokémon like you is with me, then I'll be just fine."

At first, Lance was puzzled to learn that he was being passed on. But Leslie's praise worked, as he shifted his posture to a proud stance. Still, he looked to Hilda for confirmation. When she nodded, he replied in kind, then bowed to Leslie.

"Ah, such a gentleman too," she said, laughing lightly. She clasped the Pokeball in both hands. "This is exciting! I haven't had a battling Pokémon since Bloodwraith. Maybe we'll go out on Route 1 to brush up on my skills when I don't have to work online."

Hilda smiled and patted Lance's arm. He was looking happier already, knowing that he wouldn't have Kyurem constantly watching him. Off to the side, the dragon boy watched, but made no comments as Leslie and Lance boarded the subway station to leave Castelia.
It was early January in Castelia, and the weather was simply awful. Hilbert looked outside the large window and saw the snow and rain mix that was falling down in a graying blur. On the overhang, there were many icicles dripping water, slowly growing. The streets were slick with gray slush. It might have been a time to head north and train along Route 4 and Desert Resort. Then again, that would require going out in that weather.

Instead, he found himself at a laundromat, getting his clothes cleaned and taking care of his gear. "It's one of those less glorious days for a traveling Trainer," he said. "But you have to get things taken care of."

There wasn't any other person in the laundromat, save for the evening attendant who looked half-asleep, if not napping in the chair. But his Litwick was on the table he was sitting at, listening to him. "Huu."

Hilbert tried rubbing Madeline's side. She seemed to appreciate that and leaned into his hand while closing her eyes. So far, she wasn't showing the happy attention his other Pokémon would have given. She was still homesick. At least she trusted him now. "Nasty weather out there, isn't it?"

About then, the door jangled as two people entered. Hilbert looked over in time to see Hilda kicking slush off her boots and Kyurem not bothering. She looked over and waved at him.

"Hey Hilda," he said, waving back. "How's it going?"

She smiled and gave him a thumbs up. Then she headed for the washing machines and put her bag on one of them with a heavy thump.

Over at the counter, the attendant lifted his visor up and looked at them. "Good evening," he said. "More or less. Are you that girl who's supposed to have Kyurem?"

Hilda nodded and pointed to the long haired boy with her. He just nodded too.

The attendant chuckled. "Eh, I don't believe it. That immortal Pokémon stuff is just old nursery stories. But you should've heard my gran go off on a tirade because you have him; she says this winter's going to shut down the whole region because he's active."

She just shrugged. Kyurem said, "That would be counterproductive."

Still thinking it was a joke, the attendant shifted his visor back down and seemed to go to sleep. But Hilbert found the exchange odd. She should have said something, made some joke or exaggeration about her guardian. Not stay quiet. He patted the Litwick, then got up and went over to the washers. "Something up? You're being strangely quiet."

Hilda looked serious for a moment, nodding slowly while she pulled out her clothes and sorted them. Then she looked at Kyurem, who said, "She's not to speak for today, as she's lost her voice due to using it too much after yesterday's antics."

"I see," he said. "You were trying to speak like Ghetsis for a long speech. I thought it was good." She seemed happy to hear that, although then it was weird that she wasn't replying. "Must be tough to be silent for a day."
She made a determined face and put a fist partly in the air. And the wants running right under that expression made her thoughts fairly clear. This was a challenge and she was going to take it on full force, like everything else.

Thinking he might help, Hilbert tried to sort the clothes with her. "Good luck on that; I don't know how much I can help… what's this?" He picked up a mesh bag from the pile that had been pulled out. The mesh was thick enough that it was hard to see through, but he caught a glimpse of a pink flower on white fabric. And the shape of it… oh wait, that was a bra. "Ack, sorry!" he said, handing the bag to her and feeling his face turn red in embarrassment.

Hilda grinned wide and seemed to be fighting breaking into laughter. Instead, she elbowed him and gave him a wink. That was definitely meant to tease him.

"I am not a pervert," he said, trying to keep it quiet so that the attendant didn't overhear. But when he looked at her, he couldn't help but imagine her in that underwear and… and sometimes it was just better to say nothing than to say the truth and get in trouble for it. "Erm, I'll just leave you to this." He went back over to the table where Madeline seemed uncertain of what had just gone on.

A few minutes later when her laundry was started, Hilda released her Minccino and Drilbur, then came over to sit near Hilbert at the table. She was still amused at his expense, but it wasn't long before she was paying attention to the Pokémon instead. Mimi had decided to check out the laundry machines, getting up on one and trying to figure out why it was vibrating. On the table, Madeline had hopped closer to Hilbert, watching the newcomers (especially Hilda) carefully. Olette came up near Hilda, who took the Drilbur's paw and began looking over her claws.

Knowing that Kyurem didn't talk a lot, it seemed to Hilbert that he had to carry any conversation today. "This Litwick decided to come with me for a little while," he said. "I named her Madeline. She's shy around human girls, though." Hilda seemed interested in listening, so he told her of how Banshee had gotten the Pokémon to him.

They both had to pass time while waiting on laundry, so after a little while, Hilbert got out a deck of cards and offered to play a game with them. Hilda was able to use a notepad to get across anything she wanted to say. Surprisingly, it turned out that Kyurem couldn't read the human language. It took more time to explain the symbols on the cards to him than to play a simple matching game. and by the time he got it, Mimi had figured it out too and sort of played along (she had a tendency to show the card she was looking to match, rather than just indicating a number, but it was still rather impressive).

But in that unusual card game and evening of doing laundry, Hilbert felt something he hadn't in what seemed like a long time. He felt that the others wanted to be with him and were glad that he was around. The light wasn't as intense or brilliant as before, yet Hilbert found himself loving this time more than what had come before. Maybe it was just knowing what the true absence of that light was like. Or maybe it was because their interest was more honest.

Or was it because Hilda seemed to have some kind of attraction to him that wasn't forced?

At one time, he had loved it when girls had fallen in love with him. It had been a powerful feeling, knowing that he could get them to do whatever he wanted and they'd forgive him out of love. But now that he thought back on it, it made him feel awful. He hadn't really loved them back, only loved the feel of their desire for him. He didn't want to end up like that again.

But as he was folding up his clothes and putting them away in his bag, he realized that he didn't want to let go of this light just yet. The weather outside was still cold and gray, with the slush turning to large wet flakes; that would only make him feel more miserable if he left like this. He
Hilbert felt like that wasn't the case, though. He wanted to stay with them because he wanted to be with her. Maybe at first, it had just because he thought he could get some use out of knowing her. Now, he liked her bold enthusiastic manner, and even her disregard for personal safety if it meant entertaining others and doing the right thing. And she probably wasn't the most beautiful girl he'd run across, but she did have her charms... and it had been intriguing to consider what she might look like in only underwear. Not that he'd tell her that.

How was he supposed to keep her interest, though? Hilbert hadn't had any trouble with getting girls on dates before. Then again, those girls had either asked first or had feelings so intense that he knew they'd say yes before he even asked. Hilda's attraction to him right now wasn't strong; in fact, she might not even notice those feelings. How did he ask if it was that small? Or more importantly, how did he get that attraction to grow into love?

She was already checking on how dry her clothes were, so there wasn't much time to act. Feeling a little silly in being like this, Hilbert went over to her and asked, "Would you like to go out for a coffee or cocoa? I know a great cafe here in Castelia; it's a little out of the way, but it's one of the best places around."

Without giving it much thought, she smiled and nodded. Hilbert smiled back; that was better. There hadn't been any need to worry over it, just so long as he didn't fall back into old habits.

"What do you mean to do with her?" Kyurem asked, getting up from the table with the other Pokémon and coming over to them.

"Just hang out for the evening," he answered, looking to the dragon boy. When their eyes met, Hilbert felt a slight chill in how Kyurem was staring at him. Hilbert's smile weakened; this was worse than dealing with the overprotective fathers who drilled him on what he meant to do with their daughters that night. He couldn't rely on Attract to win over trust this time.

Kyurem stared at him a moment longer, then asked, "Would you protect her if something went wrong?"

A little insulted at that, Hilda frowned briefly, then rolled her eyes and went back to pulling clothes out of the dryer.

"I think she can handle herself in most cases," Hilbert said. "But if something did go wrong, then yes, I'd help protect her too."

He felt approval from both of them on that bit of diplomacy. Good. Nodding, Kyurem said, "Then she's in your hands tonight." He looked to Hilda. "Not that I don't trust you, but we have certainly angered Plasma. I need to go speak with someone; I'll find you two in a few hours."

Hilda acknowledged this with a wave goodbye, then continued with her clothes. Hilbert waited until she was done, then they recalled the three other Pokémon and headed out. In this slushy cold weather, none of them would appreciate being outside. He didn't really like this kind of weather, but it was nice in that he could bring out an umbrella and Hilda stayed close to him for that.

On one of the smaller streets that was not quite as lively as others, Hilbert brought her to a small storefront that wasn't marked by much, just a sign with a coffee cup overhead and a picture of a saxophone on the window. The store inside kept a similar humble atmosphere, but it was warm and
inviting, a place to get out of the rush and bustle of everyday life in Castelia. There was an old bar in the back, and small tables around the room. Next to the bar, there was a small stage where a pianist and a guitar player were provided some live music in the form of blues. There were a number of customers in tonight, most involved in their own private conversations.

The bartender greeted them with a friendly smile and a wave. "Evening, Hilbert. How's your return trip been going?"

"Nothing like I expected," he said, smiling. "But it's working out. Oh, and this is a friend of mine, Hilda."

"Good to meet you, young lady," he said, shaking her hand. "And aren't you that girl in that video making fun of Ghetsis? That was a real hoot."

She nodded, happy for that acknowledgment. "Yeah, but now she's lost her voice for doing it," Hilbert said. "It was worth it, though, right?" And she agreed to that.

"That's too bad," the bartender said. "It make you sore?"

She nodded and rubbed her throat.

"I've got a nice drink that can help fix you up from that," he offered. "Get some chamomile tea with honey and a twist of lemon, and that'll soothe minor irritations. Would you like me to brew one for you?"

"I'll pay for it," Hilbert said. "And could you get me a mocha and cream?"

"Sure enough; I'll have 'em ready in a few." He then went off to get the drinks made.

"Thanks," Hilbert said, then took Hilda over to one of the unclaimed tables. This would be a nice place to sit and talk. Or write, in Hilda's case.

Kyurem went to the rooftop of the building the Laundromat was in and transformed into his true form. While up there, he observed the storm above and the city below. He knew people called the harshest winters his and he could create region-wide chills if he wanted. But this wet snow didn't quite qualify; at least he didn't think so. He didn't see many normal winters, as he slept through many of them.

For a few minutes, he closed his eyes and felt the temperament of this storm. With his power, he could guide its movement, its winds, its precipitation. It felt natural, though, not induced. If this winter was harder than usual, it was a coincidence that he was awake for it. Feeling satisfied with that observation, he took off into the air and headed northwest.

Sand began to mix with the snow as he grew close to the old location of Shira. It had been a long time since he had been there, but that wasn't his goal. When he got over the water of the bay, he descended and searched out a particular area. There were a few small islands there, including some which were obscured by the sandstorms. Kyurem landed on one that was of a decent size, then used his powers to send out a message. Hopefully there would be a response.

The sand in the air began to diverge, revealing a presence coming through. And then he was there, a tall white and blue dragon; the glow of the gem on his chest was fading as he set himself on being on the island. Dialga was the master of time, and thus his memory worked forwards as well as backwards. This made him one of the few Pokémon he could trust in fixing this problem, as he would understand why Kyurem was doing what he was.
But his memory wasn't all that perfect. "Have you made any progress on researching what happened?" Kyurem asked.

"May 4th at the top of Dragonspiral Tower," Dialga replied. "That was when she died."

That was less time than he was hoping for, but perhaps enough. But there was something about that which made him raise his head. "At the tower?"

He nodded. "You know rules. Those who are eligible may enter, not just the chosen heroes. She followed one of them inside."

"Hilbert and N, right? What happened inside?"

"I still don't know that." He bowed his head in apology, but seemed just as concerned. "You call me to this particular point for a reason."

Kyurem nodded. "Someone is using Palkia's powers. Ghetsis, the main spokesperson of Team Plasma and one of their Sages. I've seen them warp three times now, but this last time, I definitely caught the scent of her power. Is she here at this time?"

"Mmm," Dialga went quiet. He and Palkia were like Kyurem and his siblings, in that their powers were connected so deeply that they were hyperaware of each other. So when he shook his head, Kyurem knew it had to be truth. "She is not; she's still in Sinnoh at this point in time. But I do feel her power in this region. We will have to find out why."

"Right. I'll keep watching."

"Wait," Dialga said, leaning his head closer to Kyurem. "I know you wish to succeed this time, and I have agreed to help you do so. That is why I must warn you that you may need to get more active in blocking or directing developing events."

Kyurem felt momentarily angered that he was thought insufficient this time. But then again, he reminded himself that he was well off his known roles this time around. "What do you mean by that? I am protecting her, and I made sure that someone else was watching out for her this evening."

"I don't know exactly what happened in the tower, but I may know part of why it happened." Dialga straightened up, looking off to Castelia City. "At this point in time, the future is uncertain. But there are many dark paths it takes. You do not understand humans that well. Have you seen what happens when male Pokémon compete over a female?"

"Yes," he said, puzzled at the seemingly random direction of Dialga's speech. "I've seen Sawsbuck ram into each other hard enough to break off their horns, but what's that got to do with this?"

"Humans can and will do much worse in similar situations," he replied. "They can also do much better, but when emotions are running high, no one can think at their clearest. Keep that in mind and try to defuse the situation before it blows up."

That gave Kyurem something else to be concerned about, given that he'd left Hilbert to watch over Hilda. He hadn't considered the possibility of the two boys competing over Hilda, but given how they both responded to her, it could happen. "What am I supposed to do about that? I know even less there."

"You will have to solve that problem on your own," Dialga said, looking back to him now. "I'll look into the matter of Palkia's powers being used, so don't worry about that. Is there anything else
Kyurem scowled at him, but Dialga didn't respond to that. "No. But thanks for letting me know how much time I have to work with."

"I'll get back to you at a later point in time," he said, then vanished back into time.

Since he'd be left alone on this island, Kyurem stayed there and thought about what was going on. If N and Hilbert competing for Hilda's favor would somehow lead into her death, the death of his siblings, and the ruin of Unova, then it seemed right to try dissuading one or both before they got too infatuated. He was tempted to cut off both their efforts, threatening them both into keeping a friendly distance. That seemed like a good thing, as the thought of either of them getting that close to her unnerved him somehow.

And that made him concerned about his own feelings.

Some patrons of the coffee shop had left, and others had come in. Hilda and Hilbert were still there, with their Pokémon. Although they had finished their drinks some time ago, there hadn't been any incentive to leave.

"Hoenn is really a beautiful place," Hilbert said, still talking. "I remember when I was at Mount Chimney and there was a group of us just past the ash fields..."

Hilda looked over at Olette, who was busily poking small holes in a napkin. She was losing interest whenever he started talking about himself too much. Feeling that happening again, Hilbert checked himself and searched for something else to say.

"And the trail there had bike paths, even though there were all kinds of small ledges," he switched to. "I saw some interesting Pokémon there too, like this one that was a little round piglet, rather cute, with a long springy tail that it bounced everywhere on. They call it a Spoink, and everywhere it goes, it carries around a large pearl. They don't even craft the pearls themselves; they just carry them around and look into them. Some Pokémon have the oddest of habits."

That worked, drawing her back into listening. It was habit, he figured. She was interested in listening to him and his default conversation was about himself. But her attraction wasn't of the 'forgive you of anything' sort he used to get. It was something that could break, he felt that. And Hilbert didn't want that to happen.

But that still didn't solve whether he did this to feel good or because he really liked her.

He paused and looked at her. "You know, this would be a lot more fun if you could talk."

Hilda smiled and patted her throat. Maybe she felt better, but she didn't want to make things worse again.

Over at the small stage, a third musician joined the guitarist and pianist; this one had a trumpet.
"Evening, everyone," he said into the microphone. "You're welcome to push back a few tables and do a little dancing if you feel up to it. We do this twice a week now. Hey buddy, let's start with the usual."

The guitarist nodded while the pianist played an intro. "Right. This is our interpretation of a classic song attributed to the peerless musician and muse, Meloetta; just bringing it up to our style, you see." After getting in tune with each other, the three man band started in on their song.
Other people were taking up the suggestion of clearing up a space. Hilbert took Hilda's hand. "Want to join in? Just so long as you don't get crazy like last time we were at a dance."

Amused more than insulted, she nodded and got up to help get chairs and tables out of the way. The guitarist started singing the familiar lyrics; it was very common for Unova musicians to start a show with this particular song and there were many different versions. This one was slow paced.

"You ever done a couples dance?" Hilbert asked quietly. When she shook her head, he said, "Well I won't go all formal on you then. Here, take my hand, and put your other one around my hip."

Pulling her closer, he added, "and no, I'm not a pervert."

Hilda nearly laughed, but winked and mouthed, 'You suggested it, not me.'

"I keep getting myself in trouble today, don't I?" he asked, earning a glimmer of approval from her. She liked for things to be funny or interesting; that was good progress towards finding out how to hold her attention.

It wasn't easy to lead her in the dance at first, as she wasn't sure what to do and they ended up stepping on each other's toes. Then there was how small the space was, even after they had pushed the furniture aside; there might have only been a handful of them dancing, but they still bumped into each other. But once they figured things out and got in step with each other, there was a short time where Hilbert thought he didn't want to be anywhere else but here, with an old song bringing Hilda closer to him.

The feeling lasted until something clamped onto his leg and nearly caused him to trip. Hilbert clutched Hilda a little tighter just in case one of them fell over and looked down. A gray furry face looked back up at him. "Sho ka chi!"

"Oh, hi there," Hilbert said. The song was coming to an end anyhow, so he let go of Hilda and picked the Minccino up. "It was Mimi, right? You trying to join in?"

"Ca mi!" The Pokémon hugged him. Hilda scratched the Minccino's head.

"Might as well head on out," Hilbert said, a little reluctant but figuring the other couples were going to stay a while longer. Better to free up some space then. "Where are you staying? I'll walk you over there."

Back out in the cold streets, it was still snowing. Ice was forming quicker, giving many surfaces a dangerous shine. The warmth of the coffee shop hung onto him, but doubts about why he wanted to be with her were trying to break into his heart. What did he really want out of this? He could read the desires of others so well, but trying to read his own was like grasping a cloud.

He was so involved with these thoughts that he nearly walked right into something that didn't seem quite real. Hilbert stopped in his tracks, causing Hilda to stop as well and wonder why. Right in the middle of the air, there was a ghost image. But it wasn't like any he'd seen before. For one thing, it had never been in this spot, or at least he'd never noticed it on this busy street. For another, it wasn't exactly a thing. If he had to describe it like anything, he'd say it was like two glowing threads that had gotten twisted together, sparking off each other.

"Do you see that?" he asked, pointing out the twisted threads. But when he got his hands too close, a spark leapt out at him and he saw...
ran back out of the Castelia inn after her. "Hey, what gives?

"I don't think you're as good of a Pokémon Trainer as you seem to be," she said. "Your lessons are either basic or worthless. I want to be really entertaining for everyone, but I don't think I'll get that from you."

Her words were like flickers of darkness, blocking out the light. It unnerved him terribly. "What are you talking about? I've never lost a match, so there's no one who can be greater than me. Look, uh..." who was she again? He'd seen her from time to time since returning to Unova, but there were always so many people to meet.

"Hilda," she said, annoyed. "I don't know how to explain that flawless record, but it makes me think that there's something off about you and your claims. Honestly, I hardly ever see you with Pokémon."

Sometimes disapproval angered him, or it was easily explained as jealousy. But there was something, well, honest about this disapproval. He needed to disprove it, and it had to be done fast! Hilbert smiled at her, subconsciously increasing the effect of his Attract state substantially. "I don't teach everything, of course," he said. "But if you're serious about advancing your career with the League, I might be able to help out. I'd have to know that you're serious, though."

Hilda's willpower may have been strong, but his power was able to undermine that readily. "How do I know you're being serious?" she asked, but without much resistance behind it.

Now that she was interested in him again, Hilbert knew he could handle this much easier. "Why don't we go out for some coffee and talk about it this evening?"

The vision broken when Hilda grabbed his shoulder and shook him gently. She looked concerned, but when he was able to look at her, she shook her head and waved her hand in the air. The threads evaporated as her fingers passed through it.

Hilbert put his hand on Hilda's, the one still holding on to him. "Sorry, I didn't mean to worry you. I should have known you wouldn't; it was a psychic memory or something. I don't get it though. It can't be true, but it seemed to be true."

After a moment, she shrugged. There really wasn't much she could say if she hadn't seen it.

"I guess it's not too important." He dropped his hand, still holding on to hers. "I had fun tonight. But, I don't know if I want to make anything of it. I like you, but I'm not too sure about all this." Her feelings on this were hard to read. Almost as bad as his own, as he wanted to keep away until he could figure things out and keep her close by at the same time. "Look, could you just call me when you can talk again? Not like last time, hopefully."

Hilda smiled and nodded.

Hilbert laughed nervously. "I mean, that was incredible timing, catching me right as I was coming out of that shower. But I'd better be clothed next time or, " some thoughts came to mind that made him blush, "Oh drat, that doesn't sound right does it? I, um..."

And while he tried to figure out what to say without getting muddled up again, he got an impulse to kiss her and did just that before he could catch himself. It wasn't even a big one, just a short kiss on her lips. But the way it made him feel made it far more significant than any other kiss he'd had. It made it clear that he didn't want to hurt her by just using her. He wanted to know that he was being honest.
He stepped away from her, letting go of her hand. "I'll talk to you some time later, then."

Hilda nodded and for a moment she did seem sad to see him go. Through his power, he felt that she was worried about him and wanted to know how she could help. He needed to figure this out on his own, though.

Then his power picked up two strong feelings of murderous intent.

Although he didn't even see who it was at first, Hilbert knew he had to get on the other side of Hilda. He grabbed her hand again and jerked her away to swap places with her. Then something hit his head and he blacked out.

Hilda felt herself in a happy glow when Hilbert kissed her. Maybe he was trying to say that he wasn't sure about dating at that time, but he certainly did like her. She might not even tease him when she called later, although that would take a lot of willpower to resist. He was still a little too self-centered, but even that might be worn away by this trial of his.

In the next moment, things happened with confusing speed. Hilbert had gone from reluctantly saying goodbye to turning pale and yanking her away from someone who was shouting. There was a sickening thump before she managed to turn around. When she did, Hilbert was already falling onto the slushy sidewalk and some pink haired girl was standing there with a baseball bat in both hands.

The girl looked shocked for a second, then raised the bat again. "Oh, look what you made me do- aaahhh!"

And she screamed because right then, Kyurem descended in dragon form and bit one of her arms clean off at the elbow. Eating the bat as well, he landed and glowered at her with strong hatred. Although the girl had nearly tried to attack her (maybe even kill her), Hilda felt concerned and came up between her and Kyurem. Up and down the street, people were looking in their direction to see a screaming girl minus half her arm, a boy unconscious on the sidewalk, and her staring down a legendary dragon.

This was not going to look good.
Princess of Snow, part 1

morning, 1/16

The movement of the elevator made N's stomach twitch. He closed his eyes, fighting off the disoriented feeling. Why was he back here in Castelia? He hated cities and this was a city bigger than any other around. Three of his Pokémon were with him (as he was trying to keep the Sandile from going off into hibernation), but so was a stranger that none of them were sure about. N opened his eyes when the elevator stopped, but it wasn't the floor he wanted. The other man got off, though.

Just before the doors closed, he saw the hospital directory. Right, that was why he was here. Hilbert had been hurt.

N got off at the next stop, followed by his Pokémon. "This place smells funny," Kimi the Scraggy said, clutching onto her loose skin.

"It smells like bleach and chemical cleaners," N said. "They have to keep really clean here."

"I don't think this level of clean is healthy."

"I don't think your level of dirtiness is healthy," Daisy said. The Darumaka had kept clear of Kimi the whole time they had been on the same team.

"It builds strong immunity."

"I don't know if they'd appreciate that, Kimi," N said. "Sorry, but there's scientific evidence to back up their cleaning habits. You'd better return to your ball while we're here."

"That's a bore," she said, but returned after that.

After checking in at a nurse station, N went to the room Hilbert was staying in. It was mostly white, with cabinets in a pale blue and a repeated motif of dark blue diamonds. Heavy curtains covered the windows and hung from a track to give more privacy if needed. In front of the hospital bed, Hilbert was sitting in a chair, bandages wrapped around his head. A Litwick sat on the bed, observing the newcomers with a nervous poise.

Hilbert himself smiled. "Well this is unexpected. Good to see you."

"I wanted to come check on you myself," N said, taking a second chair when offered. He picked up Daisy to put her in his lap. "Hilda told me, and I passed the message on to Giallo. He had no idea that you were in trouble and said he'll come later."

"That's good, thank you." He leaned back in his chair, closing his eyes. "I was getting bored anyhow. I'm not supposed to be doing much right now; they don't want me over-stimulated."

"Are you okay with my Pokémon being here?" N asked.

"I can stay out of his sight," Rune said. The Sigilyph then flew to the window, investigating some objects on that side of the room.

"I think I'm okay with them if they're quiet," Hilbert said, looking at him again.

"I'll be quiet," Daisy said.
N patted the Darumaka in thanks. "Then what happened to you? Hilda didn't have time to explain fully."

"They got attacked by the scariest person ever," the Litwick said in a shy tone.

He touched his forehead. "She'd know the full story better than me. We were hanging out one night and we got approached by this one girl. She's been stalking me for the past few months and must have gotten jealous that Hilda was with me. She went to attack her with a bat, but I sensed her intentions and got Hilda out of the way, only to get hit in the head myself. I blacked out after that, but it seems like Kyurem then bit half of the other girl's arm off. And Hilda had lost her voice that evening, so she apparently had a tough time trying to explain what happened to the paramedics and the police."

"Is she okay?" N asked. "She seemed to be speaking well, but she didn't mention being in trouble herself."

Hilbert shrugged. "I think she won't get into serious trouble. Kyurem's attack was clearly provoked as his Trainer's life was in danger. I'm more worried if they can keep Banshee away from Hilda. She's clearly too crazy."

"Sounds like it. How are you doing?"

He smiled. "Better than they expected. I mean, I got hit in the head with a bat by an angry girl. When the paramedics brought me in, they thought she might have cracked my skull in two. But no… I've got a nasty bump, some small cracks, and at least a moderate concussion. Still nowhere near as bad as they thought. They're making sure that it's not more serious, but I could be out of here tomorrow."

"That's good." This really wasn't quite that hard, N thought. He'd been making too much of a distinction between speaking with Pokémon and speaking with humans, but in the end, it wasn't all that different. As long as you showed interest in the other person and tried for a fair exchange, conversations didn't have to be something to be nervous about.

"How've you been doing? Sorry I didn't stick around with you, but it seemed like I might distract you from your training."

N had wondered when Hilbert had left Desert Resort. "I suppose I was at fault too, since I was ignoring you for a while. I'm sorry. But it's been the usual routine. We were getting ready to challenge Nimbasa Gym, actually, but then Hilda called and I felt like I had to come check on you."

He seemed to appreciate that, from how he smiled. "Thanks. It's nice to have someone else concerned for me after all that's happened. Have you really been challenging the Gyms in order from Striaton? You're making extraordinary progress if that's true. I can't remember anyone else who went through a League that fast unless they had a lot of experience behind them."

"It's not been that fast," N said, feeling embarrassed. He didn't like battling, so it didn't make sense for him to be good at it. "I've gotten several setbacks," and if he hadn't, he might have reached Driftveil or even Mistralton by now.

"Doesn't seem to be that bad," Hilbert said in admiration. "I mean, Hilda and her friend Cheren are still here in Castelia and you guys all started at the same time. And you switch teams all the time, so that's a really good pace."
"Maybe."

There was a knock on the door frame to the room; Hilda was leaning into the room. "Hey, hi you two. Mind if me and Rei come in?"

"I think it'll be okay, for a little bit," Hilbert said. "And if you don't get too loud."

"Gotcha." Then she and Kyurem came in.

"Rei?" N asked. He wasn't sure how he felt about nicknaming a legendary Pokémon, but she seemed to have done just that.

Sort of. "Only she may call me that," Kyurem stated.

"Is Banshee going to sue you?" Hilbert asked.

Hilda shook her head. "I'm sure she'd like to, but both the defense laws and the fact that she's a real loony keep her from doing so. The police are going to take her into custody, though, so we shouldn't have problems from her."

"I can still taste her perfume," Kyurem said, making a sickened face.

"We didn't need to know that," Hilda said, lightly hitting his arm.

"Really," N agreed, trying to calm down a now frightened Daisy.

But then from the state of her body, there was no denying it: Hilda was dead. There was a crushed flower near her hand, spattered with blood. N and Hilbert were there, the former getting up shakily, the latter kneeling by her and a scattering of stones.

"You killed her."

Murder? Why did he keep seeing death with this ability? Especially that of his friends?

She spoke up, the conversation having carried on while his mind was distracted. "That stinks, that you can't do much. Well you'll have to get a recording of the live League show this Friday and watch it later."

"What for?" Hilbert asked.

Rune seemed to notice N's change in mood, as he made a coo of concern and started to fly back over. But he still didn't want to disrupt Hilbert. N closed his eyes for a second, trying to think. He had to save both of them now, had to find some way to convince them to let him protect him. Because if he gave the word to Plasma, then no harm would come to either of them.

"I'm going to challenge Burgh then," Hilda said. "I had to convince them that I'd be worth including in the show; it worked, and now this is going to be awesome."

Strange, she was even moderating her voice for Hilbert. N looked at them again and figured that was what friends did around each other. They might believe him, but what about when he told them who he really was? Would they distrust him then? That didn't seem appealing. "I don't get why they would make a show glorifying violence against Pokémon," N said.

"It's not that bad," Hilda said. "It's not like anybody's standing behind the Pokémon with a whip and forcing them to do it. Pokémon fight because they like it. I mean, haven't your Pokémon play fought? Mine do that quite a bit. Well, all but Kyurem."
"I still don't like it." It was bothering him some: his Scraggy and Sandile sparred quite frequently and they seemed to have a lot of fun with it. But the damage that could be done when it turned to abuse was too much to stay quiet about.

"Then why are you participating in the League?" Hilbert asked.

Hilda seemed interested in the answer too, which made N feel uncomfortable. He needed some more time to figure out how to break it to them. "I have my reasons," he said instead.

Thankfully, a nurse interrupted them. "Excuse me, but you shouldn't keep your visitors much longer."

"All right," Hilbert said. He smiled sheepishly. "Sorry guys, but thanks for coming."

"No problem," Hilda said, smiling. "Must be pretty annoying to be treated like you're fragile goods, though."

He grimaced. "Exactly. But I suppose I am. Sometimes my head goes weird and I'm glad they block out as many distractions as possible to help me through it."

She got up. "Well I owe you a call, but you're gonna have to call me first. Don't let anybody else hit your head, all right?"

"Of course," Hilbert said, nodding.

N said goodbye to him too, then left to follow Hilda out of the building. "Well not the Leader," she was telling Kyurem. "I mean the Gym Trainers."

"Hilda," N said, as Daisy settled herself in a secure position with an arm on his shoulder (so she could watch Kyurem). Rune flew behind him. "Could I ask you something?"

"Other than that?" she asked teasingly, slowing her pace so he could catch up. "Sure, what's on your mind?"

"What do you think of death," he asked, in a quiet voice above whispering. There were other people around and he wasn't sure how'd they take this conversation here.

"Well that's an odd question," Hilda said, raising an eyebrow. But she was keeping low tones too. "In our case, it'll happen whether we want it to or not. The important thing is to leave behind a positive impact on the people around you. It's a pity when not many people notice when someone good dies." She shook her head, bothered by that.

"Why would you want to know that?" Kyurem asked.

"You might die sometime soon," N told her, feeling nervous.

"Oh, that," she said, sounding unsurprised. She even laughed. "I knew about that. That's why Rei's here with me."

"But how did you know that?" the dragon boy asked.

They came to the elevators, one of which was there. "I have visions of the possible future," N told them, going in and pressing the ground floor button. "If I knew any more, I'd tell you. There was some kind of flower."

"What kind of flower?" Kyurem asked.
N shrugged. "I don't know."

"Then don't concern yourself with it," he said, in a way that suggested that he wasn't going to hear any arguments to the contrary. "I'm protecting her; I could do a lot worse to a person than taking a limb from them."

Hilda smiled and the doors opened again. "That means I'm in good hands, right? Well it's only a possible future, so I might still live. Don't be a stranger now, N!" She waved as she got off the elevator and headed for the exit.

_The ice was so heavy that even the strongest of trees were wilting under its weight. The dragon Kyurem watched over this bleak landscape, with snow that buried the entire town. And she was there, as pale and cold as the snow that was slowly burying her as well._

Maybe it would be worth it to be a stranger so that it didn't affect him… no, that wasn't right. It was only a possible future; she might still live. N just had to figure out how to make certain that she lived. But first, he had to tell her the truth.

evening, 1/16

It was a chilly icy evening, but there were people on this rooftop, talking and admiring the view of the city from up high. Kyurem rather liked it, so he didn't mind when Hilda wanted to come up here to look around. For the best view, he got up on top of one of the pillars that was on the safety railing. A few people looked at him in concern, but didn't say anything right off.

Kyurem did mind the two older women who had come over to talk with Hilda. "We just don't think it's safe, young lady," one of them said. "Kyurem's presence leads to terrible times where many people die. It's already a bad winter, so you should release him and try to get him back into hibernation."

"He says he's here to protect me and he won't do something big unless I let him," Hilda replied. "I might do some crazy things, but I'm not about to destroy the whole world, you know."

"You don't even have to go a fraction of that far to cause trouble," the other woman said. "He's already hurt somebody, and he would do so again."

She frowned at that, apparently annoyed at their complaints but not willing to be rude just yet. "That girl could've killed me, and as it is, a friend of mine is in the hospital now because of it. He did what most any other Pokemon would've done for their Trainer. Well maybe not as far as amputation, but it happens."

At that point, Kyurem got distracted from listening in because Mimi had clambered up on the fence to perch near him. "You might not want to do that," he told her.

"But I want to be up here with you," the Minccino said. She got up on top and peered over the edge, sliding. "Wow, we're so high up!"

Kyurem put his hand on her chest and pulled her into a more secure position. "And that's why I'd rather you not be here. I can fly if I slip."

Pricking her ears up, she looked to him. "Really, even though you're a human?"

He nodded. "Really. Although I'd rather not since they'd freak out about it."
"Wow, you can do anything...whaa!" She had slipped on the icy railing, losing her grip.

But Kyurem had a secure grip on her in seconds. He picked her up and brought her to his chest. "That's what I was worried about," he said quietly to her.

"But I knew you'd catch me, I knew you would," Mimi said, clasping his shoulder. She was completely confident in him.

Sighing, he closed his eyes and put his head on hers. "Don't scare me like that."

"Hmm?" She patted his face with her other paw. "Why would that be scary? I wasn't scared, not a lot, and I thought you weren't scared of nothing."

He scratched her head, looking back over the city skyline. "I'm scared to lose you." Again.

Having gotten away from the older women for the moment, Hilda came over to where they were perched. "Hey, you sound like some overprotective father there," she said as a joke.

"Because I am her overprotective father," Kyurem replied in all seriousness. Mimi giggled, then reached over to Hilda. He passed her over.

"You are?" Hilda asked, taking the Minccino and holding her to one side. "How'd that happen?"

"I found her egg one day and brought it back to my den. Her parents were dead." Because he'd eaten them and decided to save the egg for later. He just never mentioned that in front of Mimi. "And she latched on to me when she hatched, so I tolerated her, grew to love her as my daughter."

"And you couldn't resist cause I'm cute," Mimi added teasingly. He had to smile at that, but he didn't translate it.

"Huh, I thought your place would've been too cold for an egg to hatch," Hilda said. "At least for something that wasn't an Ice type."

He turned serious again. "It baffled me too, but I didn't care to look into that too much. Did those women bother you?"

She shrugged. "Well yeah, but I'm not too worried about it. I know you're trying to do the right thing. Although, why did you decide to be the hero this time around?"

For a moment, he considered giving her a vague answer. Not everything on his mind concerned mortals, and some things weren't meant to be known by them. But in traveling with her for this amount of time, he felt that he could trust her with some answers. He gestured out to the city below. "Because it's Unova, and my siblings. When I go out to destroy civilizations, I don't mean to kill this place. I do so in order to let them rebuild things for the better. The destruction I saw wasn't the kind that can be recovered from, at least not in the next century."

"So you're like those people who set controlled fires instead of letting wildfires clear out overgrown areas?" Hilda asked.

He nodded. "Quite. And my siblings, I know it sounds like we're fighting all the time when we're awake. But that's not entirely the case. We are..." he crossed his arms over on his knees, still crouched on the pillar, "we're bound by ancient rules that I can't tell you about, but they're in place so that the world does not become dominated by us immortal souls. The debates and struggles are a part of that, allowing people and Pokemon to decide the shape of the future. The three of us are actually quite close and there have been times when even they have gone out of their usual bounds
to support me." He looked over at them, Hilda and Mimi. "Like the time she… when she left this world. They were there for me even though they were supposed to be fighting against me at the time."

Puzzled, Mimi twitched her ears. "Huh, is that when I moved to the dream world?"

"Yes," he said, except that she'd died instead. He looked down, feeling uneasy about revealing this much. "So this once, when they're both in danger, I want to be there for them."

"That's good," Hilda said, smiling. "And you didn't even argue being a hero."

Kyurem shrugged. "If that's who I have to be, that's what I'll do. But it's like playing an entirely new game and I'm still learning all the rules. Just don't speak of this with others; I don't want people to go thinking I'm soft-hearted or anything."

"Gotcha," she said, running a finger across her lips to show her silence on the matter.

While they were talking freely, he decided he should probably bring something else up. He looked back at her. "And another thing. I know you fear being an unknown more than death. But please, don't get reckless about your life. I don't take the deaths of my friends well."

She raised an eyebrow. "Oh, so you're even admitting I'm a friend now?"

"We're all friends!" Mimi said in a squeal, and hugged Hilda at her neck.

"One of the rare few," he admitted. "But don't let it get to your head."

evening, 1/18

The day had finally arrived: Hilda and her Pokémon team were going to challenge Burgh. She couldn't stop smiling and had an inclination to go running there despite the slush and ice all over Castelia. However, Kyurem put a stop to that, pointing out that she didn't want to wreck her outfit before she even got there.

Which was a good reason, she figured. Under her coat, she was wearing a white and silver dress that went down to her knees and emphasized her chest some. It had fake fur in white around the collar too, all feathery and luxurious looking. She wore a silver necklace with a blue crystal heart on the pendant, with small matching earrings. And she'd even made sure to get her hair nicely styled this morning. It was all about making a good impression on the audience.

There would be a good audience too. When she entered, she was allowed to go into the back area to wait. Other people were coming in and going through the doorways to get to the seating which had been pulled out of hiding; those stretchy honey curtains were even gone. Not that they were really sticky, but casual visitors might not realize that.

As she was switching from her snow boots to sparkly white shoes with short heels, the door to the meeting room she was in was knocked on. "Excuse me, but may I come in for a moment Hilda?" It was Burgh.

"Sure, no problem," she said.

He came in, today dressed in green vertical-striped pants, a solid green shirt, and a pink scarf. On his belt, there was a colorful butterfly-shaped buckle. "I don't mean to bug you, but there is something I wanted to do before the match," he said. "I was thinking over your plan about being
mythic in response to Plasma and there just seemed to be something missing. I had to work late a couple of nights to get the design and crafting right, but here Kyurem, I would like you to have this, if you want it." He handed him a black jewelry box, a flat one that was as big as his hand.

Not revealing his thoughts on this just yet, Kyurem opened the box up and pulled a necklace out of it. It had just a simple leather cord on it, with an equally simple pendant. But still, it was intriguing: a large stone circle that was just the outline. Half of it was white and half of it was black. That was all there was to it.

"This would be the proper form," Kyurem said. "A circle encompassing nothing, all possibility."

Burgh put a hand to his chest, looking relieved that it was being taken well so far. "I had to double check with Drayden, as he knows more about dragons and legends," he said. "There didn't seem to be a counterpart for you."

Kyurem shrugged. "There wasn't one made. The people were afraid of me." Then he went over to Hilda and put the necklace over her head. "It is not quite right, only a symbol now. But wear it for today, for the appearance of it. I'll handle the rest later. Thank you, Burgh."

"You're welcome," he said, smiling. "I'll be leaving you to your last minute preparations then. I've got mine to attend to as well. Let's put on a good show, right?"

"Ain't no other way I'd do it," Hilda agreed. Once he was gone and the door shut again, she touched the pendant. It was only a symbol now, yet it still felt special. "So does this mean I'm your chosen villain or whatever?"

Kyurem smirked at that. "If you mean to disrupt the progress of the heroes of the twins, that is a strong possibility."

evening, 1/18

Few people came down this narrow street, so Giallo leaned against the brick wall and felt secure in talking on the phone. "Well he is young and Ghetsis knows better about managing a large group. It's only natural that he leads when N is elsewhere."

"Yes, but I'm afraid that he's overstepping his boundaries," Rood said, from where he was back in the castle. "How much is N aware of what the rest of the group is doing? Have you spoken to him ever since he left to join the League? I have and he's clearly not happy about the enforced release program."

"On the phone, but not for long. Are you sure Ghetsis is hiding things from him? We don't know entirely what goes on between them, but they are close."

"I didn't think to ask about what N knows while he was with me, but I'm almost certain that Ghetsis is hiding things from us at least. He never entirely answers if N is his son or not, for one thing, and he keeps on Dr. Umber when I at least don't have a clue what that scientist is up to. I believe in N's authority, but I can't say the same for Ghetsis."

"N trusts him."

"And that has me worried." He sighed.

"Is something the matter?"
There was a pause before Rood said, "Sorry, I just don't like how things are playing out recently. It reminds me of things... I don't want to get caught in the same mistakes I've made before."

"What's wrong with things? We have been encountering unexpected difficulties, but nothing serious as far as I know."

"Do you know everything?" he asked, a touch sarcastic. Then he caught that. "Sorry. Isn't there something, you know, suspicious about all this? I want to believe in it, but these things are fitting in almost too neatly. Like how it turns out that N does have a twin and that he is after the other dragon, and then my daughter turns out to have the third."

He glanced over at some pedestrians, but they were involved in their own conversation. "We suspected that he would have a twin, given how well he fit the mythical archetype."

"And Hilbert fits the archetype well too, almost perfect as the case is with N. I know we use the imagery purposely, and you can't control a child's development exactly but... it's just too perfect and I've been in a situation where things seemed perfect only to be rotted at the core. How well does Hilda fit into this all?"

"I honestly don't know," Giallo admitted. "Kyurem's acting against his established role, at least it looks that way. I know what to look for in Reshiram and Zekrom's partners but I don't know about a partner for Kyurem. But that is partly why I'm here, to see her in action myself. And fate does have a funny way of working just right when people don't expect it."

"Maybe fate does, but I don't think fate is entirely at fault here. Are you going to try to convince Hilbert to work with us or what?"

"That could be hard, but I'll see what I can do. Why're you so worried about Ghetsis? He works harder than any of the rest of us at times."

"He and N argued a while ago. I didn't see the entirety of it, but ever since then, I've noticed that Ghetsis is taking quite a lot of control in things. About the only thing that's really come from N lately was that stance that young children are not ready to be Pokemon Trainers, and he didn't make any statements on what to do about it. It was Ghetsis who suggested slanting the enforced release and further statements towards child Trainers."

Arguing? That was worrisome. N was their leader, but Ghetsis handled many of the day to day matters. Plasma couldn't afford a split at that high of a level. "They trust each other, but friction between them will cause issues."

"If it came down to it, whose side would you be on?"

"N's, of course," Giallo said, with hardly a thought. "That shouldn't happen..."

"But it could. Watch how things go in the next few weeks and you might see what I'm talking about. I'm going to be talking with the others and looking into things, but please don't mention this to Ghetsis."

"We're a group; we shouldn't be keeping secrets from each other and doing this."

"It may already be happening," Rood said, concerned. "I feel that I can trust you, so I'll keep you informed." The conversation ended not long after that. Now there was that match at the Gym to watch.
Princess of Snow, part 2

evening, 1/18

After checking the time, Giallo headed out to walk through the streets of Castelia, a stony look on his face. No one paid him any heed. As he had opted to take a heavy black plaid overcoat instead of his sage robes, he looked more like anyone else on the street then someone important. Not that he was that important, really. As a sage, it was his duty to instruct and guide the King on his path to glory. He was proud to do so.

But he was in a sour mood today, not just about the phone call from Rood. Maybe it was just personal matters, but there had been too much unnecessary conflict and hassle. While he would like to go over and take Hilbert home now, Ghetsis had asked him to go to the Gym first and watch this girl challenge Burgh. It didn't make much sense, as this was to be recorded and broadcast live; surely they could watch it in the castle if it was that important. But Ghetsis insisted and with what Giallo got in exchange, it was a worthy trade-off. Now he just had to shake this mood by the time he picked up Hilbert from the hospital, as he didn't want to worry the young man.

Thankfully, he was able to step away from his Plasma duties for a while and take care of Hilbert. Although Giallo called him his nephew, there were times when he felt like he was more of a son instead. He might have spoiled Hilbert some just to see him smile. Whenever he was away, Giallo always wondered what kind of power the boy had to make him sparkle like he did; it was too much to think about when in his presence. He just hoped that he had managed to teach him to be a good person as well.

Maybe he had been getting too wrapped up in his work with Plasma. It had been N who told him that Hilbert was in the hospital, and thankfully N who had given him immediate permission to take as much time off as needed to see to Hilbert's well being (Ghetsis had been against that, but N's word carried more weight). From that conversation, it seemed the two of them had become friends. It was something Giallo had always wondered about. N had a kind of sparkle too, but his wasn't as obvious and ensnaring as Hilbert's could be. At first, he had seemed to only be a socially awkward child. But once N started talking with Giallo, he had realized that his student was mysteriously wise beyond his years and highly intelligent. It quickly became difficult to treat him as a child. Rather, he inspired the awe and respect of a sage himself.

When they had been about nine, Giallo had considered introducing the two boys to each other. They were different in some ways, but they were both big dreamers who wanted to put things right. Then again, at the time Hilbert had been excited for his chance to become a Pokémon Trainer and explore the world, and N had nearly come to tears when he was told about Pokeballs and the League. That kept him from following that idea through, or even bringing it up with the others.

In thinking on today, he wondered if Rood was on to something. In his phone call, N had mentioned Hilda, so obviously he knew her. Why did Ghetsis want him to investigate her? N would tell him anything. Maybe she had a presence like the two boys did and it wouldn't be as obvious to their leader. There was something odd about the three young people appearing, and them being drawn to the dragons. It could be their fate. In that case, the only thing to do was wait and see what would happen.

He entered the Gym and one of the Trainers working there offered to take his coat and hat to the coatroom. After leaving his gear with the clown, he headed in to the main arena. It didn't seem like a full audience yet, but many of the seats were taken. He took a place on the left side, not obvious but near the aisle where he could leave quickly and quietly once the match he came to see was
He hadn't been there long when someone took the seat beside him. There were plenty of other open seats, so he was annoyed until he saw the familiar face beside him. "N?" Giallo asked. "Good evening."

He nodded. "Good evening. What are you doing here?"

"I was asked to come check out a couple of these battles, for intelligence gathering," he said. "What about you?"

"I came to see a friend of mine compete," he said. He bit his lip, then sighed. "I didn't really want to come, but I got the Nimbasa badge this morning and she was all excited about this. I'm hoping to find something to help convince Hilda to join us instead."

Maybe he could find more from N here. "Oh, another friend of yours?"

"Yes. Actually, she confuses me. She should be someone that Pokémon don't like, as she's so loud and unpredictable, and really deep into the misconceptions of the public opinions. But her regular Pokémon seem to be happy around her. Even Kyurem seems to have gotten close to her, I think."

There was a cheer from the crowd as the host of the battle show came onto the arena floor. "Good evening, people of Unova!" he called into a microphone, getting a round of applause and cheers that blocked any more conversation. "And welcome to today's live action Unova Battle Spectacular! It is the eighteenth of January and we have one wild show lined up for you today here in Castelia City. But first, may I present the man of the hour, the irrepressible artist, the master of the Bug type, Leader Burgh!"

The battle show had gotten a lot flashier, Giallo thought as Burgh entered the arena lit up by spotlights. The colorful floor shone with a pattern like a butterfly wing, despite the bee motif that dominated much of the Gym. He could remember watching these shows with Hilbert years ago. Back then, the Gyms were simpler and the Leaders... well the men were men and the women were women. The flamboyant styling of Burgh here would have gotten him laughed at. Amazing how much could change in a little over ten years.

"How's things looking tonight?" the host asked as he shook Burgh's hand.

"Simply amazing," he replied, smiling brightly. "My Pokémon and I are all buzzing with excitement. We've finally got Nathaniel to show his face around here, so that will be a match to look forward to. But I think all three matches we have lined up will be thrilling for all."

"Wonderful, then let's get this show on the road. Your first challenger for tonight is Miles Riches from Undella Bay, taking his fifth badge challenge!"

There was a small section of loud cheers as a teenager in a fine white suit and a purple tie came into the arena. This wasn't who either of them were here to see, so Giallo spoke quietly to N. "So how are things going for you?"

"I'm behind where I want to be," N said. "But if I get lucky, the next Gym shouldn't take nearly as long to prepare for. I'm not looking forward to tomorrow, though."

"Why's that?"

"I have to let this team go." There was clapping building up in the crowd as Burgh and Miles prepared to battle their Pokémon. N's thoughts were obviously far from this arena. "Some of the
Pokémon didn't want to leave before, and I've worked with these four for longer than them. Especially the Darumaka; I've had her for nearly a month now. On one hand, I feel bad about keeping her that long. But then, I know she's attached to me. Most of them seem okay with the plan when I meet them, but then that changes."

"It must be hard on you to have Pokémon get sad like that," Giallo said. "But it is for the greater good."

"I know," he said, but he still sounded dispirited. "And I'm going to have to say goodbye to all of them sometime soon."

Through the first match, Giallo tried to reassure N with what was in Plasma's philosophy. But even though he'd agreed that those things were important before, it didn't have a noticeable effect on him now. He was too worried about his Pokémon and this guilt he was feeling. Was it possible that N was losing faith?

Giallo wanted to doubt that. Life in the past few years had been like witnessing a legend being reborn to fix modern day ills. There were many things wrong in the world today, many things that needed to be changed. And in those old legends, you didn't have the leader lose faith and turn from his mission as everything else was rushing towards a fulfillment of destiny. Clearly the world outside the castle and the forest was wearing N down. Giallo would have to talk with the others about this when he made his report later on.

The first match ended rather swiftly, as Burgh's team managed to prove stronger than Miles had expected. There was a short break for commercials, for Burgh to do some healing and team switching, and for a couple of the clown Trainers to come in and do a quick clean up of the arena. Giallo kept talking with N until the host had called out, "And the second challenger for tonight is something of an exception, but not to make it an easier battle. Please welcome Hilda Medley from Nuvema Town on her third badge challenge!"

Good, they weren't going to have to sit through all three matches tonight. Giallo watched as the girl walked in; she seemed about fifteen or sixteen. And while Miles had seemed overdressed in his white suit, he paled in comparison to how Hilda looked. She seemed more like she was going to a school prom rather than a Gym match, or trying to play a princess on Halloween. It was something of a surprise that she didn't have a tiara.

He glanced at N and noticed that he had a quite different reaction. N was watching her with great interest. "She said she was going to make this something special, but I didn't expect her to come out looking that amazing."

This could turn tricky to handle. "This is your friend?"

"Well I didn't want that at first," N said. "But she's been nice to me and, well, she always seems up to something interesting. She's helped me out a lot more than Val and Carol have. And... wait, that necklace she's wearing, I thought there were only the two King Stones."

Looking back at the girl, he briefly caught glimpse of a black and white circle pendant. The symbolism came to mind immediately. "The three are connected in being born from the original whole dragon; Kyurem was the shell left behind in the birth of Reshiram and Zekrom. That would be the sign used."

"Is it real?" N asked, confused.

It shouldn't be real. But then, "Maybe."
In the arena, Burgh clapped his hands. "Wonderful to see you here, Hilda," he said. "You've been a big help to me recently, standing up to any challenge with a smile. And now you've got to face me."

"Right on, bug man!" she said with enthusiasm, grinning and facing him with confidence. "I don't know how much of a challenge it'll be, though. I'm in my element with the season, and you're not. You're going to get froze out of a win."

"Big talk from a little princess, isn't it?" Burgh replied, playfully mocking her. "I know how to work disadvantages as well as advantages. Now how about you show these people why you're here. Declare your Pokemon; I have four."

"I have three," Hilda said, taking a Pokeball in hand.

"He only had three when I challenged him," N said, behind the crowd that was getting excited already. "Maybe it is like the King's Stones. He called her a princess."

"Is it words or is it something else?" Giallo wondered aloud.

The TV host raised his free hand. "All right, then competitor's ready? Let the battle begin!" He brought his hand down, signaling the two to call out their first Pokemon. Burgh released a small Dwebble, looking like a stray rock with a claw sticking out from this angle.

And Hilda released Kyurem, dwarfing the Dwebble greatly. The blue parts of his body shone under the bright lights. While he snorted at the small opponent he had, people in the audience were cheering that she had brought him out early or whispering in disbelief that she really had a legendary Dragon under her command. Some were intimidated, but others seemed to be in awe. That was the sort of awe they would have for the heroes for Zekrom and Reshiram, but neither N nor Hilbert would be ready for a couple more weeks.

This could not be good. Giallo felt a chill in his blood. "Does her team fight well?"

"Apparently," N answered, as the first exchange of the battle was Sand Attack against Dragon Rage. "You know, I can't figure out why these Pokemon don't seem to mind being in a Pokeball. There were many in the forest that dread being captive again, but even the ones that were okay with me releasing them seemed neutral about the issue at worst. I thought there might be some brainwashing element in place, but I can't figure out how that would be done. It's not the balls themselves, I'm sure, but the Pokecenters seem okay; it's not an issue with items. I just don't know."

"The Sarasota Pokemon may be different from most," he said, as the best explanation he could think of right off the top of his head. "We're outside at times, but aside from when we're with you, we don't see them often."

"I run into less Pokemon out here than back home." He closed his eyes, briefly annoyed. In the meantime, Kyurem had knocked out the Dwebble with a second attack. "I hope that won't be an issue any more. I'll have to speak to the Pokemon in more depth."

In the arena, Burgh released a violet centipede Pokemon that was nearly as big as Kyurem. The Scolipede raised itself up as high as it could and made a proud clattering sound with its mandibles. Kyurem snorted and stood a little higher, but not at his full height.

"I definitely didn't fight that Pokemon," N said on seeing it. He put his hand to his chin. "And the Gym Pokemon are proud about their role. The Scolipede was saying that he's here to test them to
their limits, for the honor of the Gym. And Kyurem said that it's not going to be much of a test because if he went to his limits, he would demolish much of the city."

"We must seem like insects to the immortals like that" Giallo said.

He frowned at that. "So then why do they take orders from us? Why do they follow our lead? I hadn't really thought about it, but you're right. The legendary Pokemon, they created the whole world and everything in it." N clasped the stone around his neck. "But if that's true, why would they chose to listen to us, short-lived beings who must keep learning what's out there?"

"We don't know, but they've been doing this for thousands of years. They must have their reasons." Giallo looked around to see the reactions of the crowd (and make sure no one was listening to them). At that moment, there were gasps and calls from the rest of the audience; the Scolipede had managed to poison Kyurem and was focusing on intensifying the poison's pain with Venoshock. The dragon growled as he flung a cluster of rocks at the 'pede, knocking it out. His wings and tail seemed to take on an extra shine.

"I don't have a clue what that could be. He is holding back."

Turning to N, Giallo said quietly, "My Lord, maybe you should come back to the castle for a few days and think through things. When you're exposed to the ignorance and the corruption of the greater world constantly, it can erode the greatest faith little by little."

He lowered his head. "That could be. As much as that would help, though, I'm still behind on where I want to be. I think I can manage Driftveil Gym in a shorter time if I can contact the right Pokemon. Then I might come back for a little while." He then looked at Giallo. "Would you bring Hilbert by the castle when I'm there? I want him to work with us; it'll be better in the end."

He nodded. "All right, just let me know when a good day would be."

There was a loud cheer from the crowd. It seemed that Burgh had called out a Leavanny, but Kyurem had knocked it out in one blow. As a result of that Ice Beam, the floor was glistening with ice. "And they've gone from possibly losing their first member to poison back to being in good condition, all while pushing Burgh back to his last Pokemon," the host said, stirring up the excitement.

On his end, Burgh brought up his last Pokeball and held it out in a manner like a dare. "At the end of the line? But I did pick out this one just for you. Go Escavalier!"

The Pokemon that appeared was naturally armored with steel, like a red-crested helmet and snail shell body. It jabbed its twin lances at Kyurem, possibly grinning. Like before, Kyurem didn't seem to care about their challenges.

"I'd like to get Hilda on our side, under our protection," N added.

"Her?" From where they were, they could see her standing to the side of and behind Kyurem some distance. Hilda seemed to be considering the situation, but had no nervousness to her stance. There was nothing about her that indicated a need to be protected.

"I keep seeing images of her death." He was obviously concerned. "She could be a good help if we could convince her. I just have to figure out how."

"Does she know the truth about you and us?"

He shook his head. "Not yet. But I think I'll meet her somewhere in Nimbasa tomorrow, if I can."
Do you know of some of our people that I could call on for help?"

Giallo considered it. "I'd ask Zigzolin; he's stationed in Driftveil."

"Really? What's he doing there?" And like Rood had suggested, N didn't know.

"He was working on convincing the people there and freeing Pokemon."

"I see. What's everyone else doing?" Then he got distracted for a moment by the battle. The Escavalier was withstanding a lot of Kyurem's attacks, but its attacks weren't too graceful. After a wild and barely hitting Fury Attack, Burgh had called it back to use Bug Buzz.

"Do Val or Carol fill you in on things?" Giallo asked.

"I don't trust them at this point. They're interfering with my mission and even when they contacted me, they didn't give me much news." N put his hand over the wrist-worn Xtransceiver. "And I haven't heard from Ghetsis much. Is he busy?"

"Really busy, but I'm not sure of everything he's doing," he admitted. He started to tell N some of what he knew was going on.

But then there was a huge cheer from the audience around them. People were getting out of their seats in enthusiasm. A girl's happy yelp was in the center of it. "And the winner of this match, without a single knockout on her side, is Hilda with Kyurem!"

"That was simply a-maz-ing!" Burgh said, his voice carrying over the crowd, primarily due to turning his microphone back on. He brought a hand up to calm the audience. "I don't always see someone stroll in here with a legendary at their side," this caused some laughs in the audience, "but I heard you started with him at the very base level, so it is still an accomplishment. And so I have no qualms in giving you this." He walked over while speaking and passed a badge and a TM case to Hilda.

"All right, thanks!" she said, taking them, then proudly showing off the badge to Kyurem and the audience, the latter of which started cheering again. The dragon lowered his head closer to hers and nudged her hand.

"Let's get out of here," N said, to which Giallo agreed to.

After speaking to him some more and promising to contact him more often, Giallo left N to his mission. The sage went a few streets over to the hospital, finally getting to what he wanted to be doing. There were some people in the hospital lobby, mostly what seemed to be one family, as well as a young man with a Litwick and an Alomomola. At the counter, he got the attention of the receptionist. "Excuse me, but I'm here to meet up with Hilbert Godfrey; he's my nephew."

She brightened at that. "Oh yes, I heard he was around here. But I haven't seen him, actually. It's weird; you used to always be able to read what he was doing online, but in the past month, it seems like he's dropped off the face of the Earth, or nobody's interested in him anymore."

"It has been odd," Giallo said. It was something he'd wondered about, as he liked reading some of those things (but generally not the stuff from the lovestruck girls). "Can you tell me what area he's in?"

"I'm right here."

When he turned to see the young man, Giallo felt a kind of dissonance. It was Hilbert; he knew that
face, the short rat-tail hairstyle he kept, and his usual attire. But there was something else to him that he didn't recognize, making him nearly a stranger. Lacking his usual air of confidence, his shoulders were sagging and he stood as if he were ready to get out of here. It might have just be the stay in this hospital, but there was something else off that Giallo couldn't put his finger on.

"Oh, sorry," he said. "Have you been released already?"

"Yeah, I was just waiting on you." The Alomomola, floating around in a water bubble, went closer to Hilbert and nudged his arm.

"You're Hilbert?" the receptionist asked, puzzled. "You don't seem like what I thought you'd be."

"Because I'm not," he said, sounding hurt to admit it. He tapped the pink Pokemon between its eyes to acknowledge it. "You don't have to worry about it. Uncle, everything's all settled with the hospital, so we can just go."

"All right." He nodded to the receptionist, then headed out with Hilbert. "I'm sorry about not recognizing you. It has been a while, but it was..." he brought his hand up, trying to word it.

"It's a test of Reshiram's that I have to pass," he said, not interested in why Giallo had been out of contact yet. "Look, I hope you don't hate me for this, but..."

"I don't see any reason to hate you."

On the way through Castelia, Hilbert told him about how he somehow had an ability like Attract, and that was the reason that everyone loved him so quickly. It sounded strange, and yet Giallo readily believed it. For one thing, Hilbert was a really bad liar and hadn't tried since he was a small child. For another, Giallo could look back on his memories and fit that kind of power in easily. But why would he have a power like that? He was special, but this went further than the old myths.

Then again, wasn't it the same way with N's new ability to get glimpses into the future?

At that point in the conversation, they were riding an elevator up one of the taller skyscrapers. "You know how I used to say that it was all bright all around me?" Hilbert asked. "It's a lot darker now, and I only pick up a few spots of light these days. Really, you've been great to me all my life; I hate the thought of having manipulated you and everyone else. Please forgive me."

Giallo put his hand on Hilbert's shoulder. "You didn't even know you could do that, so I don't think you're at fault. You're still my family, though. I'll try to be here for you more often."

Shifting his hat, Hilbert looked down. "Thanks. Why are we going this way anyhow?"

"It's a faster way home." The elevator doors opened and let them out onto the rooftop of the building.

There, a large black helicopter was waiting on the helipad. It was the one Team Plasma owned. Borrowing it for this trip was why Giallo had agreed to go to the Gym match. At the door, one of the pilots was out of uniform, playing a game on her cellphone. She saluted them as they came up. "There you are. Come on in; we can take off in a couple of minutes."

"Thank you," Giallo said.

"You got a helicopter?" Hilbert asked, looking at it but with only a little disbelief. In his arms, his Litwick shrank back, while the Alomomola looked up at the large blades. "Stay down here, Loch."
"I borrowed it, as it seemed like the best way to get us to Village Bridge from here."

The two of them climbed in, followed by the pilot and the Pokemon. As it was made to carry around a dozen passengers, it was a little large for this purpose. Hilbert sat down, put his Litwick on the bench, and then looked around at the interior, black and fairly simple in design. Then he turned to him. "Giallo, you're working in Team Plasma, aren't you?"

That startled him for a moment; he thought N hadn't mentioned that to either of his non-team friends. "Why would you say that?" he asked, having to raise his voice some as the helicopter's engines were starting up.

"You brought a helicopter to pick me up from the hospital," he said sarcastically. "That's just another sign, though. I was thinking about things today and I realized, N's the leader of Team Plasma, right? I don't know how I didn't pick that up right off when I met him in Desert Resort. Plasma addresses its leader as a King, and N had the Black King's Stone this whole time. And he has the same ideas that Ghetsis and the others have been preaching, he just doesn't communicate them as well. Then that got me to thinking that he was able to get a hold of you when I've failed to do the same in the past few weeks. I can't remember you saying what you've been doing the past few years but it did keep you busy a lot. And Plasma has only really emerged publicly just before I got back. This has been what you've been doing."

"That's true," Giallo said. "I'm one of the seven Sages."

For a moment, he looked angry. But he got control over that quickly. "How long have you been with them?"

"Well I met N and Ghetsis about twelve years ago; I didn't fully join until nine years ago, as that's when things got formalized. Almost ten, now that I think of it."

Hilbert almost said one thing, but stopped and gave him an incredulous look. "N's been leading Plasma since he was ten?"

Giallo nodded. "Well you've met him. He was just as extraordinary back then. We've been helping a lot, but he gives us our guiding principles and goals."

"Why would you do a thing like that?" Hilbert asked, wary but not hostile of the idea.

While Ghetsis didn't seem to think this would help, N wanted to convince Hilbert. "The world is changing. We've noticed the signs and we're going to make things right."

evening, 1/18

The seven of them gathered around a table in the castle, to discuss all of the discoveries that had occurred in the past two weeks. Although, N wasn't there. It might have been better to wait on him, but their King had to focus and they could fill him in later. The room was clean and sparkling, from the white stone tiles on the floor to the brass chandeliers overhead. On the table, there were some pitchers of ice water.

Ryuko sat at one of the corners farthest from Ghetsis, who was at the head of the table. Giallo was at the end nearest the door; he had come in late with his uniform not as neat as usual. Then again, he was concerned about his nephew and would be first to leave to get back to him. Gorm was on Ryuko's other side while across the table, Rood was fiddling with a pen nervously and sometimes exchanging a quiet word with Bronius.
Then again, there were things to be worried about. Ryuko had his computer tablet in hand, making notes with his stylus. In one window, there was a list of signs and characteristics common in legends of Reshiram, Zekrom, and Kyurem. In another window, he was noting current relationships, signs, and characteristics. The similarities were astounding: the original twins that had called on the original dragon, they had been discovered together as young children in the wilderness being raised by Pokemon much like Ghetsis had found N. But then there was another story where the heroes were twins separated at birth to live lives that were different in surrounding, yet they had many parallels when they were reunited.

Both N and Hilbert had unusual unexplainable powers. On one hand, understanding Pokemon, wisdom beyond his years, and now seeing potential futures. On the other, knowing the desires of people, an amazing way of attracting people, and potential visions into alternate realities. "He says that it was true, but not for here and now," Giallo had said. "It would give him ways to consider what's going on now and what could have been." The boys were different on the surface, but some things were the same, like a desire to know what really was and why things were the way they were, as well as the will to pursue that questioning.

While he looked over it, Ryuko had a strong feeling that he had picked the right side for these events. The gods had clearly blessed these two boys and were drawing them to change the world. And they were all going to be involved in that change; it was empowering, and pushed him to help the group work together as well as possible.

But then there was the piece of the puzzle that none of them had expected to appear, the one that hinted at an entirely different picture. And that was Rood's daughter. "I didn't say anything about them because I didn't think it would affect anything," Rood said, putting his pen down for a moment. "It had been six or seven years since I'd seen them at that point and I thought Leslie would have moved out of the region."

"It seems to have come up anyhow," Ghetsis said. "So what's the girl like?" He looked across the table.

Giallo hesitated a moment, then said, "You could ask N. He knows Hilda and seems to be friends with her. Hilbert too, they all managed to meet each other on the road."

Hearing that, Ryuko made notes on his tablet. The two boys were related and they both knew the girl. And they were all in their teenaged years, so that could be a concern if the relationships were unbalanced. Or maybe they were just friends. The fact that they found each other wasn't surprising; destiny had a way of bringing the right people together at the right times.

"But on talking to them, she seems to adapt how she acts to what people are around her," Giallo went on. "She is generally very enthusiastic, likes to make a scene, and tends to be impulsive. I saw that in watching her match against Burgh as well. She grandstanded the whole time and showed no signs of losing her nerve even when Kyurem nearly got knocked unconscious by poison. Not only that, but she dressed to impress the audience, as seen in the video."

"And that necklace she wore is close to the King Stones, only with Kyurem's symbol," Ryuko noted while adding onto his lists. "We don't have any precedence for a chosen hero with Kyurem, but just looking at that picture, she's aiming for an icy or snowy royalty."

"That is no mistake," Giallo said. "The way both she and Burgh spoke during that exchange, it was all but saying that she was also a chosen hero, but that she'd been chosen by Kyurem instead. And the audience caught on quick and loved it."

"She could be working with the Gym Leader on this," Ghetsis said. "It was the two of them who
got into the building in Castelia."

Giallo nodded. "Possibly, but when I reviewed the tape, I'm certain that the fight was not staged. Burgh didn't fight any differently... well, not quite. He had a team that he would normally use against a four badge team, not a two badge team. And even then, he doesn't usually put Scolipede and Escavalier on the same team. So he made things harder and she still won."

"This is trouble," Bronius said. "People are talking about the myths being a reality, but not in terms of N. It's Hilda that's the focus, even though no one seems to know what to expect out of her. Some people are saying she's dangerous and terrible for having Kyurem at her side, but others admire the fact that she commands him and he listens. If she keeps going with the League, she could be more popular than N."

"She is more popular than N," Zinzolin said. "He should be heading for Driftveil Gym next, but no one in Driftveil is talking about him. They are talking about Hilda, though. Mostly about that video where she was mocking you."

"Right, that," Ghetsis said, more annoyed than angry. "I've had to spend more time recovering from that attack than progressing with the teachings. She seems to be quite the planner."

Giallo cleared his throat. "Um, about that, no. Hilbert was there and spoke to her before and after that video took place. She didn't plan it; she had been given that cloak and made up that speech right on the spot."

Ryuko noted 'quick thinker' on his list on Hilda. That and the impulsiveness gave him an idea. "She isn't going through the League as fast as N, but if we want to insure that she won't interfere, maybe we could get her distracted with something else. Most young people don't stay dedicated enough to go through all eight Gyms and if she is that impulsive, pushing back her progress in the League can't be that hard."

"That's a good thing to consider," Ghetsis said.

"N wants to try convincing Hilbert and Hilda over to our side," Giallo said. "He feels that something bad could happen to either of them and wants to see to it that they're safe. Since he cares about them like that, we shouldn't do anything too extreme against them."

"She's already fighting against us," Gorm said. "And Hilbert's probably leaning that way too. There usually is a conflict between the heroes of Reshiram and Zekrom; it's happened many times."

"I would think that none of us, especially N, would want the kind of violence that accompanies those times," Ryuko said.

"He already doesn't want us to continue on with the enforced release program at this point," Giallo said. "I asked him about it and he said it makes us look bad in the eyes of most of the people he meets. I plan on contacting him more often about such issues, since he seemed behind on issues."

He was? Ryuko glanced at Giallo, but he seemed to be telling the truth. Across the table, Rood inexplicably seemed glad to hear of it. Bronius said, "He was?"

"He doesn't like the two girls that were sent with him," Giallo said, nodding. "He's flat out ignoring them now and says they interfere with his work. So he hasn't gotten news from the contacts we intended to have with him."

"I thought that the three of them should have been introduced months ago," Rood said. "It takes him longer to trust people than to trust Pokemon."
"Why wasn't he brought into this meeting anyhow?" Ryuko asked. "It shouldn't last that long."

"He was busy with something, but we could have scheduled it later," Giallo said. "I'll get in contact with him later."

"I should speak with him too," Ghetsis said. "Any more ideas on what to do with Kyurem and his apparent 'hero' now?"
early morning, 1/19

It was early morning, misty and slushy, but there were still plenty of people on the streets of Castelia. The two girls were laughing and talking, not minding the people who gave them curious or wary looks as they passed by. Although many of the pedestrians now recognized that the masked boy following them was Kyurem, some attention was given to Victini, who hanging out by hanging onto Bianca's shoulders in a piggyback manner. Mimi had decided to do the same thing with Hilda, but the Minccino didn't cause as many stares as Victini did.

"You sure about moving on to the next town with me?" Hilda asked.

Bianca nodded. "Yeah, it's fine. I mean, I still just have this one badge, but it's a lot of pressure that doesn't make it fun anymore." She nudged Hilda. "Plus it's crazy thinking that I could match how you and Cheren do in battles. Oh, and that N guy too! I saw that he was already halfway done."

"Wild isn't it?" Hilda asked. "I was joking that he'd be done before spring, but yeah, he might actually do that. And Cheren beat Burgh a week and a half ago." She crossed her arms over her chest. "Man, am I falling behind."

"But your battles are so much more fun to watch!" Bianca said. "You ought to go to another region sometime and become a Coordinator. You and your team would be total show stealers, I know."

"Only if I can find a way to get Kyurem to sing and dance," Hilda said mischievously, glancing at him.

"No," he replied firmly.

Bianca, Hilda, Mimi, and Victini broke into giggles at that. "Aw, that's such a pity," Bianca said, giving an overdramatic sigh.

"Yeah." She looked up at the gate as they approached it. "And here we go on another stage of the journey," she said. Then Hilda spun around and cupped her hands around her mouth. "Goodbye Castelia!"

There were some chuckles, and somebody was nice enough to yell back, "Goodbye!"

Grinning, Hilda added, "I LOVE YOU, MAN!" Then she turned back and headed through the gate. "Aren't they so sweet?"

Through the gate, they came onto Route 4. There had already been sand inside the gatehouse, and out there the sandy winds were blowing steadily. From the winter moisture, most of the sand here was crusty and packed down, leaving clear tracks behind them. Hilda and Bianca took a moment to put scarves around their faces, although Kyurem and the other two Pokemon didn't seem to mind. Hilda decided to bring Olette the Drilbur out as well, since it seemed like the kind of environment she would like. With that, they set out down the paved road.

There was a sturdy chainlink fence on one side of the route, blocking off what appeared to be a construction site. There was even a partially buried bulldozer on the other side. "I hear they were planning on linking Castelia and Nimbasa into one enormous city a few years back," Bianca said, looking over it.
"Yeah, I remember it being on the news," Hilda said.

Her friend nodded. "But then they couldn't do anything about this sandstorm which was messing up all of their machinery. The systems they thought would work failed to do anything. It would be crazy if they could manage fusing the two places, wouldn't it? Castelia's huge as it is. I don't know how big Nimbasa is, but that might make it one of the largest cities in the world."

"How long as this sandstorm been going anyhow?" Hilda asked.

"At least since Reshiram was last awake," Kyurem said.

After some distance, the pavement ended, leaving a large stretch of sand along the route. At that point, they found Cheren over on the left side of the route, healing up his Pignite. Hilda nudged Bianca, then called over, "Hey Cheren! Fancy meeting you out here!"

He looked over to see who it was, then got up. "Oh, it's you two. Hi."

"Is something wrong?" Bianca asked, picking up on a lack on enthusiasm in his voice. The two girls decided to go over where he was.

Cheren frowned. "What are you two doing out here anyhow? I thought you were going to go back for Lenora's badge, Bianca."

"Um, no, I decided to drop out of the League totally," she said, getting a hold of Victini's paw and having him drop to the ground. "I'm still doing some battles, but I'm finding other ways to get money and other things to do. So I'm traveling with Hilda."

"And I just beat Burgh yesterday, so I'm heading up to check out Nimbasa," Hilda said.

"Yeah, I saw that," he said, now annoyed. "Weren't you supposed to not be relying on one strong Pokemon? You were just showing off."

"There were reasons behind it," she said. "No seriously, what's bugging you?"

He looked to Hilda. "I heard some people talking about you. I know most League challengers don't get attention until they have four or five badges, but here I've been working hard with my team every day, training them to be stronger, and you've been goofing off probably more than you've been training and everybody's talking about you. We have the same number of badges now, but hardly anyone notices me."

"Well she does have Kyurem," Bianca said, shifting her scarf in the blowing sand.

"And we did a lot of training, maybe not every day," Hilda said. "But yeah, it's kind of hard for me not to attract attention. You should know that."

"Have you even decided if you're going to stick with the League?" Cheren asked.

Hilda shrugged, wondering why he seemed hostile about it. "No. It's been fun so far, but there's lots of things to be doing."

"And you can't even take that seriously," he said, disappointed. "Why should I have to compete with you? With all the trouble you could be in with Plasma and Kyurem, I'd think it'd be better if you stop acting like a kid and really worked at something."

Stop acting like a kid? He should know that she was always like that and it wasn't entirely childish.
"It's not like that," she argued. "There isn't anything that says I have to get something done at some specific time. It's not like my life has a deadline."

Except that it did, Hilda thought but kept to herself. And she didn't know when it was except that it was some time before next winter. She still didn't see it as a reason to hurry to get anything done and there was no way she'd worry her friends about it. At her side, Kyurem shifted uneasily, then looked up at something.

"We don't have to fight about this," Bianca said, looking between them and clasping her hands together. "It's just how we always are."

"One would hope that certain people change for the better," Cheren said, crossing his arms over his chest. "Anyhow, I don't think you could keep up winning without using Kyurem."

"You want to see how my other Pokemon are?" Hilda asked. "Sure, we can battle. I was curious on how you were progressing."

Bianca tried to talk them out of it, but wasn't successful; she went off to the side to stay out of the way. Thinking he might start off with Smoky as the Pignite was out already, Hilda called her Drilbur forward. Only, he brought out his Liepard instead. Hilda decided to have her use Hone Claws to boost her attack, then Slash to knock out the Liepard. Cheren tried to counter Olette with his Simipour, only she managed to slash it out in one hit too. With a Rock Slide for the Tranquil and Dig for the Pignite, the battle was over faster than either side expected.

"I trained Olette and Mimi up for the Gym too, just in case," Hilda said.

"How do you manage to do that with her?" Cheren asked, tensing in frustration. "How come we work everyday and you don't, and you still beat us? We've been out here on this sand saturated route for over a week, and what have you been doing?"

"I've mostly been fighting against other Trainers in the past month."

"Would you want a legendary Pokemon to work with you?" Kyurem asked out of the blue. Although Hilda suspected he had some purpose behind the offer. "I could arrange things if you're willing to work to prove your worth."

"I," he started to say. But then a yellow and orange Pokemon dropped out of the sky and crash landed into the sand. At that, the conversation completely halted as humans and Pokemon stared at the interruption.

The Pokemon pushed itself off the ground and shook his head vigorously, sending sand flying. Then it did the same with a rather long length of extra skin. At that point, it noticed them. "Neff ka grag," it stated, then pulled its skin up and strutted off across the route.

"What was that about?" Hilda asked, interested.

"Oh, him," Cheren said, adjusting his glasses. "The workers around here call him Tarzan. He's a wild Scraggy that climbs around the unfinished structures and causes problems. He was probably swinging off the crane again."

"That is awesome," Hilda said, watching as the Scraggy started climbing the fence on the other side. She suspected that he was a Fight type, and since she'd given her Sawk to her mother, it'd be nice to have one of them around again.

"Anyhow, I might need to switch my team up," Cheren told Kyurem. "But I want to be recognized
on my own merit, with Pokemon that I've trained up to be powerful. I don't want to be known just because I happen to have a legendary Pokemon."

Quietly, Hilda stepped out of the conversation. When they didn't seem to be paying attention to her, she went across the route and over to the fence. She gripped the chain link fence and tested it; she might be able to do this. Above her, the Scraggy had noticed and stayed to watch.

"You do have to merit the attention from a Pokemon such as myself," Kyurem said to Cheren. "We wouldn't listen to just anyone."

"Maybe, but most people wouldn't see it that way."

Hilda reached up to get a secure grip, then started climbing the fence as well. Tarzan stayed where he was on top of it, watching her. Once she had pulled herself onto the bar on the top, she spent a second steadying herself. "Hey, did you really swing yourself off a crane through the air?"

"Gru kuh rah naja?" He noticed she didn't seem to understand, so he nodded.

"That sounds like a lot of fun," she said, pushing herself up into a sitting position. "I always wanted to try something like that, only my bodyguard over there would throw a fit." When the Scraggy smirked, she added, "And did you meet a guy called N? He has green hair."

He made some comment, then hopped backwards on the bar. Then he waved his hand in a way that seemed to be daring her to do something. Fight up there?

"Dunno if my other Pokemon can manage up here," Hilda said, getting her feet on the bar. Then she carefully stood up. "Maybe Mimi."

"What are you doing up there?" Kyurem demanded, finally noticing that Hilda had left the conversation.

The sandy wind kicked up, causing her scarf and coat to flare out. There wasn't a lot of space to balance up here, but she still held her hands out and took a couple of steps towards the Scraggy. "Making a new friend, maybe. I've walked on fences a lot."

"Not that high," Bianca said, coming over with Kyurem.

"I'll be okay," Hilda said, trying to reassure them. She was within a few steps of Tarzan, who had decided to stay where he was and watch. "Where'd Cheren go off to?"

"He said there was a rest house for the construction workers around here where he could heal his Pokemon. Although he did complain that you definitely weren't listening to him."

"I didn't mean to make him or anyone jealous, but he is being uptight about this." She stopped in front of the Scraggy and touched his head. "Tag!"

At that point, the fence trembled. Tarzan dropped down quickly and clasped the bar with his hands. Hilda felt her balance waver, but then an arm wrapped around her chest. "We could do without you getting injured again," Kyurem said from behind her. Then he jumped back off the fence with her, somehow slowing their descent so that they landed gently.

"I could've gotten down on my own," she said. When he glared at her, she smiled. "Okay, thanks for that."

There was a thump as Tarzan jumped off the fence too, but without the benefit of a slow fall.
Grabbing up his loose skin, he ran over. "Ha chu ka tri," he said, letting go to point at Hilda and wave a challenge at her. Although he seemed to be going for tough, it was weakened when his skin comically slipped down to his legs.

While Bianca chuckled, Kyurem shrugged. "He wishes to challenge you and see if you really are someone he'd want to go with," the dragon boy said.

"Oh, the workers might appreciate you taking him, if he's troubling them," Bianca said.

Hilda grinned under her scarf. "And I'm all for being around another troublemaker. All right, Tarzan my boy, let's see how you fight. Olette, you're up."

late morning, 1/19

Nimbasa was a bright and garish city. Lights and colors were everywhere, with flags blowing in the breeze, neon signs flickering and flashing, gates lighting up with racing bulbs, and color-exploded buses driving the streets. When one walked down the streets, there would be loud music from the stores and homes, endless talk about all the events going on, and laughter. It wasn't as dense as Castelia, but it was still overwhelmingly concrete and artificial.

Away from the main streets, N met with three of his followers. There was a fountain nearby that was running on heated water, giving a mist effect over its surface. A chilled breeze blew in from the nearby river and bay. "No, don't take her Pokemon from her," he said. "Find out if she's here, then get her to meet with me over in the amusement park. But don't let in that I've asked you do to this."

"Why do you not call her with that device you own?" Rune asked. The Sigilyph was out observing the meeting, along with two other of N's current team. It was too cool here for the Sandile's liking.

"It's not that simple," N quickly said to him. Hilda had a way of taking over conversations, plus she might decide to train along Route 4 instead of coming straight to Nimbasa.

"We'll do as you wish, my lord," one of the men said to him. "We would try to free her Pokemon, but if you don't want it..."

"Her team is too strong for you to handle," N said. The teams these three had currently would not measure up to those Pokemon, he was certain of that. "And I'll handle convincing her of the right way of things."

"Of course."

"Someone's coming in range," Rune warned.

Moments later, a woman in a long yellow and black coat approached them. A Blitzle walked alongside her. "Excuse me, but I believe that I've told you people to stop harassing people in this city," Elesa said. "Go on and leave this young man alone."

There was a strange moment where N wasn't sure why she was telling his followers to leave. But it must have meant that his cover was secure and they didn't expect him to be a part of Plasma. Thankfully, the three obliged and left the small plaza. "We weren't doing anything wrong, just talking," one of them called, but then they ran for it.

She sighed. "Nothing that we've caught you doing," she said. Then she came a couple steps closer to him. "It's not that I doubt your abilities, N, it's just that they're suspected of using dirty tactics to
"I thought they were just talking to me, but maybe not," he said. Wondering, he added, "What kinds of things are they doing?"

She shifted posture, causing the decorative wires on her headband to move and snap against each other. "Mostly, they've been challenging little kids who don't entirely know how to battle and then stealing their Pokemon when they lose, telling them that's how things are done. It's horrible, making the kids upset as their Pokemon friends are taken away. But they've also been known to take advantage of other Trainers who aren't able to think clearly or fight back decently, like those who've been drinking or shy folks who rarely battle their Pokemon. Their speeches might be convincing, but it's their actions that mark them as hypocrites."

"I see." Hopefully that would lessen in the future, as he had made it quite clear to Giallo that he didn't like how they were handling the current freeing of Pokemon. It was impressions like this that he wanted to avoid.

"Hmm, I'm sorry for ranting a bit there," she said. "It's an issue that's been on my mind a lot lately. I hope you have a good day." She then headed back onto the streets, apparently on a jog with the Blitzle.

"You too," N said, if only to appear polite. And now he had to wait on Hilda.

noon, 1/19

Hilda and Bianca entered the gatehouse to Nimbasa. Sitting on one of the benches, Professor Juniper was working at a laptop. "Hey Professor!" Hilda called, going over there. "You called us right at the perfect time; we were coming here anyhow."

"Great!" she said, temporarily closing her laptop. "I had some work to do here and I thought you might be. I wanted to thank you all for your hard work on the Pokedex. You've managed to fill out a lot of entries, Bianca."

"I usually just catch and release them," she said, shifting nervously. "I like the core members of my team."

"It's still a help to get a large sampling," Juniper said. "And the ones you keep are good for extended study. I've been getting interesting data from you, Hilda, especially about that Minccino you got from the dream world. She has an ability that hasn't been recorded for her kind so far."

"She's been a real big help," Hilda said. Maybe it was that ability; she'd have to look that up.

"I imagine. So, I have a reward for you." She reached into her bag and pulled out a pair of the plastic containers that Pokeball sets came in. "Here you are. These are Ultra Balls. They're a lot more powerful than the regular ball and have less of a chance of accidental breaks when capturing. Of course, if the Pokemon really doesn't want to come along, they can still break out, but it should help if you run into an unusual or tough specimen."

"Thanks!" Bianca said as the girls took them. "These are supposed to be expensive."

Juniper shrugged. "It certainly costs more, but some would say it's worth the price. I'm going to wait here a little longer for Cheren. Go enjoy yourselves in Nimbasa, or if you want, you can head out west of Route 4 over to Desert Resort. There's some interesting sights and Pokemon out there, if you can tolerate the sand."
"That would be neat," Hilda said. "But I think we'll be exploring the city today. Don't work too hard!"

"It's not work if it's fun," the professor said, grinning, then opening her laptop up again. The two girls then headed through the gatehouse and into Nimbasa.

"Oh, what should we do first?" Bianca said, looking excited. "I've heard of so much about this place."

"We can go take a peek at everything!" Hilda said, grinning. They had walked much of the morning towards this place (and checking out the half-finished construction, and battling wild Pokemon and trained Pokemon), but she was far from tired. It was only noon. "But maybe lunch first. Oh here, you want these?" She offered her set of Ultra balls.

"But the professor gave them to you," Bianca said.

"Yeah, but if you're catching and releasing, that'll go through a lot more Pokeballs that I ever will. Even when I go to catch for another, they usually provide the Pokeballs. It's fine."

"Well I'll take three, if that's all right. You should keep two in case you run into a Pokemon you really want." Hilda agreed to that and gave her three of the Ultra balls.

"We might have trouble," Kyurem pointed out, indicating what was ahead of them. At the first crossroad on the path, there were two Plasma members lecturing with an elderly man. "You're still confining a lot of Pokemon outside of their natural habitat," one of the grunts said. "And you do have a lot of them, don't you? You ought to release them back to the wild."

"They're not my Pokemon and I can't do something like that," the old man said.

"Well then shut down your business," the other said. "It's a bad thing to be doing."

"Hey, quit hassling him!" Hilda called, moving a little quicker towards them.

"What do you mean by butting...?" the grunt turned, recognized her, and changed his mind. "Wait, it's you, the one who's been messing with us."

"Yeah, cause you're messing with other people. I suppose it's okay for you guys to be talking about it, but you sound pushy and unreasonable there."

One of them came up to her, picking out a Pokeball. "You're the unreasonable one. I'll show you who's got the right ideas around here."

"Okay then," Hilda said sarcastically, and called out Tarzan to help her. Although he was currently the weak one on the team, he still took out the grunt's two Pokemon with little trouble. "You might want to put together a decent team if you want to try that tactic again," she said.

The old man then added, "And by your own logic, shouldn't you release your Pokemon now?"

"Ah, you see..." he took a step back and glanced back at his partner. "Let's get out of here!"

There was a blue flash on the ground as Kyurem brought his hand up and made a curling motion with it. Ice spontaneously formed under the grunts feet, causing them to slip. To make sure that they were stopped, he also clamped some ice over their feet. "Not this time," he said. "I wouldn't even bother eating you."
"I've got the police on the phone," Bianca said to them, then turned back to her Xtranciever and talked to the operator.

"Phew, thanks girls," the old man said. "I run the Pokemon Daycare on Route 3 with my wife. I did have some Pokemon with me, but they're ones we're taking care of for other Trainers. Those two have some funny ideas of what's good and bad."

"You have mistaken ideas of good and bad," one of the grunts said, trying unsuccessfully the break out of the ice clamp.

"I'd like to do something to reward your kindness," the old man said.

Hilda shook her head. "Nah, it's fine. We'll keep an eye on these two jokers until the police come to pick them up. You go on with your day."

Smiling, he shook her head. "Still, I'm grateful to you. Have a good day."

After the police arrived to take the two Plasma grunts into custody (they were suspected of taking other Pokemon from Trainers too), Hilda and Bianca headed off to find somewhere to eat lunch. Then they went exploring town. There were interesting shops, a large subway station, a Pokemon battle institute, and not to mention the amusement park where the Gym was located. Some of the more interesting things were to be found in the northernmost part of Nimbasa. There were two sports stadiums. At the large one, there was a football game in progress which didn't interest either of them. But at the small one, there were several groups of tennis players who were practicing with their Pokemon partners. And they had no problem with people coming into the lot and challenging them to Pokemon battles. It was all a part of their practice too.

"I think I know where I'll do a lot of my training in this town," Hilda said, grinning.

Bianca nodded. "Oh yes, they were really good at battling. Oh, and did you see that Simipour that was practicing serves? He seemed to be having so much fun at it! I wonder if I could get any of my Pokemon to do that."

"You do love playing tennis," she said, seeing a chance to encourage her friend in something.

"Maybe they'll show you some tips."

"Maybe." She glanced over at Timmy; the Munna was keeping close to her, but observing the sights around him with wide eyes. "Victini and Suzy are the only ones with hands, though. But then another one of the Pokemon there didn't. Hmm, I'll have to think of that." Then she pointed over the rooftops. "Look, you can see the Ferris Wheel from here!"

"It's a really tall one too," Hilda said. "I wonder if you could see clear to Nuvema from up there."

"Maybe if it was a really nice day. It's getting late now." She giggled. "I always thought that kind of thing was romantic, you know. Just a nice calm ride with a beautiful view and nobody to overhear you. Maybe if I found some nice boy, I'd ask him to take me on a date here."

"That would be sweet."

Bianca touched Hilda's shoulder. "Oh, but you know... I'm kind of glad that the Plasma people we saw earlier didn't seem to notice me. Maybe it's selfish of me, but I think they're after Victini. I had some of them come up to me before, but either you were with me, or I have gotten a little better because of what Iris told me when we hung out."

"It's okay," she said reassuringly. "That's not too selfish. It does stink that they're trying to steal
him. Hey, is this another stadium or something else?” She looked over at the building to their left. While it certainly looked the same size as the Small Stadium, it had a lot more lights and crazy decorations.

“I dunno. What's it say... Pokemon Musical Theater.” Her eyes brightened. “Oh yeah, we have to go check this out!”

“Right! Come on, Rei!” The two girls hurried over to the theater, while Kyurem tried to look unconcerned while he kept up with them.

Inside, they were met with a grand lobby with lavish furnishings and a large sweeping staircase. There weren't many people there as a show was going on, but the receptionist didn't seem to mind if they peeked into the darkened theater. It was a packed house, so there weren't even any seats in the back to sneak into. On stage, there was bright scenery depicting a field; a small orchestra was playing as six costumed Pokemon on stage attempted to play along with some human actors. It seemed unrehearsed, but still amusing.

The girls came back out into the lobby so they didn't get caught in the way when the show ended. "Oh gosh that looks like so much fun!” Bianca said, jumping a little in excitement. "We should see if we can have our Pokemon participate too."

"Yeah," Hilda said, getting one of her mischievous grins.

Kyurem looked at her sternly. "No. I refuse to be a part of that spectacle."

"Aw come on, have some fun with us."

"No."

"Please?"

"No."

"Mimi would be just adorable in a musical," Bianca said.

"She would," Kyurem said, relaxing some.

Hilda clutched Kyurem's sleeve. "And she'd want you to play along too."

"No."

"Oh fine, spoilsport," Hilda teased. Then she went over by the stairs and released Mimi. "Hey, this place is a theater, where you could dress up and go on stage to dance and sing for an audience. Would you like that? You've even got an accessory already."

"Chi?” she asked, eyes wide. The Minccino pawed at her yellow flower, then twirled around on the spot and started chattering.

"Squeee!” Timmy squealed and whirled around Mimi, making her giggle.

"Oh, you girls have such lively Pokemon," a man said, coming over to them. "Are you participating in the evening musical?"

"We don't know yet," Hilda said. "We just arrived in town."

"It wouldn't cost you anything," he said. "Pardon me for not introducing myself so far, but I am the
owner of this theater. We give out free prop cases to anyone who's interested, with some decorative accessories to start with. Would you both like one?"

Bianca smiled. "Yes, that'd be wonderful. Thank you."

He smiled back. "All right, and I should have some on me. The accessories are cunningly made with various attachments to secure to your Pokemon safely." He pulled a storage device from his pocked and scrolled through the list until he came up with two pink and purple cases. "There you are."

"Thanks!" Hilda said, taking one along with Bianca.

"You can try it out here in this mini staging area," the theater owner said, indicating the decorated space under the stairs. "The current show should be ending in a few minutes, so keep your Pokemon close."

For the next few minutes, Bianca and Hilda checked out what items were in the prop cases, then tried them out on Mimi and Timmy. The Minccino already had her flower hairpin, but Hilda found a yellow scarf to go around her neck and a ribbon to tie onto her tail. She was excited about that and kept whirling around trying to see the tail ribbon (causing Kyurem to chuckle and place her in front of a mirror). For her Munna, Bianca spent some time getting a small black top hat and a matching bowtie on him. Then she gave him a cane so that he looked classy. However, Timmy kept shaking himself, making the top hat slide off to the side.

Once the show let out, the lobby became crowded, so they left. The sky was taking on a brighter hue as the sun was starting to set. "You know, I thought I could figure out what I wanted to do by traveling around," Bianca said. "But now that I am, I see so many more things that I could do and I want to do, and I just don't know what to do."

"It's not like you have to decide right away," Hilda said. "I try a little bit of whatever looks interesting."

"I guess I do too," she said, putting her hand to her cheek.

But then they got interrupted by the sound of Hilda's Xtransceiver ringing. She glanced at it and grinned. "Hey, it's N!" She accepted the call. From the picture on the screen, it seemed that he was also in Nimbasa. "Good evening! What's up."

"Good evening," he said. "You're in Nimbasa, right? Would you mind meeting me at the amusement park? I need to talk to you."

"Sure, I can get over there in a few minutes. See you then."

"Right, see you then." Then the call ended.

Bianca laughed. "Did he just ask you out? That's so sweet."

"I wouldn't say that," Hilda said, although she was smiling. "He probably actually has something to talk about. But hey, nothing says I can't nudge it in another direction."

"I don't think that would be wise," Kyurem said. "Hilbert's already interested in you."

"It's not like we're going steady or anything," she said, slightly annoyed. "Sure, it was one date, but he said he wasn't sure. We'll be okay."
"I'd better go find something else to do in the meantime," Bianca said. "I hope it goes well."

"Me too." They waved each other goodbye, then split ways.
Good Intentions

evening, 1/19

There weren't many people in the Nimbasa amusement park. It was mid-January, after all, and the whole afternoon had been chilly. But the sky was clear and it wouldn't start snowing again until tomorrow. N had stayed around the entrance for most of the day, figuring it wouldn't be hard to spot Hilda or his followers from here.

But things hadn't worked out well. Two of the three Plasma followers had been arrested by the police around noon and the third hadn't had much luck in encountering Hilda and her friend. For the past few hours, Rune had kept suggesting that N call her instead. As the sun started to set, he figured he'd better take the Sigilyph's advice.

"It would've worked faster if those two hadn't gotten arrested," N said to Rune. "Now I've gone and wasted another day."

"Is it really necessary to hurry?" the Pokemon asked.

He crossed his arms over his chest. "The sooner I can get done, the sooner things will be better on everyone. And Ghetsis is already upset with me being behind. I don't want to disappoint him further."

Clucking, the Sigilyph drifted closer. "You're the leader of your group. He should be worried about disappointing you, not the other way around."

"I don't want to be selfish," he said, shaking his head. "He's put a lot of work into this too. I have respect for all of them."

At this point, a Minccino wearing a flower hairclip ran out in front of him. "Hiiii!" she squealed happily. "I'm a distraction.

"You're what?" N asked before he fully caught the meaning.

"NNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNN" came a shout right behind him. He froze at that, wondering what in the world was going on. That only made it easier for Hilda to tackle him in a hug from behind.

Briefly panicked, N threw her off and stumbled around. His heart was racing, more so when he saw she had that crazy grin on her face. Concerned, Rune flew closer, but bumped into N and made him jump. This was definitely not how he wanted to start this.

After sputtering a bit more, N managed to say, "What was that for?"

"I just wanted to say hi," she said, still grinning. Kyurem stood a little behind her, smirking. But he got distracted a moment later when the Minccino ran up to him and started talking.

N looked at Hilda for a moment (also trying to calm himself down). "Is that normal?"

"No," she admitted.

"Then could you not do that again?" Okay, need to get back on subject... no, not back, but on subject.

"All right." She looked more serious, thankfully. "Sorry, didn't think you'd freak out like that."
Was he strange in that? Or was she the strange one here? N rubbed his forehead. "I don't like people touching me, that's all."

She looked puzzled at that. "Really? You don't seem to have an issue with Pokemon doing so."

"Because they're Pokemon. I don't mind them, but humans touching me is different."

After considering that, she shrugged. "Okay, if you say so. What'd you want to talk about?"

"Actually, it's a private matter." There weren't many people around them, but there was Kyurem, and a few others were near the Gym. "Would you like to come on the Ferris Wheel with me? No one should bother us there."

She smiled again, pleased to hear that. "Sure, sounds fun! Oh, but I don't know if three people can go on." She looked at Kyurem.

The dragon boy considered both of them. "Fine." Then he glared at N. "But heed my words: don't hurt her. I won't tolerate that."

"I won't," N said, feeling a chill at the look. But would this hurt her? He didn't know how she would react, but he knew he had to do this.

Kyurem nodded, then waved to the Minccino and walked off with her. N then went with Hilda over to the Ferris Wheel. "Sorry if he comes off as harsh," she said. "But he's dedicated to his duty. And that ride looks so cool, right? I've never been on one."

"Me either," N said. "It is a remarkable thing. It's a mathematical perfection, being strong and balanced, yet beautiful and airy. Every piece has a purpose and they all work in perfect harmony." That's what he would like the world to work like.

At the ride's entrance, there was no line. All of the cars looked empty, so they might get extra time if this took long. N paid fares for both of them, then led her to the platform. As the Wheel was in constant motion, they had to catch a car as it moved across the lowest level. But it had been designed to give them plenty of time. An attendant even pulled open the door for them and shut it securely when they were in.

There wasn't much space in here, just enough for two people (maybe a small Pokemon too, but not more than that). At either side, there were benches to sit at. And the walls were fully transparent, with only the door handles in the way. Yet the structure was secure, built to last.

"Engineering like this has always fascinated me," N said, looking at the internal structure of the Wheel. "It's amazing what people can do."

"Yeah but I wouldn't know much about that," Hilda said. "Looks like we hit the perfect time too! Right at sunset." And she was right in a way. The sky overhead was almost entirely orange, with a bright red-gold disk of the sun on the horizon, and the blackness of night creeping up on the eastern horizon. Over that way, a pair of planets shone as the first 'stars' of the night. And they were slowly coming up over the city skyline and the trees, to see the land out below them.

"It seems so." N took a deep breath, reviewing his thoughts one more time. "I know you have Kyurem with you, but I'm still worried about you. I haven't figured out how to see things on command, but when I see the future, I see some amazing things. Like a world in a peaceful balance where things are as they should be. I want to make that kind of vision real."

She smiled at him. "That'd be great. Now you just have to figure out how to get there. Zekrom
should be able to help you."

N nodded. "I hope so. But I also see many bad things that could happen. Like I've seen things where you've died, four different scenes now."

Strangely, that seemed to amuse her. "Really? I didn't think anybody hated me that much."

"Could you take this seriously?" he asked. "I'm concerned about you. Even if you confuse me a lot, I don't want that to happen to you."

"Because I'm confusing?" she asked, although it wasn't apparent if this was serious or teasing. "And you want to figure me out."

"Maybe." Mentally, he braced himself, then said, "I could help protect you, if you would accept my help. I'm the leader of Team Plasma."

"What?" Hilda asked, a bit of sharpness behind her voice.

The fading sunlight made the landscape around them glow, but neither of them were paying attention to that now. N went through the words he had chosen for this moment. "I'm working to end the injustice and corruption of the world. I've known many Pokemon who have suffered immensely under the system the world lives in. You know that Tymppole I had? He had been injured badly, so was released by his Trainer and left to die because that person didn't want to take responsibility for him. There have been others who were used as mere decoration and cared for badly, or just outright neglected because their Trainer didn't respect them as living creatures. I didn't want that to happen anymore, so I told many people about what Pokemon felt about all that. They listened and have come to me under the name of Plasma, in order to create a better world."

"That sounds well and good, but that's not what I've seen in Plasma so far," she said. "What I've seen so far are a number of obnoxious jerks who don't seem to care if they hurt people or Pokemon."

"That is not what I mean to happen." he said, feeling angered at the accusation but trying to fight against it. She was still in the dark.

She crossed her arms over her chest and looked critically at him. "But that is what's happening. I've seen a couple of those guys throwing rocks at a wild Munna to capture it, and there's been a bunch of little kids that get really upset when their Pokemon are taken from them by Plasma, cause the kids can only tell that someone's taking away their friends. Then there was the daycare man just this morning who was being told that he was a bad person because he spends a lot of time and money taking care of the Pokemon of others, and keeping them happy while their Trainers are away. And they've been harassing my friend Bianca because she has Victini with her, even stole one of her other Pokemon trying to get him."

Those were probably lies, N wanted to tell himself. There was nothing constraining her to be honest. But she did seem to be serious, and that was worrying. "There might have been some personnel issues, but I'm sure we'll get that problem weeded out. I don't know what the deal with Victini is, though. He told me that he wanted to spend some more time with humans, which I don't agree with but if that's what he wants..."

"What about the other Pokemon who want to stay with their Trainers?" Hilda asked him. "Or is Victini special because you know him?"

"That's not the point here. Our goal is to bring peace and freedom from harm to the world."
"Well then you should make that clearer to your followers and be a better leader."

He wasn't doing well? He face felt warm, at the same time his nerves seemed to rage. "I'm doing the best I can, but people like you are so blinded by popular belief that you don't realize that your Pokemon are better off without you. You're not even trying to make things better."

She didn't even look guilty at that. "Maybe because there isn't a problem. Are you actually listening to the Pokemon? Maybe there are some bad cases out there, but most of them seem happy enough."

"Do you know that for certain or are you just assuming that? I've seen a lot of people who aren't aware that they're being hypocrites in limiting their Pokemon while claiming to love them."

"I would think the same about you guys because you speak of the freedom of Pokemon and use them in battles, just like everyone else."

"That's because it's the only way most people will listen. You even sell Pokemon when you don't have any right to own them. Isn't that slavery?"

Without them realizing it, the Ferris Wheel car had dropped down to the loading platform again; the door unlocked with a loud click. Hilda glowered at him a second, then brushed past him and headed out the booth. She couldn't just walk away from this. Clenching his fist, N went after her.

"I know it's hard to accept such a large change in belief," he started to say. Kyurem had been there waiting, but N barely noticed.

"There's something not quite right with it," Hilda said, turning back to him. "It sounds good but the evidence you say is everywhere isn't. Are you sure it isn't your idea that's the wrong one?"

"I know right from wrong," N snapped, taking hold of one of his team's Pokeballs. "And I've been pursuing right from the very beginning. Why don't you prove your side to me?"

"Even if the battle is against your beliefs?" she said, mockingly. But she did take a Pokeball and glance at it.

Moments later, it was N's Sandile against her Scraggy. After giving his orders, N said, "I haven't seen you before."

The Scraggy was distracted a moment, then bounded over and knocked out the Sandile in one blow with a Brick Break. The Sandile had been too caught in the sudden cold to react in time. Biting his lip, N knew that had been a mistake (and at such an important time too). And then the Scraggy grinned at him. "Nah, we met. You weren't that interesting for me to follow. But she was."

Taking a bit more time to be careful, N called out his own Scraggy. "What do you think of her?"

"Dunno yet."

"What's going on?" Kimi asked, looking over at her peer. "Why're we fighting that idiot?"

N told her to go ahead and attack; she was able to move quicker than the male, knocking him out. Due to their type arrangement, they were weak to each other's strongest attacks at the moment. Hilda next called out her Minccino, which N thought was a mistake. That is, until she had her use Retaliate, which was enough to overcome the odds and let her win that match-up. "Wooo, nobody had better be mean to my teammates," Mimi cheered, skipping as she went back to Hilda's side.

"Why are you with Hilda?" N asked her, calling out his Darumaka.
"Because daddy's with her, and I love him," she replied without hesitation. "And I love Hilda too! She's so much fun and let's me play and be pretty."

She seemed to be a simple creature, which could account for why she loved both of them. But then, was her devotion because she wasn't intelligent enough to consider the rights or wrongs of a situation? Possibly, that made her no different than a child. Daisy was the same way. And unfortunately, Daisy lost that match-up too.

N considered that he might be getting distracted in thought, so he focused on the battle as he was forced to call out the last member of his team, Rune. The Sigilyph was much tougher than the rest of his Pokemon, able to survive the Minccino's first hit and shift the winds to his favor, so that he was faster. Possibly worried, Hilda ordered Mimi to use Sing. N had to resist smiling, as he knew status effects weren't as potent against Rune.

However, the notes came to his ears and brushed away any thoughts of battle. It was that beautiful lullaby. And it didn't even give him a second to resist before he fell asleep.

When he said that he wanted to protect her from death, Hilda was pretty happy to hear that. She tried not to think about that possibility too much and get all mopey or fearful about it. And surely having more people look out for her would help. But then N had told her that he led Team Plasma. It had taken quite some effort to resist slapping his face.

Sure, they gave her an easy target for mocking, but they were bullying her friend because she had Victini, as well as pushing around that old guy, the little kids, and even innocent Pokemon, all in the name of ideals that went against those actions. All in the name of their King, who turned out to be someone she had been trying to help. Their ideals didn't even make that much sense; people and Pokemon had been working together for thousands of years. She didn't think there could be an ideal where the end result would be worth changing that fundamental part of society.

Hilda had been mad enough about it that she didn't care if it was N. She would beat his team with some of her weaker members and prove her worth. But then the unexpected happened and forced her to cool down a little. N had fallen asleep towards the end of the battle.

The Sigilyph had noticed right away and got frantic about it; it flew closer to him and tried to wake him up by calling him. At this unusual event, Mimi hesitated, looking up at Hilda curiously. She held her hand up, agreeing to a stop of the battle until this was sorted out. "Don't think I've heard of a human that falls asleep to Sing."

"You shouldn't do so," Kyurem said.

The Sigilyph said something in a series of beeps and chirps.

"Even raised by Pokemon is a stretch," he responded, walking over to N. But then the strange bird got defensive, giving him a tone of warning. This time, Kyurem acknowledged it. "I wanted to check something, but I wouldn't hurt him at this time." He came back to Hilda. "It's possible he may have some condition that prevents him from sleeping normally, or even just a high level of stress. That could cause this."

"It might be the stress then," Hilda said, as the Sigilyph flew up and vanished in a blue light. Maybe she'd unknowingly attacked him in a vulnerable spot when she told him he wasn't being a good leader if his followers were being hypocritical. Even if Plasma didn't have the right ideas, he certainly believed in it and wanted to make things better. Or maybe there was something to what N was saying.
By then, N had been flown away from the scene by his Pokemon. "He told you that he was the leader of Team Plasma," Kyurem said.

She nodded, then thought about it. "Yeah, but how did you know?"

"Victini told me, but he didn't want me to tell you right away."

"Ah, I should've guessed that." She dug into her bag, searching for a Revive she'd picked up a while ago. "I got mad at him for it, but now that I'm thinking on it, he might not be the problem. He's genuine about caring for Pokemon, while the others I can't really say."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"Ah, there we go," Hilda said, finally getting the Revive to use on Tarzan. "Well I know what I'd like to do, but you've been uncooperative about it."

He rubbed his nose just below the mask. "Pardon?"

She smiled at him. "I want to talk to some people and Pokemon about this, and find out what they think about Plasma's ideals. Not their actions, what they say they follow and what N believes in. That'll help me if we get into that discussion again. And if he is right, well, I'll have to find some other way of going about this. But I can't understand Pokemon, and you translate sporadically."

To that, Kyurem smirked. "If you have the right reasons for wanting that, then I will act as a translator. And if that's what you're after, then yes, I'll work with you and other Pokemon to get their message across."

Hilda grinned, feeling the excitement of a plot in action. "All right! Might as well start with you guys," then Mimi squealed and hugged her leg, "although that might not reveal much that I don't already know."

He nodded. "Very well."

N walked out the south gatehouse of Nimbasa, looking down at the sandy road and feeling tense. He was quietly grateful that he hadn't run into Hilda on the way from the Pokecenter. Falling asleep like that when he should have been focused on guiding the battle, that was embarrassing. And how dare she accuse him of being a terrible leader when she had no idea before today that he was the leader of anything? Although, there were all the things that Giallo had told him about in what the team was doing while he was on the road. Why hadn't anyone called him before? Or why hadn't Val and Carol made a better effort not to irritate him into not listening to them?

Or maybe he really wasn't that great. What should he do?

"What's troubling you, N?" Rune asked, flying closer to him. "Are you tired? Or is it about what she said?"

He sighed, feeling his energy ebb when it was mentioned. "Both, probably. But I need to let you guys go now."

"Are you certain of that?"

"Yes." He went down the construction road towards Desert Resort, but stopped partway in. There weren't many people around, so the Pokemon could get to safety in good time. He brought the other three out, as well as his release tool. "I'm sorry about that last battle. But, you guys have done
a lot for me, beating the Gym and even more than I asked for. But it's time to say goodbye."

"What?" Kimi asked, forgetting to clasp her loose skin over her torso. "No way!"

"Do you have to let us go?" Daisy asked, scrunching up her small red body even further. "You're nice and I don't mind working for you. I want to stay."

"I told all of you before," N said. "It was only supposed to be for one Gym and then I'd let you go. But then things didn't turn out as I planned and it went on too long. So I need to keep my word before I move on."

"Aw, forget about that," Kimi said. "We work good together and I think we can get really strong together."

"Yeah, we'll keep working hard," Daisy added, agreeing with the Scraggy for once.

At his ankles, Sal came up and gripped N's pants with his teeth, gently tugging at him. The Sandile never said much, but right then, he said, "Stay?"

N gritted his teeth. There was an impulse to lash out (why did they keep making him feel guilty?), but he kept that quiet. "This is for the good of everyone. Besides, I'd have to let you go eventually to keep in line with the future I mean to bring about. It's better to leave now than much later." When it might hurt them to leave even more. But it shouldn't hurt, not like this.

They pleaded, but he still released them from their Pokeballs and said goodbye. He left the four of them there not long after, not sure if he wanted to punch someone or cry. But neither option was good and it was better to keep such extremes to himself. At least Rune hadn't fussed, but the others...

No, it was Rune too. N heard him coo as he flew behind. "I was careful not to let them know that I followed."

"You should go back to your own life now," N said. "I mean to separate all humans and Pokemon."

The Sigilyph didn't heed that. "I cannot return to my previous life, now that I know Shira is nothing but a memory."

"Well then find a new life. I have to get back on track."

"What shall I do?" Rune asked, flying ahead of N and stopping in his path. When he didn't reply, Rune went on speaking. "I was made to serve. A life in what you call freedom would be a failed and worthless life in the eyes of my peers, and my own. Also, Lord Reshiram asked that I personally serve you. I am bound by his words and can do nothing against that until he says otherwise. I will continue to follow you."

"I don't want servants!" N said, trying to brush him aside. "I don't want to burden anyone else with what I should be doing myself. I certainly don't want to make a Pokemon work for me."

"We all fight and serve you out of our own free will," Rune said. "You would not agree to take us otherwise, correct?"

"That is right," another Pokemon said. To his left, a Liepard came slinking around to join them. She had a faded scar where her fur didn't grow right.

Was it her? "Pricilla?" N asked. "You're still following me? And you evolved." He reached out to
pet her, but she kept just out of reach.

"Well somebody's got to watch your back," she said, swishing her tail.

"She's been near us the whole time, save for when I flew you elsewhere," Rune explained.

They were doing this of their own free will. And it had been long enough since he'd released Pricilla that she shouldn't be affected by brainwashing techniques. Maybe it was all social expectations that were difficult to throw off. Or maybe Pokemon really wanted to be with humans.

But that would mean that he was wrong, that he'd mislead a great number of people, and that he didn't deserve to call on Zekrom.

"I'll be fine on my own," N said, then headed into Nimbasa to find a place to stay for the night. They didn't follow him, but while that should have satisfied him, it left him feeling lonely. And no matter how he tried to quiet his thoughts, they kept examining things from every angle and coming up with troubling conclusions.

It was another sleepless night.
The snow was falling in large puffs, lazily floating along the breeze. Now that he wasn't training in the heat trap that was Desert Resort, N had to deal with below freezing temperatures. He had a dark green and brown long overcoat that helped to keep him warm, as well as sturdy brown boots to get through the snow cover with. The Patch Hat was not nearly warm enough to deal with winter, so he had to wear a wool cap instead, along with a scarf and gloves. Even with all that protection, he could still feel the chill occasionally. It seemed like the coldest winter he'd experienced, certainly was the snowiest.

Right outside the gate leading to Route 5, N found a Sigilyph waiting. "Rune, what are you doing?" he asked, speaking louder to compensate for the scarf over his face.

"As I told you, I am here to serve you," Rune replied. "You need to build a new team, correct? You should find the break in that fence, and search the wooded area there."

Looking over in the direction the Sigilyph was facing, N saw a roadside fence that was missing a few sections, perhaps intentionally. It was partly hidden by a trailer that served as a roadside kitchen and eatery. "Why over there?" he asked. "I know what kind of Pokemon I want, and they'd be easier to find on the other side of the river."

"That is as expected. You should try something unexpected."

"What do you mean by that?" His plans were known by several members of Team Plasma as it was a logical progression. What would deviating like this accomplish?

"Try it and you'll see." Rune then flew over the fence and into the wooded area.

He decided it was worth a try. The Pokemon he was after should live around the river, so he might run into one here. Once he got down the path a short ways, it was hard to tell that he was near a city anymore. There were trees surrounding him instead of buildings. The only real sign of humans was the footpath, which could have been made by the paws of Pokemon. Off in the trees, he heard Pokemon calling and talking, saw their footprints in the snow.

Not only that, but he saw over a dozen Pokemon in this opening between trees, not including Rune. That helped him to relax; this was how things should have been all along. "Good morning, Pokemon," N said, smiling under his scarf.

"Good morning," a Solosis said, apparently out of politeness.

"Yay a person!" An black and yellow squirrel Pokemon glided out of the trees and landed on his head. "I came out of my winter den hoping someone would come today. Are you going to fight me?"

"No, I don't want to fight right now," he said.

"Ah poo... wait, do you understand me?" The Emolga then rapped on his forehead.
N took the Pokemon's paw. The others watched. "Yes, I do. My name is N."

"It's the truth," Rune said, staying at the edges of the trees.

"Oh, wow wow wow!" the Emolga said, nearly sliding off his head in excitement. "Can I travel with you, huh? That'd be so much more awesomer to travel with someone who knows what I'm saying."

"Aw, I wanted to go with him first," the Solosis said.

Caught off-guard, N wasn't sure what to say. They wanted to go with him? And he didn't even have to talk them into it or let them know about his mission? "It would be nice," a Trubbish said, sounding hopeful.

"You want to come with me?" N asked, with echoes of Hilda's claims coming into his thoughts. "Why? When people capture you, you get used for fighting, made to work, are kept confined in a ball..."

"I hear it ain't so bad," the Trubbish said, odd chinks coming from its body as it shifted around. "You don't have to scumble around all day for your food and if you do well, you get stronger and better."

"Have you ever been captured by a Trainer?"

"Nope, nope," the Emolga said.

The others gave negative signs too. "No, but I'd really like to be," the Trubbish said.

"And humans have so much more interesting lives!" the Emolga said. "They have sports, and plays, and all kinds of stuff that Pokemon would never think of. I want to go live with a human and get to play their games. But I'd go with you, cause then we could talk!"

Any sense of relaxation was gone now, replaced with a mental disorientation. "But other humans aren't that great. I've heard a lot of bad stories about Pokemon who get hurt or even killed due to humans. I'm working to get recognition through the League..."

"I can fight in Gyms!" the Emolga said, gripping his hat. "I think I can, anyhow. I wanna try."

"I don't know..." N said, thinking that since Elesa used them, an Emolga might not help against Clay.

"I could give a Gym a try," the Trubbish said. "I'd really like to make someone happy for fighting well."

"Yeah yeah yeah," the Emolga agreed. "We can make you proud."

"You might not want that," he told them, trying for some secure idea. When his thoughts treacherously went back to Hilda, he added, "Some people dress up Pokemon for amusement."

And the Emolga and Solosis both giggled. "That'd be fun fun fun!" the squirrel Pokemon on top of his head said. "Humans are so nice! Like like, the lady who works in the thingy out by the fence, she leaves us nuts and seeds when its tough weather like this. I wanted to work for her, but she's already got three Pokemon and didn't want any more. But I would love someone who'd dress me up."
"But I'm working to separate Pokemon and humans so that no one gets hurt and everyone can live better lives," N said, for the moment feeling like it was his last defense.

The Emogla sniffed. "Feh, that's lame. I want to go live with a person. So even if you can hear us, I don't want to help someone who'd ruin that dream." It then jumped off his head and onto a nearby tree, which it climbed to look for someone else. The other Pokemon in the area got disinterested as well and went off to another location.

All except Rune, who stayed nearby. "N? What troubles you?"

At that point, he realized that he was trembling. "This can't be right," he said in a quiet voice. "Tell me that didn't just happen."

The Sigilyph blinked. "I cannot lie. That conversation did happen."

N clenched his fist, but turned away before he did something rash. He took a few steps, then stopped. While he should just ignore it, he knew that he shouldn't and he knew that he needed to talk it out. Wanted to talk it out. Even if it made no sense. Why did all those thoughts conflict with each other? "I've never met a Pokemon that wanted to come with me right away," he said, turning back to Rune. "After they get to know me, yes, that happens, but some I've had to convince, by telling them of my dreams or by promising just one Gym. But not like that."

"I always lived and worked in Shira, so I wouldn't know what's normal for them," Rune replied.

"It can't be normal," N said. But the words he said caused other memories to bubble up, other instance where something strange to him turned out to be normal. Like what a normal family was like and how his fa... Ghetsis seemed so distant.

That wasn't the same! He felt his face heat up, but tried to explain it as some effect of the cold as he turned away from Rune and began walking again. A short distance later, he spotted a Minccino. Without a flower hairclip, so it couldn't be that one with Hilda. He went to greet the Pokemon, but then she ran to him. "Oh, hi! Are you a good Trainer? I want to be with a good Trainer. Why don't you fight me and prove your worth?"

"No!" N shouted without thinking. The Minccino puffed up in a fright and ran off into the trees. Great, now he'd scared a Pokemon without thinking. Being out here was turning him as bad as the other humans. He really shouldn't have left his forest.

But those thoughts all made him feel horrible, so he tried to bite down on them and find a Pokemon that was more normal to him. Yet no matter how far he went into these woods, he kept finding Pokemon eager to join a human. None of them saw anything wrong with it. Maybe there wasn't... but then it couldn't be because that meant what he was doing was wrong and everything that he thought he was was wrong. Or that meant the Pokemon were wrong, which could be, or that they were being deceptive. He didn't want to think all of them were being deceptive, especially not Rune who was acting on behalf of Reshiram.

After some time, N came to the banks of the river. It was all iced over, with a layer of snow on top of that. When he swept some snow cover off, he could see that there seemed to be water flowing underneath. It was only the surface; the whole river getting frozen would be worrisome. But that was hardly a problem compared to the mess in his mind.

He crouched down at the river's edge, as the snow wouldn't be good to sit in. The big lazy flakes continued to drift down from the sky, occasionally getting caught on his face. It was all social expectations, he told himself. What ones he had asked admitted to never having been captured
before. They didn't know what the world was really like. They didn't know, and it would be a terrible lesson to learn. If only there was some way he could tell them all to move deeper into the woods, where the humans didn't go. Then they'd be safe.

Even as he thought it, he knew it would be a tough thing to convince them of. They really thought that was the way to power and friendship. They even dismissed him when he told them of what he meant to do. If only he could convince one of his Pokemon friends from home to come out with him and tell the naive wild Pokemon of what really happened when they were captured. But that might mean the other humans would go further to capture them. Maybe once he succeeded with the human side, he'd find a way to convince the Pokemon side of his ideals too.

Another vision struck him as he watched the frozen river

*It was hot and the sun shone brightly over this river. There were a few young Pokemon that dared to play out here so close to the human areas, but they were keeping away. They were happy and healthy; things were as they should be. Feeling satisfied with that, N headed back to Nimbasa, seeing no other human until he got to the route. As the new ruler of Unova and the ambassador between Pokemon and humans, he was the only one allowed to go off into the wilderness areas freely.*

People greeted him, being highly respectful. But he didn't feel a strong connection to them because he wasn't like them. Strangely, it was the same way these days with Pokemon. He had succeeded in convincing them of the right way, but now the ones who didn't know him avoided N as another human. No matter where he went, he was different. Held above everyone else. Isolated. It was a strange sad feeling. But, he'd made his ideals come to life. Things still needed tweaking, but it was good.

Ghetsis found him and began walking with him, to discuss matters of state. N had trouble feeling any of these matters were important, though. Yes, he knew he had to keep things fair, just, and peaceful, but he didn't feel the drive that had possessed him before. He did his best, but it was like trying to walk upstream in a deep strong river.

A few things were still important to him. "Have our agents located Hilbert yet?"

"No, nor the others who are trying to restore the old ways."

"I see." It made him feel sad that his brother had refused to see how this way was much better. Now Hilbert was a definite enemy, someone N had to imprison and punish. Perhaps even kill if he went too far. There was a twinge of guilt at that thought, but those feelings had plagued him so much during his League journey that he could ignore them most of the time.

Back at the hotel, N excused himself and went back to his room. He felt less alone here, even though Ghetsis and all the others weren't with him. Taking off his cloak to hang up, he said, "It's really hot out there. Some people are saying you could fry an egg on the pavement, although I don't think anyone would want to eat it."

There was no response to this.

He went over to the window and found Hilda where he had left her, sitting in the chair which was faced so that she was looking out the window. Maybe. N went over and knelt by her, taking her hand. "It's been dull lately, but things are almost as they should be. Humans are learning to live independently and the Pokemon are safe and happy. And I protected you like I promised I would. You lived when you should have died."
She didn't respond though. She didn't respond to anything lately.

Sighing, N put her hand to his forehead. "I'm going to find a way to fix you. Then life will truly be good."

A hot summer like that seemed far off when he was looking over a snow coated river. So then he could succeed. Although it was worrisome to think on what might happen to Hilbert and Hilda. What had gone wrong then? But at least they'd both be alive, which had to be an improvement over the death visions.

And there was something else about that vision, recalling how he had held her hand like that. It tempted him to try it, or maybe something closer. But wasn't that inappropriate to think of now, when she was still against them? He felt embarrassed, hoping that there wasn't anyone to notice.

There was a crunch of snow behind him. N tensed and glanced back, but it turned out to only be another Pokemon. This was a Gothita, looking like a woefully under-dressed tiny girl, what with that little black dress (or whatever it really was) seeming not enough to protect against the cold. And it had to plow its way through the snow, since the six or eight inches of cover came up to its waist. "Hey, are you the guy others are talking about?" he asked (and once he spoke, N knew the Gothita was a male). "The one who understands us?"

"Yes, that's me," he said. "I'm N. You didn't have to trouble yourself with the snow to come see me."

"Eh, it's not that bad and I wanted to." The Gothita came over to his side and looked him over curiously. "I've been all over the place and I haven't met a human who could speak with Pokemon. Though I have been hearing all kinds of rumors this winter."

N looked down at him. "You've been all over?"

He nodded. "Yup. Was born far northeast of here, and then I've been traveling around. Sometimes by my own two feet, sometimes by being captured and let go." He laughed. "Oh, the look on some of their faces when they find out that the cute little girly Pokemon they got is actually a guy. I love that! I did stick with one long enough that he named me. Everybody calls me Frank now."

"Frank, huh? Does it bother you that they keep rejecting you?"

The Gothita shrugged. "Not really; it's kind of funny. Although I would love to stick with some human, you know. I'd get trained up to be a powerful Pokemon, and then all the females would be trying to attract me as a mate." He grinned at the thought.

Well that would be one attractive reason for them, N thought. "Can't you become powerful enough to evolve on your own?"

"I could," Frank admitted, "but then you can't deny that human trained Pokemon are stronger and better all around than self-trained Pokemon. I've always wondered how you guys do that for us, but the only answers I can find are that it's because you have stuff that just makes us better, or that it has to do with the whole reason why humans are here in the first place."

"Why we're here?" That was something N hadn't considered. He had wondered why humans were here, whether evolved away from Pokemon or animals, or having arrived through other means. But... Pokemon could be stronger due to humans?

"But that's ancient history, not that important," the Gothita said, waving it off. "What I want to know is, what are you doing here?"
N hesitated, recalling how the other Pokemon around here had acted. But then he decided to tell
Frank anyhow. Thankfully, he didn't dismiss it right out. He listened and gave it some thought,
asking some questions when he had them.

And he had one for the Gothita. "Is it just the Pokemon in this area that are strange, or are they
what you'd usually find?"

"They're pretty normal for what you'd find near a human population," Frank said. "See, a good
number of Pokemon would agree with you; they just live further from places like this. But just as
many of us are hoping to work with humans someday. So we live in places like this, hoping to
attract attention from a Trainer. I find it strange that you haven't run into many Pokemon like us.
They should be all over near the routes."

"I really wasn't expecting to hear that," N said, still feeling lost. "I've heard so many bad things
about training over the years, and then today just puts a whole new twist on my thoughts. I'm not
sure what to do now."

Frank put his hands on his hips. "I suppose that it is perplexing from your point of view. Are you
going to keep at your mission?"

"Yes. I'm sure I can find a way to convince both people and Pokemon that the current ways are
flawed." Because he'd just seen that it was possible.

"I see. Well would you mind if I come with you for a bit? Yeah, I know your deal, just one Gym,
and I'm cool with that. But seems to me like you've only been speaking to downtrodden Pokemon,
the ones who already agree with your ideas." Frank smiled and held a hand out. "Maybe you
should have a more ordinary Pokemon like me around? And I'd get what I want, some training and
proof that I am as great as I say I am. What do you say?"

"That sounds reasonable," N said, gently taking the Gothita's hand. "Thanks."

1/25, evening

His old home at Village Bridge was much as Hilbert remembered it: a narrow three story home that
used up any space it got because it didn't get much space at all. The walls were painted light colors
in a hopeful attempt to make the space look larger. At the east wall, there was a narrow and steep
staircase heading up to more private areas of the house. The house was decorated with ancient
things: framed and protected pieces of parchment, old stone tools, colorful artifacts, and even a few
recreated ancient items. And in one area, there were degrees and awards that Giallo had gotten in
his research, as well as awards Hilbert had gotten for his accomplishments.

How much of that was real accomplishment and how much wasn't? Hilbert tried to ignore that; it
wouldn't do him any good to continue in regret. He had to figure out what to do with his life now.
However, he wasn't sure staying at home was helping any. Everywhere he looked, there were
reminders of his childhood and his old life. And then there was his uncle.

Giallo was in the kitchen, preparing supper. There were occasional chinks of utensils against the
pans, but no conversation. Or any music; Giallo used to have the radio on when cooking, but not
now. This led to an uneasy silence in the house. Conversations had been strained lately. Or an
outright argument, that once.

And it didn't help much that Hilbert's second egg was hatching today. The first one had hatched
while he was asleep in the hospital. That thought made him smile, recalling how he'd woken up to
wet kisses on his cheek, then saw the pink-scaled Alomomola hovering in its water bubble only an inch from his face. Loch turned out to be very affectionate. It was nice to see how a Pokemon that authentically liked him (even in a parental substitute manner) behaved.

Currently, Loch was drifting around the air, watching the egg curiously but keeping away as asked. Madeline the Litwick kept away on a high shelf; it seemed that she didn't want to hurt the hatchling, something that puzzled Hilbert. Whenever he met up with N next, he'd have to ask about why she felt that way.

The egg itself was sitting on one of the kitchen chairs. Hilbert had left his jacket and scarf around the egg for the past few days, hoping that might help. Since the first cracks had appeared, he'd removed the items so they didn't get messed up. But now he was wondering if he should have kept them there. It had been over an hour and the egg hadn't fully hatched yet.

He tried to recall what had been advised about hatching eggs. Was this normal, or should he try to help? He knew that the hatchling should be left to rest in most cases, but that was after. The crack had grown, but not in the past few minutes. The more that he thought on what he knew, the more he realized how much he didn't know. He'd breezed through life before, but that could no longer be.

While he was thinking, Giallo put a filled bowl in front of him. "Supper's ready." he said.

"Oh, thanks," he said. It was a soup tonight, vegetable, beef, and barley, along with rolls from the store. With how cold and snowy it was outside, it was a welcome warm meal. Village Bridge generally got icy fast; many residents would move elsewhere for the winter to avoid it.

There never seemed much to talk about, now that Hilbert knew his uncle was working in Plasma. They used to talk about Pokemon and the League, years ago, and that turned awkward lately. Perhaps mythology as that was Giallo's area of expertise, but that might lead into what was going on in Unova now. What to say?

"What are you going to do about Pokemon like these, hatched with humans?" Hilbert asked, trying to find something and realizing it might not be good after he said it. But since he had, might as well press on. "They might not have the skills they need to live in the wild."

"Pokemon are adaptable," Giallo said. "They should be able to adjust, and older Pokemon usually help younger ones."

"Will that be enough though?" Hilbert asked, as Loch came over and nuzzled his shoulder. The Alomomola was getting better at not soaking anything his water bubble touched. He patted the Pokemon on the nose, pleasing him. "And what about the people who really depend on Pokemon? The blind ones who use Pokemon for sight, or deaf ones for hearing, and any of that?"

That actually caused him to think. "I'm sure we'll find other ways." He left his spoon by the soup bowl for a moment and looked over at him. "Hilbert, the truth is is that fate has marked you and your brother for something magnificent. The world is going to change and there's nothing that can be done to stop that change. We should then get ready for it and not try a fruitless fight against fate."

"But how do you know what that fate is?" he said. "Nobody should be able to know."

"I think N knows some of it."

To that, Hilbert recalled when N needed Christmas and Pictionary explained to him. Maybe he had
been more impressive as a child, or when his knowledge gaps weren't so obvious. He'd have to talk more in-depth with him later. Still, no matter how much he disliked the idea of separating humans and Pokemon, he couldn't forget how he had been.

There was a crack from the chair where the egg was, so Hilbert dropped his spoon in the bowl and looked over there. There was definitely a larger fracture now, one that ran all the way down the side of it and splintered off all over. After another push, the newborn Pokemon finally broke out. Shell fragments collapsed onto its brown furred back, and it had to shake a larger piece off its head. The Pokemon twitched its antennae; on finding nothing of alarm, it started kicking eggshells aside with its six legs.

Hilbert scooted his chair over to pluck the eggshells off the newborn's back. "It's a Larvesta," he said. The Pokemon was briefly concerned about his touch, but once the Larvesta got a good scent of him and realized he was helping, it relaxed and settled down to rest.

Thankfully side-stepping the controversial matter for now, Giallo said, "That's interesting. Maybe it's from your starter."

He checked the status screen of the Pokeball. "He has to be. She was the only other Larvesta I've owned."

And that almost seemed like another sign, as he recalled what had happened with her.

…

It was Hilbert's tenth birthday party and every kid who lived in Village Bridge was there. In fact, kids who weren't from Village Bridge were also there. No matter where he went, people loved him and wanted to be his friend, which made Hilbert feel like the best and happiest kid in the whole world.

But even more exciting than the crowd was the idea that he'd be getting his first Pokemon today. He was hoping for either a Deino or an Axew, as his current subject of admiration was Drayden, the Gym Leader in the neighboring town of Opelucid. If he managed to get one, then he was absolutely confident that he could impress Drayden enough to become an apprentice to him.

"And here's your last present," Giallo said, smiling and handing him a red and white Pokeball. "Since you're all eager to start the League right away, you need a great Pokemon to start with."

"Yeah!" Hilbert said, grinning as he accepted the ball. He could feel the excitement others had for seeing what he had, as well as his own. There was so much he wanted to do on his journey, not just beating the League, but finding his real parents and seeing lots of great places. So he happily pressed the release button, revealing a rather unimpressive looking tan Bug larva. For a moment, he wondered if it was a mistake.

"This is a Larvesta, an extremely rare Pokemon," his uncle explained to him. "A very rare type too, a Fire Bug, so no one else will have something like it."

"Really? That's neat, I guess." But he still wasn't impressed.

…

It was late summer when Hilbert finally came back to the Daycare to pick up his Larvesta. She had been difficult to train, plus not what he wanted to be using. But although she'd been there a while (and her return fee was high), she still hadn't changed from that unimpressive brown bug. It was a little embarrassing to admit this was his starter, so he usually avoided mentioning it when he could.
"Oh, young man, you should take this," the woman at the counter said, passing over a Pokeball. "This contains an egg that we found with your Pokemon just this morning."

"All right," he said, wondering what he should do with it.

"Take care."

After putting the egg into storage, Hilbert traveled over to Striaton. There, he met with another Trainer; Alder had been talking earlier about how he was interested in finding certain unusual Pokemon, especially rare Bug types. After talking the older boy into a good mood, he brought out the Pokeball. "Hey, I have this Larvesta here that isn't fitting into my team. Would you trade your Deino for it?"

Alder's eyes went wide. As Hilbert had figured, he really wanted this particular Pokemon. "Sure, that sounds great! Thanks a lot, Hilbert; I'll treat it really well."

Having traded off his starter for the Pokemon he really wanted, Hilbert was satisfied. But his other plans had changed and he didn't intend to train with Drayden anymore. He was going to make himself famous all over the world, not just in Unova.

And he completely forgot about the egg a couple days later.

…

A starter Pokemon was supposed to be a special one, Hilbert thought. It seemed like every Trainer kept the first one they were given for life, no matter what. But in his case, he had traded away his starter not even four months after he'd started. He hadn't cared about her. Come to think of it, he hadn't really cared about the Deino either. The dragon had been more of a status symbol. Also a pain to train, which caused Hilbert to lose attention after a few weeks. He had eventually gotten it to a Hydreigon, but he didn't see it as a living being. It had been just another prop to his being 'amazing'.

He was up in his bedroom now, watching the Larvesta, now nicknamed Ember, crawl along his bed and investigate it. Frost patterns formed on the window, causing Loch to look at them in interest. On the dresser, Madeline was watching over all of them. They didn't constantly surround him with the light of admiration. But in being that way, Hilbert was finding it easier to see them as their own beings, ones that he truly was responsible for. And having them seemed more amazing than what he'd done without effort. Especially in thinking on how long that egg had taken to hatch, and now seeing the Pokemon trying to learn about a pillow. Ember gripped it with his front pair of legs, touching it with his feelers, sniffing it closely, even giving it an experimental lick to see if it was edible. Then he crawled on top of it and consulted how his weight sunk into the pillow's mass.

"I was pretty rotten back then, but no one could point it out to me," he said. Loch and Madeline paid attention to him when he started talking, but the Larvesta didn't seem to notice. "Maybe you guys can help me figure things out. But then they want to take Pokemon away. Not sure what I should do."

"Shu hu nai," the Litwick said, swaying in place. It seemed she wanted to encourage him.

Hilbert sat up on his bed, looking to her. "I wonder if I could learn to understand you guys. N can." Then he recalled something. He had wanted to find his parents originally, back when he was ten. Apparently Ghetsis was his father, which wasn't that great. But there was a hint to something further, right? He grabbed his Xtransciever and called his brother.
When he answered, N appeared to be outside somewhere. It wasn't snowing, but he was dressed up warmly and the thermos he had in his other hand was steaming. "Good evening, Hilbert. Why're you calling? I thought you were restricted on activity."

"Good evening," he said. "I'm feeling all right and I really just had one question. I remember you said that you had a hospital band when Darla found you in the forest. It had your full name on it, right? What was it?"

"Yes, it did. Natural Harmonia Gropius." He looked puzzled. "Why do you want to know?"

I hope my birth name wasn't half as embarrassing, Hilbert thought. But then realized that he'd share the last two names, so that didn't help much. "Well I always wanted to find my mother, at least to know about her. And knowing your name, I think I might be able to find a birth announcement or something in public records."

N was interested to know that too, so Hilbert agreed to share what information he found. With that taken care of, he chatted a little with N (he meant to challenge Driftveil Gym within a few days, which seemed impressive) before hanging up. Then he went to the household computer to search for that name.

And within a couple of minutes, he got it. A birth announcement for twin boys, Natural and Solace (Hilbert smacked his forehead and felt determined to keep control of who knew that name), born to Stacy Gropius and Ghetsis Harmonia in Opelucid City.

Chapter End Notes

There is a reasoning being N's canon full name. It's really symbolic, and can be read as 'nature in harmony with science'. Gropius is the name of a famous architect. So any way you look at it, canon N does not have to change personality or (most of) dialogue to fit into either the technology leaning Black or the nature leaning White. He also does not have to change to summon Reshiram or Zekrom, since the way he speaks could be interpreted for either legendary. It's a nice touch. Maybe I've discussed it before, but I like giving Zekrom to N in fanfiction primarily because of Ghetsis. Manipulating someone who believes in ideals is easier than manipulating someone who believes in truth. Solace, I just came up with as a name to be on the same level of oddness as Natural.
1/26, morning

"Are you going into Desert Resort?" the gatehouse attendant asked. She was dressed in the usual uniform of a blue dress and blue hat. "The ruins are blocked off at this time. Please be careful and watch your Pokemon."

Hilda paused by the desk. "Is there some trouble there?"

"There shouldn't be," she said, shaking her head. "But a while ago, a number of poisons showed up in sand samples. They were driving Pokemon away, making it so that you could hardly find any out there. We've done a lot of clean-up, but we're still checking if we got all of it. However, the Pokemon seem able to detect it. If any of yours seems reluctant to go somewhere, heed their warnings and let us know when you leave."

"Where did the poison come from?" Kyurem asked, before Hilda could ask the same thing.

"The police are still investigating that matter. I'm sorry, I don't have any more information than that."

"Hmm, well thanks for the tip," Hilda said, then headed out into Desert Resort.

For the past few days, she'd been talking with Pokemon in Nimbasa, figuring out how they felt and what they wanted. Most of them seemed happy to be with humans. Sometimes, they ran across one who wasn't happy, but so far those cases were easily solved with Hilda and Kyurem intervening on the Pokemon's behalf. Stuff like a Purrloin that didn't like his tail being pulled by his young Trainer, or an Unfezant that disapproved of his Trainer's hairspray (for being horribly stinky, to him). There were other cases where communicating between Trainer and Pokemon helped, such as a Herdier who didn't understand why he had to get baths. But so far, nothing was bad enough to necessitate the release of a Pokemon.

For today, though, she wanted to get away from that and explore around some. It was too bad that the ruins were closed off, but maybe the desert itself would have something interesting to see. But it didn't take long to realize that the most one could see here was the sandstorm, thicker with airborne particles than Route 4. There were some battles to be had, but with the ruins closed off, there didn't seem to be much to do.

"Hey there!" she heard a guy call out in the storm. "You up for a Pokemon battle?"

"In this weather?" she called back. "Sure, once I can see you."

He came into her vision, with his winter coat hanging off one shoulder. This area was warmer, surprisingly. Although he had a rough look with his pierced nose and red tipped black hair, he had an Audino walking alongside him. "Yeah, it's like this about every day. Wait a sec.. you're that girl with Kyurem, aren't you?"

"Yeah, that's me." She smirked at him, although the effect was lessened due to a protective scarf. "Having second thoughts?"

He chuckled. "Well yeah. I mean, my Pokemon are good, but I dunno if they're that good. But since you're here, can I ask you about something? I heard you two were going around talking to people's Pokemon in Nimbasa. Think you could help me out some with that?"
Hilda glanced at Kyurem. "I can try to talk him into it. What's up?"

"It's my Audino here," he said, patting the pink Pokemon on the head. She tilted her head up towards his voice. "I caught Bossa here a while ago and I was thrilled to have her along. But she hasn't seemed too happy with me lately, and I dunno what I'm doing wrong. Could you tell me what she says?"

"Bo hoba lo auda ee," Bossa said, leaning towards her Trainer and looking at Kyurem warily.

"Don't worry, I won't let him hurt you," Hilda said, guessing that she was intimidated. "Would you do that, Rei?"

He nodded. "Very well. What is the problem?"

Bossa took a couple steps forward, nervously clasping her paws to her chest. She spoke at length about something, eventually putting her hands to her ears and shaking her head.

When she'd stopped, Kyurem nodded. "She says that you're a musician who plays very loud music with your friends. It hurts her ears and gives her a headache whenever you guys are playing."

"Really, that's it?"

"All Audino have sensitive hearing, or so I've heard," Hilda said. In particular, it had come up in the research of one of Juniper's colleagues, and he had told her about it while Hilda and her friends had been doing work for the professor.

The guy put his hand to his chin. "Huh, well that's a bummer. I always thought they were nice and wanted to raise one for a bit." He looked down at Bossa. "But I don't want to be hurting you either. I'm sorry. Maybe I ought to let you go after all."

"Hoda ba ri sa aunna jo," she replied, bowing her head.

"She says that you're a good person, but she's not going to stand in the way of your dreams," Kyurem said.

He nodded. "I see. Well thanks for your help. I think I'll be more careful with what Pokemon I try to get next." They said goodbye, and then the musician walked off to return the Audino to where he'd caught her.

Hilda waited until they were hidden by the sandstorm to say, "Well that's one Pokemon that needed to be released out of, what, 200 interviewed?"

"Seems like that," Kyurem said.

They continued on exploring Desert Resort, eventually coming upon a castle tower sticking out of the sands. Taking some protection from the sandy winds, Cheren was over there with his Tranquill and Liepard, looking through his Pokedex. Hilda felt tempted for a bit to not speak to him, after how he'd been last time. But, he was her old friend and she'd rather not give up on that. "Hi Cheren!" she called out.

He looked up, then shrugged. "Hi. What are you doing out here?"

"Looking around, thinking of doing some training with my team," she said, continuing to approach him. "Mostly I've been checking out how much truth might be in Plasma's words."
Cheren raised an eyebrow. "Really, you're doing that? They don't make sense; it doesn't need research to know that."

"Well I found out that I know people in Plasma." She put her hands on her hips, standing a few feet from him. "So I thought I'd try. Kyurem's helping."

"You know people in Plasma?" he asked, puzzled.

Hilda frowned. "Didn't I tell you that in an email a while ago? You know how my Mom said my dad's a jerk and a slacker? Turns out he's one of the bigwigs in Plasma, and he helped me a bit once. Him and another person who's a lot nicer and genuine about it. For them, I'd check things out."

"Then what have you found out?" Cheren asked, putting his Pokedex away.

"Most Pokemon are happy enough with humans, although if there were more ways to communicate with them, I think a lot more people overall would be happier."

"Could we speak with yours?" Kyurem asked. "They seem tense."

"I suppose so, although it might just be the effect of you being here," he said.

"I'm not letting him hurt any of the Pokemon we talk to," Hilda said. With that out in the open, the Liepard and Tranquill spoke some with Kyurem. "So you doing anything other than training?"

He frowned. "No, that takes up much of my time. I'm only in Nimbasa to spend the night, and clean up from all this sand." To prove the point, he shook his sleeve, causing sand particles to fall off.

That had her concerned. "What, you don't do anything just for the fun of it anymore? Surely it doesn't take that much time."

"We do have to work that hard if it means keeping up with the likes of you and your team," Cheren said, annoyed. "I'm out here to prove that I'm independent and capable. If I slack off, my parents will say that they expected that and talk about how much better my brother was at my age. That's what they always do."

"Well if you're independent, you don't really need their approval, do you?"

"It's not that simple. Your mom supports you no matter what; you wouldn't understand." He crossed his arms over his chest. "So let me do things my way, all right?"

"If you could do the same for me and Bianca," Hilda said. "But I do want to help you, if you want it."

He sighed. "I feel the same way about you two. I'm worried that you won't reach your full potential in the way you're both going."

She shrugged (causing some sand to shift off her shoulders). "Well we don't know what we're going to end up doing, while you do." She then chuckled. "Kind of hard to prepare for something when you don't know what the something is."

"Your Pokemon are tense with anxiety," Kyurem said, abruptly interrupting the conversation. "They're worried that they're not coming up to your expectations no matter how hard they try, and that you're going to take them out of the team because of that."
"Is that it?" Cheren asked, looking down at his two Pokemon. The Liepard looked down at his paws, while the Tranquill cooed uneasily. Hilda thought of saying something, but he asked, "Well could you leave us for now? I may have to speak with them, after I consider what's going on."

"All right, but don't be a stranger," she said. She walked off a few steps with Kyurem before yelling back, "Call me sometime, remember!"

There wasn't a response to that.

"Man, he always was serious, but this is taking it rather far," she said, walking north of the lingering tower. "We would've helped him talk with them. Right?"

"It might be something he needs to discover on his own," Kyurem said.

"Well I hope he hangs out with me and Bianca again some time. Her birthday's coming up, you know."

Not far from the tower, they came upon a cliff that made a very definite end to the land, although the sandstorm still blew out past it. Down below, Hilda could see the Alma River, a dark mass through the yellow sand. There was a riverbank down there, apparently of good size.

"Is there a way down this cliff, I wonder," she said, glancing along the cliff.

"There were stairs at one time," Kyurem said, pointing off to the east.

What stairs they found were eroded down into a rough ramp, but it was still possible to go down to the riverbank. The sandstorm wasn't as potent down here, the winds weaker. Because of that, Hilda decided to bring out her whole team and play football with them. It was good exercise and they liked it. Although Kyurem hung on the sidelines more often than not.

One time when Tarzan had to go running after the football, he came close to an odd white mist hanging around the river's edge. There was sand mist everywhere else, and then this one patch of water mist. The Scraggy ignored it, throwing the football back at Olette, but Hilda went over to check it out. Before she even got close, a Pokemon burst out of it, causing the mist to dissipate. It looked strangely like a living ice cream cone, but its cone was sharp and sparkling ice. Coming into the middle of their game, it seemed to stammer something out, causing puzzlement among the other Pokemon.

Hilda reached into her bag and tried to find the Pokedex, to figure out what this was. "Hang on, guys. If it doesn't want to be disturbed, we can leave it alone."

"Hacha per ila mi cichi," Mimi said in a friendly manner.

"Kikikiki cha chi hssffri ki ki ri, ai..." the stranger wailed, trembling. "Cha cha ki sssss ffft."

Kyurem frowned. "This Pokemon is making no sense."

Finally finding her Pokedex, Hilda flipped it open and aimed the camera at the stranger. Its name popped up quickly: Vanillish. "Is it speaking French?" she asked, half-joking.

He shook his head. "He's speaking complete jibberish. It's something like if you were to put together a bunch of words that could mean something separately, but don't mean anything when put together."

The Mincinno then came over to Hilda and Kyurem. "Mish, cha cho hai lichi cho." She seemed
sad, maybe in sympathy.

"If you wish," Kyurem said softly. "He seems to be troubled by something, she says."

"I could've guess that," Hilda said. The Pokemon stranger turned to her, but floated backwards, seeming to try hiding his face behind his cone body. "We don't mean you trouble, Vanillish. But if you want some help, you could join us. We'll try to figure things out."

The Vanillish closed his eyes, mumbling about something. Then he shifted his stance, with his cream head coming further out of his shell. "Ssshhh."

"He'd like the usual challenge, but you should know something first," Kyurem said, speaking quietly next to her. "This Vanillish is at least ten levels higher than any of us, and so is technically a powerful opponent."

She nodded. "Okay, thanks." After a few seconds thought, she figured she'd try to use Tarzan to weaken the Vanillish, and then swap over to Mimi to put it to sleep before trying to capture it. It was important that he see how her team was to impress him, because even a sleeping Pokemon could break out of a Pokeball.

But then, she did have the Ultra balls on hand.

It was redundant to add the Vanillish to the team. But Hilda wanted to see if she could help it, so Kyurem didn't mind all that much. He was glad to be out of that desert, not because of the memory of Shira there, but because that constant sandstorm was irritating after long enough. It slipped under his clothes, and even under his mask. And since he couldn't fully remove that, it took a little while for Kyurem to get all the sand particles out from under it.

Back in Nimbasa, Hilda was getting dinner for the group. He half kept an eye on her and half watched over for the four other Pokemon. "You don't have to be so scared," Mimi told the Vanillish, whom Hilda had nicknamed Pierre. "We're a team! And we'll get through anything together."

"And we'll do anything together," Tarzan said, clutching his loose skin close. "Like cliff diving!"

"I object to that," Kyurem said. "Some things are too dangerous."

"Well what've you got to worry about that?" he asked. "You're supposed to be unkillable or something."

"I can't be killed permanently." Temporarily, yes, but his soul would remain and seek to be reborn.

"And you don't have to worry about Kyurem, cause he's on our team," Mimi said.

"Team?" Pierre said, probably the first thing the Vanillish had said that actually made some sense. "Okay, somewhat fine, grass to sky, but the eye was there. Them, it was them. Here and there is leppas and oran. Refined."

"I like oran berries," Mimi said, trying to talk with him.

"I didn't know about working on a team either," Tarzan said. "Cause someone like me should shine brightest when on a solo career, you know? But after being with them a little while, it seems pretty nice. We've got each other's backs, right?"
"Right!" Mimi cheered, pumping a fist in the air. "We're all friends, Hilda and all of us. And you'll be a friend too."

"Although I don't think I ever caught what you were here for, Olette," Tarzan said, looking over at the Drillbur. "You don't say much."

She put a clawed paw to her face. "I don't need to say much," she said with a smile. "But I like listening to the rest of you. I'm here and I hope to stay here because I think we're part of something bigger than any of us. I'll be here and do my best so that we can do what needs to be done."

"There isn't much that's bigger than Kyurem here when he's a dragon," Tarzan said.

"I don't mean literally."

"Literal is dangerous," Pierre said, shuddering enough that flecks of ice came off him.

"Oh, Hilda!" From nearby, Bianca waved to them. A young woman (but older than the teens) was with her; she was dressed in a long black winter coat with speckled brown fake fur on the edges.

"Can we join you?"

"Hi, sure!" Hilda said, coming over to the table Kyurem was sitting at. "We're having supper, actually; join us if you want."

"I've already fed my Pokémon, but haven't eaten myself," the woman said. She shook hands with Hilda. "I'm Elesa, the Gym Leader here. I happened to meet your friend by chance, but I did hope to speak with you as well."

"Sure, good to meet you," Hilda said, smiling.

Elesa smiled back, then went to go order a meal with Bianca. As she walked, two wires hanging off her hat flipped into each other and snapped with static. There was something strange about it. And about her, Kyurem thought. However, he couldn't quite say what that strange thing was. She smelled different than most humans, something that should have made her distinctive if not for the fact that he'd notice that with several other humans he'd met since joining Hilda. Maybe it was just something these humans wore, as a great many things had changed since he'd last been awake. Not that he'd been around humans much over his life.

At first, the dinner conversation wasn't terribly important. Hilda and Bianca were getting caught up on what each other was doing (Bianca had spent much of the past week at the Small Stadium with the tennis players, seeing if she had what it took to take it seriously), and the girls and Elesa got to know each other. But having these Gym Leaders as allies was a good move, as they held authority within Unova's communities. For that, he would tolerate their chit chat.

"I did have some news to pass along to you guys," Hilda said, toning down her voice so it'd be harder for other tables to overhear them. "When I was talking with Burgh, Iris, and Cress, they said that you suspected who Plasma's King is. I know for certain who it is now. Oh, and Bianca? You should keep this quiet too."

"Okay," she said, nodding.

"It's N."

"Oh my, him?" Bianca said, eyes wide.

But Elesa nodded knowingly. "I see. That was who we thought it was. How did you find out about
"He told me so himself," Hilda said. "Thing is, something still not right about all this. N really believes in it, but he seems like such a sheltered person. I can agree that the rest of Plasma might not be able to influence Zekrom, but N definitely can. How did you figure him out?"

"What he was saying to us at the Gyms, that's what singled him out," she explained, leaning on the table. "He does have a very strong connection to Pokemon in being able to fully communicate with them, so we can hope that he is convinced otherwise. But if other members of Plasma are manipulating him for their own goals, it's going to be tough. Do you know why he's participating in the League? We can tell that it bothers him when any Pokemon gets hurt, not just his own."

Hilda thought about that for a moment. "Well based on what I know of him, it's because he thinks that's the best way to get his voice heard. And if you think about it, really good Pokemon Trainers are respected a lot. If one of them presents an unpopular view, people are more willing to consider it from them rather than someone else. That doesn't exactly explain why the rest of Plasma is using Pokemon."

The conversation paused for a moment, so Kyurem looked at Elesa and asked, "What are you?"

"Excuse me?" Elesa asked. But she tensed at that question; there could be something to his suspicions.

"That's an odd question," Bianca said.

"You keep crackling," Kyurem said.

She took one of her wires, which snapped a little. "Oh, you mean this? It was a gift from a dear friend, years ago. Don't worry, it's not dangerous. It uses very little power."

"That is neat," Hilda said, and that was pretty much the end of that subject.

Kyurem still thought there was something she wasn't saying.

After the meal, Hilda, Kyurem, and Bianca walked with Elesa towards the Gym. "What do you plan on doing about Plasma now?" Elesa asked as they were walking in front of the subway station.

"I'm not sure," Hilda said. "But I'm thinking of trying to convince N to change his views. Kyurem's been helping me talk to Pokemon too, so I'll have better grounds to debate with him later on."

She nodded. "That would be a good thing to try. We'll see how they react to that." She glanced around, then added, "The League has been considering some serious actions to work against them, such as suspending Gym activity temporarily."

"What, you mean that no one can challenge the Gyms then?" Bianca asked in a hushed voice.

"Why that?"

"Since they want prestige, possibly even the Championship for that influence, then suspending things will stall their progress too."

Elesa tapped her chin. "And since N changes his team with every Gym, that will give any rivals he has for Championship the opportunity to build their team's power and catch up. Such as you, Hilda, and a few others who are strong contenders."

"That could be good," Hilda said. Although, it depending on how long the suspension was. She
could level up most of her team, but Fedora wouldn't be out of hibernation for a while yet.

"It won't happen right away, if it happens," Elesa added. "But there's a strong chance that we will do so."

Then someone else's voice dropped into the conversation. "Bianca, there you are." Her father Peter came down the steps of the subway station and approached the three of them. "You've come a long ways."

Bianca stepped closer to Hilda. "Oh, Dad. Wh-what are you doing here?"

"I've come to see if you're ready to come home," he said. Hilda noticed that he didn't seem as sharp about it now, at least not yet. "You've been gone for a long time, but I don't want to see you get hurt."

"I'm doing fine," Bianca said, losing some of her nervousness for anger at being treated like a child still. "I mean, I still don't know what I'm going to do, but I've found out lots of interesting things I could do, and I've learned a lot more than I could have if I'd just stayed at home."

"But you've only gotten one badge in all this time," he said.

She hesitated. "Well..."

"If you don't mind me," Elesa said, her headband wires giving a particularly loud snap, "one doesn't have to be good at battling to be good with Pokemon."

"Yeah, she's even got Victini's respect," Hilda said.

"Who are you?" Peter asked, suspicious of the woman of the group.

"I'm Elesa, the Gym Leader here," she said patiently. "I've only met your daughter this evening, but it seems to me that she is a capable young lady. Besides, it's only natural for teenagers to go out and explore their possibilities. Didn't you do something like this in your youth? Most everyone has."

Surprisingly, he didn't get angry about this. Instead, he nodded somewhat calmly. "I see, it's like your mother said. Bianca, I'm sorry about how I've been acting lately. You kids seem to be growing up so fast; I didn't want to believe that you were that old already." Then he smiled. "You should be making your own decisions now, not listening to me all the time. Although I do hope that you're being careful."

Bianca blushed. "Oh, Dad... um, thanks for coming to say that in person. I didn't really want to make you upset."

"I was being childish. So you girls are looking out for each other?"

"Of course," Hilda said. Good, he'd finally come around to accepting their journey... even if it was two and a half months into it. "We always keep in touch."

"Good, that helps. I have the evening off; would you mind showing me what you're doing, Bianca?"

"Uh, sure, that'll work," Bianca said. After some discussion, she and her father went off to see the sights in Nimbasa.
"I'm not sure what was going on, but it looks like it turned out well," Elesa said to Hilda. "I need to get back to the Gym."

That gave Hilda an idea. "Oh, if that's so, may I come along? Not to challenge you; my team hasn't really prepared. No, I'd like to speak with the Gym Pokemon. If I'm going to try to sway N's opinions, it would be good to know what they think."

Elesa smiled and nodded. "Yes, that would be an excellent thing to know. All right, you can spend the evening with us. We'll even take the back way in."

Located right past the entrance gate to the amusement park, Nimbasa's Gym took the form of a series of indoor roller coasters. The cars were all sleek and the tracks were covered in brightly colored flashing lights. That much could be seen from the large windows on the front. However, Elesa led Hilda to a small hidden path that went along the side of the building and to an unremarkable gray door close to the far end. There were signs warning the general public away.

Inside the back door, they came upon a large open space that served as a barn for the Gym Pokemon. There were close to four dozen Pokemon here, all allowed to wander around freely while there weren't any battles to fight. As could be expected, they were all Electric types: Emolgas, Blitzles, even a couple of Galvantulas. Before long, an Emolga and a large greenish eel Pokemon came up to them, greeting Elesa.

"This is Glint the Emolga, and Nessa the Eleektross here," Elesa said. "Whenever you get a large group of Pokemon together, one or two always emerge as the leaders, and that would be these two in this Gym. They're actually too powerful to use in a Gym challenge, but I keep them as part of my high level team." She patted the Eleektross' head. "Nessa, Glint, this is Hilda, and Kyurem. They want to talk to you Pokemon about some things, so make sure the others are cooperative."


"Not at this time," Kyurem said. "We're just talking, not fighting."

Once reassured of that, the Gym Pokemon were quite happy to speak to them.
How to Flirt

1/31, afternoon

It was cold and snowy, just how it had been ever since Hilbert came back home nearly two weeks ago. As he'd been feeling well, he wanted to get back on the road. There were some things to do, and his uncle had already gone back to his 'job' in Plasma. But before he went, he wanted a Pokemon capable of getting him around quickly with Fly. So he was out here in the foot deep snow, searching for one that could be taught such a move. He still had an HM of it with his gear.

He was having a tough time of it, though. The Rufflets around here managed to be stronger than Madeline, so the Litwick had been knocked out twice now. While he had two other Pokemon, they were definitely not ready to handle these birds. And the three times that he had used a Pokeball, the Pokemon had broken free and gotten out of the fight. They didn't want to work with him.

Why did the Pokemon population out here have to be so tough? Hilbert needed to get to a more laid back area, like Route 1 and 2, in order to start working with his Alomomola and Larvesta. The Pokemon here seemed to have some need to be high leveled before they came out to seek Trainers. Because of that, they were notoriously picky about being captured.

"Please, I know I suck now, but I want the chance to prove myself better," Hilbert said to the flock of Rufflets that had settled into the snowy field for the winter. "I've been spoiled much too long and now that I'm on my own, there's not many that I can rely on while I try to get the favor of Reshiram. Would one of you please help me in what I must do?"

He'd been trying to listen to Pokemon, but he'd made little progress in understanding them. The three in his team he was starting to figure out better, but these wild ones were still unclear. Because of that, he only knew the Rufflets were mocking him by the way Madeline's blue flame flared and her eyes narrowed. The way they cawed and shook their neck ruffs didn't mean much to him.

Maybe his Litwick had stood up for him, because most of them flew away without warning. However, one stayed behind and approached them. It clawed through the snow and puffed its chest up. That was a boast, wasn't it? It seemed boastful. What Hilbert did know what that this Rufflet wanted him to explain more. About Reshiram?

"Hang on, I think I get it," he said, opening up his bag. He pulled out the Light Stone. Strangely, it was still heavy and cool. "This is Reshiram's hibernating form. I have it because I'm trying to prove my dedication to the truth. At first, I wanted to awaken him because I didn't like people who lied to me. But I've found out that things aren't as I thought. I just want to know what the truth is now." He put the Stone back into his bag. "I want some Pokemon to help me, especially one who can fly like you. I had to start over completely. Would you consider helping me out?"

The Rufflet cawed, but held its ruff and head down. Then it stretched back up and spread its wings out, a sign that it wanted a test battle. At his side, Madeline swayed some in a positive reaction.

Hilbert nodded. "All right. Madeline, Minimize."

After taking a few hops away from him, the Litwick compressed her body, to make herself a smaller target. The Rufflet hopped into the air and stirred up a warm dry breeze. That was Defog; he'd seen it used on TV before. But seeing it in person made Hilbert feel a little odd. That breeze seemed to pass right through his clothes and into his body, a touch of power from the Rufflet. Why was he feeling that?
Madeline called out to him, breaking out of his thoughts as the Rufflet followed up with Air Slash, a potent version of the move that knocked Madeline onto her side. Thankfully, she hopped back upright, breathing a little heavily from the damage. "Confuse it," Hilbert said, feeling that would be the safe option.

She sent an erratically moving flame at the Rufflet, muddling with his senses. That gave them a couple of safe moments to attack it (although he had her only risk one Inferno, because she might knock it out) and increase her evasiveness again before Hilbert picked out a new Pokeball and activated it. After it captured the Rufflet, the Pokeball landed in a snowbank. Hilbert waited for a moment. When nothing happened, he went over to dig it out and claim his new Rufflet.

It turned out to be a male, so he nicknamed him Regal. Between Regal and Madeline, he could easily reach Opelucid on foot without wild Pokemon forcing him back. And if he had the two young Pokemon observe, they ought to become ready to battle themselves quicker. Although he still wanted to start them in a different area.

Since he had already prepared to leave, Hilbert only needed to go by the Pokecenter to heal up his team. The nurse had cups of coffee and cocoa up for sale, raising money for some charity fund. He decided to take advantage of that and bought a drink for his thermos, as some hot coffee while traveling the snowy routes would be good. While he was chatting with the nurse, he got the feeling that someone wanted his attention. He worried for a moment that it was Banshee, but then it wasn't near as intense. This someone wanted him to recognize her.

Well, now he didn't have unnatural charisma to fall back on if he didn't remember who this person was. Hilbert glanced over at the girl as he closed up his thermos. It was a young woman, probably about his age, with long dark green hair and a jean coat with leather fringe. At first, he couldn't think of how he'd recognize her, but then he noticed a small doll hanging from her travel bag. It was of Keldeo, but it had a doll-sized cowboy hat attached to it. That was familiar, enough that he could remember her name.

"Hey, is that you Tabby?" he asked. Her name was actually Tabitha, but back when they had been kids, everyone called her Tabby.

She looked at him, then grinned. "Oh, hi Hilbert! My gosh, it's been so long since I've seen you in person. I'm amazed that you would recognize me."

"Well it's the doll more than anything else," he admitted, smiling. "You've changed a lot since I left."

Fortunately, she was amused by this. "Yes, I still have my buddy," she said, patting her Keldeo doll. "Always have and probably always will. But I knew it was you over there. I've been following talk of your adventures online, but then they stopped all of a sudden a little while ago. What's with that?"

"It's a long story," he said. "What are you doing these days?"

"Well I started to travel around with my small Pokemon team, hoping that I might be able to find Keldeo itself. That would be amazing, although I'm afraid that won't happen. I mean, it all sounds really easy when you watch the challengers on TV, but then in order to get really good Pokemon, you have to trek out hours into the wilderness. It's such a hassle, but they say that the Pokemon who hang around towns are weaker."

"You can always train up a weaker Pokemon to be strong," Hilbert pointed out.
She shrugged. "I only have a year off, not even that long due to how much work it'll be getting accepted to a university. Getting one of them up to a competent level seems to take forever. But I'm headed for Opelucid right now, to meet up with some friends."

Tabby had been one of his childhood friends, so he thought this might be a chance to see how she was doing. "Really? I'm headed there myself, for some research. Mind if I travel there with you today?"

She squealed and hugged him. "Great, I'd love that! We can talk about our engagement."

Engagement? What was she talking about? And would this lead to trouble again? "Wh-what are you talking about? I haven't seen you since we were kids."

Then she laughed and let him go. "You're still cute when embarrassed. Aw, don't you remember? One time I asked you if you'd marry me when we grew up, and you said okay if you didn't have someone else. We were six."

"I don't remember that," Hilbert said. Him being six seemed too long ago. "Sorry."

"But I've been waiting for you." Tabby smirked. "Well, that's not the whole truth of it, but I don't have a boyfriend right now. Do you have a girlfriend?"

"Not really," he said, since he still wasn't sure about Hilda. But then, this girl was paying attention to him, and he had that feeling again of not wanting to lose this light. Maybe he could see the truth better through this. "Are you going to hold me to a childhood marriage promise?"

She shrugged. "Maybe, maybe not. I'm ready to go, and you?" Since he was, they left the Pokecenter and headed west.

Route 11 was a path along uneven ground, where many cliffs dropped off to several levels, leading to spectacular waterfalls on the way. The falls were weak right now due to ice and snow clogging up the rivers. Thankfully, someone was keeping the ice off the wooden bridges so that the walk was not as treacherous as it could have been. There were many bare trees and brown grasses on this route, housing a number of strong Pokemon. But by combining their teams, Hilbert and Tabby didn't have much trouble from the wild battles.

On the way, they talked and caught up on each other's lives. Tabby had opted to continue formal schooling, but she was taking a year off before starting up university classes next fall. She was in the Pokemon League, although she didn't think she was doing that well. However, her main purpose was bonding with her Pokemon so that they could help her out better in school. She was still indecisive on what degree she was after, either crime investigation or something in the legal fields.

And he told her some of what he had been dealing with lately, although he avoided mentioning Hilda specifically. "Does it bother you that it was a supernatural reason you liked me before rather than just a normal one?" he asked her. "Some people have said no, but I don't know if they're just trying to make me feel better."

Tabby crossed her arms over her chest, thinking. "It's hard to say. Cause yeah, if you have been using Attract intentionally to make people like you, that'd be horrible. It makes me wonder how much I really knew you back then. You are a lot different than I remember."

"In a bad way?"

She smiled and patted his arm. "You're being too harsh on yourself, I think. You seem to be doing
the right thing. Hey, do you want to hang out with me for the afternoon? I don't have to meet up with my other friends until evening." She did want to make him more than a childhood sweetheart with this.

He still had to talk with Hilda, he remembered. But that thought didn't last long, as she wasn't here and Tabby was. "Sure, that'll be fine. It'd certainly be more fun to be around someone like you."

Delighted with that, Tabby giggled. "And now that you're not attracting everyone, I've got you all to myself. Want me to be a creepy stalker?"

"No!" Hilbert said, feeling a chill in his blood. She just laughed harder, so it must have been a joke. He laughed a little in embarrassment.

When he had been a kid, Giallo had occasionally brought him to Opelucid for shopping that they couldn't get done back on the bridge. It had always looked so old, with wooden houses, brick streets, and neat flower gardens. Visiting it now, it was still old-fashioned in some areas but technology was making a strong bid to take it over. Alongside the quaint century-old houses made of wood and brick, there were new houses built of synthetic materials that prized efficiency and modernity. One house still proudly held onto oil lamps by its door while the house next to it had colorful LED lights to light its walkway. And at least one brick street had been pulled out in favor of a modern asphalt road with stylish modern streetlights and a row of convenient vending machines. The least they could have done was try to blend the old and new, Hilbert thought as he walked along its streets.

"One thing I don't like about traveling is how tough it is to keep my clothes clean," Tabby said "I hope they have good clothing stores here, or I might just have to take a subway to Castelia. Although with the way this winter is going, keeping ice-free and dry is also a hassle."

"That's not much trouble," Hilbert said. Then, feeling that she'd want something more reaffirming, he added, "You're pretty enough that most people wouldn't notice."

"No, you're the one who would dazzle anyone in any condition," she teased him. "And I suppose you wouldn't care, being a guy."

He wouldn't dazzle anymore, and he didn't like being reminded of that. But he didn't want to get her mad at him either. "Hey, a guy can care about how he looks, right?"

"I suppose so. It's nice when you find one who really cares." And one who cared about being romantic; that's what her desires said. She would like him to sweep her off her feet in a real life romance tale.

But that made Hilbert feel uncomfortable. What was he doing? Did he really want to live by appealing to what other people wanted? He could imagine getting tied down to someone like Tabby and not being able to back out of it because she didn't want that. But the light that came from her, he definitely didn't want to lose that.

Thankfully, someone interrupted them by calling out, "Tabitha! What are you doing here early?"

She turned around and waved at a pair of girls approaching them. "Hey girls! I should ask you the same thing. I thought you weren't going to get here until evening."

"We were thinking that too," one of them said.

"Although we wouldn't want to interrupt if you're walking around with your boyfriend," the other teased.
Tabby laughed. "It's not like that! This is Hilbert, you know? The famous guy I've known since we were kids."

That increased their interest in him. "Oh really? Wow, I never got a chance to meet you. What are you doing hanging around her?" She shook his hand and, for a moment, she would have liked things to turn romantic too. As did the third girl. But although they didn't feel it yet, going after one would cause jealousy in the other two.

If he still had Attract, he might be able to win all three girls by that night. In the past, he would have done it. But Hilbert didn't think he could manage that now, and it embarrassed him that it had been his first thought on that. "Just catching up with an old friend, you know," he said, then shook hands with the other girl just to be fair. "But if you had things to do with Tabby, I could leave you girls to it. I have things to do here myself."

"Well if you have to go," Tabby said. However she didn't seem disappointed in that he was going. She still wanted to be his friend at least. "You have my number now, so call me sometime, okay?"

"Sure, I might do that," he said. "See you around." Then he headed off towards where the hospital was.

It wasn't long before he heard, "Don't call me that!", causing laughter from all three girls. Maybe she was going by Tabitha more often these days, but didn't mind her old nickname being used. And that parting had not only left behind the issue of trying to appease her wants, but also left some positive feelings with him in that their friendship was still there. There was probably a trick to all this, like using simpler wants to please someone else, but ignoring complex ones that would bog him down.

While on his way, no one paid particular attention to him, and nobody wanted to stop him for something. It still felt dark compared to how it had been. But no, this had to be what was truly normal: people keeping their thoughts to themselves to get through their day. He looked down at the sidewalk, but felt with his mind to see how things were. In general, there was a positive feeling in this city. People wanted, but not in a strong manner. Most were satisfied with life.

"Now I have to figure out how to be satisfied with my life," he whispered to himself. At least he was getting one thing he really wanted accomplished, and that was finding out about his past.

He made his way to the maternity area of the hospital. It was a bright and sunny place, which had the appearance of having been redone recently: the peach and pale yellow paints, the shiny metal handles, the speckled tile floors, they all had the look of new things. At the nurse's station, there were two women and a man there, discussing things. "Hi, can we help you?" one of the women asked, coming closer to the desk when she saw him.

"I'd better go to my area and clock in," the male nurse said, waving before leaving.

Hilbert went over to the desk. "Yeah, I'd like to know if I can check the birth records. I think I was born here."

"We'll see what we can do," she said. "Do you have a birth certificate from the hospital?"

"No, because I was abandoned as an infant and my adopted parent couldn't find birth records for me." Even though he was living only one town over. Maybe there was some legal issue complicating things.

That might have been it, as the nurse had to think about that. "I see. Then would you come with me
for a few minutes? I'd like to run a DNA test on you and see if you match any records."

He agreed to that and went with her to an examination room, where she took a sample from his mouth. Once that was deciphered by the computer there, it checked the hospital records for a match. As he thought, it came up with a match to the name Solace Harmonia Gropius; he had already told the nurse the name he preferred to use.

"In this case, I can make a copy of your birth certificate," she said.

He nodded, but stepped closer to see what was on the screen. "That would help. Actually, I was wondering if I could talk to someone who knew my parents. From what research I've been able to do, my mother died not that long after I was born."

"Really?" the nurse said, shocked. "That's a terrible thing. Let me check here..." she looked through the records.

"I know. I really wanted to know more about her in particular, because I know where to find my father. Kind of."

She nodded in acknowledgment, but then looked puzzled. "This is odd... I was hoping that a nurse would still be around to speak to you, because I know of a few who've worked here for even longer than that. But it looks like the ones who worked with her are no longer employed here, and I don't recognize them. Looks like Dr. Umber didn't work here for long either, just three months."

Umber... he'd have to remember that name. "That was the doctor at the delivery?"

"Yes, and the one who cared for her while she was here. Oh, and it looks like you have a twin brother."

"I know," Hilbert said. "Well thanks for confirming things, at least."

"Wait, you know," the nurse put in an order to re-issue the birth certificate, then smiled at him. "I might be able to find you some pictures, if that helps."

Pictures? He hadn't been able to find good ones in his search so far; the obituary for Stacy Gropius didn't include a photo, and neither did the birth announcement. "Yeah, that'd be great. Thank you."

He went with her to a utilities room, where a wall full of filing cabinets held onto hard copies of documents. They had to search for the right year, then go through several folders of photos that had been kept for one reason or another. But they managed to find three photos taken after he and N had been born.

Their mother was in all three of them. Stacy seemed to be a tall woman, with a similar kind of body structure to N. She had dark brown hair that was straight like straw, like how Hilbert's tended to be. At the moment of these pictures, she seemed to be quite happy, tired in the earliest one but still happy. She also looked healthy, not like she would die in less than a week.

In contrast, Ghetsis was in none of the photos.

1/31, evening

N sat on the hotel bed, observing the Dark Stone in his lap. Ever since he'd removed it from Twist Mountain, it hadn't sparked again. It was a heavy thing, cool and smooth to the touch. It had been a month now since he and Hilbert had spoken to Reshiram. How were they to get news of what the
dragons thought of them? Would the stones glow again, or even speak? Or was it something they would see in a dream? Or did he just have to wait until he could enter Dragospiral Tower?

"It should be doing something," he said aloud.

"It's a rock," his Cubchoo Clara said, putting her white paw on it. Also in the room was Frank the Gothita, who was pacing on a dresser; Allen the Swanna, who was looking at the 'human things' in the room suspiciously; and Glenn the Deerling, who was checking out the window. Glenn was missing one of his small antlers due to a particularly cruel Trainer and Clara was half-blind. Other Trainers would have overlooked the two, but N felt that this would let them feel like they did something important for once. While he didn't know what exactly had happened to the Swanna, he knew that it had been due to an abusive Trainer.

"It's the hibernating form of Zekrom," N explained to the Pokemon. "I hoped to have her blessings for my plan to make the world better, so that none of you will have to suffer. Ideally, I could do this on my own, but people are so stubborn.

"Well she is one of the gods of the world," Frank said, brushing down the skirt of his dress. It was like silk cloth, made of natural fibers the Gothitas created without knowing how exactly they did it. "She'll answer in her own time. Well since you aren't hearing from her, what are we doing tonight?"

"I don't know," N said. "We did a lot of training today."

"I'm tired," Glenn said "I'd rather just sleep."

"It was brutal," Allen grumbled, hiding his head under his wing.

On the dresser, Frank shrugged and turned to them. "I wouldn't say it was that bad. In that case, how about we go out and do something fun? N, we could go pick up a girl for you tonight."

"Why?" he asked, not sure what this was about.

"Do you have to go and make him do that?" Allen said, lowering his wing to show his eyes. "Humans are cruel despicable creatures, except for him, and you shouldn't be throwing him into a situation like that."

The Gothita crossed his arms over his chest. "You're biased. Besides, when this great separation of humans and Pokemon comes about in the future, he's going to be with the humans cause that's what he is. So he has to know how to deal with them, especially when it comes to something as vital as choosing and attracting a mate."

That was the point to the suggestion? N blushed and stammered, "B-but that's not important to my mission."

"It is important in general," Glenn said. "Especially since what I've seen of what humans do seems to take so long. I just have to win a fight or two to get a female's attention, when that time comes around. I hope my antlers grow back properly for it."

The Swanna agreed with that by putting his wings back. "When you put it that way, I suppose he won't be able to avoid it in the future. But shouldn't another male human be teaching him that stuff, not us?"

"Probably," Frank admitted. "Has someone showed you how to attract a female?"
"Not exactly," N said. "I mean, I know about that kind of thing, but they never told me how to get a woman to like you."

The Gothita snapped his fingers. "Well you ought to start somewhere. I know some of how humans go about courting. Besides, what harm could it do?"

N was worried about going into something like this not knowing exactly what to do, but since the Pokemon seemed to think it was important for him to learn, he agreed to try. Frank first had him do a touch-up shave, including using some lotion from a sample bottle he had found. While it had a powerful scent when N opened the bottle, he figured that a little would go a long ways. Then he had to make sure that he had clean clothes and that his winter gear wasn't messy in any way. He left the hotel then, allowing most of his Pokemon to go off and enjoy the night on their own. He and Frank went to the Driftveil Marketplace.

"This seems like a good place for people to be," Frank said as they entered, from where he was perched on N's shoulder. "Now what kind of female do you want to go after?"

Looking around at the open air market, this did seem like a good place to be. There were a lot of people milling about, including many around his age. There were still some fruit and vegetable stands, but most had switched over to other sales like Pokeball Seals, accessories for both humans and Pokemon, handmade items, and imported goods. Some people were shopping, but some were just chatting. Overhead, electric lights and fans kept the place bright and warm.

"I don't really know," he said.

Frank poked the side of N's head. "Well then look around at them and see which one is pretty in your eyes. Then go over and greet her. And make sure to give her a compliment to make her happy."

That seemed simple enough. Although, 'pretty' was a subjective word and he hadn't given any thought as to what would make one pretty. N guessed that it had something to do with having good proportions aesthetically. Some of the girls here were dressed up moderately, prepared more for the cold outside than trying to look impressive. Some others didn't even bother trying, like one red-haired girl who had muddy snow pants and a fraying coat. As the latter kind might not be interested, he decided to try one that had a neat appearance. The particular one had wavy dark brown hair and wore a yellow coat with white trim.

"Good evening," he said to her. "How are you doing?"

"Good pick," Frank whispered. "She has nice breasts."

In response, the girl gave him a sharp look. "Do I know you?"

N felt nervous at her reaction, but the Gothita encouraged him on. "No, but we could know each other," he said. When she narrowed her eyes at him, he smiled in defense. "Right?"

"Why are you even talking to me?" she asked.

"Uh," he needed to say something, although what that something should be... oh right, a compliment. "Because you have nice breasts."

She very nearly slapped in the face for that, maybe only stopping because she might hit Frank. N stepped back, feeling his spine tingle in fright. After a second, she snorted. "Weirdo." Then she stomped away through the crowd.
"I'm sorry," he tried to say to her, although the girl in the yellow coat didn't give any indication of hearing it. "This isn't working out too well."

"Eh, she was in a bad mood," Frank said. "You can't give up after only failing once. And we have learned something, right? That compliments about breasts probably won't work."

"True," N said, focusing a moment on calming down. He tried to find another girl, hopefully not in a bad mood too.

There was one nice looking girl nearby, but she was holding hands with another guy; probably not a good idea to try her. At a booth that was selling warm drinks, there were a pair of girls talking to each other and a third who was walking off. Well if he tried to talk to the pair, he had two chances of getting one's attention. N went up to the booth and ordered a hot tea for himself and a small juice for Frank.

"How do you get your Pokemon to sit there nicely?" someone asked him. When he looked aside, it turned out to be one of the two girls he had been going to talk to. "I tried training a Pidove to do that, but he wouldn't sit still and kept dropping on me."

"Well for a Pidove, it can't help doing that," N said. "I didn't really train him to do this. He wanted to, so I let him."

"I get to see better in a crowd when on your shoulder," Frank said, shifting his pose some.

"No way, that's a male Pokemon?" the other girl asked. "He's just so adorable that it doesn't seem right."

N glanced at the Gothita; he seemed to be acting cutesy while sipping at his juice. "They don't live with our gender expectations. He's perfectly normal for his kind."

"It's still weird. At least some kinds of Pokemon are only the gender they look like."

"The Pokemon can't help the way they are," N said, their attitude grating against him. "We ought to respect that."

Frank nudged him again. "Hey, don't get into politics."

"Geez, they aren't people," one of the girls said.

"Yeah, they can't think right," the other said.

"Some humans can't think right either," Frank said, indignant.

"You should be more understanding," N said, then left them. Those two weren't worth the effort.

"They were jerks, yeah, but if you're trying to attract a female, don't start talking about politics," Frank repeated. "That's boring."

"That wasn't politics, that was philosophy," he said. "Politics is the study of how people organize into a group and make decisions as a whole. Philosophy is the study of knowledge and understanding. The question of if humans and Pokemon think differently or similarly is a philosophical one, although I suppose it could get into biochemistry too."

"For me, politics covers anything boring that few people would talking willingly about just for itself," Frank said. "The only reason to talk about it is if it makes me right and puts me in a more
powerful position."

"That's a rather egocentric view."

"That's good, right? Cause that means my ego is at the center of things, as it should be."

"I don't think you know what you're talking about," N said. But as he looked for another girl to talk to, he noticed that people were looking at him in disdain. Was it a bad thing to be talking with a Pokemon out in public? But that view had to be wrong. They claimed to like and appreciate Pokemon, so why would it be wrong to talk to one? It was that corrupt social model that the world had going on right now, the one he had to change.

"I do too," the Pokemon insisted. "Now how about you try again."

"How long do I keep trying? This isn't pleasant."

He put a hand on his chin. "Well that's only cause you've not succeeded. You keep trying until you get a kiss. Then I'm sure you'll see the point behind all this."

Although N didn't think even that would help, there was still much of the evening left to spend. He spotted the girl that had been walking away earlier; she wore a long black coat and had blond hair with red tips. It was an odd choice for coloring, but maybe it was done to get attention. Despite that, she was sitting out of the way, almost out of sight of most here. Did she want to be approached or not?

Only one way to find out for sure. N went over to where she was. "Hello," he said, smiling and trying to look pleasant. "Nice hair."

She smiled back, but smugly. "And what of it?"

Now what? He tried, "And I thought it might help in talking to you if I said so."

"Cute try, but I don't think you're worthy of me," she replied, rolling her eyes and sitting back.

Not worthy? N had no clue that there was a factor of worthiness involved. But then as he thought on it, he'd seen some Pokemon attempts at courting fail because the courting one was deemed not worthy at the time. But this fast? "What do you mean?"

"Obviously, you don't care about Pokemon properly," she said, still smug. "Otherwise you wouldn't be a Trainer and forcing that Gothita around with you."

"Oh please," Frank said, snorting.

"He's with me because he wants to be, and he also wants to be right here," N explained, patting him lightly on the head. "And that's fine."

"It's not going to be that way much longer when Plasma succeeds."

"I know that." Feeling like he should prove himself, he took the cord around his neck and pulled out the Black King's Stone from under his coat. "I made Plasma what it is; this is just part of my current mission to have him along."

When she saw that, her eyes went wide and her face went pale. "Oh my gosh, you... I hadn't seen you up close, and so I didn't think... I, I'm sorry, my lord, I just... sorry." Then she got out of the chair and fled the marketplace; he momentarily saw that she was crying, but she went too fast for
him to catch up with Frank on his shoulder.

The Gothita put his hands in his lap. "Wow, you could have really turned that situation to your advantage if we'd known she was a supporter of yours in the first place! But then, she was haughty at first, so it's better that we saw how she really was up front. Maybe you ought to try flirting among them." He elbowed N in the ear.

"That may be improper. Of course, I don't if this is also improper."

"But you're in charge. Don't worry about it." Then he nudged N. "And don't try that one. That one's actually a male."

N was momentarily puzzled, as he'd been looking at a woman (or what he thought was a woman) with curling black hair and a very feminine shape. He was even wearing a long red dress under a white fuzzy coat that made it look like he had breasts. Although it didn't actually show any, just hinted at it. "People out here can be strange," he said quietly.

"My lord," a quiet female voice said at his side. "What are you doing here?"

Tensing, N looked over at a pale face that had her eyes obscured by thick white hair. This person had a black coat, black gloves, black boots, and black pants. Oh, it was one of the Shadow Triad. Relaxing, he turned to her. "I don't have an appointment with the Gym until tomorrow and most of the Pokemon with me were too tired to train. Frank suggested I try socializing for a while."

"You must be careful," she said.

"Whoa, creepy girl," Frank said, nudging closer to N.

N hadn't considered that, but maybe they seemed that way to others. If one went by voice, then there were two females and one male in the group. Otherwise, it was difficult to tell them apart. Their body shape wasn't entirely masculine or feminine, their faces were obscured and pale, and they concealed themselves in dull clothing that blended into the shadows extremely well. N knew that he had nothing to fear from or around them.

She went on, "That was an agent of Plasma, albeit a foolish one. But someone else may try taking advantage of your position. Your mission is also more important than such frivolity."

He flinched at being reminded of that. "The Pokemon seemed to think it was important. But I don't mind letting it go. What are you doing here?"

"We've been reassigned to be your guardians now, since you disapproved of Valerie and Carol. They have been taken care of. We're still bound to follow your orders. Call on us when you need it."

"What do I call you?" N asked. He'd never gotten to know the Triad's individual names.

"Just call us." She then vanished from the spot, only showing a minor distortion to N's eyes before not being there at all.

"Did she have to speak in such an emotional monotone?" Frank asked, rubbing his head. "She makes my mind feel weird."

"They've always been that way, as long as I've known them," N said. "But they're very reliable."

Since he wasn't succeeding in impressing any female humans, N left the marketplace and headed
for the riverside, to look for wild Pokemon to talk to. But ever since the day he'd picked up Frank, he had once again run into just a few wild Pokemon. He found none that night.
2/1, afternoon

A buzzer sounded, sending the Vanillish into a panic. "All visitors, please clear the field," an overhead speaker said. "The Large Stadium is scheduled to have focused practice for the indoors soccer team, without public access. All visitors please clear the field."

Hilda ran after her Pokemon. "Pierre, it's okay," she said. "It's just trying to get our attention."

Shuddering, he started to build up his mist again. He usually did so when feeling scared.

"Let's at least get out of here before that buzzer returns," she said.

That worked, as the Vanillish followed her off the field, back to the teleporter that led to the lobby. It was something of a peculiar feature, in that they let access that way instead of through doors. Then again, it was harder to sneak through a teleporter than through a door. Once outside, Pierre didn't seem any less nervous, so she recalled him to his Pokeball and considered what to do now. There was apparently a town that could only be reached by taking the subway from Nimbasa; that could be interesting, but it was said they had a swap meet every weekend, so it wouldn't be the best day.

She wondered how Hilbert was doing. He hadn't contacted her yet, so either he was still feeling bad or he'd gotten busy somehow. In which case, he ought to be told to relax. Hilda decided to call him, so she went to the lobby of a hotel to be out of the cold snowy outdoors. Kyurem was with her as usual, although he wasn't speaking much today.

After a couple of rings, Hilbert answered. From the background, he seemed to be in a Pokecenter. "Hi Hilda. How's it going?"

She grinned. "Great, except that it's so cold. How're you? Better?"

"Lots better," he said, rubbing the side of his head. "Well enough that I've started traveling around again. I'm in Opelucid, looking up some things."

"Ah, good luck with that."

"Thanks." Then he smiled. "So what are you calling for?"

"Oh, just because," Hilda replied. "And I hadn't heard from you since I saw you in the hospital. I kept thinking about calling you, but then I wondered if you were going to call or message me somehow."

"Sorry about that; I got caught up in things, like my two eggs hatching."

New Pokemon did need a lot of attention sometimes. Back when Hilda had helped out Professor Juniper with an egg project, there had been a Deerling which had been bounding around play fighting within a couple hours of hatching, as well as a Lillipup that hadn't done much of anything for the first week of its life. "That's understandable. What've you got now?"
"An Alomomola and a Larvesta. Plus a Rufflet I caught just yesterday. Here, check this out." He shifted his Xtransciver so that she could see a fluffy brown bird spreading his wings out, apparently playing with a large pink fish that was swimming around teasing him.

"Aw, that's cute," Hilda said, chuckling.

"I did manage to see your match against Burgh," Hilbert said, reshifting the unit so the screen showed him. "That was interesting to see Kyurem battle, but that was a cheap shot."

She laughed, pleased to hear it. "Wasn't it? But the whole thing was to get noticed for it."

He looked puzzled, a bit concerned. "Really?"

She nodded. "Yeah, because Plasma seems to be recreating local myths so that people will want to follow them. But I came out and outdid them before they had fully revealed things. I hope it did mess them up."

"Possibly, but won't you get in trouble?"

Settling into the couch, Hilda was satisfied with it. "I'm already in trouble. At least this way, people will raise a fuss if they threaten me."

"Huh, I guess that is one way to use popularity," Hilbert said, pausing a moment to think.

"What are you doing now that you can travel again?"

"I'm looking for information about my mother," he said. "I got a break a couple of days ago that I thought would reveal everything, but there's another obstacle in that there's hardly any information about her around. I was able to confirm her identity through blood tests, but it doesn't help that she died just a few days after we were born."

"That's sad," then his wording triggered a thought, "Huh, we?"

He looked surprised. "Oh, I hadn't told you about it earlier? I thought I did, but my mind was on other things that day. N is my twin brother; he had the extra information that I needed to find out who our parents are, but I haven't got back to him on it."

Over in another chair, Kyurem lifted his head, attentive to the conversation now. It was something unexpected... but maybe it shouldn't have been. "Really? But you two don't look much alike!"

"Well we're fraternal twins," he said. "Which means that Ghetsis is also my father, which stinks."

"Oh yeah, that would. Did you hear that my father turned out to be in Plasma too? His name is Rood."

"Really? Huh, that's weird. And my uncle's also in Plasma." He paused, looking bothered. "You don't suppose that this was all intentional?"

Hilda frowned. "I hope not, because that would be creepy. But can you see how they're trying to invoke myth?"

He nodded. "Yeah. Maybe it's better if I step out of all this. That would break up what... no, not quite, because N is determined. He's Plasma leader, you see."

"Yeah, he told me himself," she said. "They've been infuriating, really, but I can't be mad at him. But you know, maybe the two of us can talk him out of it, and the rest of them will follow. He
really believes, but I think he might listen if we had a compelling argument."

"True. I keep thinking that maybe he'll run into some genuinely happy Pokemon with humans and that'll reveal the holes in his argument. And... well N has invited me to go visit Plasma headquarters so he can tell me more about what his beliefs are about."

"And I've had Kyurem translating between me and Pokemon. We should put our information together and make up a plan," Hilda suggested. "See, you're in a good spot, where you can go into Plasma without committing to joining and get information no one else can. Meanwhile, I have connections to the Gym Leaders and the Pokemon League now, and they do know more. I'm sure they'd be willing to help us out if we exchange information with them."

Hilbert looked impressed at that. "Right, they would be concerned. I'm afraid that I've already promised that I won't tell where their headquarters is, but it's just that information and nothing else. It's a risk, but that could stop things."

"Yeah."

"Does he have the White King's Stone?" Kyurem asked.

"What was that?" Hilbert asked.

Hilda repeated the question for him. "Kyurem wants to know; he's been listening in, but no one else is here at the moment."

"Yes, I have it. I picked it up in the ruins of Desert Resort about a month ago."

She grinned. "Cool, so you are a king now too."

"I don't know about that," he said, blushing a little. "I just have the King's Stone, and the Light Stone. I haven't been fully accepted by Reshiram yet. Actually, he said we had to give them a month to consider things, and it has been a month. I haven't heard anything from him yet."

"Give them another two weeks before you get really concerned," Kyurem said.

Hilda relayed that, just in case. "We should meet up sometime after you visit N. That should give you time to figure out what you want to do."

"Right. Um, Hilda?"

"What?"

"I hope you're not disappointed at me not saying anything, after what happened in Castelia that night. I'm having some trouble figuring out what I want." He bit his lip and momentarily looked away from the screen.

"I was more worried if you weren't getting better," she said. "And I thought you had the power to know what people want."

He nodded. "I do, but that's only other people. It's like you can't see your own face except in a mirror, and I don't have a mirror for what I want. I'm pretty sure that I'm confusing getting favorable attention for, well, everything, now that it's not blaring at me."

"Well what's important to you?" Maybe she could help him talk through it.

"I always thought honesty and truth were important. Fame too, but it might not be that important."
He struggled for a moment to think of something. "I really don't know beyond that."

"Maybe friends? I always thought helping my friends was important."

"I don't know if I've really had friends before," he said sadly. "Well there's you now, I think."

"Of course," she said, hoping to cheer him up. "And I'll help you like any other friends I have, you know. Always got to stick up for your buddies."

That worked, as he smiled. "That's good. I'll do the same for you. Although, I'm still not sure about dating again. I hope you don't mind."

"Nah, that's okay," she said, shifting how she was sitting. A few people came out of the elevator and walked out the front door, but didn't seem to be eavesdropping. "I don't really want to get into that yet either, cause I want to be free to travel around and do lots of other stuff. If any boy wanted to fall in love with me, he'd have to be willing to travel."

Hilbert chuckled at that. "I was the same way, actually. Always on the move no matter what some of the girls wanted otherwise. You mean to just travel around Unova?"

She shook her head. "Nah. Maybe for now, but I'll go out and see other regions someday. You made Hoenn sound really awesome."

"That's cause it is," he said, seeming upbeat again. That was a lot better than getting him sad; Hilda was glad she managed that. "There's just so much diversity in the landscapes that sometimes you have to wonder if you're still in the same region, even if you've only been traveling for a day. You'd want to get a Pokemon that can use Surf though, if you have any intentions of seeing the eastern half."

"You want to show me around there?" she asked teasingly.

"Maybe," he said, then turned a little more serious. "Hey Hilda? Have you kissed anyone before me?"

"Yes," she said without hesitation. At his look, she giggled. "What? It was a guy I dated for a little bit last summer, but it didn't work out cause he was lying about things. But I didn't do much more than that kiss."

"Oh, well at least you didn't lie about that," Hilbert said, turning a little pink.

They talked for a little while longer, agreeing to meet up again later on.

N stood by a large red pillar of the suspension bridge. Nearby, the Swanna he'd nicknamed Allen landed on the railing. He was free now, along with the Cubchoo and the Deerling. While the other two had not argued against being released in the places they were caught, they both seemed greatly saddened at parting. It still made him feel bad, so he felt strongly that he should just keep walking down the bridge at this point.

But then Allen spoke up. "Then you're going back on your mission?"

"Yes, of course," N said. "Thank you for your help."

The Swanna dipped his head. "Thank you for taking me."

That was puzzling. "Really? But I had such trouble convincing you to come."
"That's because I thought all humans were bastards," he said. "My mother had told me years ago that someday I might find a human friend who would take me in and ask for my help, and that I should help my friend because we might become so close that our hearts would always remember each other. But I had gotten to the point where I thought that was useless dreaming of because it couldn't happen. You though, I've only known you for a few days, but I think my heart would always remember you. Will you come by this bridge again?"

"I might," he said. He would always remember the Pokemon he'd met. He just wished that it could make him feel happy.

"I hope I get to see you again, then," Allen said. "I'll be happy on that day." Then he flew off over the river.

Was he implying that he'd be sad until then? N put his hands on the railing and watched the Swanna fly off until he vanished from sight. Then he had to rub his eyes so he didn't start crying. "I hate these days," he said. "Too many goodbyes." But he had one more Pokemon to let go, and for that he had to cross the bridge to near Nimbasa.

It wasn't snowing today; N's boots crunched on salt that had been left to keep ice down. While it discolored the snow, it wasn't as bad as the piles that came up on vehicle bridges. Those turned black in proof of the flawed technology around today. If he knew more, it might be good to try solving that problem. But he had a more important problem to tackle.

A treacherous thought in his mind wondered if it was as important and pervasive as he thought it was.

The world was wearing down on him, like Giallo had suggested. He really did need to get out of this for a short time and clear his mind of all these doubts. If he went into Nimbasa, he could take a subway to Opelucid and get back that way. Rune was probably still following him too, so maybe if he had something to give the Sigilyph in exchange for that favor, he could fly him back.

N headed past the fence and into the forest to let Frank go in the area he had been in, but there was another person there, a girl in a pink coat. "Hilda? What are you doing here?"

He felt nervous given what happened last time they met (but why should he? He had been right), but she turned and smiled. "Oh, hi N! Fancy meeting you out here. I wanted to train my team in the stadiums, but they're both closed to the public for team practice. So I came out here instead."

"And that's dumb because I was going to get the ball in that basket this time," the Scraggy with her said.

"What about you?" Hilda asked.

"I came back here to release a Pokemon," he said. "I beat Driftveil Gym earlier today."

"Really? That's wild. I mean, hasn't it been barely two weeks since you beat Nimbasa? You have to be a really awesome Trainer to make that kind of progress." She seemed genuinely impressed. And, not still mad at him?

"You defeated me last time, though," N said. Although his team had been designed to beat Elesa, so that had given him an advantage in the Gym and a disadvantage against other Trainers like Hilda.

"Probably cause your team was made to defeat the Gym, not me," Hilda said, eerily echoing his thoughts. "And hey, I'm sorry about getting mad at you then. You were trying to help, I suppose,
but some Plasma folks have been harassing Bianca about Victini and that was strongly in my mind at the time."

That made N feel relieved. Maybe he could still win her over and convince her that his views were right. "That shouldn't be happening any more, nor the other incidents of us forcefully taking Pokemon. People should realize the reality of the injustice and choose to do so on their own. I've told them to stop that."

"That's great." Then she smiled. "Oh, and I convinced another person to let his Pokemon go free."

She what? That didn't make sense. Why would she convince someone else to do the right thing, but not do so herself? She still had her Pokeball holder next to her Xtransciver on her left arm. "You did?"

Hilda nodded. "Yeah. I got to thinking about what you said, so I talked Kyurem into acting as a translator for me, so I could question the Pokemon themselves." Then she explained about how a musician had been accidentally causing his Audino painful headaches because he played in a loud band.

Good, that was one of those bright points to this rough mission. Too bad it hadn't been N himself to speak to the musician. "That's good. I could forgive someone like him, as it seems like he did end up caring about how his Pokemon felt."

"Yeah, he did. But you know," she waved over at where Nimbasa was, "I've been talking to Pokemon like that most of these past couple of weeks. And all the rest of them seemed pretty happy and healthy in captivity. It was good that we could help the Trainers talk to their Pokemon and solve smaller problems and misunderstandings. That Audino was the only one who was really happier away from her Trainer."

"There are much worse cases out there that must be stopped," N said. "But thanks for your effort. Will you let me help you, then?"

Disappointingly, she shook her head. "Nah, I'm good. Kyurem's watching over me."

N glanced around the wooded area, seeing some Pokemon watching them but not the one he expected. "Yes, but he's not here now."

"He's off hunting," she said, not worried. "He's been more concerned lately, and he's even eaten cooked meat more often so he doesn't have to leave like this. But he really isn't happy like that, so I told him to go on and go."

"I'm protecting her now," the Scraggy said, showing off a fist while keeping his loose skin up with his other hand.

"So Tarzan here is watching out for me," Hilda echoed.

N came closer to her. "But who would protect you from Kyurem? The myths and histories tell us that he is a destructive force that comes to destroy powerful corruption in Unova, but he will destroy a lot more in doing this, forcing everyone to start over. And just look around you." N grabbed the end of an tree branch and easily snapped it off. It was coated in ice. "This winter has been terribly cold, with more snow and ice than any person living here can remember. It has to be the influence of his being awake."

"It might be a passive effect of that," she admitted. "But I have confidence in him. He told me what he's up to, maybe not all yet but enough that I trust him. Besides, have you seen how he acts around
Mimi? That tells me he's not all bad."

"If you know," N started to say, thinking he might get it out of her. But something in his memory called for his attention. "Wait, Mimi? That's the Minccino's name, right?"

"Yeah, that's her. She came from Kyurem's dreams."

Dreams? Those insubstantial visions that haunted a slumbering mind? "Came from his dream? How do you know?"

She seemed to think it was no big deal. "I was in that dream when she came to the waking world. But she's the only Pokemon that I've had come out of another Pokemon's dream. Mostly it's just berries and little items."

"You can see into the dreams of Pokemon?" N asked, now being the one who was amazed at her. That was a power that was mentioned a few times in myth; maybe there was something to the stone pendant she was now wearing after all. "That's incredible."

"Actually, it's technology," she said, patting her bag. "I have a device which was a gift from Dr. Fennel, who's been trying to view and interpret the dreams of Pokemon so that we can better understand them. But I've only really remembered and can figure out three of the dreams I've seen so far, so there's still a lot to do."

"I had not expected that technology to be functional yet," he said, putting his hand to his chin. Seeing the dreams of Pokemon might help. But at this stage, it would be better to work with what he had rather than trying to learn a complex new angle. "But I could see Mimi coming from Kyurem's dreams; that would mean that one myth is true."

Hilda raised her eyebrows. "Oh really? Which one?"

"The one about an old tradition in Opelucid, to bring about spring. It was always seen as a peculiar one, as it didn't fit in with the rest of the tales about Kyurem. But if the Mimi you had came from Kyurem's dreams, it might have some truth to it."

"Huh." Then her eyes brightened. "But you like science, right? Isn't it always that if a scientist has a theory and something goes against that, then the scientist must be willing to admit that the theory is wrong? So if that one story is different from accepted beliefs and Mimi proves that it could likely be true, then the accepted beliefs might be wrong."

N bowed his head. "True. But it doesn't mean the idea that Kyurem could be dangerous to you is completely false."

"Well thanks for worrying. And hey, I have a great idea! Could I give you a Pokemon to take care of?"

Give him a Pokemon? What was she planning now? "You want to give me one? But you know that I don't keep them for long."

"I know, and I don't mean to sell him to you either. You were right about that, most likely. But this guy," she pulled one of the Pokeballs off of her holder and enlarged it to release the Pokemon. "This is Pierre; I picked him up in Desert Resort and apparently Kyurem can't understand him."

A Vanillish appeared by Hilda's side; his posture suggested anxiety and fear. His black eyes darted around, but soon stared at N. "You have green hair!"
"I can understand him," N said.

Pierre shook himself, sending ice crystals flying. "Time falling like earth-born ashes, no blood here. Why move forward? It lurks yet, swimming through the earth. It was a mirror at the wrong tick. Fear the right tick."

N gaped at it for a moment. "On the other hand, no, he's not making sense."

"He can make sense about once a day, but that's it," the Scraggy commented.

"I saw his dreams once and it was an awful nightmare," Hilda said. "Very bloody and lots of nonsensical images. I can't really use him on my team, but even without a translator around, I can tell he needs help. There's a chance that Kyurem intimidates him, but you shouldn't. Would you take him and figure out how to help him? If you can; it'd be like a trade."

That didn't really work with his mission. He wasn't supposed to keep Pokemon long so as not to hurt them. But, this one was suffering. And Pierre being in a Pokeball would help to keep him close. "I don't know if I could trade, as I only have one now, and I shouldn't..."

But then an idea came to him. The Gothita was fairly normal and he had already said that he'd probably seek out another person to grow stronger with. Like with Victini, N could let him go, but couldn't guarantee that he'd stay free since he didn't want that. Then there was how happy and loyal Hilda's Pokemon were. Even this Scraggy, whom N knew was a recent addition, his body posture in relation to her showed that he respected and trusted her. They were already friends and teammates. If there was anyone outside Plasma that N could trust to treat a Pokemon well, it was Hilda.

"You don't have to trade," Hilda said. "I know how to hand his Pokeball over as a gift."

N glanced around again. It was just them and the Pokemon out here. "Actually... I know you treat Pokemon well. Let me check, though." He released Frank. "Look, I know I was going to release you, but I was wondering..."

"I was listening in," he said, putting his hands on his hips. "So this the girl you've been talking about? Is she a good Trainer?"

"You got that right," the Scraggy said smugly. "She makes us a team, a powerful team, and we'll kick the asses of anyone who says otherwise."

"Fidelity, compassion, loyalty, passion, charity," Pierre mumbled, his eyes half-closed now.

"She's good enough to get Kyurem's loyalty," N said. "Do you mind going with her and watching her closer for me?"

"A spy for my team, huh?" Hilda said. Was she teasing him again or not? "Well as long as I know up front."

Frank smirked. "To my mind's eye... she's interesting. And she'd fit my wants better than you. Still, you've been nice. Okay, I can handle that."

N nodded. "All right. He's okay with that; this is Frank, by the way, and this would be Hilda. I hope you don't mind..."

But instead of thinking it was strange (or maybe because it was), Hilda broke into a grin. "Oh, Frank, really? Oh man, that's perfect. I'm surprised that you'd pick that, though. Mom would never
let me watch the entirety of that movie."

The Gothita chuckled, but that didn't mean anything to him. "What movie? He told me that was a nickname he liked, so I called him that."

"He chose it? I guess I'm going to have to be careful around him then. Do you know how to make a trade or should I show you?" She came over next to him.

As it turned out, trading Pokemon rather than gifting them was a long process. Gifting erased the previous Trainer's DNA data, while trading kept both the old and the new for some reason. Nothing seemed to happen to Pierre and Frank as they were still out, but the two Pokeballs became wrapped in a pale light, then connected through the light. N's arms tingled from the power of that exchange. After a minute, the lights disconnected and reabsorbed into the Pokeballs. On the screen, it noted that Frank was now owned by Hilda.

"Good, that's done," Hilda said, then was interrupted by a chirp. "I wish there was a progress bar for that trade... ah drat, my holder's battery has got low power. I thought it'd be good for the rest of the day."

"You didn't see and feel that light?" N asked.

"What light?"

"It was something you can only see by your mind's eye," Frank said. "And she doesn't have the sense for that."

"Oh. Don't worry, Hilda, it shouldn't matter to you. I'll see what I can do to help Pierre."

"I want to help," Pierre said, distressed for a second, then depressed the next. "Never to be. I'll sing a lament for you."

"Good luck with that," Frank said, kicking his way through the snow to check out Hilda's bag nearby. "I'm only disappointed that I never got a girl for you that night."

"That wasn't important," N said, feeling his ears and cheeks get warm.

Unfortunately, Hilda picked up on that. "Now what's got you all shy all of a sudden?" she asked, going to poke him but deciding against it last second.

"It was something silly," he said, glancing aside and hoping she'd lose interest. "Frank tried to get me to attract some girls last night."

Hilda started to laugh, but put her hand to her mouth and tried to stop, making her cough. "S-sorry. That was just weird."

"It was. And I don't see what the point of it was."

"Oh really?" she asked, definitely teasing him now. "How'd you do?"

N thought about saying nothing more, but the words came out anyhow. "Well don't tell anyone else about it, but not too well. I had a hard time getting any of them to speak to me at length. Frank said to try to get one of them to kiss me, but that definitely didn't work. I don't see why he thought that was important."

"How's that not important?" Hilda asked, looking to him curiously.
N brought his hand up and tried to put those thoughts into words, but wasn't sure how. "Well I don't see what the point is. It's just another form of touch. And the whole thing was just to pass the time because none of my team wanted to train anymore that day and it wasn't time to sleep yet. I mean, I didn't know what I was doing anyhow, so it was a waste in the first place and since it didn't get anything accomplished, I just don't think that..."

And then his attempt to explain himself was interrupted when Hilda kissed his lips.

It was a strange thing, only lasting a few seconds. He'd never liked physical contact with other humans, or at least he'd always thought that way. This should have been the worst offense yet, as she was right up close to him with one hand on his left shoulder for balance. And where he could feel her breath before she dropped back from tiptoes. Instead of distressing him, it was actually enticing. It made him feel that he wanted to keep her close.

"See any point now?" Hilda asked, smiling impishly.

"I'll take that for a success," Frank said, winking at them.

"Possibly," N said to Hilda, making her laugh. It was really stupid and he knew that; it probably didn't even qualify as a joke. Yet he still found himself laughing with her and feeling happy about that.

"Never know until you..." and out of nowhere, there was a small explosion nearby. They all turned immediately to the sound. "What was that?" Then there was a scream from a woman and Hilda took off to see what was happening. Her Pokemon followed, while the Vanillish started up a more frantic rambling of fright.

"Don't worry, Pierre," N said, going over to him. But he was worried about Hilda going straight for the trouble. Should he recall the Vanillish, or work on calming him down and then seeing if she was okay? It would have been no issue earlier today, as he'd help the Pokemon. But now his mind felt torn.

"My lord," a calm voice said. The air vibrated for a moment as one of the Shadow Triad materialized. "You are needed back at the castle."

The scent of fire was in the air; Pierre was shaking, slowly drifting away from both of them. "What, now?" N said in irritation. If they hadn't called him back in all this time, then they could wait until he had his Pokemon calmed down and made sure that Hilda was all right.

"Right now," she said. "It is your responsibility. Recall him and take my hand."

His responsibility. It had to be important then, if terribly timed. "Fine. It'll be okay, Pierre."

"Does it start again?" the Vanillish asked in a whimper. N recalled him and took the ninja's hand.

The air blurred in a disorienting way as their surroundings changed from the cold snowy forest to the warm and bright interior of the castle. "Ghetsis will meet with you shortly," she said. "I will inform him that you have arrived. Please stay in this area." Then she vanished.

There was no one else in the area, not that he could see or hear. What could they want him for? N paced for a moment, then called Pierre back out to speak with him.
Don't you just hate it when random explosions interrupt a special moment?
2/1, evening

There was a rap on the desk. "Lord Ghetsis."

For a moment, he felt a spark of anger at being interrupted during his speech review. It broke the mental sequencing he used to memorize such things. But the serious pale face watching him told him that it was a worthy interruption. The Shadow Triad would bide their time unless it was important. That didn't mean he'd go any easier on them. "Why have you given up your disguise as that girl...?" he paused, looking for the small signs of which one this was, "Carol?"

"It was not functioning as required," she said, her voice a pitch between the male and the other female of their group. "He does not trust them, but he trusts us. I have brought him back; I had to set a firebomb on a trailer to do so." She then explained what had happened when N went back to the Nimbasa area to release a Pokemon and unexpectedly met up with Hilda. Because she had been asked not to hurt that girl, the ninja had been unable to interrupt until too late.

Previously, the Triad had kept him informed daily of what N was up to and he had let the boy be distracted from time to time. That was part of the risk of sending him out into the world alone when he had little experience in normal society. However, knowing of those distractions gave him ways to nudge N back into what he was supposed to be doing.

But Ghetsis knew that this incident required immediate action. No matter how careful the Triad were in making sure N followed his path, they couldn't stop him entirely from talking to Pokemon that would favor humans and put holes in what Plasma was about. That was acceptable because his motivation was to help the Pokemon and he'd rationalize until it fit his preconceived notions. Even befriending those outsiders could be acceptable as his motivation shouldn't waver. But this incident where Hilda had kissed N? That opened up the potential of N changing his motivations and sending him off the path Ghetsis had made for him.

It was time to set his King straight.

N's footsteps echoed on the stone floors. This place was bright, clean, and regal, with large airy spaces. But while the scale was much grander than a human one, N felt comfortable here. Not as much as he did in the forest, but this was a good safe place. "No one would hurt you in here. Once they know I'm working with you, they'll leave you be."

Near him, Pierre the Vanillish turned about slowly, looking around at everything. "Cleanliness means someone is hiding. Steps blend into dirt but there is no dirt here. Is there some mark or record of life? Buzz buzz, hum hum."

"It's almost like your thoughts can't stabilize and you say whatever is on your mind at that immediate moment. Or do you sense things that aren't there and react to them?" But how would N tell if one of those ideas was the answer? Pierre might not be able to communicate what he felt. Although he was an Ice type and shouldn't have paranormal senses, maybe this was a unique situation.

The Pokemon looked at him, his body a glossy white like the polished floor. "Past is always present, present is elusive. Here is new. Here is too big." Then he retreated to his Pokeball.
If he wanted to be away, N wouldn't make him stay out. It might be hard to train him. Then again, he only had three gyms left. It might be time to put together the last team so that he could keep up on their training as they progressed. The plan had been wait until his seventh Gym challenge for that, but if he needed the time to work with Pierre on his personal issues... and a Vanillish would be a big help for Mistralton, so perhaps adjusting the planned team for that to include him...

Then his thoughts strayed back to a few minutes ago. He'd already taken off his coat and winter things, but he could vividly recall the chill of the air contrasting against the warmth of another person's breath. It had been such a small gesture, that kiss, but that wasn't matching up against how it had made him feel. Did it have a greater meaning as well? If he had a chance to take Hilda away somewhere so that she was safe, and so that he could be with her, would he take it even if it meant leaving his plans behind? There was a terrible temptation to do just that.

"The greater good is worth personal sacrifices," N whispered, reminding himself of something that he had said to others to teach them the right way of things. Other people had listened to him, many of them sacrificing much for the greater good. So why was a strong portion of his mind saying that maybe the words weren't right?

There was a click as the hall door to the west wing opened up. N stopped pacing and headed over there to where Ghetsis was. "Good to see that you came so quickly," his father said, smiling at him and waving him to come to the west hall. "We have the results of a project that you should see."

"Is this going to take long?" N asked, taking hold of the door and closing it as he came through. "There was some trouble when I left and I don't want to make people worry by completely disappearing." And he didn't want to keep worrying about Hilda and that explosion.

"Don't worry, that trouble isn't significant," Ghetsis said, leading him towards the stairs. "Besides, as we've said before, you need some time away from the corruption of the world. It must be causing you unnecessary conflict in your mind and heart, as well as clouding your mental vision."

He started feeling uneasy. Ghetsis had a way of piercing right to the real problem, but it would be N's own fault if he'd fallen astray. Had he? "Their social expectations are set very strongly. I had thought being confronted by the truth of injustice would be enough, but they're mired in it, the humans and the Pokemon. They believe in it strongly enough that it's hard not to believe them."

"It's how they were all taught. Most people simply can't open their minds enough to face reality. But you realized those wrongs early; you're very lucky in that way. Have you managed to convince anyone during this time?"

Feeling his face get warm in shame, he looked down (but at least he could pretend it was to look down the stairs where they were going). "None that I know of. I have an easier time when you're there with me, but I thought I'd be able to convince at least a few people. I end up talking to those who defend the normal ways most of the time, and they can articulate things better than me."

They continued talking while heading down to a lower level. Ghetsis kept talking positively to him, hopeful for the future. Yet it made N feel increasingly bad. "The people we have see the wisdom in your ideals and they have great faith in you. I would like you to speak with a group of them a little later on, as that would inspire them to take up our mission with more care and thought. When they continue to hear things indirectly, it can lead to miscommunication and mistakes. You would help correct some who are starting to stray from the proper path."

But he was having doubts himself; was his faith not enough? If that was happening, then he could led those good people into worse mistakes. That would make him unfit as a leader and unworthy of Zekrom's attention. How could he be unfaithful to his own ideals, the things he'd realized clearly
when he was just a child? The right to freedom and the right to not come to harm. But he had just
given a Pokemon to another person who would keep him. For more than just a moment, he thought
he might be willing to give this all up for something else entirely. How could be be so weak?

"You are a strong person, but even the best of us must sometimes retreat to review the situation in
calm contemplation," Ghetsis said.

He had such faith and confidence in N when he might not deserve such respect.

They arrived at the lowest level and went into one of the rooms there. It was a research lab, one
that he'd been in for science lessons when this level had been completed. All around the room,
there were pieces of equipment that were keep in excellent shape, as well as notes on current
information and research. N had felt that science would be important to help humans live
independently of Pokemon, as well as teach others to think with reason rather than tradition. But
the particular scientist in here, Dr. Umber, he sometimes got into research subjects that were best
left alone. There were two Pokemon in the room with him.

Feeling like he'd composed himself enough to at least look calm, N nodded to Umber. Ghetsis
shook hands with the scientist. "I thought that it would be best to give your progress report with N
here," he said.

"If that's what he wishes," Umber said, nodding and taking the interruption gracefully. "I've been
looking to disrupt the fossil regeneration service given in Nacrene. It won't be easy at this time, but
when our ideals begin to push into the public conscious it will be easier. I managed to acquire these
two Pokemon from them."

"They're prehistoric Pokemon?" N asked, looking at them. The practice of reviving such Pokemon
infuriated him, since there was no reason but vanity to bring Pokemon into a time when they
should not live. On the edge of a counter, there was a brightly-colored feathered Pokemon whose
beak and feet were textured like rough stones. It was holding its wings low but not tucked in,
observering all that were in there with sharp black eyes. On the floor, there was a tortoise Pokemon
with flippers for limbs and a rough dark-gray shell. It was within a water bubble, but it was
keeping to one place and wary.

"Yes. This red one up here is identified as an Archen, while the blue one down there is a Tirtouga.
I've been studying them in this lab and considering what to do with them. They may unbalance the
natural environment or be unfit to blend in, but while they are alive, we must respect them as
such."

"Certainly," N said, moving closer to the counter where the Archen was.

It raised its wings and opened its beak, letting out a soft caw. "What?" it was saying, "I'm tough.
What?"

"What?" the Tirtouga echoed. Rather simple creatures, perhaps.

"They're uncertain of their environment," N said. "You look tough, Archen."

Umber looked over a paper on his clipboard. "I observed that, but I haven't had them long. I would
like to see how they act in a natural setting, but I may need your assistance to limit problems. There
is another fossil-Pokemon related project that I'm working on as well, in particular about changes
in genetic sequencing."

"Will you be doing revival in that project?" he asked. That definitely wouldn't be good in Plasma's
"No," the scientist said. "It's about the progression of species evolution as a certain kind of Pokemon progressed over the centuries into stronger and more refined forms, until they became so specialized that they were unable to adapt in an extinction-triggering event. It's a Bug type that has some distant relations surviving today, in particular the Scyther. I want to study the fossil sequence and see where they lost the ability to adapt."

"What good would that study do us? Aside from the information itself, of course."

"My Lord, there are some Pokemon existing today that depend on human intervention for personal evolution and continuation of their species. I hope to find clues about which types today might face difficulty in adapting to a life separate from humans, and then finding indirect ways to assist them."

Considering that, N nodded. "That's thoughtful of you, Umber. I just don't want you reviving any prehistorics and causing the Pokemon trouble."

"Of course, I always keep that in mind now," Umber said. That was good, because he was being more thoughtful in what he was studying. Previously, he had wanted to do genetic adaptations on living Pokemon and made N furious with that. That project had seemed more likely to cause harm than help.

They spoke for a while longer with Umber, then left him to continue studying the two fossil Pokemon. Ghetsis then brought N across to the east wing and up a level in order to meet with the people he was to talk to. "They're going to be eager to see and hear you," Ghetsis warned him. "They look up to you greatly for your writings and deeds."

"What should I speak to them about?" N asked, his nerves squirming at the thought of facing a situation like this unprepared.

"You should remind them that our goals are to help both Pokemon and humans live better, more peaceful, and more respectable lives." He pointed out some things in particular that he might get asked about and what the best course for answering would be.

Once they entered the east wing, they began encountering more people, especially the lower level followers that were new or didn't have much authority within Plasma. They stepped aside as if it was common for them to encounter Ghetsis here. When they recognized who he was, though, they became awestruck, whispering to each other and not certain of how to approach someone they held in such high regard. N tried to ignore it, but it made his skin prickle.

"Remember to be confident," Ghetsis said quietly to him. They were being followed, as those who had been in the lower hall wanted to see what their King was doing here. "You represent our highest ideals, and you don't want them to feel disillusioned and hurt."

What if they had a good reason to get disillusioned with him? N bit his lip, but then corrected himself of that. There was a method to this: keep a straight posture, look ahead or into the eyes of those he spoke with, keep shoulders relaxed, keep his hands from making nervous motions. Ghetsis had taught him about that when he had been young, to help him in formal discussions and meetings. Also, keep emotions in check unless it would help emphasize a point; that was one of the harder things to learn, as emphasis in different places could alter meanings. N didn't have the knack Ghetsis did for knowing exactly where emotional emphasis was most potent.

The second level of the castle's east wing was a lot more open than most halls. This was because it was a large meeting area for Plasma. And, there was a large number of followers in here. Once N
was recognized, they all became hushed and excited, looking right to him, someone who had considered abandoning them although there was no way they could know that. He knew that, and it felt like a thorn within his chest.

"Good evening, all of you," N said, stepping ahead of Ghetsis and into the center of the crowd. Those from the lower level closed in and he was surrounded. "It's good to be back with you, even if temporarily. I have come back for personal meditation to pull away from the polluted influence of the society outside these walls, but we may speak freely tonight, together."

There were some cheers and clapping, as well as many returned greetings and gratitudes. They were glad to have him back. Their guiding light was back with them, he heard somewhere in the sound. He was the soul of the group and his return breathed life back into the hidden castle. While he should feel honored and glad to have their love, he actually felt horrible.

"I am honored you show such love for me," N said, as that would encourage them more than speaking for his full emotions. "But please, I still have a long ways to go to prove myself and fulfill our dreams of a better world."

And they showed great approval of this. One young man spoke through the crowd, "Lord N, if I may ask you something..."

"Go on," he said, nodding. "That is why I am here with you now."

"Why are you having us slow down on the release of the captive Pokemon? We don't want to cause their suffering to continue when we could end it now, when we could make them happy with freedom."

N had to stall a few seconds to keep his conflicting emotions from rising, so he brought his left hand up to his chest. "I don't want to make them suffer any longer either," he said, trying to make the words he was saying stick in his mind louder than those he wasn't saying. "But we can't end this now. Public opinion is still against us and starting the mass release now was a mistake. Those on the outside are still clouded by tradition. They can't see what they're doing wrong. And in that deluded state, they misinterpret our actions and see us as the bad guys. We want to show our most positive side to them, show how much we care for and respect both Pokemon and humans. Both sides can be much greater if they adapt to our ideals, but if we force our views, they will not accept them."

Fortunately, they accepted this. A treacherous thought wondered if they were the deluded ones. But that could not be so. It was that irrational guilt at letting his Pokemon go, the very real pain he felt on seeing those Pokemon upset, that was getting to him too. In reality, he should be grateful the people listened and try to solve his issues to better lead them.

"How are you doing in bringing the truth to people?" a woman asked.

Horribly. Hilda had managed to get a Pokemon freed before he had and she didn't fully believe in Plasma's ideals. However, he was here to encourage, not discourage. "I am still making myself known to these people without revealing who I truly am. That I am your King is secret, so I must prove myself to them as if I were no one. It's been hard to speak fairly with them when they dismiss me based on who they perceive I am. That should not be an issue much longer."

"Are you going to be summoning Zekrom after all?" another woman asked.

The Dark Stone still wasn't responding to anything, which could mean that he'd failed already. "That would be the best way, bringing her into the modern world at least long enough to convince
the others that our ideals are right. I have been taking the necessary steps to do so, but I have been made aware that it will take some more time." Although he should have heard something by now.

As he continued to answer questions, more people came, even the other Sages. While there were a few discussions going on at the fringe, N was the center of attention. Ghetsis stayed nearby, mostly observing but occasionally speaking up if the current subject was something N wasn't certain of. It helped some to be in a group that already shared his ideals, to enforce the right thoughts by speaking them. But those other thoughts and doubts kept coming up, contrasting with what he said. That couldn't be good, but now wasn't the time to settle that. How long was he supposed to do this?

He got through answering a question of how the Pokemon were faring out there and decided that he had to distract his mind from recalling their parting words. He turned and stepped towards the crowd where the other Sages were listening in. "Giallo, good to see you again. How's Hilbert doing?"

"He's made a remarkably swift recovery," he answered, as some of the crowd parted between them. "You can't tell anything happened to him now. He went back to traveling, but I can get back to him about his visit."

N nodded. "That's great. We should bring him here soon."

"Is this a friend of yours?" someone asked.

"Hilbert's my twin brother," N said, causing gasps of surprise and wonder from those who hadn't heard. "We met on the road and discovered that. You might have heard of him as Hilbert Godfrey, a famous traveler and Pokemon Trainer. But he has decided to pursue Reshiram and in doing so, he has had to confront the wrongness of what he has been doing. I hope to convince him to fully realize our truth and join our efforts. It would be better than fighting against him."

That was met with approval. "This is so much like the old legends," a man said. "You can do it, that's absolutely certain now. And we'll always be here in support of you."

N wished he could be that certain. There were some more things asked of him and discussed, but he was having an increasingly hard time forcing himself to stay. While they had true faith in him, he was finding it hard to find faith in himself. He trusted the gods to do what was right. But himself? If he didn't set himself right soon, then he was going to fail and everything that he had built his life up to be would be as nothing. And he'd drag down all the people now surrounding him. Maybe he deserved that failure, but they didn't. They had given up so much for him.

As the conversation continued, the tension built in his chest. The faces of his followers began to blur together, their words blending and losing meaning. His heart pounded and N felt he had to get away because he might get sick. Or something would happen. What did happen was that the light bulbs overhead suddenly exploded, intensifying the light for a half-second before plunging them all into darkness.

There were yelps of surprise and confusion around him as his head suddenly felt tender, throbbing from the chaotic noise. The tension continued to build, his heart continued pounding. For a moment, N nearly cried out from the strange panic within him. But right before his will broke, a feeling of intense clarity filled his mind. "Don't be afraid!" he called out his followers, quieting them to greater effect that Ghetsis had managed.

And then there was a brilliant flash of light flooding the room.

All N's tension and pains rushed away as suddenly as they had built up, leaving him with a strange
sense of silence and stillness. But that was only within. Without, his followers were gasping, giving amazed exclamations, and staring in awe at him. He didn't feel all that strange with them doing that, just wondering why they were doing that. And wondering why the room looked odd. The lights above were still broken, but there was light all around them. Oddly, the shadows lay in strange patterns, nearly missing on the faces of those closest to him, falling long and dark all in a circle from one source.

He was at the center of that light source. N looked down at his hands and realized that they were glowing. Not just them, but his whole body was emitting pure soft light, like from the full moon. He looked over his hands, not understanding why this was happening but feeling that this wasn't going to hurt him.

Seeing that he didn't know what to do, Ghetsis came to his side and took control of the situation. "I believe we should end this meeting for now, my Lord, to figure out what's going on."

N nodded. "Y-yes. It was good to speak with you all. Please go back to your duties and studies. Oh, but someone clean up the glass shards and replace the lightbulbs here."

"Please, my helpers," Concordia's voice came through the air. She was indicating a few of her staff to deal with the damage. Most of the followers left for the stairs or the door to the central wing, in order to head back to their rooms or whatever work they had to do. But Ghetsis stayed by N's side, and the other Sages came up to them.

"N, how are you doing this?" Zinzolin asked, reaching for his arm.

He brought it to his chest before he could be touched. "I don't know. Something was happening to me, and then it burst out like this when the room went dark."

"Are you feeling all right?" Ryuko asked, concerned. "Before the lights went out, I noticed that you weren't looking well."

N yawned. This day was just... so much had happened. There was the happiness of a good conversation with his Pokemon friends, the usual stress of defeating a full Gym, the sad release of the Pokemon, the pleasant surprise of Hilda's kiss, the worry about what had exploded, the temptation to abandon Plasma, the onslaught of guilt when he realized what he was thinking, and then this strange light. Even having been through it, it was hard to believe that one's emotions could shift so wildly over just one day. "I'm tired. There was something weird here," he put his hands to his chest, "but it all cleared up with the light. I think it's just, I'm tired."

They agreed to let him rest for the night, and talk more tomorrow. But Ghetsis walked with him back up to the level where N's living quarters were, in the central area a level below the throne room. These few rooms were his alone, such as the private dining room where only he and his guests would eat. However, the hall was still somewhat public, as people sometimes passed through from other areas, or Concordia's people would come in to clean.

"Ghetsis, would you come in here for a moment?" N asked as they stopped outside his bedroom. "I, I have to say something to you."

"If you want me to," he said.

N's room had gone through a few different designs before he settled on what helped him sleep best: an approximation of the forest that he had lived in in his early childhood. There was a mural of a forest on all of the walls, more artistic than realistic. With the primary colors being green and brown, all of the furnishings were wood, stained in natural tones. N's skin was still glowing, but he
turned on the lights as he didn't know how long that would last.

"I have missed you being around," Ghetsis said. "I didn't anticipate how the atmosphere of this place would change without your presence."

Some of the tension returned on hearing that. N had been wondering if their relationship was too cold and formal. If he felt that way, maybe it wasn't so bad. Maybe Ghetsis had been uncertain socially at one time and he had to work hard at being normal (actually, better than normal) too.

"Things have been different than I anticipated as well. The hardest things aren't what I thought they would be at all. The thing is, I've been having doubts about what I'm doing. A great many of the Pokemon with Trainers seem happy and going with my plan keeps making me miserable."

"You shouldn't be having doubts," Ghetsis said, a stern tone in his voice.

"I know I shouldn't," N said. "Things were so clear when I left in November, but then so much has happened and I've heard so many different ideas. I wanted to make the Pokemon happier, but then they seem happy with humans and sad to leave me. It's hard to know what I should be thinking and feeling sometimes."

Ghetsis looked at him critically. "It seems that you are getting muddled by moral relativism. It seems like a harmless pattern of thought, but it is quite dangerous. Morals are absolute, either right or wrong; you've always known this, correct?"

"Of course," N said. Things weren't half-wrong or half-right; that was just nonsense.

He started to pace in thought, emphasizing his points with gestures. "Now when we are discussing morals, it all seems so clear. The right and wrong of things are plain and obvious. But when you get out into society, people will try to confuse you with complexity. They will say, this may appear wrong but there is a reason there that makes it not so. But this is trickery. It is like when a child steals some food, and people will say, 'oh, he had nothing to eat and no money to buy, so that is not so bad'."

"Then the problem would be why the child was hungry," N said, thinking that it was pretty bad if a child had no food. Unless it was in punishment for something, in which case the child just had to deal with it and not commit further wrongs. He used to get that for a few days at a time, once a whole week.

"No, the problem is that it is still theft, and the theft must be punished," Ghetsis corrected. "Stealing is wrong under any circumstances. If you accept this one theft, then that says that you will accept some theft, and more things will be stolen. More people will try to explain away things that are wrong as being right for the circumstances and before long, morals will no longer mean anything. There will be anarchy and no one will respect the laws. People out there prefer having shades of gray to clear cut morality because it excuses their own selfish behaviors, and that has led to the wide-spread corruption out there. You need to remember that morality must be absolute in order to be effective and that any arguments to the contrary are excuses. There is no other way; you have said this yourself."

"Right. I really do need to consider things, to figure out how to erase those doubts." Maybe some time in the forest would help clear things up.

Ghetsis nodded. "You must also not let yourself be bewitched by a girl's kiss."

N could feel the color drain from his face at that. "Wh-what? How did you know about that?"
"I know," he said. "You've been letting yourself get distracted with mundane and frivolous things such as a party or an evening's idleness. It's that girl Hilda, isn't it? I've had the Shadow Triad look into her. She has few clear morals and does things without thinking seriously about them. She most likely did that just to get a reaction out of you, with no real feelings behind it."

"How can you be sure about that?" N asked. While he wanted to agree with that because that would make things simpler, a part of him still wanted to believe that something that had made him happy should be something good. Especially when he had been sad before that due to parting with his Pokemon friends.

"Women are treacherous to those of us seeking a moral life," Ghetsis explained. "They will tempt you to give up your principles for just a few minutes of happiness, and then control you after that. It doesn't help that your own body will work against you in fighting the temptation. If you feel you must pursue that kind of thing, you're better off seeking a more submissive and obedient girl, one who already agrees with your beliefs. It will work out much better that way."

"Is it that bad?" On seeing the look of Ghetsis' face, N looked down, ashamed. "The Pokemon I had seemed to think it was fine, even something important."

He came closer to N. "She's already gotten you to compromise when you traded Pokemon."

"But this one I got needs help," N said, releasing Pierre as he thought of it. Almost immediately, the Vanillish began staring at him. "And she takes good care of her Pokemon, so I thought..."

"That's proof that they're muddling your morals," Ghetsis said sharply. "You must be absolute in such manners, all or nothing. Make one exception and that will lead to more, which will eventually make things no different than if there were no rules at all. You should have refused that trade the moment it was suggested."

"Oh my god, you're an angel," Pierre said, in awe of the glow that still remained. Then he was pressing himself against N's shoulder and crying, bewildering both of the humans for a moment.

"Hardly," N whispered, thinking over what Ghetsis was saying. Still, the Pokemon was upset for some reason; he put an arm around the Vanillish's icy cone.

Ghetsis headed for the door. "You ought to get some sleep, think over things. We'll talk more tomorrow." Then he left, shutting the door behind him.

With a sigh, N headed over and sat on the edge of his bed, still holding onto Pierre. "I seem to have lost my way without noticing. No wonder Zekrom hasn't responded yet. I need to set myself straight and get back to what's important." Maybe he even had to avoid going to the forest. Even if he would like that, he needed to make up for what he had lost. "I need to protect Pokemon like you."

"Things change fast," Pierre said. "They said my mind was always broken from the moment my egg broke. But the demons, they didn't come until later, when the knife was pulled out of her heart and the blood that remained after death turned into the demons who made it so that I can't forget her screams. Then they never stopped hunting me and I kept running and hiding and it didn't work. Angel, give me peace."

Things did change fast; his concern over his own progress left his mind as concern for this Pokemon took over. "You saw someone murdered?" N asked quietly. The glow on his skin seemed to be fading now.
Pierre shuddered and kept crying.

N put his other hand on the back of Pierre's head. "I'll try."
2/1, evening

The trailer kitchen on Route 5 was on fire. Hilda and her two Pokemon came out from behind the fence in time for a second explosion from inside. Out in front of the flaming trailer, there was a young woman who apparently had been knocked down into the snow. "Hey, can you get up?" Hilda called, running over and crouching down to take her arm. "Let's get away from here."

She pushed herself up partly; her nose was bleeding. "Huh?" She glanced back, but as Hilda tugged her away, she got up and went to the other side of the route with her. Hilda was going to grab her DSD to get a towel for the girl's nose, but as she put her hand on her hip, she realized that she'd left her bag back in the forested area.

A few minutes later, the Nimbasa fire department was out with a small truck and a squad of firemen and Pokemon to handle the trailer. A paramedic had looked over the girl, named Valerie, and determined that she was fine aside from hitting her nose and even that wasn't bad. A police officer spoke with them; Hilda explained first what she had been doing. They wouldn't let her go into the wood after her bag yet, but they did say that they would look for N, wherever he had disappeared to.

When Valerie was done being checked out, she spoke with the officer. "I needed to call somebody, so I ducked into the trailer's entrance for some cover. It was dark and I didn't see anybody in there. But then there was this explosion and a mass of fire inside. I tripped on the stairs and next thing I know, she was talking to me about getting away."

Hilda was going to wait there until they let her go by, but Valerie decided to stay with her so it wasn't boring. As far as fires went, this one was small and not interesting to watch, although the trailer would be badly damaged. But why had someone thrown a firebomb at it? It was weird. At least Valerie was the only one hurt (and not by much) and the fire crew was getting it under control.

"Hey wait, you're that girl with Kyurem, aren't you?" Valerie asked.

She nodded. "Yeah, that's me. I let him take the evening off."

She laughed. "That's nice. I wasn't really sure, you know? Cause the only time I saw you before was at Castelia Gym, and I was primarily there to watch Miles Riches battle. He is so hot, and usually he's a lot better at battling. It was such a shame when he lost."

"I hadn't heard much about him before," Hilda said.

"You haven't?" Valerie clutched her arm. "How so? The Riches family is like the best in Pokemon battling in Unova! They don't participate in the League much because they say it would be unfair of them to be competitors, but they enter all kinds of world tournaments and win so much. And Miles is the rising star in the family, you see, and a lot of people expect him to surpass his grandfather who is like one of the top living Trainers ever. How could you not hear of him?"

"Well I have heard of the Riches, but not Miles in particular," she said. "I didn't get that interested in following them. They're really that good?"

She nodded. "Oh yeah, the best. Miles won the Orange Island Tournaments when he was twelve, seriously, oh, and he won a Roulette Battle Tournament in Sinnoh when he was ten. And the only
reason he's doing the Unova League now is because people have been saying that the Riches family can't do that because supposedly they use enhancement drugs that the League makes illegal, which is totally not true. All those people are just jealous. And you know the deal with Alder not taking challenges in the past couple of months because of his Pokemon dying, I mean geez, that's so unprofessional of a Champion, you know? So Miles stepped up and said that he would take the Championship from Alder and do things properly.

"His Pokemon did die," Hilda pointed out. "That's an awful thing to go through."

Valerie frowned, twirling her hair in her fingers. "Yeah, I guess so, but you'd think he'd get things back into gear by now. But anyhow, Miles has been blasting through most of the Gyms so far, doing really great up until Burgh somehow bested him. I heard the only person going through the League that fast is that N guy who nobody knows anything about. But Miles would beat him."

For a moment, Hilda wondered if Valerie had missed her telling the police officer that her friend N was strangely not around after the explosion. It wasn't a common name, after all. "Maybe," she said, considering how N chose his teams.

Valerie brightened. "Oh hey, you know what? The Riches usually keep their family secrets to Pokemon training to themselves, but you know, sometimes they take a shine to another Trainer and help him or her do way better than before. I tried getting their favor once so I could get close to Miles, but it was a disaster. You might be able to get them to like you, and then they could help you use better strategy, or sponsor you for some of the global tournaments. Although you wouldn't be able to beat Miles."

That was an interesting prospect, having a chance to go to a global tournament. Then she could put on a showy battle that so many people would see. Hilda thought that her strategies were working fine so far. Still, there might be something to learn from the Riches. "They live over in Undella, don't they?"

"Yeah, in the biggest mansion in Unova. It's really beautiful over there too, even during the winter, with a large variety of Pokemon living in the surrounding area. I just have things to do here around Nimbasa and Driftveil. I might go back over there in the summer, although it'll be crowded then."

"What happened here?" Kyurem asked, managing to approach silently despite the deep snow.

"It's not my doing," Hilda said, then laughed. "Somebody set that trailer on fire with a bomb. I have to wait."

"Miss!" One of the fire crew came over. "We have this under control now and it won't be spreading to the woods. You can head back now."

"Okay, thanks! Maybe I'll see you around, Valerie."

"Maybe. Take care." She got up and headed towards Nimbasa.

Valerie did go back into Nimbasa, but she slipped into an alleyway as soon as she could. Once she knew she was out of sight of the residents, she brought a contact lens case out of her purse and took out the pair she was using. They were patterned like normal green eyes, covering up her natural eyes which were yellow in color, a slitted shape instead of round. Then she carefully detached her wig and shook her white hair to fall as it preferred to do. After changing her coat, snow pants, and boots to items of a more subdued black, she was ready to return.

Seconds later, she was within the castle, in the hidden room she and her siblings stayed in while
here. The two of them glanced to make sure it was her, then went back to their training. She put the bag in a cubby. "That's done," she said, dropping the perky and airheaded tone she had taken on as Valerie. "I gave the girl the idea."

"It's good to be able to drop that act, isn't it?" her sister said. "Too much work to emote like that."

"You didn't choose an act much different than what is natural," she retorted, then clucked her tongue. "Sorry. It took effort to learn."

"You were the only one of us who could have pulled off that personality," she said.

"Certainly." their brother said. He preferred not to speak; it took him the same amount of effort to do so as it took her to be Valerie.

"How is N doing?" she asked.

Her sister indicated some screens that were showing the meeting hall on the second floor. "He's manifested. The lights are broken in that room."

She went over and observed the view. N was heading to the stairs for a higher level with Ghetsis. And even by the camera's view, she could see a brighter glow over the young man's body. "Are we going to inform him?"

"We will discuss it with Ghetsis. Likely not."

She nodded. Ghetsis would make the decisions. They would carry them out. That was how it always was and how it would always be.

When Hilda got back to where she had been, she pulled her bag out of the snow and began checking the contents. It didn't look like it had been messed with. N wasn't here either. "We were talking up until the explosion happened, and then I went to check it out."

"You went right for a dangerous situation?" Kyurem asked in disapproval.

"Hey, I heard someone scream and I wanted to help. Thankfully she wasn't that bad off." She brought out her DSD and scrolled through the list of its contents. Digital storage was usually safe, but she had left it for several minutes.

Frank explained something. Kyurem nodded. "So he was taken off by some form of teleportation. And who are you?"

"I traded Pierre for him, from N," Hilda said. "He's a kind of spy, but I think it got the Vanillish into a better position to be helped. That, and I think helping him will help N figure out something else he can do with his talents. Give him some more options."

"That could work out." He paused for a moment, listening to the Gothita. Then he snapped, "What?"

Hilda looked over and saw that Frank looked scared, wide-eyed and trembling. And Kyurem was furious, scowling at her. "What?" she asked, feeling for a moment that maybe she should run. But he shouldn't hurt her.

"I thought I told you that I don't want fighting about my siblings, because that's most likely part of what got them killed," he said. "Why did you kiss N?"
"Well it was set up so perfectly," she said, feeling a mix of anger and embarrassment. Why did he have to react badly to that? "He was telling me how he had trouble with other girls and didn't see the point in kissing, so I kissed him. It was just a little one, just a few seconds. What's up with you? It's not like that's going to ruin everything."

That didn't seem to convince him; his fist was clenched even. "It's something that could tip the scales. You've already got Hilbert interested in you, and N might not have thought any deeper about you but now you'll have his attention. That's going to make them jealous of each other and that could escalate into ruining everything. And something like this happened the last time I left you alone for more than a few minutes."

That was back when Hilbert had taken her out for coffee in Castelia. "I talked that out with Hilbert already, and it's not like I've said that I love either of them like that. I'll just make sure that both of them know I just want to be friends and it'll be all right. Besides, what do you know about romance?"

"Not much, but not knowing means that I'd rather err on the side of caution." He relaxed some. "But I do know that small actions can have far reaching consequences, and it is impossible to fully tell how someone will react to such things. You had best make sure that they understand your intentions clearly. Although with how quickly you act, I'm not sure if you know the intentions of your actions clearly."

"I'll be fine," Hilda said, still a little mad.

Later that night as she was trying to sleep, she thought about what had happened. She tried to work herself into a proper anger at Kyurem overreacting. But the more she thought on it, the more she saw what he meant. She had only kissed N because he told her he hadn't been kissed and was trying to argue against it. Really, the set-up seemed just right (and it had been nice to kiss him too). But given that N had not been kissed before that, it was more likely that he'd read too much into it. Also, when she thought back over her conversation with Hilbert earlier that day, he had agreed to her keeping to friendship verbally, but there was still a definite interest from him. And she'd probably muddled that up even further in talking to him about traveling.

She was being too impulsive.

2/2, early morning

It was barely dawn when Regal the Rufflet dropped Hilbert off in Mistralton. The sky was a deep violet, only showing blues to the east. At this time, the town seemed deserted, with most of its residents still asleep. Light snowflakes tumbled through the air. He let Regal fly off to investigate something in the trees while he brought out his Litwick. "Madeline, we're not far from your home in Celestial Tower. I'll release you from the Pokeball's bond inside the center, then take you up there."

"Huuu," she replied, shifting her posture in what was probably an uncertain stance. Then she shook herself. She didn't want to go free just yet. She wanted to go to the tower, and then decide things. Something back at the tower was necessary to check.

While that would take a little longer, he was okay with doing as she wanted. "All right then, we'll go there first. Regal, would you stick with us this time?"

After waiting on the Rufflet to fly back, Hilbert walked alongside Madeline as she hopped out of town and towards the tall tower to the north. Off to the northeast, he could see an even taller tower
showing over the rim of Twist Mountain. That was Dragonspiral Tower. Maybe later today. But this morning, he had a promise to keep to Madeline.

Celestial Tower was a relatively recent monument, made of greenish-white stones and built in honor of departed Pokemon. As they approached, a bell on top of the tower rang out, a clear note that somehow caused Hilbert to feel a moment of regretful sadness. But it wasn't his regret; what was he feeling?

The bell was only rung once, so Hilbert soon put it out of mind and entered the tower. There was a man near the doorway, quietly reading a book. This attendant, as it seemed to be, glanced up and nodded to him. "Welcome to Celestial Tower," he said, keeping respect in his voice. "Please be respectful of the departed souls and others who visit them. There is one other in the tower, but others will likely come in a few hours."

"All right," Hilbert replied. Then he turned to his Litwick. "Where should we go?"

Up. They climbed up three levels, getting attention from other Litwicks as they did so. By the time Hilbert got there, close to forty Litwicks seemed to be in the room with them, watching. Madeline floated over to one of the headstones that recorded the deceased Pokemon, then gave a long and strangely beautiful call.

It was answered from within the walls; a Lampent entered the room. Like most of the others here, it bore eerie flames of violet, not blue such as Madeline. A few of the other Litwicks came closer to where Madeline was, while others backed away. The Lampent then spoke at length, with Madeline occasionally answering.

Again, Hilbert wished that he could understand Pokemon like N did. He listened to the sounds they made and tried to make it all he thought of. He watched the movements of their flames, their bodies. While he could glean that something rather important was going on, he could not understand what. If only he had had a Pokemon living with him in is early years, maybe he could grasp this situation better.

And then his mind seemed to burst with emotions. A jealous anger, a relief tinged with remaining concern, a bravery that mingled with nervousness, an unexpected pain, and that regretful sadness, he seemed to be feeling it all at once. But why? And why did it all seem so, how did he think of it, colorful?

"Kuu ruu li ka?" Madeline asked, coming back over to him in concern.

Hilbert realized that he didn't see her concerned. He felt her concern for him. When he looked around, he realized that he had fallen onto his knees (which hurt due to hitting the stone floor, explaining at least one emotion). He also felt a puzzlement, a sympathy for a stranger but not knowing what was going on with that stranger. As he was the primary stranger here, he realized that what he was feeling what all the Pokemon around him were feeling. Desire, hate, love, and want were lights and darks to his mind; something about this place had intensified his ability so that he knew exactly what others were feeling like colors that infused light.

"Don't worry about me," he told Madeline. "I, I think I'll be okay when I figure out how to stop being overwhelmed."

"Shuuu ra," she said, coming close and nudging his cheek with her nose. Then she went back over to her previous spot and apologized.

Hilbert remained kneeling, although he put his hand on a headstone for support. He still couldn't
understand the words, but feeling the emotions helped him understand. When he focused on the
group with Madeline, he figured out that one of the Litwicks with her was her mother. The
Lampent was like an elder, a respected member of their community who dealt with arguments and
advised the others. Madeline was asking permission of the elder and her mother to leave the tower,
as she hadn't been permitted to when Banshee had captured her.

However, some of the other Litwicks were not happy with this. They felt she should be punished
for leaving without permission, even though she couldn't help how she left. A few were jealous,
presumably because they had permission to leave but hadn't found a human to capture them. On
the other hand, Madeline's mother seemed happy and proud that she had found a human she wanted
to help. The Lampent was listening to all of this, keeping strong control over his emotions so that
not even Hilbert could tell what he thought of this.

After letting the debate go on for a few minutes, the Lampent caused his flames to intensify,
silencing the Litwicks. He spoke again. Hilbert watched their motions with his eyes and felt their
emotions with his mind, but the specific meaning escaped him. As best as he could tell, the
Litwicks were given a test if they wished to leave the tower, and Madeline now had to pass that test
to get full blessings from her mother and the elder.

Hilbert felt curious about this. How many other people... no, how many other humans had been
able to see something like this? The Litwicks were busily organizing themselves, deciding who
would do what. Before he could figure out more about it, though, the Lampent came over to him.
"Penna huu fiizz hu," he said, holding his candle arms away. He wanted to know what was going
on with him.

How much could the wisdom of a Pokemon like this help him? Hilbert wasn't sure, but he
explained about his powers. "I don't know why exactly my talent opened up further like that," he
said at the end of it. "I wished to be able to understand you, but then knowing the emotions of all of
you was a lot to deal with. I'm going to have to relearn control over that sense."

The Lampent considered him, then pointed upwards. Looking there, Hilbert realized that whoever
was sad was up another level, not here with the Litwicks. Maybe whatever was going to happen,
the Lampent didn't want a human to see.

"I think I understand," Hilbert said. "You want some of your traditions hidden unless you really
know the outsider. Okay, I'll go see who's up there." On his way to the stairs, he passed by
Madeline. "Good luck, my friend," he said, patting her side.

She hummed, grateful for his words.

He wondered for a moment what was going on with his abilities. His psychic instructor told him
that it was possible for such powers to develop further, but that it usually took time and dedicated
study. Not sudden unexpected awakenings that came about because of a strong desire. Even
Pokemon usually needed a time of practice to fully acquire new moves, or to upgrade moves in a
sequence like Bubble to Bubblebeam. Unless there had been something blocking him from making
full use of his empathy sort of skill. Maybe his narcissism had done that.

But on the fourth level, Hilbert found a small group near one of the headstones. The sadness was
more pronounced as it was coming from more than one source. There was a large older man there,
with distinctive bright orange-red frizzy hair and a heavy tan coat. With him were a few Pokemon,
including a Volcarona. "Good morning, Alder," Hilbert said.

"Morning," he replied, looking over and not particularly wanting him to stay or leave. "Don't recall
who you are, but I seem to think I've seen you around before."
To be polite, he offered a handshake. "It's been a long time; I'm Hilbert Godfrey."

Alder smiled a little and took the gesture. "Ah, yes it has been years. Huh, wouldn't really connect you to that self-absorbed brat. If you'll excuse me for saying that."

He shrugged. "It's fine. I know I was a pretty rotten one now, but I'm trying to improve."

"Good to see you paying respects to the dead too," he said, then got up. "I ought to be heading back for today."

Hilbert brought his hand up. "Actually, we shouldn't leave quite yet. The Pokemon who live here, the Litwicks, they're doing something on the level below us. And I'm pretty sure they don't want to be interrupted."

"I see. Any idea of how long they'll take?"

He shook his head. "No, but my Litwick is involved, so she'll come back to me when it's over."

"All right, so you came for her." Alder looked over him, apparently thinking of something.

"Right," Hilbert said. "I would guess you're here to visit your friend."

His posture sagged at being reminded of that. "Yeah. I come here around dawn when I do; less people around." He turned back to the headstone where several names were listed, momentarily touching 'Jinx the Scolipede'. "First one I've lost to death, although I've had to release a few. It's been tough getting used to him not being around anymore."

From the feel of his emotions, there was something that he wanted to talk about but was wary of doing so. Hilbert made a guess at how to handle this. "Do you feel responsible for his death?"

Alder looked to him in surprise, but that seemed to be the key. "Yes, I do. Huh, you're the first person who seems to understand that, even though I didn't say anything yet. A lot of people have been telling me that it was a bad accident and there wasn't anything I more that I could have done. But I could have."

"Kruuu," the Volcarona said, trying to comfort him. It flew closer to Alder in support, as the others drew near too.

"I hadn't heard what actually happened," Hilbert said. It likely wasn't a pleasant tale to hear, but he wondered if it might help to just listen. And there was a morbid curiosity about this incident that he couldn't deny was there.

Alder closed his eyes, recalling things. "It was a battle between me and the current Sinnoh champion, a match that really wasn't worth more than regional pride. But you know how it is; lots of people get worked up about that kind of thing. It was a challenge for us, but we all put our best efforts into it, to make the people of Unova proud."

"At a critical part of the battle, Jinx was facing a Medicham, a tricky match-up on both sides. He took a hard hit at a segment joint. He managed to take it out, but then I saw that he had a large crack in his body plates as an Empoleon was brought out. For a moment, I nearly called him back, but Jinx gave every indication that he still felt good enough to battle. So I let him give a heavy hit to the Empoleon; he got knocked out in the next attack, but my next Pokemon was able to take the Empoleon out in one more hit, which pretty much won the match for us."

"I went to the on-duty nurse as soon as I could, since an injury that breaks a Bug type's exoskeleton
is unusual. Only it turned out much worse than I had first thought: Jinx's skeletal plate had been knocked out of alignment, torn over halfway around his body. I knew at that point that I'd have to retire him but I thought he might live by forming a new skeleton and shedding the broken one. By the end of that day, the doctor found that his wounds were infected and he died the next day.

"But I'm certain that the Medicham's hit couldn't have damaged him that badly. It had to be that plus the Empoleon knocking him out that made it that extensive. If I'd pulled him out as soon as I saw there was a crack, I might've lost the match and there's a chance I would have to retire him anyhow, but Jinx could have lived." Alder looked back at the headstone. "As a Trainer who battles, I have to make the major decisions for our team and be accountable for everything that happens to the Pokemon with me. Of course I'm responsible for his death. I made a bad call and Jinx had to pay for it."

"That is a heavy burden to have,"

Hilbert said, trying to imagine how that might be with one of his four current Pokemon. "But you have a responsibility to all of your Pokemon, right? They seem pretty worried about you."

"Caruuu," the Volcarona agreed.

Alder petted her head. "That's true. And Jinx would be pretty worried too if he saw me like this. Still, I worry about if I can keep up... oh, never mind." He bowed his head. "Thanks for listening. Say, have you ever rung the bell at the top of this tower? They say that it soothes the souls of the Pokemon who rest here."

"No, I haven't," Hilbert said. When he'd been traveling around Unova as a young teenager, he had not been interested in visiting a cemetery. "I heard it earlier; it has an unusual tone."

He nodded. "That's something else about it. Supposedly, it can speak for the soul of the one who rings it."

Put that way, it was intimidating. What could a bell like that reveal? Maybe something terrible. Then again, refusing to do so might hint at something terrible he was trying to hide. Despite his apprehension, Hilbert went with Alder up one more level to reach the top of Celestial Tower.

Unexpectedly, there was someone else on the rooftop when they emerged, a woman in heavy blue jeans and a brown coat styled like a pilot's jacket. It took a moment for Hilbert to recognize Skyla, as she usually didn't dress this conservatively. Then again, it was cold with that light flurry today (thankfully it would get above freezing, so the snow pack might melt off). "Oh, good morning Alder," she said cheerily as they walked up a ramp to the bell's platform. "It's like being in a snowglobe up here, isn't it?"

"Good morning, Skyla," he replied. And he did seem to be in a better mood.

But something puzzled Hilbert. "What are you doing up here? The groundskeeper told me only one other person was in this tower this morning."

For a moment, she looked uneasy. Then Alder laughed. "What, you find it odd that the Flying type Gym Leader got up a tower without being noticed by people inside? We're always finding her in high places if no one has seen her arrive yet."

Skyla smiled and laughed too. "Right!" She turned and looked down into the air filled with swirling snowflakes. "I like to come up here in the early morning if I have something to think about. It's peaceful and calming, plus the view's magnificent."
"Is it about the proposal going around the League?" Alder asked.

She lost her smile and nodded. "Yeah. I can see what they mean, but it's going to affect so much. Maybe not as much as what could happen if..." she looked at Hilbert and decided not to speak on that subject. "Anyhow, I ought to open up soon. Good to see you in a better mood." She took a couple of steps away from them, then cupped her hands around her mouth. "Westa! Take me back to the Gym!"

There was a call from out in the snow, then an Unfezant flew by, picked up Skyla with Fly, then took off into Mistralton.

"You're right, that should have been obvious," Hilbert said. But why had she felt like she'd been caught doing something she didn't want to admit to? It had only been for a moment, but he was certain it had been there. Since he probably wouldn't find the answer to that question, he went over to the bell and looked it over.

It was made of a pale kind of metal, that or it had been plated with silver. Hilbert wasn't sure how to judge how well a bell was made, but this one certainly looked impressive, as tall as he was. What he could tell, though, was that there was some kind of power within the bell. And, he could see those little blue threads again, coming in and out of existence like sparks.

"It may look heavy, but it's keenly balanced," Alder said, coming up and putting his hand near the bell. The blue threads passed right through him without reaction, like they had with Hilda. "Just give it a push and step back."

"Okay," he said, putting his gloved hands on the bell and doing as told. It swung out and began tolling; it was moderate uncertain note, that gave out a feeling of loneliness. It was like a mirror into his emotions, giving him a picture of them like how he sensed desire and now emotion in others.

While it was still swinging, Hilbert looked at the strange lines. What was their meaning? He captured one in his hand and tried to see it.

In the warm spring breeze, the bell was silent. It was swinging, but it made not a sound. Hilbert frowned. "What's the meaning of this? It can't handle me?"

An old man with him looked uneasy. "It should make a sound. Unless it means that..."

"What does it mean?" Hilbert demanded to know. But after the old man hesitated, he simply rolled his eyes. "Pretty lousy bell if it won't make a sound." He turned and began to leave.

But at the ramp, he met with Hilda. "Oh, hi," she said. "Paying your respect to the dead too?"

Seeing her only sharpened his foul mood. "What do you mean, 'oh hi'?"

"Just being polite," she said, shrugging.

"What the hell is going on with you?" he asked. "I heard that you kissed N the other day. I thought we were going out."

Hilda gave him a critical look, crossing her arms over her chest. "Oh yeah, I thought we were too. But then I saw you making out with that crazy pink-haired girl. I figured that we were over with and you just hadn't told me yet, so I went for a guy who seems nicer and less likely to play around."
He tensed in anger. It was the truth, but no one else had seemed to care, much less tell him something like that to his face. "Him, nicer? He's the leader of Team Plasma; they're not nice."

"I think he could do better things and just hasn't realized that yet," she said. "And compared to you, except when you're giving sugar-coated but all too often empty promises, yeah, he's nicer. Now are you going to say anything reasonable for a defense, or just depend on your sparkle to excuse everything?"

Hilbert started to reach for a Pokeball (and was tempted to attack her directly), but then the old man spoke up, "Aaah, please, I'm sorry, but please don't disturb the dead. Some of them have suffered much and need the peace."

After glaring at them both, he turned and headed down the tower. A short time later, Hilda must have rung the bell. It came out bright and clear, full of energy.

She's too much work, he thought. It had taken him a lot of flirting to get her into adoring him, while he could get other girls to practically worship him in much less time. Yet the challenge of earning her love was somehow more alluring and rewarding, even now when she was trying to break away. Especially now.

He would get her to adore him again. For that, he had to do something about his rival. For Hilda, for the dragons, for the love of the region... he had to settle things with N.

Alder had his shoulder. "Hey, Hilbert?"

He shook his head. "Oh sorry. It's... it's a power I don't have control over yet. Did you say something?"

Thankfully, he just smiled at that. "You spaced out there for a few moments. Although I was saying..." he looked at the bell. "I heard from one of the keepers of this place that this bell seems to respond to the state of love within a person, on multiple levels. You want to be loved, but also want to be in love."

"You think that from the bell?" he asked. Although that seemed right.

"Anyone in mind?"

He immediately thought of Hilda and blushed. Scratching his head, he said, "Yeah, I guess so. But she said she wasn't interested in love at this time. She just wants to be friends."

"Maybe it's the time to prove that you're reliable, someone she can depend on." Then he winked. "But what could I know? Good luck." He then patted Hilbert's arm and waved to one of his Pokemon. "Might as well fly away myself. Nice seeing you."

"You too," he said. "Um, but just out of curiosity, if the bell responds to love, is it possible for it not to ring? What would that mean?"

Alder paused. "You know, I asked that of the old man myself. Apparently it has refused to ring for some people. But it only does so when the person is incapable of love, or only has love for himself, or herself. I wish I knew why it does this; it'd be an interesting thing to know." He then had a Braviary fly him and his Pokemon off the tower.

"That must be true," Hilbert said, considering what he had seen. He looked back at the bell and tried to catch another vision, but they eluded him this time.
A few minutes later, Madeline came up through the floor. "Li li huu ra," she said, bopping her body in a happy manner.

"Did you get permission to leave with me?" he asked, then added, "And do you want to?"

"Hoossuuu." She bowed, giving an affirmative and strangely respectful response.

Hilbert smiled and picked her out of the air. "Great! We'll all work on improving ourselves, together."

And that pleased the Litwick more than any kind of flattery could.
"We can agree on many of the best ideals: never harm another, do not steal, do not lie, help others above helping yourself, avoid jealousy, avoid anger, avoid greed. But while many people say these things are good, they rarely do them. Focusing only on themselves or those closest to them, people continue to use and abuse others, both human and Pokemon. This is where corruption builds and breeds, where the world has gone terribly wrong. Speaking words without meaning, doing things that are against the true ideal, this is where the ruination of a soul begins. And a ruined soul becomes... next to worthless."

Ghetsis shifted his stance. For a moment, N went tense, expecting a rebuke for faltering in the reading. They were in a small stark room in N's area, one he used to use for study. Now, he was using it to refocus himself, as it had few distractions. He had to make up for his pause quickly, so he started reading aloud quicker.

"One must reconnect with the knowledge of right and wrong that everyone has. But society works against the morel, no, moral p-person to misle... misguide them and make them compri- compromise their..."

"Calm down," Ghetsis said sternly. "You should know all this already; you wrote that book."

"I know," N said, lowering the book for a moment. Ghetsis had helped him out by ghost-writing it, but he had come up with the majority of its concepts and explanations. And they had done it when he had been seven. "I don't know why I knew this with such confidence back then, but now I have doubts."

"Because you let yourself get caught up in the corruption outside. You let yourself get weak and lose faith. But I believe you are not too far gone yet. You can set yourself right. But you have to work at it. Now that you have felt doubt, it will be much more difficult to hold onto a true faith."

"Should I have stayed here instead?" he asked, looking up from his chair.

Ghetsis stepped closer to the desk and leaned on it. "No. More people will believe if you are out there showing them the proper way to be. Besides, there's no way to go back to what you once were. You have to focus on your goals, properly this time. But you were right to confide in me alone. We should not let the others know of your struggle, or their faith will falter as well. I understand you and I know how to help you. Keep a confident face in front of others."

N felt uneasy about that. While he did have a point that such a deception may be necessary, he didn't like that it had come to doing so. If only he'd been stronger... "How do I do that?"

"You did moderately well the other day, in the meeting hall," he said. "Although you started to lose control towards the end."

He looked down. "But it felt horrible. I wanted to get out of there."

Ghetsis rapped his knuckles on the desk, a signal that he shouldn't be looking away. "If you don't want people to know how you really feel, just smile at them. It may help you feel better, and it will
make them think that you feel fine. N, look at me. Smile."

While he could look back up at him quick, smiling wasn't easy. N felt awful today, his emotions tugging at his mind so much that he was almost physically ill. He felt guilty about being tempted without realizing it, he felt guilty about remembering the Pokemon he had captured and let go, he felt guilty for letting his ideals get compromised, and he felt guilty about Hilda... well, an awful lot about her. How was he supposed to smile when he felt like that? But Ghetsis had suggested it. N forced himself to smile.

"That will need work," Ghetsis said. He opened up a drawer and pulled a hand mirror out of it. Placing that on the desk, he said, "Keep reading aloud and check yourself every so often to improve that smile. I'll send a messenger to get you when Hilbert arrives."

That was something to look forward to today. N nodded. "Okay." As his father left, he picked up the mirror and looked at his own smile. It really didn't look natural. He tried a few moments, then picked the book back up and read aloud from it. When he did this, it was like his younger self was lecturing him as well.

How could he have missed what was so obvious back then?

Their footsteps echoed in these grand halls. Hilbert was caught in fascination of this place. Like the lower rooms in Shira, this castle was made for the scale of the legendary dragons, not for humans. The hallways were tall and wide, with giant columns and long tapestries. Past the doorways, there were mostly rooms on a human scale; in one, Hilbert spotted a staircase that went to a higher room on the same floor. If they meant to let all Pokemon go, why did they build this as if the dragons might be here for a long time?

"To be honest, I'm not sure where N is at the moment," Giallo said. "He is in the castle, but this is a large place."

"How did you build this without no one noticing?" Hilbert asked. "Where are we, anyhow?"

"I can't tell you where, and I didn't get involved in the how. At the time, I was mostly tutoring N and a few other members of Plasma, so they understood their roles better." He paused by a room, then went inside. "Ah, Ghetsis. Excuse us for a moment, but I've brought Hilbert in. Where's N?"

"He's studying at this time," he said. "But he should be done soon. Since you're here, would you mind speaking with me alone for a little while, Hilbert?"

It was a little strange to see Ghetsis without his cape, being in a dark green business suit instead; he was a tall and lanky man, of a thinner build than most people would guess. They were in a room that was like an old fashioned parlor, with a collection of chairs, a few low tables near them, a standing clock, a tea cart, and a radio that was playing classical music. In back, there was a small staircase that went up, as this room more on a human scale. While the setting seemed relaxing, Ghetsis wanted to control the situation. Hilbert could feel that desire for control strongly, enough that it blurred other emotions that he felt. There was a curiosity somewhere, but it was a distant feeling.

Feeling that he should be able to handle this even alone with him, Hilbert nodded. "All right. I'll see you later, Giallo."

His uncle smiled; he was in a good mood, hoping that Hilbert would change his mind here. "I'll see you later, then. I'll be in my office checking over the schedules and other projects." He then left the
"Please, sit down," Ghetsis said, indicating the couches and chairs. "Would you like some hot tea? I'm afraid that we don't keep coffee or cocoa around here. There's ice water too."

He didn't mean to harm him, not immediately anyhow. Hilbert sat down, glancing around the room. There was a window across from the hallway door, but it was blocked off with locked shutters. "Some tea would be nice." He rubbed an arm, feeling a slight chill without his coat. The rough texture of the chair didn't help with warmth. "This place was made for N?"

"It serves as headquarters for Plasma, but yes, it was made primarily in honor of N." He brought over a plain tan insulated teapot and three tea cups. Ghetsis poured his own tea, but let Hilbert do so for himself. "Why did you come here?"

"I wanted to talk with him." He looked over at the tea cart, but didn't see any sugar or anything else to put in the tea. "I thought if he was somewhere familiar, he'd be more comfortable and focused. And I was curious, based on what little he'd said."

"Giallo said you were resistant."

Having poured his tea, Hilbert tried it. On the edge of being too hot and with a bitter overtone; it could really use some sweetening, especially as it sat in that pot. "He's changed since I knew him as a child. Sorry, but do you have any milk or sugar around?"

Ghetsis felt amused by that for some reason, but his expression showed none of that. "Oh, well I'm not sure. We don't use a lot of sugar and the milk would be kept elsewhere. Let me check." He got up and searched through the storage of the tea cart. "I suppose he would have seemed to change to your perspective. We don't know everything about the people around us. Might not even know a fraction of that. By the way, what do you think about people keeping Pokemon?"

Was he trying to catch Hilbert in saying something wrong? He thought that was likely, but he couldn't tell what Ghetsis might be thinking. It was easy to tell what Pokemon were thinking by feeling their emotions, as they usually didn't try to hide them. But humans did, and their feelings were more complex and mixed. "I'm not sure at this point, but I think they can help us," he said after some thought. "It feels like I'm reevaluating everything lately."

"Would that be due to your curious passive Attract state?" Ghetsis asked. Then he pulled out a small ceramic bowl and took off the lid. "Ah, there's some sugar cubes." He shut the cart's drawer and put the sugar bowl on the table with a soft chink.

"Thanks," Hilbert said, taking two cubes for his drink. N or Giallo must have been talking to him if he knew about the Attract thing. "Yeah, that's it. Being without it makes things... different, more difficult. My Pokemon are helping me adjust."

"You shouldn't have to rely on them for something you need to do yourself."

"They rely on me too, and they want to be with me."

Ghetsis gave him a critical look, as if silently asking if that was enough of an excuse. The old clock ticked out of time with the music. For a moment, it was like the uneasy atmosphere that had invaded his home. Hilbert was in a place where his opinions were unpopular, but for some reason they were tolerating him.

Maybe N's acceptance of him was all that kept him safe here. Hilbert shifted in his seat. "Ghetsis, could I ask you about Stacy Gropius?"
"What about her?" he replied with a slightly chilly tone. But his emotions told Hilbert that he was now the one uncomfortable with being put on the spot.

That gave him some confidence. "Well she's our mother and you must know something more about her. I've been trying to find out who she was and what she was like, but that information is scarce."

Ghetsis considered that in silence for a few moments, clasping his hands together on his lap. Then he said, "I didn't know her all that long. I was rather more..." he tilted his head, "extravagant in my youth. I didn't really consider what was more important in life until N convinced me otherwise."

Trying to shift the subject away from her? Hilbert felt a spark of anger at that. "That's a lie."

"What?" Ghetsis asked, looking at him sharply.

"You moved to Opelucid and rented an apartment with her about three months before we were born," he explained. "You had taken a job as a gate attendant on Victory Road and you worked there for the next eight years. And you were quoted in her obituary in the newspaper, even though it was short. I found that out in a library because they kept around phone directories and newspaper records. But that's literally all that I have found on her so far, aside from the birth announcement. I can't even tell where you guys had moved from. You had to have known her at least for that year."

At that evidence, Ghetsis felt a strong desire not to talk about the issue, as well as an anger that was a sharp contrast to the calm look on his face. Maybe he still had unresolved feelings about Stacy's death, or maybe he did not like being asked about his private life. "It didn't work out as well as we thought at first," he explained in a steady voice. "I remember that she talked a lot but seemed to hardly say anything in it. I gave her a home out of obligation more than anything, although it was shocking that she got killed the way she did. And then you two had disappeared, so I tried not to think about it for a long time."

This time, Hilbert didn't know anything to counter him with. He still didn't like it and wouldn't trust his word. "Could you at least tell me where you had moved from? Or where she lived prior to that?"

"We moved from Lacunosa," Ghetsis said, consenting to that much. "But I don't know where she had been prior to that. She certainly didn't know Lacunosa all that well."

It at least gave him a new place to look for information. "I see."

"Did you find out about how she died?"

He nodded. "Yes, stabbed with some kind of knife in a major artery, and no one found her in time. The case still hasn't been solved."

"Very unsettling; please don't tell N about that." He took a sip of his tea.

"Why not?" Hilbert asked in a demanding tone. Why would he not share information? "He knows I'm looking into it."

"I mean about how she died," Ghetsis said. "N's really a sensitive boy and he feels terrible for another person's pain and suffering. If he heard that she died from violence like that, he would take it hard. It was better when he thought she just disappeared from the world."

His anger started to make him tense, but he tried to restrain from bursting out. "If he is that way, then why did you send him out alone on the League Challenge?"
Ghetsis shrugged apologetically. "He wanted to go and make sure his voice was heard. I tried to send him with others, but he resisted. Everything that I've done for a great many years now has been to help and support him. He got a little overconfident, but I'm sure he..."

At that point, there was a knock on the door. The person entered without waiting, coming over to them. "Hilbert, thanks for coming," N said, smiling and taking a seat in another chair. "Sorry I couldn't meet you in the teleporter room. I've been busy."

Hilbert smiled back. "Good to see you again." Something felt odd though. N's emotions seemed made up of dull and tired colors, although no signs of weariness showed in his eyes or body. What did that mean?

"What did you plan on doing today?" Ghetsis asked, looking at the both of them.

"Uh," N brushed a stray hair from his face, "Mostly talk, I think. I might show him around a few places in here and talk to some people. How long do you have to be here?" He poured some tea for himself and looked at the sugar bowl as if it was out of place.

Hilbert shrugged. "I don't have any other plans for today." He pushed the bowl over closer to N, since he seemed to want it.

That caused a strange reaction where N was conflicted over whether to take the sugar or not. For some reason, Ghetsis was watching these small actions and taking note of them. Hilbert was puzzled about why this was, but he decided to keep quiet about it for now. Maybe they really didn't use much sugar around here.

No one else mentioned it while they continued talking. After some small talk assured him that Ghetsis wasn't going to try anything with N around, Hilbert straightened up and asked. "Well one of the things I really want to know, from you two in particular, is why Plasma is taking any aggressive tactics when your stated purpose is actually rather peaceful? And why you'd trouble to go so far as to awaken Zekrom when you mean to separate Pokemon and humans in the end. And not any of the fancy rhetoric, just plain answers."

"The issue does seem simple, just getting people to stop hurting Pokemon," N said, in a tone that was oddly like he was reciting something. "But the sources of the problem go very deep, within the very structure of modern society. People depend so much on Pokemon, for building, for protection, for everyday activities. They do this so much but view Pokemon as beneath them. If we tried to simply teach them this was wrong, they would consider laughable. I was lucky to find people like Ghetsis who believed in me early on, so that we could develop this into something even skeptics would consider."

"And even when you try peaceful large-scale tactics, all too often people won't listen because it disrupts their comfortable lives," Ghetsis said. "It will be a shock any way it goes, so we might as well be bold."

"Won't it disrupt all of society then?" Hilbert asked. "On both sides. Pokemon have rituals concerning humans."

"They do?" N asked, puzzled.

He nodded. "My... the Litwick with me, she had to go through some kind of ritual challenge in order to be allowed to stay with me, when I went to return her to Celestial Tower. I wasn't allowed to see it, but it was apparent in the way they were behaving before I was made to leave. Plus all the people who have jobs involving Pokemon are going to be out of work if you succeed. It seems like
your proposal would cause chaos and uncertainty."

N was worried to hear about that, but Ghetsis spoke up quickly, "That kind of uncertain period can be expected during any major change in society. The trouble is that current society has some wrong beliefs at its core; that must be dealt with in order to make a truly better world."

"True, you can't just make a large change like that overnight," N said.

Ghetsis checked his watch, then got up. "Pardon me, but I have a meeting to get to. Don't cause any disruptions to the work of others."

"We'll try not to," N said as Ghetsis left the room, picking up his cape from a coat rack that was in the corner.

After the door was shut, Hilbert said, "Why's he giving you orders if you're in charge?"

"He's one of my advisers, as well as the man who took care of me for much of my life," N said. "I respect him because of that."

"It's not like we were planning on making trouble." He glanced at N, who was looking at the sugar bowl again. "If you want some of that for your tea, go on and take it."

Turning pink at that, N stammered out, "It, it's not that; I usually don't put sugar in my tea. I was just wondering what it was doing there because it's usually not used and it's odd that it has sugar cubes. Unless he felt that you might want them, so I guess that would be just polite."

"All right, it's not worth a big fuss," Hilbert said, trying to sound reassuring. "I like it because it balances out the bitterness."

"Added sugar isn't good."

He shrugged. "It's not much. Unless you're diabetic?"

"No." He still seemed uncertain. "That might help, but you have to be absolute about things."

Why was something so simple not? "You're over-thinking it. Just try it since you want to."

N took the bowl, but hesitated again. "You can't be lax with ethics." He put it back down.

"It's not complicated enough for ethics," Hilbert said, feeling frustrated but trying to hold that back. "It's just food, well drink, but same idea. If you start going that deep with that idea, you might as well skip out on all cooked foods because they're mixed and altered."

"Really?" N asked, intrigued by the idea.

He felt a twinge of guilt; maybe he shouldn't have suggested that. Was he really that gullible? "Um, don't try that, honestly. It's probably unhealthy and I have no idea how you'd do that right."

After a moment's consideration, he nodded (if a bit reluctant). "That does sound extreme. I guess I could try one. You wouldn't mention this to the others, right?"

Hilbert nodded. "Right." Feeling that he wanted some more reassurance, he added, "I won't say anything about it.

"Thanks." He took one of the cubes and stirred it into the tea. "Have you heard from Reshiram again?"
"No, I haven't," he said, thinking of the Light Stone which was in his bag. "Kyurem did say to give them a bit more time before worrying, but it's hard not to. And the Stone hasn't reacted to anything all this time."

"Neither has the Dark Stone," N said, then took a sip of his tea. "Hmm, that is better. Anyhow, Zekrom's form has been still, without a single spark. It's even a little cool to the touch."

"So is the Light Stone, but I thought it was just because I was outside a lot again." There was something strange about it. If the two dragons were alert and aware of them, then one would expect their hibernating forms to react in some way.

"Do you think maybe that it's because of Kyurem?" N's worry brightened, at least to Hilbert's sense. "Zekrom might be able to be cool, but Reshiram should be emitting heat. If Kyurem's power is blocking them off, that could explain why they're cool to the touch."

"Wouldn't they be icy then?" But the thought was troubling. "Kyurem's been rather protective of Hilda when I've meet with them, but not in a bad way."

"His role is that of a destroyer. I tried to warn Hilda when he wasn't around, but I don't think she was convinced." N started talking about that particular evening, and since it seemed to be bugging him, Hilbert let him. It seemed like Hilda was going through with her plan to sway N. But then he said that she had kissed him.

A burst of anger erupted in response to that, causing Hilbert to tense. She had kissed him? He wasn't sure if he was mad at her or him. Probably both. She had said she wasn't interested in having a boyfriend, but maybe she just said that because she was interested in N. For a moment, there was a feeling that Hilbert was the one who should have Hilda, not N.

Before he could lash out, he noticed how N was torn and unsettled again. That was enough to let Hilbert check his anger and consider the circumstances. N had admitted that he'd never been kissed before that. Knowing her, Hilda probably couldn't resist doing so just to get a reaction out of him. It was a hard temptation to resist; he knew because he done similar things before. Now it wasn't looking like a harmless action anymore.

"You ever been in love before, even just a crush?" Hilbert found himself asking.

N shook his head. "I never considered such a thing. I noticed how some Pokemon courtships went, but didn't think about it myself. I didn't have much time for that kind of thing. There was so much to study and learn about being a proper king and hero to Zekrom. Any free time I got, I spent with my Pokemon friends. Do you think she's in love with me?"

I am not the person you want to be asking that, Hilbert thought. Then again, who could N ask? It seemed suspicious that he had been called back right after that incident. "I don't know," he said. "She mentioned to me that she's not interested in having a boyfriend right now, so she might have just been messing with you."

"I don't know if I want it to be like that or not," N said. "I can't afford being distracted from my goal much more. But even when I've decided on that, I keep thinking about her. Ghetsis says to just forget about it because it'll lead to trouble. Maybe after things have changed. Do you know how to get a girl to like you?"

"I'm not the right person to ask about that, as I used to be able to do that without any effort," Hilbert pointed out.
"Right," N said, then sighed. After a moment, some idea came to him. "We might not get anywhere with that, but I do know one place I want to show you. Where's your coat and things?"

"Over by the teleport room," he said, getting up as N did.

"We should go over there and get them, then stop by my room. Let's go."

For as big as this place was, the people were few. Or maybe they just seemed few because of the large scale. They weren't dressed in armor down here, instead having simple clothes with solid colors. When the two of them passed by, these members of Plasma stepped out of their way immediately, bowing their heads or speaking reverently to the both of them. Especially N. They worshiped him, if not in words than at least in their hearts. It was quite different from the celebrity status Hilbert had had.

In contrast to the other halls, N's area was deserted. The floors and tapestries were much cleaner, it was quiet save for the echoes of their feet, and none of the rooms had their lights on until N turned them on in his bedroom. Hilbert waited out in the hall, but after a moment, he got curious and peered into another doorway.

"What's up with that room?" he asked when N came back out wearing his winter coat.

"Oh, that," he said, getting his hat on before working on the scarf. "That's why you don't let a nine-year-old design the rooms he wants and then give him exactly what he asked for."

Hilbert chuckled as they headed off towards the upward stairs. "Oh really?"

"Well it was more of I'd been given a catalog and told to point out things that I liked," N said. "I really don't have much use for it now, but I know they worked hard to give me this place and the castle, without using Pokemon to build it."

"That's pretty amazing, that they could manage that."

"That's how things should be," N said, then paused on the stairs. "Oh right, since we're going outside, I need you to promise that you won't tell anyone where this castle is. I really shouldn't risk it, but I think it's important that you come."

He knew that the others he might be working with would like to know where this place was. But he also knew that he needed to keep the trust of his brother (although the matter of Hilda would have to be... settled, somehow). "Okay, I promise I won't reveal that."

N smiled, relieved. "Good. We shouldn't meet anyone from this point, but let's hurry."

After a couple more flights of stairs going up (including one point where N pointed out the throne room, but Hilbert only got a glance that gave him the impression of cavernous), they came to a simple metal door that led to a path inside a hill, heading out. Once out in the open, it was difficult to tell that there was a castle underneath the ground. There were occasional ventilation chimneys, but the only one Hilbert could tell was the nearest one. It was camouflaged to look like a tree. Otherwise, it just seemed like a rolling grassy plain at the edge of a forest.

He couldn't immediately identify where he was, and N led him towards the forest before he could find a landmark in sight. "This is where I lived before I met Ghetsis," N explained, his emotions brightening. "It's still my home as much as the castle is."

"You seem to love it more out here," Hilbert said.
He blushed at that. "I guess I do. I have a lot more freedom and the people who wait here for me, the Pokemon, they don't expect anything but my friendship."

For the first couple of minutes that they walked in the forest, things were quiet. There were the occasional Pokemon calls, things that N listened to but didn't bother to translate or respond to. Then they arrived at a small clearing where there was a fallen tree. The stump had been smoothed out so that it could be safe to sit on. Once there, a large black wolf Pokemon emerged from the trees and came to N's side, looking at Hilbert cautiously.

N petted the Zoroark's head. "He's fine," he said quietly. Then he spoke up into the surrounding area. "Don't worry, my friends. This is my brother, Hilbert. He won't hurt you; I wanted to introduce him to whoever was brave enough to come out."

The Zoroark made a soft bark, shifting his stance.

"He can't understand you, so it might take a little time for us to talk."

With N's reassurance, more Pokemon came out from the forest to the clearing. He seemed to be familiar with all of them, responding to their greetings and trying to keep Hilbert in on the conversation. Much of it seemed to be happiness at N being back, worry about Hilbert but accepting him if N said he was okay, and talk of how the winter was hard. It was a blur of emotions: fear, happiness, uncertainty, relief, curiosity. Hilbert tried to block it out so that he could pay attention.

Once he succeeded, he began to notice something about these Pokemon. Most of them looked as if they had been through rough lives. There was a Lillipup that had some patches of fur missing with rough skin showing, apparently signs of old burns. There was an Unfezant that was missing one of his feet, with only a stub of a leg on his right side. There was a Tepig that had a limp because of a bad leg. Even the ones that didn't have physical scars were timid and uncertain to some degree to have an unfamiliar human in their midst.

It didn't take Hilbert long to realize that N knew the story behind nearly all of them.

"There's been others who have made it here but did not live long," N said, after telling Hilbert about some of them. They were sitting on the fallen tree now, having brushed the snow off. The Zoroark lay with his head on N's feet, while the burned Lillipup was brave enough to come onto Hilbert's lap for attention. "I don't know what it is about this place that draws them. None of them have been able to tell me, not even the most intelligent. A few were dropped off by Plasma workers, but even when I was very young, Pokemon seemed to come here to hide from humans. But Darcy thought it was important that I learn to live among humans, and now I can do something more than just comfort these Pokemon after the fact. I can prevent them from being hurt at all."

"I see." And being here with the Pokemon N was thinking about when he set up Plasma, it was hard to argue against him. No one should want to see a Pokemon to end up like this.

The one-footed Unfezant leaned over and said something to him that made N pale a little.

"What's wrong?" Hilbert asked.

N looked down, causing the Zoroark to lift his head. "He asked if I've found supporters outside the forest. It's been very hard even finding other humans who will listen, like Hilbert here. The Pokemon I meet out there don't want to believe me either. They want to go with humans because they believe it will help them. Yes, I know it could hurt them, but the wild ones doubt me."
"Wouldn't Pokemon be more willing to listen to you since you can listen back?" Hilbert asked.

"I thought that myself," N said. "They're more blunt about arguments, though, since those arguments are usually simpler. I'm still learning about the other humans' beliefs and way of life too. And about what people like you have lived with."

"I might not be the best source for what the average person is like," Hilbert said. He tried to pet the Lillipup; thankfully, it (she?) seemed to appreciate that. "But I do know a lot of the media and hype around Trainers." Since N and the Pokemon there seemed interested, Hilbert went ahead and told them about popular things and beliefs, even sharing parts of his own life.

It was evening by the time they came back into the castle to get to the teleporter room. Hilbert felt that he could have his Rufflet Regal just Fly him away, but he decided to respect N's wishes and go this way. N had told him about his own life too. While it helped Hilbert to understand him better, it also made him worry about leaving N here with his followers and advisers. In particular Ghetsis whom Hilbert trusted even less now. But did he want to give up his Pokemon and freedom in traveling in order to be a closer support to his brother? Having only met him in the past few months, he wasn't sure what to decide.

"Where are you going to go?" N asked.

"Lacunosa," he said, not even thinking about it. "I'm still looking into information on our mother and that's where my next lead is taking me."

N smiled at that, genuinely interested. "That's good. What have you found out about her?"

"Her name is Stacy..." he paused, glancing at the person who was in the room with them. He didn't want to follow Ghetsis' advice and keep the truth from N. But, he didn't want to add to his current troubles either. "She died not long after we were born. Nobody knows why or what all happened, but we were reported as kidnapped. I haven't really got much more. I do have some pictures, though."

"Really?" N stepped closer as Hilbert tried to find the scans he'd made into his Xtransceiver. When he touched his arm, a peculiar vision came.

They were outside, playing with remote controlled cars in an open plaza. From the white stone, tile designs, and flower bed holders, this was Lacunosa. A bridge passed overhead, with the stairs to the upper level of town on the other side. There was an unmarked and unremarkable door nearby, with a tinted glass that let light in without revealing what was inside.

They were just kids, not even ten. Hilbert had a black and yellow car that he was racing between the concrete flower holders. N had a dark brown and green car that was easily outrunning Hilbert's although it was proving difficult to steer. On turning a corner, it skidded and flipped over. "Oh, now what?" N said, going over to it. "I had enough trouble with it jerking around at first."

"That's cause you messed with it yesterday," Hilbert said, in a taunting manner. "They're good enough on their own."

"But I did get it to go faster." He stopped when he noticed the car smoking, then yelped and jumped back when fire burst out of it. It smelled immediately of burning electronics and plastic.

"Watch out!" an odd voice called out. A Wingull flew down and used Water Gun to put the RC car fire out. "You okay?"
"Yeah, we're fine," Hilbert said, then made a face. "That smells awful."

"But I worked so hard to make it better," N said, then turned as the door opened. "Mom!"

"What's going on?" she asked, concerned and looking them both over. Her short brown hair was loose, only held back by a headband. She was dressed casual but nice in a blue blouse, darker blue vest, and a long skirt. When N came running over to her, she put her arm round him. "I thought I saw fire."

"I messed up again," he said, upset.

"His car caught on fire," Hilbert said. As much as he teased his twin, he knew all the effort he'd gone to in trying to make the car better. "But he had it going really fast this time, like twice the speed of mine."

Stacy patted N on the back. "Well you must be improving then. You took pictures of your work this time, right?" When he nodded, she said, "I'm still on the clock, but go take the car and the pictures over to the school shop. I'm sure the teacher will still be around, and he can tell you what went wrong."

"But I wanted it working for the young engineer's show," N said, worried that with this car wrecked he couldn't get the project together in time.

"That isn't until August; you have lots of time." For a moment, Hilbert was conflicted on what to say. But the fact that he did want to see him succeed decided it. "You can work on mine, but you have to make sure not to make it go up in flames too."

She smiled at him, silently thanking him for making the offer.

"Thanks, but I'll keep trying with my own allowance money," he said, letting go of their mother. "I might need to do some extra work to keep at it, though. Do you think the shop teacher will let me work some there?"

"I don't see why not, since you're in there after school so much already," Stacy said. "Go on, or you might miss him."

"Okay, we'll see you back home," Hilbert said, shutting off his car. "Come on, I'll come too."

"That's who she was," N said, half questioning it and half stating it. "But we were never together as kids."

"It was what could have been our past, not what was," Hilbert said. "I wonder if that could help me now."

"Was that place Lacunosa?"

He nodded. "I'm sure of it. It's the only place in Unova that looks like that. Unless we were in another region entirely, but somehow I doubt that."

"I hope you do find her. And thanks for coming today. I think you've helped me figure out a few things."

Hilbert smiled and shook his hand. "You've helped me too, I'm sure. I'll see you around, whenever you get back on the road."
"Maybe in the next couple of days," N said. "See you later."

Chapter End Notes

The thing with smiling... I don't know about you, but towards the end of the game I found N's smile unsettling. The game has little animated segments in it, but they chose some weird places. And it's mostly N when he's talking to the player. He's always smiling, but with his eyes, it just doesn't sit right with me. It looks fake, which might be animation limitations, but those tiny scenes did influence me on creating N's character here.

I mean no offense to anyone who follows a raw food diet, or similar things. I have a good friend who altered her diet to something like that for her health (although hers isn't as restricted as what Hilbert sarcastically suggested). And it does work for certain people. However, as with any diet, one has to be careful and do research to make sure it is done in a balanced and safe way. The comment slipped in when I was toying with that little power play over sugar.
2/11, late morning

It was a really good morning that was almost like the old days. Hilda had met up with Bianca a few hours ago, and Cheren joined them not long after that. Thankfully, he had eased up and wasn't being as strict. Perhaps it was only because it was Bianca's sixteenth birthday, but that was good for now.

They came out of the Musical Theater, laughing and enjoying the company of their Pokemon. At least Hilda and Bianca were. Cheren only had his Emboar out. Bianca hugged her Munna. "Oh Timmy, you get so easily distracted and forget your timing. But you're such a darling on stage."

He squealed, happy to be hugged.

"It is quite interesting, even though the Pokemon were all obvious amateurs," Cheren said. "Did you see when the Foongus startled the Cottonee into puffing up to twice its size?"

"I didn't see it happen, but it was funny when it was being blown around by the air conditioning," Hilda said. "What do you want to do now, Bianca?"

"Um," she checked her Xtransceiver for the time. "Actually, I need to go to the subway station so I can catch a train back to Accumula. That way I'll get back home for my family's party at lunchtime. Thanks for the presents and hanging out with me this morning. I miss you guys sometimes."

"We see each other at least three times a week, though," Hilda said.

Bianca chuckled and playfully took the boy's shoulder in a hug. "Well then it's good to see Cheren around for once."

He smiled. "Sorry, but I have trouble finding places to train in city limits."

"Man, you should try going into the stadiums during practice," Hilda said, elbowing him from the other side. "They got some highly skilled Pokemon and Trainers in there."

"I thought they just played sports."

"They're really good at battling too," Bianca said. "What are you two going to do?"

Cheren scratched his head near his winter hat. "Well I might check out the stadiums if you two say so."

Hilda grinned and clapped her hands together. "Me and my team are ditching this town and heading for Undella!"

"Undella?" Bianca asked, surprised. "I hear the beach is lovely, but it's the middle of winter!"

"Better to avoid the crowds now," she said, waving in dismissal of the argument against it.

"That doesn't make any sense," Cheren said, frowning. "There's no Gyms out in that part of
"It's partly for the Pokedex project," Hilda said. "Who knows? There might be some unique Pokemon out that way that most League Trainers don't find because there isn't a Gym there. And some other reasons, but it depends."

"Some Pokemon will only come out in the winter, I hear," Bianca said. "Well be careful out there, both of you. Good luck!"

A few minutes later, Hilda was walking along Route 16. It wasn't a particularly inspiring route, as it was mostly a concrete road with industrial buildings clustered around. A group of motorcyclists were cruising along there, with their radios blaring heavy metal music and their bikes belching out strong-smelling exhaust; she had to keep to the pedestrian lane. Behind a tall chainlink fence, there was an untouched path of woods that led north into the central part of Unova. She was interested in the eastern exit, though, a gatehouse that led to Marvelous Bridge. It was different in that there was no attendant, nor a visitor's station with a guide screen and message board.

There wasn't anyone else in there, so she brought out the four other Pokemon with her and Kyurem. "Okay team, I think it's about time we reviewed the plan."

Mimi cheered while Tarzan shrugged. Frank smirked and crossed his arms over his chest, and Olette was quietly attentive. "There was a plan?" Kyurem asked in a deadpan voice.

Rolling her eyes, Hilda said, "Yeah, it kind of happened before I noticed. I got confirmation from Elesa yesterday that they are going to have a League shutdown in the future, but they need some more time to organize. We could challenge her, but I think it will benefit us more if we hold off on that badge and do more training for the rest of winter. Now the trouble with that is that one of the team members is in hibernation until spring. A couple of you haven't even met him; he's a Servine named Fedora and he pretty much started out with me and Kyurem.

"In the meantime, I need to figure out what to do about Hilbert and N. I need to know a few more things, I think, but I'll look for that on my own or with Kyurem. Best case scenario is that me and Hilbert can change N's mind about Pokemon and humans before the other two dragons get awakened, but we're not sure what a worst case would be. Definitely if the two of them start arguing.

"I figure that what needs to happen is that we step up our training for now. I'll work on things with those two boys in the meantime. When spring comes and the weather warms up, I'll go back to Nuvema to pick up Fedora and then we'll do a time of just training. We can decide how much time for that later. By then the League should be reopened and we can catch up to N."

This little speech got cheers from most of her Pokemon. The Gothita looked impressed; Frank nodded in approval. As did Kyurem. "That seems like a reasonable course of action. If we're going to be in that area, let's avoid Lacunosa. We wouldn't be welcomed there."

"All right. But first," she turned and pointed out the gatehouse's doorway, "we need to cross Marvelous Bridge. It's a really long walkway over the road cars take, made to cross a wide canyon. And I never did get to race across Castelia's bridge because my leg was broken at the time. So let's race across this one!"

"Don't go running into anyone," Kyurem warned.

"Of course not," Hilda said. "You're joining in, aren't you?"
He shrugged. "Very well."

Hilda held out a hand to Tarzan, who was a little too eager to start running. "Okay, okay... get ready... and GO!"

With the cold wind blowing across the bridge, the group took off out from the gatehouse and onto the bridge. The white steel pillars stretched out far in front of them. The excitement and cheer of the race was enough to get all of them smiling and laughing at the end. Even Kyurem, if only a little bit.

2/11, afternoon

Lacunosa was sometimes said to be the prettiest town in Unova, even above wealthier places like Undella. It was paved entirely in local white stone, surrounded by it in a wall that made it seem much like a castle. Although most of the buildings looked similar, it was a quaint style that had been in this place for centuries. The community kept artistically formed concrete planters all around town filled with a variety of flowers that bloomed throughout the year. It was only little hardy winter flowers now, kept in blossom through constant care and brushing away of snow. Outside the walls were deep drifts of snow, but Lacunosa's streets were being kept snow and ice free.

Despite the lovely surroundings, Lacunosa was not a popular place to live. There was always a sense of unease here, even fear. While people livened up the street during the day, it was deserted at night. This atmosphere only intensified in the winter. The residents were quiet and solemn, hurrying to get things done while the sun was in the sky. Northeast of Lacunosa was the Great Crater, the place where Kyurem resided. That meant that this town belonged to him and those who lived here were in the most danger when he became active.

But it wasn't that way this time around, Hilbert thought as he walked through the streets. Kyurem had appeared in Nuvema instead of waking up in Great Crater. Why was that? Hilda said that she knew why he was around but never told Hilbert why. Did she know the truth or had the dragon lied to her? Ever since N had mentioned that he didn't trust Kyurem, Hilbert couldn't stop worrying about if he should trust them or not.

He also couldn't keep from feeling jealous of N and Hilda. They weren't even really together, at least not that Hilbert knew of. But they could be a good couple, as N would have help breaking out of his way of thinking and Hilda might even calm down. N had no experience in dating, so it would be nice if Hilbert backed off. Yet while that made sense, he didn't want to snap at the Pokemon.

Hilbert rubbed the Alomomola by his fin. "It'd be nice if love was that simple for me too." He then looked around the area, trying to distract himself with what he had come here to do.

After being here a couple of days, he hadn't made much luck in tracking down information about his mother. Lacunosa was a guarded community on many levels so unlike in Opelucid, he wasn't able to get old community books to look at. He had been able to search local papers in the library, but nothing had come up for Stacy Gropius or Ghetsis Harmonia (save for current articles about
Plasma that had nothing new). Maybe his father had sent him off in the wrong direction?

Then he stopped and looked at the bridge overhead. Lacunosa had two levels to it, with buildings on both levels. While there were several upper walkways on bridges, this one in particular was familiar. There was an unmarked glass door near the bridge that had tinted glass for privacy, and long flower bed planters. This was where he and N had been in that vision of their alternate history. Was it a valid hint?

"Behave yourself, Loch," Hilbert said. "I don't know what their policy on Pokemon is, but I guess we'll find out."

Loch gave a positive response, so they went to the door and went inside. There was a jangle as the door opened, so it was probably a place of business still. Inside, there was a lobby and waiting area. There were chairs for both adults and children, as well as a small collection of old toys. On the wall was a large holder for many pamphlets, along with informational posters. There were two desks serving as a receptionist area right near the door, with a level of clutter that suggested a busy if low profit business.

"Oh, hello," the receptionist said, sounding uncertain as if either she was new or someone like him dropping by was unusual. "May I help you?"

"I'm not sure," he said. "This might sound odd, but I'm looking for information on someone and I'm not sure what this place is."

She gave him a puzzled look, then shook her head. "I'm afraid that we probably can't help you. This is a shelter and help center for women and children escaping domestic violence, so I can't release any information."

Was that it? Feeling embarrassed, Hilbert scratched his head. "Oh, it's nothing bad. I've been looking for information on my mother, as she died shortly after I was born. It's..." he wasn't an established psychic, so would they really take his word on it? "I had a vision of seeing her here."

The receptionist bit her lip and gave it serious consideration. "Well... I suppose if you have proof that it is your mother, I'll see what I can do."

"I have my birth certificate, DNA tests, and adoption papers," Hilbert offered.

She nodded, so he got the papers out of his digital storage and handed them over to her to look at. It took several minutes in which she checked the authenticity of the papers (especially the change in name), then went through another door to find someone to speak to. Since he was a visitor, he had to stay in the lobby. He took one of the pamphlets for the women's shelter and skimmed over it. He'd never thought a place like this would exist, but it seemed like a good thing to have. Did they have a lot of people to help or not?

After he'd looked through three different pamphlets, the receptionist came back with another woman. "I'm the shelter's director," the latter said, shaking his hand. "Thanks for being patient."

"No problem," he said.

"We did find records that your mother had been here for a year and a half," the director said. "I wasn't working here at that time, so I don't know anything. We did find this in our storage." She patted a box that the receptionist had put on the desk. "Stacy left these things behind when she moved out of the shelter. Since you're her son, you're allowed to claim this. The envelope on top has reports from her case worker, so it should help you with finding out more about her history."
So she had been here... why? That had to be in the reports. Hilbert nodded. "Sure. Thank you very much."

He had to sign the claim form, but then the box was his. It didn't seem like all that much, like a re-purposed box for a pair of boots. Yet it felt like an incredibly valuable thing, a treasure chest. On his way to the Pokecenter, he considered calling N to share opening the box. But then he considered that this was his mission, and he was still irritated about Hilda. He'd look into this himself.

The Pokecenter seemed quiet, so Hilbert took a table and let his other Pokemon out for a time. After making sure they wouldn't cause trouble, he took the large envelope off the top and opened that first. There were only a few documents inside, much of it was basic information or things that didn't make sense to him. But there was a case review written after Stacy had left the shelter.

'Stacy Gropius was transferred to this center from the homeless shelter in Castelia City when the staff there determined that she was in need of our assistance. Her location prior to this is uncertain, but her speech patterns, knowledge, and beliefs suggest that she is from an oceanic or sea community, most likely the Sevii or Hoenn Islands. Tests show that she has a low level of education and socialization, but a high intelligence. Her work skills are limited; she would do best as a homemaker. At the time of coming here, she said that she was 17.

'She was quiet and reserved on most occasions, as well as obedient. On becoming familiar with a person, she talked more freely, but avoided personal matters. She held fast to a notion of saying nothing bad about anyone, so it was difficult to obtain information on her situation. Analysis of her behaviors and craft work suggest that she had an aggressive and violent father, most likely an alcoholic, and a passive mother who stayed at home. Her parents seem to have favored her brother, although she was accepting of this. It is possible that her mother died as a result of physical abuse shortly before she left home, or that she was forced to leave by her father's orders.

'For some time, I was able to make progress in helping her gain independence and willingness to admit her problems. This progress became stalled when she got into a relationship with a man named Ghetsis Harmonia. We consider him a bad influence due to holding radical ideals and controlling her activities. I was unable to convince of this before he told her to leave our care. She stated that he was not violent and would not hit her; this may be so, but his influence will certainly keep her in her stunted emotional state.

'Stacy has the capacity to become an independent and capable woman, but unless she accepts the help she needs, she's not going to get there.'

Hilbert felt a chill in his blood while reading it. This was exactly what he had wanted to find, what his mother was like. And yet it managed to be what he didn't want to find either. He had thought that his mother was a nice cheerful woman; the pictures from the hospital seemed to support that. Maybe she was remarkable, or maybe she was simply ordinary. But this, a hint of growing up in an abusive household and then ending up in a land far away with a man that a group against domestic violence thought was suspicious, this was terrible. Maybe he could hope that at least her life here was nice, but this community was so suspicious and fearful.

"Shoo ki?" Madeline was near the box, swaying her body. She and Loch had sympathy and wanted to know what was upsetting him. Regal was keeping an eye on him, but had not yet bonded well enough to show such feelings. And on the couch beside him, Ember had picked up that something wasn't quite right; he was snuffling around Hilbert's knee to see what it was.

"Some things you wish you didn't know after you learned them," he said. "Maybe it is better that I see this before N, I mean... maybe I should go back there and ask if they can help me with him."
They might only help women and children, but they should be able to tell me better ways of dealing with N."

Loch came over and nuzzled him again. He'd have their support as long as they were with him, even if they didn't understand the situation. Knowing that let him smile again. And that support was a definite reason. He had to keep N from succeeding with Plasma.

There was still this box of Stacy's things to look through. He cut the box open with a pocketknife and looked over the contents. Right on top, there was a journal that had a picture of a lighthouse on the cover. A glance inside showed that she had written in it, all the way through. He set that aside and checked on other items. There were more photos, some of her, some of a Wingull that seemed to be hers, and some of the area around Lacunosa. There was a necklace that had a pink coral beads and seashell pendant, with a painting of a Corsola on the shell. In a small cloth bag, there were a number of tiny dolls made of toothpicks and various colors of thread. There were some paper craft items, including drawings in colored pencil. Finally, there were a number of miscellaneous shells, rocks, feathers, sea glass, pressed flowers, and a Heart Scale.

Hoping he might catch some glimpse of her life, Hilbert touched the items in there. He didn't get any visions from them, leaving him to wonder why she had these things and why she had left them behind when she went with Ghetsis. What did they mean to her? But even if he couldn't make sense of them, he had her journal and that would be a better glimpse into her life. He closed most of the things back in the box and opened up the journal. Her handwriting was small and tidy, with an occasional doodle on the margins.

**Entry 1**

They gave me a new journal, which is great because I left my diary back home. They want me to talk about my old life, which isn't good because I came here to make a new life. I don't want to spread the negativity I left behind.

This town is odd. Lacunosa is pretty in the day and people are friendly. But it becomes different at night. They say that we can't go outside at night because of some monster. Even when I look out my window, it's spooky out in the streets. The people say it's safe as long as you stay indoors, but they haven't told me what this monster is. Is it some Pokemon? I haven't heard of a Pokemon that dangerous that a whole town goes into hiding, at least not a normal one.

At least this place is quieter than Castelia.

**Entry 85**

I know I haven't written in a while, but I've met the most wonderful man! His name is Ghetsis and he has a wonderful voice. He's very smart; no matter what I ask him, he knows the answer, sometimes many answers if the topic is deeper than I realize. He's handsome too with the most amazing soft green hair and a face and eyes that project a sense of power; you'd really have to see him in person. And he's wealthy too! He's so cultured that he can be gentle with his words and still possess a powerful will. I almost can't believe that someone like him could exist, but he's there, at the coffeeshop every morning and then at the library in the evening. I actually changed my schedule just so I can meet him more often.

I think he's starting to like me; he bought me coffee this morning and he asked to take a walk with me in the early evening. I'm writing and waiting on the right time to meet with him. It makes me nervous to be out alone with a man like that, but I think I'll be okay. I feel safe in his presence.

He has a lot of ideas that could change the world. He told me about some of it this morning and I
was amazed. He wants to make it easier to punish people who hurt others, and to make sure they get punished appropriately so that they never do bad things again. Apparently prisons and fines don't really deter criminals, and some even see it as a mark of honor if they end up in jail for a few years because they can behave in a way to trick the guards into getting an early release. If Ghetsis were in charge, he'd make sure that those who tried to escape punishment would get harder punishment so that being good would be the easier and more obviously better choice.

He doesn't believe in marriage either, which surprised me. He says it's an outdated notion that people do because that's what's always been done. But because it's been going on so long, people try their hardest to get married and will lie in order to make themselves look like a better spouse. They'll act much better than they usually are until they get married, and then they stop trying and be their normal selfish selves. And then there is so much pressure to be a perfect couple that it stresses the couple out and they end up trying to escape that through terrible means. People get unhappy because their partner turns into a different person, but they were doing that in order to get married too. Since it causes so many problems with so few benefits to compensate, people just ought to not be married and be with whoever they want. He says it will make everyone happier.

It's a little hard for me to understand, but he must know what he's talking about. He wants everyone to be happy and not be afraid of getting hurt. I would love it if the world really worked like that. I wonder if he'll let me help him do this.

Oh, it's almost time! I need to go to the meeting place.

Entry 217

I haven't told the shelter staff yet, and I haven't even told Ghetsis yet, but I know that I'm pregnant now. I tried two different tests and they were both positive. This is wonderful! I should make an appointment with a doctor, but I don't want the staff to find out. They don't seem to like Ghetsis and the social worker who talks to me says that she doesn't trust him. But they haven't really sat down and talked with him, I know. He seems strange at first because of his ideas, but I know that he's really ahead of his time and he's going to make the world a better place to live in.

I can probably get Ghetsis to help me make the appointment. I know he doesn't like marriage, but I'm okay with that. He does believe that both parents should help with raising a child, so he should be glad for us. And he should have no trouble supporting me and our children, even if I'm not good for much but keeping a home.

While I haven't seen a doctor, I know that I'm going to have twins. There's no surprise there, because I have a twin brother, and my mom has a twin sister, and their mom also has a twin sister. I always thought that it was funny that it happened that way, but I'm glad that I know it will happen. I hope I get a boy and a girl, because that would be the nicest pair.

And I decided what I would name them long ago, as I don't want my children to have ordinary names. I think boys ought to have names that encourage them to be peaceful, so that they grow up to be good and nice men. My boy will be named Natural and he will be like a forest, deep and wise, gentle and sweet. And girls ought to have names that are beautiful so that they grow to be just as confident and beautiful. My girl will be named Charity and she will be like the sea, graceful and steadfast, yet flexible and forgiving.

If I end up having two girls, then the other girl will be named Lunar, to be mysterious and bright like the moon, enchanting all who see her. If I end up having two boys, then the other boy will be named Solace, to be a good listener with a kind heart, so that he can be there to help and comfort anyone in need.
Entry 252

I don't have much more space to write, but that's okay. I'm going to move on again, leaving this life and starting over yet again. But this time, I have someone wonderful to care for me and help me to a better place. Ghetsis says that he knows of a great place where we can both be free to find the future best for us. The shelter staff really don't like him now, even though they don't know that we're moving away. I don't know how they can't see how wonderful he is. I'll be safe and happy with him.

I'm very lucky to have gotten a man like Ghetsis to be in love with me. I'm not sure what he sees in me; I'm an uncultured girl who never finished school and is so plain and ordinary that nobody would call me pretty in honesty. But he says that I make him happy and he can see the hidden beauty in my soul. I'm going to try my hardest to be a wonderful girlfriend to him, and the best mother that I can be to our children.

I'm certainly happy. I'm a little nervous about what's going to happen to us, but I think it's just being pregnant is doing that to me. But I really think that he and our children can make the world a better place, so I'm going to do everything I can to help them do so. Although I would be grateful if my children are just safe, happy, and kind.

2/11, afternoon

N was walking through the forest that surrounded Route 6. Snow was falling and it was pretty quiet. Earlier, Rune had dropped him off here from the castle. N had tried to give him a berry treat in exchange, but the Sigilyph had refused. "Gratitude for a job well done is reward enough," he had said. Then he departed, although N suspected he was following in the trees.

He could understand the feeling. When he saw Pokemon that were happy, he felt good for doing his job of representing them. But he didn't want Pokemon to serve him more than necessary. He wanted to put an end to Pokemon enslavement, so it was wrong of him to not reward a Pokemon or keep them captive in service to him.

While he was musing on those thoughts and reviewing his plan to work with his next team, a Pokemon dashed out of the trees several feet away from him and pounced on something. It was a Liepard... no, it was Pricilla again, and she had a mouse under her paws. Odd to see a regular animal out here; normally they hid away from people and Pokemon, unless domesticated like cows.

For a moment, he felt sad for her. Even though she had seen the darker side of humans, she continued to follow him in hopes of staying with him someday. Why were Pokemon so set on working with humans? They were strong enough to be independent, and even strong enough to dominate humans if they chose to. But they didn't.

There was that bond, though, the feeling of happiness when friends succeeded together.

At that little rebellious thought, N thought over the things he had taught Team Plasma. That was what he was representing out here, and it was embarrassing to recognize that he was still weak when it came to resisting the lies out here. He tried to hide it with a smile, thinking that they would find new reasons to be happy once the world was set right.

Still, it was rude to just pass on. "It's good to see that you're still well," N said.

Pricilla grabbed the half-dead mouse in her teeth, just to make sure that it did not get away, and
then looked to him. Her ears twisted back in annoyance at something. Then she bounded off into the trees with her prey, acting so much like she didn't care that it was obvious that she did. She probably had been waiting here for him to reappear all this time.

That hurt, although N wasn't sure why. He crossed his arms over his chest and continued walking along the path, still smiling and trying not to cry. He had come this far and he couldn't give up now. There were so many people counting on him, and Pokemon that were waiting for a time when they could feel truly safe. And to do that, he had to somehow make his heart stronger, less prone to temporary sentiments.

Something made the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. "My lord," a solemn male voice said. One of the Shadow Triad was walking alongside him now.

"Is something the matter?" N asked, trying to sound just as calm.

He put his hand on N's shoulder. "There is an obstacle ahead. I should take you past it from here so as not to further delay you."

"What kind of obstacle?"

"Nothing you need to be concerned about." He tightened his grip before teleporting them directly to the entrance of Chargestone Cavern.

Once there, N glanced back at the road. There was a large stream running through the woods here, and a wide wooden bridge crossed over it. At the bridge, there was some kind of blockade with police officers there. "Why are they...?"

"Do not worry," the Triad member said. "We are shadowing your steps. We must enter before they see us."

N nodded. They were experts at what they did, so if he said not to worry, there was nothing to worry about. "Okay. Don't startle any of the Pokemon."

"Of course not." Before long, he had blended with the shadows and vanished from sight.

Electricity caressed his skin as he walked into this cavern. Something about this place generated a naturally high electrical charge. Maybe it was the Pokemon who lived here, or maybe there was something about the large crystals everywhere. He had read about this place many times and had wondered about why it was. But being here in the cool charged atmosphere was far better than just reading it in a book. The feeling was nice, almost refreshing.

There was a sign on a wall that a shortcut bridge to Mistralton was out, so travelers would have to access the lower levels in order to reach the other side. And it was quiet in here. Maybe the Pokemon stayed away from the upper level to avoid humans. He'd have to go lower in order to find them.

Hopefully, if this place also wasn't deserted right as he came to it.

Chapter End Notes

There are some routes where I wonder, if the places are real, would they really leave these places so difficult to get around? Chargestone Cavern is one such place. There's
even a pair of platforms on the uppermost levels which would be a great place to put a bridge for easy passage through. But of course, if the bridge was there, then you wouldn't have to run the Plasma gauntlet (which is actually pretty fun). On the other hand, Mount Coronet in Sinnoh does have easy paths through it which one could imagine regular travelers going through to get from place to place.

The routes that are blocked off by cracked rocks are among the most annoying...
2/18, morning

Black City seemed like a harsh foreboding place. For whatever reason, all of the buildings were made of black or dark materials, save for the Pokecenter which was its usual cheery neon orange. The white snow was turning black, even away from streets that allowed vehicle traffic. It had an air of busyness and business, where most people were hard at work or dealing with money. As Hilda saw it, she didn't think such a place should be at the end of a structure called Marvelous Bridge. She would have passed through a week ago when she had arrived, but she had decided to see how the Trainers here were.

They were brutally tough.

Their opponent's last Pokemon had fallen and the moment after let Hilda realize that she was sweating with tension. It had been a narrow margin of victory; even Kyurem was unconscious at this point. Olette was breathing heavily and had started bleeding again. Flexing her claws, she waited to see if it was over. And this wasn't some Gym Leader. No, it was a teen about her age, wearing a black coat with yellow trim, a supposedly normal Trainer for around these parts. "That was some power your Pokemon had," she said to him.

"Of course, although yours had definite style, for regulars..." he paused for a moment, looking at the Drilbur.

She had the glow of evolution around her. Hilda grinned. Not long after their first battle in Black City, Frank have evolved into a Gothorita. Another evolved member of her team would be welcome to come up to the challenge of the Trainers here.

"Hey!" the boy shouted. Olette stilled, the light dissipating. This caused him to laugh.

"What was that about?" Hilda said, feeling her blood burn with anger. She had a notion to punch him in the gut, but it wasn't right, not after they'd already had a Pokemon battle.

He smirked. "Can't let someone like you catch up." Then he bolted in case she decided to punch him anyways.

After taking a deep breath to calm down, she knelt down by Olette. "He didn't seem so obnoxious until that. Can you try again?"

For a moment, the Drilbur focused, keeping her forepaws by her chest and lowering her head. Then she put both of her paws over her eyes. "Aarraa," she said softly. It sounded sad, although since she rarely spoke up, Hilda wasn't sure if that was her normal voice or not.

Hilda patted her head, avoiding damaged areas. "It's okay. We can keep training and you'll get another chance. But go back to your ball for now so I can run you all to the Pokecenter."

Olette looked at her, reaching up carefully to pat Hilda's cheek without hitting her with claws. Then she agreed to being recalled, letting Hilda secure the ball in its holder, make sure she had all her stuff, then jog down the streets to reach the Pokecenter. A few people glared at her as she ran by, but that didn't matter. They should know it didn't matter if she was a Pokemon Trainer taking care
of her Pokemon. Just another way this place was so different.

At the Pokecenter, the nurse greeted her cheerfully as always. The center itself was oddly quiet, aside from the jerk who gave her a taunting smile as he left and another Trainer who was either working or playing on a tablet computer. "I'll get them healed up shortly," the nurse said, taking the Pokeballs and setting them onto the table of the machine there. "I've seen you around lately; where's your boyfriend?"

"What boyfriend?" Hilda asked, puzzled.

"That handsome young fellow who always wears a mask," she said, setting the machine to run. "He always seems to be with you."

Hilda laughed at that. "That's not my boyfriend. He's my bodyguard."

Right on cue, Kyurem appeared in human form by the desk. "What happened?" he asked, giving her a wary look.

"Nothing bad," she said, although he still seemed skeptical. "Olette finished up the fight so that we won, but then the guy had to disrupt her from evolving. Then I ran back here."

"One who couldn't accept losing, then," he noted.

"He was saying something weird, about how we weren't bad for regulars."

"That'd be a bit of jargon among some Trainers," the nurse said, turning back to hand over the Pokeballs. She smiled at Kyurem. "Oh hello, when did you come in?"

"When I could," he said. "Explain."

To the nurse's moment of confusion, Hilda said, "This jargon thing about regulars."

"Right," she said, smiling again. "It means that you've trained your Pokemon within standards of the Pokemon League. They have restrictions, you know, but most Trainers never have the chance to break those rules. A lot of the Trainers around here and up towards Undella, they have the money and the means to do otherwise."

Hilda leaned on the counter while putting the Pokeballs back into their holder. "How's that? I've heard that the scanners check for signs of abuse, theft, and illegal drugs."

The nurse nodded. "The drugs are a big part of it; they're usually things that are approved for uses other than Pokemon boosting, like steroids, so the drugs can't be made illegal themselves. A lot of the Trainers I see regularly use performance drugs to make their Pokemon more powerful than they should be, even though there are a lot of risk factors. Part of the trouble is that there's so many organizations and every one of them have their own restrictions and guidelines: the Leagues, the Pokeathlon, the Frontier groups, the stadiums, the tournaments," she waved her hands. "It's hard to keep them all straight, but one thing I do know is that the tournaments, which have the biggest payouts even if there's less prestige, tend to have the most lax rules."

"Then you'd have a lot of people like these going for that," Hilda said. If the tournaments had a high enough prize, then these Trainers might think it was worth the cost of getting the drugs. Would it really be worth it, though?

"Now when you look at a League Champion, you know that that person is highly skilled at Pokemon training, and has a great love for them," the nurse went on. "I still don't know how the
League does that, but you never hear of a Champion who's abusive. And when you look at a tournament winner, you're just not sure if it was skill or money that helped them. They talk of other methods, but I don't know what they all are. I do know that I've seen an awful lot of Shadow Pokemon come through here."

"What would Shadow cursed Pokemon be doing here at this time?" Kyurem asked. Although Hilda had heard the term and knew it wasn't a good thing, she wasn't quite sure what it was.

The nurse shrugged. "Frankly, I don't know. My teachers said that I'd probably never encounter one, as it's a rare occurrence. It's been about a year and a half, I think, since I saw the first one, but now I know of a dozen with Trainers who come in here often. I made sure they all knew what was going on, and unfortunately I had to warn a few who weren't making adequate progress with undoing the curse."

"That's odd," Hilda said, standing up straight again.

"Oh, I'm sorry for taking up your time; thank you for coming." She bowed. "Take care of yourself, and your Pokemon."

"Thanks too, and don't worry," Hilda said with a smile. "I know why matches aren't as even as they seem now. Besides, seems a little dead in here."

The nurse scratched her head. "Yes, usually it's not this quiet even now... oh, you know, I bet it's that debate with Plasma."

She raised her eyebrows. "Plasma, huh?"

"Yes, some of the business leaders in Black City invited them to a public debate. I sure hope that the city decides to take a stance against them. I mean, did you hear that Accumula had to shut down it's Pokecenter a few months back?"

Hilda nodded. "Yeah, I was there when it happened."

She shook her head. "Awful business. And I heard that Lacunosa might be making an allegiance to Plasma public sometime soon, while rumor has it that big names in Undella are in a heated debate over their stance. The Gym towns will probably be against them, but you hear of small pockets all over starting to voice agreement with Plasma."

At the mention of Lacunosa, Kyurem briefly glared at the counter. But he didn't say anything about it until they were out of the center. "It might be a good time to assess just how much influence they really have. Their words are spreading."

"That stinks." Hilda looked over at him. "Does it bother you that Lacunosa might support them?"

He frowned for a moment. "I don't have control over them. I could if I were of mind to, but that's not my mission this time. But personally, it does bother me that the town most associated with me would do that."

"Yeah. Well I don't see a point to sticking around here much longer, except maybe to catch a bit of that debate. Want to find it?"

Kyurem shrugged, so Hilda went to find it.

It turned out to be held within the mall, a large black building that held many small premium stores. A couple of days ago, Hilda had checked it out but found nothing that could fit within her
After a while of listening, it started feeling like political debates that hadn't really interested Hilda before. "Don't make this an issue of economy against sympathy," the man up for Black City said. "Pokemon should not suffer, yes, but you can't solve a problem like abuse of Pokemon by making everyone suffer. The economy on the local, the regional, and the global levels are influenced in large part by Pokemon. Think of all the jobs we have in their care. There's doctors both in private practices and public services that deal exclusively in Pokemon; what happens to them when demand is cut drastically with the dissolution of Pokemon ownership? There are businesses, many of them, that offer items and services that are only good for Pokemon and those who train them. Those will all collapse if your policies go through, leaving a gaping wound in the economic structure of the world, the social structure as well."

"The system currently in place is one that uses Pokemon, often without their consent," the Sage up for Plasma said. "Can you honestly excuse a system that depends on the enslavement and suffering of a significant portion of the world? Whatever troubles you perceive will be temporary. We believe in the ingenuity and strength of the human spirit as well; we can overcome such an abusive dependance and recover quickly, even exceed our current levels. But we won't be able to if people keep clinging to a malignant system."

"Hey," a voice said under the speakers. "Aren't you that girl with Kyurem?"

Happy for an excuse to stop watching the debate, Hilda looked over to a boy who seemed about her age. He had neatly styled blond hair and dressed in a refined manner of expensive taste (at least that was her guess from the custom fit blue suit and diamond accessories). Having checked on things, she thought she knew who he was. "Yeah, I'm Hilda. And aren't you that Miles Riches guy?"

He chuckled. "Ah, so we've recognized each other." He bowed his head. "Yes, that's me. It's interesting that I should run into you here. I was thinking about coming to meet with you somewhere, but I had to be here for family business."

"I'm mostly exploring around," Hilda said. "I heard your family were hot shots in Pokemon training, so I wanted to see how things were too. I'm learning about it and have reasons to improve fast."

He rubbed his chin. "Really? I'd have to consult a few others, but perhaps we can help you. For myself, I was wondering how you managed to capture a legendary Pokemon. It's funny that you should say that you're still learning when it usually takes a extraordinary person to just encounter one of them."

"I have my reasons," Kyurem said.

"Oh yeah, this is Kyurem," Hilda said, pointing to him. "But if we want to talk, think we ought to skip out of this place?"

"That would be prudent, yes." Miles checked his watch. "I need to head back to Undella, though;
would you mind walking with me that way?"

"Nah, that'd be good; I wanted to go visit there myself."

Once outside of the mall, Hilda decided to call out Olette to walk with them, and make sure she wasn't still upset over earlier. Miles didn't seem to mind this, but he didn't call out one of his Pokemon to join them. There was a light wind that gave an occasional chilly nip, with a few clouds overhead. On their way out of the all too serious city, they talked about general things, a little bit about Plasma. The Riches were on the side against Plasma, but Miles explained that a number of his peers among the wealthy were willing to let go of their Pokemon pets in exchange for the idea of social liberty. "It's an excuse to feel morally superior when it isn't much of a loss as they get rid of what they think of as a hassle that lets them look good in society," he said in disdain. "But our family is deeply invested with Pokemon, both personally and economically."

The area out of the city and around the route was lovely; various streams ran along forested hills, with a few waterfalls by wooden bridges. The ground was covered in snow, a sparkling white that was covered in Pokemon and animal tracks. As they got further northeast, closer to the ocean, a white mist began to fill the air. Apparently this area was commonly foggy. It was a world of difference from Black City.

"If you can get here on a breezy spring day, it's really beautiful here," Miles said as they approached the beach. Pale tan sand laced with ice crystals crunched under their feet.

"Would be fun to run around the forest here," Hilda said. "I heard that your family doesn't usually compete in the League, so why're you doing so now?"

He gave a smug smile. "Well that would be because people said I couldn't. It may seem odd to you, but in my family, we've used methods of training for years now that don't meet the rules for League challengers. It makes the Pokemon much better, but the global organization doesn't believe it's fair. Since others used that to downplay our skills, I decided it was time to prove that we could win with regular Pokemon too. Burgh simply caught me off-guard. If I'd had my normal team, then I would've squashed him."

"I've heard that 'regular Pokemon' term," she said. "And yeah, that is weird that your training doesn't meet League rules. How can you do that without getting into illegal things?"

"There's ways," he said, not seeming bothered by her tone. "There's some performance drugs that work much better than the Protein, Iron, and other power drinks like that. Then there's training services, where you have another Trainer work on your Pokemon for you. In order for that to be legal, the Trainer has to have an extra license and the Pokemon they don't intend to use themselves need to be marked by Pokeball data as such."

Hilda frowned. "But then you didn't really train the Pokemon."

Miles shrugged. "It wins battles, having the expertly trained Pokemon with you. And it takes so much time to do it yourself. I mean, it might not matter to a person like you who earns a living traveling about and being in Pokemon battles daily, but I help out in my family business, doing jobs and taking many classes. We have a reputation as high level Pokemon Trainers to keep up too, so every little bit helps."

Although she nodded, she felt like this family couldn't be the great Trainers that people like Valerie believed they were. Maybe they did have high level teams, but it wasn't representative of their work. But he did invite her into his home to see a collection of treasures and rare Pokemon items, and Hilda was too curious to decline the offer.
"Hey, don't they have things like this in the Nacrene Museum?" Hilda asked, looking into a glass case with two clay tablets inside.

The leader of this household, Miles' father, nodded proudly. "Oh yes, and they've been asking to buy these off me. But these tablets are special; they have some ancient script engraved in them, see? I hear there's a similar collection of engraved tablets in Sinnoh, but we believe that this set tells a different story. Finding the other engraved tablets is something I hope to get accomplished. I have others in storage, but I'm sure we're missing a few from this set still."

From some distance away, Kyurem kept an eye and ear open to them. But it seemed that this place was safe; something bad could still happen, but it was looking less and less likely. These people just liked to show off. Perhaps they might try to recruit her as one of their hired Trainers, to improve their teams without having put in the personal effort. He was pretty sure that she would refuse at this point.

Meanwhile, he was speaking to a Haxorus. The other Pokemon was being kept in a room that had some kind of electric force field keeping him from getting out. It was a large room, furnished with a cushioned bed, various rocks and toys, a small pool of water, and a radio in the wall. Comfortable looking but still a prison, that's what Kyurem thought of it.

"I don't think you're as tough as you say you are," the Haxorus jeered, shaking his head and showing off his tusks. "You come in here and I'll gut you."

Kyurem crossed his arms over his chest. "So you think. You're in a place where the temperature never changes, correct? I'd subjugate you with sub-zero temperatures."

He laughed. "Oh, the ice will be fun to play with. The challenge would be refreshing. Normally I go up to my enemies and knock them over with a flick of a tail. But I'd still win. I always win and if I don't, it's because the other guy cheated so it doesn't count."

"And how many battles haven't counted yet?"

"Careful, that one's a powerful dragon," Miles said, coming over towards them.

Kyurem raised an eyebrow. "And that's supposed to intimidate me?"

"It should!" the Haxorus said, stretching himself up to his full height for a moment.

"I guess not," the teenaged boy said. "Now I've been wondering, what are you doing in the region at this time? And with a girl who only started as a full Trainer last fall. Whatever you're up to, you could do a better job with someone who has more resources and experience."

Kyurem gave Miles a cold look. In a way, he appreciated the guts and guile it took to try talking him out of his current arrangement. If this boy truly knew who he was dealing with, then it was quite arrogant, the sort of pride that could change society. He suspected that there was mostly greed that was driving this, though. "You are insignificant to my mission."

"Excuse me?" he said, frowning. But some facade of politeness kept him from fully getting angry.

He looked back at the Haxorus. "That is simply how things stand. You have little or no connection to why I am here. I wouldn't be surprised if this visit ends up as nothing more than a day's diversion. On the other hand, she is important to the reason why I awoke now. I didn't know why at the time, but I went with her. Now I know better why, and it has nothing to do with you."

Although he wasn't liking the reason why Hilda was important. She was a strong point of conflict.
between the twin heroes this time around and Kyurem felt like he didn't want to see her in love with either of them. It was disrupting the cool neutrality he was supposed to have towards humans.

"Well it's hard to argue against that," Miles said, getting back his calm face. "Even if I don't agree; I probably could solve a problem or two you're facing. I have the capacity to do a lot more than she can." He paused, looking at the Haxorus himself. "You like my Pokemon?"

Kyurem smiled at that. "That I do."

The Haxorus bellowed to that. "Cause I'm more awesome than you!"

"He's the kind of Pokemon I'd normally be looking to recruit," Kyurem went on. "Proud, strong, no hesitation to battle. He would see war as a game and would give everything he has in order to win. Violence would be his first answer, but he's not damaged or cursed to see things that way. In fact, I would rather like to see him released."

"We can't really do that," Miles said, starting to explain.

But he brought his right hand up, causing icy claws to form on the fingers. "I think I can see how to take out those force fields. Then I would tell him that his game is to knock down humans, and he would attack all of you that he sees, all in the name of fun. It seems to be your method of training that gives him this mindset, so I'm certain that I could find the rest of your Pokemon and release them in a similar manner."

"Oh, that would be the most awesome game ever!" the Haxorus said, excited. He saw nothing wrong in it.

At this, Miles started to pale. "You wouldn't really do that. Right?"

Kyurem flicked his hand, dismissing the ice claws. "Right. That's not the role that I'm in today."

"Aw rats," the other dragon said, lowering his head in disappointment.

"Your Pokemon would be good in battle, but only in battle," Kyurem added, then walked back over to where Hilda was. She was wide-eyed in excitement, grinning over something Mr. Riches was saying. Meanwhile, Olette seemed nervous over it. He wondered what kind of mischief she'd be getting into now.

"Hey Kyurem, come on, we're going to go swimming!" Hilda said, holding onto an oddly colored Pokeball.

"In this cold?" he asked, concerned for her health.

They were out on the water in this cold. Undella Bay was iced over closer to shore, but out here the surface was liquid, with small fragments of ice drifting around. Overhead, the sky was covered in gray; a bright golden haze showed where the sun tried to pierce through the winter cold, but didn't entirely make it. On the water, Hilda was riding on a Lapras that she had borrowed from Mr. Riches. He had also lent her some water repellant boots and pants to go over her usual winter attire, which let her stay dry and warm. Behind her, Kyurem was there in human form, keeping hold on her just in case.

"And why exactly are we out here?" Kyurem asked.

Hilda laughed; she had been caught up in excitement, singing for the amusement of the Lapras.
"Didn't you get it? Mr. Riches says that there's the ruins of a castle in the bay and I wanted to see it. So he let me borrow one of his Pokemon and the other equipment to go take a look. He says that if we find an artifact that he wants, that'll pay for renting the Pokemon, and he would pay good money for anything else."

He nodded. "It'd be Zelthas, the home of the Black King who ruled under the authority of Zekrom. Are you sure about going there in this cold, though?"

"You have a problem with that?" she asked playfully, glancing at him.

The Lapras twisted her neck and looked back at them. She cooed, worried to hear that carefree tone.

He clutched her arm. "It could be dangerous for you."

"I'm dressed warmly enough; can't even feel the cool of your skin through this coat. Well good, if you know where it is, then we might have more time. The thing that could hinder us is that when the tides change, the currents in the castle become really strong. That's why we had to set out right away, as we have about five hours to the next change."

"We'd want to dive over there," Kyurem said, pointing out a patch of water further head.

With that hint, Hilda signaled for the Lapras to do just that. The sea Pokemon summoned up a forcefield around them, giving them air to breathe while keeping the chilled water off them, then dove down into the bay. The dark waters soon surrounded them, so Hilda brought a flashlight out of her bag. Hopefully that would be enough.

Eventually, she spotted blue lights in the water. They faintly illuminated an enormous building of black stone. They weren't enough to see a full layout of the ruins, but there were a few towers still standing, with a long wall running along the ocean floor. At a few clusters of lights, there were piles of rubble from parts that had collapsed. Kyurem pointed the Lapras towards a large open window further in; at that point, they entered.

Her flashlight and the blue glowing crystals were enough to see by inside the structure. Sea plants were growing all over in the first room, giving hiding places to many small Pokemon and fish. But down a nearby staircase, the plants grew thinner without as much sunlight to reach them. Riding a Pokemon through the watery empty halls, Hilda felt a chill of excitement. She'd love to just explore around and look at things, but she was supposed to find something to give to Mr. Riches in thanks.

On many of the walls around them, there were strange letters and pictures. "What's all that about?" she asked, waving towards a mural that looked like a trial.

"Prallllaaa," the Lapras trilled.

"Laws, records, directions, lessons," Kyurem said. "They believed that carving knowledge onto walls and stones would make it endure for all time. Scrolls and papers could be destroyed, rock not as easily. I still brought it all down."

"Why'd you go and do that?" Hilda asked teasingly.

Surprisingly, he gave a serious answer. "Because they had lost the way that my siblings had taught them. Their selfish interests corrupted them and I was asked to demolish their government so that things could be started over again. It happens a lot over your history."

They continued to explore for a couple of hours, finding little pearls mostly. But in one room, they
found an intact vase and a clay tablet, the latter much like the ones she had seen on display in the Riches' home. While she was able to reach the vase from on the Lapras (the water had stung her bare hand with its iciness), the tablet was in a pile of rubble that the Lapras couldn't get much closer to. Kyurem was able to enter the water to retrieve it though.

He handed it to her while causing the water on him to freeze. "I hope that's sufficient," he said, starting to break the ice off himself. The Lapras was waiting on the floor of the room so he could stand and do this within the air bubble.

"It ought to be, since he collects the engraved ones." Hilda held it out as it was dripping; the shine of the water in her flashlight's beam gave the letters a deep contrast on the dark blue tablet. "I have no clue what it could be saying, though."

"Let me take another look," Kyurem said, sitting back on the Lapras as he'd 'dried off'. Hilda patted the Lapras' neck, signaling her to go back to the hall and explore some more. After a few minutes, he handed it back. "I recognize the story now. It's about the wars of the gods."

Hilda used her digital storage to stow the tablet away safely, along with the vase and pearls. "The wars of the gods? I don't know that one."

"It might not be common knowledge," he said, then paused. "I suppose there would be no harm in telling you."

In the early days of the world, there were many legendary Pokemon, all of which were active within the world. Each was given a power and many were given a domain; one would have the power of water with the domain of a portion of the ocean, while another would have the power of storm with the domain of another portion of the same ocean. Some lands were shared, others were exclusive. Some were vast, others small. And we ruled over our domains and all the Pokemon that lived within them.

As for we, Zekrom, Reshiram, and myself, at that time we were one self, given domain over Unova. I will not say what power we were given... but we were fascinated with knowledge. We wanted knowledge of knowledge itself: how one knows what is, why it is, why it is not, how it could be, why it should be. In trying to figure things out, we attracted some legends who did not have a domain but were interested in the same questions; some of them continue to live here today, such as Victini and Meloetta.

There were other legends who were interested in power, though. They wanted to become powerful and expand their domains. Over all of us, the Original One watched and kept many in check, but there were still those who tried. There were also legends who did not agree with each other. They got into fights over boundaries, or over what could or could not be done. Some foolish ones even believed they were most important and fought others to prove their dominance. While such conflicts started small, they grew each and every time until we had entered the era of history known as the wars of the gods.

They had drawn ordinary Pokemon into their battles, sending armies after the inhabitants of their enemy's domain. These soldiers began to die in great numbers, causing anger and grief in their legendary commanders. However, the battles only continued to grow. Legends began to die physically. While we could be reborn from that, exactly as before, the domain of a dead legend would become chaotic and dangerous, spawning natural disasters such as great storms or earthquakes. Famine and plague were also common within such places, and the Pokemon would suffer until the legend could be reborn to correct things.
And even we, concerned primarily with intellectual pursuits, we got drawn into these wars. A promise of allegiance to another, thinking nothing bad would come of it. But then a war would erupt and we would be drawn into it in order to uphold the promise. A few times, we were uncertain of what to do as we had promised support to others who turned out to be on opposite sides. It wasn't the primal fighting that comes with hunting and being hunted; this seemed much worse as none of the wars were needed and bodies were wasted.

Then came the worst year of it. Entire species of mortal Pokemon were wiped out; portions of the world were torn apart and rendered unfit to live in for centuries after. And there was a group of immortal legends that were completely killed, body, mind, and spirit, so that they could never be revived. Their loss brought much chaos into the world, driving some other immortals insane temporarily. This was when the Original One came forward and declared that this could not continue.

At that point, laws were brought into being to control our influence. We were no longer to rule over the mortal Pokemon; we were to serve and protect them, even from ourselves. We had to restrain our raw powers so that such absolute destruction would not be repeated. We were to spend a certain amount of time in hibernation, inactive in the real world during that time. Most of all, we were not to start another war unless someone who had earned our loyalty commanded us to. And the few that we would grant loyalty to, we were to follow their lead no matter what, protecting them and advising them, but always following their will.

It worked. The time of wars was over and peace returned to the world. However, it worked too well. The mortal Pokemon have a great many abilities, but they lack a true ability and drive to change the world. We immortals were able to see how the world could change and become better; we wanted the world to develop and become greater. But the mortals were concerned with their own lives in the present. The few who could realize the concept of past and future saw no point in changing how things were.

And so to prevent the world from stagnating because we had restricted our guidance, humans were introduced into the world.

…

"Then we're here to keep things interesting, huh?" Hilda asked.

"You humans certainly do that," Kyurem said.

She chuckled. "Well then I've been contributing to that well. And I guess you were able to get around the laws keeping you from interfering because of the other two facing true death."

"Exactly." He tapped her shoulder, then pointed down another hole. "We might wish to go that way. I smell something odd in the water."

"We should be heading out soon, but it should be safe to look. Come on, Lapras, you've been a good girl." Hilda patted the water Pokemon's neck, then pointed her the right way.

"Kuurrra," the Lapras responded, happy with the compliment and going further in.

This hole was not a staircase; hinges and a rusted lock suggested that it had once been a trapdoor with a ladder, but the cover was long gone. The Lapras had only inches to spare getting down the hole, which led to a short unlit hallway. At one time, a massive door had been in place here. It was lying in pieces on the floor as if some explosion had taken it out. Past it was a small room that did not have much in it. There was some rubble, rusted and broken pieces of once treasures, and a
stone table that had a crown on one side. For being underwater for a good portion of history, the crown was in remarkable shape.

After guiding the Lapras over there, Hilda picked up the crown from the table. "Wow, how did this stay so nice?"

"It has a touch of fire," Kyurem said. He leaned closer and pointed out the design; bits of red, white, and gold showed through. "And this would be a symbol of Shira. This crown belonged to the White Kings."

"Then what's it doing in the castle of the Black King?" Hilda asked.

He shrugged. "Could be a copy. Could be something they were entrusted with." He put his hand on the part of the table in the air bubble. "And this... the other crown was here until recently, sometime in the past year."

Turning the crown around, Hilda wondered if some cleaning and touch-up would make it look almost new. "N might have it. He'd be the sort to leave the other one." She turned to see Kyurem's face and grinned. "I have a great idea."

Chapter End Notes

I have Black, although I have other reasons for having Black City at that location. For one, I did want to have at least a reference to the economic angle presented by Plasma's plans. However, I don't know how many of you would be interested in a full blown discussion of that. I'm sure I could find some other fans who'd like to debate and discuss that issue, but I'd rather not bore people. Black City seemed the appropriate place to have that reference, given how business-oriented it seems. The location seems more like somewhere that would be a tough city-dungeon in other games, with the dominance of black and the high-level Trainers.

The issues of what people might do to Pokemon to get ahead is an interesting topic to think about. As is figuring out why legendary Pokemon will submit to humans if they are god-like creatures instead of just super rare varieties.
Crowning a King, part 1

2/26, afternoon

Mistralton

N walked quickly through town, eyes on the ground. Despite the falling snow, people were out today, sharing news and chatter. He hardly heard them, or saw anything of Mistralton. He was on his way to the airport, where the Gym was located. Even after getting five badges, he still dreaded these days. These were some of the toughest battles where the Pokemon were most likely to get hurt. And then he had to release them... no, that should be the good part of the day.

Today, he felt more nervous than usual. His stomach fluttered and his body seemed completely tense no matter how much he tried to calm himself. He wasn't prepared for this; his team might not be ready. However, he had little choice in the matter. Just that morning, he'd gotten a call from Zinzolin with some bad news: the Pokemon League had announced that they were suspending all League activities for one month, starting tomorrow. There had been something about a review or assessment, but the suspension came at a terrible time. It was going to delay their plans. If he could defeat this Gym today, that would help. If not, it would take even longer.

The Shadow Triad had helped some by giving him a number of Rare Candies. These special treats could make Pokemon stronger quickly, but the method of making them was a closely guarded secret. And whoever made them never sold them, leaving them as mysterious gifts from an unknown benefactor. Despite this, the Triad said they'd be searching for more. It might help, but N wasn't sure if it would be enough.

What should he have Plasma do during this month long stall?

Undella

Unlike previous days, the lobby of the Pokecenter was noisy. Trainers that had come in recently were waiting in a line that snaked across the room, wanting to get their Pokemon healed up from the trek here or battles that had taken place in the outskirts of Undella. On a couch in the waiting area, Hilda was making last minute checks on how her plan was going. A woman from a catering service was talking with her, discussing a change in where things were to be set up. There was a map of the beach on the table, as well as a small stack of receipts, a vague schedule, a history book opened to an illustration of one of Zekrom's heroes, and a list of people that had been almost fully checked off.

Kyurem was nearby as usual, in one of the armchairs in the waiting area. But for this moment, he wasn't watching Hilda closely (there were so many people in the Pokecenter that he felt there wasn't a high chance of trouble). His eyes were closed and his body relaxed; his mind was focused in meditation. He had a part to play in the day's events, in making sure that his power wouldn't interfere. In his lap, Mimi had curled up and gone to sleep after he'd made it clear that he wasn't going to play with her. Her presence was simultaneously reassuring and worrying, even if the worry was irrational when he was in human form.

"Oh my, it's so crowded in here," a familiar voice said. Kyurem opened his eyes to glance at Bianca passing by his chair; she was wearing a green face mask for some reason. Cheren and Professor Juniper were with her. "Hi Hilda, Kyurem... hi-choo! Oh, sorry, I'm still getting over this flu." She put her hand to her face, bashful.
Hilda got up from her seat. "Really? I hope you're feeling okay now. But it's great that you came. You even brought the professor with you."

Juniper chuckled. "Well I heard that you were up to something big, so I had to come check it out myself. I'm afraid that your mother is busy, but she told me to give you a hug for her."

"Aw, that's nice," she said, getting up to hug Juniper and Bianca. "I'm just about ready to get things started, but I need to leave the center for a minute. Have to get the guest of honor here, after all. Coming, Rei?"

Kyurem nodded, then picked the Minccino up gently and carried her outside without waking her. "Things should go well."

"Good," Hilda said, pleased to hear it. "Are you feeling okay?"

"I have to make my presence as passive as possible," he said. "I feel lousy. But if this does what you hope, it will be worth it."

Castelia

Hilbert stood at the end of one of the piers, listening to the snowy wind and the steady waves. There weren't many out here; there wasn't even a boat at the time. At the moment, it was only him and his four Pokemon. They were keeping active to endure the frigid air, although Loch the Alomomola seemed to have no problem with diving in and out of the water. It wasn't that bad, just cold.

At this point, he was forced to admit to himself that he'd hit a dead end on finding out about his mother. He didn't even have any ideas on where to look next. There were still a lot of questions he had. At the moment, the one he was considering was what he should do now. Trying to make contact with Reshiram was looking like a good place to start. Shira or Dragonspiral Tower, then?

His Xtransciever buzzed, breaking his train of thought. It was Hilda; he considered not answering, but not for long. "Afternoon," he said. "What're you up to now?"

"Getting wise to my ways, huh?" she asked teasingly. "I'd like to tell you what, but you have to come see it in person. Why don't you come out to meet me in Undella Town?"

He shrugged. Undella was a nice place, although he couldn't think of any particular reason to be out there this time of year. "Maybe. What time?"

"How about right now? Or you'll miss it and everyone will be disappointed."

Right now? Well, it wasn't like he was doing anything. But what was she up to? "Everyone?"

"Yeah! Come on, please?" She smiled warmly. "It'll be great but I need you to be here."

"I would've liked some warning. But, all right. I'll be there in a little bit." Hearing that she needed him, even if he didn't know what for, was nice.

"Awesome!" she said, eager to do whatever it was she had in mind. "I'll have your outfit ready when you get here, so just meet me at the entrance of the Sea Breeze Inn. See ya!" Then she disconnected.

"My outfit?" Hilbert asked, even more bewildered.
"Shoo la," Madeline said, looking curious and interested.

He bit his lip. "I hope this isn't going to end up embarrassing us. Okay, Madeline, Loch, Ember, I need to recall you three for a bit. Regal, we're going to Undella."

Mistralton

This had to be the worst Gym he'd been in yet. The layout was confusing; the walls and barriers were of no uniform size, making the whole place look messy. While there were guide arrows on the floors, the meaning of their colors and sizes were not immediately apparent. The path was forcing him to fight every single Trainer under the Leader, wearing his Pokemon down little by little. His Boldore and Klink were doing okay, but he already had to revive the Joltik and the Ferroseed had nearly been knocked out twice now. While he had Pierre with him, he was trying to avoid using the Vanillish.

And then there were the cannons. Artillery weapons, things that were symbols of war, were placed indoors to be used as a method of traveling over the various obstacles. It was utterly insane and he expected an equally insane person to be in charge of this horror.

The Leader turned out to be a rather attractive woman wearing a short blue jacket and equally short shorts. As if this Gym wasn't bad enough, she had to try appealing to base instincts to throw her challengers off. He wasn't going to let that get to him, though. N walked up the steps to the platform where she battled. "Your equipment isn't working accurately; I nearly hit one of the barriers over there."

"It's all working within appropriate safety guidelines," she said, smiling like it was no issue. "It's pretty nice, right? You get to feel like you're flying through the air just like a Flying Pokemon."

"I would rather have not experienced that," he said.

She tilted her head. "Can't please everyone, huh? Well I'm Skyla, Leader of this Gym. Have you come in for a challenge? If you fail, it'll be a while before you can try again."

"I know, that's why I came." He wanted to add, 'can we get this over with?'. He couldn't see how someone who saw this Gym as 'nice' could be an appropriate person to work with Pokemon.

Undella

There were a number of cottages that lined the beach in Undella, beautiful homes that were made for those that loved the ocean. During the winter, the town was usually quiet and relaxing. Maybe a person or two would be beach combing when the sun was out. Today, there was quite a crowd at the beach, people talking and waiting for something to begin. There were a few tables set up with a snack buffet. Elsewhere, a small group of musicians were setting up and testing their equipment.

At one of the cottages, a young woman leaned against the wall near the front door. She wore a long black leather coat over heavy black pants and a black sweater. She observed the crowd, wondering what they were doing. As far as she knew, there wasn't any celebration planned.

The door opened, letting out another woman who had a very different style. Her hair was long and brown, hanging loose down past her knees. She wore a white and pink coat over one of her usual elaborate frilly pink dresses. "Have you figured out what's going on?" she asked.

The woman in black shook her head. "Nothing's really started, it seems like. It looks like a party;
nobody's checking for invitations, so it can't be a private affair."

Smiling, she turned to lock the door. "I think it will be an interesting event. Come on, they shouldn't mind us."

"Sure." They headed down to the beach.

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N's Castle

The parlor area hadn't seemed all the necessary during the planning stages. With a building of this size and this many rooms, though, there ended up being more than they needed. That and N being interested in various styles of architecture at the time led to this two level parlor entering the plans. Now that they had it, Ghetsis had to admit that it was a pleasant room that was useful for getting others to relax, letting their guard down.

"I don't think Rood is thinking of defecting," Bronius said. He, Zinzolin, and Gorm were in here with Ghetsis. There were no stated plans for this 'meeting', but Ghetsis was guiding the conversation to get what he wanted. "But I'm not sure what he's doing."

"Is he trying to spread dissent?" Gorm asked.

Bronius shrugged. "I don't think so. He's been encouraging others to stay loyal to N. After that incident with the lights, he's been telling those who weren't there about it. But he has been speaking of doubt in others in Plasma."

Ghetsis considered that. He might need to speak to Rood and get control over him once again, figure out what he was doubting. While he was proving harder to manipulate lately, Rood was useful for his skill and knowledge in many fields. Even in Pokemon training.

"I think it's mostly a fear of failure," Zinzolin said. "You and Rood were both involved with GrEF, right? In a way, he was burned on the failure of that group, and he's now wary of getting everyone hurt again. I've spoken to him several times the past few days and his heart is definitely still devoted."

"We're stronger then they were, and founded on better ideas," Ghetsis said. "We can encourage him to allay those doubts. At the moment, I'm more worried about this announcement from the League about their shut down."

"That's an unwelcome delay for us," Bronius said. "Do you think they did it because of us?"

"I can't see how," Gorm said.

Zinzolin nodded. "We could use this to strengthen our position if the argument is worded right. Spread rumors that they did it because they're starting to believe in our philosophy and are considering disbanding."

"I'm worried that they know who N is," Bronius explained. "Or that they suspect it and want to see if delaying him will delay our actions."

"I agree with that," Ghetsis said. "They aren't dull idiots, after all. N is so passionate about his cause that he had to have said something to the Leaders, and they would have compared notes to discover the truth. And we do want N to be in a position of authority in the eyes of the public before they know that he is our King and the hero of Zekrom. We could use the extra time to sway popular opinion, but then so can they."
"I asked him what he planned to do during the shut down, and he didn't seem certain," Zinzolin said. "Maybe we should reveal him early? Because according to their rules, they cannot deny his challenges even if the knowledge that he is our King is out there."

What would N be doing during this unexpected four week delay? That worried Ghetsis. N's resistance to outside ideas was weakening quicker than he expected; the delay would give him more time to consider them and realize that he had options. And after the last time he had returned, Ghetsis wasn't sure he could use the pressured study to reinforce him again. It might be time to pull something drastic and make N dependent on him again.

"The public would have more time to say it was a hypocrisy if we revealed him now," Ghetsis said while he activated his Xtransciver. But he only sent a text message with it. 'Is that Purrloin still following him?'

"Right, and we don't want him to have bad publicity at any stage," Bronius said.

The message was answered. 'yes, and it is a liepard.'

Not that it really mattered. 'Kill it; make sure that N knows of the death personally but not that you were involved.' To the others in the room, he said, "When he comes back, we definitely need to show our support for him. This has been a stressful time for him and he won't like it getting stretched out longer than it must be."

'as you wish.'

Undella

"I don't know how she talked me into this," Hilbert muttered to himself, pulling up the other glove and heading into the bathroom. Hilda had let him borrow her room to change into this outfit, apparently something she'd picked out and bought herself. While she didn't say why yet, or what they were even doing, he figured he might as well. He just wasn't used to dressing like this.

He took his hair brush and worked on that while checking over how he looked. It was a rather fancy outfit, with white slacks and a white collared shirt. Even if those were nice, they paled in comparison to the main piece of the outfit, a white long coat that was trimmed with fake red fur. Not just any red either: it was a bright crimson red with long thin hairs, the fur part being on the collar, down the edges, along the bottom, and around the arm cuffs. It wasn't even a full coat. The torso part came around his chest snugly, but past the waist, it curved back so that the bulk of it was behind him, with the end of it a little above his ankles when he wore white boots. Then there were the gloves, and Hilda had insisted that he not wear a hat. He was allowed earmuffs as long as they matched, but he didn't have any (much less matching ones).

Actually, when he got over how weird he looked without a hat on, it was an impressive outfit. The quality of it kept it from looking like some costume, although it seemed something more appropriate for a character in a fantasy manga. Maybe this would be something good. And, maybe the fact that she bought this for him meant she was interested in him. But why would she do this after she kissed N? It just didn't make sense, until he realized that he had done similar things in the past. What was her purpose in it? He had only been interested in satisfying his ego, but that didn't seem right for her.

He left the room and found her waiting. "Well it's not what I'd normally wear, but it's kind of nice," he said.
Hilda grinned. "You look handsome in that. That's perfect. Now I have to go put on my outfit and we can get things rolling. Don't worry, it shouldn't take me long."

"Wait, what are we doing?" he asked, grabbing her arm to keep her from slipping by. Did she mean dressing up for a date? But why to this extent?

"Well you're trying to be the hero chosen by Reshiram, right?" she asked with that playful smile of hers. "And that hero is often recognized as a king, like how N is said to be the King of Plasma. So, we're going to get you crowned a king too, today."

His jaw dropped. "You're... going to crown me?"

She nodded. "Yeah. But I have to be ready too; be back in a couple of minutes." She then went into the room and shut the door.

Surprisingly, Kyurem stayed out with him. He was holding onto Mimi still. "It was her idea," he said.

"You two are doing that?" he asked, still not sure that she was being serious.

Kyurem nodded.

"Why?" He wasn't even sure if he was worthy of summoning Reshiram now. After all, he had lived a deceptive life before, even if he insisted that he was always honest. But even a truth could be manipulated into a deception, such as when he used careful wording to excuse never taking a relationship seriously.

He looked steadily at Hilbert, like a chillingly calm judge (although the effect was lessened due to the fact that he was holding onto a sleepy cute Minccino). After a long pause, he said, "You have spoken with her about this before. Plasma is trying to invoke the spirit of mythology in Unova in order to gain the support of the people. Hilda has decided that she wants to outdo them before they're ready to reveal everything. Thus, we will crown you as the White King and present you to the people of Unova."

At that, he felt something he'd never experienced before: stage fright. "Is this going to get recorded?"

"That's in the plans," he said.

"And what if I don't manage to summon Reshiram?" Hilbert asked, the doubt causing his insides to feel all knotted up. "That's not going to help us with stopping Plasma."

"Lia hoona so rah," Madeline said, hopping over to him and using her energy to float up onto his shoulder. Regal seemed to caw in agreement with the Litwick.

Kyurem looked over at the Rufflet. "They believe in you. They want to help you succeed now. Do you want to give up being with Pokemon? Especially when many of their reasons seemed to be based off a warping of the truth?"

Hilbert glanced over at Madeline; the Litwick was smiling. Loch and Regal were also being positive; just as Kyurem said, they wanted to help him. And there was Hilda too, so he wasn't going to be alone in this. "No, I don't," he said, calming down.

"Then focus your energy on contacting Reshiram, and believe that you can accomplish it," Kyurem said.
"Huuumuu?" Mimi mumbled, shifting her head and opening her eyes. It was quite a contrast, seeing Kyurem's expression soften as he rubbed her chin. "You do need to wake up, or you'll miss all the excitement."

It would be a sad state of things to have Pokemon and human separated. But something occurred to Hilbert then. "If having me do this would help people resist Plasma, then I'll do it. But, what am I supposed to be king of? N has Plasma, but I don't own any property and there hasn't been a ruling King of Unova in a long time."

Smirking, Kyurem said, "I don't think you need to be king of anything. You just need to be a King, and have the appropriate attitude for it. But if you think of something that won't ruffle any feathers, tell us before we get around to the coronation itself."

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Mistralton

N was sweating; his heart was pounding. Even with the boost from the candies, Skyla's team was devastating his. He had advantages with type, but she seemed to have experience and strategy to overcome that. Now he was down to the Klink. "You... need this win," Tock said, weary but hanging on. He spun his gears rapidly to launch one at the Swanna.

Don't push yourself too much, N wanted to say, but his thoughts were too frantic at this perilous position to actually speak. The clank and shudder of Tock's body as his gear came back made him wince, and again when Skyla used a Hyper Potion to keep the Swanna fighting. He did the same for Tock, but in making his way through the Gym, he had used up most of his supply. Due to that, the healing was not enough to make up for the Swanna's next attack. The Klink clattered onto the ground before N could make himself recall him.

Had he really lost?

Then a red light flashed in front of him, followed by a white mist. Pierre had called himself out. "Terror of the sky," he said softly. "But don't fear, angel. I will fight for you. I must. Just keep those that are not Pokemon away."

This wasn't right. He shouldn't have Pierre fighting when the Vanillish was unstable. But, he wanted to, and N wanted to get this badge out of the way so that he didn't have to return to this Gym in a month's time. He nodded and gave out the next command.

Undella

Hilda was excited. Everything was working out as she had hoped. While she didn't have a lot of money, she managed to get a discounted deal with a caterer for this event and had convinced the guy who ran that coffee shop in Castelia to recruit some musicians willing to play for it. She then found Hilbert's remaining fans online and told them about this, as well as why he had seemingly disappeared in recent months. She also told some local newscasters and others who would be curious about the crowning of a king. And for her efforts, she had gotten quite a crowd at the beach on a winter day, all to put Hilbert's search for Reshiram in the public eye in a big dramatic way.

It left her without much money, but if she took on a few battles later on, it shouldn't be much of a problem.

Hilbert had lost the nervousness he had earlier, at least on the surface. He gave others a confident smile, but the past month had toned down his pride to a tolerable and even admirable level. In fact,
more people were recognizing him as a famed Trainer despite the loss of his Attract state. All around them, there were whispers of admiration and curiosity. He was refusing to battle his team so far, which was probably for the best.

As it seemed anyone who would be there was there, Hilda got people to clear out a circle with her, Hilbert, and Kyurem inside. "Hey all, thanks for coming out here today!" she said. "Hilbert here and I have been looking into Team Plasma, with the help of many others that don't want to be picked out. You've probably heard them refer to their mysterious leader as their king. Well we've found out they mean that their leader intends on becoming the Black King, the hero of Zekrom who will potentially lead Unova into a new age under their ideals."

This caused some to nod their heads in realization, or to whisper to a friend in surprise. It was an obvious connection to make, but Plasma (especially Ghetsis) spoke indirectly about it, talking of both truth and ideal so that they appealed to many in Unova. If word of this spread, then the dramatic impact Plasma was hoping for would be diminished.

Feeling the thrill of the moment, Hilda gestured to Hilbert and bowed her head slightly. "What you might not know is that Hilbert has been searching for Reshiram's favor himself, even before he knew of Plasma. Lately he's become quite determined to counter Plasma's actions and use the truth to uncover their manipulations. So we've decided to have him crowned as the White King, in hopes of evening the odds. And that is what you've all been gathered here to witness today."

"Actually, you decided to do this," Hilbert said, getting laughter from the witnesses. Then he bowed, holding the Light Stone near his chest as he did so. "But thank you, Hilda. You as well, Kyurem. "It's odd that I would find help from you. But as I understand it, you're here now to prevent a disaster, not cause one. I hope that I can help with that as well."

Kyurem gave a slight nod. "Sometimes even a small effort can make a difference. But one should always try for their best."

"So what's he supposed to be king of?" a girl at the inner edge of the crowd asked.

"I will be the White King," Hilbert said before Hilda could think up of some nonsensical thing. "That's all that matters. I don't have the authority to rule over our land, but I will serve it in every way that I can."

Hilda smiled as others voiced their approval of this. That was probably better than any joke. "Exactly that. Now, you have the hibernating form of Reshiram with you?"

While she knew this, he went ahead and nodded, holding up the Light Stone in both hands. "He is here with me, at least this small physical presence."

"Good. Now then," she turned to the crowd, looking for the person she wanted. "Hey Alder, get in here."

"Sorry," he said. Other people moved aside so that he could enter the circle. Somehow, he'd found a red and gold coat that went down past his knees, something that looked very formal. It seemed impressive, even with his messy frizzy red hair. Following close behind him was a Volcarona, given a small white ribbon for the event. Alder came over and shook hands with Hilda. "It's good to meet you finally, Miss Hilda. I wasn't sure how serious you were being in your email, but I'm glad to help out."

"Thanks, man," she said. "The old texts I found said there should be a shamanic priest to place a blessing on the new King, but I don't know anybody like that around these days. You seemed pretty
Alder grinned. "Maybe more so than you know. So then, Hilbert." He turned to the young man and stepped up right in front of him. "You're of the opinion that humans and Pokemon should live together?"

He nodded. "Yes, as both sides can help each other greatly. There is a need for us humans to have more respect towards Pokemon, but I don't believe it's great enough to call for drastic action. The Pokemon come to us willingly to help us; we should do the same for them."

"I see. Since you are taking on such a prestigious role of the White King and the hero to Reshiram, do you intend to selflessly serve the people of Unova?"

"Yes, I will do everything that I can."

"Then one last question," Alder said, leaning closer. "It is known that if one wishes to ask for the favor of the Yang Dragon, one must be honest not only in words, but also in the heart. If there is any deception within you when you call upon it, there is a significant chance that you will be burned severely, possibly to death. Knowing this, are you willing to take on this role fully?"

Answering without hesitation, Hilbert said, "Yes. I have had to face my own deceptions recently, some so deep that I still don't know why they were. But now I am continuing to work on living an honest life."

Hilda caught sight of Kyurem giving a slight nod in approval to this. Some in the crowd even cheered that statement. "Good," Alder said, taking a small glass bottle out of his coat pocket. "So then, do we have another authority to perform the actual crowning? And a crown? Since it's not much of a crowning if we're missing that."

Among some of the amused laughs, Hilda grinned and nodded. "Yeah, we've got a crown. Mimi, Tarzan, Frank, come over here!" The first two Pokemon came out of the crowd, each holding a handle of a white box (and Tarzan using his other hand to keep his skin from tripping him up). The Gothorita followed after them, carrying a book. "And I'll do the crowning."

"If anyone wishes to doubt her eligibility for this, you have to take it up with me," Kyurem said in a cold serious tone. The general mood of the crowd earned this statement chuckles and cheers.

"If Kyurem says so, then it must work," Alder said, nodding. "Hilbert, if you would kneel please." Once he did so, Alder got a bit of the bottled oil on his fingertips, then traced out a symbol relating to Reshiram on Hilbert's forehead. "Spirits of the world, spirits of the heavens, be with us now. We bring before you a seeker of truth, and a friend to Pokemon, Hilbert Godfrey. He wishes to call Reshiram into the world and halt a great change that lies ahead of us. After much consideration and thought, I believe him to be sincere and earnest in this. Please give him your blessings and watch over him as the new White King."

Had Alder really put a lot of thought into this? Hilda hoped he had, as this was not a time to be insincere. As for herself, she had spoken with Hilbert the other day about his attempts to track down his mother. If he put that effort into this 'battle' with Team Plasma, then things would greatly improve. They might not even have to come to a confrontation about this; they just had to sway N's mind away from that.

Hilda then waved Frank to come over with her; he handed her the book. Smiling at the Pokemon for doing as asked this time, she flipped the book open to the marked page. "Now then... I have a modern translation of the Oath of the White King here. Keep your hands on the Light Stone and..."
“Repeat the lines after me.” She then read from the book, pausing regularly for him to speak it.

There had been an older and more formal translation in the book, as well as a few others that depended on different circumstances (like having Reshiram there in person). However, the modern one was clearer to her, and still suitable for the occasion. After a formal introduction, it went, ‘I have perceived a need for the clarity and simplicity of the truth in our homeland, to cut through the veil of ignorance and lies. In order to bring about a new age of peace, prosperity, and wisdom to Unova, I swear that I will serve the sacred Yang Dragon, Reshiram, as well as the people of Unova, with integrity, honor, and respect that comes from the depths of my heart. If the spirits of the world and the heavens find any fault with my intentions, then I ask that they strike me down before I cause further harm to the home that I love.’

At the end of it, Kyurem simply stood there, still observing. The clouds overhead were breaking up, allowing a few stray sun rays to fall through the air. The crowd was silent, as if waiting to see what would happen. Since nothing did, Hilda passed the book back to Frank and opened up the box Mimi and Tarzan were carrying. She pulled the ancient crown from Zelthas out and brought it in front of Hilbert. On seeing it, his eyes widened in recognition and disbelief.

"Your Oath has been recognized and witnessed by the good people and Pokemon here," Hilda said, following the ceremony described in the book. Mostly. "I, the chosen hero of Kyurem, thus crown you as the White King, to serve Reshiram. May the spirits of the world and the heavens guide you well." Then she put the crown on his head.

Just seconds later, Hilbert grabbed both of Hilda's hands without warning. It startled her, but then she saw that the Light Stone was now glowing red and floating, similar to how Kyurem’s hibernating form had acted when she first got it. The difference was that Reshiram's form burst into flames, enormous ones that soon enveloped both of them. Around them, there were gasps and calls of concern, but Hilda didn't feel in danger. The flames touched her, but more like a warm hug than anything else.

Hilbert stood up, still holding onto her hands. "Don't worry," he said softly, leaning closer. "It won't hurt you as long as you hold onto me."

Shortly after he said that, the flames ended. The Light Stone remained as a stone, but now floating between them. The concern around them turned to relief and awe at seeing them untouched; there was applauding and cheering before long. But for a moment, she hardly noticed them as Hilbert was there, smiling with a look of adoration in his eyes.

As nice as it was, it wouldn't help with the problem of avoiding disaster. Hilda let go of his arms, smiling herself. Then she turned to the crowd around them. "Ladies, gentleman, and Pokemon, I present to you, the White King!"
Crowning a King, part 2

Mistralton, afternoon 2/26

Too close; much too close. Skyla's team shouldn't have been that hard. She had all Flying types. He knew their weaknesses and strengths. For the ones he had gathered, it should have been a simple match. But he was out of healing items, was out of ideas... was out of Pokemon. And she still had the Swanna in front of her, barely hanging on, perhaps only out of willpower. "I have done my duty," the Swanna said, modest but with a strange love and loyalty to Skyla.

N had lost.

"Wow, that was a real nail-biter," the Gym Leader said, smiling while flicking some ice off her arm; one of Pierre's attacks had gone a little wild. But the smile didn't last long. "You have a good mind and heart for this, but you could have used more time to bond with these Pokemon."

Bond with them? Feeling his face burn with anger or embarrassment (or both), he clenched his fists. "What do you know about bonding with Pokemon?" he snapped. "You can't even understand them."

"There's more than one way to understand things," Skyla said.

N tried to respond to that, but his mind was flooded with thoughts, sympathetic pain, disappointment in himself, and concern. There were too many things to say and not the right words to say them with. Then a peculiar feeling caused him to tense. Oddly enough, it felt like the air in Chargestone Cavern.

And then a bolt of lightning came right through the building and struck him.

For a moment, N couldn't see or hear a thing, only white and a ringing in his ears. He did feel something new, a presence very close to him, like a mind greater than his own briefly making mental contact. It was Zekrom. Without words, she apologized for the unexpected lack of contact. There hadn't been much they could do, as some force blocked off their ability to see into the physical world. Now, she would be watching him, waiting for the right time and the right place.

Then his vision returned, if blurry for a moment. Skyla was close to him; the Swanna was nowhere to be seen. "N? We can call the hospital." Her voice seemed to be coming from far away.

"No, I'm fine," he said, taking a few steps back. He turned, but recalled that there was one of those barriers there... and all around them. "How do you get out of here?"

"Teleport pad, over there," she said, pointing her thumb over her shoulder.

His bag shifted, so he opened it up while walking over there; he'd just ignore Skyla for now. The Dark Stone floated right out of the bag and came to drift alongside him. Although he had believed it when he felt her, he was momentarily glad to see this. But only a moment. His Pokemon friends had suffered because he had failed to prepare properly and took this challenge before they were ready. Once he was on the other side of the Gym, he took off running for the Pokecenter. Several people gawked at him, or more accurately, at the sparking black stone following after. But he ignored them too.

While he had once suspected them, he now felt that the Pokecenters were trustworthy. Misguided, yes, because their work depended on the wrongs of the current system. But they did good work and
the nurses seemed to put their hearts into it. It would be a pity to have them all shut down, but they
would not be necessary in the future. After an antagonizing few minutes where he had to wait in
line, N had the Pokemon healed, thanked the nurse, then headed off.

But not far. He got to the waiting area up front and wasn't sure where to go from there. So he
dropped into one of the seats with a sigh and tried to think through things rationally. The Dark
Stone came to his side and stayed there.

N looked over at her. "You picked a terrible time to show up like this," he whispered. He had lost a
battle, he had put his and Skyla's Pokemon through unneeded pain, he felt like he was still
stumbling in trying to find his way back to what he should be doing. Then he realized the rudeness
of that and rubbed his forehead. "Sorry, I don't mean..." he found tears that were hot with shame.

Why was he crying? He shouldn't be crying. N spent a moment trying to think of anything else,
even nothing, in order to get a grip on his emotions. Right now, the matter should be deciding what
to do with the Pokemon with him. He would be keeping Pierre, as he still needed help (and
probably needed more now). But the others, should he train them over these four weeks? He had
kept his Nimbasa team a fairly long time, although that just led to another hard parting. It seemed
better to just let the others go. He had already failed them, so he shouldn't make them work even
harder.

Someone in the Pokecenter turned up the volume on the TV nearby, which initially annoyed him.
But then he heard something that caught his attention. "Now we bring you a special report on an
unexpected event, the crowning of the White King in Undella Town."

"The White King," N said to himself, looking over at the screen. And yes, it was Hilbert, dressed in
a regal fashion that was perfectly suited for his role as a seeker of Reshiram. His ceremony was
performed by Alder and Hilda, with Kyurem watching closely. It was held outdoors. While it was
technically the proper format, it was done with a bit of informality that could be expected from
Hilda. That didn't seem to detract from meaning of it.

Seeing the recording, he was reminded of his own crowning. It had been all formality, done
precisely as the records they had found. He had even spoken his oath in the original language it
had been written in, something that he had had to practice continually for over a month to get right.
As a religious expert, Ryuko had recited the blessing over him; as his father, Ghetsis had then
crowned him. N had not been prompted with the oath like Hilbert had, having spoken it from
memory. There had been no Pokemon there as witnesses, something that had disappointed him but
was more fitting of their ideals. And all of the Plasma members of that time had been there as
witnesses, in the throne room of N's castle. They had not spoken until the end, and then only to
give statements of their loyalty to him. Feeling the burden of their hopes and dreams had kept him
calm and serious through the event, even though he had felt an inner excitement over it before.

Did the difference make one of them more worthy than the other? N wondered that as he watched.
He was surprised to see the crown Hilda had. Wasn't that the one he had left behind in Zelthas? He
had thought that it had been part of his test there, to pick out the right crown for the role he was
seeking. He wasn't as surprised when the fire enveloped the two of them. If Zekrom's
manifestation had struck him with lightning, it only made sense. Then he saw the warm look
Hilbert had as he was holding Hilda's hands.

Jealousy clenched at his mind before he realized it. How dare he... he knew that N liked her, so
why was he trying to snatch her first? It didn't matter that she seemed to deflect the look to
continue on. What mattered was that Hilbert was trying to steal her away before N had a chance to
figure out how to attract her.
After the initial reaction, N bit his lip, feeling like someone should slap some sense into him. He was trying to cut off Hilda's distracting influence, so if they wanted to be together, then that should be fine. Seeing that shouldn't make him feel like punching his brother in the face. At least Hilda didn't seem to be returning that look.

Once the clip was over, the reporter started talking with Hilbert himself.

north of Iccirus

Due to the lay of the land, Iccirus tended to be the first town in Unova to get cool in autumn, and the last to get warm in spring. It never got as cold as Lacunosa could reach, but it was said that parts of nearby Twist Mountain were cold all year long, just like with the Great Crater. Residents here were used to snow and ice, although even they felt that this year was rather hard. Some even claimed that the town was easier to get around during the winter.

To the north of town, there were two locations that ice skaters liked during the winter. The marshy area to the northeast was larger, but tended to have more obstacles sticking out of the marsh ice. The lake around Dragonspiral Tower was smaller and clearer, making it popular with kids. On that day, the twenty-sixth of February, there was a group of children skating on that lake, racing with each other and debating on starting a hockey game (if they could find something to use as sticks, and as a puck).

One of the kids was new to town. She skated over to one of the boys. "Hey, you said that the heroes would go into that tower to meet with the dragons."

"Yeah, they do," he said.

"But there's no door," the girl said. "I just skated all the way around it."

"Maybe they have to fly in," another girl said. "Or there might be an underwater entrance."

"It's a secret entrance," the one boy said. "But I haven't found it yet. I will, though! I hear there's some people who might get in there, so I'm going to watch for them."

"Unless it's very secret and they won't tell you how," the new girl said, turning her skates around to look at the tower. "It's weird, being shiny like that and made of stone."

"It's usually not shiny," the other girl said, looking up with the rest of the kids. Despite what she said, the tower did have a noticeable gloss on it, like sunlight hitting polished metal.

As they watched, something happened. Ice began to form unnaturally fast all over the tower. Within a minute, pure white ice had encased Dragonspiral Tower. And it was still growing, now into patterns of spikes. The air on their skin was turning colder as well.

"Wow, I've never seen ice build that fast," one of the boys said. "Hey look, the lake is starting to mist."

It was a growing mist, only a few inches off the lake's icy surface. Then, without warning, a spike of ice taller than any of the children there rose out of the lake. More ice spikes erupted out as the children scrambled to skate off the lake in time. None of them got hurt, but it was obvious that something very cold was sealing off the tower.
"Actually, I know who the King of Team Plasma is," Hilbert told the reporter. Once the crowning was over, a party had started in celebration. There was music playing in the background, as well as people dancing, talking, and eating snacks. "He's the Black King. But, he's also my brother, and he doesn't want to come out into the open just yet. I must respectfully decline saying who he is, then."

The reporter looked surprised. "Is that so? But you've already spoken out against Plasma's goals, so won't you come into conflict with him?"

"I do have a disliking for Plasma," he replied. "But I really want to avoid starting a fight against him for now. I'd like for things to be solved in a more reasonable manner. I think I can be done that way too." If they could just get N to stop listening to Ghetsis, it could be resolved without actual conflict.

"That would be wonderful," the reporter said. "Now this crown of yours, it looks a lot like the royal crown of Shira. Is it the real thing? Where did you get it?"

He touched the gold crown on his head. "As far as I can tell, it is, but I'm no expert. Hilda was the one who got it and I have no idea where she did. I asked her and she just said, 'Oh, around someplace'. I know her well enough that I don't think she stole it, but it would take a lot to replicate it, and I don't think she has the money to buy something like this. I think she must have been exploring around someplace and came across it. Maybe even in the ruins of Shira."

After the interview, later on in the party, Alder started refereeing some Pokemon matches. He seemed to be in high spirits today, his happiness bright and infectious. While Hilbert wondered what had triggered that, he wasn't sure he should ask about it. He went ahead and approached the older man, where he was observing Hilda's friend Cheren battling his Pokemon again the small teams of a pair of ten-year-old kids. "Hey, mind if I ask you something?" he said quietly.

Alder glanced over, smiled, then looked back over the match. "Go for it."

"What did you mean earlier, when you said you might be a closer match than Hilda thought? About the shamanic priest? Because that kind of role fell out of favor generations ago."

He put a finger to his lips, but seemed lighthearted about it. "It's much the same as you being the White King with nothing to rule over. The shamans were picked because they were people who understood Pokemon extraordinarily well. Probably not in words as your gifted brother does, but they still knew. When people struggled to create a friendship with one Pokemon, before the invention of Pokeballs, the shamans could make a dozen Pokemon, or more, their friends. So the kind of person needed for this ceremony is more common that most people would think."

"Oh, so it's a matter of attitude, then," Hilbert said.

"Maybe, maybe not," Alder said. The battle ended, with Cheren having his Tranquill left standing. "Good fighting on both sides," he said, stepping closer to the battle area on the beach. "You two kids go on to the Pokecenter to get your Pokemon healed up."

"Yeah, the Pokemon were having fun," the little girl said. "Thanks!" She and her friend then ran off into town.

Then Alder waved Cheren to come closer. "You've got good technical skills," he said, "but you could stand to be less strict on your Pokemon and show them more love. The way they are right now, they might not come through for you in a pinch."

"I've treated them well," Cheren said, defensive about it. But underneath that, there was a strong
worry about himself not being good enough.

"There's treating them well, and then there's treating them like friends," Alder said. "Keep thinking on it, kid."

Hilbert could sympathize with Cheren on that. He wanted to become a powerful Trainer fast, but was toeing the edge of going too far. Hopefully he could be drawn back before he went over that edge. It might be something Hilda would want to know about.

"Okay, then who'd like to come up next?" Alder asked. "Remember, I do have a special bonus for someone who shows me a good win."

"My team and I will give it a whirl," Hilda said, stepping out from the crowd. She was still wearing that sparkly white dress, making her look amazing now that the sun had broken out of the clouds. There were cheers in the crowd, with sparks of excitement at seeing her battle in person. Hilbert was interested as well, seeing how she had progressed so far.

But Alder, he wanted to give her a real challenge. "Excellent; I've heard that they're quite a sight in person. But we ought to give you a real chance to shine." He smiled, a touch of mischievousness there. "I thought I saw... hey Cynthia, come up here!"

A blond woman dressed entirely in black came forward; she seemed amused at this. "Good afternoon, Alder," she said, playing along. "Did you want something?"

"Yeah, I was wondering if you wouldn't mind battling Hilda here. She's something of a rising star here in Unova, so I don't want to set just anyone against her."

"Hmm." She looked over Hilda, then nodded once. "Very well." She turned to face her, confidence and grace showing in every motion. "Caitlin and I came out while you were setting things up to see what was going on; very glad that we did now. I hope you and your Pokemon are ready for this."

To Hilda's credit, she did recognize that Cynthia would be a serious challenge, given that Alder had picked her out and that the woman was not intimidated at all that Hilda's team had a legendary dragon on it. But she also didn't seem to recognize the name, and couldn't resist a chance to be flashy. "I hope so too," she said cheerily, grinning. "Let's put on a good show then!"

"Excellent," Alder said, stepping back. "Challengers ready... and begin!"

Oddly enough, the first Pokemon Cynthia called out was a Rufflet, one that was eager to prove its worth to its new Trainer. Hilda had started with her Drillbur. "You're setting her against Cynthia?" Hilbert asked quietly when Alder got back. "I'm not sure if she even knows that she was the Pokemon Champion of Sinnoh at one point."

"Well that will make things more interesting," Alder said back, also keeping quiet even though Hilda would have been paying attention to the match. "She's going to be important in events to come, isn't she? And not just because of her connection to Kyurem, although that will certainly factor into things. As that's so, I want to see how she performs under pressure, and faced with a challenge that she can't beat."

Hearing that, Hilbert nodded. It made sense, to test that out now in a controlled safe setting instead of a more dangerous situation later.

"Did you want to have a battle today?" Alder asked.

He shook his head. "No. My Pokemon are good and I feel that I can trust them. But, I don't feel
confident in battling publicly like this."

"I hope we can resolve things without conflict, but there is a strong chance that it won't happen that way."

Chargestone Cavern, Mistralton entrance

N was a few steps inside of Chargestone Cavern with his current Pokemon out with him, all but Pierre. "I'm sorry about what happened in the Gym," he said, smiling in an effort to remain calm. "We shouldn't have gone so soon. But, they're closing down for a long time, so I'm going to go ahead and release you all so that you're not in captivity the whole time. Again, I'm really sorry if this was all a worthless bother."

"You need to get a way lot better if you're going to pull this off," the Ferroseed said, his eyes narrowed in a frustrated matter. "You didn't even try to talk to us most of the time."

"Well that," N stopped, feeling his throat tense up. He had tried not getting too attached to these Pokemon this time, even though he felt horrible the whole time for doing so. Even though most of them were fine with being released, his guilt was just as strong.

Most of them were fine with it. Before he could release the Klink, the gear Pokemon came up and nudged him in the arm. "You have a resistant load to move."

"What?" N asked, not sure what it meant.

The eyes on both gear faces glanced at each other. Was it thinking? This Pokemon was an odd one, so sometimes even N wasn't sure what to make of it. "Heavy load to bear?" the other face asked. "That an appropriate phrase? We think of it as tough resistance."

"That would be right," N said, bowing his head. "Thanks Tock, but I have to keep going. I don't want to make you work longer than you have to, though." He started to put the ball in the release mechanism.

But Tock nudged his hand away. "You suffer greatly in it. It's like your gears are out of alignment; that's what we thought when we saw you trying to restrain yourself in talking to us all. You should go with what's natural for your being, or else you're going to get stress fractures as a result of not operating as you should."

"I don't think the mind works like that," N said, although he was making a guess at what it was trying to tell him. Although having stress fractures in one's mind was a horrifying thought. What if it did work that way?

"We would stay with you to find out who you really are," Tock said. "It does not bother us; there is nothing that we would stay here for. We wish to come with you."

The word 'no' was there, as he had forced himself to say every time before. There was a part of himself that didn't want to, as before. But Tock was a calm Pokemon; its observations were unnervingly speaking to something he couldn't quite word. Hearing that it wanted to know who he really was, he had to struggle to keep his promise.

His resolve broke. Maybe it was because Tock could help with Pierre, as it was calm even around the Vanillish's outbursts. That had to be the reason. "Okay," N said quietly, but with a great deal of relief. "I meant to have one final team for the last couple of Gyms and Victory Road; you could be useful for that."
"We will do our best," the Klink said, both of its gear faces smiling. It made N feel happy, even if he was still uncertain about what was right with this situation.

"N!" A blur of colors moved at the edge of his vision; he turned to see Rune the Sigilyph coming in, frantic. "You must hurry, Pricilla's in trouble."

Fear and concern quickly made every other thought in N's mind fall away. "Where is she?" he asked, running off after Rune when he flew back out of the cave. Tock and the Dark Stone followed after him.

Undella Town

There weren't many people in the Pokecenter in the afternoon, as most Trainers would come in to heal from the few battles on the beach, then head back out. Hilda thanked the nurse as she took her team's Pokeballs back. Nearby, Kyurem had appeared as soon as he was able; he was quiet as usual, just watching Cynthia closely as she turned over the few members of her team that they had managed to hurt. Hilda had figured it'd be a tough battle, but she knew now that she was outclassed in that, far worse than in Black City.

"It might have been nice to be warned that you were a Champion at one point," Hilda said with a smile. "But I still would've fought you."

"That's good," Cynthia said, smiling back. "It seems like you started out later than many, but you are doing quite well despite that. Even accounting for your bodyguard here."

Hilda shrugged. "It seems like we started late, but me and my friends have been working with Professor Juniper for several years now. We've had to handle a bunch of different Pokemon over that time."

"That does help. I mean to head back home tomorrow; good luck with your efforts."

"Thanks." She thought of just saying goodbye, but then something popped back up in her mind. "Oh, but do you mind if I ask you something? I noticed that you had a reptilian dragon on your team, that Ground one, I think."

"The Garchomp, yes," she said.

"How do you get him to be alert enough for battle in the middle of winter? It's not that cold today, but I started out with a Snivy, a Grass-type reptile Pokemon, and he's been in hibernation since December."

She gave it a moment's thought. "Hmm, is that the Pokemon's first stage?"

"He's in his second right now," Hilda said. "I think he has a second evolution at some time."

Cynthia took her Pokemon back and thanked the nurse as well before heading out with Hilda. "That's one thing; a fully evolved reptile Pokemon can be used in winter provided you pay special attention to its needs, giving it extra food to compensate and trying to limit how long it's outdoors during that time. Did you want to be using him again?"

She nodded. "If I can mange it safely. I mean, the League is going to be shut down for a month here, so I'm going to be doing lots of training of the rest of my team. He's going to fall further behind even if I can get him right at the start of spring. And with what's going on, I'll need the help of all of them. Don't want to hurt them doing it, though."
"And it could be just as bad trying to train him up so quickly," Cynthia said in agreement. "Since he's a Grass type, that makes it tougher. But if you can find a way to train him indoors, there might be a way to wake him up early and keep him up with the rest."

"You think so? Mind telling me?" It would be good to see Fedora again, and every little bit would help.

Cynthia chuckled. "Most people, I wouldn't. But I've seen how your Pokemon fight and how they feel about you. They have a great love and trust in you, even the one that seems most recent. And you show great love and respect for them. I don't mind." She took Hilda's arm. "Now what you should do is..."

around Mistralton

They were discussing how to get N to the scene when the young King appeared anyhow. The Sigilyph and Klink were with him, but Ghetsis had only given instructions on the Liepard. "I don't know what happened," the Sigilyph said, frantic and upset. "I felt her pain and came to see, but she was alone, already gone."

The Liepard was dead; they had moved quickly when given the chance, as N was in the area and they wanted to limit the chance that he or other Pokemon would see the deed. Or hear from her. It was a relief that the Sigilyph had not seen or felt anything more. In disbelief of what he was seeing, N dropped to his knees and touched her head, as if trying to find any way to save her. They had seen to it that there was no chance.

Hidden from view of others, the three looked at each other. It was a death, no more, no less. It meant nothing to them. But to him, it would mean an awful lot. They would be the ones to deal with him immediately. Their male member was a total loss at this kind of dealing. While the two females felt no more emotions than he did, one of them was a lot better at mimicking it. She nodded and came out into the open, by N's side.

"My lord," she said.

He wouldn't look at her at first. "Who did this?" He looked up at her then, so she shook her head. "Someone killed her; you have to find out who. They can't be allowed to get away with this!" N cringed and looked back at the Liepard, clasping her paw. She had been stabbed through the spine and heart.

"There's a strange haze I can't see through," the Sigilyph said.

The Shadow Triad member didn't pay notice to the Pokemon's words, but it was a testament to their skills that they'd blocked the truth of it from a Psychic. "We will look into it," she said, although he was not to be told. "But it may be an enemy of yours seeking to break your resolve. They might have noticed that this one has met with you many times."

"No, no, it's not," N shook his head, trembling. "She should have just stayed near Striaton, and then she wouldn't be hurt. How could anyone want to kill her? What happened!?"

His emotions were keeping him from thinking straight. She took a risk and grabbed his shoulder. "You could be in danger if your enemies are still around, my lord. We'll take care of her; I should take you back to the castle." Her brother and sister appeared before N as well. They probably would handle the body in a way that others wouldn't discover it.

"I don't care!" He started mumbling, fighting to keep from weeping.
Figuring that he wouldn't be moved in this state, she went over to the others and let them know what she thought. They ended up burying the Liepard with N there, to keep her from predators and scavengers. Then he finally let them take him back to the castle, barely fighting them in his state of shock. Once they were there, Ghetsis was conveniently not busy to come deal with N better.

It really didn't mean anything to the Shadow Triad, but then again, few things did.
late morning, 2/27

As the Light Stone was being active, Hilbert thought it would be a good time to check on Dragonspiral Tower. He wasn't sure if he should call on Reshiram yet. After all, he had to consider how N might react. But if he was there, he might get a hint on where to go next, to further prove his worth. When the Light Stone had activated during the crowning, he had been told to take hold of Hilda to prevent her from being burned. He was also told that something had been blocking the dragons off from the waking world. Maybe he had to find out about that, or maybe it would be another issue.

When Regal brought him to Icirrus, Hilbert immediately felt that something wasn't right. The atmosphere of the town was uneasy, moving closer to fear. While normally kids would be out playing no matter what time of year it was, there were only a few people outside, nervous and talking. It was eerily like Lacunosa, except that he couldn't think of anything that would threaten Icirrus like that. He looked around and nothing stuck out to him. That is, until he looked north and saw that Dragonspiral Tower looked different. He couldn't think of what was different, so headed out of town for a closer look.

The lake looked completely different from how he'd seen it last time. Granted, that had been one summer years ago, but even accounting for the season didn't explain this. The lake was frozen solid, with crystalline clusters of ice scattered around it. The ice continued up the tower, for as high up as he could see. Around the ice, there were those strange blue threads, the ones that seemed to trigger his visions. They seemed much more numerous here than he'd ever seen before. Why? At the start of every floor, there was now a ring of ice spikes that went all the way around. Another set of ice spikes at the side facing town was formed into an empty circle. Kyurem's sign.

On the lake, N was standing in contemplation of the tower. Something had happened to him; Hilbert could see an internal pain within an emotional numbness that was trying to snuff the pain out. He wasn't sure what to do. But, showing concern now might help later on. "Keep quiet, please," he asked Regal, then walked out over the ice. "N, what's happened here?"

Not replying for a moment, he lowered his head. The Dark Stone was floating beside him, flickers of blue electricity appearing occasionally. Once Hilbert got to him, he saw that N was smiling, but that was just a cover. "It happened yesterday," he said, his voice sounding tired. "About the same time I got struck by lightning as the Dark Stone activated. And when your Light Stone activated."

"Really?" Hilbert looked back at the tower. "Kyurem was there, but I didn't notice him doing anything unusual."

N tensed. "It has to be his power. His sign appears here. Why don't they want us calling on the other dragons?" He turned to Hilbert. "Why didn't you tell me that you loved Hilda? I saw that broadcast of the crowning."

He felt a mix of anger and embarrassment, but tried to keep it from rising. "I got caught up in the moment," he said, feeling his ears get warm. "And I don't know if she loves me, or you, or anybody. I haven't been sure of how I really feel about her either. I can read the desires of other people, but not my own."
"It shouldn't be important; she's probably trying to ruin both of us." For a moment, he seemed like he was trying to convince himself of the truth of that (Hilbert wasn't sure of the truth of it himself). But it soon got swallowed up by whatever else was affecting him. "It isn't important."

"What happened?" Hilbert asked, trying to sound reassuring about it. When N looked away, he added, "That doesn't explain the amount of grief you're trying to hide."

"Pricilla died," he said, sounding like he'd faced a terrible defeat and was struggling to keep calm. "She was the first Pokemon that I captured, but she insisted on following me after I let her go. And she got killed because of me. Murdered; that wasn't an accidental death."

"That's terrible," he said, stepping closer. N flinched, so Hilbert avoided touching him. "But it couldn't have been your fault."

"It was my fault," he said sharply, his emotions briefly turning dark against himself. "I should have told her to stay at her home and avoid humans; I should have been stronger in telling her to stop following me. But I was too sentimental and didn't. I need to be stronger and not let these things affect me."

"That isn't being strong," Hilbert said. "N, it's okay to feel sad after a friend of yours has died like that." After all, Alder had been in a good mood yesterday, but from time to time the sadness over his loss still appeared. "Did you get to bury her at Celestial Tower?"

"Where? We did bury her out of respect."

He pointed towards the southwest, where that tower should be. "The one north of Mistralton. That's where people go to remember the Pokemon that have passed away."

"That can't be true; your people out here don't respect Pokemon enough for that." He turned to hurry away from there, as fast as he could across the ice. But then he nearly ran into a man who was approaching them. "Dr. Umber, what are you doing here?"

The man smiled. He seemed interested in the both of them, but his emotions were well-guarded. Hilbert couldn't even tell what he wanted here. "Ah, Lord N, good to see you out here. I heard that Dragonspiral Tower had froze solid and wanted to ascertain the truth of it, as well as why it might have done so. If we know why, we can find the way to unfreeze it."

"Fine, I'll leave you to it." He then headed off.

"My, he seems to be in a dark mood," Umber said, although without a trace of actual concern in his voice. "And you, you're his brother, right? Funny that I should meet you out here. Or maybe not; you'd both be interested in seeing what happened here." He went right up to the frozen tower and gave it an experimental prod.

"I am," Hilbert said, but something bugged him. Dr. Umber... he thought he'd heard the name before. It took a moment for it to connect. "Wait you... you signed our birth certificates, didn't you? So you'd know our mother. Or was that a relative of yours?"

"Well done," Umber said, chuckling. "You have an eye for details if you noticed that. Yes, I did, and I met with her many times over a short period. I've been curious about you, Hilbert. Some things I've wanted to check up on, but that required tracking you down and I have so many other things to attend to. But now that you're here, it'd be nice..." he frowned. "Well, maybe not here."

Something didn't seem right about this. Between N's recognizing him and Umber's careless attitude, Hilbert felt uneasy. Umber should at least be concerned for N's 'dark mood'. "What do you
"Can't you tell? My mind is exquisitely trained; one might say that I was paranoid of psychics when I was younger. Now, I don't have to worry. You still interest me, actually. There are a few things I want to know, and there are things you want to know as well, right? About your mother, and perhaps even more than that. Tell you what, I'll meet with you at the Castelia Pokenecenter this evening, around seven? Would that work for you? That will give me time to review this unusual occurrence as well as track down the files you would be interested in."

Because he couldn't read him well, Hilbert didn't want to trust this scientist. Umber might know something, but he might also be up to something. He shook his head. "No, I'll keep looking on my own. And there's other things that could become more important soon." Like figuring out if Kyurem was an enemy or not. He never projected intentions like that, but now Hilbert knew for certain that his senses could be blocked. Perhaps even misdirected.

"Or maybe you can read me," Umber said in a stern voice. "I can't take no for an answer here." He snapped his fingers.

Hilbert knew that he was in danger, but only for a moment before he blacked out.

When he started coming to, he wasn't sure what had happened. It was something to do with an infernal buzzing filling his mind to the point of being overwhelmed. That didn't really make sense, but that was all that Hilbert could recall. As he became more aware, he smelled salt and fish. Something rough was around his wrists... a rope? Yes, that was it. He'd been tied up and was now on a boat to somewhere. He opened his eyes and confirmed that.

"Good, you're already reviving." The scientist came into view, drinking out of a bottle. "It's what I expected to see. But not when we really want you up. Go on and sleep until we're ready." He put a cloth to Hilbert's nose; it had a strong scent that tickled his nose. While he thought he might sneeze, he ended up falling asleep instead.

…

Outside, it was raining heavily. About of third of the room was taking up by various machines. Some were recognizable as computers; others she had no idea what they could be used for. "Where is this place?" Stacy asked, looking at one of the windows. Blinds covered it and some equipment sat right in front, blocking access to it. "It wasn't raining in Opelucid."

Dr. Umber smiled as he gripped her arm. "Don't worry about that. I have a few more things we need to do today, but I want my equipment to work with instead of the hospital's. This should be the last round."

She bit her lip, putting a hand over her stomach. "What are we doing with the twins? I know he said it was for the best, but these operations you've been doing have been giving me strange dreams, of dragons and such."

"Interesting, but I doubt that it's anything to worry about," Umber said, as calm and pleasant as always. He was the kind of person who could tell you that you were going to die a painful death and still be the nicest smiling doctor while doing so. "We're simply making sure to give them the best start in life possible. I know what I'm doing; nothing unexpected will happen. Please, just relax and sit on the exam table while I get things ready."

Stacy went to sit there, but it was hard to relax. "Where's Ghetsis been?" she asked. "I haven't seen him for a few days."
"I'm sure he's just busy working to get a good amount of money to support you and your children with. He doesn't like getting caught unprepared, I know."

It caused her some heartache to think about. It had all seemed so wonderful months ago, like her fortunes had finally turned around. But in the time since, things had gotten strange. Ghetsis was out working a lot, or at least he said he was. And then this doctor of hers had some complicated idea to make things better, which Ghetsis had agreed to. At first she had too, but now Stacy wasn't so sure.

_The blue threads flickered and appeared over the scene. There were many of them, many ways in which she could have chosen. But two were much stronger than the others, one of what could have been._

After the operation, Dr. Umber had sent her back home via the teleport pad and told her to get some rest. But Stacy had decided that things were just too suspicious to ignore. She wanted to speak to someone, but Ghetsis would tell her to just speak to him and no one else. She wanted to go back to the shelter in Lacunosa and talk to someone there.

Only, she wasn't feeling well after the operation and she was eight months pregnant. She took a few things from the apartment, like the Pokeball to her Wingull, money that Ghetsis had tried to hide from her, and some things to snack on. Then she went to the subway station to get a ride to Lacunosa.

Stacy was trembling with nervousness in the station. Maybe Ghetsis would find her here. Or maybe all the strangers around her would be criticizing her, like the old maternity clothes she was wearing or the way her hair was unbrushed, or that she was here alone, not even twenty and pregnant. But when the train got there, the station attendant sent a couple of other passengers to help her find a seat and watch out for her. They were actually nice to her and even offered to see her to her destination in Lacunosa. While she thought of refusing, she still wasn't feeling well so agreed to the help.

And even though she expected the people at the shelter to be angry or critical of her, they were forgiving. It even made her cry some, but it was good that they cared.

_But that wasn't the path of history. This was._

Back at the apartment, Stacy wondered and worried about what she should do. She had thought about going back to the shelter in Lacunosa, but was afraid that Ghetsis would find her there and bring her back. She felt like she should trust him, because he loved her and all. But maybe not because he was gone an awful lot now.

Ghetsis came back that evening. When she asked about the operation, he reassured her that it would be fine. It should be okay, but there was still a lingering doubt.

…

Time, those blue threads were related to time somehow. They had appeared in times and events where something different could have happened, like his mother choosing to trust Ghetsis or not. Or a history when Kyurem wasn't here. While it didn't explain why he could see these alternate histories, it was a better idea of what was happening.

Hilbert stretched on waking up and realized that he wasn't tied up anymore. He'd figure out the past later; he had to figure out what was going on now. Opening his eyes and sitting up, he found himself on a simple cheap-looking bed in an empty room. The floor was paved in concrete, but the walls and ceiling were left as rough rocks. Had to be a cave. There were no door or windows; if he
could find a way to the surface, he could escape. But when he reached for his Pokeball holder on his wrist, he found that it was gone. Along with the Light Stone, his Xtranciever, his bag, and everything but his clothes.

"We're ready to begin," a voice embedded in the ceiling said. It took a second for Hilbert to recognize it as Dr. Umber. "Please head on out; I'll decide on what to do when you decide on what way to go."

He got out of the bed and looked around. He could see the speaker now, but nothing more beyond a hallway. "What's going on? Why did you capture me?"

"For your first question, this is a test. If I could have seen everything with just a DNA check, I would have left you in Icirrus. But I want to test a theory before it gets put into action, so we have to test you. For your second question, the plan that depends on this theory can only work with two people, you and N. I'm not allowed to use N for the test, so that leaves you."

Hilbert left the room to see what was there. The cave hallway went for a short ways both directions before splitting off, giving him four options. Wishing he had something to mark the walls with for less confusion, he went to check each way. "That doesn't explain what's going on. What's this test for?"

Umber chuckled. "Well I can't tell you everything, now can I? The experiment would be rendered invalid if you knew exactly what was going on. Don't worry about what it's for. Just find your way. And talk to me; it'll be less boring for both of us."

Hilbert listened to his words; the hallways weren't giving him any helpful hints of which way to go. "Are you drunk?"

"Possibly? Not that it matters, as you're being recorded and that cave is fully covered with security cameras and features. I don't mean to use the latter against you but... we'll see."

"Where is this cave?" He could smell the ocean, particularly strong down one tunnel. He headed that way.

"It's underneath my old laboratory. At least, part of it is. And you'll want to watch the surfaces of where you're going. Some of those tunnels get flooded with the tides."

That worried Hilbert; he could swim, but the waters would be close to freezing. Here, it looked dry. "Are you trying to kill me?"

Umber laughed. "No, dear boy, not yet. My employer would be greatly disappointed if you died here and now."

"Ghetsis would?"

"Exactly. After all, it wouldn't do him much good to evoke the mythology of the legends if one of the twin heroes died early. By the way, excellent job during the crowning yesterday. You said exactly what you should have without having a team research public opinion beforehand. Ghetsis took it calmly on seeing it, but you should have seen him later when the ignorant ones were out of the room. I had to express my condolences, but it was a beautiful rage."

He was trying to follow the scent of the ocean, but had ended up in a large room. There were concrete stairs and platforms on three levels, leading to various other tunnels in this cave. Right now, he was on the second level. Down below, he could see seaweed, lichen, and moss on the ground level. "What kind of doctor are you? You should be medical, but you're running me
through this weird experiment and wanted to study the ice on the tower.”

There was a pause; either he was still drinking or he was switching the speakers as his voice came through clearly even in that room. Or both. "My studies were in biology and genetics. I did cross-study for humans and Pokemon. You may not have heard of me, but I'm one of the top researchers in my fields."

Thinking that heading down without a swimming Pokemon wouldn't help, Hilbert climbed up to the third level to explore there. "How does this apply to genetics?"

"Genes dictate everything about a living being. How they look, how they act, what they are capable of. I want to see if you're capable of what I theorize you should be doing. Should be capable of doing, I mean."

It still didn't make much sense to Hilbert. "What did you do to my mother?"

"To her? I didn't do much to Stacy. I had another doctor that did the actual health checks and delivery, but I signed the certificate because I was more important to how you turned out."

"What's that...?" he stopped, hearing a strange Pokemon cry from the cavern. Hilbert stepped back into the large room and looked down.

Alarm bells went off in his head as he saw the Pokemon there. It wasn't like any he had ever seen before, a bipedal Pokemon with sleek dark violet steel armor. On its back, there was something that looked like a cannon, with joints that allowed it to be shifted. The Pokemon was clicking and hissing, rather like a Bug Pokemon. It didn't seem to want anything right now, but he had a feeling that it was territorial.

Hilbert backed off into the upper level tunnel. "What was that?" he asked, trying not to be too loud.

"That would be another project of mine," Umber said, some pride showing in his words. "Genesect. I resurrected her from a fossil, but with the way she was, she would not have survived in the modern world. So I modified her to be more viable, and more effective. She's rather aggressive and fierce; a primal beast, you might say. You ought to fight her."

His heart started racing at that suggestion; he tried to move quicker to get away and not make much more noise. "What? That's insane. I don't have my Pokemon with me."

"You should be able to handle her on your own."

"I don't have any martial arts training." He heard a screech from behind him. Had this Genesect heard him? "I'm just a human and that thing..."

"Are you?"

Something about that question hit Hilbert with a sense of dread.

"Let's look at the facts, shall we? For years, you've had a peculiar aura effect that mimics Attract perfectly. Better than perfect, as you could influence straight males and genderless Pokemon. You have a number of abilities that could be called pseudo-psi as a number of humans have. However, they can also be explained by such things as Detect and aura sensing. A couple months back, you were struck in the head with a baseball bat and would have been killed by the hit if you were normal. Instead, you recovered quicker than someone with a lesser concussion. There is also how I put you to sleep earlier: with Sleep Powder spores."
And he was being held captive by a crazed scientist who claimed that he was important to who he was. Umber could have been lying. But all those unusual things supported what he was saying. "I'm not... so wait, I'm a Pokemon?"

Umber laughed. "No, you're not that either. You're a gijinka, part Pokemon, part human. Technically one that was modified from a human embryo and not a natural born one, but you still qualify. That's what Ghetsis wanted out of you two; the chances of a pair of twins being born gijinkas with all the qualities he wanted were astronomical. And that's why he brought me into it, because I had already been working on artificial gijinkas."

"So there's others out there?" He and N were half-Pokemon... that could explain why his brother could understand Pokemon so naturally (although not why he couldn't). Could he use that to convince N to back off of his position?

"Certainly, I have several that I made before you two. Not as many after, as I got into other projects and studies." He paused again. "You were the only twins I worked on, although I did work on two sets of triplets. One of those sets started off as identical, all three of them, but you couldn't tell that now meeting them in person. But I think you and N are the best of the gijinkas I made. We shall have to wait for your powers to fully manifest to know for certain, but if this works as in my theory, none of the others would be able to come close."

"And all along, I've been a Psychic," Hilbert said. That didn't make his chances good if that Pokemon, either Bug, Steel, or both, were to find and attack him. Not to mention how he didn't know how to do anything like a Pokemon ability or move consciously.

"Psychic?" Umber laughed for quite a while on that one. Genesect's cry came through the middle of it; it was searching for him. Hilbert took off into a sprint. "Not a chance, Hilbert. That's only how it was explained when you thought you were human. No, you're not Psychic typed. You're a Dark type."

"Dark?" He thought this couldn't get any more shocking, but then it did. And he could hear Genesect's heavy footfalls.

"The Dark type... do anything to win. Sense what someone wants, sense what they feel, then flirt or threaten them into doing what you want them to do. That's how you've operated for most of your life, haven't you? Instead of fighting an enemy, you manipulate it into fighting someone else, or being your devoted follower. It's a fine tactic, nothing to be ashamed of. But such delicious irony, isn't it? That the seeker of Reshiram, the dragon of truth and often associated with light, is a Dark type gijinka who relies on manipulation of truth and emotion to get ahead."

A loud noise filled the cavern; a bright beam of energy flew at him. Hilbert couldn't see it, but he could sense it. Detect. He jumped out of the way without breaking his running stride, letting the attack miss him entirely. It blasted into the wall, creating a deep hole through the rock.

Dr. Umber kept talking, as if Genesect chasing after Hilbert was nothing to be concerned about. "Now N, Ghetsis wanted him to be perceived as pure and innocent, someone that people would readily accept as a selfless hero seeking to create a perfect world, someone that people would want to follow. He had to be good. After much consideration, I turned him into a Normal type. After all, could you imagine a Normal typed Pokemon being a villain? Fire types are passionate but hot-tempered, Steel types are loyal but stubborn, and so on; these are general beliefs that hold strong in society. If you want a pure and innocent Pokemon, then a Normal type is best for getting that message across."

A dead end; Hilbert had found a dead end and Genesect was still chasing him, pursuing him in
believe that he was prey. For a moment, he just stood there staring at the rock, his heart pounding in his chest. What now? Then he considered trying to use Attract. Kyurem and Reshiram had restricted his unconscious continual use of it. Could he use it consciously? He turned around and saw Genesect staring back at him. The cannon on its back wasn't pointed at Hilbert, but its poise suggested it was considering tackling him. 'Use Attract to keep it from killing me,' he thought. Then he smiled, trying to project his feeling of light towards Genesect.

"You can see where this is going, right? N was created, with my help and Ghetsis' guidance, to be a beloved hero, the one who would win the affections of the people of Unova. And you were created to be a villain, someone who rose to fame quickly and made many love you, but then be revealed to be a manipulative narcissist who cared nothing for anyone but yourself and who was dependent on his powers. You were created to lose to N; I made certain of that. Your Attract power got broken much too early; a pity, because I was particularly proud of it."

Genesect was hesitating, shifting out of an aggressive posture. Good. Maybe he could get Genesect to help him get out of here. That is, if he could keep this up for long.

"It wasn't working as an ability and Cute Charm didn't cut it, so I turned to a rare genetic fault that causes some Pokemon to have a passive move such as Attract become a permanent effect on their aura. Usually it's a stat-boosting move that ends up shortening their lifespan as it continually drains energy. But you would be in no physical danger from it. Oh, and I'm pretty sure that Genesect's kind was the sort where females killed their mates, so don't go doing something stupid right now like trying to keep her under Attract."

"You're crazy," Hilbert said, although his last point might be something to keep in mind. "When I get out of here, I'll let others know the truth about you, and Ghetsis. Then your plans will be ruined."

Umber only laughed again. "Can't accept the fact that you're the loser?"

"Why are you even telling me all this? It will tarnish Plasma's image."

"Do you think that I really care about them? I get my funding from Ghetsis, yes, but I have my doubts about the feasibility of his ultimate plan. He let too much randomness into the plans, especially with you. If they succeed, then it will be because of my efforts; they will have to keep me close and happy so that I don't unravel it all. If they fail, then I could cut off all my ties to them and find someone else to fund my projects."

"No one would hire you; you experiment on people and Pokemon without caring what happens to them." Then he turned to Genesect, who was still staring at him. "Go on," he said, trying to wave her away. "Go back to your nest, or den, wherever you live. I won't trouble you if you don't trouble me."

"Cute try," Umber commented. "They'll hire me. I'm much too valuable to be imprisoned or executed. I know the differences between Pokemon and humans, and I know how to make those differences disappear. I know how to make humans who would make excellent soldiers, independent of Pokemon and even able to face one on equal terms. But most of all, I know the differences between immortals and mortals. I can turn a mortal into an immortal. If you want proof, look before your eyes. Genesect's kind were mortal Pokemon, but she is an immortal. A legendary on equal grounds with the dragons you and N seek."

"I have nothing to fear anymore because people will be begging me for my expertise. You have nothing to look forward to save for being defeated by N. Perhaps you can find some mercy by joining them, but Ghetsis will make sure that you suffer for it. That's one thing that he's good at,
making others suffer. He would never hit anyone, but he can do much worse. He can turn your own mind against you, make you chain yourself into slavery and say that you love him. And he will enjoy making you do so, every single minute of it. He certainly seemed pleased when he got your mother to swear her eternal love to him, and then ordered her killed. I heard that she didn't even fight it."

"Shut up!" Hilbert snapped, feeling so furious that he was seeing red. Red flames that twisted around him, reaching out towards Genesect. She hissed sharply and got ready to attack again.

Then a yellow shield appeared between them, locking Hilbert into the dead end. Genesect crashed into the barrier, causing sparks to fly. However, it held. Then she turned her head. Something else had her attention, something that made her dash back down the tunnels howling.

"Good, that's exactly what I'd hoped to see," Umber said in approval. "But even if that proves the theory, I can't have you taking out your anger on my precious Genesect. She's only been alive like this a few days, after all. You cool off, and then we'll see what to do from there." There was a click, as if the intercom system was turned off.

Hilbert screamed and punched the barrier, only getting a painful shock for it. He stepped back and tried to calm down. While he wanted to believe Umber was lying to antagonize him, there was some of it that he knew was true. Shuddering, he looked down, trying to ignore the red flames that still surrounded him.

And there he saw something bewildering: a shifting circle of red and black underneath his feet. It almost matched the sign that had appeared under Kyurem's feet when he had sealed Hilbert's power. However, there were no stars within the circle.

Chapter End Notes

Seems a little sudden that N and Hilbert are half Pokemon due to genetic tampering? It's not. I decided on that very early on, before I even started writing Chapter 1. I left signs of it in many places, but tried to make them not so obvious. The purpose behind this story was to explore various Pokemon fandom cliches and ideas, including having half-human half-Pokemon characters. Now guess who else Dr. Umber has messed with, or find evidence of which skills they have.

I knew Hilbert would be Dark-typed as I began setting up things, but figuring out N's type took more thought. Grass was an option for a while, not just because of his hair, but also because this version of N is most comfortable in a forest. Water was also an option due to his emotional state of being. But in following a line of thought similar to Umber's, I made him a Normal type. Think about the fairy Pokemon like Clefairy and Jigglypuff, and Audino, and Zigzagoon, and Skitty, and so on. Even the ones who cause trouble, like the last one, rely on a cute 'innocent' appearance to get by. (Also, remember there was no Fairy type when I wrote this. I'd probably still make him Normal.)

Making them both Psychic was also under consideration, but I overuse Psychic types as it is in fanfiction!
Hilda frowned and kicked at the ground. "Rats, he isn't picking up. I wonder what he's up to."

"Who are you calling?" Kyurem asked.

"Hilbert; I'm just checking up on my friends." She accessed the list of numbers she had stored. "Bianca's over her flu now, so that's great. Cheren was broody over what Alder was saying to him, but it seems like he's the one getting sick now."

"You are being careful of that, right?" Kyurem asked. The Pokecenter nurse had warned them about it just this morning. Apparently, a lot of travelers in Unova were picking up this sickness, causing it to move from town to town. He wasn't sure how one would stay safe from it, but the face mask Bianca had been wearing that day was supposed to help keep it from passing.

Besides, thinking on that kept him from feeling bothered that she was calling Hilbert.

"Yeah, I'll be washing my hands and all," Hilda said. "Well I can try N, but he doesn't always answer." She waited on the call to go through.

It should have been obvious that she'd try him next, although Kyurem wished she wouldn't. Staying away from both of them seemed like a good option. That is, if it wasn't too late already. He glowered at the concrete floor, hoping that they could get a move on again soon.

But N actually answered the call this time.

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N's Castle

When N had been a young child, he never had much in the way of toys. When he lived in the forest, it was sticks and stones mostly, or games with the Pokemon there. He got a few toys when Ghetsis had adopted him, after promising to take good care of them. It was a reward for doing well in his studies and being properly obedient. While he had told Hilbert that this particular room was a result of an over-eager child's mind, a fair number of these toys were newer than that. It was something he could do if he did what he was supposed to be doing first.

He had been doing what he was supposed to, so it was fine to pass a few hours playing. It would keep his mind off things. At the moment, he was using brightly colored wooden blocks and a steam engine train set to simulate a mountainous circuit that the train had to get through. He had plenty of tracks to make the go around between his towns (represented by various Pokemon figurines), including a bridge over a gap in the blocks (because it was a river). But when he set the train to run its circuit, it kept bouncing on one part of the tracks.

Since real engineers would have to work quickly to keep the trains running on schedule, N left the train to run while he tried to figure it out. The blocks seemed study enough, but there was a connection between two tracks that wasn't fitting up as well as he thought. He tried pressing it further into place, but the train again bounced over that one section, threatening to derail. No problem; he just had to find a different piece of track that would fit. He judged on which piece to take out, then picked out a matching piece. Once the train passed over the bad section, he tried to
pry the one track piece out. But it wouldn't budge, stuck fast at the bad connection.

It shouldn't be a big problem... N waited for the train to pass again, then gripped the track and tried to pull it out. The other side would come off just fine, but not the trouble spot. Stay calm, it's no big deal... but it was extremely frustrating and he felt an intense anger at it. Why didn't he notice that when he was setting it up? He struck the blocks underneath, knocking them over and finally causing the piece to snap off, almost hitting his face. Well that would derail the train, but he didn't care anymore. He would like to see it wrecked since it wasn't working right for him.

Instead, the train's guidance chip sensed from the rails that there was a break. It stopped there, then went around backwards. Just like it was supposed to.

"Idiot," he grumbled, then sighed and put his head on his knees. Why was he getting so worked up over this? It was just a dumb game he made up to pass time. What was he even playing? He should be visiting with his Pokemon friends while he was back... but then one of them was gone. Or he should be studying, praying, or meditating to figure out what to do now that the tower was frozen over and the League was shut down for a month. But what if he was no longer worthy?

The Dark Stone was still there, floating in place. She hadn't said anything more, even if N had asked her many questions about if what he was doing and feeling was right or wrong. Was she not speaking because she had already deemed him unworthy and was only there because he was still trying? But if that was true, then everything here was worthless. It would be entirely his fault.

No, he couldn't give up yet. But he had to keep away from those thoughts; they just made him feel horrible. He had to keep hopeful and strong, somehow. Leaving the train to run, he went over to grab a basketball. The room was tall enough for him to have a hoop in. While it really was mindless to just stand and throw the ball in the hoop, mindless suited him just fine today.

Then his Xtranciver rang, startling him and causing him to drop the ball. Even though it was on his wrist, he forgot it was there sometimes. When he saw that it was Hilda calling him, he knew that he shouldn't answer. But he wanted to, and so after a check of listening for anyone else, he accepted the call. "What is it?" he asked, forgetting about the phone manners she'd been trying to get him to learn.

She was somewhere inside; the sound of a subway train's horn was in the background. "Just checking to see how things are with my friends. What's up? You look miserable."

That's why he'd come here to be alone, he remembered. People kept asking him what was wrong and he didn't want to have to repeat that tragedy all the time. Plus, he didn't feel right in telling his followers about it because that would be admitting to keeping close ties with a Pokemon, too close. "It doesn't matter. Would you leave me alone? I have... things to do, think about."

"Well it seems to matter an awful lot to you," Hilda said, being serious with her concern.

She should have just listened when he asked to be left alone. But, he wasn't angry at that. It just made him feel that sadness even sharper, like a knife within his heart. Well, she loved her friends too, so maybe she would understand better. "Pricilla died, just yesterday. We think it was someone trying to attack me."

Her eyes widened in shock at that. "Aw, really? That's terrible; how could anyone do something like that? But I bet she was concerned about you and that's why she was following you. She was your starter, after all, and she seemed happy to be with you that time I saw her in Striaton Gym."

"How did you know about that?" N asked, but his anger was hollow. His sadness filled him
instead, which is exactly what he wanted to avoid. Yet it felt nice to hear her words.

"I guessed," Hilda said. "Did you get to memorialize her at Celestial Tower? If I were there, I'd give you a hug, but since I'm not, just know that I'm sending you one."

Was she trying to confuse him again, like when she'd kissed him? "Why would you do that?" he asked. "I already told you that I don't like being touched." Although... no, she was muddling with him. Hilbert had to be in on it since he had also mentioned that tower.

"That's what you do when people are sad, to comfort them," she said. "You shouldn't have to suffer through this sadness alone. I could come over and visit if you want."

"Quit messing with my mind!" he said, feeling like making sure that train got derailed. "I don't need your temptations, so leave me alone."

"S-shh. Remember what I said. Smile at me." Although he managed to smile quickly this time, it didn't meet with approval. "It seems that your mistakes have led you to becoming too weak. A couple of the cleaning staff saw you like this. It'll be all over the castle in a few minutes, I'm sure. People are going to be uncertain, concerned about this turn of events. The outsiders are fighting back to keep their corrupted ways. We need to remain solid and certain in these trying times. We need you to be strong and certain."

N thought of a great many things he could say in his defense. But it all fell flat before it was even spoken. No matter what, Ghetsis knew what was best for him. He looked down at the floor, ashamed.

"Do you know what you need to do?" he asked.

He nodded. "I need to serve a penance so that I can address my weaknesses and banish them from my heart."

"And what should you do for a penance?"

He had a month before he could get back to working through the League. "I should study alone in a stark room, with limited contact and a restricted diet to eliminate any possible distractions."

"That should do," Ghetsis said, finally approving of one idea he had. "Do so for a month and we'll see if you've made adequate progress. But you need to get into the library to find study material. Look at me." N did so, but was met with a shaking of the head. "Remember to smile while you're out there, and reassure any who speak to you that things are fine. Don't tell them of your penance yet, but let them know that you feel the need to be apart from the world to clarify your spirit. But first, you need to wash your face; your eyes are pink and the tears leave marks on your cheeks."
N nodded, but hesitated on going to wash up. "Ghetsis... why didn't you ever hug me? Even when Darcy died, you just..." stayed there and talked to him. That had been about the time he'd started teaching N that he shouldn't be crying.

"That's not important," he said, waiting on him to do as instructed. "Besides, you never liked being touched."

"When did I say that?" The question came out before he could even think about it, and he realized his error when Ghetsis narrowed his eyes. "Sorry, sorry, I didn't mean... it's all mixed up, sorry, I'd better get ready." He left the toy room and went to the bathroom to clean his face.

But it made him think of something else, something he hadn't thought of in a long time. Shortly before his Darmanitan mother had died, N had been getting frustrated in trying to learn human ways and he had told Ghetsis in a tantrum that he was going to live in the forest with the Pokemon and not come back. Then Darcy had died, and most of the forest Pokemon didn't seem to understand how upset he was. One of them had mentioned that it was a human-like trait, so he'd gone back to Ghetsis to talk with him about it.

That couldn't be related, though. Nobody could be cruel enough to use murder as a means of control. But even as N told himself that it wasn't important, there was a little doubt that insisted that it was.

"Did you hear that Lord N was crying earlier?"

Rood paused in browsing through the books in the castle library. A few of the knights had been talking in the next row, but they weren't quite loud enough for him to bother rebuking them about it. While he had heard that N was back in the castle, he hadn't seem him yet. N was quite emotional, but he usually kept good control over it. If he'd been crying, then something major had to have happened.

"Maybe the outsiders have been harassing him. They're starting to guess correctly on who our King is, so they're attacking him directly."

"They shouldn't treat him badly. If they had really listened to him and seen what he can do, they'd respect him."

"Well it could be because they're trying to make things harder on him."

He heard a sigh from the row behind him. Rood glanced over and spotted a green ponytail on someone's back through the various books on the shelves. While he hadn't noticed N come in, there were hidden ways around the castle. He might have taken one of them. The Sage put one book up and took another, then walked over to the other aisle. It was N, leaning on the bookshelf and deep in thought. Close to him, there were some books that had been examined, but were forgotten about.

Since touching him for attention was out of the question, Rood glanced at a nearby set of books and pulled one out. "N," he said quietly. The young man jumped to attention, but relaxed on seeing who it was. "Is something the matter?"

He smiled, which was at odds with the rest of his downcast expression. "It will be okay. Don't worry about me."

Rood took the book he was holding and placed it at a shelf at eye level; it would help muffle their conversation from others, something the other group could have benefited from. But he still spoke at a moderate whisper. "You say that when you look like this and I'm going to worry. What's going
on? We're here to help you with your burden."

For a moment, N's smile nearly broke. But he seemed to force it to stay. "You're very kind, but, it's my problem. Nothing to do with Plasma. I... have more studying to do. And I need to get out of the influence of the outside world, away from everyone. It's vital." He glanced at the Dark Stone, now floating beside him.

Was it something that Zekrom had asked for? But it still didn't seem right. The way in which he'd been standing here earlier, and if he had been crying not that long ago... Rood wasn't willing to let it go at that. "Are you sure about it? It seems like something is troubling you."

"It's okay, I'm going to be strong about this," N said, not in a convincing manner. "And it's my own problem, not the greater issue, so I really need some time to myself to deal with it, clarify my... spirit..." he had been stacking up the books to take, but then lost his focus, similar to when he'd seen things before in Rood's presence.

"N?" he asked quietly, when he hadn't said anything.

"The time is drawing near," he said. N bit his lip, then turned to Rood. "You leave the castle sometimes, right? Would you...?" he hesitated, glancing around. Something about this had him worried of being discovered. But by who? Maybe he was growing suspicious of Ghetsis too. Rood hoped so. "Would you be able to find Hilda?"

"I'm sure she wouldn't be hard to track down," he said. She tended to draw attention to herself, and even if she didn't try, news of a girl was battling with Kyurem would get around fast.

N took half a step closer. "Good, then, would you find her some time? And give her my apologies for how our last call ended. It... it's been a bad time and she got me at the wrong moment. But tell her to get out of Unova, soon. That's the best way of things, I think, the safest for everyone."

"I don't know how well I could convince her, but I'll pass along the message," Rood said. He didn't think his chances of getting her to listen were good, but maybe getting her friend's Pokemon back counted for something.

The assurance did relieve him of some worry, although not all. "Good, thank you. And, if she insists in continuing to travel in Unova in the winter, she should make sure to dress really warmly. Because if she's not careful she could freeze to death out there."

Anyone who had been traveling two months into Unova's winter would know that from experience (well not death, but how cold it could get), but as it seemed so important to him, "I'll make sure she knows that."

N nodded and took his stack of books. "There is some kindness out there, but the cruelty eclipses it all. I'd like to protect the kind people in Unova too, but they just won't listen to us." Then he walked off, feeling that the conversation was done.

Rood considered trying another tactic to get N to really speak his mind, but in the quiet of the library, that could create a scene, which would drive N further away from him. He'd have to find some way to speak to him privately.

Nuvema

Back at Hilda's home, they were greeted by her mother, the Cottonee, the Sawk, a new Pokemon in an Axew, and Fedora. The Servine seemed a touch sluggish still, but he went right up to Hilda and
hugged her when they came in. "I didn't mean to sleep that long," he said, adjusting his hat back into place. "But it's weird that I woke up and the bottom half of the window is covered in snow!"

Kyurem translated this for Hilda, so she smiled and rubbed under Fedora's chin. "It's all right; I know you couldn't help it. But we got some help in figuring out what to do about it."

Specifically, Cynthia had told her to find an electric light that mimic the sun's rays and use that on him for several hours a day to let him keep up his warmth and light needs. They were to train him indoors until he evolved again, and then he could be used in limited battles outdoors in the winter. It was things like this that impressed Kyurem about humans, using their technology and intelligence to get around natural limitations.

"I've got plans for dinner if you want to stick around for tonight," Leslie said. "I just need to double-check what all your Pokemon can and can't eat."

"I think I've got that all in my Pokedex, now that I've worked with them all a while," Hilda said, going to her bag to dig the machine out. "Sure, that'd be great. We can take a day easy before we really get into training everyone."

Cooking for two humans and nine different Pokemon was something that Leslie handled well; she even gave Hilda a lot of tips and advice which got logged into the Pokedex as additional information. The meal for the humans was a chicken dish with a cheese sauce, peas and broccoli, and some herbs, served over rice and alongside a vinegar bean salad. Frank, Tarzan, and Lance were all humanoid Pokemon, so they could eat whatever the humans were. Kyurem and Leslie's Axew were both meat eaters, although the Axew needed to eat rocks similarly to Olette; they got some grilled chicken with lighter seasonings, which Kyurem tolerated. While Olette ate rocks, she was more of an herbivore with some bugs, like Mimi, so those two got some lightly cooked broccoli and peas. Finally, Fedora and the Cottonnee had just woken up out of hibernation thanks to the sun lamp, but they sparingly ate bugs and fruit in addition to photosynthesis. Leslie had some suet, nut, and berry blocks that she used for birds in the winter, but she broke one up for the two of them to share.

The house was safe; he knew from when he'd been here at Christmas. While Hilda talked with her mother over the evening, Kyurem sat in one of the chairs in the living room and watched out the windows. He would like it if nothing dangerous happened tonight. Or any night. But there was the strong chance that something could.

At one point, the two humans went upstairs to check on space and beds. Fedora followed them partway, but then came into the living room where some other of the Pokemon had gathered. "Hey Kyurem, you seem different now. You talk more."

"Things change," he said. "She's shown that she's worthy of trust."

"That and he's half in love with her," Frank said, looking over his hands. "Only reason I say 'half' is cause he won't admit it."

"What gave you that ridiculous idea?" Kyurem asked. At his side, Mimi twitched her ears and looked over at the Gothorita.

Putting a hand on his chin, Frank smirked. "Well just watching you two interact. Your eyes are on her a lot, and you have a different way of talking to her. Kinda like you do with your daughter there, but kinda not. Oo, and you got so jealous when the other two boys got close to her. That was fun. It's a nice tactic, you know: find a female and say, 'Hey there, I'll protect you in this dangerous place, and you can thank me later, if you know what I mean'."
Kyurem glowered at him, but Frank seemed to expect that and was able to brush it off this time. "I wouldn't do something that shallow."

Fedora laughed. "Sounds like he's onto something, though."

For a moment, it felt out of place to be in this conversation. Kyurem had worked with other Pokemon over his life, but a lot of them were like the Riches' Haxorus, focused on battle and proving themselves the strongest (until Kyurem put them in their place). To be part of a group that didn't mind conversing normally with him, even teasing him, it didn't feel like him. But this was where he'd ended up this time. "Not entirely."

"But you are interested in her, am I right?" Frank stated.

The two humans still weren't back downstairs, but he could hear them laughing. Mimi patted his leg, so he rubbed her head. "I should keep my distance, from all of you. My memory spans much of history, and may continue on just as far in the future, if not further. On that scale, all of you are here and gone in such little time. Harboring even a feeling of friendship is guaranteed to cause me grief someday."

"I'd think that the happiness of company would balance that out," Olette said, shyly putting her claws over her face. "If you don't mind me saying."

"I'm always with you," Mimi said, looking up at him and smiling in her adorable manner. "Always and forever!"

It did cause a brief smile, but also a reminder that she wasn't exactly the Minccino she looked like. "You came from my dreams," Kyurem said. "And, you'll probably return to my dreams someday."

"Okay, and you can bring Hilda there too, cause she's nice and fun," Mimi said, putting her head on his lap and feeling satisfied that the issue was settled.

Frank snapped his fingers. "She's got it figured out. At least it makes sense to me."

"Dude, you deserve a hat," Fedora said, tipping his own.

The Gothorita looked scandalized, touching a black curly pigtail. "What, and mess up my hair? Not a chance in the world, bub."

"But hats are for awesome people," the Servine said, starting up an argument with him.

Olette crept closer to the couch. "I think it's going to be more entertaining with both of them around," she commented quietly.

Nodded, Kyurem replied, "Even more so if they drag Tarzan into it somehow." But to his recall, the Scraggy was still chatting and sparring with the Sawk in another room.

Were moments like this really worth the loss later?
March 3

Hilbert was exploring the tunnels again. Someone was getting in and out, at least to leave him packs of food and supplies while he was sleeping. When he had tried to stay up and see who was doing that, a Watchog was sent in to confuse him first. But since he'd been let out of the barrier, he hadn't heard from Dr. Umber or anyone else again. Sometimes he saw or heard Genesect, but he did his best to avoid her.

In the meantime, he also tried to figure out what he could really do. He had figured out how to work Detect, although using it meant that he had to momentarily stop trying an attack. Attract was easy too, at least with the few wild Pokemon in the tunnels he had tried it with (he usually told them to go hide, as he couldn't understand them to ask how to get out). In those little battles, he had also figured out that he could use Haze, negating any advantage that another tried to get. But he hadn't figured out any attack moves and didn't want to risk fighting Genesect to find out.

He picked up a feeling of worry; someone wanted to find him. Relieved, Hilbert followed that emotion and found something new: a ramp that led up to a fourth level. There was an enforced iron gate in the way, but it was easy for him to figure out how to move the latch that unlocked it. Clearly, it was there more to keep Genesect from going further. The lights weren't as numerous, dimming the air as he ascended. At the top, he saw a familiar violet light moving in the tunnels. "Madeline?" he called out. "Are the others with you?"

"Liiiaaa!" She floated his way, followed by Loch and Regal. Also with them was the fiery Light Stone, carrying Ember as it went with them. The Larvesta kept reaching out into the air, not certain about how he'd gotten caught on a round stone with no ground around.

"It's good to see you all too," he said, patting them all in turn. When he got to Ember, he picked him up and held him to his chest, lessening his worry. "I wish I knew how you all got free. But later, maybe. How did you get in? I haven't been able to find a way out."

The Light Stone led the way back, bringing them to a small elevator. Glad that all of his Pokemon were still small, he rode up with them into a laboratory. Immediately, he recognized it from the vision of his mother, as Dr. Umber's lab. There were all those machines, a security station for the caves, an operating table, several computers, and locked cabinets. Some of those things were lightly coated in dust; others showed signs of recent use. More importantly, there was no one up here, his things were out in the open, and the door could be unlocked from inside.

"I wonder if he meant for me to escape," Hilbert thought aloud as he got his things and left, but soon turned his attention to what was outside.

They were on an island, covered in snow like everywhere else in Unova this winter. Brown blades of grass showed through some areas of snow, and there were a few trees. While most of the edges were sharp drop-offs, there was a lower sandy beach leading out to an expanse of swift moving water spotted with rocks of various sizes. To the east, there was a much taller island over a hundred yards off. To the west, there was a forested coastline. A check of his Xtransciever confirmed that he was in southern Unova, near Nuvema.
He tried to think of what to do. Going to find Hilda and Kyurem would help; they ought to know about this. But something Umber had said had stuck in Hilbert's mind. There might be someone who could help him better (or would help him without giving vague near-threatening advice). He spoke with Regal and had the Rufflet fly him over to Striaton.

On arriving at the southern entrance, he avoided the afternoon pedestrians (mostly children getting out of school) and went straight for the Gym. Inside, there were a few restaurant workers setting up for the coming meal rush. "Good afternoon," one of them said. "The Gym's not active, but we're still serving."

"I'd like to speak with the Leaders, if I can," Hilbert said. "I'm Hilbert Godfrey, and it's about a man called Dr. Umber."

"I don't know, but I can ask." He went to get a phone at the reception desk. A couple minutes later, he put the phone away, looking puzzled. "I'm to take you back to the main office. Whatever this is about has gotten Chili serious."

He felt relieved. "Then I've probably got the right people. Thanks."

They went through a hall into an adjacent building where the Pokemon were housed. Cress came up to the office door at the same time Hilbert and the waiter did. Several months back when Hilbert had challenged them, the blue-haired brother seemed the calmest of the group. Now he was flustered, fumbling with keys to get them out of his pocket. "I'm terribly sorry, but give me a minute," he said, then unlocked the office door and went inside. "Cilan?" The door shut.

After scratching his head, the waiter looked at Hilbert. "What is it about this doctor?"

"He's insane and has no qualms about flaunting it," he said.

"And we thought he was dead," Chili said, coming in from the restaurant area. "Is he alive?"

Hilbert nodded. "I just saw him a few days ago. He mentioned you, not directly, but I'm pretty sure it was the three of you."

The door opened partially, with Cress peering out. "All right, Hilbert, come on in. You too Chili. We could be a while, so tell Rachel she's in charge for the afternoon. Maybe the evening too, we'll see."

Once all four of them were in the office, Cress closed the door again. It was a large room for an office, but then it did have to accommodate the three Leaders. There was one oversized black desk with a gray sidetable that served as the main work area. In other parts of the room, there was a smaller desk, several rolling chairs, a white markerboard with meal schedules and Pokemon data on it currently, two cabinets, and a couch with a standing lamp nearby. Cilan was sitting on the couch, rubbing his eyes while his green hair was messy; his shirt wasn't on straight either, so it seemed he'd been taking a nap before Hilbert had arrived. And all three of them were nervous.

"What's Dr. Umber up to now?" Chili asked.

"I'm not entirely sure," Hilbert said. "But, he told me that he had created me to be a Dark type gijinka. N's one too, only a Normal type. And he mentioned that he had worked on two sets of triplets. I thought of you three, in the way he said it."

They glanced at each other. "You guessed right," Cress finally said. "We were part of a group that escaped from his control about nineteen years ago."
"We were all just kids, but we made a plan to get out of the cave system he had us trapped in," Chili said. "But then that bastard showed up when we hit a snag and said that he'd let us go, because we'd served our purpose and were now useless to him." He scowled. "Had to humiliate us one last time, though."

"Calm down," Cress said, although he had a flicker of anger remaining at that as well. "That was then. When we got to Castelia, we told the police about what had happened. It took a little convincing, but they sent officers down to Route 16 to check things out. The next day, they told us that he'd been found dead, badly mauled with a feral Pokemon loose in the lab. I'm not sure how he would have faked that or where he got the Pokemon, but... what happened with you?"

Since they had openly spoken about that, Hilbert told them of how he'd been kidnapped at Dragonspiral Tower and then shut into a cave system with a fossil Pokemon modified to be an immortal like the legends. He didn't mention all of what Dr. Umber had said, just that he had repeatedly provoked him until he got angry enough to unleash red flames. "Would he be the sort to lie just to anger someone?" Hilbert asked.

Cress nodded. "Certainly, unless the truth would work better to that end. And especially if he was drunk. Maybe you can use Fury."

"Fury doesn't look like red flames, though," Cilan said, finally speaking. "Revenge might fit too, but doesn't quite match that description."

"Well it might be different when perceived by the user," Cress said, tapping a glass of water that was on the desk. "We already know that I see my water manipulation differently than others watching me, and you perceive plants differently. Plus there's Skyla's air sense that she invented her own lingo to describe because she just knows the flow and condition of the currents."

"Skyla's one too?" Hilbert asked. Although now that he thought about it, that might explain her unexpected appearance on the Celestial Tower roof. That is, if she could fly. But he could see the emotions and desires of others as color and light, so Skyla being able to fly didn't seem that farfetched.

"There's seven of us who escaped back then," Cress said. "If we add you and N to the numbers, then there's ten known gijinkas living in Unova. We all ended up working within the Pokemon League, actually."

"We know our own types so well that it seemed like the natural thing to do," Chili said.

"Can you understand Pokemon, like they're speaking our language?" Hilbert asked. "I know N can."

Cilan shook his head. "None of us can do that. We do have an empathy towards Pokemon of our own type, so we can understand them to a greater degree than most people."

"That would make sense," Hilbert said, although he couldn't think of if he had gotten along with his Dark type Pokemon better than others. It didn't help that he had no Dark types now. "But, I've never heard that there were gijinkas living in Unova today," he said as the thought occurred to him. "The people here have respected gijinkas for a long time as especially blessed people, so why are you hiding this?"

"Well Unova has historically been accepting of people like us," Cress said. "But with movements between regions being easier in modern days, there's a good number of people here who hold beliefs from regions where gijinkas are seen as a curse upon a community, or as certain evil.
There's also the fact that there's an unusually high number of us here."

"Right, normally there would be a single individual in all of Unova being a gijinka," Chili said. "Possibly two. Three like us would be a rare occurrence. But with so many of us, especially being artificially created, the people who we first talked to felt that it cause us harassment or other problems if it were known openly."

"I guess that would be a problem," Hilbert said.

Over on the couch, Cilan yawned. "Uh, sorry," he said, rubbing his head. "The sky's been overcast here for weeks, it seems like."

"You have been sleeping an awful lot this winter," Cress said, worried about him.

"Do you hibernate?" Hilbert asked, curious.

"He did one year," Chili said, smiling some. "Scared the heck out of us at first, but even that's better than the winters he get depressed."

Shrugging, he said, "I can't help it; sometimes even the sun lamp's not enough. Now if my skin was greener, I might cope better." He smiled when the others chuckled, then looked over at Hilbert. "I heard you mention something... did Umber really say that he knew the difference between mortal and immortal?"

He nodded. "Yes, but if he's not reliable, who knows?"

"Still worries me," Cilan said. "We can remember some of the tests he put us all through; boring sometimes, but sometimes it was the stuff of nightmares. He has no sense of ethics or restraint, and will do anything to pursue his goals. If he wanted to know about immortals, and if he knows enough to make one, he might have captured one for study."

The atmosphere in the room got sharp and grim at that. "And he'd have no respect for it," Chili said. "What do we know of the legendary Pokemon in Unova, I mean, where they would be now?"

"We know where the three dragons are," Cress said.

"One of Hilda's friends has Victini," Hilbert said.

"Then there's the kami trio," Cress said, counting off on his fingers. "And the four knights, and Meloetta. We can send out a message to the rest of the League; hopefully someone's seen or heard of something of those eight in recent years."

What if Umber did have one of those eight captive? Hilbert knew that he would not hesitate to do anything if it furthered his research and goals, not after how he'd risked both Hilbert and Genesect in bringing them into conflict. "I might be able to talk with that girl... Bianca, about Victini and seeing if he can help."

The three Leaders nodded. "Yes, we ought to let Victini and Kyurem know of this possible problem," Cress said. "Would you go speak with them, since you know Hilda and Bianca?"

While he didn't know the latter as well, it shouldn't be an issue if he talked to the former first. So Hilbert nodded. "Sure, I can do that."

"Have you figured out what you can do with your Pokemon genes?" Chili asked. "It's been a little different in each of us, but there might be some things we can help you with."
"Sort of." They spoke for the next couple of hours about that. It didn't answer every question he had, but Hilbert felt reassured that he wasn't alone in this.

Hilda stepped out of the subway train and tried to look through the crowd for Hilbert. He had called not that long ago, asking to speak with her and Bianca in person. As it turned out, he was in Striaton. "Hey, come on!" she said, waving a hand high once she spotted him with his Alomomola and the Light Stone. He came over once the people leaving the train had cleared the area, passing a ticket to the attendant. Hilda showed off her new card, so was allowed back on to ride to the Accumula station.

"Hey, good to see you," Hilbert said with a smile. "But when did you get a Battle Subway pass?"

"Just a few days ago," she said, sitting back on the bench where she had left Kyurem with her bag. "I need somewhere to seriously train my Pokemon while indoors, and with the Subway group I can get them matched up decently."

Hilbert nodded in acknowledgment of Kyurem before sitting down on Hilda's other side. "Sounds good, but I thought they didn't allow legendary Pokemon as competitors."

"We convinced them to make an exception," Kyurem stated.

Feeling a surge of excitement again, she grinned. "Yeah, it's awesome! I can train the other five in normal matches, but in the evening, Kyurem and I get marked as a 'Mysterious Challenge' that's worth three times as many BP if our opponents win. We go out to fairly open places which aren't in town, but are close, like the Dreamyard, and battle out there. We haven't lost yet, but it hasn't been long and I'm sure once word gets around what the Mysterious Challenge is, they'll start hatching strategies."

"That will only make things more interesting," Kyurem said, show a bit of anticipation for that.

"Oh, am I keeping you from that?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Nah, we just scheduled the opening of it for a few hours later. So what's the deal with you? I tried to call you the other day."

He winced at that, then glanced at the train car. There were a few other passengers. "I'm sorry, but that was... unavoidable," he said. "Let's just wait until we meet with Bianca, there's a lot we need to talk about."

At the Accumula station, they and a great many other people got off the subway train. It was when a lot of people would have gotten off work in Castelia, but they were able to stick together. In fact, it seemed like people were purposely ignoring them, or looking down on them. Hilda wasn't quite sure why, until they got back outside and saw that the abandoned Pokecenter had not yet been repurposed. Not only that, but there were some of the Plasma grunts walking around town. This place had clearly allied themselves with Plasma.

One of the grunts approached them on their way to the south entrance of town. "Hey, what are you doing here?"

"Being here," Hilda retorted. "You have a problem with that?"

"We're just passing through," Hilbert said.

"But you're the White King, and this town is following the Black King," the grunt said.
Hilbert looked puzzled. "But why would I avoid this place then? I had to come through here to get to where I'm going."

As the grunt looked ready to cause trouble, Hilda did some quick thinking. She knew Hilbert was not as eager to initiate a Pokemon battle lately. "Well if you recognize him as the White King, why're you trying to pick a fight with him?" she asked. "The two Kings are equal in power in the legends right?"

The grunt paled a little at that. "Well..." Hilbert said.

Before he could undercut his own image, Hilda interrupted with, "If you think you can take on the White King in a Pokemon battle, does that mean you think you can take on your own King in a Pokemon battle? Do you disrespect him that much?"

"N-n-no, no, not at all!" the grunt said, backing up. "I, I wasn't thinking that he would be equal to our holy King. Are you...?" Then he shook his head and backed off again. "N-never mind. I'll just pretend I didn't notice that you were here." The grunt then walked off elsewhere to find something else to do.

"I guess that is one way to use their fanaticism against them," Hilbert said. "Thanks."

"No problem," Hilda said, heading off towards Nuvema. "Let's get going."

Down Route 1 closer to Nuvema, they met with Bianca. She was out with her Pokemon, watching three of them dig tunnels in the snow and play games. By her side, there was a Simisage that was dressed in a child's coat and a wool hat, to keep warm. It wasn't snowing now, although the sky was still overcast and gray. Although she still couldn't let Fedora out in the snow, Hilda let her other Pokemon do what they wished as she, Hilbert, Bianca, and Kyurem gathered to talk. Hilbert let his Pokemon do the same, although they preferred staying close to him (his Larvesta seemed perfectly happy to perch on his shoulder while they talked). After being asked for, Victini burst out of a snowbank and joined them.

"I'm working as Professor Juniper's assistant again, but she said I could have this time off," Bianca said. "So what's going on?"

"I have a lot to tell you four," Hilbert said, indicating the two girls and the two legendary Pokemon. "First of all, I've discovered that I'm a gijinka."

"Oh wow, really?" Bianca said, putting her hands to her lips in surprise.

"Can you prove it?" Hilda asked.

Hilbert turned pink at that. "Aah, you don't want me proving it," he said sheepishly, holding his hands up. "I mean... you remember when I had that permanent Attract aura? It's something I can do consciously now. And Hilda, remember when Banshee attacked me? She meant to hurt you, but I can also use Detect really well, enough to get you out of danger without thinking about it."

"I'll consider that proof enough," she said, smiling. "But does that mean N is one too?"

He nodded. "Yes, he is."

"And so are the three Gym Leaders in Striaton," Kyurem said. "And Elesa, and that girl Iris."

"Ko?" Victini asked, tilting his head.
"Uh, yeah, they are, but how did you know?" Hilbert asked.

He rubbed at the bottom of his mask. "I could smell it, but I couldn't identify what smelled differently about you and N. I noticed it on those others. But why are there so many of you at once? It's a once in a generation occurrence."

"It's because we were created this way by a man named Dr. Umber," he said.

"Him?" Hilda asked, at the exact moment Bianca did. She glanced at her friend and stuck her tongue out at her, causing her to giggle.

Hilbert looked confused. "You two know him?"

"Yeah, he tried to buy Victini off me for, what, a million Poke?"

"Something like that," Hilda agreed. "And he hit on her."

Bianca made a face. "Yeah! That was disgusting."

"You might see that as even worse when you hear what he's really like," Hilbert said. Then he explained what he'd gone through in the past few days: seeing Dragonspiral Tower frozen solid (to which Kyurem just shrugged), getting kidnapped by Umber, meeting with an apparently new legendary Pokemon in Genesect, learning about his true identity, and then escaping and speaking to the Striaton Leaders about all this. In particular, the concern that Dr. Umber might have captured one of the other legends. "So we wanted to ask you two," he looked to Kyurem and Victini, "where the other legendary Pokemon of Unova are and which ones we ought to check on."

"I've felt the presence of Virizion in Pinwheel Forest last December," Kyurem said. "And I've sensed Tornadus' power in the winds on a few occasions."

"Thu ra cha si rassa nari calril," Victini said, pointing up at the sky.

"He says that he's seen Thundurus this past fall," Kyurem translated. "I would not recommend speaking to those two in person, though. You would do better to speak to Landorus at his shrine near Undella to check on the status of all three of the kami."

"I can't understand Pokemon, though," Hilbert said.

"Landorus can speak the human language even in his Pokemon forms." Kyurem lowered his head, thinking. "I would not be certain of the rest."

Bianca knelt down by Victini. "Can you locate them? Because you're Psychic?"

He put a claw to his lips, then laughed. "Feh sai lessa chi e dai ku re. Te."

"I'll translate," Kyurem told him. Victini nodded, then skipped off a few paces. After burning a circle out of the snow, he clutched his front paws to his chest and made a golden-red circle filled with stars and runes appear on the ground. "He needs some time to locate them."

"Could you girls help me talk to the others?" Hilbert asked. "Because even if we know where they are, we ought to still check in on them."

"I might be able to convince the Professor to come out with me to look for a few," Bianca said. "But she does have some important things on her schedule and as her lab assistant, I'll probably have to go with her."
Hilda shrugged. "I don't know. I mean, I was planning on using this month break from the League to focus on training my Pokemon team. N wants the recognition of being the Pokemon Champion and I think I may need to have my team on equal terms in order to talk with him. So we really need this month to catch up, and I can't train Fedora, my Servine, outdoors yet."

"I see," Hilbert said. "I mean, I can see how that would be helpful, in case N does get through the League and become Champion. If it came down to it, you could challenge his position as such. Maybe I should do that, but then," he scratched his head. "I didn't really earn my current Gym Badges. My Attract aura distracted my opponent's Pokemon and encouraged my own. I'd have to start from scratch and you're already doing a good job at getting attention off of N in the League."

She smiled. "Well if we get to the point where Fedora can travel outside, maybe later in the month, we'd be willing to help find any that haven't been spoken to."

"Good, then I'll focus on finding the legends."

Victini came back to the group, his ears held back. When he spoke to Kyurem, he seemed worried. "Landorus is at his shrine, with Thundurus and Tornadus wandering the lands," he translated. "It would still be good to speak with Landorus. Virizion is still in Pinwheel Forest, with Cobalion at a cave near Chargestone Cavern and Terrakion near Victory Road. However, he cannot locate Keldeo or Meloetta. Keldeo is one of the knights, so you may be able to get further clues by speaking to the others. He can also confirm that Genesect does have a power akin to our own, because he sensed her in the bay close by here."

"Oh dear, so two could be in trouble," Bianca said. Then she brightened. "But you know, Juniper and I are supposed to travel to Pokemon League Headquarters in a couple of days. I don't know if my team can go through Victory Road, but I can ask if someone there would accompany me to find Terrakion."

"The four knights usually don't take kindly to humans," Hilbert pointed out. "They were involved in a war against us long ago."

Kyurem shook his head. "As long as she has Victini with her, the knights will not hesitate to approach and speak with her," he said. "On the other hand, they would steer clear of me and Hilda, or else attack us outright. They are incredibly stubborn and hold long grudges. They would be wary of you until you have summoned Reshiram."

"Okay, so then I should focus on meeting with Landorus first," Hilbert said, nodding.

"That sounds like a good plan," Hilda said. "Now if you'll excuse me, me and Kyurem need to get back to the subway for tonight's training. Sorry, but I do have a lot of ground to cover."

Bianca laughed. "You really need a bike, Hilda. Oh, and here," she pulled a small charm out of her bag, one that looked like a painted egg, and passed it over to Hilda. "Professor Juniper asked me to give this Lucky Egg to you. It's a bit mysterious, but apparently it will help you train your Pokemon. Good luck, and don't get hurt, any of you."

"Good luck to you too in finding Terrakion and Landorus," she said, waving goodbye.
One thing about writing long Pokemon fanfics is that usually there needs to be a training periods so that it's reasonable for the Pokemon to level up. But writing about training, and reading about it, is boring. Getting Hilda the Lucky Egg now plus having her join the Battle Subway is my way of skimming through the issue. Although, I never did give her a bike yet even though she should have had it on entering Nimbasa and fighting those two grunts. Trying to look honorable and heroic there cost ya, Hilda.
"Wow, this place is so huge," Bianca said, looking up at the grand and stately building that made up the Pokemon League Headquarters and gaping at it. There were stone pillars that reached twenty feet into the sky, holding up an immense roof decorated with relief sculptures of Pokemon. Underneath it, sunlight spilled into a circular room with a dirt floor and a magnificent statue in the center of it all. Four walkways led to doors in separate areas, leading to the individual challenge areas. At the entrance, two guards in blue uniforms stood watch, keeping an eye on who came and went.

Mary Juniper chuckled. "Well it has to be," she said. "It's like five Gyms combined in one whole, if you think about it. Not only that, but it has to symbolize all of the glory, challenge, and achievement that reaching this place holds. I think Unova's building is one of my favorites, of the ones that I've seen." She walked up to the guards and brought out her ID card. "Good morning; I'm Professor Juniper and this is my assistant Bianca Waverly. We're here for the meeting."

One of the guards nodded and stepped aside. "Good morning, and go on ahead. They're gathering in the small meeting room."

Aside from the Elite 4 and Alder, there weren't many at the meeting. From what she understood, these were some of the financial supporters. She was mostly there to observe; at least, that had been the idea. But instead, Professor Juniper spoke with the others before the meeting began to explain what Hilbert had told them. "That's why we want to find Terrakion."

"We heard about that from Cress," Grimsley said.

"We were thinking Bianca could possibly find him due to her having Victini, but her team isn't up to handling Victory Road," Juniper said. "Would one of you be able to go with her during the meeting?"

"Sure, we could handle that," Alder said. He considered the others.

But Shauntal spoke up first. "Marshal, you should go with her. If you're dealing with one of the knights, it's best to get their favor as much as possible."

"That would help," Marshal said, getting up from his chair. He was a tall man with large muscles, wearing attire that suited a martial arts fighter. Which only made sense; he was famed as one, as well as being the Elite member who specialized in Fight type Pokemon. As Bianca thought that, she figured that's why Shauntal recommended him. "I'll get you down there."

"Thank you," Bianca said. Since she was just there to observe, she and Marshal went ahead and left the building.

"Do you know how to get to where Terrakion is?" Marshal asked as they passed through the gate. Past there, they emerged on top of a steep slope. A number of steel and rock platforms were jutting out along the edges, leading to caves inside the cliff.

"Te, cha ra siiiah," Victini said as he walked by Bianca's side. He gave a few hops every now and then and was alert with his ears, apparently in a good mood.

"He can find the place," Bianca said. "Um, do you know where Terrakion hides?"
Marshal shook his head. "Haven't seen him, but we always hear of those who do. Usually not up close, but he might be in a distant tunnel or lurking in the wooded area. Some people only hear a mysterious bellow." He paused, looking at the topmost cave entrance. "This place is inhabited and created by Durants. Over many centuries, they've dug out a series of tunnels and rooms in this plateau. Even though we're stationed here, we don't know how deep and far these tunnels go. The road is safe in the regularly traveled tunnels, but if we get off the path, stick close to me and watch where you step."

Dangerous? It made her a little nervous. But then, Hilda would think it was a better adventure if there was some danger involved. "Ah, all right," she said, doing her best to muster her courage.

While they walked through the tunnels, Victini led the way and a Conkeldur belonging to Marshal brought up the rear. The Conkeldur had been given a special tag that intimidated weaker Pokemon, so that fewer would bother them on the way. On observing the walls, Bianca noticed that they weren't entirely smooth. There were grooves and ridges from where the Durants had carved them out. But when she got a glimpse of a wild Durant, the steel-clad ant seemed so small. It was even a little smaller than Suzy had been when she was an Oshawott.

They went down a level and Victini paused in the middle of one hallway, sniffing the air and twitching his ears. Then he went right up to one of the stone walls and passed right through it. For a moment, Bianca wasn't sure she was seeing things right. After all, he wasn't a Ghost type. Then Victini came back through the wall and waved them to come.

"Now that's new," Marshal said, going over and putting his hand on the wall. No, through it. It seemed to be nothing more than an illusion. "That would explain how no one's really found him."

"Yeah," Bianca said, walking towards the not-wall. Only, it resisted her just like the stone it appeared to be. "Huh?" She tried again, closer to where Marshal was partway into the wall. But that was just as real. "That's weird. I wonder why it's like that."

"Kosha ne, tekio," Victini said, putting a paw on his face and shaking his head.

"I'm not the one to ask about this kind of thing," Marshal said, taking her hand. And it was just the same; his hand could go through, but hers could not. "I've focused a lot on training up my power; never saw illusions as useful until recently, so I don't know much of them."

On seeing that, Victini perked his ears up and chattered about something. He put his paws together, then closed his eyes. Then he looked between the two of them, waving them to follow again.

An idea of what that meant came into Bianca's mind. "Oh, we should... I mean, if you take my hand Marshal and I close my eyes, maybe it'll work? It could be linked to belief and if I didn't see the rock, I might be able to pass through the illusion."

He shrugged. "It's worth a shot, anyhow. Don't worry, I won't let harm come to you, on my honor."

She clasped his hand, which was nearly twice as large and three times as rough as hers. "All right, I believe you." Bianca then closed her eyes and waited on Marshal to guide her ahead. She also tried not to think that there appeared to be solid rock ahead.

After a foot, it was apparent that the illusion didn't affect her when she couldn't see it. "This goes on for some distance, I believe," Marshal said, returning to a normal walking pace. "Keep your eyes closed."
It was like walking in a dream, Bianca thought. There was some force resisting their movement, but not enough to stop them entirely like the illusion rock. But after a couple of minutes, the feeling passed. She thought that she could open her eyes, but waited.

"You're okay to open your eyes now," Marshal said after Victini made a chattering noise. "Not that there's much light back here."

She did so and looked around. Some areas of light existed around large silver crystals, but much of the air was dim and gray. In the shadows, there were movements of Pokemon living here. She wondered what would be living here for a moment. But then, if they lived past an illusion, maybe they didn't want to be disturbed.

She heard the thump of a hoof ahead and tried to look into the dark area there. There was the form of a large Pokemon there, bulky like Marshal was. After a moment, it stepped closer to the light of one of the crystals, showing the form of a quadrupedal Pokemon with the rough skin of a Rock type and two large yellow horns on its head. That was him. Feeling relieved that they didn't have to look far, Bianca stepped forward. "Master Terrakion, we wish to speak with you."

Terrakion snorted and stamped his hoof again. Then, without any further warning, he dashed towards her with his horns low. Bianca's mind and body froze, uncertain what to do now. However, Terrakion never got to her. Instead, Marshal ran ahead of her and grabbed Terrakion by the horns. He got pushed back a few feet, although it was clear from his tense muscles that he was pushing back at his utmost. Terrakion snorted, then twisted his head with a jerk to throw Marshal to the ground.

"Tekio, lo thi ai!" Victini jumped up on Terrakion's head, lightly slapping him. Then he started explaining.

Raising his head and listening, Terrakion took a few steps back. When Marshal got up, the bull legend gave him a glance, but made no more aggressive moves. Bianca went over to her guide. "Are you okay?" she asked quietly. "I didn't expect any of that."

He nodded. "I'm fine." He looked at his hands, which had roughened up further in trying that. "As strong as I've made myself, I didn't expect to be any more successful than that."

Bianca looked back over to Terrakion to see that a glowing gray circle had appeared under him; it was like what happened with Victini on occasion when he did something special. Then the bull began to speak in perfectly clear words. "Let's hear this in your own words. Why are you here, gijinka and friend of Victini?"

Gijinka? Hearing that, things made more sense to Bianca. Marshal must have been one of them, a Fight type which Terrakion would be more inclined to listen to. Also, the illusion rock wall was meant to keep out humans, but since he had genes from a Pokemon, Marshal was able to walk through it. He spoke up first. "She was the one who wished to speak with you. I came down to make sure she came to no harm. I'm sorry, but I gave my word."

"If it was based in honor, then I have no quarrel with you attempting an attack," Terrakion said. Then he looked to her. "You now... you don't seem like a strong one."

"I know," she said, giving a bow. "But Victini and I are helping out some friends, including the one who is seeking Reshiram." She didn't think mentioning Hilda would be too smart here, but Hilbert should be okay. "And, they want to help you. We've come to believe that someone may have taken one of the legendary Pokemon of Unova for research into immortality, and may have done cruel things to it. We wanted to check on as many of you as we could, but Victini could not locate
Keldeo or Meloetta. That's what I want to ask: have you been bothered by anyone, and do you have any idea where the two of them might be?"

Victini knocked on Terrakion's head and gave some argument, at least it sounded like he was defending something. Maybe her? She wasn't all too sure why he was still with her, as she'd offered to let him go any time he wanted. But she did appreciate his company. Victini was a fun Pokemon to be around and had given her some interesting insights into other Pokemon by interacting with them.

"That's your choice," Terrakion replied to the Pokemon on his head. "But I understand. For myself, it has been much as usual. Some have considered capturing me, but never had a chance or gave up quickly. However, there are times when I hear the grief and toil of mortal Pokemon nearby, yet I am never able to locate them. I know it is not the ones that your League own. Yours speak of affection and care, while these hidden ones call out of cruelty. That deeply concerns me."

"Oh gosh, that would," Bianca said, worried and clasping her hat while wondering what could be done. "How long have you heard them?"

"About fifteen years ago, I believe, is when I first starting hearing them. They have been not as numerous the past five years, but the ones I do hear these days are more chilling." Then he closed his eyes and stilled his tail, an expression that seemed saddened. "As for Keldeo, we have not heard from him in almost twenty-five years. And we know it is not because he went into a state of hibernation. I myself have only returned here recently from searching for him again."

Then it may be him. "What do you know about what happened?" Bianca asked.

Terrakion came closer, but even Bianca could tell that he wasn't going to harm them now. "The four of us knights met in White Forest one summer day, for battle practice and discussion, but Keldeo was anxious when he arrived. He said that he had gotten a telepathic message from Meloetta which had no clear message, but indicated that she was in trouble. Because we had already agreed to meet up, he came but said he was leaving early to go find the muse. We have also not heard anything more from Meloetta."

Both of them? This was looking to be a real problem. "I see. Did Keldeo say where he was going?"

"No, but I have suspicions that if they are still in the region, they are in a place with many humans." He bowed his head. "We have been able to search the wilderness, but we do not like approaching your cities and towns. Plus, we have no easy way to conceal ourselves from notice, unlike Victini here who is small and can distract the minds of others. There is also the chance that they were taken out of Unova. We hope that is not so."

"Okay, thank you," she said, bowing. "I'll let my friend know about this. Is there anything else he should know?"

"Not that I'm aware of. If he does deserve to be chosen by Reshiram, then he should be able to accomplish this. As for you... perhaps strength of heart is enough. The heroes that everyone sees like the stars in the sky, often they are only as great as they are because of the friends they have. You need to be ready to help them when they falter. Now if you'll pardon my insistence, you should both leave this place now that our business is complete. I keep this area apart for the Pokemon who do not wish to be near humans. Go out in the same manner in which you came in."

On their way back up to the Pokemon League headquarters, Bianca gave a lot of thought to what Terrakion had said.
March 11

"Yes, we've been fine," Landorus said, rubbing one of his wrists. "This winter is giving me such aches, though, as the ice and snow continue to cover the land. Thundurus and Tornadus are pleased with it; they're hoping it is a prelude to a stormy spring when they can roam freely. While that's going to make them a hassle to deal with, I'll be glad when the melt-off begins."

Hilbert nodded. From the stories his uncle had told him, he knew he had nothing to fear from Landorus. He watched over farmers and miners, as well as anyone else who dealt with the land. The trouble had come from convincing him to appear; he normally kept out of sight of humans. So Hilbert had come and offered to work for the farmers that lived here. Being that it was late winter, there wasn't actually much farming to do. But, the winter had done damage to Landorus' shrine. Hilbert helped with repair work on that: replacing a few of the beams, taking out the hinges to one door to replace them, sanding the old paint and new wood off, then weatherproofing and painting it. With that done, and perhaps some prodding from Reshiram, he had gotten Landorus to appear a week after he had arrived.

Landorus could intimidate, though. He had a heavy muscular body and a hefty hammer tail. But when looking in his eyes, he reminded Hilbert more of a kindly old man with the wisdom of many years in his words. "But I agree that something is amiss with Keldeo and Meloetta. They're both travelers, so you normally hear of sightings of them scattered across the land. But not in recent years. It's a shame. Sometimes Meloetta came here to sing or play instruments."

"Do you have any idea of where they might be?" Hilbert asked. "A friend of mine spoke with Terrakion and they've been looking for Keldeo all along. They suspect they're either out of the region or somewhere near many humans."

He put his hand to his chin, thinking. The cloud of dust that hung below him whirled faster. "I doubt they're out of the region. The rhythm of the land tells me that Meloetta's power still touches it. Keldeo's tougher for me to sense... he loves the water so much. I can only say that they're across the bay."

"Across the bay, huh?" Hilbert hadn't been on the west side of the Alma River Bay.

"You should ask Tornadus for more information," Landorus said. "He could cause you a lot of trouble, but then again, it may take me as long to get the information out of him, or longer. If you defeat him in battle or take on a challenge from him, he should cooperate with answering questions. Don't take a racing challenge if that's what he offers; that's just not practical for most Pokemon to win."

"Why him and not Thundurus?" Hilbert asked.

"Because Thundurus is much too noisy to notice Meloetta. That, and Tornadus has claimed to hear her music last summer. I tried to get more information out of him at the time, but..." he shook his head and sighed. "Those two just won't mature. They're immortal and they behave like such children. I could tolerate that kind of behavior from most ordinary Pokemon, but they should know better. Anyhow, I hope you can find the two lost ones. They're not in a cave, for I would know precisely where they were then. I would imagine that they're indoors. If their feet do not touch the ground, I will not feel them. If they are surrounded by certain types of walls, then Victini would not be able to sense them. And if they are in a place inhabited by humans, then the knights will not go near them. But if they were placed with all that in mind, then this Team Plasma and Dr. Umber worry me a great deal more than they did before."

"They might have thought all that through," Hilbert said. "So how can I track down Tornadus? I've
heard the stories, that they can travel to every town and important place in Unova in a day, or that they can fly over it all much faster."

"Well one way is to simply find the most active storm in the region, as you have a high chance of encountering one of the two of them there," he said. "But you're in luck right now. Tornadus has gotten fascinated by something in Aspertia. If you go there in the next month or so, you're likely to be there at the same time he is, even if there is no storm. Just keep the Light Stone out with you at a place where the winds can be felt best and he's bound to come investigate."

He nodded. "Okay, I'll go there then. Thank you for your help. I'll work to figure this out as quickly as possible."

He put a hand to his chest and bowed his head. "Then I'm sorry for making you wait to see me. You have yet to fully awaken Reshiram, so I was uncertain of how much you could be trusted. But if I had known this was about Keldeo and Meloetta, I would have come sooner."

"I understand."

March 12

For the past week, Cheren had been trying to have Pokemon other than his Emboar walk with him, trying to forge a stronger bond with them. They were hesitant at first, tense but sticking close by. But he was already seeing some improvement. His Liepard was walking alongside him with a proud posture, more fitting for his kind than his meekness earlier. Shadeclaw had yet to try stealing something, though. Although he thought about it a long while, Cheren wasn't sure if that was good or not. Anecdotal sources said that they would steal things and act pleased when the theft was discovered. Perhaps they thought it showed their cleverness. But while it was natural, it had to be quite inconvenient to Trainers. He could be sued if the victim were so inclined and the item important enough.

And there were a lot of people out here in Castelia, at their usual business and pace. Sometimes one could find a Pokemon battle at the city square, but not here out on the busy streets. There were some talented Trainers around that could give his team a challenge, but most people here were too wrapped up in business and commerce. So why was he here?

More importantly, why was he going ahead with this? He did need something to do during the League's downtime. Cheren had considered training with the Battle Subway, like Hilda was doing. But then last night, he had gotten a call from Bianca...

It had seemed like any other call from her. But then she started talking about legendary Pokemon. "Hilbert called me a little while ago, saying that he'd made contact with Landorus. He's going to Aspertia to try speaking to Tornadus. But you know, he has regained a fair bit of his confidence, but I think he's still uncertain and would appreciate some help. Would you go with him?"

"Why should I?" Cheren asked, puzzled at her request. "I don't know him that well and this doesn't have anything to do with me."

"Oh, but Cheren," she said in a pleading tone. "This is really important. Something happened to Keldeo and Meloetta, and we strongly suspect that it may have something to do with Umber. And he doesn't care about people or Pokemon, or even those affected by his old experiments. Something terrible might have happened to them. Also, Team Plasma has been trying to build up hype around N being like the kings of old Unova and a hero. So, we should help Hilbert do the same, before they reveal N if possible. This is a great opportunity. But, even the hero kings of history didn't
"You and Hilda have been helping him out," he pointed out.

"Yes, but I'm busy helping the professor and she's working on making herself N's equal in terms of Pokemon battles, when he has an advantage in being able to communicate with them and having two more badges than her now." Then she smiled warmlyly at him and spoke with a bit more concern. "Besides, you've been working alone almost all this time. You stay that anti-social and no one will notice your accomplishments. And I know you can do great things too. You're just, I don't know how to say it, working so hard to get out of your brother's shadow that you're not paying attention to anything else. It's not good for you; I end up worrying about you a lot. I think, this will help you as much as him, I hope so anyhow."

With that kind of argument, Cheren finally agreed to go with Hilbert, even calling him last night to offer to go along. He had made up the excuse that he wanted to see different scenery, but Hilbert had seemed grateful for it. Now he had to meet up with him at the docks to catch the ferry to Virbank.

It took a moment to find him among the group of people waiting on the dock, but once Cheren spotted a white stone floating in the air, flickering with small flames, he knew Hilbert was there. "Hilbert, good morning," he said as he came closer.

"Hmm?" He turned, then smiled on recognizing him. "Ah, hello Cheren. I didn't know you had a Liepard." He looked down at the purple feline and reached out a hand to him, oddly interested. The Pokemon twitched his ears and sniffed his fingers, but didn't seem certain what to do about the attention.

"Um, yes, this is Shadeclaw," Cheren said. "I've had him for a while."

"I had one too, but not for long," Hilbert said, still observing Shadeclaw. "And that was years ago. Did you hear about the gijinkas? I was told that we had an affinity for Pokemon of our own type, but I don't have a Dark type right now."

It had been strange, hearing that someone was really using science like that. It was like something that should have been in a sci-fi film, not in real life. But, here was Hilbert and all the others. "I heard about that. I've decided to keep working with him, though. You can talk with him, I guess. Would you cooperate with him, Shadeclaw?"

The Liepard glanced at Cheren, then sat down and started cleaning his face.

"Still can't understand him," Hilbert said, disappointed. "I thought it might be easier. Although I do get a sense of something... he wants to prove his independence by not obeying immediately."

Shadeclaw lowered his ears for a moment, then focused back on rubbing them clean with a licked paw.

"Actually, I'm glad to hear that. Means he's acting normally. I had some trouble with stressing them out... trying to get away from that, though. Just keep an eye on anything loose you have; he kept stealing my glasses when he was a Purrloin."

"Probably because it was fun. Huh?" He looked at the Liepard, who looked off elsewhere. "Did you...? Well if you don't want me to look at you." He looked back to Cheren. "That was... odd."

"Did you hear what he said?" Cheren asked, curious. Understanding Pokemon like that would be a
huge help in learning about them. But he wasn't sure most Pokemon would make for interesting conversation partners.

He shrugged. "Not exactly. I mean, not like I'm hearing you. But, I kind of understood him like I understand you. Either that, or I think enough like a Dark typed Pokemon that I can make a really good guess." He shifted uneasily, glancing at the Light Stone.

"If that's natural for you, then it shouldn't be a problem," he said. "You also think enough like a human that you know where to draw the line."

"True. So how much do you know about what's going on?"

"Hilda and Bianca told me some things, but it'd help if you let me know what you know and what exactly we're looking for in trying to find them." Cheren never liked doing things without knowing as much as he could. Obviously, there were some things going on here that even Hilbert couldn't explain. But that just meant that they needed to examine the clues they did have more carefully.
Trainer Hilda vs Sage Rood

March 18

The train was quiet itself, but the battles could get to be quite a racket. Hilda put her hand to her ringing ear; their opponent had used something called Echoed Voice in this Triples match, a three part attack that got painfully loud. But during that, Frank and Mimi had managed to knock out a pair of their opponents before the final part of the attack put them out of the match. Tarzan was still holding on, but the Scraggy was clenching his loose skin in such a way that showed it was mostly willpower keeping him in the fight.

But they'd already knocked out five Pokemon, so this had to be the last. And it had to be a Sigilyph, a Pokemon that Hilda was quickly learning was a royal pain to deal with. Since she was in the train, using Kyurem was out of the question. "Hang tight and crunch it," she told Tarzan as she released Olette. "Olette, hit it with rocks."

Olette flexed her claws, looking over their foe from under a natural steel plate armor. Within a day of getting Fedora back, Olette had evolved into an Exadrill, turning her into a large and intimidating figure on a battlefield. Once Tarzan got out of the way from an attempt to snap the Sigilyph's right wing with a biting attack, she threw her arm out and caused a cascade of rocks to tumble onto the colorful bird. It caused the Sigilyph to collapse onto the floor of the train unconscious.

Seeing that, Hilda winced. A hit like that had to hurt. "Ouch, sorry about that," she said to the guy she was battling. "But it's like Kyurem says: the Pokemon would do this anyhow and the structure and healing we offer them makes things much safer."

The Exadrill put a paw to her face and bowed her head. Even if she looked (and was) more dangerous, she was still the same quiet and gentle Pokemon. Maybe she wouldn't bother other Pokemon if placed in the wild, but there were others that were definitely more eager to fight.

"I guess so," the guy said. Then he shook his head. "But man, you broke my longest win streak ever. I thought that if you didn't have your dragon available, you'd be an easy fight."

Hilda laughed as she started up the healing machine in the car to get her team back in shape. "Not by a long shot, we're not," she said teasingly. "The rest of them have a lot to keep up with, but we keep going."

After he left, Fedora called himself out. He hissed and shifted his hat to look tougher. The Servine even made a punch at the air, making the Lucky Egg charm on his wrist shake.

"Yes, I know you're a tough guy," Hilda said, patting his shoulder. But his Grass type had a lot of weaknesses, which other Trainers took advantage of. She had known this back when she decided to take a Snivy. However, she always felt like she could handle it. "You need to get more levels to catch up to everyone still. Tell you what: at the next stop, we'll see about transferring over to the one on one matches for the rest of the day. You all right with that?"

Fedora cheered that suggestion while Olette gave him an encouraging wave.

Later that evening, she was out on Route 5 with Kyurem as the mysterious challenge. It was
snowing lightly as they waited under the streetlights. Catching a snowflake on her gloves, Hilda said, "Man, it's still all snowy. Are you up to something, Rei?"

"Not that I'm aware of," he replied. But he looked up at the sky. "It is a lingering winter, especially when I'm not doing it intentionally. There might be a way to tone it down, although..."

She waited for a moment before asking, "Although what?"

"Let's see how the next few days go. Someone's coming." He nodded towards Nimbasa, where a silhouette could be seen passing through the lights off the gate house. It appeared to be a man in a trenchcoat.

As he came closer, it turned out to be someone she half-recognized. He had a cut out of one ear and hearing his voice reminded her of his identity. "You've proven extremely hard to track down, Hilda," Rood said, stopping a few feet from her. The bottom half of his coat flapped in the wind, but he didn't seem bothered by the cold. "I've been trying to find you for almost three weeks now."

She smiled. "You've picked a bad time to be doing that. I've been all over the place this month."

"It would seem so."

"What do you want?" Kyurem asked, watching him suspiciously.

Rood bowed his head to him, speaking respectfully. "It's not what I want. I've been asked to find her by our King. He wishes her no harm, although he is suspicious of you due to the freezing of the tower. But that's another matter." He turned back to her. "I don't know if he's contacted you since, but he wishes to apologize for how one of your calls with him went, three weeks back. He seems to have had a rough time then. He wouldn't tell me why, claiming it was something personal."

That dampened her mood some. But it was good to hear that his lashing out wasn't entirely because of her. "Oh, I thought it might be that. He told me that Pricilla had died, possibly killed intentionally. You know, his starting Pokemon because she was the first Pokemon he caught, the Purrloin."

"That explains a lot," Rood said, putting his hand to his chin thoughtfully. "But this is looking worse and worse. I haven't seen or spoke to him since the evening he asked me to find you. Hardly anyone has, although Ghetsis reassures us that he knows where N is."

Hilda frowned. "If he's the only one who knows, then that's something serious to worry about. N must've been crushed by it and Ghetsis might use that to squash out any independent thinking he'd been doing."

"That is serious, although I am more worried about N being alone in this state. He holds a lot of influence over many in our group; they would not question any idea he presented to them, even if it was born of grief and solitude. Ghetsis, though..." he paused, closing his eyes. "I really shouldn't be speaking of this with an outsider. But... when I look at what's going on, I'm reminded of chess. Do you play?"

"Nah, never really had the patience," Hilda admitted.

"I could've taught you," he said before he could stop himself. "What I mean is, the kings are the most important pieces on the board. If one is captured, that side loses. But the kings are not the most powerful pieces. They're as weak as the pawns, and more vulnerable because they are the target of the opposing side. The strongest pieces... well, the analogy isn't perfect, but the point still stands. I've given my loyalty to N, and I intend to stick by him to the end, hopefully guiding him..."
better. You keep an eye on the boy you crowned; he won't have the power to make his point effectively, no matter what he thinks."

"Oh, did you know about that?"

There was a pause. "Know about what?" Rood asked.

She glanced at Kyurem, uncertain for a moment if she should say anything. Seeming to guess at what she meant, the dragon boy nodded slightly. So Hilda moved closer to her father. "N and Hilbert are gijinkas. Not only that, but they were made that way by Ghetsis and some crazy old scientist called Dr. Umber. N might not even know about that; Hilbert only found out recently."

Rood took a deep breath, looking up at the sky for a moment. Then he shook his head. "I wasn't aware of it. I suspected something was going on, but I wouldn't have guessed that. However, I don't know how much I can speak of it. I'll consider it in how I approach him."

And there was another thing N wanted me to tell you. He asks that you leave the region."

"Really?" she asked. "It's been suggested to me and Mom, but we've decided not to."

Nodding, he said, "I felt that would be so, if Leslie hadn't left already. If you aren't leaving, then N asks that you at least dress safely for the winter weather and make sure you'll be warm. He sees things that could happen and it worries him greatly. He seems to believe that you're at risk of freezing to death."

Hilda chuckled. "Well I'm dressed warmer than you are right now. I'm watching for that. So if you don't mind being a messenger..."

Rood shrugged. "I won't speak of it to any but N."

"Okay. Thank him for his concern, and tell him that he ought to go visit Celestial Tower sometime. I'm worried about him not getting the full picture, and that should help."

"I'll do so. One last thing, if you don't mind." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a Pokeball. "Want to know what I'm doing out here while trying to pass as an outsider? I'm training some Pokemon on behalf of the team."

She raised her eyebrows. "Really? I've heard why N does it, but doesn't that go against your message?"

"People won't listen unless you behave in ways they expect. People of this world expect Pokemon battles, and they expect that the winners will have the louder voice... and that the losers will back down. This holds true even with the criminal elements. Some of the most aggressive criminal groups have even disbanded simply because they were defeated soundly in Pokemon battles. While we don't like the system, we must work in it to overthrow it." Then Rood shrugged and tapped his pocket. Something chinked. "That is what we say. I myself am the only one within Plasma currently who owns a full set of eight League badges. Even if they are out-dated, all Pokemon will still heed my word in respect. Thus I was asked to prepare a select group of Pokemon to be highly skilled."

"Is this for N's mission?" Hilda asked, curious. Why was he telling her that he was loyal to N but then reveal this blatant action against their philosophy? Perhaps it did bother him.

"I won't say that exactly," Rood replied. "But you may wish to pay attention. Since I am training them, I'd like to challenge you. I'm aware that you're supposed to be running one on one matches for the Subway group, but this would be full team, singles, and you can call on him."
She looked around the route, but they seemed to be alone out here. The snow might be keeping others away, especially if they were getting word that it was one on one versus Kyurem. "Doesn't seem like I have any official challengers." She grinned at him and stepped back. "All right, Dad. If that's what you're asking for, that's what you're going to get."

He laughed for a moment. "May the gods forgive me of this moment of selfish indulgence. But give me your best effort, and I will give you mine."

It was late, but it actually wasn't that cold out on Route 19. Hilbert could look around and see green appearing under the patchy snow. When they crossed streams and passed by lakes, the ice was breaking up and the water starting to flow. It was a little late for these conditions that were a hint at spring. But from watching the news earlier, he knew that the majority of Unova across the river was still weeks behind in terms of weather. The weather anchor was saying that places like Lacunosa, Village Bridge, Undella, and Iccirus still looked like they were in mid-winter. Maybe it was just the active presence of Kyurem. Unfortunately, they might not know it was really a problem unless the wintery conditions continued for another couple of months.

As the wind made his hair flutter, he glanced around. Shadeclaw was beside him, lying on the ground with his eyes half closed. A few feet away, Cheren was battling one of the local teens by using Ember. They had decided to swap these two Pokemon for a few days. Hilbert kept observing and talking to the Liepard, getting better at communicating with him. In the meantime, Cheren worked on training the Larvesta, who was growing much slower than Loch. No one was quite sure why, but Pokemon often leveled faster under a Trainer who wasn't the one who caught (or in this case hatched) them. This even worked with one like Ember, who wasn't as intelligent as other Pokemon. Although, he seemed to be able to identify the difference between the two of them by scent.

The wind had been steady and constant around Aspertia, even Floccesy to some extent. Hilbert had asked around town and was told that it had been like this for the past month. But even though Hilbert had kept the Light Stone out this whole time, he hadn't seen Tornadus yet. Sometimes he thought he heard someone whispering or laughing at the edge of his hearing. "I wonder if Tornadus knows we're looking for him," Hilbert said quietly. "So he's just teasing us."

Shadeclaw's ears flicked. "That's what I would do," he said. It really wasn't like words that his ears heard. Instead, the meaning came into his mind like he interpreted human speech. The longer he spent talking with the Liepard, the clearer the meaning became.

Loch whistled, then got distracted by something on the ground and swam down to check it out. The Alomomola was saying something too. However, Hilbert still didn't have a grasp on the meaning with him. He was starting to get a sense for Madeline's messages, but only in a general sense, like if she was talking about a particular person or Pokemon.

Looking up at the starry sky, Hilbert continued thinking aloud. "He likes pranks... and it would be a good time to do something like that, since it's dark tonight."

"There's no moon," Shadeclaw said, looking up at him with a feline grin. "On this kind of night, we can do anything. Especially if we steal Cheren's glasses, cause then he can't see anything right. Let's prank him to get Tornadus' attention."

Chuckling, he rubbed the Liepard's head. "I was thinking more of trying to get him to pull something on us, only keeping more alert than he thinks. But if nothing happens, we can always try that."
Cheren came over to them, having finished the battle. "Hey, I need to go back in town to the 
Pokecenter. It's starting to get late anyhow."

"It's not that late," Hilbert said, getting up and brushing off his pants. "But sure, let's go. I want to 
check out the overlook again."

Aspertia was about the size of Opelucid and Nimbasa, but it was full of many older buildings 
where a lot more attention had been paid to attractive design. None of them looked exactly alike 
and there were some trees and small gardens around. While Cheren went off to the Pokecenter, 
Hilbert headed to a tall cliff that stood at the northwest corner of town. It was a bit of an odd 
feature, a natural landmark that stood taller than many trees, even the buildings around it. On 
coming to Aspertia, Hilbert was certain that was the place Landorus meant as where the wind 
would be felt best. He was spending a lot of time waiting up there.

As he reached the top of the stairs to the little plaza on the overlook, a pair of younger teens ran by 
him towards the stairs. "Hey Hugh, careful on those stairs in the dark," Hilbert said. There was a 
railing, but it was a little low to be running there.

"Oh, hey Hilbert!" the boy said. The girl with him looked at Hilbert curiously. "Don't worry. Come 
on." They headed down.

Well, they should be okay, he thought. He'd run into Hugh his first day in Aspertia; the boy had 
helped him with figuring out what was where in this city. He'd seen him with that girl several times 
since, although he couldn't remember what her name was. They hadn't talked to him much since 
that first day.

The wind was strong up here with nothing to block it. During the day, the view from here was 
amazing, showing forests all around, a pond a short ways north, and a grand snowy mountain far to 
the north. It might be nice by moonlight too, but with the electric lights reflecting off the shifting 
clouds, there wasn't much to see now save for darkness. Was it the night of the new moon? Hilbert 
wasn't sure; he usually wasn't interested in such things.

Fifteen minutes later, he heard footsteps and hooves on the stairs. Cheren had decided to join him, 
accompanied by his Emboar. "Anything?"

He shook his head. "Nope. But there might be."

When he got a few feet from Hilbert, Cheren shifted his glasses and looked back. "There's a couple 
of kids on the stairs trying to hide while watching you."

"They can't be that much younger than you," Hilbert said teasingly. "If it's them still." He 
shrugged. "Well when the wind shifts, they'll just have to join us in being soaked."

"What do you mean?" Cheren asked.

Hilbert put his hand to his left ear. Off to the east, the sound of rustling leaves had increased 
dramatically. Half a minute later, the overlook was blasted with intense wind and rain. He and 
Cheren had managed to brace themselves in time, but they did hear a yelp from one of the 'spies'. 
Hopefully this wasn't enough to knock the railing out and throw them off the stairs. Next to him, 
the rain hissed as it came into contact with Reshiram's hibernating form. The stone's flames 
increased, able to illuminate the plaza when the lampposts were all darkened.

This would be the time to get him. "Tornadus, I need to speak with you!" he shouted into the wind. 
"I was sent here by Landorus!"
In response, the rain lightened and the wind shifted. Loose leaves and debris began to circle around the overlook instead of blow right by. The water on the ground gathered up into a small twister, then formed into the shape of a burly near humanoid Pokemon with a long whip-like tail and a white cloud below his waist. "If you ask for me, so I shall come," he said. "Maybe. Maybe not. What's on your mind?"

Even though he had gotten Tornadus to appear, it was no guarantee that the wind kami would say anything useful. And Hilbert didn't want to lose any more time in this. So he prepared to use Attract to help the discussion along. Subtly at first, though. "I came to find you because Landorus told me that you might know some valuable information," he said, taking a step closer to Tornadus. "I know that Reshiram and Zekrom have restricted the movements of you and Thundurus at times. I mean to call on the former at a later date, but if you cooperate with me now, I'd be willing to convince him to go easier on you this time around."

Tornadus raised his eyebrows. "Really? Those two are such mood killers; they have absolutely no sense of fun. Nobody else would tell you, but you are going to be so restricted if you do awaken that rock there. You're gonna have to watch everything you do and everything you say, as everyone will be watching, listening. A thoughtless line out of one of the Kings can become warped into the basis of tyranny. And you will have very little fun. But, were you to work with me, then we could have a lot of fun indeed. What do you say?"

Hilbert was thrown a little off guard by the offer. It was something to think about, he realized, but from Tornadus? Still, he gave his charming smile as he shook his head. "I'm sorry. I realize it could be fun to work with you, but there's a major threat in Unova now. We need the truth to make sure things don't go wrong. And because of the position I'm in, I'm going to awaken Reshiram to cut through the political and philosophical haze in the air."

In a graceful motion, Tornadus came within reach of him. "Spoken like a true White King, I suppose," he said, tapping the King's Stone hanging from Hilbert's neck. "That's disappointing. But if you spoke with Landorus already... what do you need to know from me?"

"It's about Keldeo and Meloetta," Hilbert said. "They've been missing for twenty-five years now, right? Have you noticed them in your travels around Unova? If you've seen them, or even if you've just heard her songs."

"Those two?" Tornadus crossed his arms over his chest. "Lots of questions have come to me about them. I don't see why everyone's so concerned. They're immortals just like me, so if they get in trouble and die, they'll just come back in a few years, fine and fit like always."

"We're concerned that someone might try taking their immortality from them," Cheren said.

Hilbert glanced over and nodded. "Right. There's been someone that has been researching immortality, and has even created a new immortal. They might also be able to find a way to destroy one of you fully. Any of you. Which is why we need to find them and make sure they're okay."

Tornadus frowned. "Well that's not fair. And a new immortal? You're not immortal."

"I know that," Hilbert started to say.

But the kami continued, "You're a demi-mortal, maybe. Never thought I'd see that again."

Demi-mortal? That caused Hilbert's thoughts to freeze for a moment. What did he mean by that? But it could just be a distraction. "That's not important right now," he said in a calm voice, using the full extent of Attract now. "I'm looking for Keldeo and Meloetta. What do you know about
them?"

At that, Tornadus’ emotions shifted from wanting to toy with them to wanting to answer him. He even dropped his arms to his side. "Really... you really are serious about this. Well, I guess I should, just in case there's someone dangerous to even us out there. Okay, if you're going to find Meloetta, there's one surefire way the narrow down her location. Her aura inspires those around her, especially when it comes to music. So if she's been captive all this time, you should look to somewhere where the music scene has been unusually strong and productive."

"There's musicians living all over the place," Hilbert pointed out. "And there's many places they gather..."

"But there is one place that has attained a stronger music presence than before," Tornadus said. "About thirty years ago, Virbank was entirely an industrial town. It's still surrounded by factories and warehouses. But if you go there today, there's a lot of new music clubs around. There was even talk of putting a second theater for the Pokemon Musicals there, so I heard on the wind. Also, when I hang around that really cool place to the south of there, I hear a flute where no one lives."

"Virbank then?" Hilbert said. At least it was nearby; they had passed through there in order to get to Aspertia. "Thank you; I'll go check out that area next."

"I really didn't think anybody like us could get in trouble," Tornadus said. "I mean, me and Thundurus break out of the seals placed on us all the time. Besides, as long as I heard the music, I figured nothing bad could be happening to Meloetta. I might help, but..." he grinned, "one of the houses here has a really awesome wind chime! It's got so many whirly things, and chimes, and it's so sparkly..."

"I'm sure it must be wonderful," Hilbert said, smiling. Seemed like such a simple thing, but it was probably best to keep him in a good mood. "If you want to help out, that would be kind of you. That's all I needed to know from you." Maybe he'd even offer to explain what he'd been talking about earlier.

Unexpectedly, Tornadus curled his tail in front of him and got shy. "Oh, but... could I have something from you first? I mean, before you go?"

"What is it?" he asked. Maybe a promise to keep his word about letting him act freely.

"Just a little thing," he said, and then darted closer and kissed him on the lips.

What the heck? Hilbert stiffened, not sure what to do, especially since Tornadus had a grip on his shoulders too. But then the kami pushed him away and began laughing hysterically. Nearby, Cheren was trying to muffle a snicker behind his hand. "What was that about?" Hilbert asked, rubbing the back of his hand over his lips.

"That was sooo worth telling you that!" Tornadus said, now shaking with mirth. "That look on your face was just priceless. You almost had me there, but I decided to fake it and see what I could get away with. Have fun rescuing the muse and the knight, your majesty." He made a low bow in jest, then took off into the sky howling with laughter again.

"I guess that's what you get for trying to flirt with a troublemaker, huh?" Cheren said, a wide grin showing from behind his hand.

"Get lost," Hilbert said. But a moment later, he laughed himself. "I probably should have seen that coming, huh?"
Rood had used a Watchog, a Herdier, a Scraggy, a Tranquil, an Archen, and a Tirtouga. The last two Hilda only knew because he had called out their species name in ordering them. And, it wasn't that great of a team. But he did make good use of the Pokemon he had, lasting much longer than Subway teams of a similar mix and level range. "I did say that I was training them," Rood said, using Revives on their Pokeballs. "I only have three that I've kept for very long lately, and I left them behind for this particular trip."

She rolled her eyes. "That's lame, after the way you worded your challenge. You should try again with your three."

"That might not happen. After all, I'm supposed to be denying any link to you. I know I can get away with it tonight, but it would be risky to try again." He set the last of the balls back in his holder, then tapped his head. "I'm sorry about all this, but I'm only trying to do what I see as right. Keep in mind what I've said." Then he turned and headed off.

Hilda clenched a fist. This didn't seem right; she'd only encountered her father twice now, but both times he proved himself a decent man, at least better than she expected. While he seemed to be speaking honestly, it was hard to tell what he might be thinking, deciding to do things like this. He was an obstacle for being a leader in Team Plasma, but then she didn't want to be fine with just ignoring him. Was she supposed to keep disliking him for the way he left her Mom, or was there reason to respect him now? Or even admire him for what he was trying to do...

"Hey!" she shouted after him, before he got into the gatehouse. "Don't go doing anything stupid and maybe we can talk more after this all blows over!"

Rood paused, then gave her a nod and a wave.

Having not been used for that battle, Kyurem came closer to her and put his hand on her shoulder. "Are you going to be all right?" he asked.

"Should be," she said, rubbing her eyes. "Dang, I was supposed to be having fun on this journey."

"Things do tend to get serious when we're around," he said. "I'm sorry. Someone's coming."

Hilda dug out a tissue from her pocket and blew her nose, dabbing dry parts over her cheeks. That shouldn't look too suspicious. Looking back towards Nimbasa, she saw a young teen coming down the road towards her. She was wearing a wool hat, but the length and bulk of her hair hanging down her back still made her recognizable. "I'm supposed to meet somebody from the Subway out here!" Iris called.

"Over here!" Hilda called back, coming into a better lit portion of the area. "Good evening."

"Good evening," she said, smiling. "Hey, it is you! I heard some rumors about this, but I was gonna check it out anyhow due to down time." When she got close, she handed over her Battle Subway ID.

"You guys would have to keep your Pokemon in good practice," Hilda said, taking the card and running it through an accessory on her Xtransceiver. The Subway group had given it to her to document battles. As she handed it back, she added, "You can still back out if you want. The challenge is a one on one match against Kyurem, so you only have one Pokemon you can send out. No switching, obviously, item use is fine, your side still has to meet normal restrictions on what Pokemon you use. Want to give it a try?"

Iris grinned and nodded. "Sure! Oh, but can I ask you something first? It does have to do with
"Yeah, what is it?" She pressed the confirm button on the phone's screen so that the match could be logged.

She pulled something out of her bag and came closer. "I'm sure you've heard people say that this was one of Kyurem's winters, being so snowy all the time. But there's something odd going on around Giant Crater. It has this snow cyclone thing that shows up occasionally the past month, and a lot of the paths to it have become coated in thick ice, to the point where some are completely blocked off. Here, see?" She handed over a digital camera, set to show photos stored in its memory.

Even in the still pictures, it wasn't hard to see that there was a spiraling effect in the snowfall around the crater. The ice seemed brick-solid, even when it was on the ground with no source of water around. And when she said that paths were blocked, she meant that there were huge blocks of ice standing on the footpaths through the forest. "Huh, looks like you could make a fortress out of this," Hilda said.

"I have done so before," Kyurem said. "We'll go there and see what can be done."

"Don't you know why it's there?" Hilda asked.

He crossed his arms over his chest. "Perhaps."

Well if he was getting into that mood, then he wasn't going to say anything. "Right. Don't worry, Iris, we'll go check it out."

"Great thanks. I know who I'm using." She brought out a Great Ball. "When do we start the battle?"

"Whenever we back off to make room," Hilda said jokingly. "All right then, Miss Gym Leader, we accept your challenge!"

Chapter End Notes

I do find it a curious feature of the Pokemon world that anything can be settled by a Pokemon battle. It's mostly gaming convention so that you can win, but I like thinking about why it might be that way and what might happen because of it.
Kyurem's Winter

March 19

The fastest way for them to get to Giant Crater was to take a subway to Lacunosa and leave town. However, Kyurem still wasn't keen on going into that town. The previous night, they had traveled to Undella to stay at a hotel there. Hilda and Kyurem got up before the sun had risen to head out as soon as possible.

Hilda turned on her Xtransceiver in order to get an update on the weather. While it was below freezing now in this area, the report said that it should get close to 40 degrees Fahrenheit with an overcast sky and no winds save for the crater which had that odd cyclone. It shouldn't be a bad day to travel on the main route. However, N was apparently worried about the cold and she was bringing Kyurem back to his home area. It would be best to prepare for freezing temperatures and changes in weather. She got out her heaviest coat, gloves, scarf, and hat, as well as her snow boots and a few layers of clothing just in case.

They headed out as the sun was rising, following the beach east and north until they got on the higher ground that led to Lacunosa. At this time and in this cold, they didn't run into many people on the way. Not even a single Pokemon battle, which was good as Kyurem said the Pokemon around the crater tended to be very strong. "Descendants of my followers and warriors," he specified.

As the taller buildings of the walled city came into view, Kyurem led her down a smaller path that headed directly north, away from Lacunosa. It was mid-morning by then, with the air being a gray twilight due to the sunlight coming through the thick clouds. The snow crunched under their feet, with distant crunches indicating that wild Pokemon were still active and moving around. As they went along, the ice became more noticeable: building off rocks, hanging from trees, shining on fallen branches. When they came across the large ice blocks, most weren't much taller than they were and they could cut through the trees to get around them. But it helped that Kyurem knew this area well, making it quicker to find the path again if the blocks were at turns or forks.

"You've been oddly quiet," Kyurem noted at one point. "Is something about your father on your mind?"

"A little bit," she said. "I hope I do get to talk to him later, after all this." They kept going for a couple of minutes. It was really quiet out here. "I guess I'm a little tired too. Shouldn't be, I mean, I've been walking all over, most every day. Not as much lately, but still."

"If you want to stop for a bit, just say so." Then she sneezed, causing him to stop them both. "Are you sick?"

"I felt all right this morning," Hilda said, shifting her scarf. She might have to take it off is she sneezed harder. When she felt her face, it was warm. She had been feeling warm rather than cold, but this was through her thick gloves. "Maybe I'm getting sick."

Kyurem frowned, but in concern. "If you're sick, we shouldn't be around here for long."

"I'll be all right for a while, I think," she said, continuing to walk along the path. "But you can tell what's going on when you see the place for yourself, right? We can head over to Village Bridge once we take a look, maybe go back when I'm better."
"If you think you can make it," he said, taking a few quick steps to keep up with her. Then he put a hand to his chin, making that blue sign appear under him again. However, it fizzled out quite literally, the sign fading away. "This..."

"What happened?" Hilda asked. His tone kept getting more worrying. But, he was the most dangerous thing around, right?

Kyurem grumbled, rubbing his nose. "I think I see what's going on. We should go to the edge of the crater to see that cyclone; I'll know for sure then. But then we're getting out of here. I forgot to account for something."

"And that would be?" she asked when he didn't continue at first.

"Remember how I told you that I'm from the future?" He pointed ahead. "My past self is still here; I didn't even consider that when planning this. I've been passive about weather control this time, but the presence of both of us would be amplifying this winter. While I don't remember coming awake at this time, my presence might be awakening him. He doesn't know what I know, and so we'll be seen as trespassers."

"Then he could attack us." That wasn't a pleasant thought, even if she were well.

"Keep quiet and do what I tell you," Kyurem said. "We don't have much further to go."

Ten minutes later, they were standing on the top of a rise that looked into Giant Crater itself. The edge was steep, nearly straight down for twenty-five feet. A nearby opening in the ground led to a tunnel, presumably a way to get to the base of the crater. While the trees around them were normal, some bare with branches and some green with needles, the trees in the crater were twisted and scraggly from a harsh life. At least those that she could see. The crater seemed maybe two hundred yards across, but the snow cyclone took up most of it. It was a blur of small white particles flying upwards in a slow steady funnel.

Hilda shivered, feeling colder just looking at it. Since Kyurem seemed to be examining it intently, she found a nearby tree and leaned against it. She hadn't sneezed again, but her nose and throat tickled occasionally. Now that she had noticed, her weariness seemed to be growing. Village Bridge would be a few hours away, especially if they paused for her to rest from time to time. But she wasn't sure how the residents of Lacunosa would welcome her and Kyurem coming in to find a place for her to rest for a few days.

After looking over the place, Kyurem turned and waved for her to follow him, heading down another path heading east, away from the crater. She nodded and pushed herself away from the tree in time to be greeted by a tremendous roar. Hilda hurried to get closer to the Kyurem she knew, briefly seeing a dragon's form in the cyclone.

"He's half-asleep but more powerful than I currently am," Kyurem whispered to her. "It's probably a warning."

"What are you doing here?" a hostile voice exactly like Kyurem's asked them, with such force that the icy trees near them shuddered. "And don't run!" he added when they tried to leave, sending a row of ice spikes across their intended path.

"That's half-asleep?" Hilda asked quietly.

Kyurem nodded. Then he called back into the crater, "We're working with the White King. This is not your time to emerge. We mean no disrespect, did not mean to disturb you. May we continue on
our way?"

A low growl came from the cyclone. "If you pass on a message to those in Lacunosa, you may. They have not yet kept their promise, and so their spring is delayed. If they don't..." then a pair of icy blue lights flashed within the flying snow. "Wait, who are you?!!"

After taking a deep breath, Kyurem quietly said to her, "Be ready to call out Mimi if we must." Then he spoke up again, "I am you."

"You are an imposter!" the other Kyurem roared, sending a blast of frigid air at them.

The chill of it pierced right through Hilda's protective clothing, gripping her insides with such painful coldness that she fell back against the tree before dropping down onto her knees. At the same time, her skin erupted with fever, far faster than any other illness she'd had. Remembering what her guardian had said, she managed to release the Minccino. She and Kyurem did something to fight back against the other Kyurem. Except, the one she knew was really the other one, because the one in Giant Crater was supposed to be here in this time.

"Are you supposed to be here?" someone asked her. Hilda looked up and saw Hilbert standing next to the tree she was near. He was dressed in an outfit that seemed more fitting for a breezy autumn day, not a cold late-winter one.

"What do you mean by that?" she asked, briefly wondering what he was doing here and why he didn't feel cold. Or hot.

Ignoring her question, he asked others, "Are you really helping me, or are you helping yourself? You're not paying too much attention to us new friends... but you're not paying attention to your old ones either. Why?" He put one hand on the tree and held the other one in front of him. There seemed to be strings there. "Are we following the lead or are we breaking it?"

"What's with the seriousness?" she asked, trying to smile behind her scarf. But she felt so tired.

"Things aren't black and white, after all," her father said, appearing from out of the snow cyclone before them. "People think differently, see differently, prioritize differently. I don't prioritize family, especially in pursuit of the ideal."

"And that's why you suck," she told him, although she couldn't even feel really angry about that anymore.

"What do you prioritize, Hilda?" Hilbert asked before they both turned into Pidoves and flew away. And then things began to really not make sense.

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He was late. He'd gotten busy with something a superior had asked him to do, it took longer than he thought, and he completely missed the time he had to deliver dinner to the King. Trying to hit a balance between keeping the food on the tray and hurrying, he made his way up the stairs and down the hall.

As usual, this area was dead quiet. There wasn't a purpose set for this particular hall yet, being so far up the castle and so distant from the teleport room. The maintenance group would even skip this one if they were falling behind schedule. However, the King was currently staying here, away from his usual area. The low level of activity suited his purpose and only one among the knights knew where N was.

"Hi-choo!" Grimacing, he paused outside the room to catch his breath, placing the food tray on a
side table. He didn't want to be sneezing around his King.

But he was feeling tired and achy all over his body, not to mention a little too warm. Was he getting sick? He hoped not. He had been entrusted with this job; very few people were supposed to know where the King was so that he could do his work uninterrupted. They would all support and be loyal to their King, of course. That's why they were knights. But there was always the chance that there might be a spy in their numbers. The more people that knew, the bigger chance there was of N coming into danger.

He knocked three times, not too hard but not too soft. Then he unlocked the room before knocking one last time. "Lord N," he said, picking up the tray and coming in with it. It was the same way he had done this every time.

This room was stark, to limit the amount of distractions. The paint on the wall was all white; there was a tan rug in the area N was always at, but the rest of the floor was bare stone tile. On one wall, there was a cot. In another corner, there were two low tables surrounding that one rug. One table held several books, some of which he was asked to go exchange with others in the castle library; it also held the tray from the last meal he had brought up, as well as a pen, a pad of paper, a matchbook, and a box of stick candles. The other table, at a perpendicular angle to the first table and against the wall, held three candles, the main source of light, as well as whatever book N might be studying. Over in the corner of the room, there was a small bathroom. And that was it. N was kneeling in front of the table, hands on his lap, eyes closed, and head lowered. The Dark Stone floated close to him, occasionally making soft crackles of electricity in the silence.

Working as quietly and quickly as he could, the knight pulled the old tray closer and put the new one in its place. He noticed that not much of the food on the old one was gone: there was still rice in the bowl, a few apples slices (now brown), and the bag of nuts unopened. He moved that last item to the new tray, just in case.

Then he paused. There was something else that needed to be done, but N seemed so deep in thought that he hardly noticed him. "Lord N?" he asked

His head shifted at that. "That time already?" His voice seemed dull, like he was making himself say something.

"I'm actually late, I'm sorry," he said, then paused as he felt a tickle in his nose. It passed without a sneeze, but N hadn't said anything more. "Pardon my asking, but are you feeling well? You didn't eat much."

"I'm fine." After a moment, he even smiled a little, so the knight brushed it off as imagining things. This room was dim (and a bit eerie; he couldn't stay in a place like this for meditation, adding another reason to admire the King).

"Do you need anything else from me?" he asked.

"I..." he hesitated, then turned and picked up the notebook, skimming over a couple of pages before finding what he wanted. "I want to send a message to the Sages, and all of you. The enforced release program should be put back into effect."

"I'll let them know," he said.

N turned back to face the candles, putting the notebook in his lap. "I was concerned about how the outsiders would view us. But I know now that it does not matter. History will vindicate us and it's been far too long that Pokemon have been allowed to suffer. The longer we wait, the more they
will resist. The kind ones..." he lowered his head again and shuddered. "There's too few of them. It must be absolute to work. But, keep a few Pokemon within the Team for now to help with this, as well as plenty of healing supplies for Pokemon. Respect them fully, but use them to defeat the outsiders. Once you have won, take the Pokeballs for their team, heal up the Pokemon, then release them out into the wild. Preferably in a place far from human settlements. And try to control the distribution of new Pokeballs as best we can."

He felt glad to hear this. Quite a few of them were concerned about why the policy had been discontinued when releasing the Pokemon was necessary. With this, things would become right quickly. "Yes, we'll do this as best we can."

"I don't want to hurt anybody, but this can't be helped," N said.

"Is that all?"

N looked over at him briefly. "Oh. Yes. That's all for now. Thank you." He then turned back to the candles.

For a moment, he thought he'd seem small wet streaks down N's cheeks. But why would he be upset to give an order like that? Unless he meant that he didn't want to hurt the few kind Trainers that he had met with it... no, it had probably been a trick of the candlelight. N was above all that. N was an angel.

It hadn't been said officially and the Sages wouldn't confirm it. But they didn't deny it either. Amongst the knights of Team Plasma, it had been spoken and thought of so often, in hushed reverent discussions, that it was accepted as a mysterious truth. It was in how he didn't act like anyone else, how he had come to such wisdom as a child, how he understood Pokemon like no one else. And it was proven that one evening when N had been speaking to them and became surrounded by divine illumination. After seeing that, there could be no doubt in his heart about it.

But in realizing that, many of them had also realized that N was in even greater danger than they realized. He was unfamiliar with the ways of the world and felt hurt simply by hearing about the cruelties and harshness out there. He was threatening the current world structure and if the outsiders also realized his angelic nature, they might go to terrible lengths to get rid of him before he destroyed their wealth, power, and way of life. But he had come to this world on a grave mission, to plead for mercy on behalf of the Pokemon.

The knight didn't even regret leaving behind his name and identity for new ones. Like all the others, he was here to make N's vision of a world at peace and free of pain come true. Whatever it took; he'd sacrifice anything to help.

Once he took the old meal tray back to the kitchen area, he headed out to find Ghetsis to report N's orders. He was utterly exhausted by the time he made it to the Sage's office, and Ghetsis told him to see the team's doctors and take a break because he looked so pale. The doctor who looked him over told him that he had the flu and so had to take it easy for several days. Reluctantly, he agreed and gave up his duties to serving N temporarily.

After all, he'd do his King no good if his body wasn't strong enough to do as ordered.

When his past self (although technically the present self) blasted them with wind, Kyurem recognized that he was trying to lay a curse on them. It was something that he warned humans about for hundreds of centuries. If he caught trespassers in his territory, he would not hesitate to kill or curse them. How severely he attacked depended on his mood and how awake he was. His
other self wasn't fully awake, as evident by how he failed to recognize himself. Kyurem blocked the curse attempt.

At least, he thought he had. He had kept himself safe, but Hilda quickly collapsed from it. Of all the days she could have gotten sick... that made it easier for her to get cursed as well. For once, his blood seemed to boil. This wasn't the mixed anger and thrill of fighting a losing battle. This was an outright hatred of someone who had hurt someone who was his, even if the hatred was against his past self.

Than a voice snapped him out of doing something rash. "Huh, Daddy?" Mimi said, hopping over to his side. "Why're there two of you? Why're you fighting?"

"What, why is she...?" his past self said, confused enough that touches of his sleeping mind could be heard in his words.

Kyurem bit his lip. Even if he shifted to his regular dragon self, he was going to be at a large disadvantage against his past self. Not to mention that if he managed to defeat him, there might be some bad time distortions as a result. "Mimi, it's because I'm from the future and he doesn't know everything," he told the Minccino.

Her ears pricked up. "Ooo, really?"

The present Kyurem growled, making blue sparks appear in the snow cyclone. "You're an imposter and you stole her from my dreams? You are going to pay dearly for that."

"He sounds sleepy mad," Mimi said, looking into the cyclone. Still unafraid, somehow.

Picking her up, he readied his aura to intensify her power. "Right, he's waking up too soon. Help me put him back to sleep, will you?"

She giggled, putting a paw to her nose. "Okay!" Then she used Sing against the present Kyurem.

"Don't you dare hurt her," he said as the snow cyclone started to slow down and fall apart. Then Giant Crater quieted and his image vanished.

"Daddy wouldn't hurt me," she said, nuzzling against his chin. "Neither of you would."

For a moment, he grimaced and felt like telling her that her grave wasn't far from here. But he caught that statement in time and put her down. "Yes, but we need to help Hilda now."

Mimi glanced over, then hopped over to the girl. "Ooh, what happened to her?" She put a paw on Hilda's cheek. "She's warm, but it's cold. What's she saying?"

Although he could hear her mumbling, it didn't make sense. "She's probably delirious," he said. He should get her somewhere safe as fast as he could. But some rational thoughts remained and insisted it had to be safely as well. Kyurem looked over the Pokeball holder before taking one off and double-checking it. Then he released Olette. "I need your help." Then he checked Hilda's bag for a blanket.

"What happened?" the Exadrill asked in concern, coming closer to Hilda.

"She's sick and cursed," he explained. "We'll need to carry her over to Lacunosa. I didn't want to go there, but with what's happened, it can't be avoided. I would take Tarzan if he was evolved, but he'd trip over his skin as it is."
"Can't you turn back into a dragon and carry her back real fast?" Mimi asked.

He frowned, but found the blanket and got it to materialize. "I could, but that would make things worse. My regular body is cold enough to sap the warmth out of anything." He spread the blanket out on top of the icy snow. It wasn't optimal, but it should work. "Let's get her on the blanket. I'll take one end and you carry the other Olette. Mimi, you scout out in front of us and look for problems with ice blocks and hidden things."

"Right!" the Minccino said, with Olette nodding.

Their trip was slow, even if it was a short walk to town. Hilda wasn't still in her fevered state, so sometimes they had to stop her from trying to get off of the blanket. When they came across another ice block, Kyurem brought out Tarzan to break it as best he could; it would take him a few of his strongest kicks, but he got it and two others out of the way. Sometimes wild Pokémon would come out to try challenging them, but a threat from him usually got them to scatter. It didn't help that the clouds were turning darker and snowflakes were starting to fall.

When they came to the open gate of Lacunosa, the three other Pokémon relaxed and were hopeful that Hilda could get help soon. But Kyurem was still wary. Reactions to his return had varied widely over his lifetime, from a proud welcome to a fearful barring of the gates. And if the rumors were true about them supporting Team Plasma, then this might not turn out well. Plus, there was no way he could enter quietly. This was his city and it recognized him.

Once he stepped onto the white stone streets, a bell in the center of town began to toll without being touched. The outer walls glistened with ice, then burst into rows of sharp spikes all around. On the bridges in town, the ice came out in the form of a frieze of dragons. The people here should recognize the signs even though he had been gone a long time.

Should. A group of children that had been playing in the streets paused on seeing a dragon made of ice on a stairwell nearby. "Wow, how'd that happen so fast?" one of the boys said, getting closer to it.

"Don't touch it!" an old woman warned, grabbing him before he got close. "That is usually a sign of Kyurem's power."

"It's always a sign of my power," he said sharply.

"M-master Kyurem?" the old woman asked, trying to back off with the boy.

"Oh, you're Kyurem going around as a person, right?" one of the girls asked, curiously looking over the group.

He snarled, getting them to all be wary. "Yes, that's me. Listen closely so that you may tell the others: I am very angry. You, this whole town, is only a part of the problem, but I'm in a mood to snap at anybody who dares annoy me further. If what I hear is true, then I might even destroy all of you. But you can give yourselves some more time to address your wrongs if you show me where your hospital is. Right now."

"I, I'll do it," another boy said. "It's down the street, not that far." He led the way down the street, so they followed. The other children and the old woman scattered elsewhere, already spreading the news that he had returned.

"Um, did you have to be mean about that?" Olette asked, firmly keeping a grasp on her end of the blanket.
"In this case, it will help," he said. Besides, it was partly what they would have expected, at least the older folks. This would get Hilda the help she needed quickly.

In the hospital, an emergency doctor agreed to see her right away. The female doctor tried to get him to leave, but after a firm disagreement and a proof that he was the legendary dragon, she didn't object to his presence further. After checking to make sure Hilda didn't have frostbite, the doctor and a nurse took her winter clothes and changed her into a hospital gown. Then they did what they could to control her fever and figure out what was wrong. Kyurem stood against the wall and watched them the whole time. The other Pokemon had to be called away, but he stayed.

After half an hour of this, the doctor turned to speak with him. From the way she kept shifting her shirt and gloves, it was obvious that speaking to him made her nervous. Some level of professionalism pushed her past that. "She has the influenza infection severely, unusually so for an apparently healthy girl. But, her body temperature seems to be dropping at her extremities, even in this heated environment. I can't say what that is yet."

"It's a Pokemon's curse," he told her. "Can you do anything about that?"

She scratched her head. "A curse? I'm afraid not, as it doesn't seem to be a standard one that I recognize. And with the way it's going, we may not have a lot of time to save her. We'd need to get a specialist in, and cross-reference with a Pokemon expert... what kind of Pokemon was it?"

Kyurem lowered his head. Of course this wouldn't turn out well. "Is the equipment in this room capable of withstanding cold temperatures?"

Although puzzled at the unexpected question, the doctor answered after only a second of thought, "No, we definitely couldn't put these machines outside."

He stood up straight and walked over to the bed where Hilda was. "Then get it out of here."

"But some are supporting her..." she protested.

"I can get rid of that curse, but this room is going to turn freezing because of it," he said, showing a bit of the anger that was still burning in his soul. "I'm giving you a chance to not have your machines wrecked. And make sure you have what you need to treat hypothermia ready, within a few minutes."

The doctor's eyes widened. "Oh, well... we shouldn't waste time if you can handle it. Actually, let's get her into an empty room." She had the nurse help her disconnect Hilda from the machine, then they rolled the bed into a smaller closed off room. Once the door was shut, it was just the two of them.

She wasn't mumbling anymore, or even struggling. Hilda's face was flushed pink with fever while her hands were turning pale from the curse's cold. As it was, it must be a struggle for her body to keep working. But he couldn't waste time now. "At least we're in a safe place for this," he said. Then he placed his hands on her chest. "Hilda, I'm sorry for this. But it's a choice between possible death and certain death."

By the time he got done, the windows to the room were covered in heavy frost. There was a light dusting of snow on the floor as he had frozen the humidity right out of the air. As he opened the door to let the doctor and nurse come back in with the hypothermia treatment, he nearly slipped on the slick floor himself. A second nurse waited out in the hall. "Um, we can put you up in a room to rest, sir."
"I'll find my own place to rest," he said, leaning on the wall. "Take good care of her, or else."

"You don't need to worry," he said, although his eyes betrayed his fear.

Kyurem staggered through the hall back into the emergency care lobby; countering a strong curse of his own make was more draining than he thought. The people in the lobby, both staff and visitors, watched him with a sense of unease, concern, and fear, stopping all of their conversations. So they recognized him, and perhaps even knew they had done something wrong. Ignoring them for now, he went outside, back into the new winter storm that was brewing thanks to him meeting himself.

Out there, he walked for a short ways until he found an open street where he wouldn't block off access to the hospital. Then he changed back into his dragon form. A few people that had been walking on the street quickly got off it upon seeing the icy black Pokemon there. Not that they had much to worry about immediately; Kyurem collapsed onto the street in weariness. For a moment, he considered his reactions to what had gone on today. He had not been concerned about failing his self-appointed mission or causing the disaster he was trying to avoid. No... he had been afraid of losing Hilda to death, with a power that was his own.

He didn't get long to think on that as sleep overcame him.
March 19

Hilbert and Cheren got into Virbank after dark. Like Tornadus had said, this was an industrial city. The walkways and many of the buildings were made of concrete, grayed over the years. However, there were also many lights, from electric lampposts lighting both the sea and upper levels of town to the neon lights marking various places of business. There were still a number of people walking and talking in the streets, many of them in fashions Hilbert would expect to see in Nimbasa or some areas of Castelia. The streaked hair styles and so on usually indicated sub-cultures heavily tied to music too.

"Do you get the feeling that we stick out like sore thumbs here?" Cheren asked him quietly.

"Definitely," Hilbert said. "But I think that's what we're looking for. He mentioned a cool place to the south, which I think is those warehouses over there. You feel up for looking around?"

"Sure, it's not that late." He looked around the crowds for a moment, then said, "I wonder what kind of music they're playing around here. I haven't been in a club before."

"You're a bit young for some of them," Hilbert teased him. "But there might be a teen club around somewhere if there are a lot. You want to check one out later?"

Cheren shrugged. "I dunno. I mean, I was told that in order to be respectable, you had to avoid that kind of thing."

"I guess, if you're following older values," he said. "I was told it was more important to be yourself. But your family does sound like it's pretty strict." It was something of a surprise to hear about his family life. Hilbert wasn't even sure how they got on talking about that today, but comparing stories showed just how permissive Giallo had been. Except about having Pokemon; he'd never had a home pet Pokemon when he was a kid and now he was thinking that was why he was having to learn communicating with Pokemon at this time. "I suppose moving past the limitations your parents put on you is what most everyone goes through."

"Yeah," Cheren agreed. "Or maybe confronting them about it. Listen, this might not seem related, but it kinda is in my mind... I was checking out the curriculum of the Trainer's School back in Aspertia, and they have a series of classes about the Pokemon League. You know, about how they run things, what's required of its members, and its history. The school in Striaton didn't have anything like that."

Hilbert smiled. "That sounds cool. You thinking of taking those classes?"

"Maybe." He chuckled. "I mean, who knows? There might be some way to work around their rules to get an advantage in a challenge battle."

He laughed and playfully punched him. "Trying to find a legal way to cheat, are we?"

"Not cheat! Work the system. But seriously, it would be great thing to know. The first class of the set doesn't have a new session until summer, though." He tapped his fingers, mentally counting through something. "I think, by that time, I can take the entrance exams and meet the qualifications to be a full time student. I need to look into it some more, especially about talking to my parents about me moving to Aspertia for that. But I'm not sure."
"Well you've got a few months to decide, a little time, but not a lot. Do what you feel is right for you." He looked over a Cheren, hoping that would help.

It seemed to; he didn't seem quite as tense as he had when they had met up over in Castelia. "Right, thanks." Cheren looked back at him an raised an eyebrow. "But when did you become decent listener? You were so egotistical when I first met you; I know some of what's changed you, but you've really changed."

"Well I did listen back then, but only when it helped me in the end," he pointed out. "It's more interesting to help other people out these days. And, I guess part of it was when I learned what my birth name meant."

"What, Hilbert?" Cheren asked, confused.

He shook his head. "No, I had a name before that... it's rather embarrassing, though."

"It can't be that bad." He pointed down a street that went into the warehouse area, "I think we need to head that way."

"Yeah... it is bad." He scratched his head. "But, I think you'd understand. Just don't tell Hilda; she'd tease me so bad." He checked around them, but the part of town they were going into had much fewer people. So he quietly told his name to Cheren.

He was quiet for a moment. "I can see what you mean," he finally said. "But that is a bad one."

"I can understand trying to be significant and unique, but that's trying too hard. Anyhow, let's get looking for them. Maybe listening." He brought out his Pokemon to help search, even letting Ember perch on his hat for the time being. Cheren brought out his Pokemon too, having Shadeclaw back.

There was music coming from a few of the warehouses, but those turned out to simply be late-shift workers looking for a good start to their night. Hilbert and Cheren asked them if they had heard unusual music around, or just a flute or a great singer. While a few said they had heard a flute around from time to time, they didn't seem sure where it was coming from. And a few workers who had been here for years knew most everyone who owned a warehouse here: Team Plasma and Dr. Umber were not known.

"There is one odd building you might want to check out, if you can get in it," one of them said. He seemed to be in his fifties from his gray hair and rough skin, but he still seemed tough and strong from his muscles and large beard. "It's over in the refinery past the wall, right next to the entrance. It used to be their offices, but I know they meet up in Warehouse 12 now, along with their place in Castelia. I don't recall anybody using that place in the past couple of decades, but somebody keeps it maintained."

After thanking him for that information, they headed down to the refinery. The most obvious music here came from a group of teens that had met up in the southern part of the refinery, past all the storage buildings. Other than that, there were sounds of wild Pokemon scurrying around and squabbling in several weedy areas of tall grass around the buildings, and calls from flying Pokemon perched on the steel beam catwalks that hung several feet overhead. Everything here seemed clean and efficient, not particularly dangerous. But it was all a little mysterious, as Hilbert didn't know what the purpose of all these buildings and structures were.

That including the small office building they had been directed to. Two stories tall, it blended into the area and didn't seem important. From a few holes in the wall, discolored areas, and a piece of
metal in the ground, it seemed that any identifying signs had been taken away years ago. There were a few windows, but the ones on the first floor were blocked off by blinds. And there didn't seem to be any door; the entire outside was coated in plaster, save for those few small windows.

Cheren soon pointed him to a crack in the wall. "It's fairly regular, about what a door would be if it was here," he said, running his finger along a smaller vertical crack a few feet from the larger one. "And I can't think of any normal reason for plastering over a door."

"The trouble is going to be getting in," Hilbert said. "I sent Madeline to go into the wall and look around. If we knew a good Fight Pokemon, we might be able to get this kicked in." He touched the larger crack, but a bit of metal seemed to indicate that this was the hinged side. That meant somehow getting a hold on the smaller crack to get inside. "Maybe this place is abandoned, but then, why not just take it out?"

After a moment, the Litwick passed through the wall. "Lisha pell saa ree," she said, upset enough that her flame was quivering. Then she came closer to him and nudged his arm away from the door. There was a click on the other side of the door. "I think she wants us to back up," Hilbert said, taking a few steps back.

After another few clicks, the door was then opened outward. The one who met them seemed like a child with a pale face and dirty green hair. But her delicate hands were black and what seemed to be a dress had the quality of the false clothes that many Pokemon had, with no seams and slightly uneven edges. 'One of you is the White King?' she asked without moving her face.

"That would be me," Hilbert said, taking the door's edge. "We've been looking for you and Keldeo. Would you come out and help us?"

She put her hand to her cheek. 'I can't leave, not really. But he's here, and if you can get him free, then we can both go. He's in chains.'

"I should probably get the police to help out," Cheren said. "If I tell them there's a Pokemon in trouble here, I think they should be able to enter the house without trouble."

Hilbert nodded. "That would be good, go get them quickly." While Cheren left, he opened the door further, finding three locks on the other side. He then rolled a rock to keep the door open. "I'm taking Ember with me," he told his other Pokemon. "You three stay out here and guard the door until Cheren and the police come back."

Inside, the old office was dark and empty. It was oddly clean, with the smell of chemical cleaners a bit strong in the air. While most of the furniture must have been moved out, there was a small shelf with cleaning supplies and rags on it. Right in Meloetta's reach, he noticed. She led him up the stairs.

"Why haven't you left if you can move around freely and unlock the door?" Hilbert asked.

She looked back at him. 'The one who captured us, he said that he would kill Keldeo if I left. He doesn't come in a lot, most often to leave me new supplies every few months. But I can't judge how powerful he really is and what he can tell about what happens. I stayed just to be safe. Clean stuff to pass the time, and play music to keep Keldeo happy, that's what I do now.'

"Was it Dr. Umber who captured you?" She seemed a little too intimidated by a mortal human, but concern for Keldeo might be enough to keep her in here.

'Not really. I was captured by a different man, Takumi, and he sold me to Umber. Umber was the
one who tricked Keldeo into captivity by using me, though. Then there's someone called Ghetsis who comes in even less often. They're all powerful, in their own ways.' She opened the door at the top of the stairs and brought him into where Keldeo was held captive.

There were no dividing walls or anything on the second level. On the structural walls, there were a number of strange rune circles giving off a weak power. There were some metal structures on the floor and ceiling, but the device they were attached to was inactive. Inside those, there was a metal ring attached to the floor, holding onto a chain that latched onto a harness around Keldeo's chest. That was all that was holding onto him, but Keldeo didn't look to be in shape to do anything about it. He lacked a lot of the fur that he was usually depicted with, leaving him with bald patches among his short white fur. On seeing them, he got up from the floor shakily; his bone showed through his skin and he only made a few steps before Meloetta and Hilbert were able to get by him.

"What happened to you?" Hilbert asked, dropping down to sit by Keldeo. "Meloetta seems like she could be fine after a bath and a few days fresh air, but you're really rough."

Keldeo waved his tail and nudged Hilbert's hand.

'Umber may have destroyed his ability to return to life,' Meloetta said while Hilbert petted Keldeo. 'He seems much too normal, unable to use any of his higher powers. That's why I couldn't leave with that threat. The wards in his room make it hard for me to tell, but if he does die here, it may be a final death. He's certainly grown old over our captivity.'

While Hilbert didn't think he could do much, he looked over the harness on Keldeo. It was made up of straps of metal around his neck, behind his forelegs, and a strap on the back to hold them together. While it was a little loose to let him breath freely, it wasn't enough for him to slip his legs through. It was attached to the chain with a padlock. "I don't think I can get him out of this," Hilbert said. "Never saw a need to learn to pick a lock, and this harness might have to be cut off him. But the police ought to have tools to get him free."

Meloetta sat down and clasped her hands in her lap. 'Well I'm not leaving until he does.'

"I'll stay with you," Hilbert said, expecting to see Cheren back shortly.

March 21

Hilda was sitting in the hospital lobby in Lacunosa, talking on her Xtranciever with Cheren (who was in Virbank) and Bianca (who was in Nuvema). "I'm still feeling worn out," she said. "But we guess that I was only actually sick about five hours; Kyurem apparently froze out the virus when he removed the curse."

"I don't think I'd want that to happen, even if that flu was bad," Bianca said. "You're lucky the cold didn't kill you."

Like what N had been worried about, Hilda thought, but she didn't say anything about that. "I know. They don't want me doing much activity myself for the next couple of weeks."

"But you can still participate in the Battle Subway, right?" Cheren asked.

She nodded. "Yeah, that's fine, although I can't run around with my Pokemon like I normally do during regular practice. Actually, I'm waiting on someone to go take a walk with me outside for a while. Seems that Kyurem is being hostile and the people around here are freaking out in trying to figure out what he wants."
Cheren frowned at that. "How can you be so calm about him being hostile? A lot of people know that he's with you and if he does something violent..."

"I know what's got him riled up," she said, interrupting him. "Maybe not specifics, but I'm sure this can be solved. But we need to talk with him to make sure and he's apparently not going to talk until he knows I'm better. He's still protecting me, so I'll be okay."

"Well I hope you can get the people of Lacunosa to trust you," Bianca said. "And don't push yourself too much while you recover. Remember what happened back when you were thirteen and you were out with that cold twice?"

"The second time wasn't that bad," she said. "But yeah, I'm resting up after that. So how's it going with you, Cheren? I heard you were helping out Hilbert."

Bianca nodded. "Oh yeah, have you two been getting along?"

"Better than I thought we would," Cheren said. "We ended up talking a lot while traveling. We did find the two of them; Meloetta's okay, although she doesn't seem sure what to do with herself now that she's not in captivity. But Keldeo's in pretty bad shape. We think whatever power makes them immortal has been broken in him, and he's grown old and weak. I mean, he was kept in place with a steel chain and harness, which he could have broken out of at his normal power."

"That's awful," Bianca said. "Is he okay now?"

He shrugged. "More or less. They had to cut the harness off him, and he behaves more like a regular elderly Pokemon than a legendary one. But he seems to be in a good mood. Meloetta seems to think that Reshiram can tell better what's going on with Keldeo and what can be done about it."

"Then is Hilbert going to watch over Keldeo until he can summon Reshiram?" Hilda asked.

"Maybe."

"He glanced over somewhere off screen. "He's in a sour mood now because the police chief chewed him out about breaking into private property. I guess it is the law, but the two of them were in trouble. Actually, I'm considering offering to take care of Keldeo myself."

"That would be good of you," Bianca said with a smile.

"Yeah, although you couldn't use him in battles," Hilda added.

"Obviously not," Cheren said. "But you were right, Bianca; we didn't mean to, but we've gotten into something big here. Even if I can only do a little, I should help out. I'm just thinking... it would be nice for Hilbert to have Keldeo, as that could help his image with most people if he helps him. But then Plasma could use that against him. If someone else had Keldeo, then Hilbert could focus on keeping up with them. I'll probably talk with him and the doctor here about it later."

The doors to the hospital lobby opened up, letting in Iris and an older woman. "Oh hey, I've got to go," Hilda said to her friends. "My visitors have shown up. You two take care of yourselves."

"You too Hilda," Bianca said. "Talk to you later."

"And be careful," Cheren said. Then the call ended.

"Hi!" Iris said, coming over and leaning on a nearby chair. "How're you doing? I didn't think you'd have that much trouble with going into the Crater."

"Neither did we," Hilda said, getting up and putting on her coat. "But hey, I'm still alive and I'm not
sick anymore, so it's good now."

She smiled at that. "Good. Oh, this is Mrs. Robins of the Lacunosa city council; she's been trying
to talk with Kyurem the past couple of days. And this is Hilda, Kyurem's friend."

Mrs. Robins shook her hand. "I hope people here have been treating you well," the councilwoman
said.

"They've been good to me," Hilda said. "So where is Kyurem? I thought he'd be in here waiting for
me, but he's apparently out in the city somewhere."

"Yes, he's been waiting on you. He's up on the wall right now, but it's not too far off."

Once Hilda was prepared, the three of them headed out of the hospital. There was snow falling
lightly in the air, with a thick gray overcast in the sky. Every building was iced over, but in patterns
and ice spikes instead of icicles and sheets. On their way up the stairs, Mrs. Robins explained that
all the excess ice had appeared when she and Kyurem had entered the city. No one living in the
city had seen this before, but it was remembered in tales from over a century ago, or more.

In the northeastern corner of the city wall, Kyurem had set up a place where he was staying. It was
within sight of the hospital, although he seemed to be trusting the people here a lot to make sure
she was safe. The ice was thick here too, but not on the stone floor they walked on. Instead, he had
formed the ice into a throne, with an dome ceiling held up by twisting columns surrounding it. He
was in his human form, sitting on the throne and thinking.

"Dude, you didn't tell me you ruled over this place!" Hilda called over to him as she walked into
this throne room he had set up. "Just that it was your home city, more or less."

He looked up at them, then shrugged. "I can if I want. It's good to see you up and about again."

"I can't be doing much yet, but I feel much better now. So I've heard these people want to talk to
you, but you haven't been cooperating." She looked over at Mrs. Robins. "It took me a while to get
him talking in specifics, so I'm not surprised."

Bracing herself, Mrs. Robins came closer and gave Kyurem a curtsey. "Yes... we've watched over
her as you asked. But please, we want to know why you say you're angry with us. We'll do what we
can, but you haven't said anything else."

Kyurem gave the councilwoman a cold gaze.

"Well I do know something," Hilda said, recalling the meeting with the Kyurem that was supposed
to be in this time. "Lacunosa has had some arrangement with him for centuries where he promised
to end his winters if you kept your end of the bargain, but you haven't kept it for some time."

"Arrangement?" Mrs. Robins asked.

"Oh, I know that story!" Iris said. Hilda silently thanked her for that, as she didn't know anything
more than what she'd said. "It was Isabelle the gijinka, a brave girl who was sent into Giant Crater
as a sacrifice for Kyurem, but she came across him mourning the death of a Minccino. She helped
bury the Pokemon and consoled Kyurem by singing a song in honor of the Pokemon's soul. So
because of that, he promised that he would stop that winter, and any that came after it, if the people
of Lacunosa would honor the memory of his friend by singing that song at the Minccino's grave
site. And it helps if it's another gijinka doing that, to imitate the original story."

"That's exactly it," Kyurem said. "No one has sung there for many decades. I've been asleep all that
time, but I know this. So I'm not stopping this winter until this is done."

Unfortunately, Mrs. Robins seemed at a loss of what to do. "Erm, well... I remember my grandmother talking about that ceremony, but I've never heard of it being done. I think, there was one hard winter a long time ago, and it naturally faded away into spring, if a little late. I guess people thought it wasn't needed." Then she winced when Kyurem glowered at her. "I, uh, I don't even know what song you mean. Maybe someone else would know." She stepped back. "Um, if you'll excuse me, I can ask around about it."

"Sure, that'd be good," Hilda said.

"Then I'll go do that." She hurried off, heading back down to the main level of town.

Iris pouted. "She could've asked me. I've seen that song in one of Drayden's books, and he can sing it. Me and him could do the ceremony for them, cause we're both gijinkas."

"Both of you?" Hilda asked, although she already knew Iris had been one.

The brown-skinned girl smiled. "Yup! He's been watching over the rest of us, but since we're a lot alike, he adopted me. But don't be fooled by my size, cause I'm older than you."

"If they ask, then it's fine if you two do the ceremony," Kyurem said, leaning back into his throne. "Since she's gone, we ought to tell you more of what's really going on."

Hilda nodded. "Right. You're asking for them to do the ceremony more for the other Kyurem, right?"

"Yes," he said. "The sleep we left him under isn't going to hold, but hearing that song should calm him down and keep him where he is until my job is done."

Iris looked at each of them in turn. "What, there's two Kyurems around? I thought there would only ever be one."

"Yeah, because technically the one with us isn't supposed to be here," Hilda said. Then she explained about the situation.

March 22

In the end, the people of Lacunosa had to ask Drayden and Iris to carry out the ceremony, then teach a number of young people there how to do so for the following years. Hilda was curious to see it, but she didn't feel up to walking all that way and Kyurem didn't want her to leave the city without him. And since bringing the two of them back into close proximity would possibly inhibit trying to put the other Kyurem back asleep, she just went back up to his throne room on the wall to visit him at that time.

He was quiet most of the time, standing on the edge of the wall and watching the forest that was between Lacunosa and Giant Crater. Hilda looked over there too, able to see the movement of the snow cyclone. Once it disappeared, Kyurem dropped back down. "He's fully asleep again," he said. "That should keep him from stirring until autumn. He'd better not wake up to what I did."

"We're making sure of that," Hilda said.

"I hope so," he said, starting to pace around.
"Well if you don't remember starting to wake up now, you've already changed things." She turned around and leaned against the wall, watching him. He had his arms crossed over his chest and was tapping a finger there. "What's on your mind, Rei?" she asked.

"A lot," he replied. Then he looked back towards the crater. "I don't even need to be there, but I can hear them singing. It's one of the few things I can when I'm not there."

"Because it's about Mimi?" After wondering if she should, she asked, "What happened to her?"

His arms dropped to his sides as he looked down. "Instinct killed her. Hers, but it was my fault. In the winter, Minccinos will spend nights with others, keeping close to them to keep warm. I had done my best to restrain my power, but cold leaks out from my dragon body all the time. All it took was one night when I was too tired to pay attention and she tried to get close to me to keep warm. And because she trusted me, she wouldn't leave my side even though my power was slowly killing her."

"That's really sad," Hilda said. "But, it seems like you did what you could."

"It was inevitable that she'd go like that," Kyurem said. "I knew I should have scared her off to another of her kind. But, it was surprising how quickly I became attached to her. Mimi was never scared of me and thought I was her parent. And she loved me for no other reason than that. There hasn't been another Pokemon who's affected me in that way. She doesn't have the power most of my followers do, just her affection. She didn't get long to live either; she's been around now longer than she was back then."

She went over to be closer to him. "Does it still make you upset?" It affected him enough that he still kept that promise to end winter. The sky was already starting to clear over Lacunosa.

"Just thoughtful," he said, looking up to meet her eyes. "You affect me differently too."

Hilda raised her eyebrows. "Do I?"

"Hmph." He turned around and snapped his fingers. The ice throne and structure shattered around them. "Do you remember the first time we made contact?"

"Uh," it took a moment of thinking, but then she nodded. "Yeah, that dream. I remember you asking me what was more important, truth or ideals."

He turned back to her. "Do you remember what you answered?"

Hilda shrugged. "Not entirely. It's not easy to remember dreams."

"Then what would you answer now? Which is more important?"

What was he thinking? Hilda wondered about that, but she also remembered a bit of what she'd seen under fever. She had always wanted to keep her options open, but was it that important to settle on something? One side or the other? "I don't know. They're both good things to have, but truth can be harsh and short-sighted, and constantly keeping after ideals can mean that you miss reality right in front of you. You put too much importance on one and things get out of whack. You'd need the other then. Like Hilbert getting in trouble for ignoring the law when he was trying to find the truth about Meloetta and Keldeo, and the fact that somebody needs to smack N with the truth so he gets some common sense."

A smile crept onto Kyurem's face. "'Neither' is an acceptable answer, you know. Thinking too much in a binary sense also causes trouble." Then his expression turned more serious. "You're
definitely not going to die this year, not if I have anything to do with it. How long are we staying here?"

"We could leave in a couple of hours if you really don't want to stick around. I should talk with the doctor first, so unless she says otherwise, we can take the subway out of here."

He nodded then headed down the wall to get back down to the ground level. "Good. It's better if I stay away from my past self. And it's best if you stay away from Dragonspiral Tower."

"Because that's where I died?" she asked, following him.

"Yes."
March 23

In the central part of Unova, there was a large section of wilderness that had no human settlements in it. White Forest was recognized as a nature preserve, so buildings in this area were limited to small structures approved by the park. There were many trails, including one that wound all the way between Undella and Driftveil. In this area, one couldn't even capture Pokemon without a permit. Battles were okay in some areas, but in much of it, it was advised that Trainers should avoid triggering one.

It had actually been warm that day, so the ground was soggy and it was hard to find dry wood for a campfire. But they had agreed to meet up and rent a couple of cabins to exchange information and plan what to do next. Hilda was helping to prepare some vegetables for the foil packets they were going to cook their supper in, while Cheren worked on trying to brown the meat with a metal skillet. Hilbert had let his Larvesta sit on the burning log while he worked on getting the fire to stay. Inside the cabins, Bianca was making sure things there were in order. Kyurem and a few other of the Pokemon were keeping an eye out for trouble, although Keldeo was asleep on a bamboo mat near the firepit site. Fedora, having just evolved into a Serperior that afternoon, was on patrol too, although suspiciously in the sunniest areas.

Bianca came out of the cabin assigned to the guys. "Everything looks okay inside," she said. "They've still got everything closed up for winter, so it should be warm."

"Hopefully not too warm," Cheren said. "They were saying that the night's going to be above freezing in this area finally."

Hilda grinned and glanced over at Kyurem. "Hey, you gonna melt in this weather?"

"Hardly," he replied.

"But he might become grumpier than usual," Bianca said, smiling.

There was more general chatter, but once they had dinner roasting and the campsite settled, they got down to business. "Well first of all, I had some suspicions about Kyurem's intent in being here," Hilbert said, taking charge of things. "But since you helped with ending the enhanced winter and didn't hurt anyone in doing so, I'm sure that you're being honest with being here on a different purpose."

"I've hurt a few people," Kyurem said. "If I thought they were threats to her."

"That's fairly normal, I think," Hilbert said. He got up from where he'd been sitting on a log bench. "Let's review the basics first. First, we have Team Plasma calling for the abolition of Pokemon ownership to end cruelty to them. It's an extreme viewpoint, but their leader N believes in deeply. And all four of us have been involved with the Pokemon League to some degree, in taking their challenge and sometimes assisting them. Plus, I know that all of you know how much Pokemon can affect us positively, and how we can make life better for each other."

"It became a lot more clear when we got our own Pokemon and began traveling with them," Bianca said. Her starter Suzy, now a Samurott, touched her cheek with her horn. Bianca patted her in exchange.

"We can also affect them negatively, so it's our responsibility to avoid that," Cheren added.
Hilbert nodded, glancing at Madeline and Keldeo. "Right. Now, Team Plasma might have been a peaceable movement, perhaps even less extreme. But they've been formed to be that extreme by someone else, which brings us to our second point. Ghetsis holds immense influence over Team Plasma and N, even though he claims to only be the King's adviser. I believe that Ghetsis isn't sincere in following Plasma's ideals. Instead, he is directing them into being a more aggressive movement, and guiding N into a position of great power and influence."

"I think he's trying to get the power to influence all of Unova through Zekrom," Hilda said. "But since his purposes must not be pure enough for him to summon any of the dragons, he has to do it indirectly through N. If N gets Zekrom in a Pokeball, Ghetsis might be able to take Zekrom from him."

"Zekrom wouldn't obey him, but he may not have to actually use her to get people to respect him for it," Kyurem said.

"Do you think that he has no intention of stopping his use of Pokemon?" Cheren asked. "Because a lot of disputes these days can be settled through Pokemon battles, but if most people don't have Pokemon and are restricted from getting them, they couldn't do much against someone like him."

"I'm sure that could be a reason," Hilda said, thinking over what her father had said the other night.

"Given the level of control he has, I'm sure that's in his mind," Hilbert said. "And that need to control things has led to a number of horrible actions already. He partnered with Dr. Umber in order to create both N and I into gijinkas that would fit the images of legends among humans precisely. He also partnered with an assassin named Takumi; I've only gotten wind of this lead in the past few days, when Meloetta told me about him, and how he had dealings with both Umber and Ghetsis. And as we've been saying, he's warped what could be a good ideal from N into this whole mess lately with Pokemon theft and trying to weaken the Pokemon League."

"They've started that up again," Bianca said. "The professor's lab was nearly broken into the other night, and while I was able to confront the men who did so, they said that if I lost, they'd take my Pokemon from me, as well as others that were in the lab. There's been a lot of reports of crimes like that in the past week."

"They weren't doing that for a while," Hilbert said.

"Maybe it's the reopening of the Pokemon League?" Cheren suggested, shrugging. "They're going to have a big demonstration about that in Opelucid in three days. There's been rumors they might officially reveal N then."

"They're rumors, but poss...," Hilbert stopped mid-word and mid-step. Then he put his hand to his head. "Something's not right. It just happened, but I don't know what it is."

"Maybe it's something with N?" Bianca said, putting her arms around her knees.

"I've never felt anything like that before," he said.

Then Kyurem stood up, wary. "Someone teleported close to here. We could be in trouble."

'I've seen a time when Pokemon enslavement became worse after I lost. It had spread to humans enslaving other humans, with the most powerful picking out their successors, leaving everyone else to suffer in powerlessness and hopelessness. Even the most human-like of Pokemon were thought of as nothing more than tools and animals to be used, not respected.'
'I've seen a time when I was given authority over the whole world and my ideals had become reality. It was a world at peace and harmony, safe. But everything that I loved, from my friends to my homeland, was lost or destroyed in the process. As such, I could hardly enjoy that victory.'

'I've seen a time when there were no Pokemon in the world, only humans. And when there were no humans, only Pokemon. And there was one beautiful time when humans and Pokemon lived together in peace and equality, everyone understanding each other and having respect for their fellow living beings. But I was not there; the people all prayed for my return, both human and Pokemon. I do not know why they would do that.'

'I have also seen a time when a city was being consumed by fire and lightning and I was there with Hilbert, asking him what happened to Hilda. But there was no life in him and something about it drove me to such despair that I turned mad. I don't know why.'

'But I'm also seeing colored spirits flying through that air, reeling around like fish in safe waters. I can't touch them and they don't respond to my words. Have I already gone mad?'

N squinted; although he knew what he had written, it was a little hard to read. Part of it was the lighting, but he had enough candles lit that it hadn't been a problem so far. The letters seemed to waver, like they were made of a line of tiny ants crawling around in their shapes. Then there were the colored... things that occasionally flew in front of his face. Nothing much, just blobs of color that seemed to shift appearances in tune with his thoughts. A few even seemed to boil, like it was too hot.

It was too hot. Putting his hand to his forehead, he could feel little beads of sweat there. And his head hurt; his whole body hurt and he wasn't sure why. He wanted to get back on the cot and go back to sleep, but he couldn't. He still had to finish this. Which was... what? He looked at the notebook and after a moment, could tell that he had been writing about the visions he had experienced. They were swarming him the past few hours... days? He wasn't sure, as there wasn't anything in here to keep time. How long was he supposed to be at this meditation? How much longer did he have left?

Where were his Pokemon friends? He realized that he hadn't seen them in a long while. Were they worried about him, or did they think he had abandoned them? He didn't want for the latter to happen. But he didn't know about going to find them. Pierre certainly wouldn't like this room.

So hot. N took off his shirt and socks, hoping that might be enough to tolerate it. Then he knelt back down by the table and looked at his notebook. What was he doing? His mind and body were so fuzzy, and achy.

He felt a cool bump on his arm, accompanied by a little shock of static. The Dark Stone was there, quiet and probably observant as always. "What am I supposed to do to get a reaction from you?" he asked.

Then, something large moved out of the corner of his eye. N looked over and saw that one of the walls appeared to be shaking, like the surface of a pond being struck by rain. Something wasn't right. Looking the other way, he saw the tray of untouched food. But he didn't feel the slightest bit hungry; the thought of eating any of what was there made his stomach complain. He took a drink of water, then stood up. And blacked out.

When he next came aware, N faintly saw someone with him. "Be calm, and stay there," an unfamiliar voice said.

"What happened?" When he looked around, he saw dozens of those odd shapes flying around.
Mostly blue thread-like things.

"I think I scared you or something. I'm sorry. But I didn't expect to find myself. I probably should have expected it, although I don't remember this exactly. Maybe I ended up in the wrong time."

As his vision cleared, N looked up to see himself, kneeling at his side. His other self was fully dressed, though, wearing a black and white checkered jacket over a white shirt and black pants. Around his left wrist, there was a brass bracelet with three glass orbs hanging from it, one pale blue, one pale pink, and the last a pearled violet. He also had odd white and black tattoos on the backs of his hands going up his arms, but N didn't have a good view on the designs.

The other N looked down at him and smiled. "Do you feel better? Remember to smile."

"Not really," he said, trying to smile a little but feeling so worn out. "I don't think you scared me; I just blacked out."

"Good, I was worried about scaring you. You should appreciate your situation, you know. He looked over at the hibernating Zekrom, who was still floating there. "Appreciate it very much."

"I don't remember what exactly I was doing." He tried to sit up, but began to feel faint again.

"Stay down for now. Here." He got the glass of water and helped him to drink from it. "I know it's very tough where you are. There's so many that are depending on you to succeed, and you don't have many to depend on. You have yourself, and Ghetsis. Ghetsis knows best; he'll always pick the correct choice." The other N nodded, seeming a bit hazy for a brief moment. Then he snapped his fingers. "Oh right! I can help you out, since I'm here now. I know something that will make this pressure easier for you to handle. Because, I only found this out a couple months ago, and if I had known it then, I mean, now when you are, it would have been better. I know the secret to being happy."

So he could not be conflicted and guilty over what he knew was right, and instead glad for it?

"What is it?"

He put the glass back, then sat up straight. "It's to forget about the bad things. Lots of things can make you feel bad or not sure if you did what was right, all because of the corruption in the world which keeps everyone from living in a proper manner. And it makes me feel horrible, like walls that keep me from my goals. But, if you forget about that kind of thing, then you have no reason to feel bad. Everything becomes so clear then, with nothing to confuse me."

"That's all it takes." Because it did make sense. If he could put all the confusing stuff out of his mind, then he could be strong and happy doing what he knew was right. But how did he go about removing his own memories?

The other N tapped his head. "I don't know... if you really have the capacity at this point to do this fully. But just put the bad memories out of mind as best you can. Sometimes it puzzles me, like when I wonder if someone has gone or where they are. Then I remember and it's really bad for a while. But then I can lock them away again and everything's good. Are you better now?"

"I want to sleep, but I need to finish what I was doing." He sat back up, not feeling as poorly this time. "Once I remind myself of what that was..." He glanced at the notebook and saw flashes of his past visions. "What are you doing here?"

He tilted his head. "I'm looking for someone who escaped by traveling through time. It's very important that I find him. Kyurem's absence disrupts the time I live in, and the time in which he
"Fled to."

"Him? Kyurem's with Hilda." Wherever they were. Hopefully they had left Unova like he asked.

On hearing that, the other N's smile faltered. "Hilda? Oh yes, she would be alive now. But what is she doing with him?"

"I don't know." But the other's words triggered some ideas. He shouldn't get involved with Hilda anymore, but he still didn't want her to die. Maybe if he knew what exactly to avoid, she would live. "How did Hilda die? I know she easily could, but I don't want her to."

"No, see, that's exactly the kind of thing I should forget," he said, not smiling anymore. "It's not good to dwell on death; just forget about those who died and remember the good times when they were alive. You can be happy that way."

Forget about the dead, like Pricilla and Darcy? If he could get rid of those memories of seeing them dead, he would. "I realize that, but if I can stop someone from dying, then I should try. Right? But I don't know how she'll die. I've seen possibilities, but I don't know which one to focus on."

His other self looked down at the floor. "I was there. I didn't realize it until too late. But that doesn't mean I could do anything..." he shuddered.

"Even if I could just tell her something to avoid," N said. "She's working against me, I know, but even so, she's good to her Pokemon. I don't want a good person to get hurt. I'd rather no one get hurt."

Looking back at him, the other N was smiling again. "You don't want anyone to get hurt?"

He nodded. "Of course. You do too, I'm sure."

"Yes. Do no harm, avoid violence unless there is nothing else. We should stop anyone from being hurt." Then he leaned over and put his hands on N's shoulders. There was something intense about his gray eyes. "You don't want her to die?"

"That's right," he said, nodding.

The other N grinned wider and took hold of his neck, choking him. "Then let's kill you. Don't worry, it won't take long. Then you'll never be hurt by anything again, and no one will be hurt because of you. The worst is yet to come, but now you'll be happy because you won't have to live through it."

For a moment, N didn't know what to do. His other self seemed much stronger. As his lungs struggled to get air, he panicked and tried to fight back. And then he fell out of the choking grasp and through the floor. Everything was black, save for himself and the blue sparks of Zekrom's hibernating form. N took hold of the Dark Stone, not sure what was happening anymore but thankful to be breathing again.

He ended up in a muddy forest, where the snows were starting to melt off. Where was this? It didn't look like any part of Sarasota that he knew of. But it was still hot and when he tried to get up, he got light-headed and slipped back into the mud.

"Hey, it's N!" someone called, then came running over to him. N quickly recognized him as Hilbert. "You look awful... and your skin is burning up."

"Is it?" he asked, looking over at the Light Stone following Hilbert. Then he rubbed his neck. "I
don't know what's going on. I nearly got killed by myself, I think."

"Well it's not warm enough out here for you to be going around in just your pants," Hilbert said, helping him up. "Come on, I'll take you over to our cabins. We'll see about getting you transferred to a hospital."

Was being sick what was wrong with him? N nodded and let Hilbert lead him. He didn't feel like thinking at the moment.

From what they could tell, N probably had that flu virus that had been going around, and a bad case of it as well. But it wasn't clear how it had struck him so hard, or why he looked so thin. The emergency crew that had responded decided that he wasn't strong enough to be teleported through their system, so they called on a helicopter to transport him. Thankfully, Hilbert had managed to convince them to let him come visit N, but to restrict who else did.

"I hope he does talk to you," Bianca told him. "He probably could get most of Plasma to stop if he changed his mind."

Hilbert nodded. "But if he does, he will need extra protection. Well I was going to see about speaking to Takumi, in case he might know anything about Plasma and Ghetsis. But I'll have to keep tabs on N and speak to him once he's started recovering."

"You already found that guy?" Hilda asked.

"Yes, but he's on death row," he said. He bit his lip. "Arranging a meeting through prison officials could take some time, and I have to get it all done before his execution date comes up. Still, I think it's a good lead to follow. I was also wondering if I should do something at Plasma's demonstration."

"Don't worry about it," Hilda said. "I plan on doing something there."

"Violent?" Hilbert asked, concerned. She was still recovering from that illness herself, so she shouldn't be doing anything big.

She shook her head. "Nah. Confrontational maybe, but it won't come to blows then. I've gotten a really good idea just now that should weaken their position, no matter what they do."

"You mind telling us so that we know that it won't be something stupid?" Cheren asked, furrowing his brows.

"Sometimes stupid things work," she said with a grin.
"He should be well enough to have a visitor," the nurse said, checking a tablet computer. "Oh but, may I ask something of you?" When Hilbert nodded, she explained that, "He's not eating enough and now that he is alert more often than not, it's been difficult getting him to eat anything. And from the condition he was in, this may have been a problem for the past few weeks. If you get him to give up that refusal, that would be a big help in getting him back into good shape."

"I'll see what I can do," Hilbert said. "Has there been any other trouble? I mean, from Plasma?"

She shook her head. "No, it's been quiet around here. I haven't even seen any come in, well, in their weird uniforms anyhow."

"I see. Thanks." He waved to Loch to stop him from being distracted by an aquarium of small fish, then headed with five Pokemon over to the room N was staying in. But only the Alomomola was his.

This morning, a peculiar Sigilyph had appeared outside his tent. After some guessing and help from Madeline, Hilbert thought it was the same Sigilyph that had been with N when he had been in the hospital himself in Castelia. Not long after, a Vanilluxe, a Klang, and a Zoroark also came to his campsite. The last was able to confirm that they were friends of N and they wanted to see him. None of them were his own, but they were well-behaved and Hilbert thought it would be for the best to let them visit too.

N was sitting up in the hospital bed, which had been tilted up to support him. He had a dull and disinterested expression at first, looking out the windows. On a nearby table, there was a small vase of flowers, an untouched puzzle book, a water glass, and an unopened plastic cup (Hilbert guessed it was some kind of soft food they gave patients who couldn't eat much). On the side facing the door, the Dark Stone was floating silently, although she did come closer as the Light Stone approached. N didn't even acknowledge them coming in until the Vanilluxe dashed over to his side and startled him.

"Pierre?" N asked, looking down at him, then around at the others there. Hilbert smiled at him. "What are the four of you doing so far from the forest?"

The Vanilluxe gave a blubbering answer, sobbing on N's shoulder for one reason or another. The others chimed in too, although Hilbert only heard the Zoroark saying, "We had the chance, so we came."

Putting his arm around Pierre, N said, "I'm sorry. I had to do some private work and almost nobody was allowed to interrupt. I didn't want to, but it couldn't be avoided." Then he looked up to Hilbert. "Thanks for bringing them to me. It's been a long time since I've seen them. Or much of anyone, really."

"No problem," Hilbert said, moving a chair over so that he could sit there. "But what were you doing to take you away from them so long?"

"I can't really say." He looked downcast, but then tried to smile. "Don't worry about it."
Or did he not want to say? That annoyed Hilbert, but he couldn't let something like that disrupt this meeting. "If you say so. Who are they?"

"This is Pierre here," N said, still holding onto the Vanilluxe. "He's evolved since I saw him last. I'm sure you've met Rune before, or at least seen him. Oh, Tock there says he's about ready to evolve too. I guess you all must have been practicing to be better too. And this..." he looked over at the Zoroark. "Well, I haven't given him a nickname yet, but I've known him for years. Never needed one, I guess, because he was the only Zoroark that I knew of. Sorry, I hadn't thought much more on that."

The Zoroark patted N's hand with his paw and gave a quiet bark. "I could go with or without one. I'll still be your friend whatever you call me."

"Zoroarks are a rare sight to my knowledge," Hilbert said. "N, there's a lot we need to discuss. Are you feeling up to it?"

He bowed his head in thought, then shrugged. "I'm not doing anything else right now, just recovering. What is it?"

Picking up the plastic cup on the table, Hilbert glanced at the label. It was serving of highly enriched peanut butter, which he'd heard was given to those who suffered from malnutrition in one way or another. He tried to give it to N. "Well first of all, the nurse says you aren't eating enough. You shouldn't be doing that."

"I don't feel like eating." The Sigilyph said something to that, which made N say, "Maybe it is illogical, but I just..."

"You aren't going to be strong if your body is weak," the Zoroark said.

Hilbert nodded. "He's right about that."

"Maybe, but..." he stopped speaking for a moment, then looked at Hilbert. "You understand them now?"

"Not all Pokemon," Hilbert said. "But I have gotten to where I understand a few of them. He's the only one here that I can, although I can almost get my Litwick's words right."

"That's good."

Hilbert leaned over, putting the cup of peanut butter in N's hand. "But that's besides the point. You want to change things in the world, and impress Zekrom enough that she agrees to help you out. You can do a lot with words and ideas, but you need action too. If you don't take care of your body, then you're not going to be capable of following your dreams. Also, we'll both need to climb up to the top of Dragonspiral Tower sometime soon. As you are now, you're not going to make it far in, not because you're unworthy, but because you're physically incapable of it."

Looking down at the cup, N took it and turned it over. "I hadn't thought about it in that way."

"You should keep it in mind now," Hilbert said.

N seemed to accept that, as he detached the little plastic spoon on the cup and opened it up. "I guess you're right about that. These people are healers, so we can trust them."

"Right." Thinking on trust, he added, "Team Plasma is out in Opelucid today talking to people. Do you know what it's about?"
"It's probably the usual event of teaching people what could and should be," N said. "I hadn't known it'd be today. The Sages have been handling things while I've been traveling."

"Maybe you should be there some time? Anyhow, Hilda and Kyurem are there too." It worried him, both in what they could do to her and what she could end up doing to them. Hopefully it wouldn't end up as a riot.

"What are they doing there?" N asked, seeming concerned too.

"I don't entirely know," Hilbert said, knowing some of it but not wanting to reveal it to N. He might take things the wrong way. "She says they're not going to hurt anybody there. We'll just have to see what she's done later."

Opelucid streets

As this was one of the few demonstrations that had been announced, there was a large turn-out. The Team Plasma members were obvious, well over a hundred of them. So were members of the police force, but according to a news report this morning, they were being unsuccessful in arresting those Plasma members that were taking the Pokemon of others. Due to their uniforms and resistance to giving names, it was difficult to identify the thieves personally unless they were caught in the act. And the police couldn't go arresting every single member of Team Plasma. The atmosphere was tense, but so far nothing bad had happened.

They had set up a temporary stage in one of the open areas of Opelucid, in a sunny spot that could be seen easily from three different streets. Even if they only meant to use it for a few hours, they had made it grand, with large black and silver curtains for a backdrop, big tapestries of their insignia, a pair of flags at both ends of the stage, and a quality sound system. At the moment, Ghetsis was on-stage with the six other Sages, giving one of his famous speeches.

And Hilda was with her Pokemon, climbing up the stairs behind the stage. The curtains were closed, so as long as she stayed quiet, they shouldn't notice her until too late. They certainly hadn't noticed when she battled the one knight left to watch this area so that he backed off. "Now we just have to wait for the right moment," she told them in a hushed voice. "Keep it down."

Frank, Fedora, and Tarzan nodded, while Mimi kept close to Hilda's feet. Olette was still working on climbing the stairs without making much noise, as her large feet and steel parts didn't make that easy. When the Exadrill got up with them, the stage structure sagged under her weight. It didn't seem to be in threat of collapse, as long as she didn't do anything active up here.

For a while, Ghetsis went on in his usual fashion: current use of Pokemon was abuse, the time when it would all change was soon, do the right thing, blah de blah blah. But then he got on an interesting line right as Hilda was thinking of just going on even if it wasn't optimal, just to get him before he stopped. Ghetsis spoke about N more than just a mention.

"I'm sure many of you have been wondering about our King, especially in light of the revelation of the White King," he said. "Our King is a very compassionate and wise young man. All of us in Team Plasma as you see today have been moved greatly by his story and philosophy. And in a month's time, you will have proof of this when he calls on Zekrom at the top of Dragonspiral Tower."

"I thought that was still frozen, but hey, maybe they figured out something," Hilda murmured. Then she nodded and waved to her team. "Okay, let's go."
Tarzan went up to the part between two curtains and pulled one aside, letting the rest of them walk onto the visible part of the stage. They came up right behind the other six Sages, a couple of whom glanced back to see why the curtain had moved. In front of them, Ghetsis was looking at the audience in his address, not paying attention. As for the audience, they were out of Hilda's sight, but they had noticed the curtains and were momentarily distracted by it.

Seeing her father on the left, Hilda turned to the three robed men on the right. "Hey, may I borrow a microphone off one of you?" The question didn't get broadcast.

One of them paused, but another was caught enough off-guard by her appearance to comply with her request, taking a clip microphone off his collar. "It's not on right now," he said.

"Zinzolin!" one of them hissed.

But she already had it. The switch was obvious, but she flicked it on, then off to check it before clipping it onto her pink windbreaker. "It's all right, thanks." She flashed him a smile then took a few steps closer to Ghetsis. As she and her Pokemon started creeping into view, some in the audience chuckled.

The green-haired man still hadn't noticed. "His devotion is quite serious, I assure you. When you meet him, you will agree that he is a true hero meant to lead us into a glorious era of peace and happiness. For now..."

Flipping the microphone on, Hilda cheerily said, "For now, he's not here. Don't worry, you all will see things clearly soon enough."

Ghetsis jumped around, causing the audience to laugh at his surprise. For a moment, he glared hatefully at her for interrupted him. Then Fedora slithered up beside her, rearing up and glaring back defensively. Although even he must have realized the Serperior was unlikely to attack right then and there, Ghetsis' mask of calm control soon slipped back on. He raised an eyebrow at her.

Grinning, Hilda made a silly wave. "That was what you were gonna say, right? Except in bigger words. Unless you prove me wrong in that?"

"Close enough," Ghetsis said, stepping aside so that he could look at her and still be partially facing the audience. She complied by coming forward a few steps, Fedora keeping close to her. "But must you be so rude as to interrupt an important life-changing speech without invitation?"

She stretched her arms back. "Well I would've come even if you invited me." A few members of the audience cheered that, or laughed. "And don't mind my Pokemon. I said they could come or stay behind, whatever they wanted, and they chose to come with me up here. They should behave themselves."

Fedora tilted his hat forward, as if giving a silent warning not to mess with her. Tarzan and Olette both took up positions near the other six Sages to look important (although the Scraggy was the odd one out, looking goofy in holding his skin up). In the meantime, Frank had gone to keep an eye on Mimi, who had gotten fascinated by a dangling curtain tassel.

"You don't have your dragon with you as usual," Ghetsis pointed out, seemingly stalling while he put together his thoughts on this disruption.

"Oh, he's here too," Hilda said, pointing upwards and to the left of the stage. Kyurem was perched on top of a three story building nearby, watching over the event. "But this stage can just barely handle Olette as it is. This set-up is so human-centric; most events would plan for having a group
of Pokemon on stage as well."

"What are you doing here?" he asked, trying to step away from the Pokemon issue.

She put her hands on her hips. "I've been meaning to talk to you for a while, and this seems as good an opportunity as any. And it's even better that it's in public. I've got nothing to hide; how about you? And you all, you want to hear this?" She looked over at the audience.

The clusters of Plasma members seemed uncertain, but the other parts of the audience agreed by clapping and whistling. Maybe they thought it would be interesting to see a Pokemon Trainer interrogate this public face of Plasma. Or maybe they recognized that this could be entertaining due to the dramatic flair that both he and her had shown in the past. Whatever the reason, their approval would make it hard for Ghetsis to decline this unexpected discussion.

Giving a confident smile, Ghetsis made a bow. "If that's what you wish, although you may find yourself out-classed."

"That's what you think," Hilda replied in perfect confidence as well.

Mistralton hospital

Hilbert had said that there was a lot to talk about, but Pierre had taken several minutes to calm down. "I thought you were gone forever into the abyss, so I thought I had to get strong to rescue you or the demons would finally kill me," the Vanilluxe said. "I did my best for my angel, but then I failed. I'm sorry. Don't leave me again. They were all kind, too kind, but they are ignored by the darkness beyond."

"You can stay in the hospital with me," N said. "I'll have to convince them, but I'll make sure of it."

"I'm pretty sure they'll let at least one of them stay with you if you ask," Hilbert said.

"Good." He patted the Vanilluxe's larger head. "And I don't blame you for what happened in Skyla's Gym. That was my fault as much as yours for rushing it."

"We shouldn't have trouble now," Tock said, turning from his examination of the machines keeping an eye on N. "The energy flow is stronger."

"That's good." Then N sighed. "But we can't stay together forever. I want people and Pokemon to be safe and happy, but the best way to stop the worst abuses is to separate both sides. There is too much pain to let the current system continue."

"But I need to stay with you," Pierre said, shuddering in his lap.

"He is more sane in your presence," Rune said, now perched on the bar at the end of the bed.

"About your plans," Hilbert said, nudging him to keep eating the peanut butter. "There's something that could change that. Is there anything you can do that humans normally shouldn't? Aside from understanding Pokemon?"

"I'm not sure," N said, scooping out some more of the food. When he had to take care of an upset Pokemon, that was more on his mind than eating. And as far as he knew, his language gifts were the most remarkable thing about him.

The Zoroark looked over at Hilbert. "He gets affected by Sing, and I saw him get poisoned once
when trying to take care of a Whirlipede. And he can affect others by singing the same song used in Sing."

He nodded. "That's close, but it'd be hard to work with in here."

"He's not a human," Pierre insisted. "He's an angel. He even has a divine glow, sometimes."

"I did end up glowing that one time when the lights in the hall all blew out," N said.

"How did that happen?" Hilbert asked.

N thought over it, then shrugged. "I'm not sure. It just happened; I was feeling stressed out but trying to keep cool while talking to others in Team Plasma. And then all the light bulbs exploded for no reason and I was glowing."

His brother took a deep breath, sitting back to think. "Well I can't explain the light bulbs. But I can teach you how to use that glow affect whenever you want."

"How, can you do it?" N asked.

He shook his head. "No but... I can guess how you do it. Did you have a sense of power building? And where was it?"

Nodding, N put his hand to his chest. "In here. It made me feel a little sick."

"I hope it doesn't now," He leaned forward. "Okay, focus your mind on that light you had. How intense it was, the feel of it, the look of it. And bring that sense of power back to your chest."

"I'm not sure how to bring that up."

"Just try it," Tock said. "We've never seen a human glow before. Tynamos and Joltiks, yes, even one of our kin once, but not humans."

N closed his eyes and did as Hilbert said. It had been like the glow of the moon, cool but bright. Once he thought to bring that power of moonlight into himself, it happened. It didn't even make him feel disoriented this time. Instead, it was just as natural as listening to Pokemon.

"Now will the power to manifest just as it did before," Hilbert said.

"Okay," N said, opening his eyes to a bright flash of white light. It made him wince, but then he was able to see that the glow had indeed returned to him. "That was a lot easier than last time."

"Ooo, that was so bright," Pierre said, squinting.

The others in the room were rubbing their eyes too. "That's exactly it!" Tock said. "It's Flash."

"Flash?" N asked, puzzled. "But that's something only Pokemon can do... but I guess it happens to me somehow." He looked over his hand again, trying to see if there was some trick to it that he didn't know.

"That's right," Hilbert said, holding his hand up and waving it once. There was a momentary appearance of an icy mist in the room, but it cleared up quickly, leaving only N's glow. "Okay, so now that my eyes don't hurt..."

The Zoroark shook his head. "Thanks for that."
N gaped at Hilbert for a moment. "That, that was like Haze."

"Yeah, because Flash reduces accuracy and Haze counters that effect," Hilbert said.

No, this couldn't be right. It had to be impossible. "What's going on? We, we shouldn't be capable of this. We're just humans, relying on our wit, memory, and will to survive in a world of powerful beings."

"Calm down, it's all right," Hilbert said, taking his hand. "We're not entirely human. We're gijinkas, part human and part Pokemon. I asked the hospital to run blood tests to prove it. Here." He took a file out of his travel bag and opened it to show him.

Not all of it meant much to N, but the proof was there. The tests had come out positive for showing Pokemon genes in his own. In a line marked 'Gene identification', it stated 'Uncertain- typing Normal'. Hilbert had his own test results as well, which were similar save for the typing; it said that he was a Dark type.

That... was an immense relief. N felt like truly smiling for the first time in weeks. "That's great. It can be as I hoped for."

Hilbert looked at him oddly, maybe surprised. "Really? Why?"

"Because it means that I am qualified to be an ambassador between humans and Pokemon," he explained. "The separation must be absolute for it to work, and for both sides to adjust properly. But if I belong to both sides, I can go between both sides freely." And spend more time with Pokemon, as he wanted.

Hilbert bit his lip. "But if people like us exist, doesn't that mean that people and humans are connected already? Your separation can't be absolute because of us. And since Pokemon can be reborn as humans, and possibly the other way around, then it's a sign that we're meant to be together, working to help each other out. Humans have the capacity to think deeply, but they don't have much power beyond that. Pokemon do have great power, but they don't have the minds to plan for beyond immediate needs and wants, or to consider complex issues. So it seems that the world would work best if humans and Pokemon to do as they do best, but work together in that. Like now, but with more respect and awareness to the needs and wishes of Pokemon."

N shook his head. "No, then people will take it as a sign to keep things as they are instead of improving them. The position of Pokemon in the world has degraded. Even on the level of the legendary Pokemon; fewer people honor and respect them these days. And most humans have seen no interest in changing that as they think that the current situation benefits them most. Maybe in the future we can all work together, but for now, the separation is necessary to wake humans up to their thoughtlessness and carelessness."

"It's going to cause a lot of problems and chaos to go that far," Hilbert said. "And both humans and Pokemon are going to be upset about it. I mean, these ones have come to see you because you were separated from them and they didn't know what happened to you."

"And just when we wanted to see what you were like," Tock said, slowing down the spinning of his gears briefly.

"Pricilla followed you for months rather than be without you," Rune said. "Other Pokemon may do the same to remain with their human friends."

That mixed-up feeling of not being sure what was good or bad returned, plus a pang at recalling
Pricilla. Why should that be? He'd spent nearly a month trying to clear his heart of that and it still wasn't gone. N closed his eyes, thinking that if he could put all that out of his mind, then he wouldn't feel bad about it. But, it just wouldn't go away. And his brother and friends were still here. It wasn't right to ignore them, he was fairly certain.

"Hilbert," N said, looking over at him. "If I tell you something here, will you promise not to tell anyone else? Anyone at all?"

He nodded, seemingly without a thought otherwise. "Of course. I promise I won't speak of it."

A little shiver ran through him. Could he talk about this? He shouldn't. And yet, he really wanted to. "Sometimes, I don't want to be in this position."
March 26

Opelucid streets

So far, the event had been predictable, if bigger than others that Plasma had held. Ghetsis had only added a few new details in the strategy he had been using for the past few months. And the others were there to back up his points and put pressure on people individually to join them or 'do the right thing'. Even the debates had been similar due to Ghetsis' ability to drown out vital points his opponents made. After so much of it, the speeches of Team Plasma were starting to lose their novelty. Now their best and most intimidating speaker was squaring off against a fifteen-year-old girl and all groups in the audience were eager to see what would spark between them.

"I heard some interesting stuff around Black City," Hilda started off with. "They were saying that this big plan of yours is going to do a lot of economic damage to the region. And that makes sense to me, cause just about everybody I know is in a job that involves or even depends on Pokemon. It seems like if you force humans and Pokemon to separate, then most everybody will have trouble getting food and things, as well as keeping their houses. If you want to suggest such a radical change, shouldn't you be starting to offer work that doesn't involve Pokemon, like, now? Be responsible and show everybody the alternatives before forcing us all to find them."

"Such things will be available; you simply have to take the Pokemon out of the work and get it done yourself," Ghetsis replied.

She tilted her head. "That still don't work out, cause my neighbor studies Pokemon for a living, and one of my friends has a job helping her do that. And my Mom sells specialty Pokemon accessories and gear online, which will totally become worthless if nobody can have Pokemon to give that stuff to. And me and another friend earn money through League association. You can't take the connections to Pokemon out of those, save for maybe selling things. And many people here are probably the same way, right everybody?"

She got several loud agreements from the audience.

"You're not thinking enough about this," Ghetsis said. "But you are only a teenager. We can't expect you to know anything about the economy and government systems."

Grinning, Hilda said, "Yeah, that's right. Your King's a teenager too, right? Well, barely, since he'll be turning twenty in about a month. But he does have all of you to handle the big stuff. I'll have to talk with him about the jobs next time I see him. If he is going to awaken Zekrom in a month, that's much too soon. I'd guess we'd need five years or something to adjust, at least. He should listen."

"Are you sure about that?" Ghetsis asked, smiling himself.

"Pretty sure," she said. "Or I can show him. He's a pretty cool guy, actually; I like him." Then she crossed her arms over her chest. "I don't like you, though." Many people laughed at that.

"That's hardly the point now, is it?" He pointed at her. "Our King has spent much of his life studying up on how to make his ideals turn into reality. His education has been a spectacular asset when combined with his native intuition. Your education could have only been general, so you
would know much less than him. What would you have that he doesn't?"

"Common sense?" Hilda asked sweetly, which the audience (at least the non-Plasma members) approved of. "And real world experience, that too. By the way, where is your King?"

"He's not here right now; he's off doing important things for us all, refining his plans." He didn't seem too worried about that.

But he should be, Hilda thought, putting her hands down to her sides. "Yes, but where is he?"

Ghetsis raised an eyebrow. "I'm not at liberty to reveal that. Why do you want to know?"

She leaned towards him. "Do you know where your King is?"

At that, Ghetsis seemed to pick up that she had to know something. Although the audience wouldn't see well, there was a shifting under his large cloak, and a search of her expression to find some clue on what to respond with. Fedora had come down from his intimidation stance, but his tongue flicked out and he came slightly in front of Hilda, just in case this would cause trouble. Over to the side, the other Sages glanced at each other, some whispering. Even the audience had quieted down.

"Right now?" Hilda added. "Because I know exactly where he is. Right now."

"Do you?" Ghetsis asked, a slightly dangerous tone in his voice. He was trying to warn her not to mess with him.

But that was what she had come here to do, when he couldn't react aggressively due to the presence of the audience. "Yes. Me, Hilbert, and some of our friends were out camping in White Forest when we came across him, delirious and in really bad shape. They didn't even want to teleport him because he was so weak from that flu that's been going around this year."

This sent shock waves through the Plasma members there. There were gasps of disbelief and worried whispers in their groups, possibly even a few crying already. As for Ghetsis, he froze, caught in a situation he didn't have a smooth answer for.

Hilda wanted to keep the momentum in her favor before he could formulate a response. "He's in the hospital. I called them up this morning and they said he's recovering, but it could be a while before he gets back in good shape. Hilbert's gone to visit him, you know, because they're brothers. He said he had a lot he wanted to talk with him about. And that's why it's just me and my Pokemon here today."

"Hold on," Ghetsis said, taking his hand out of his cloak to turn off the microphone for a moment. "Gorm, Ryuko, would you two go look into this? Ask him if he needs anything from us now."

"Sure," one of the two said. "Which hospital is it?"

"Mistralton," Hilda mouthed. "Mistralton? Okay." The two of them walked behind the curtain, talking quietly to each other.

Ghetsis then turned the microphone back on. "Thank you for informing us of this..."

"No problem!" Hilda said quickly. "We figured since none of you had been seen there, you didn't know about it." She thought about adding a jab about them being irresponsible, but she didn't really need to. After all, anyone who was paying attention would realize that something wasn't
right with this picture.

That was one of the big points she had come here to make, to unsettle them. But that meant that Ghetsis now had a chance to lead. "We have been careful in such things, so ignorance does not need to be your first assumption. Besides, you're working with the White King, so your intentions are suspect. You may try to undermine us, but Team Plasma is strong enough to endure any weak indirect attack like that. We will make justice prevail." This got cheers from the Plasma members, although maybe not as enthusiastic as it might have been earlier.

"Picking a side makes intentions suspect? Does that work both ways?" Hilda nodded to the approval she got from others in the audience. "I'm working with the White King because he needs the help. He's going after what he believes is right, same as your King, only Hilbert doesn't have as much to work with, just a famous reputation that he's trying to move away from."

"Your intentions are especially suspect, given that you have been chosen by Kyurem," Ghetsis said in a strong voice. "That would mean you are one who believes in neither truth nor ideals, and are one who is most likely to be a destructive force in the world."

There was the safe answer to that... or the fun answer. "Well maybe I just want to watch the world burn," she replied in an exaggerated fashion. 'I mean, who doesn't?' Then she gave an evil-ish laugh, getting much of the audience to break into laughter too, as she was purposely making even her gestures over the top for that.

Ghetsis glowered at her. "Can we be serious about this?"

"Man, wanting to be serious is asking a lot out of me," Hilda said, shaking her head. "But if that's what you want... gosh, such a stick in the mud. Yeah, I don't think either of them are more important than the other. Ideals without truth, or truth without ideals... both of those states are dangerous. The balance is more important; that's what makes the world work. Your group is running on shaky grounds, openly ignoring some very practical truths. So no, I don't think that you're as strong as you say you are, because unless you accept those truths and do something about them, your world of ideals is going to collapse into utter destruction, possibly even the ruin of Unova."

Mentally, she made a note to thank Kyurem later for talking to her about that issue earlier. Much of what she said about it was his words, or adapted from them; she wouldn't have really known what to say herself. But during that pause, she noticed that Mimi had left the curtain tassel alone in favor of eying Ghetsis' cloak. She had a stance that suggested she'd try grabbing it. Looking back to meet Ghetsis' eyes, she wondered if she should call the Minccino over before she caused trouble. But this could be interesting, or even useful. Besides, Frank was still watching over her; the Gothorita should be able to get Mimi out of the way if something happened.

"It is a matter of balance, isn't it?" Ghetsis said, getting on a roll. "Did you ever consider that the world is currently imbalanced in favor of ugly truths used to keep an unethical system working? It is unbalanced, in the favor of humans. However, this ends up making us weaker overall, too dependent on the Pokemon that serve us. We are concerned about balance, in the balance of power between humans and Pokemon. Most people are able to ignore the signs that Pokemon give us about the lack of care and respect given, but we could not, and so..."

At that point, he turned while Mimi pounced on the cloak. The combination of forces was enough to rip it off the shoulder piece, making it fall on top of her. Hilda immediately went over to take the cloak off Mimi and pick her up. "Sorry about that," she said as she stepped back. "She's a playful little girl; got one of my skirts the other day. You really should be more careful." She tapped the Minccino's forehead.
"Mino," Mimi said, tense as if she hadn't expected the cloak to come off like that. She looked over at Ghetsis right before he got control on his anger over that interruption. That spooked her further, causing her to bury her head on Hilda's chest and shiver.

"We can't blame her for doing what comes naturally," Ghetsis said, his composure cool again. "Although you should be able to keep their behaviors in check better."

She could stay up there and keep debating with him. But, actions spoke louder than words; Hilda unclipped the microphone, but didn't turn it off. "Listen, I'd love to stay and keep talking, but she's scared now and I don't want to keep her up here like this. Keep things civil, all right?" She tossed the microphone at Ghetsis. "Sorry about ruining your awesome cloak. Come on, crew, let's get somewhere quieter." There was some cheer and applause for her exit, but she just turned and headed back through the curtains, away from the staging area.

Not long after, Kyurem met them in his human form, on a street that was past all the action. With him was a Druddigon with a small bag on its shoulder. "Is she all right?" he asked.

"Yeah, he just scared her," Hilda said, still petting Mimi. "Who's your friend here?"

"She belongs to Iris, and was sent to me with a message." He nodded to the other Dragon, who brought a paper out of her bag.

"Thaks," she said, taking the paper with one hand while still trying to support the Minccino with the other. It was a short message, but made her grin. "Hey, she and Drayden are inviting us over to the Gym for dinner. Well who am I to deny free food? Sure, can you let them know we'll be there? I can't write at the moment."

The Druddigon nodded, then flew back off to find her Trainer.

Mistralton hospital

It was odd to hear N speak of his doubts. He was normally so stubborn to work his ideas around what he saw that getting him to admit that he might be wrong was a big change. But, Hilbert knew it had to be a good change. This was N starting to open up to other ideas and thus into leading Team Plasma in a different direction. That is, if he did have as much influence over them as he thought.

The Vanilluxe had even quieted down, watching N as he kept speaking. "This has been the meaning of my whole life so far, setting things right for the sake of Pokemon, so that the world could be better and fairer. I thought that was the secret reason behind everything: why I could understand Pokemon when most could not, why I ended up abandoned in the forest to be adopted by Pokemon, why I met the people I did. Everything was connected and it all made sense. It was something I could handle. It was what I was meant to do.

"But then sometime when I was out traveling around... I don't know when exactly, as I may have just realized it little by little... but what had seemed so simple and manageable became complicated and far bigger than I realized. I've met people who are so tied up in this system that they won't know what to do with themselves when it's gone. Some of them are ignorant and careless as I thought, but some of them seem like genuinely good people that I really don't want to hurt, like you. Then I get constant reminders about how Pokemon suffer and how much they need this to happen, and I don't want to hurt them either through inaction. Plus all the people who've put all their faith and trust in me to help change the world, I can't let them down and I have to stay strong for them even if I don't feel strong. When I think about all this and get to the point where even I'm
not sure what's right or wrong anymore, I just want to run away from all this and go back to a simpler life where all that mattered was the present day and company."

"Life is rarely easy," Hilbert said, thinking about how the both of them had been sheltered from troubles for much of their lives. There was a time or two where he wanted to give up, but so far he had kept going. Then he came to wonder, why now? Kyurem had broken his 'shelter' so he could prove his worth to Reshiram, but why had Ghetsis let N out of his at this time, before he had to perform one of the biggest parts of their plan, summoning Zekrom. N looked crushed by the pressure now.

But then, maybe that was the point: throw N out into the world alone when he wasn't prepared to be independent, so that he would willingly return to the life of a sheltered puppet and never look back.

"Don't you think it would be nice, though?" N asked. "We could take our Pokemon friends and leave Unova. We'll find somewhere where humans aren't around; I'm sure there's still wild places left in the world. Living off the land isn't that bad, especially if you're careful and listen to what local Pokemon have to say. Then we'd all be happy, not under the pressure of expectations from other people."

"That could be nice," he admitted. "But what about Hilda? And those in Team Plasma following you."

"I think I'd be all right with Hilda and her Pokemon coming too, just so long as we didn't have to go against her any more," N said. "If we weren't dealing with all this, I can see how she's a good person. Her Pokemon do love her. But when I have to deal with this being a king and hero, and her being with Kyurem, I get all confused again. There's a lot of stuff that's confusing, like how the Pokecenters take care of Pokemon, but because of their existence the Pokemon League can exist, so you can't tell if they're good or bad... but I'd want to get away from all that. We wouldn't bother anyone else as long as they don't bother us and it would be good." Then he sighed. "But running away wouldn't change the problems and that's what keeps me from doing it."

"If this is causing you that much confusion, maybe there is something else wrong with what's going on," Hilbert said. He doubted that he could change N's mind that fast, but getting him to start thinking independently was important. "You should consider what causes that conflict in you; that should tell you where the problems lie."

"And pay attention to all that goes on around you," the Zoroark added.

"I try," N said, his head bowed. But then a knock on the door caused them all to look to the entrance. There were two men there, dressed in the robes of Plasma's Sages. But neither was one that Hilbert recognized.

"My lord, we're sorry that it's taken us this long to come see you," one of them said, coming in. "We weren't aware that you had left the castle."

"We weren't aware that you had left the castle."

"It's all right," N said, his attitude shifting to something more guarded. "I'm not entirely sure how I left myself. Hilbert, would you mind leaving us for the time being? We can talk more later, if you want."

"Sure thing," he said, although he was a little uneasy to leave him with these men. At least it wasn't Ghetsis; these might be ones who authentically cared about N. "Take care of yourself. Loch, let's go."
His Alomomola whistled and swam through the air to follow him. Hilbert had done what he could; bringing N's Pokemon here might even help. Besides, there was still time before the hospital would release him. This opportunity wasn't lost yet.

Someone else knew of his doubts and foolish wishes. It had made N feel nervous about someone finding out before, but now that he had told Hilbert, he felt calmer and a little more confident. In having done that, he had affirmed how selfish it was and was more certain that it was his responsibility to see to the happiness of many rather than just one. This time might be tough, and if his other self was right it would get tougher, but too much time had been lost already. He could put aside his own desires, his own wishes, and maybe even his own self until the separation of peace was firmly in place in Unova. At that point, he could then figure out how to be happy himself in the new world order.

"How are you doing, N?" Ryuko asked.

"I'm better than I was before," N replied. "I still need some time to get my health back, and sort out things. My friends here came to visit me; Pierre's going to stay with me, but would you see the rest back to the castle safely?"

"Of course," he said.

"Is there anything you need us to do to help you?" Gorm asked.

There wasn't much he could do himself until he was released from the hospital. But, there were some things, mostly planning. "When is the Pokemon League reopening? And have you made any progress in determining when I can get into Dragonspiral Tower?"

"The League will be back in less than a week," Gorm said. "On the first of April. As for the Tower, the ice does show some signs of thinning, but it will be late April at the very least before it clears up enough to enter. Possibly not even by May."

He nodded. "I will need to make sure these Pokemon are ready, but that should be suitable. Also, I had a notebook in the room I was staying in. Would you get that to me? I'm not ready to make a statement on things yet, but that will help. Some things have changed."

"Like what?" Ryuko asked.

He felt they had the right to know. N handed the blood test results to them. "I'm not entirely human."

Opelucid Gym

"This Gym is seriously fun," Hilda said as she and Kyurem followed Iris through the pathway that led to the Gym Leader's platform. This building was huge, but in depth and height more than width. There were a few battle platforms around it, but much of the space was taken by a pair of dragon sculptures that functioned as walkways between the platforms. Not only that, but the sculptures had mechanisms that changed their shape and direction. To get around, one had to ascend, descend, and cross along the dragons' backs.

"Well we're taking the easy path through because the Gym's not active," Iris said, smiling. "But you should come in some time when we're open and see how they really move. We've even got different systems so that it's not always the same puzzle."
"That does make sense, so that people that come in have to figure things out for themselves." They got up to the Leader's platform, but entered a hidden door against the wall to get into the area where the Gym's Pokemon stayed.

The room was just as big as the room before it, but it had been designed with a rocky mountainside in mind. There were clusters of large rocks, some which appeared to be fabricated to certain shapes but others which were natural; they seemed to be perching or hiding points, especially for the dragons capable of flight. In one corner, there was a rock pool with short waterfall that kept the water in motion. There were a couple of Haxorus bathing over there, but they paused to see who was coming down the stairs.

Drayden was in another part of the room, working on getting the Gym Pokemon fed. Apparently, not all of the Dragons ate every day, so a schedule was kept to know which one would need food each day. It also wasn't unusual for Drayden and Iris to invite other Trainers with non-Dragon Pokemon over, so they did keep things on hand for other types. They ate over in one corner of the room that was covered by a rock overhand, but was otherwise designed and furnished like a normal kitchen, dining, and work area.

"Thank you for taking a stand against Team Plasma, at their own event even," Drayden said as the meal was coming to an end. "I don't know if you saw, but I did debate with him a while later in the afternoon. He was prepared for me, but he wasn't prepared for you, which made him easier to deal with."

"Yeah, you completely blew a hole in his plans by knowing N and being able to talk about that openly," Iris said. "We can't really do that because we're supposed to be keeping them from knowing how much we do know."

"Well I did what I could," Hilda said, grinning. "It was lots of fun. I wasn't sure how effective I was going to be, since I haven't done much for public speaking aside from battle dramatics."

Drayden nodded. "Simply taking a stand can be enough at times; this will get people talking, encourage them more to be active themselves. And it follows with your plan to stay in the public eye. Speaking of that, a lot of people are still talking about how you helped get Kyurem to let up on winter. I want to ask: is the other Kyurem going to cause other problems in the future? Or do you have things settled?" He looked mostly at Kyurem for that.

"He should remain asleep until at least fall, but I don't have control over him," he said. "Dragonspiral Tower froze over because there were two of us, altering the balance of power in the region. However, with him asleep again, it should thaw out in time." Kyurem paused, leaning back in his chair thinking. "And by fall, I should be gone. I believe that my duty here is only required until summer. Things may still change, but the balance of power should be in its natural state after that, if we are successful."

Iris put her fork down and asked, "So is he going to awake again later this year?"

Kyurem shrugged. "Maybe. Maybe not. That would be when I awoke, but I believe this time has already altered enough to make it uncertain. If he does, then I cannot guarantee that Hilda will have influence over him. That would depend on several factors."

"As long as we know that he could awaken without knowledge of this, we can have access to Giant Crater blocked off by the League," Drayden said. "It won't stop everyone, but there are other precautions we can take as well."

"You can send Hilbert in there if he has Reshiram awake," Hilda said. "That Kyurem would listen
to them, right?"

Kyurem nodded. "That would be wise."

"Good. Of course, this is assuming we can handle this Plasma situation by summer. How are you preparing?"

Hilda glanced at Kyurem, but when he declined to answer, she said, "We've been training up the team with the plan that when the League reopens, we'll blitz through the remaining Gyms as quickly as we can, in order to catch up to N. I've got them in their early to mid forties in terms of levels and we exercise as a group to keep our unity. Well, not me as much since I got sick; I'm still getting tired fairly quick, but I can direct them for longer so they keep in great shape. Since N intends on becoming Champion to get more people to listen to him when he starts officially speaking on Plasma's behalf, I should be able to slow them down if I can snatch the title after him. And I'm sure that the more time N spends outside the group and around the Pokemon he uses, the more likely he is to change his mind."

"He was starting to falter a month ago," Kyurem added.

"That's a good sign," Drayden said. "We will help how we can by demonstrating our bonds with Pokemon to him. Unfortunately, he last challenged Skyla. She's a good woman, but subtlety is not her forte and she's already angered him. Brycen or I might be able to reach him still; we'll just have to see about it."

"I'll try too, if I'm on duty when he comes," Iris said. "So what's he like, huh?"

"He's moody and stubborn," Hilda said. "But that's because he's very emotional, he doesn't have the social defenses that most people his age would have, and he's struggling against the difference between what he believes and what he sees happening around him. N is intelligent and I think he could be a more reasonable person. He certainly cares deeply about Pokemon and hates it when they get hurt, even with regular battle injuries. Humans, though, he's not too sure how to deal with the rest of us. At least that's what I notice about him."

Drayden rubbed his beard for a moment (he did have impressive facial hair. If he wasn't talking, Hilda couldn't tell where his mustache ended and his beard started. It was awesome, although not something she'd want to copy herself). "It is odd to see him as a leader, if what you say is true. A sensitive and emotional person like that... I've known of people like that who can be great inspirations to others, with real insights that can change the world. On the other hand, Hilbert has more confidence and ability with others, plus he comes off as much less vain than he did before. It would be interesting to see what those two would do together. But then, they were made to be like that." He glanced at Iris.

"Well I hope he does decide to work with Hilbert instead of Team Plasma, even if he founded them," Iris said. "I don't see the point of separating humans and Pokemon because we work so well together. Sure, there's some bad things that happen, but that's not enough to force everyone into a situation where they'll be unhappy."

"That's true," Drayden agreed. "If a Pokemon didn't want to be with humans, it could simply choose to stay away from us. And so many of them stay close that I'm certain most of them don't want this separation either. Even then, just because you've captured a Pokemon with a Pokeball doesn't mean you've captured their heart."

"I have Kyurem who sometimes will translate for me," Hilda said, smiling at him. "But even if he's not, I can usually guess what my Pokemon are trying to tell me. We've been around each other a
"And that shows in how they act around you," Drayden said. "Kyurem wasn't with you on the stage, but I saw that the others were paying close attention to what was going on, watching out for you. Well, most of them, and even if the Minccino was easily distracted by other things, she clearly trusts you enough that she preferred to stay close to you instead of running off when scared."

"She is a little childish at times," Hilda said, glancing down on noticing a movement of gray by her chair. Mimi had noticed mention of herself and come over. She patted the Pokemon's head. "But she's still a darling." Iris giggled at that.

The older man smiled. "Yes. And while you're here, I want to present you with the Legend Badge." He then put a golden metal on the table, shaped in a way like a dragon's head.

"Really? Awesome!" Hilda picked it up and looked over it. "But what for? You're supposed to be closed."

"Well you did beat me the other night," Iris said. "And, see, we can give out a badge in exchange for a service done to the community, if we feel that it is appropriate to do so. You helped us figure out how to calm the other Kyurem down, and you did a great job standing up to Ghetsis."

"And you did so with the assistance of your Pokemon," Drayden added. "Thus, I'm certain that you know the Dragon type well enough to deserve this badge. But a word of warning: this acknowledgment can only happen twice for one Trainer, and Lenora used the same ruling to give her badge to you. You will have to battle for the remaining four you're after."

"That's fine," Hilda said, picking up her bag to find her Badge Box. "Thanks! It doesn't put me even with N yet, but it gets me closer."

"Also, while you're here... I've noticed that the bond between you and Kyurem is quite strong now. If you want, we can teach him a special Dragon-type move," Drayden said. When the dragon boy gave him a questioning glance, he added, "There are some moves out there that are potent, but come with strong handicaps or the potential to cause great collateral damage. Many Pokemon are reluctant to learn such things. But if they are with a Trainer they know and trust, they are willing to learn them and accept their Trainer's judgment on when and where to use the move. And you should be careful with this Draco Meteor. Still, with what you're up against, it may come in handy."

It had to be a normal kind of Pokemon move, Hilda thought, nothing like Kyurem's powers as a legendary. Still, it could cause a great damage? Or have a handicap to balance its power. That could be loads of fun... although here, she did want to be a little serious. "That could be nice. Do you want to?"

"I haven't learned that one, at least under that name," he said. "Sure."

While Iris and another Gym worker cleaned up after their dinner, Drayden brought Hilda and Kyurem out to the center of the room. He ordered the other Dragons to clear out of one area, but had one Haxorus join him for the lesson. Kyurem shifted to his Dragon form; although he dwarfed the others in the room, his presence only spooked the younger Pokemon of the Gym. Deciding to show bravery and loyalty, the older Dragons kept stoic, if extra watchful. Hilda's Pokemon stayed out of the way to watch too, although Mimi came by Hilda's side to be closer.

"This is best taught from one Pokemon to another," Drayden said. Then he pointed out a rougher area of the floor, an indent that was roughly circular in shape. "Since this attack can possibly do
damage to the building's structure, even enforced as it is, I want you two to be aiming for that spot. Faize, would you demonstrate Draco Meteor to Kyurem?"

"Raaaa," the Haxorus replied, shaking his horns about. After a few grumble-like sounds (although it seemed to be his way of talking rather than annoyance), Faize reared up and summoned a brightly glowing meteor to strike at the indent in the floor. It broke off edges of the spot and made a new crack.

"Draco Meteor burns up a lot of energy when its used," the Gym Leader told Hilda. "Their special attacks will be weaker for a time after, but it will make a powerful strike."

"All right," Hilda said as Kyurem's ice glimmered brighter. Then he used his own Draco Meteor, hitting the target exactly. The indent was pounded down another couple of inches, with many cracks breaking up the floor. "You have to repair that spot often?"

"From time to time," he said. "That should do it, unless you want to try again to make certain."

"Chira, ku re!" Mimi cheered, running over to Kyurem's side. She jumped up and waved her paws at him, causing him to chuckle and bump her with his nose. Then she turned, looked at the indent, and clapped her paws together. A third Draco Meteor appeared and struck, a little off target this time.

"Wait, wait, what was that?" Iris asked, coming over to them. "Was that the Minccino doing that?"

"Looks that way," Hilda said, watching as Mimi cheered and hugged Kyurem's snout. She turned on her Xtransceiver to find the app that tracked her team's moves.

"That would be unprecedented," Drayden said, crossing his arms over his chest. "It's only supposed to be usable by Dragon Pokemon."

"But she's got it now," Hilda said, showing them the screen. It showed that both Kyurem and Mimi could use Draco Meteor. "Those two are really close; she treats him like her father and he does the same in response."

"If it is his will, then Kyurem might be able to help her overcome that," Drayden said. "I know you're working on the Pokedex project, so make it clear that this is an exceptional circumstance."

Later on, when they had checked into a hotel for the night, Hilda went through her inventory and found the Shiny Stone she had. "Hey, remember when Hilbert gave me this?" she said to Kyurem, showing it to him. "It will evolve Mimi, right?"

Back in human form, he nodded. "Correct."

"Are you okay with me giving it to her now? I mean, I know you think of her as the young Pokemon you adopted. But she needs to keep up with the rest of the team too. And well, she knows freaking Draco Meteor; she'll probably never use it as effectively as you, so it's mostly for the surprise factor, but we still don't want to waste that as she's unevolved."

"That's true," he said, looking down and closing his eyes. "It makes me... uneasy to think of her growing older and stronger. She won't need me to protect her like she did. But it is selfish of me to keep holding her back because of that."

Mimi jumped into his lap and patted at his mask. "Chi micci."

Kyurem took her paw. "I guess it would be time to stop holding onto that past so tightly. And
worrying about the future. For now, I'm grateful to be where we are." Then he nodded. "Go ahead and give it to her."

"Well not while she's sitting on you," Hilda said, waving to her with the shiny yellow salt rock. "Mimi, come over here. You can have this now."

"Ko?" She hopped over and took the Shiny Stone. After sniffing it closer, her eyes and ears perked up in delight and she started chewing on it.

"It should have its full effect by morning," Kyurem said. "You finish that off so you can be strong too."

Mimi looked pleased to hear that.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I know that Minccino/Cinccino cannot learn Draco Meteor. But it's too funny to pass up.

The general way that I use evolution stones is to say that they're edible, based on salts and minerals that trigger the evolution in Pokemon. That just makes sense to me. Of course, saying they're a kind of radioactive magic could also work, given what we're dealing with in Pokemon.
April 1

outside Driftveil

Route 6 brought Cheren back out to the wilderness again, at least it seemed that way. The thick forest blocked out all signs of Driftveil, leaving only winding grassy paths and old wooden bridges to follow. Instead of the sounds of conversation and machinery, he heard the swiftly flowing river, the calls of Pokemon, and the battering of raindrops on the water, leaves, and his black umbrella. As this environment favored Pokemon, he knew this would be the right place. He just had to hope Keldeo was up to leading him.

Before he got into that search, he was caught up in a conversation on the Xtransceiver. In particular, he winced at the happy shriek from Hilda. "You guys are the best!" she squealed. "This is going to be so much fun! Thanks for all this, even talking me out of picking out an outfit for today. I knew I could count of you two."

Bianca was caught up in giggles over the reaction. "Oh yes, I can't wait to see how it turns out! We just knew that, since you're turning sixteen today and you'd certainly be going for your next badge too, that we had to top what you did with Burgh's challenge."

"And the fact that Elesa's doing that special showing today made it irresistible," Cheren said, rubbing his ear with his free hand. But she was so happy that he smiled anyhow.

"Aw yeah," Hilda said. "But how in the world am I going to top this for my last three badges? Well, whatever, today's going to be the best birthday ever! I don't know which one I'd choose, though; they have so many when I last looked."

"About that," Cheren said. "Since I'm helping to pay for this, I insist that you have Bianca go with you to be the voice of reason. I don't want to get over there and find out it turned into something inappropriate."

The two girls laughed at that. "Oh, don't worry, I'll be helping her," Bianca said teasingly. "But we did agree that it would be her choice."

"And that's what worries me," Cheren said, giving a half-smile to let them know that he wasn't too serious. He was almost certain that it would be okay and Hilda wouldn't go with anything too outrageous... but then, it was Hilda.

"Then you are going to be there?" Hilda asked, looking hopeful.

Cheren shrugged. "I'll try my best to be in Nimbasa this afternoon, but I'm over near Chargestone Cavern at the moment. If Keldeo can help me find Cobalion quickly, then it shouldn't be a problem."

"Right, you shouldn't put that off for too long," Bianca said. "Good luck with that."

"Yeah, but I think Cobalion would want to meet with you since you have Keldeo," Hilda added. "So, we'll see you in Nimbasa! Sorry if you were going to challenge Driftveil Gym today."
He shook his head. "That's no big deal. I'll try myself against Clay tomorrow, that's all. Besides, the Gyms are likely to be really busy the next few days; you're lucky you got scheduled with Elesa." Or maybe not; the League was assisting them with their work against Team Plasma, and they knew of Hilda's plans to catch up to N. But then, they certainly were not about to give someone a free ride, especially not someone as popular as she was.

"Well I went in three days ago, and beat all the Gym Trainers in order to make the reservation for the event," Hilda said. "I love her Gym design, with that great roller coaster ride. Wasn't that cool? But then, Drayden and Iris have a nifty one too, and all the ones I've been in have been fun."

"I had to take a minute to get rid of the dizziness," Cheren said, recalling when he had challenged Elesa. "Seriously, putting a loop right before you face her? Isn't it cheating if you disorient challengers before they fight you?"

"There is the option to wait a minute or two," Hilda pointed out.

Once they had finished up the conversation, Cheren turned off the Xtransceiver and looked down at Keldeo. It wasn't even two weeks since he and Hilbert had released Keldeo, but he was already looking better. His fur was starting to grow back, short but getting rid of the bald spots. With better food and hygiene, he didn't seem unhealthy. He was still weak, currently napping from the walk out here.

To his surprise, Meloetta had snuck up while he had been talking with his friends. She was kneeling by Keldeo, petting his head. "Oh, good morning Meloetta," Cheren said. "What are you doing here?"

She looked up at him, brushing her green hair back. 'Good morning. I'm sorry to be a bother. But, after helping the police, I wasn't sure what to do with myself. My mind's still in a haze after being in that building so long.' She got up and dusted off her dress. 'Do you mind if I travel with you and Keldeo for a little while? I thought I'd be all right with musicians, but I think, maybe a traveler would be better.'

That caused Cheren some thought. He had set out to prove his worth as a powerful Trainer last fall. But now he thought that power alone didn't make a great Trainer. He wasn't entirely sure of what to do; his plans had been to stick with the four Pokemon he had and figure out how to better work with them. As Keldeo wasn't fit for battling but in need of extra care, he didn't mind taking along one Pokemon he couldn't use. But was Meloetta up for battle? And, did he really want to be using legendary Pokemon too? Winning like that seemed like taking the easy way out, not trying. Hilda could pull it off because she used all of her Pokemon and she was so audacious with taking on higher level challenges. He wasn't sure that he could do that.

But then, it was also important to help out these two. The reason he had Keldeo was that Hilbert already had a lot on his plate in trying to work against Team Plasma, with N, and with Reshiram. And, Cheren remembered one Pidove that had been a family pet until he died of old age. Even if he couldn't do much in his later years, he always seemed so miserable being kept indoors, hunched up on a perch. Cheren used to take that Pidove outside when he had some time; in a similar way, he wanted to let Keldeo continue to enjoy the outdoors until this issue could be resolved. If it would help Meloetta too, then it would be good even if he ended up with two team members that he couldn't use fully.

"If you're all right with following me, sure," Cheren said. "You just let me know what you want. And, if you could help me understand my other Pokemon, that would be good too."

She curtsied. 'Certainly. You, you have a lot on your mind. I know some people seem to achieve
greatness without trying. But I can tell you from experience, no one becomes great without effort put into it. It doesn't matter how long it takes to get there, just that you don't give up.'

For a moment, he felt unsettled. Was she picking up on his thoughts that even he didn't fully notice? Her words did make sense, though. He wasn't going to push to keep up with Hilda's new goal and pace. But then, he'd keep working and sometime in the future, he'd surely have a team that could give her a challenge. "I see. Right now, though, I want to meet with Cobalion and let him know that we found the two of you. I was hoping Keldeo could help," he knelt down and nudged the white Pokemon. "Keldeo? You rested enough? But if you know the way too, Meloetta, that would help."

Meloetta pointed across the river. 'The entrance to Cobalion's territory is in that cave, even though a good portion of it is in the forest. It's usually sealed to keep humans out, but the both of us should be able to lift it temporarily.'

Keldeo got up, stretched, then looked in the direction Meloetta had pointed. He barked happily, then plunged right into the cold river to swim across. There didn't seem to be a bridge to the cave entrance, but Cheren was able to get his Unfezant to fly him and Meloetta the short distance over the river. Once across, Cheren peered into the cave but a growl from Keldeo made him pause before entering. There was an area in the rain that seemed especially hazy. Before he could figure out why, someone stepped out of the hazy area to clear it up.

Strangely, it seemed to be N. Only it couldn't be because N had only been released from the hospital a couple of hours ago according to Hilbert. He was still weak but it had been the insistence of himself and Plasma that made the doctor cooperate. Here, he seemed to be in good health. Not only that, but he wore an odd black and white outfit, with tattoos on his lower arms (black scales on the right, and white scales on the left).

"Did I get the right year this time?" N wondered aloud. "It must be. But then," he looked over at the three of them, then clenched his fists. "You..."

"What are you doing here?" Cheren asked. "Aren't you supposed to be in Mistralton today?"

"What did you do to Keldeo?!" N demanded, coming closer.

"I'm trying to help," he said, clutching his Unfezant's Pokeball. Greywing moved closer to him, clucking and puffing up his colored crest feathers in a show of intimidation towards the one threatening them.

N was too angry to be stopped by that. "His powers have been neutralized and won't be recovered until his next lifetime. I can see that much in his aura. And you, I remember you. You were one of her friends, the one who was blind to what your obsession over power was doing to your Pokemon. Your help would only be a hindrance."

"I'm trying to get better," Cheren said, but then N raised his black scaled arm and a sparking ball of electricity formed in his hand. They were half-Pokemon, he recalled, but he thought Hilbert said they weren't capable of any attacks yet. At least, not him. Maybe N...

Then something caused N to pale. He stumbled back a step and the energy in his hand exploded. Although his Unfezant darted in front of him, the force of the blast was enough to knock Cheren onto his back. After a brief moment of pain, he felt numb all over, like someone had dosed him with too much anesthetics. He managed to sit back up, but Greywing and Keldeo were both gone, knocked unconscious from the blast. Meloetta was on her knees, dazed.
N was still standing, his white hand over his face. "Th—that was too close. Don't get me mad." Then he came over, snatching Cheren's left arm. "Leave Meloetta alone; I'll handle Keldeo, release him over at the sacred stone where he should be. You aren't worthy."

Cheren tried to pull his arm back, but the numbness made his movements sluggish. He wasn't able to resist N taking Keldeo's Pokeball from his holder. But then, another voice came out of the rain. "I'm not so certain you are worthy either," Cobalion said. His blue eyes glinted, then the tall gray beast rushed over, looking as though he was going to strike N across the chest.

And he might have, if N hadn't vanished from the spot. A few feet away, he clutched the Pokeball. "Don't challenge me, now or in the future," he said. "We all regret that. I'm only looking for the other being who doesn't belong in this time. But that doesn't mean that I won't try to set things right so that my past self doesn't have to do all that I have done. Don't fight me." After a flash from the orb bracelet he wore, the haze swallowed him back up and N was gone.

Cobalion watched that spot for a moment, then looked down at Cheren. "Are you able to walk?"

"Maybe," he said, working to get back on his feet. He had a weird sense that he wasn't certain of where his body was, even if he could see it. "We were coming to tell you about Keldeo."

"I know; I've been watching." He put his head against Cheren's. "Get Meloetta and get on my back. I'll take you into town before I head to the sacred rock to find them."

'I was going to help Keldeo recover,' Meloetta said, walking over shakily.

"Are you sure about that?" Cheren asked, surprised by the offer. "I don't want to disrespect you."

"Your respect should go to the Pokemon that took that hit for you, and saved your life," Cobalion said. "And it would have killed you, even as that attack was incomplete. To see that both you and the Unfezant are properly cared for, I will let this one time slide."

Greywing had saved his life? Cheren bowed his head. "Thank you. I'll take good care of him."
Then he picked Meloetta up and put her on Cobalion's back before trying to get on himself. Thankfully, the tall Pokemon knelt down and let him use his horns to help.

The forest route went by in a blur; it wasn't even three minutes before Cobalion stopped running outside the Pokecenter in Driftveil. Cheren slid off and was going to offer to help Meloetta down. But she clung to Cobalion's neck. 'I think I should go too, to the sacred rock. I'll be okay; I wanted to help Keldeo.'

"Okay, but you need a Potion." He fumbled for a second with his bag as people out on the streets finally noticed the sight and were staring in shock. Then Cheren pulled out a Hyper Potion and sprayed it on her. "Be careful."

"We'll talk later," Cobalion said, then sprinted off to the south.

Cheren went into the Pokecenter to get his Pokemon healed. The nurse immediately offered to call the hospital for him, so he agreed and waited there to get checked out himself.

The Nimbasa amusement park was packed that afternoon, but only a small portion of that crowd was there for the rides and standard games. Many were there to see the live filming of the Pokemon League Battle Show, today showcasing Elesa's Gym battles. In celebration of the re-opening of the Gyms, she was holding her challenges outside on a large stage. Not only was she judging the battle skills of her opponents, she was also judging their fashion styles. The challengers had come
dressed in expectation of that.

Elesa herself was dressed in an outfit designed and made for this day. Slim yellow pants led up to a yellow top, both of which were covered by a long black jacket with large jagged cut-outs. Bright yellow ties were spaced along her long black braids, with her usual headband wires given a striped black and yellow pattern. Finishing it off were black and yellow heeled boots and many black and yellow bracelets, five of which were actually Pokeball holders for the various teams she needed today.

As it was Elesa, she opted to do all the announcing herself instead of having a commentator from the show on stage. Smiling, she spoke to the audience, "And now, for a match I know many of you have been eager to see... we have seen her become a big name on the streets these part few months, but can she make it as a star on the stage as well? Please welcome up, Hilda Medley of Nuvema Town!"

There were many cheers from the audience, which soon turned to whistles as the girl Trainer came up on stage. Unlike the others who had come up so far, she didn't try to match current fashions. She came up with her Gothitelle, dressed up as a Gothorita. It was a remarkably good cosplay too, with tall black boots, black stockings, black gloves, and a little black dress with large white bows. Even her brown hair had been styled as a reasonably good match, with bun ponytails tied up with large white ribbons. True, the Gothitelle had a better strut than she did, but the effect was stunning.

"I see you decided to show off your love of Pokemon today," Elesa said.

Hilda grinned. "Fashion is about expressing yourself, right? So I did."

"Hard to go wrong with that in mind," she agreed, pointing her to the right spot on the stage. "Now you have to show that you have the right attitude to match your lovely looks. And, you've put yourself on a higher level already. How many badges do you have?" Elesa already knew, but this would be important for the audience to hear.

She snapped her fingers. "Four of 'em! I'm afraid it didn't get taped, but Drayden and Iris said I well proved my worth to them in a special Battle Subway round, as well as how I was handling Kyurem. We even got the whole team evolved up for this day. But I'm still hoping to get a worthy challenge out of you."

Elesa shifted her bracelets to unlock the one that had what would normally be a seventh badge battle, taking the first Pokeball as she did. "Is that so? I'm certainly not about to let anyone down. So then," she pointed at Hilda as her wires released a particularly loud snap, "you will be facing all the grace and beauty of my Pokemon; yours had best be able to keep up with them on this stage. Ready? Go!" She released an Emolga, which let loose a decorative shower of sparks and cheered. The microphones both she and Hilda were wearing made certain that their voices would carry above the roar of the crowd. Making a quick choice based on what was there, she added, "Volt Switch."

"Frank my boy, hit it with a block!" Hilda called, gesturing towards her Gothitelle.

Showing a confidence like he had been on stage all his life, the Gothitelle made a quick walk over to his position, crossing his arms over his chest. But before he could attack, her Emolga shot towards him in a cluster of sparks to attack and return to his Pokemon. Elesa then released a Galvantula, which took the effects of the curse Frank struck with. The yellow glow that appeared told her that it was Heal Block. Tricky, but they could wait that out.

"X-scissor," Elesa called out, thinking to knock this Pokemon out.
But Hilda used that chance to switch out her Pokemon, releasing an Exadrill. The yellow spider's attack hardly scratched the black and red Pokemon, who didn't even raise her steel arms in defense. "Sword Dance, Olette."

This was getting dangerous; the Exadrill crossed her steel claws, then slashed them down while spinning, a surprisingly graceful motion for such a bulky Pokemon. Not being able to heal, Elesa decided she had to take it out fast. "Volt Switch," she called, preparing to call out her Zebstrika.

"Earthquake!" Hilda responded, right as Elesa caught her returning Galvantula to exchange for the Zebstrika.

"Flame Charge!" Elesa called, clutching a fist to her chest. With her wires sparking as her own Electric powers acted up in response to her heart pounding in excitement, she had a feeling that this round could determine the whole battle.

The Zebstrika reared up as flames wrapped around her body, calling out a challenging cry. She charged the Exadrill as the stage started the tremble. But Olette's black eyes narrowed with determination, staying alert despite heavy damage. As the Zebstrika backed off, she released a tremor that violently shook the stage. The structure remained intact, as it had been built to withstand such things. The Zebstrika was knocked out.

Elesa felt a little shaken, but despite the Pokemon genes she had, she had never picked up any type resistances or weakness. She brought out a Pokeball, glanced to make sure, then released the Emolga that had started the battle. "Quick Attack," she called out. The timing might be just right...

No. Hilda already had a Hyper Potion out and hooked up to her Exadrill's Pokeball, healing her of all damage. The Emolga flew in for a direct attack, but it did nothing. "Now, Rock Slide!"

That meant the battle was practically over. With Sword Dance increasing her power, Olette knocked out every other member of Elesa's team in one Rock Slide each. Neither Emolga and neither Galvantula had something they could use well against an Exadrill; the Zebstrika was supposed to be able to take out an obstacle like that.

Even so, she would always take loss with grace. "Magnificent!" she said, coming over to Hilda. "Such overwhelming power, and yet you've made this even normally gruff and tough Pokemon into a lovely lady." She petted the Exadrill's head.

"Currrooo," Olette said, shyly bowing her head and letting her armored paws down.

"She is the sweetest Steel Pokemon I know," Hilda said cheerfully. She then brought her Gothitelle back out. He looked over at Elesa and smiled with a smug poise.

"And she's very devoted to you," Elesa said. It was part of their gambit against Team Plasma's philosophy, but that didn't make it any less true. "The way she stood her ground for your sake, and how quickly you responded to take care of her, it speaks of a deep bond of friendship that everyone should aim to have with their Pokemon. The beauty of that then shines outward and everyone is able to see you and your Pokemon for the stars that you are. And in honor of that, I proudly present you with the Bolt Badge." She passed over the gleaming yellow badge to Hilda.

"All right!" she cheered, holding up the badge for the boisterous audience to see.

"Let's hear it for Hilda and her darling Pokemon!" Elesa said, taking the bashful Exadrill's hand and holding it up. Olette seemed to be part beaming and part blushing.
Once again, Hilbert felt surrounded by the bright happiness of starstruck fans. Only, it wasn't for him. It was for Hilda, still dressed in her black dress and white ribbons. She spoke happily with the people who came up to meet her after her win against Elesa, even signing a few autographs when asked. When people asked what she meant to do next, she boasted that she was going to take her team to go pulverize Clay in a few days.

Which might be, considering her Pokemon. They were all hanging out with her, playing with the crowd and not minding pictures being taken. Olette was getting a lot of attention, although she was mostly keeping still and being careful when she did move so as not to knock into anybody. But the Cinccino made up for that with how active she was, hopping around people and letting them pet her elegant fur. Kyurem as in human form as usual, occasionally pulling Mimi back to stay with the group but mostly watching for signs of trouble. The Scrafty, Gothitelle, and Serperior all kept close together, teasing each other and occasionally having a playful argument. Sometimes Hilbert heard snatches of it from Tarzan, which made him curious to hear what the whole topic was about.

Hilbert kept an eye on the time. At five, he came closer to Hilda. "I'm sorry to disrupt things, but we do have an engagement to get to."

"I am not about to be engaged to anybody, even you," Hilda teased, putting her hands on her hips. Laughing with the others, he took her hand. "No, I mean we have a party to get to. Let's go."

"Oh yeah! Goodbye, all of you! Keep an eye out, cause even I never know what I'm going to be up to." She then walked away from the crowds with him, smiling. "That was such fun. No wonder you didn't want to give it up."

"Well I think you earned it better than I ever did," he said.

They arrived at one of the restaurants, where a party had been set up for her. "Happy birthday, dear," her mother said, coming over to hug Hilda. "You look beautiful today; that battle was really impressive."

"Olette and Frank had it all handled," she said. "But thanks! Bianca and Cheren are the ones responsible for this outfit; they got me into the costume store here to let me pick any cosplay I wanted."

"I suppose this one is reasonable," Cheren said, sounding worn out. Meloetta was sitting quietly by him. "Looking good there."

"Thanks, but what's up with you? Spend a long time wandering around the caves?" She sat down at their table, glancing at the menu.

"I never even got in because I nearly got fried by lightning," he said, rubbing a cheek. "I'm still having a hard time feeling anything."

Bianca nudge him. "And now you have to tell us what's going on. Who attacked you?"

Cheren nodded and then explained how a strange version of N appeared and forcefully took Keldeo from him."Greywing's okay now; I left him in the Driftveil Pokecenter after making sure he was going to be fine. He just needs time to recover, like me. But she didn't come back with Keldeo." He looked down at Meloetta.

She looked down and put her hands in her lap. 'Keldeo wasn't where that N said he would take him. Cobalion and I stayed there for a while, but we didn't see either of them. He said he was going to go back and wait. But then, I felt something while I was there. I don't think we need to worry about
Keldeo for now. I sensed his presence in Unova again, and I saw that he would be there in the future, with someone else. It was different; I can't say why, but I think things will be fine.'

"If you feel that way, we might see him again," Hilda said. "But what about N? I can't imagine him getting tattoos."

"I saw him just yesterday and he didn't," Hilbert added.

'It wasn't the N you know,' Meloetta said. 'Part of the power he used was his own, but part of it was borrowed from a few legendary Pokemon. I don't know why, but he did have relics of three of them.'

"He said he was looking for the other being that doesn't belong in this time," Cheren said, looking at Kyurem.

"We should be careful if he appears again," Kyurem said.

Chapter End Notes

I planned on the Nimbasa Gym battle running this way months before I played White 2. Kinda nifty to see that the same kind of idea went into the sequels. Well, not the Pokemon cosplay part, but the fashion show theme.

And yeah, reality of crazy-future-N confirmed (that is exactly what I call him in my notes, lol).
Bittersweet Visitation

April 1

Route 7

Battling Skyla was much easier the second time around. Not only were Tock and Pierre stronger, but Umber had given him the two fossil Pokemon he had studied. They were evolved now, although neither Archeops nor Carracosta could communicate beyond basic ideas. With those four, and Rune and the Zoroark he was now calling Zane, N's team was the one overpowering Skyla's birds. It was a shame to see her loyal Pokemon get hurt by his win. He stifled out feelings of sympathy with the thought that this had to be done for things to get set right.

Afterwards, she had complimented him on getting better when she gave him the badge, but also expressed concern with how pale and 'scrawny' he looked. N had brushed that off and left once he had the badge. Now that he was thinking about it, she had tried to be nice about it. When he had come in to register his second challenge, the Gym receptionist had called Skyla about him. He had worried they had figured out that he was the Black King, but no, they decided to move some of obstacles so that he didn't have to deal with the cannons. Maybe it was because he had already gone through it, but maybe it was because he was still recovering.

He certainly felt tired, even though it was only the afternoon and all he had done today was the Gym and walking out here to Route 7. Earlier, Zane and Rune had insisted that he sit and rest for a little while before he went on. He had agreed, letting the other four out to enjoy the spring air while he sat on a flat rock and watched them. All around him, there were trees that were filling out with green, even a number of blossoming trees starting to scatter their petals. There wasn't any more snow on the ground and while everything was starting up late this year, the plants were all going strong.

Not that far to the north, there was a white tower standing out in the forest. It had an interesting design that was obviously influenced by nature, as it was reminiscent of the spiraling of seashells. However, it had certainly taken a skilled mathematician or an engineer to make a sturdy building seem so light and natural; it pleased N just in looking at it. Sometimes a bell could be heard tolling from the top; every toll was different, making him feel sympathetic emotions. Most often tears and grief, but there were also tones of hope and strong love. It was strange. That place was supposed to be Celestial Tower, where Hilbert said people remembered their Pokemon friends that had died.

"That place is crowded with voices," Pierre said as he noticed N looking at the tower.

"There are many spirits in there," Rune explained. "Mostly Pokemon souls, but there are a few humans with them. But the presence I feel there..."

"Are they stuck in that tower?" N asked. "That would be a terrible fate, to die and then be stuck in that strange building forever, no matter how beautiful it is in numbers and form."

The Sigilyph blinked his eyes. "No, they're not stuck. The bell there can reach the spirits and it seems to be soothing them. Every time it rings, they come closer to accepting their fate and resolving their hearts. It surrounds the place with an aura of peace. I'm sure if you went inside, you could feel it yourself. After all, you saw Shira."

"Hilbert said I should." They couldn't really be fooling him if his own Pokemon noticed these things. Or, could they?
Before he could decide on what to do, a voice called out to him. "N, good afternoon." It sounded like Rood's voice, but when N turned to him, he looked different. It wasn't just that he was in civilian clothing; his black hair had abruptly turned a pale gray.

"What happened to you?" N asked. "You look twenty or thirty years older than when I saw you last month."

"This..." he brushed his hands through his hair. "Don't worry about it."

That wasn't a fair answer. "Well if I don't know, how can I not worry about you?"

"Didn't I say the same to you last time we spoke?" Rood asked back, sitting down on the rock beside him.

Realizing that it was true, N looked down. Was it better not to ask Rood about it, or better to talk to him about what was going on? Ghetsis had said not to talk, but N knew he could trust any of the Sages.

"You could consider it proof of my loyalty to you," Rood said. "Or that could just be my opinion of the matter. I had to deal with an unruly Cofagrigus while doing work on behalf of the team. I don't blame it for what happened, as I don't think it would have done so if its Trainer hadn't taught it to be cruel by being cruel to it."

"That's terrible," N said, looking back at him. "Did you get the Cofagrigus released?"

He shook his head. "I tried, but the Trainer got away while I was hurt. Now, what are you doing here? You can't be thinking of going through Twist Mountain, not with you still recovering."

"It would be harder to get through as I don't have something to follow, like I did with Zekrom," N said. "No, I don't think so. Maybe later. But, I had heard about this tower from Hilbert."

Rood nodded. "Yes, Celestial Tower, where people remember Pokemon that have passed on. Actually, remember that message you wanted me to get to Hilda? I did manage to speak with her, although it took some time trying to encounter her. She took it well, although I doubt she's going to even think about leaving Unova any time soon. I say this because she suggested that you visit this place."

He looked over at the tower. "Her too? That's what Hilbert said, that I should go in there. What do you think? I thought people didn't really care about Pokemon as individuals, but that place suggests otherwise."

"Well it's not like everyone is a villain," he said with a smile. "Otherwise, we wouldn't get people joining Team Plasma to help make your ideals a reality. Still, I think it's a good idea too for you to visit, so you get a better view on the regular people out there."

N nodded. "All right, then. Would you come with me? The way you're dressed now, we shouldn't cause much of a disturbance going inside."

"If you'd like," Rood said. "I would have offered to do so, to make sure you don't push yourself going up all the stairs."

As they got up, N thought of how good it was to know he had reliable people like Rood around. Still, he couldn't help worrying about the Trainer that had attacked him. Who was it, and why would they do such a thing to a good man? But he knew what it was like not to want to say something, so he decided not to press it any further.
They met a number of people coming out of the tower, talking quietly to each other. With that group gone, there didn't seem to be many inside on the first floor. There was a woman sitting in a chair near the front door, wearing a lace-adorned hat and a gray dress; she was engraving small plaques. Further in, there was an older couple standing by one of six large stone memorials. The woman in gray looked up and smiled at them. "Welcome to Celestial Tower. You may have your Pokemon out with you, just keep an eye on them and be mindful of other visitors."

There didn't appear to be many there, to normal sight. But N could feel the presence of many Pokemon, not crowding him but still many. In the air, they appeared as misty orbs of colored light, perhaps representing what they once were. A few got interested in him or the other people there; their focus allowed them to appear as faint images of Pokemon. There was a Amoongus and a Deerling by the old couple, and a Lillipup looking up at him.

"Oh, aren't you N? The fellow who's been going through the Pokemon League at record speed?" the woman asked. "I've heard rumors that you're actually the Black King, and the leader of Team Plasma."

Her comment diverted his attention for a moment. "I am," he said, then thought better of it. "Don't worry, I wouldn't hurt this place. And don't speak of it to many." He then turned from her and walked over to the Lillipup ghost. Crouching down, he asked, "What happened to you?"

For a moment, the ghost reverted to a misty orb. But then it reappeared. "You can see me?" it asked.

He nodded. "Yes."

The Lillipup sat down. "I'm not really sure. My boy comes and visits me, but he doesn't seem to see or hear me. And, I can't seem to leave. I don't know why; the door leads to a really white place, and then I end up back here."

Looking back at the door, N couldn't see it for a moment. But then it appeared briefly, a whiteness that blanked out all else. He turned back to the Lillipup. "I see. But, you're dead."

"I didn't think I was," the Lillipup said, turning its ears away. "Maybe sick or lost, but... am I really dead?"

N considered for a moment how to tell the ghost that.

Being in here made Rood's skin prickle. He knew it was the ghosts of Pokemon living here, and the atmosphere was calm. However, the intense touch of the spiritual made him feel uneasy. The last time he had felt it, it was malicious in nature...

He had gone to confront Ghetsis alone, which might have been his mistake. He wanted to know why they didn't know that N was gone, or even sick, until an outsider came up and pointed it out to them. In public. For the past month, Ghetsis had reassured them that N was fine, off doing intense studies and meditation on the last stages of his plan. The fact that it had been a surprise to him was the last straw for Rood; he was going to get to the bottom of the problem.

And unfortunately, he had. Ghetsis was in a foul mood, as there wasn't a lot he could do about Hilda and the uncertainty about N was causing stress through the whole team. But he could vent his frustrations out on Rood. He had spoken truthfully then, and the truth was that Ghetsis was viciously insane under his well-spoken and confident mask. Spending two hours in the coffin of a Cofagrigus while knowing that had very nearly broken his spirit. But, Rood knew he had to stay
together to help N... and to survive long enough to get to talk to Hilda again. He could deal with having been aged rapidly, but the memory of that would linger.

...at any rate, there was a problem to deal with now. N had revealed himself to the woman working here. True, most people thought that N was most likely to be the Black King. But they didn't want to cause trouble here.

While N was distracted with something, Rood stepped closer to the woman. "It's true, we're not here to cause trouble," he said. "I would object to it if the idea came up. And if you let him spend some time here, I'm sure that he'll forbid it. He's only heard of this place recently."

She looked at Rood for a moment, then nodded. "All right. But what is he doing?" She looked back over where N was crouched down and talking quietly to thin air.

"Most likely talking to a ghost," Rood said. "I've never seen him do so, but his heart does understand the feelings of any Pokemon. And please, answer any questions he has. It's important."

A smile appeared on her face. "I can do that. But it sounds like you're stirring up trouble."

He gave a soft chuckle. "Well let's not be obvious about that. But seriously, he's had a limited view on the world for much of his life. I believe it's important that he see more of the big picture."

"That's important for anyone. Sure, and I'll do my best not to be preachy about it."

Rood nodded. "I appreciate that."

Then N got up and turned to them. "Do you get many people visiting this place?"

She put her engraving pen to the side. "Yes, we do. Today's been fairly quiet, but mornings, evenings, and weekends are when we get the most visitors. Some are regulars, while others visit on occasion. I'd say there's been about seventy people on the three hours of my volunteering shift today."

"Do they have a lot of volunteers working here?" At least he was curious; that helped.

She nodded. "We try to have someone here at the entrance at all hours, and a few priests who hold funerary services on request. There's also a few mediums who come in to make sure that none of the spirits are agitated. There's also some people who are paid, but mostly for cleaning and maintaining the tower so it stays in good shape."

N looked around some more, then asked, "What do you do with the Pokemon who passed away? The structure is all stone, so you can't bury them."

"Actually, there are some who get buried here," she said. "Not on this level or on the roof, but in the floors above, there are slates that we can move to place coffins in hidden graves. When we need space, they get moved down to the catacombs, although we don't allow most visitors to go there. But for most, they get memorialized with these plates." She tapped the one she was working on. "We put them on the stone tables there; once a section gets full, we move the oldest section up to be stored in the tombstones in the upper levels."

N was watching her, listening intently. "Do you charge money for that?"

She shook her head. "No, not the plates. We do charge for private services and burials, because that takes time and needs to follow safety guidelines. Did you have a Pokemon you want remembered here?"
Shifting uncomfortably, he asked, "Why would you offer that? I told you who I am."

She shrugged. "Why not? I'm not about to deny someone a little peace of mind or comfort because of their political standings."

"You have to be absolute with your beliefs, or else you might as well not have them," he said defensively.

She kept a calm tone, trying to sidestep an argument but wanting to make her reply. "If things were like that, we might as well cut everybody off from each other because of all the different beliefs out there. And then nobody would be happy. But this isn't that big of an issue, just a sign of love for Pokemon that have passed on."

"Really?" When she nodded, he was quiet, then turned to Rood. "I don't know if I should."

Although he'd heard about what happened from Hilda, he didn't want to reveal that just yet. And there was a risk of the Shadow Triad watching on Ghetsis' behalf. Taking a neutral stance didn't feel right either. "Well if it's to honor and respect a Pokemon that cared for you, and you cared about, I don't see what's wrong with it," Rood said. "There's several of my Pokemon recorded here from years ago, even back to when I was younger than you."

"Oh, you've lost friends before?" he asked, surprised. "Well..." he tensed for a moment, then went closer to the woman in gray. "Actually, there are two, if it's okay. I don't know, though. One died a month ago, and the other was years ago. I didn't know about this place then and she was never buried."

She bowed her head. "I can make an exception for them; you're clearly someone who cares about Pokemon." She leaned down and picked out two blank plates and a charcoal pencil. "I just need their name and species, although if you wish to add anything small, that's fine."

"Pricilla the Liepard and Darcy the Darmantian," N said. He waited a little for her to get them written down and spelled right, then added, "Darcy adopted me when I had no one else. I've seen a number of Pokemon die, but losing Darcy hurt the most."

"Is that so?" the woman asked, looking up at them. "It must have been terrible. Well I've got this one to finish up, then I'll engrave these. They should be up by tomorrow."

"Thank you," N said, seeming both relieved and worried.

"Do you still have the plates around from the Bloodwraith days?" Rood asked

She nodded. "Yes, they take up most of the second floor. It's not quite time to move them all to the catacombs; we mean to do a special memorial later this year when we do."

"That's all I wanted to know," he said. He glanced at N, who was already back to discussing something with the ghosts. "Thanks."

After glancing at N, she leaned forward and quietly added, "I don't envy you for having to be his guide. Good luck, sir."

He smiled and gave her a nod of acknowledgment, then followed N closer to the stairs. "Do you want to try going up?"

"Maybe," N said. "There's a ghost here who says his Trainer is around and wants to talk with him. I mean, it's only important to them, and I don't want to be wasting time on my mission."
"Well you beat Skyla this morning, didn't you?" he asked. "And if it is important to them, it is important, even if only to them."

"Every little bit of good helps," he said, reciting from something. "Okay, we'll try to find that Trainer."

They climbed up to the second floor, where five people were. The tombstones were made of gray and white stone, some of the finest that they had mined out of Twist Mountain and the Driftveil area. They were five feet tall and looked solid, but were actually hollow, constructed of multiple pieces. At the side, there was a wheel that attached to a clockwork system inside that could shift around the plates and change which sections were displayed. Still, there were many tombstones here, and so many Pokemon had died in that short time that it could take a long time to find the right one.

"Cururu," N's Sigilyph called, drifting closer to Rood. He appeared interested somehow.

"Oh, Rune thinks he can find what you're looking for," N said, then he crouched down and asked, "Is he here?"

"Thank you, Rune," Rood said. "If you could find... now which one would be most unique? Saphir the Swanna, that should give us the right plates."

Rune blinked its eyestalk eye slowly, then turned and flew towards one of the rows further in. Rood followed him while N went around to see if the ghost's Trainer was on this level. At one tombstone that had been marked with a Leavanny, Rune stopped. "Kur, click click click click."

"Four times, you think?" he guessed, looking over the names listed on the front of the tombstone. He pulled the wheel on the side down, causing the names there to back in and a new plate section to rise up. After he changed the plates four times, he saw Saphir there, third from the top. "That's it. I thought they would have put it further away by now, although their spirits should have passed on years ago."

N came over. "You found them? The Trainer isn't here." He looked at the tombstone where all the names were listed.

He nodded and ran his hand alongside the familiar names. "Yes, all of them. These," he tapped Saphir's name and passed down nine names to Scruffy the Watchog, "were my Pokemon, the ones I used when I was in the League. And these ones," he moved down to the name under scruff, Elega the Emolga, through five names ending at Lady the Lilligant, "were friends of my wife Leslie."

"Why did they die so close together?" N asked, puzzled.

Even all these years later, it still caused some sadness. "They died within hours of each other, over two days. It was the Bloodwraith plague, which devastated many regions over twenty years ago. Did you hear the lady downstairs?" He waved to the tombstones around them. "The names all around us, they all died in that plague. And worse, it was partially the fault of human technology."

"That's terrible," he said, shivering. "What if something like that happens again? I know many good Pokemon now, in many parts of Unova."

"From what I understand, they've fixed the flaws in the Pokeball system that caused the virus to spread so quickly," Rood said. "Back then, this is why I first thought people and Pokemon should live apart. It was a tragedy that shouldn't have happened. But I admit, it wasn't easy adjusting to that. I was lonely for a long time, even if there were many people with me. I still came here to look
over their names for years after. Not since I started working with you, though." He touched Saphir again; he had been the first Pokemon he had gotten, as a Ducklett on the Charizard Bridge. "It's nice to see them again, as I remember them all fondly. But sad too, knowing that I won't get to see them any more than this."

"Maybe. Wouldn't it be better if you could just forget the things that make you sad?"

That was something he'd expect to hear out of a child. "Not necessarily, because then you'd forget why you loved them, and what made you happy. Well, shall we head on?"

His legs felt like lead, but N pressed on, climbing up to the top level of Celestial Tower. There had been many more ghosts hanging around, in various moods. Some were confused, others sad, others angry, others coming close to contentment. But overall, this didn't feel like a bad place. Just crowded. The other ghosts had observed him curiously, but only the Lillipup had stayed close. They hadn't found his Trainer yet.

Coming out from the stairwell, he felt a warm spring breeze pass by again. The rooftop was open to the elements, with a guardrail that continued the seashell motif. The Lillipup ghost sniffed around, then barked excitedly. "Oh, he's here! Great!" It then darted off to the upper level.

More stairs. N paused for a moment, feeling worn out. Rood took his arm. "You okay?"

"Yeah, it's not much further," he said.

"It's good that you made it up here, but I'm not certain you should have pushed yourself today," Rune said.

"Yeah, it's not good to grind on at low power," Tock added.

"I'm fine," N said, pushing back his own feelings and walking to the stairs that led up. For the rest of this journey, he had to be tough like this. Leaving behind the names of two Pokemon he loved here... that should help. His feelings were here, out of sight once he left. Then he could press on to his goal, no matter what happened.

Thankfully, it was a shorter set of stairs up to the platform where the bell was. It was a magnificent piece. But more immediately, the Lillipup ghost was up here, trying to nudge a boy who was standing near the middle of the bell platform, looking off at the landscape. This did have an excellent view of the land around, although Twist Mountain still loomed overhead.

What should he say? "Your Pokemon friend is trying to get your attention," he tried as a start.

The boy looked over at them, but he didn't seem startled. He had probably heard them coming up. "I don't have a Pokemon anymore," he said in a dull voice.

"Well his ghost is," N said, pointing it out. "The Lillipup is right next to you."

"How do you know that?" he said, turning fully to them. His cheeks were wet with tears and his eyes seemed irritated. "Are you one of the mediums?"

He nodded. "It would seem so. The Lillipup is worried for you; he was sad to be alone, but feels sadder by seeing you this way."

"Yeah, I didn't want to make you upset," the Lillipup whined.
"I thought he was here," the boy said, looking down.

"Shouldn't you be in school?" Rood asked, joining the conversation instead of observing it.

"Yeah, but I didn't feel like it," he said. "I didn't think that Lillipup was going to die; I thought he was just sick and that he'd be better in a few days. My parents say they're sad too, but I don't believe them. It's not fair; they didn't care about him like I do. He was just another Pokemon to them, but he was one of my best friends. I took the subway up there. It's good that he is here, even if I can't see him."

"But aren't you going to get in trouble?" the Lillipup asked. "I don't want you to get in trouble because of me. I guess since I am dead, I have to go away for good now. But you should be back in school. Um, would you tell him that, mister?" The ghost came over to N, but then went back to his friend's side.

N passed on the message. "I think Lillipup will be fine now," N added. "This is a peaceful place. But don't make him worry about you so much."

"Is that what he wants?" the boy said, still sounding upset. "I guess. I wish he hadn't died, but there's nothing I can do about it now. I could ring the bell for him. Lillipup, I'm sorry. I love you and I'm going to miss you a lot." He then went over to the bell and rang it.

Up here, the emotions coming from the bell's tolling were more intense. The boy really did love the Lillipup and felt sad without him. But, there was still an element of looking down on Pokemon in there. The Pokemon had been a pet to him, not a true friend. Something else was in that ringing of emotions too; the boy's capacity for love was immature. How he could tell that, N wasn't entirely sure.

He did hear the Lillipup bark happily at the bell's ringing. His spirit turned back into an orb of light and then... there was a brief moment where the light of the spirits was overwhelming, passing on a feeling of love, peace, and rest. Then, the ghost was gone, happy to hear the love of his friend. But why? It was unequal.

After a moment of quiet, the boy walked away from the bell. "I guess I should go back... um, thanks mister." Then he ran off down the stairs.

"I suppose things like that might happen commonly around here," Rood said.

"He's not old enough..." N mused aloud. "And his love for the Lillipup wasn't as a friend, but as a pet. Still, the ghost moved on happy." Shivering, he turned to Rood. "Why is that? Why would the Lillipup be happy with something so patronizing? And how do I know all this? It was in the bell, but I can't understand bells."

"If the ghost is gone, we can't truly know," Rood said. "Maybe that love is enough. Still, we shouldn't settle for that. As for the bell, I've heard many stories about it. Apparently it rings as a mirror of the love of the one who rang it, so to speak."

"This bell is special, or the place is," Rune said. "But I believe that he is right. The sound of the bell is the sound of your heart."

"Some metals can do that, if in the right place and in the right shape," Tock said.

"That could be," N said, looking at the bell. It was quiet now, still. Should he try ringing it? He had come all the way up here and it had helped the ghost. What about Pricilla? He hadn't seen her ghost here, or at all. Maybe the inscription of her name would draw her here. Or, perhaps if he
were to ring it, the sound would. Thinking that he wouldn't need to worry if she were in the peaceful place, N went over and put his hand on the bell. There was no crank, no rope to pull. But the boy had pushed it, so N did the same, as hard as he could, then stepped back.

When the clapper hit the bell, the sound of it was overpowering and painful. It nearly made his grief break out. But then that spiritual light returned, not briefly but all around him. In that instant, he saw hundreds, or thousands, of spirits swarming closer to him. He couldn't see the living with him, or the bell in front of him. Whatever he was seeing blinded him even to his own thoughts and feelings.

Not that it worried him. It reminded him of places of wilderness, like Desert Resort, Twist Mountain or even his home in Sarasota Forest. The calm here banished any worries and made him feel connected to all of the spirits around him. If this was where souls ended up, then there was nothing to fear from death.

A red spirit passed through him, or maybe came from him. Then he felt a strong hand on his shoulder, and intelligent brown eyes looking back at his own. The red heat was comforting, and familiar even though it had been a long time since he had felt it. "Darcy," he said softly.

"It seems like I've been sleeping a long time," the ghost of the Darmantian said. "I thought you were in trouble and wanted to stay with you. But you're all grown up now, so I don't have to stay with you anymore."

She had been with him? And... she was going? "Wait, Darcy..."

But she let go. "You have to stand on your own now. But be careful. There is something within you that is very dangerous. Don't let others control that power. I believe in you."

"But I don't know what to do," N said.

"If you listen to your heart, you'll know. I love you, my little boy." Then she was gone and the light faded.

But Celestial Tower didn't reappear.

*The cry of a dragon split through the air, like a painful scream. It startled the guards at the entrance to the ruins of N's Castle. Originally, it had been an entrance to the east wing. With the central part collapsed and the western wing unstable, this was the only part of the castle in use.*

*Then N was kneeling at the top of the stairs, his head hung. His shoes were missing and his shirt was torn, revealing a number of arcane tattoos covering his arms, chest, and back. He was covered in sweat, wounded and shaken.*

*The guards quickly came over to him, offering to help him up. "My Lord, what's happened?" one asked.*

"*Don't touch me,*" N snapped. *Then he put his hands on the ground, barely able to support himself. Then he spoke in grief, "I don't know what's going on, so don't touch me."*

"*I-I'll get the Sages,*" one said, going into the castle. *The other stayed watch, uneasy.*

*By the time Ghetsis and two others came back with the guard, N had managed to get onto his feet. "N, there you are," Zinzolin said. "We've been worried about you. A lot has been going on..."*

"*Don't touch me or you'll die,*" N said, walking unsteadily into the castle.
He couldn't even make it to the stairs, so ended up going into a sitting room and shooing everyone else out. Not Ghetsis, though. Ghetsis could stay. "Your power seems to have grown in the time you were gone," he said.

Too exhausted to even nod, N lay down on one of the couches. "It's still unstable... very unstable. And wherever I go," a sob escaped him, so he closed his eyes, "I don't want to hurt anyone. I don't want to hurt them. Keep them all away, all the memories, all the people. I don't want to hurt anymore."

"This path seems to grow longer, doesn't it?" Ghetsis said. "But you will succeed. Your development proves it. I have managed to solve part of the puzzle this time. You still need to meet with Kyurem. We're certain that he should be able to stabilize your powers."

"Should I?" N asked. "I tried meeting with others. I don't really remember... they have fallen. I don't know what to do, I shouldn't..."

Ghetsis interrupted him with, "It will be fine when balance is restored. The world will be better off when you've succeeded, even if it seems bleak now." He then placed something by N's hand. "We've discovered that Kyurem has traveled through time, to the past. It has split history in two from that point on, and he imbalances the new history he has created. Use this to find him and you can save two worlds."

Opening his eyes, he saw a golden bracelet with three orbs. "Lustrous, Adamant, Griseous,... where did you find these? They've been missing, stolen from some Trainers in Sinnoh."

"Don't worry about that," Ghetsis said. "This has been constructed in a way that the latent powers of these orbs can be used by anyone. Can be, although I have only managed to teleport with them myself. You, on the other hand, should be capable of using this device to its fullest capacity."

"They resonate," N said, but saying that made him remember something. It made him want to scream... no, he had to control it. Tense, he clutched the bracelet and closed his eyes again.

"Spend some time recovering; you need it." Ghetsis walked to the door. "I'll make sure you're left alone to rest."

"I don't want to hurt anyone," N said. But there was a power inside him, an insanity, that could destroy anything it touched.
"All right, I'll just take them for a moment," the Pokecenter nurse said, setting the Pokeballs to Hilda's team into the healing machine then starting it. "Something up? You seem so serious, unlike when you're on TV."

"Hah, I guess I would look that way," Hilda said, smiling at that. Then she shrugged. "I normally just relax and do whatever. I'd really like to explore around Driftveil for a bit. Seems like there could be a lot of interesting places in and out of town, but it's been a week and I've hardly seen anything. There's big things going on and if this doesn't go well, I won't be able to explore around with my Pokemon freely."

She nodded. "That's true. Still, don't push yourself too hard. It wouldn't be good for you or your Pokemon." Seeing that the machine was done, she took the balls back out.

"We're all passionate about it, and I wouldn't do something if they didn't want it."

"That's good of you. Well here you are. Take care... oh, hello Clay," the nurse smiled at someone behind her.

"Evening," he said. Clay was a large man, both strong and stout. He wore dusty clothes, although the browns made it hard to tell where was dust and where was clean. On his head, he wore a large cowboy hat which made his stern face more intense. "You seen any of those goons from Team Plasma today?"

She shook her head. "Not that I can tell. Is something the matter?"

"We got a few troublemakers, so the town's blocked off for now," he said. "Don't let anyone complain to you about it." His Xtransceiver went off, so he stepped back. "Pardon me." As he went to put the call through he waved to Hilda and added, "Follow me." Then he left the building, talking to someone about watching fliers.

Hilda glanced at Kyurem, who shrugged. Maybe it had to do with the 'troublemakers' he was dealing with. At any rate, it seemed like a better idea to go along with what Clay wanted. They left the Pokecenter too, then waited on Clay to finish up his call.

"Keep me informed," the large man said, turning off the phone and then nodding to them. "Listen, I'm not one to follow hype," he said in a gruff tone. "I've seen all too many people turn out to be all bark and no bite, so I don't care about what image you've been building. I know that the dragon beside you is usually a sign of trouble, Hilda, and I don't want to be pulled in to a disaster by trusting the wrong people."

Kyurem narrowed his eyes at Clay. However, the Gym Leader didn't seem intimidated by that. From what she'd seen of him, Hilda knew that Clay was a serious person and he did not mess around when he thought something was wrong. "I don't blame you for feeling that way," she said. "But most trouble I cause is harmless."

"Hmph." He shifted his hat. "As you heard me say, I've got the town blocked off now. There have been fifteen Pokemon thefts in Driftveil today, and I nearly caught a couple of them in the act. I've got word that a couple of people have used Fly to enter Driftveil in the past half hour, but no one has left in the same manner. We've got the drawbridge up and you passed by the group I sent to block off the path to the forest. Did you see anyone suspicious going to the forest when you left?"
She shook her head. "Nope. I've only met with regular Trainers in the forest today, not any Plasma goons."

"Hmm. Well, you can't leave now, and if you try to Fly out, you'll have someone tailing you. So why don't you make yourself useful and help us search the town? We want to get them before they slip off and claim that we can't identify who the thieves were."

For a moment, Hilda was irritated at that order. But he was right. If they couldn't leave town, then there weren't many chances to train. Besides, it would be good to get some of Team Plasma to be held accountable. "Sure," she said, smiling. "Anywhere in particular?"

"Well you've got him with you, so why don't you check out the Cold Storage area?" Clay said, pointing to the southeast. "You can find the entrance at the south end of town. You should be better at picking out people and Pokemon in that area."

"Certainly," Kyurem said.

"All right, I still have my coat and things. Let's go!" The two of them headed off south while Clay continued to search around and in buildings near the Pokecenter.

Driftveil was an old town, unfortunately in sad shape. This was especially apparent in the homes in the southern half, with a few roped off as unsafe and due to demolition. While those were suspicious locations that people could hide in, they were possibly dangerous. Besides, Clay had sent them off to another area. The weathered old houses with peeling paint still made her feel a little sad. This was the town she was born in. Were one of those old houses the one she might have grown up in, if things had gone differently?

Off to the south, there was an area blocked off by a striped gate, but the sign leading to the Cold Storage was on a neighboring street. In front of that area, she saw Cheren, Hilbert, and a few of their Pokemon in a group. "Hey, where's you running off to?" Hilbert asked, waving to them.

"On a mission!" she said, raising a fist and slowing for a moment. "Have you guys seen any Team Plasma members around?"

"No, we just got into town," Cheren said. "What's the matter?"

She waved off to the rest of town. "Clay's got Driftveil closed off now, at least the roads. They've had a rash of Pokemon kidnappings today and he's certain they're still in town. We're going to check out the Cold Storage area. Want to help?"

"Plasma, huh?" Hilbert said. "Wouldn't hurt to look around."

"Eh, from what I've seen of them, they're surprisingly weak battlers," Cheren said. "But who knows. We'd better hunt around too if the trail is hot. Cold Storage then."

"Well he sent us because Kyurem will be comfortable searching around," she said. "But if you wanna brave the chill too, come on, no time to waste." They went on past the gate and split up.

There were about half a dozen large warehouses, with big machinery keeping them chilled. This place looked old too, if in better condition than some of the houses. The sides were worn from winds and rains, while the machinery was quite noisy, putting out steam often. There were patches of tall grass here, slipped in between the concrete roads. There even seemed to be Pokemon around, calling out or watching them quietly. On one hand, that might be a sign that Plasma wasn't here. On the other hand, they could be wild and so Plasma wouldn't bother them.
After Kyurem immediately dismissed two warehouses as not smelling anyone in them, he brought her into one of the largest warehouses, at the southeast corner. "There's a number of people and Pokemon inside," he said as he walked through the door. "I can't tell specifically."

"Better check it out then," Hilda said, following him.

Not too far in, a man wearing a brown jacket with the Cold Storage logo on it came up to them. "Hey there. Here for some battles? A few of the guys have teams around, but we can't take long for battles."

"Not right now," Hilda said. "We're looking for some guys from Team Plasma that are causing trouble. Mind if we look around?"

"Mm," he checked a clipboard, "you should be all right, since we don't need to do any big moving at this time. Don't mess with the machinery and I hope you have some good shoes. We're having some problems with the freezer in this warehouse and there's ice patches on the floor. The guys should be clearing it, but better safe than sorry."

"I should be okay," Hilda said, after giving a check on her shoes. They were sneakers that she had used to walk around in when boots weren't needed, and they had handled ice fine. "So have you seen any of them?"

"I think I saw a few hanging around the other day," the worker said. "But honestly, we get people coming in and out of here a lot, some to check on merchandise, some to battle, some to work, so unless there's a big fuss, I usually don't notice. Plus there's some containers that we aren't allowed to mess with, but if people are hiding out in here, the container doors should be open as it's unsafe otherwise."

"I see. Thanks." She headed further in, to where Kyurem was looking around. "Well he was honest, but it is worrisome that they wouldn't really check on who's around."

He nodded. "There's a fair number in here, mostly in groups. Let's go."

The warehouse was full of the big containers that went on back of semis and trains, all frosted over with ice and snow. The lights hitting the ice made a glare which sometimes made things hard to see. In other spots, moisture hung thickly and made the chilled air hazy. There were piles in many places with broken up ice, sitting against the containers which made a gridded maze. At first, they only ran into workers who were breaking up the ice or checking on inventories.

One of the workers pointed them to a container in the northern part of the warehouse. "The back of C-86 has been open lately. One time I spotted a crate of Pokeballs, but not the kind we get from factory shipments. Then this guy came up and chewed me out for peeking into a private container. I didn't think it'd be related to Pokemon thieves, but now that you mention it, that was suspicious."

After thanking him, Hilda and Kyurem navigated their way to the particular container. It didn't look like Plasma's normal deal: no 'P' signs, its colors were gray and orange, no propaganda. Kyurem pulled Hilda closer to the container, around the corner from the open back. "Someone's in there that I want to listen to."

She nodded and tried to pick out the voices inside too. It wasn't easy to hear through the container, but she did hear, "He is back, I saw him."

"How is he? I was worried when I heard about it."

"He was really pale and one of the Shadows had to support him as he was really tired. But you
know, I heard later that it was because he had climbed up Celestial Tower. That was the day he'd been released from the hospital too."

"I don't know if I'd have the will to do that after being so sick. He's amazing even when he's weakened."

"Sounds like N," Hilda whispered. It was the kind of stubborn thing he'd do. But if he had gone to Celestial Tower, that was good.

"Wait a bit," Kyurem said.

"Wasn't he going to address everyone tonight or tomorrow? I wanted to be back for that. We hear from the Sages all the time, but N hasn't done much speaking since he set out last fall."

"I hope we can get back for that."

"Keep it down," an older voice said.

As that voice tried to get the talking down, Kyurem let go of Hilda. "Go call for them," he whispered. "There's ten people in there, and who knows how many Pokemon they have in Pokeballs."

She nodded and walked off to the end of another container, trying to minimize how much they'd hear her. Since she didn't know how to contact Clay, she called Cheren and Hilbert, asking them to get a hold of the Gym Leader. Then it was just waiting quietly, still trying to eavesdrop.

Cheren arrived first, walking up the same way Hilda and Kyurem had come. "Hilbert called Clay, but I came over in case of trouble."

"Good," Hilda said with a smile. "Not much changed, except I can't hear them as well."

Then, footsteps came from inside the container. One of them had left. Giving a frown, Kyurem indicated for them to wait a moment, then vanished into an icy white light. He moved to the open area in back of the container, then reappeared in his dragon form. Given the space between containers, he barely fit, with his tail blocking off the side opposite from where they were hiding. Once in place, he gave a simple growl.

The one Plasma knight who had wandered out yelped, running back into the container. Hilda brought out Olette; after giving her and Cheren's Liepard a chance to adjust to the cold, they went ahead towards the opening in the container. Turning the corner, they found it was just as Kyurem had said: there were nine of the knights, one of the sages, a few small covered crates, and a wall of ice blocks in the very front. "What're you all chilling out in here for?" Hilda asked.

"I could ask you the same," the sage said, visibly shivering. "What business do you have in trapping us here?"

"You've been stealing Pokemon around here, and we're here to get them back," Cheren said. "Now stop wasting our time and surrender."

"I don't think so," the sage said. "Perhaps you have us trapped, but we have you outnumbered, and over-powered."

"You have us overpowered?" Hilda asked sarcastically. Kyurem gave another growl behind her.

"I don't believe your dragon can maneuver well in here," he replied. "Get those kids out of our way;
we might as well take the chance to get out of this miserable cold."

Hilda winked to Cheren, who smiled back. They hadn't paired up for battles often, but Hilda felt confident even if Kyurem wouldn't be as great in this place. While the knights seemed to have two or three Pokemon a piece, Hilda had five she could use, and Cheren had four, all nine of which were capable and loyal. Team Plasma tried to take them down, but the pairs kept falling before them.

And then the last of the knights and the sage came forward. "Well, now that your Pokemon have been worn down, let me show you what I meant," the sage said. "My name is Zinzolin, and your efforts will end here."

"You'd better match that big talk or we'll be disappointed," Hilda said, using a healing potion on Tarzan. He was handling things so far alongside Cheren's Emboar Smoky.

To his credit, the ice crystal Pokemon Zinzolin first called out was pretty tough, even surviving a hit from Tarzan (although not the second hit). He then called out a Beartic, which Hilda remembered from a Trainer in the forest nearby. It went down quicker. She hardly noticed what Pokemon the knight had, because Cheren had him shut out of the fight fast.

Still, the Sage didn't look too bothered to be left alone. He held onto his third Pokeball for a moment. "Now let's see how you handle something you could know nothing about. Meet Genesect." He then released a tall dark violet Pokemon that buzzed unpleasantly. She immediately shifted the cannon on her back.

"We've heard about her," Cheren said. "Smoky, Flame Charge her."

"Tarzan, follow up if she's still standing," Hilda added as the Emboar built up a ring of fire around himself for his charge.

To Zinzolin's orders, Genesect fired a beam of bright energy at Tarzan. The Scrafty then disobeyed Hilda in order to jump back and yank Hilda to the side before the attack went off. The beam flew right at Kyurem, punching a hole through his black shell and going straight into the container behind him. Then Smoky slammed his body into Genesect, causing her to hiss under Kyurem's roar of indignation. He fired an Ice Beam at her, aiming it so that there was no danger of hitting Cheren or Smoky. This knocked Genesect out.

"You can't have had her to train for long, based on when Hilbert met her," Cheren said.

In the meantime, Hilda looked over to Kyurem. He wasn't bleeding, but thick white mist poured out of the wound. He was coating the wound in ice slowly while keeping an eye on the inside of Team Plasma's container. Since he seemed okay, she hugged Tarzan. "Thanks for that," she said.

He murmured something in reply; it sounded like he was glad to have kept her safe.

"What in tarnation is going on here?" Clay's voice rang out in the warehouse. He and Hilbert came up to the entrance of the container, along with a group of policemen, miners, and warehouse workers. "You nearly put a hole through the wall."

"They found us, but we were still able to block them off," Cheren said, stepping aside so Clay could enter. "It was one of their Pokemon that caused that blast."

Clay glanced around, then nodded. "So you all were hiding out in here. From the looks of things, you were defeated honorably in battle and you have the stolen Pokemon in here. I'm putting all of you under arrest. Fellows, take them to the station and make sure they don't run off. And confiscate
all of the Pokeballs they have."

Zinzolin clenched his fists, then nodded. "Very well. We'll go with you."

"But," one of the others said.

"Honorably," Zinzolin interrupted. "But the other Trainers were aware of the conditions that were set for battles. You won't make much of a case."

"So you think," Clay said as the others gathered Pokeballs from the Plasma members, then escorted them out of the warehouse.

With them doing that, Hilda and Cheren stepped away with their Pokemon, over to where Hilbert had stayed. "That was a close call," Cheren said, shifting his glasses. "Is Kyurem okay?"

When Kyurem didn't make a response, Hilda checked his Pokeball. "I guess he can't shift back to his human form with that injury. Not getting any warnings off this, so he should be fine."

"What hit him like that?" Hilbert asked. "Seems unreal that it could go through him and three containers. Or was it multiple hits?"

"It was that Genesect," Cheren said. "The sage had her."

"Nearly hit me, but this hero got me out of the way," Hilda said, rubbing Tarzan's head.

"At least she'll be out of their hands now," Hilbert said. "It might even be a chance to prove their shadier works. Oh, Hilda, there was something you and Kyurem should hear about."

"Go ahead," she said. "I'll let him know if he's not fully paying attention now."

Hilbert glanced at the others, then said, "Remember when we went to speak to Tornadus? He mentioned something odd about me, saying that I might be a demimortal. He wouldn't explain it, and between one thing or another, I haven't had a chance to ask about it until today when I was out training with Cheren. Meloetta was watching us so I asked her."

Cheren nodded. "Yeah, and she wasn't too sure about that either. It might have just been Tornadus messing with you."

"Yes, but if it's real," he shifted his stance and crossed his arms over his chest. Whatever it was was still causing him thought. "A demimortal is the heir to an immortal. It is rare for one of the immortal Pokemon to fully die, but there are occasions when one might choose to not return to life. If that happens, then during their final years, they select a Pokemon that they feel worthy to be their heir. The demimortal then lives with their predecessor, learning from them and slowly being changed by their power. At the end, the immortal passes on their power and responsibilities to the demimortal, who often takes on a form similar to their predecessor. There are also cases where a demimortal doesn't inherit, but is close enough to the immortal that they take on unusual qualities."

"Oh, like Mimi?" Hilda asked. "She now knows a move that only Dragons are supposed to know."

"I suppose," Hilbert said. "The thing is, we should already have close contact with an immortal if we are. Still, she thinks it might be possible due to some quality about our auras."

"That's weird," Hilda said. "But you're going to call on Reshiram anyway. He should be able to clear things up."
"I was hoping Kyurem might know something."

"Wait for Reshiram," Kyurem said, now back to being human. His clothes were different, with black cloth wrapped tightly around his chest like bandages and a long black jacket instead of a shirt. "He'd have the clearest answer."

About then, Clay came over to them. "Thanks for yer help," he said, nodding in appreciation. "We've still got some searches being done, so the town will be closed off for a couple more hours. But we might've got the big group if we have one of the Sages."

"You also have a rather dangerous Pokemon in your possession," Hilbert said. "Genesect was genetically altered from a fossil by a scientist connected to them, so be careful with her."

"Same one that caused that?" he asked, pointing over to the hole in the container.

"Yes, that one," Cheren said.

"I see." He put his hands in the pocket of his jacket. "I'll take care of that one personally. The police will get the stolen Pokemon sorted out. But now, young lady, I was expecting you to be around my Gym any day now."

She nodded. "Right, we're ready."

"Ready?" he said, raising an eyebrow. "Fine. I'll be in my Gym, but I have special conditions for you since I know you like a challenge. Once you enter the Gym, you have one hour to make your way past all of the Trainers on duty tonight and defeat me. If you can't make that, then you're not getting a badge tonight. See you." Then he headed out, calling ahead to one of the miners.

"One hour?" Cheren asked. "But you're going to waste some time on working all the lifts. Not only that, but I've fought quite a few Trainers who work in the Gym. There could be a lot to get through tonight."

Hilda looked at Kyurem. "Then he wants us to blast right through everyone? It depends on how the guy with a hole punched through his body feels."

The dragon boy smirked. "It was a strong hit, but nothing truly serious. Stop by the Pokecenter and we should do just fine."

"Looks like we're meeting Clay's terms then," Hilda said. It would be a challenge. But then, it was already feeling like a thrill.

Cheren had been right about the lifts. In the entrance room of the Gym, there was a large elevator that brought them down into a deep mine shaft. It had been big enough that she could stand comfortably there with Kyurem in his dragon form. But these lifts did not move as fast as the elevators in Castelia City. Once she got onto a level, she had to navigate steel pathways to find the Gym Trainers. Temporary blockades were in place too, and there were nine elevator shafts in all, on three levels. The battles themselves weren't too bad when Kyurem could Ice Beam through the majority of the Pokemon there (and if one was resistant, a Draco Meteor handled the situation fine). Finding the right paths and waiting on the elevators to get to the right level took up much of her hour.

When they reached the central elevator, it dropped them past the three levels and deeper into the mine shaft. Hilda checked her Xtransceiver for the time. "Just under fifteen minutes left and with what the receptionist said, we've got all the Gym Trainers," she said. "I think we're fine."
"It sounded worse than it was," Kyurem said, standing at the edge of the platform and watching the layers of dirt pass by.

"So what do you think?" Hilda said, coming over to lean on the railing by him. "Was Tornadus messing with Hilbert or is there something to that?"

"I can't be sure, even after I affected Hilbert's powers," he said. "There's definitely something different about those two. They're not like the gijinkas as I know them. The N from my history even managed to follow me here." He crossed his arms over his chest, his attention now inward. "I am... bothered by the description Cheren's given. With this new possibility, that one may actually be dangerous to me."

"N? You mean his Pokemon?"

"No, I mean him, alone," Kyurem turned to her as the sound of metal shifting began below them. A gateway to a lower mine was opening up. "If we consider those two as demimortals, then they have acquired that potential without an immortal to trigger it in them. There is a chance that it was Keldeo's suffering that did this. I doubt that, though at this time we cannot be certain. So they have the ability to inherit the power of an immortal. At the time I left my history, both Zekrom and Reshiram were dead. Combine that with the sign of black and white scales on his arms, and I believe that that N may have inherited the power of both of them. If he can control that power, then he can overwhelm me if he surprises me. And that still doesn't answer what killed my siblings in the first place."

"That does sound dangerous," Hilda said. Then she smirked. "Well then, we're just going to have to be prepared for him. And don't forget, you're not alone. I'm sure the whole team will back you, and I'll do what I can to help."

"Then I have no reason to lack in confidence," Kyurem said, bowing his head. "Thank you."

Past the large metal gate, they entered a darker part of the mines. The lights down there slowly got brighter until the large battle platform at the end of a pathway was easily visible. Clay was at the far end of the platform, waiting for them.

"Looks like you made good time getting down here," he said as they came onto the platform. "A good Trainer needs to have a solid bond with their Pokemon; a great Trainer needs to be ready for anything that comes his or her way." He then adjusted his hat. "With that in mind... we're fighting doubles tonight. Four to four. Will you agree to these terms?"

Doubles, four to four? Hilda's mind raced, thinking through her team. She had been thinking this would be the League standard of singles up to six. Still... having a limit of four could mean that she could keep Frank out of the fight; as good as he was, he didn't have any particular skills that would be effective here in a Ground-type Gym. She wasn't sure who else would sit out, but she could play that by ear. And doubles, she hadn't done that much, but people in Driftveil were fond of triples and rotation.

She nodded. "Gotcha. We can handle that."

"Good, then let's not waste your time left. Declared four to four, ready... and begin, Krokorok and Crustle!"

Kyurem stepped back as Hilda picked up an extra Pokeball. "Fedora and Tarzan, both of you out here!" she called, releasing her Serperior and Scrafty. "Seed and swagger, at face."
After giving each other a glance, the two Pokemon set the battle in motion by moving before either of Clay's Pokemon. Fedora used Leech Seed against the Krokorok, setting up a continual drain on it. Meanwhile, Tarzan made some insulting calls and waved off the Crustle, making it both angry and confused. Still, the red reptile tried (and failed) to use Swagger back at Tarzan, followed by firing of rocks from the ground crab (although a fair number of those shots missed).

Now that they were afflicted, Hilda had her Pokemon take a turn to boost their own skills, Fedora by Coil and Tarzan by Work Up. Clay's side both attacked, although the Crustle attacked itself and the Krokorok's Bulldoze wasn't that affective against the Serperior. Then Fedora did one more Coil while Tarzan struck the Crustle with a kick. If it had any Bug type moves, it could be a big problem even while confused. And it seemed to, given Clay's orders. By then, Fedora was able to ready to strike with Leaf Blade and finish off the Crustle.

Clay took a second to consider her Pokemon, then called out his own Exadrill. Hilda knew it would be tough to take down. However, she also knew that the Krokorok with Swagger could lose her control of the battle. She ordered both of her Pokemon to attack the Kokorok and whichever one was slower... that was Tarzan. Fedora wiped out the Krokorok easily with Giga Drain, but Tarzan took it in stride and used Hi Jump Kick against the Exadrill, managing to knock the heavy Pokemon back a foot. But not knock it out.

She ended up smiling on seeing Clay release a Palpitoad. If she had kept with using Kyurem through this, then it and the Exadrill might slow them down. As it was, the Palpitoad was no match for Fedora and Tarzan could finish off the Exadrill. Although not before it slammed him with Steamroller, an intense looking attack where the ground grew spikes and slammed into the Scrafty.

With that, Clay finally smiled at her. "Well then, it seems that even time limits and unexpected changes aren't much of an obstacle to you all anymore."

Fedora called out in agreement, raising himself up, while Tarzan smirked and repeated some of his gestures from Swagger. Hilda nodded. "Yeah, but it was a lot of fun. I know I can rely on my friends."

"And that's how it should be," he said in agreement. "Well, you've proven yourself to me this evening, with real talent under your boisterous facade. You've earned this badge well, but keep up the hard work. There's still got a lot to accomplish this month."

"Yeah," she said coming up to accept the Quake Badge and a handshake from Clay. Then she turned and showed it off to Fedora, Tarzan, and Kyurem. "Thanks, you three! I think we've all earned a day off tomorrow. What do you say to that?"

Fedora and Tarzan gave noisy cheers to that idea, while Kyurem quietly nodded.
Showdown in an Electric Blue Cavern

The throne room was buzzing with anticipation. Any of the team members who could make it were there. This included Zinzolin and a group of knights that had been under him. Although they had been arrested last night, Ghetsis, Grom, and Giallo had stepped in to get them released. Now they were all waiting on the meeting to begin, one of the biggest meetings the team had had in the past few months. And N was to lead this meeting personally.

He was in the hallway with Ghetsis, now that it had cleared out. Looking into the hall, he could feel their excitement. It intimidated him, making his stomach flutter. Not only that, but his friends weren't there to back him up as Pokemon were not normally in the castle. And he was dressed differently today, in a long black cloak, black dress shirt, black pants, and the Black King's crown. Being so formal had been special once, but it only added to his discomfort now.

"They're expecting so much out of me that I'm afraid that I'll only disappoint them," N told Ghetsis.

"You won't," he said. "And you need to get used to this. Before you know it, you'll need to address the entire region of Unova, and even the world. I can only cover for you for so long. Are you well rested? I've done what I can to make you look less ill, but you'll need to keep alert this time."

"I'm fine," he said, smiling despite his anxiety.

"Good. Let's go."

It was time. Trying to push away his feelings, N led the way into the throne room, up the center aisle which had been kept clear. The pools had been covered over so that everyone had plenty of space to stand. At first, the room hushed in reverence. Then people began to cheer, happy to see that it was him. They're all here to support me, he reminded himself. Like Rood said, they proved that there was good still in the world by supporting his vision of what the world should be like.

The other five Sages met them at the front of the room. N bowed to them, and they replied in same. Then he turned to the rest in the room and raised his hand. They all quieted in response, heedful of his authority.

My responsibility is towards the innocent Pokemon, and these good people, he thought. After taking a deep breath, N addressed them with a smile. "Thank you for your warm welcome. It always cheers me to see how devoted all of you are to our cause. We have been through rough times ever since we stepped out of the shadows and into the public eye last fall. But we have stayed firm to our beliefs and have even grown in numbers; there are a great number of you who weren't even here for my coronation last summer, and I am grateful that you have decided to support our dreams of equality and freedom for all, both human and Pokemon. In the next month, the conflict could become more agitated as our enemies try harder to bring us down. But I believe in all of you. Together, we can stand against their ignorance and cruelty.

"I must apologize for being distant in recent days. I have had many things to reconsider and changes to make." Ghetsis had told him several times that he shouldn't speak of doubt here, as that would weaken their faith in him. "But now that I have seen the world's falsehoods for myself, I am more determined than ever to bring justice to Pokemon and set the world straight. By the time summer comes around... no, within a month's time, we should have our plans come to fruition and the changing of the world will begin. It won't all happen immediately, and our path will continue to be a hard one, but in the end, we will have a better world where peace and fairness will rule over all and there will be no reason to hurt each other anymore."
"To start things off today, I have need for a group of volunteers who do not mind taking part in Pokemon battles. Some of our most powerful opponents are young Pokemon Trainers, and we need to discourage them from continuing to fight against us." It did hurt to think about it... they could have been friends. But he needed to deal with Hilda and Hilbert, the sooner the better.

After a day of getting to relax and actually enjoy Driftveil, Hilda and her team moved on through Route 6 to reach Mistralton. They had spent a lot of time on the route before, training up and even battling some scientists who worked at the Weather Research lab there. They had not gone into the cave at the end of the route, but they would need to today to pass through to the next Gym.

It was raining hard and the stream that passed through was swollen with melt-off from Twist Mountain. But although that covered the ground in mud and slick puddles, it was still a pleasant walk. Even more so when Hilda came upon Bianca and Professor Juniper heading the same way. "Hey, it's great to see you two out of the lab!" she called.

"Oh hello Hilda," Juniper said, grinning and waiting on her to catch up. "Well it has warmed up and after all those papers I had to write, I'm eager to get back out to field research. How's it going with you?"

"I saw that you had beat Clay the other day despite the crazy restrictions he put on you," Bianca said, hugging her. "Congratulations!"

"I saw that you had beat Clay the other day despite the crazy restrictions he put on you," Bianca said, hugging her. "Congratulations!"

"Thanks! And really, it turned out to be not that big of a deal." She started telling them of what had happened that day. Meanwhile, Kyurem walked along with them, watching the area carefully.

Further down the path, they came upon a muddy field of tall grass. "Be careful around here," Juniper said. "Sometimes you'll see what looks like a Pokeball lying in fields like this, but it turns out to be a mischievous Pokemon called Foongus."

"Yeah, I had to fight a few of them recently," Hilda said.

"I hear there's a couple other Pokemon that also look like Pokeballs," Bianca said. "Isn't that really curious? I mean, Pokeballs have only been around, what, the past hundred years or so. And those Pokemon only really showed up in the past hundred years."

"That is something researchers have been looking into for a while now," Juniper said, shifting her jacket against a cool gust of wind. "The Pokemon we're interested in finding today is like that too, actually. See, there's one known as a Klink living in Chargestone Cavern ahead, and it looks like a couple of gears hooked together. My father has found evidence, or rather, lack of evidence that it existed in the distant past. He's trying to figure out an exact date, which is tough because in the early days, a lot of Pokemon were mysterious and virtually unknown. I want to see one for myself, maybe catch one for close study."

"So what, did they spontaneously appear when things like Pokeballs and gears came into existence?" Hilda asked.

The professor shrugged. "In the cast of the Voltorbs, the other Pokemon that looks like a Pokeball, almost. That one has a proven cause of existence, when a factory accident caused some Pokeballs to turn into Pokemon. How they can do that, we're not entirely sure."

"What do you think about that, Rei?" Hilda said, nudging him.

"I wasn't paying attention," he said. "There's something about the forest today that I don't like."
"The rain?" Bianca asked. When he shook his head and went back to watching the trees, she said, "I hope it's nothing dangerous. But anyhow, I'm excited to see Chargestone Cavern! I did some reading on it, and there's a naturally high level of electricity inside. I mean really high. It's enough that some of the crystals inside will actually float magnetically! You can even push them towards each other and they'll be attracted or repelled based on the lay of their magnetism. Maybe it sounds silly, but it seems like fun."

"It is pretty fun, until a cluster of them ends up blocking your way forward," Juniper said with a chuckle. "There's a great many wonderful places in the world, and even just here in Unova."

"That does sound wild," Hilda said. She was trying to think of some joke to go with it (or the rain), but then someone grabbed and pulled her back. She caught a glimpse of black gloves and white hair when the rainy forest blurred into nothing. Then, with a crackle of electricity, her vision reformed into that of a cave filled with a cool blue glow. Ahead of her, there was a large piece of blue crystal from where the light came from. Smaller blue and white crystals hung in the air, while the darker stones of the walls and floor were solidly there. Not sure what was going on, she grabbed the band she stored her Pokeballs on and picked out Kyurem's.

"We have blocked off the exits to the cave," the person behind her said. "You have been called to enter alone."

"Except that I'm not alone," Hilda said, pressing the button on the Pokeball twice. Once to recall Kyurem, and once more to bring him into the cave. She had aimed the release so that he also appeared behind her. There was a growl and the snap of his jaws.

But the person had teleported with her a few feet ahead, out of Kyurem's range and facing him. Two more appeared close by; they wore identical outfits, entirely black so that it all blended together, from the slim shoes that left no imprints to the long scarves that covered the lower half of their faces. However, their hair was pure white, thick and short, with bangs just long enough to help obscure their eyes. But not entirely; the one that she could see best had red eyes with no pupils, almost resembling the multifaceted eye of a Bug Pokémon.

"Yes, but we don't want to hurt each other," the one holding her said. It sounded like a woman. "Right?"

Kyurem growled, his eyes seeming to brighten in the dark cave.

"I don't think he's going to back down unless you let me go," Hilda said.

"We've been instructed to bring you to meet with our lord," another one of them said. Not the red-eyed one, but another woman.

"Go ahead," the one behind her said, letting her go. "But don't try to leave; we'll prevent that."

Then the three of them vanished.

Hilda walked over to Kyurem, who was looking around warily. "Man, that came out of nowhere."

There was a flash as Kyurem reverted to his human form. "Are you okay?" he asked, walking up to meet her and putting his hand on her shoulder.

She nodded. "Yeah, I'm okay. Professor Juniper and Bianca are probably worried, though." She turned on her Xtransceiver, but the screen looked a little warped. Although it was hard to read, there was a warning. 'Electrical interference too high for visual transmissions. Please reserve audio transmissions for emergencies to limit damage to equipment.' But this was enough of an
emergency, so she requested a call to both of them.

It was picked up immediately, although the screen was filled with static. Juniper spoke up first. "Hilda, is that you? The screen's black."

"Yeah, it's me," she said. "Sorry about the black screen, but I got brought into Chargestone Cavern and can't do visuals. Kyurem and I are fine, but we've got some people in here that want to talk with us."

"If you have Kyurem, you should be okay," Bianca said. "He flipped out when you vanished, but then was gone just as suddenly."

"Do you want us to bring some help?" Juniper asked. "And who has you?"

"I don't know who, but it was some weird ninjas," she said. "They said they have the exits blocked off, so I don't know how well anyone else can get in here. Don't worry; we'll go see what they want and try to get out of here quickly."

"All right," Juniper said, sounding reluctant to leave it at that. "Be careful. I'll make some calls to get some help." Then they cut off the call.

Once she was off, Kyurem pointed away from the large crystal. "They've got the entrance clogged up with Galvantula webbing. It's electrified, but Olette could remove it without harm. But with how quickly those people can act, we'd best go ahead and meet with them."

She nodded. "All right, then let's go show them and their boss that we aren't to be messed with."

The path was straightforward, as it went around the large crystal and led to an opening in the cave. The three ninjas were waiting on them there, as was their leader. Inexplicably, it turned out to be N. He smiled on seeing her, but something wasn't right. Maybe it was the blue lightning turning things a little creepier than they were.

"There you are," N said. "Welcome to Chargestone Cavern. This is a wonderful place, isn't it? A great number of Electric Pokemon settled here in years past, causing the natural static electricity here to build, and attract even more Pokemon who love electricity. And it's beautiful in more than just looks too. When you take measurements and calculate the flow of everything you can see those formulas come to life here, causing the force of gravity to be defied and the light to be so clear. It's really breathtaking."

"Your rate of talking is breathtaking too," Hilda teased. But the fact that he was talking fast again meant that he had to be nervous. And then there were his eyes, which looked dull and tired, not with the wonder he was talking about. He still looked thin too. All those mixed signals didn't make his smile convincing. "This is a pretty cool place, but seriously, I haven't seen you in a while, not counting when you were delirious. Are you doing all right? I'm just getting back into my normal traveling routine."

"I'm fine," he said dismissively. "Aren't you concerned about what you're here for?"

Although that was a worry, she put a hand on her hip and replied casually, "Maybe, but I'm more grateful to see one of my friends up and around again. So who are these three? They're quite rude and if they weren't so fast, Kyurem would've eaten one of them by now."

"These are the Shadow Triad," N answered. "They work for me."

"They snatched her away from me," Kyurem said in anger.
N bowed his head. "Sorry about that, but we weren't expecting others to be coming here with you. We don't need to be interrupted. I have instructed them not to hurt either of you, so you don't need to worry. They've been gathering information on you and your friends."

"And that's not a reason to be worried?" Hilda asked, raising her eyebrows.

N came closer. "Your friend Cheren left home in search of power and recognition, and he has become strong at the expense of his Pokemon. It's a shame that he didn't realize how harsh he was being to them."

"Well he's realized that now," Hilda said. "I heard it from him, that his Liepard collapsed one day and he had to acknowledge that it was his doing. His parents have pressured him just as hard to succeed. He has relaxed his attitude in the past month, so you don't have to worry about him."

"I hope that is so. Now your friend Bianca," he frowned. "She has found that not everyone can be strong and has all but given up."

For a moment, Hilda's anger bristled, wanting to smack him for talking about her that way. But she caught hold of that before it came into the open. Antagonizing N was the last thing they wanted to do. "I wouldn't say she's given up. Rather, she's decided to turn her focus on other things. That doesn't mean that she's not strong."

"But she is not strong with the way the world is now," N pointed out. "As for you... you didn't go in search of power. Power found you. You haven't tried to be strong, but became strong anyhow. You had no serious goal in mind when you left home last fall, you move fluidly from one idea to the next, you can work for your friends one day and yourself the next, you don't value things so much as use them when convenient to you... in this, you seem to have hit some strange middle road."

"And what's wrong with that?" Hilda asked.

N sighed. "How is the world even clear to you? You need to have some certainty so that you know where you're going, but you cultivate uncertainty and spontaneity."

"It might be that her values are on a scale completely different from yours," Kyurem said.

He shook his head. "That's impossible. There is right and wrong. There is no gray, just black and white. There can't be a different set of values that is also right."

She shrugged. "Well if you brought me in here for a debate, I hate to disappoint you but I've never studied philosophy and don't really intend to."

"That's a shame." N stepped back and pointed further down the path. "But enough with words. I want to see you prove yourself in this cave. Whatever your values are, and however you think of Pokemon... you had better keep them close because you will need them. If you fail, you will forsake your Pokemon and everyone will know about it. I'll see you at the end." He nodded to Shadow Triad member nearest to him. That one took his hand then disappeared with him, and the other two."

"How does he want me to prove myself?" Hilda asked, dropping her hands to her sides. "Is there something special in this cave?"

Kyurem shrugged. "There's a lot of electricity here and if I'm right, the path through it is long and winding. We'll just have to see."
Hilda smiled. "You and the others are with me. I'm not worried. Let's go."

After climbing a few ledges, moving some crystals out of the way, and going down a long path, they found someone else. But not a Team Plasma member. Hilbert was there with his Lampent, looking cautiously across a long stone bridge. "Did you get captured by Plasma too?" he asked on spotting them.

"Looks like it," she said, hurrying over. "How are you doing?"

"Not so well," he said, looking down and shifting his hat. "I was avoiding this place on purpose, you know. My Pokemon have been getting better, but the wild Pokemon around here hit so many of their weaknesses. And on the other side of this bridge, there's a whole bunch of Plasma knights looking to fight me... us, I guess. N said he'd take my Pokemon from me if I failed."

"You too, huh?" Hilda frowned. "Man, I do not like seeing him get into being an antagonist."

"Right," Hilbert said, nodding.

"He has completely the wrong attitude about it," she said, shaking her fist in the air in jest. "Way too gentle and nervous about it. If you're going to be a villain, then you have to focus on it and really be a villain."

For a moment, he stared at her. Then he laughed. "Oh, I get it. Yeah, if this was a movie, I'd be calling him a lame villain too. Although this is a pretty cunning trap. With the other bridge out, this cave is long and there's all sorts of places for them to wait and ambush us. Who knows how many of them are in here."

"Quit your whining," Hilda said, walking over to the bridge. Then she turned to him. "Remember, the other day I had to fight ten Plasma members as five doubles in a row, with Cheren as my partner, and we fought Genesect. She might've been underleveled, but after that, Clay forced me to run through and beat ten more battles in a row in under an hour. And I did it. So yeah, maybe this place sucks for your team to get through. But if we stick together, we can handle it. Maybe we don't know how many of them are ahead, but that's fine. I stocked up on a lot of medicines yesterday as I was planning on spending a while in here training anyhow. We're going to be just fine."

"Yes, m'am," Hilbert said, in a teasing voice. "When you put it that way, it doesn't sound as bad. Shall we?"

"I'm just waiting on you to start walking," Hilda said, turning around and heading across the bridge with Kyurem.

Thankfully, Team Plasma didn't attempt to separate the two of them while passing through their gauntlet of battles. Hilda got Hilbert to join her in battles whenever they ran into a pair of the knights, switching around his Pokemon to help them with battle experience. There were six of them across the bridge, leading up to a staircase down to a lower level. Down there, they ran into a full dozen of the knights. Still, it wasn't a big problem even if she had to find some Ethers in her bag to keep her Pokemon from exhausting themselves. Ethers were hard to find, but they were perfect for a long series of battles like this.

They ended up back upstairs after shifting some floating crystals around to clear the path to them. There were six Plasma knights right at the top of the stairs, but they turned out to be no more difficult than the rest. But after that, the way was empty and quiet. "Are we near the exit to the cave?" Hilda asked Hilbert.
He nodded. "It's a short ways around that corner. But I would think they'd put their strongest fighter there, after we've gone through all the rest."

"Yeah, makes sense," she said.

They went around the corner and N was waiting for them. "So you made it by working together," he said. "I hadn't expected that."

"What, you thought we'd ignore each other?" Hilda asked.

"We're friends, so of course we would work together," Hilbert added. "What do you want to prove with this?"

"I want to see how devoted you are to your cause, and if you truly do care about your Pokemon." N then pulled out two Pokemon. "And since you insist on working together, then I will battle you both."

"Are you sure about that?" Hilbert asked.

N nodded and released a Klang and an Archeops. Well if he was serious... Hilda took Kyurem's Pokeball, signaling him to take battle alongside Hilbert's Lampent Madeline. She had seen him earlier in all these fights, so she didn't react badly when the dragon appeared. Recalling that the Archeops would get less aggressive as it got hit, she ordered Kyurem to use Ice Beam against it while Hilbert had Madeline hit the Klang with Flame Burst.

That did not end well. Madeline managed to hit the Klang with a burst of flames, scattering indirect fire all around it. This made the Archeops turn hazy, revealing it to actually be a tall black canine instead. The Zoroark Zane then struck Kyurem with a powerful hit of Night Slash right before he got hit with Ice Beam. Both were left standing. That is, until the Klang struck Kyurem with a blinding attack of Hyper Beam. Kyurem roared, but then fell unconscious from the combination of blows.

Hilda hadn't seen Kyurem get defeated so quickly, at least not since her first fight against Hilbert; he had even stood up to Genesect's attack when he hadn't been directly in that battle. Would they try something against her now that her guardian was gone? Still, she had to keep focused against a strong opponent. She brought out Tarzan and called for him to attack the Zoroark with Brick Break. "You do the same thing," she said to Hilbert.

He nodded and had Madeline attack the Klang again, while it was recovering from the Hyper Beam attack. But N healed up Tock the Klang and had Zane use Embargo on them. Not being able to use items for several rounds was going to be a problem. Tarzan managed to make a strong hit, but the Zoroark sneered, barely hanging on to consciousness. He had the same kind of attitude Olette did when she was nearly knocked out when fighting Elesa.

N had Tock do a weaker Mirror Shot at Tarzan while Zane attacked Madeline with Night Slash. She managed to strike with Flame Burst again, but then got knocked out. While that was going on, Tarzan finished off Zane, although he was squinting as he hopped back into position. N then brought out his actual Archeops, calling on it and Tock to attack Tarzan, while Hilbert brought out his Rufflet Regal.

Unfortunately, N had asked Tock to use Thunderbolt, and the Archeops' Acrobatics knocked out Tarzan first. Thunderbolt startled Regal, but he managed to stay alert long enough to use Air Slash on Tock. It couldn't have hit for much, but the Klang was weak from the Flame Bursts and was knocked out. N was down two, but they were down three.
Thinking it was less risky, Hilda brought out Olette and had her use Rock Slide. However, N then brought out a Carracosta and had it use Aqua Jet on the Exadrill while the Archeops struck Regal with Acrobatics. Hilbert tried a last minute attempt to help with Tailwind, but Regal was down before he could do so.

The rest of the battle was just as intense. It had been very close. N had six Pokemon with him, all who seemed to fight with everything they had in order to protect their Trainer. He had been facing against ten Pokemon, including one legendary dragon. And he ended up winning, but with only one Pokemon, his Sigilyph Rune, still conscious at the end of it.

Once it was over, the Shadow Triad appeared again. "Wait," N said, holding his hand up to them. He closed his eyes, moving his lips in thought but not audibly.

"Kususo cri?" Rune asked, doing his best to stay aloft.

"He was way better than last time I fought him," Hilda said quietly to Hilbert. "But that battle didn't end normally."

"He had better not," Hilbert said, clenching his fist. But he was shaking. Afraid? Hilda had to admit that his threat of taking their Pokemon if they failed was nerve-wracking now.

"You make your Pokemon battle, but illogically they did not hold back when there was a chance that they would be separated from you," N said. "All of them were like that, they love you enough... I don't want to, but it would not be fair to separate you when you've made it this far with their assistance. But don't take them for granted. Someday, you will have to let them go." Then he walked off towards the exit of the cave.

"Are you going to make up your mind as to whether you want to stay with Pokemon or not?" Hilbert called after him, sounding a little angry. "You can't claim the separation is for fairness if you don't live with that restriction as well."

N didn't reply. When Hilbert started off after him, Hilda grabbed his arm. "Hey, he backed down on taking our Pokemon away now. So there is some give; he might end up not doing it in the end. But let's get to the Mistralton Pokecenter instead of going after him." She didn't want to say it, but having her whole team unconscious was making her anxious about staying around in this cave. And if this was the end of the cave, then she didn't want to use Revives and have them waking up in pain.

"Right; it's not too far now," he said. And with that, the two of them hurried to get out of Chargestone Cavern. They didn't even run into N, but he had probably left with the Shadow Triad's help.

It was disappointing to have lost. But, N had the Archeops and Carracosta. The same ones that her father had been training? If that was so, then maybe this was the team N meant to stick with for his challenge against the Elite 4 and Alder, save for swapping one out for Zekrom. Knowing that, she started to consider how she might get an edge for that battle.
Hilbert was escorted through the prison halls, the Light Stone following close as usual. They were bleak and stern, more for security than anything. On coming in, he had been searched and his Pokemon scanned and registered. One of the prison guards was to stay with him the entire time as well. It was a lot of hassle, he thought as he waited on the red steel doors to slide aside. But it could be worth it. The man he was going to speak to was due to be executed in a couple of days.

In the visitor's room, he was brought to a table with a simple chair. Sturdy dividers made separate meeting areas, but it seemed he was the only one in today. A pane of security glass was set in the middle of the table, with concrete below it. On the other side, he saw the one who had captured Meloetta years ago, Takumi.

Unnervingly, he looked an older version of the Shadow Triad he had encountered just yesterday. He had pure white hair hanging short, but some of his bangs still fell close to his eyes. He had human eyes, though, a pale pink with noticeable red veins. That along with his pale skin made him seem ghostly, although the effect was lessened by the bright orange jumpsuit he was wearing.

"Takumi, this is the White King Hilbert," the guard said. "He's requested this meeting with you."

Takumi blew one of his hair strands away and gave him a look that clearly said he didn't care. "The White King, huh? Wouldn't have thought you'd picked up on my trail."

"Meloetta told me that you captured her around twenty-five years ago, and then sold her to Dr. Umber for experimentation," he stated. Hopefully he would get this man to cooperate by being open like this. "She also said that you had some communication with Ghetsis, who now holds a lot of power in Team Plasna. I'd like to know anything you know about Ghetsis and Team Plasma."

He rested his arms on the table, looking at him skeptically. "That's it, huh? What makes you think I could know anything useful to you? Or even tell you if I did? I've got nothing to be afraid of, even if you got some title for nothing."

"Something that seems insignificant at first glance might turn out important later on," Hilbert said. "We don't know a lot about Ghetsis or Umber, and you seem to know them both. Besides, what good is anything you've done if no one knows about it?"

Takumi snorted, then gave an amused smile. "There is that." He looked at the Light Stone, which was quietly smoldering there. "If that's what you're after, then I might know a few things. Maybe even useful things. So then... yeah, I got Meloetta for Umber and some other guy. It was his student or something, Colridge or something. I don't remember that guy, hardly saw him. She wasn't the first Pokemon I went hunting for on their behalf, but she was the first legendary that I tried to go after. It took a while, but she's not really a fighter, wasn't that hard once I figured out how to find her. But the strangest thing he asked me to do was to train some gijinkas he had."

"The Shadow Triad?" Hilbert made a guess.

Takumi nodded. "Bunch of creepy kids, if you ask me. He didn't even tell me what they were at first, just that he wanted them to be capable. I haven't done much training for other ninjas, being disgraced like I was. But that's a long story about idiots. Those kids didn't have names, and they wouldn't answer to any name I tried to give them. I learned to call them Shadow, and they'd answer. All three of them, yet they somehow knew which one I meant. They were talented, basically only needing someone to show them the proper way to do things. On the flip side, they rarely spoke,
had no heart or emotions at all, and were so dang serious all the time. I don't give a damn about anything, and they were beyond even that."

"They're still pretty creepy," he said, recalling how monotonous their speech was.

He shrugged. "Met them? They were worse as kids, I guarantee you that. I eventually went to ask Umber what the hell was wrong with these kids, and he told me that they were gijinkas. Not only that, but they didn't even have proper parents. He had cloned them from my DNA, then modified them with Pokemon genes." A dark look crossed his face. "Never said a thing about using me like that before that point, then all of a sudden I learn these three creeps I've been training are pretty much my kids. I blew up at him and threatened to kill him. To this day, I honestly don't know how he slipped out of my grasp.

"But me and my shadows learned something important that day: Umber had no reason for keeping them around. He made them just because he could and once they were old enough, he was going to let the loose without any purpose. I thought, fuck that, these kids are as dangerous as I am and they're still learning. But I'm a loner; nobody works with me, nobody gets near me, I just use my skills for the money. But the only one I could think of that would have any use for three unnatural ninjas was Ghetsis, so I brought them over to him and said, here, take these spooks and make good use of them. And he was happy to get them; apparently he'd been taking in other kids for one reason or another. Probably this Team Plasma shit. He even had a couple of teenage girls who seemed to be slaves for him. Hardly heard a peep out of those two girls, but they were so utterly polite and obedient to him that it was disgusting. I never cared to learn more about them."

"And you thought Ghetsis would be a good caretaker for your kids?" Hilbert asked, not understanding why anyone would think that.

From his shrug, Takumi clearly didn't care. "Because he would make good use of their skills, I told you that. Anybody else would have thought them damaged or whatever and tried to use therapy on them. It would've backfired spectacularly, but I know it's better to have a good purpose than to get what you people think is help. Ghetsis only cared about how useful someone was to him. He even had me kill one of his girlfriends when she tried to take their sons away."

"You killed her?" Hilbert snapped. If this man wasn't going to be killed by the government in a matter of days, then he might have taken the matter into his own hands.

Takumi smiled at that; maybe he thought that reaction was worth speaking freely about. "So you are one of those boys. Don't let it get to you. I didn't know that woman beyond seeing that she was a sappy weakling. Ghetsis called me to come with him when he went after her, saying that he wasn't a violent man but she had to be gotten rid of. Although it's more like he didn't want to get his own hands dirty with murder and theft. But he did make her apologize and say that she loved him before he had me kill her. Then we dumped the both of you in separate parts of the woods, although he had me keep an eye on one of you, maybe even you, to make sure that a particular person picked you up. I thought it was too complicated, but as it turned out, he was very calculating, as he is in many other things."

This prisoner was now one of his few hated people, but Hilbert did his best to keep that down. He clearly liked getting a rise out of people. And the truth had been asked for. "Then what connections do you have with Team Plasma?"

He watched Hilbert for a moment, possibly wondering how to get him to lash out again. "I did a few jobs for them. Or more particularly, Ghetsis. He told me to steer clear of the public leader, so I don't know much about N other than he sounds like a real dimwit with a soft heart and inhuman thoughts. That's how Ghetsis talks about him, but the guy must be useful or he would have been rid
of him by now. Actually, I'm in here because my last job was for him."

"What was that?" Hilbert asked.

"He had the Shadow Triad busy in Unova, so he asked me to go over to Sinnoh and get a hold of three artifacts for him: the Lustrous Orb, the Adamant Orb, and the Griseous Orb. They have something to do with legendary Pokemon and each was being held by a different Trainer. But they were all kids, younger than you. I got two away fairly easily, but when I went after the Adamant Orb, a stroke of bad luck got me. To get away with it, I had to attack the kid and a couple of his Pokemon. I got the three orbs back to Ghetsis, but then an old client squealed on me and the police here caught me. I got tried for the attack on the kid and the Pokemon, as well as a large number of other attacks and deaths I've carried out for others. I never killed anyone unless someone was paying me for it, but that don't matter to most people."

"That doesn't excuse murder," Hilbert said.

Takumi shrugged. "That's what everyone says until they want someone dead. Then they talk to me. But that was pretty much it. I knew Umber and Ghetsis because I did business with them, nothing more. And they were both reliable clients, always paying me well for the work. I can't see how those two can work together for long, though. They both hate being out of control in any situation. Sooner or later, one of them is going to destroy the other as a rival threat."

Hilbert asked a few more questions, but Takumi insisted that he didn't know much else useful. The prison guard wanted to have a statement from Hilbert about a few things they talked about, mostly the revelation about the death of Stacy Gropius and the connection Takumi had to Ghetsis. Then he left.

And wanted to punch something. "Was that the truth or was he messing with me?" He didn't really expect an answer, since Reshiram didn't talk to him a lot like this.

But there was a response. 'That was him being honest.'

"At least he'll be dead in a few days," Hilbert said, rubbing his forehead. "But that still leaves Ghetsis and Umber still out there, somewhere." Then he turned to the stone. "Are you coming closer to waking up? I haven't heard you talk since the crowning."

The fire swirled around the horizontal center of the sphere. 'You didn't like what you were told in what he said about your mother's death. While you didn't accept it at face value, you accepted that it could be true. And on being told that it was true, you aren't trying to deny it. With this, our bond grows and I can communicate even in this state.'

He nodded. "I see. I can't bring Ghetsis to justice if I ignore the truth. But what does it mean for N? He fought against us, but then let us keep our Pokemon when he won."

'I wouldn't betray a person's secrets unless it is more dangerous to remain hidden,' Reshiram said. 'Truth can be used to destroy others, yet I feel that's not what you want. Since you are concerned for him, we should wait. You could attempt to call on me now, but that would further divide you both.'

Hilbert could imagine that happening. What connection they had now was as brothers, friends, and even non-serious rivals. But if he were to call on Reshiram now, N might interpret that as a threat and a challenge. That would turn into a serious rivalry, with them both in command of dragons that could each destroy a good part of Unova. Not to mention, the Shadow Triad seemed to have no qualms in doing as N ordered.
"Are you still drinking? It's a wonder that hasn't killed you yet."

Umber stopped walking and turned to glower at the one speaking to him. But the blond man just smiled smugly at him. He wasn't dressed like any of the Team Plasma members. "Colress?" he said, having taken a few seconds to recognize him. "What are you doing here? I haven't seen you in years."

"Ghetsis asked to see me, that's all," he said, glancing around the room. "The operations here are quite interesting, so I asked to stay for a bit and poke around. When he told me how you were working down here, well I couldn't resist coming to see how you were doing. Poorly, it seems."

"What the heck are you taking about, poorly," Umber growled, taking a seat at one of the computers and taking another drink before starting up some programs. "I'll have you know that I succeeded in the legendary experiment. Brought Keldeo down several pegs and created my own legendary Pokemon. Plus some gijinkas that are more powerful than anything you could have put together."

"Well sorry if I wasn't as interested in modifying genetics," Colress said in that irritatingly dismissive tone he had when apologizing. "I've been looking more into other mysteries about Pokemon. So you've got immortality down, huh? Can you change a mortal person into an immortal yet?"

"No," Umber said, scowling at the screen as he entered in his password. "But I'm working on it. It's a hard thing to test without a large supply of subjects and the ability to definitely remove immortality once it appears. And what are you doing?"

"Just watching," he said with a smile. He tapped the blue glasses he was wearing.

"That makes you look even more like a smug dandy," he retorted.

"And you're still a thrall of alcohol, more inclined to masochism than science." There was a few moments when neither of them said anything, with Umber checking on experiment monitoring programs and Colress did something with his handheld tablet. "I have been doing some research on this visit. Nothing big, just a bit of social science. Did you know, I could sort most everyone in Team Plasma into two groups, based on their objectives and dreams?"

He snorted. "Social science is a waste of time. But I can tell you're not going to leave me alone, so let's hear it."

"Very accommodating of you," he said, oozing with false sweetness. "You see, there are a number of people in here who are like Furret's. It includes most of the lowest ranking knights, but goes far up the hierarchy, even to some of the Sages like Ryuko. They like being a part of the group; they're meek and very faithful. Especially when it comes to N; one would almost think a religion is blooming around your young King. They think it's all good and will be greatly disturbed if Ghetsis reveals his true self. But they're here for N. They will be loyal as long as he is there."

"Bunch of loonies, them," Umber said, not really wanting to agree with him.

Colress nodded. "Possibly. But the other group, they're like Raticates. They like the darker side of Plasma even if they don't admit it. They're here because it allows them to express what they would otherwise suppress: being able to steal Pokemon from others for a reason they see as good, going against the established authority, causing trouble in the name of ideals. They're not entirely loyal, though. If the group starts to fall apart or show signs of defeat, they'll be the first ones to bail. But
they're not without use. They'll be willing to go farther in the name of Plasma, do more violent and nefarious deeds if asked. You just need the right price or motivation to get them to do it, while the Furret would balk at the thought of turning more violent."

"You're not a part of this, so how would this be useful to you?" Umber asked.

"I really have no idea," he admitted. "But it is something to think about. As is giving up your dependence on that junk." He flipped his hand into the bottle, almost tipping it onto the keyboard. "I've seen your recent reports. You are straying further and further from true science with the passing of time."

"Leave me alone, you ingrate," Umber said, pounding his fist on the table. "I taught you and you used that to steal a big grant from under my nose. I don't care about the rest of these people, whether they're loyal or not. I do know that your loyalty holds as much weight as a wet paper towel, so get out of my sight."

"If that's what you want, professor," Colress said in exaggerated politeness. He walked away, only to come back a couple of minutes later. "Oh, Umber, there is one thing I forgot to say."

"What?" he said, glaring.

He just smiled brightly at him and tapped his glasses again. "I have a camera attached to this, and I have now changed the password to your personal network."

"What?!" He looked back at the screen, only to see that he had been kicked off. Umber grabbed the bottle; it was glass and he couldn't wait to smash it against that smug pretty face.

But a black gloved hand grasped his shoulder firmly and shoved him back in his chair.

"That's actually what Ghetsis asked me to come do, find out your password," Colress said. "Don't know why he couldn't do it himself, but maybe you were more guarded around him. I've just checked and made sure that I could access everything. You really haven't changed all that much, have you? Now that Ghetsis has everything he wants from you, I believe he intends to let you go from the team." He smiled wider. "If you know what I'm saying."

N was back at Skyla's Gym. He didn't really want to return here, but an opportunity had come up. Later today, he had a scheduled battle against Brycen. Now, Hilda was battling Skyla and the Shadow Triad had brought him to the Gym to watch. They were in an alcove far above the Gym floor, where they could observe what was going on without being seen. Not that being seen was a big problem. Anyone around the Gym was too eager to see Hilda fight to pay attention to who else was watching.

Hilda was doing much better in this battle than N had done against Skyla. Given the difficult fight she had given him in Chargestone Cavern, it was no surprise. It was only because his friends were determined to help him succeed that he won. Although, it was because her friends were equally determined that the battle had been so hard in the first place. But here, Skyla was using a six Pokemon team, and Hilda was still doing well. She wasn't even relying on Kyurem. Instead, she brought out Mimi every time Skyla brought out a new Pokemon. The Cinccino would put the Pokemon to sleep, then Hilda would bring out one of her others to make a better attack. Or leave Mimi out, which she did against the Swanna.

On the last (and sixth) Pokemon, she did bring out Kyurem and had him use a move called Glaciate. It was a terrifying move to watch, making N shudder as Skyla's Sigilyph fell to it. For this
attack, Kyurem froze the very air around him into ice spears that seemed almost as long as N was
tall, threw them at the target, then used the spears to freeze the target solid for a moment. He didn't
even seem to be putting a lot of effort into it, doing a dragon equivalent of flicking a wrist to knock
the Sigilyph out in one blow. He must have learned it recently, since the fight in Chargestone.

Watching this, N felt concerned about that battle. Not Hilda, but Hilbert. His Rufflet and Lampent
were quite strong, almost equals to the others. But his Larvesta and Alomomola were glaringly
behind the rest. What levels were they at? The Alomomola Loch had only managed a Protect, and
then a Heal Beam in attempt to help Hilda's Serperior. The Larvesta Ember's strongest attack was
apparently the reckless Take Down. Yet in what little he had seen of the four, they were devoted to
Hilbert. They just weren't strong enough, leaving an unequal balance of power between the two
brothers.

This bothered N greatly and he wasn't sure why. When they called on Zekrom and Reshiram, the
twin dragons would be of equal levels. But the rest of their teams would be unequal and N doubted
Hilbert's other Pokemon could catch up in time unless he had lots of Rare Candies around.
Eventually they would battle for their beliefs, much like the heroes of history had done. As it was,
Hilbert stood a strong chance of losing that most important battle.

But that was good. Wasn't it? Because that would mean that his ideals would win out and people
would have to let their Pokemon go. The Pokemon could live free from harm and fear, and humans
could start relying on themselves instead of others. That was what he wanted. But then why did he
feel like he didn't want that to happen?

No, no... he shouldn't even be thinking like that. That was what his penance had been about,
banishing that kind of internal treachery. Why was he still paying attention to it? It had to go, along
with the rest of his feelings, until he managed to succeed at his life-long quest. Then he could
figure out all this confusing stuff. He could attempt to stall until Hilbert's Pokemon were ready to
fight on equal terms. But they couldn't delay. It had been far too long already that the corruption
had gone on.

One of the Shadow Triad snapped her fingers. "My Lord? If you mean to catch her, we need to go
now."

N looked down at where Skyla was congratulating Hilda with a clapping of their hands... or was
that what some kid was calling a high five? "Right. Let's wait outside."

It didn't take long after teleporting outside that Hilda came out of the hanger in a cheerful mood,
followed by Kyurem. "Have you been considering what it is you value?" N asked, making sure to
be noticed.

She spun around to face him... and grinned. "Oh, hi N! Being more sociable, huh? It's better to start
out with a greeting, remember? You were pretty good about it at first."

He found himself fighting to keep to a stoic smile, not a glad one. It wasn't appropriate to feel
happy that she was still being friendly to him... no, keep that away. That kind of confusion was for
sorting out later. "You're not answering the question. And why are you happy to see me, after I beat
you before?"

As he might have expected, she jumped on that spontaneous question while ignoring the more
important one. "Why shouldn't I be? You agreed to let us keep our Pokemon even though we lost.
Thanks for that! I know that you're not a bad guy at heart. Really, you don't have the right attitude
to be one."
"It was a moment of weakness," he said, tensing. "It won't happen again. Now if you're not going to cooperate, I'll ask about the other thing I had in mind. I'd like to speak with Frank again, so would you let him out?"

She laughed. "Come to check up with your spy, huh? Don't worry, I haven't forgotten why I have him." She brought out a potion to heal him up, then released the Gothitelle. "Hey Frank, N has something to talk with you about. Don't be afraid to speak your mind."

"As if I'm ever," Frank said, turning around and putting a finger to his cheek. "What's up? Have any more luck picking up girls?"

"That's not important," N said firmly.

The Pokemon gave him a look of pity. "Oh, that's a shame."

Right, he was like that. "What's it been like working with Hilda? And what do you think of her?"

"Is that all?" he asked, tilting his head. "I think it's been great. It's a whole lot of fun and she works out with us whenever she can. It's not like other Trainers who will just sit back and call orders. No, she'll get into some rough and tumble with us, and call on us to take a break if she thinks we're getting tired. And this has got to be the best team I've ever worked with. It's so much fun to talk trash with Fedora and Tarzan, and Olette is such a sweet lady that she helps everyone get along. Mimi's a ditz, but she always means well and can be entertaining. And it's terrific being about to tease Kyurem freely. Oh, and don't worry so much about Hilbert being a rival for Hilda's affections. She's trying to ignore romantic advances from both of you equally, so you have just as much chance as he does still. But I'd keep an eye on dragon boy over there, because he won't admit to having a crush on her."

"I don't think that's what he asked about," Kyurem said, doing his best to be indifferent.

N tried to ignore anything about romance, especially that odd part about Kyurem. "Right, it wasn't important. So you're all good friends and she is very involved with you all."

Frank nodded. "Exactly. If I had the choice to go with any Trainer I've had, I'd stick with Hilda. No offense to you, but her values match up with mine pretty well. She might not be the most dedicated Trainer out there, but I never have a doubt that she cares about me and the others. And, she's more fun to be around than most humans I've met over my travels. I try to give her trouble on principle, but when it gets down to it, she has my respect and loyalty. Friendship too. Even if it comes down to the law making all of us Pokemon be released from Pokeballs, I don't care. I'll stay with her because I want to."

"You certainly seem happy," N said. A brief rebellious thought wondered why he couldn't be happy with pursuing his dreams, but he quickly shut it out. "But if all of you really want to keep that as your ideals, then you need to defend them stronger. We're down to waiting on Dragonspiral Tower to thaw out and that isn't too far away."

"We're going to be prepared," Hilda said with a smirk. "Oh, and you probably shouldn't smile if you're not feeling happy. It comes off as really creepy the way you're smiling now when your eyes look half-dead with stress."

"I'm fine," he said, although the phrase had nearly lost its meaning to him. He'd been saying it so much to stave off the worry of others. "Consider your own inconsistencies before you point out mine." Then he walked off to the south.
Once he was past the nearest airplane, the Shadow Triad reappeared to take him back to Icirrus. Dragonspiral Tower still glistened with ice as the sun hit it. But the large spikes had crumbled and the lake was close to breaking free of its icy prison. It wouldn't be long before they could enter safely.

And then maybe he'd find a real reason to smile.
The Final Badge

It took Hilda two days to get through Twist Mountain. The dirt paths were slick with mud, treacherous enough that most of the miners had not yet returned from their winter break. As for the few left behind, they were willing to take a break and battle her. There wasn't a lot they could do until they could start moving equipment around, so they were scouting out tunnels to see how the winter had changed things.

Once in Icirrus, it was back to the grind of training. Not just to defeat Brycen and get her eighth Badge, but to build her team up in any way she could to better match N's team. Hilbert was training in this area too, checking on the Tower every evening. Sometimes, he seemed to be in a really bad mood, angered over something. But he calmed down as time passed on.

On the evening of the twenty-seventh of April, she met him by the lake where Dragonspiral Tower stood. The lake ice had all broken up now, leaving a chilly rippling surface. But on the tower itself, some icicles and chunks of ice remained. As she watched, a piece on the second story shifted, then fell off and crashed onto the water. Underneath it all was a mysterious stone tower of black, white, and gray stones.

"It's almost cleared up," Hilda said as she came up with Kyurem. "Find a way in yet, Hilbert?"

He glanced at her. "Oh, evening Hilda." He looked back at the tower and shook his head. "Haven't figured that out yet. I've heard a few things from Reshiram lately, but he won't answer about this one."

"That's not surprising," Kyurem said. "The way will become clear."

Hilbert waved his hand through the air. "What I wish would become clear is the air around here. You can't see it, but time distortions are numerous in this place. They're evading me for now, or giving me visions into other worlds that aren't really useful here. At least I don't see the use for them."

"Time distortions?" Hilda asked. But as he said, she didn't see anything aside from the weakening ice and the mysterious tower. "Maybe it's because of Rei here. I mean, we figure that his presence combined with the present Kyurem made the winter harder than normal, and froze up this tower."

Hilbert reached over to Kyurem, but stopped when he gave him a look. "I can see the time distortions around him easier here. I've seen such distortions in a few other places, but not as many as are here."

"Maybe this place is just that important, that events filter in from other worlds," Hilda suggested.

"It might also be that the important event that drove me here occurred at this place," Kyurem said. "If that's so, then they will remain as long as I am here."

Hilda teasingly nudged Hilbert. "Hey, maybe you are a demimortal to whatever legendary Pokemon is in charge of the multiverse and that's why you see into them."

"I doubt that," he said, smiling.

"Well since you're in a good mood," she said, making it sound like a threat, "mind telling me what you've been so furious about? Not openly, just there's something bubbling under the surface waiting to lash out and we'd rather that not happen."
"Right, right," he said, turning more serious. Then he told her about what he'd learned from Takumi, the one who had actually killed his mother.

Hilda listened through it. "He sounds like a nutcase, fitting in with the rest of that group," she said when he seemed finished.

"Really," he said, nodding in agreement. "Him and Umber, and Ghetsis... they don't care about anything but themselves and power. Maybe seeing others suffer. Bad thing is, N's looking for corruption in the world and doesn't realize that it's in people like them."

"Well that ninja guy is taken care of, so all we got to worry about is Umber and Ghetsis," Hilda said, crossing her arms over her chest. "And I heard something interesting from Professor Juniper: someone has released some of the papers Umber wrote about his experiments."

"Like his study into immortality?" Hilbert asked, concerned. "Because if that gets out, there's a lot that could go wrong."

She shook her head. "Not that one, at least not what she said. Mostly into the gijinka project. It's still only in scientific circles, but sooner or later the news is going to break out to the general public, about people like you and N, and Elesa and all them. It's enough that the police have started a serious investigation into finding him. Although if they release something that links Umber to Team Plasma, N could get in serious trouble."

"I'm sure he has no idea what Umber's doing," he said. "Or else N would have kicked him out. But, that's all out of my hands now. It made me so mad to learn about it, listening to that sociopathic freak. I shouldn't let it get to me. It's just, as I keep learning things, and then stuff like Chargestone Cavern happens... well I don't know what I can really do about it. I tried talking to N, but he's clammed up tight now, thinking that if he focuses on awakening Zekrom and getting the separation made real, then he can deal with his problems later."

"That's not going to turn out good," Hilda said, worried. "His mind is changing, but he's not accepting that. I'm getting annoyed at it too, since he seems to be swapping between extremes so much. I know he has problems, but geez, it's like talking to a robot; you have no idea what affect your words are having."

Hilbert kicked at a small rock. "I know. Sometimes Reshiram talks to me, so I think I can awaken him. The rest of my team... well, Regal and Madeline might be able to help, but Loch and Ember aren't even a year old, and quite a ways behind. I don't want to push them too hard when they're so young, because they might turn difficult to handle when they're older. Even if we don't consider that, my team is unbalanced. But they've all become important to me and I don't want to let them go like I did the rest. And with following the legends, I'm sure he's going to insist on battling me. Maybe I can convince him to just duel Reshiram and Zekrom... but I don't know."

"Don't a lot of the stories that talk about them fighting end up in the destruction of Unova?" Hilda asked. "Or having to stop the battle so that doesn't happen."

"All things being equal, a battle between them will always be a draw," Kyurem said. "Neither has a strong advantage over the other. Collateral damage is a high possibility."

From the sounds of it, Hilbert was still affected by that last battle with N too. That couldn't be allowed. Hilda put her hands on her hips. "But a duel like that with Hilbert and N won't end in a draw."

"What makes you think that?" Hilbert asked, looking confused.
She smiled at him. "If you can talk him down to a dragon duel, you have a better chance of winning. After all, what are you fighting for? You want to prevent the separation of humans and Pokemon. He says he wants to separate them. But, he has doubts about that. He let us keep ours, for one. They're affected greatly by the beliefs of their partners, right? So because you have no doubts, Reshiram will be stronger."

Hilbert rubbed his chin, starting to pace around in thought. "You think so? And according to the legends, they used to be one Pokemon until a conflict in beliefs had them split into two. Or three, if we include Kyurem. That might be... although I wouldn't say that I'm without doubts."

"But on the main conflict, you are certain about that?" Kyurem asked.

"Yes, I am," he said.

Possibly picking up on herplot, he told him, "Then don't worry about it. Keep trying to reach N and weaken his position, and keep working on forging a strong bond with Reshiram."

Hilda slapped Hilbert on the shoulder. "Right! And you have back-up in us. If you can't talk sense into N, then we'll kick it into him."

He laughed. "I see. Thanks." Then he looked back to the path that led to Icirrus. Someone was coming their way.

It turned out to be Brycen; a white scarf wrapped around his head like a mask, leaving a wide opening for his eyes. "Good evening," he said calmly. "Lucky that I've found you, Hilda; I was considering making calls to get your contact number."

"Oh, does the League have news to pass along?" she asked, turning to him.

He shrugged. "Not much. Team Plasma has gotten more aggressive, but so have police efforts against them. No, I wanted to talk with you about the Gym battle. You want to keep up with N; he has only one badge left to get as well, and Plasma has been saying they intend to come here," he pointed to the tower, "in early May. Not only that, but people all over the region are eager to see your last Gym battle. We need to discuss a time to bring in the Battle Show crew in, but still give you time to try again if needed."

Hilda grinned. "Oh, that's very thoughtful of you. Although I don't think I'll need more than one try."

Giving her a smirk, Brycen said, "Don't get cocky; that's when you'll fail. But that does seem to be one of the qualities people like about you. April 29th, at 7 PM. That seems like an appropriate time. Since this is your eighth badge, you will need to defeat at least six of my Gym Trainers before that time to be eligible for the challenge."

She nodded. "Gotcha. Well that sounds good to me too. I'll meet you in battle then."

"Looking forward to it," he said, giving her a respectful salute. Then he walked ahead to follow the shore of the lake.

"That gives you two days to defeat the Gym Trainers, so that should be easy," Hilbert said.

"Well I'd better do some more training in the moors just in case," Hilda said. She gave a wink. "Because if my fans are going to be watching, I'd better be ready to impress."
Icirrus Gym

The inside of Icirrus Gym was like a huge cave walled with ice and snow. The ice floors were extremely slick, enough so that it took careful balance and attentiveness to cross the slippery platforms. And there were multiple platforms, connected by stairs and slides that seemed to be constructed out of snow. Bright light filled the whole place. If there wasn't a roof overhead, one might think one was outside on a clear day after a snowstorm.

Due to the airy design, there weren't many places for an in-gym audience to be. Still, there was quite a crowd tonight. Brycen had quietly added the battle to the schedule on his Gym's webpage, yet the news had spread like wildfire. He was a movie star who had retired to run the Gym, and she was now a star with the Pokemon League. This would certainly be one of the most watched live matches of the year, even if it was only April.

Hilda had opted to wear the orange and black uniform of an Ace Trainer. It was something that could be easily be mimicked, but after some pestering of people online, she was able to buy an official Ace jacket that she could pin her current Gym Badges on. Normally, there was a battle test in order to join the organization and buy their gear, but they agreed that earning three Gym badges in one month, and high level badges at that, was suitable as proof of her eligibility (although the guy she had talked to had warned her that they could spring the test on her 'unexpectedly' now). It was a widely-recognized achievement to be part of the Ace Trainers, enough to get respect anywhere. So, it seemed appropriate for her final Gym challenge.

Because it was a live filming of the Battle Show, they had to work with the show announcers. Brycen was quiet for much of the introductions, simply nodding when he was named. He stood in front of a grouping of icicles that disguised a path to the back area of the Gym. In the center of the platform, Hilda was excited as usual. "We've been gearing up for this battle all week, and we're ready to roll!" she said to the announcer, pumping her fist in the air. The small live audience cheered in approval.

"Excellent!" the announcer said. "So then, we will give the stage over to the coolest star of the Pokemon League, the one and only, Brycen!" He stepped back.

Brycen beckoned her forward, then walked up to greet her with a handshake. "The time has come for your last challenge before you can embark on Victory Road itself. You've already said that you're ready, but there is something we must take care of first."

Hilda raised her eyebrows. This was unexpected. "Is there?"

Nodding, he stepped back. "You managed to draw attention to yourself in your very first Gym battle, when you made the audacious move to challenge all three of the Striaton leaders at once. There are many who have been following your progress through the Unova Pokemon League ever since. But, there is one battle that they missed out on. The Battle Subway records show that you defeated Iris outside of Nimbasa City, but that one was not taped."

"We were out at night on a quiet route, so there wasn't anyone or anything to record with," she said. But it made her wonder and guess at what he was plotting.

"True," he agreed. "But you have been seeking out greater challenges and it is a shame that people had to miss out on that battle. I've decided that this battle will be fought as a Doubles match. You will have only yourself and your team, but my partner," he gestured to the side, "will be the Opelucid Gym Leader Drayden."
And then Drayden stepped out from behind the group of icicles there, dressed in his usual light clothes and showing no discomfort at being in the middle of a icy Gym. He spoke in a gruff tone. "You didn't think I was really going to let you get away without a fight, did you?"

Brycen and Drayden, recognized as two of the toughest Gym Leaders in Unova... Hilda grinned. "Now that's more like it!" she called, pointing to them. "You're going down, suckers!"

"I told you, don't get cocky," Brycen said, tapping his nose. "Now, all participants declare your Pokemon. I have three."

"Three here as well," Drayden said.

"I have six," Hilda said.

"With that, Hilda, you need to show your Pokemon at their best tonight. Begin!" Brycen released a Vanilluxe while Drayden sent out a Fraxure.

Ice and Dragon. Hilda quickly picked out two Pokeballs and sent out Tarzan and Frank. "Frank, cut off their supply, and Tarzan, knock that cone out of the sky."

The Gothitelle nodded and used Embargo against the Gym Leaders' team. Hilda had learned from Skyla that high level Gym challenges allowed them to use high-level healing items, which was a huge pain when the Pokemon were tough. Tarzan had the Vanilluxe down before it could use Blizzard, but the Fraxure swiped at the Scrafty with his tail, somehow forcing him to return to his Pokeball and pulling a random Pokemon out. It was Olette.

Time to take a chance. "Earthquake, and Frank hit the dragon with Psychic," she ordered.

Olette brought her claws up, but it would take her a moment to use her attack. Frank used his mental attack against the Fraxure, making the air around it warp with his power. In the meantime, Brycen brought out a Cryogonal. It turned out to have Levitate, which made Olette's Earthquake worthless against it, a shame when Frank got hit by it too. But her attack did knock out the Fraxure while it was trying to raise its attack with Dragon Dance.

"Frank, again against the Cryogonal; Olette, you're back," Hilda called, pulling Olette out of the fight. If it was just Drayden, she'd be just fine, but Brycen made this no match for her to be in long. She brought back out Tarzan as Drayden brought in a Druddigon. The Scrafty immediately got hit with an Ice Beam from the Cryogonal, which managed to freeze him in place.

A mess of bad luck, although balanced out because Frank knocked out the Cryogonal. Hilda had him attack again, this time the Druddigon as the Embargo would still be in place. She then used an Ice Heal on Tarzan to get him back into the match. That didn't last long, though, as the Druddgion used the tail attack to return him once again.

But this time, the switch forced Kyurem out. Brycen was down to his last Pokemon, a Beartic. "Get that other Dragon down, Rei!" Hilda called. "Frank, make sure the Embargo stays."

The Druddigon manged to strike Frank with Night Slash, knocking him out before he could use Embargo again. Then Kyurem knocked him out, only to get hit with Swagger from the Beartic. That could cause a lot of trouble. But, she already had to bring out a new Pokemon. She decided on Mimi as Drayden brought out a Haxorus.

"Kyurem, Mimi, Draco Meteor for both of you!" Hilda ordered. Now to hope that Kyurem stayed with his senses enough to attack the other side.
The Cinccino hopped up in excitement and struck the Beartic with her attack. While it didn't knock it out, there was a definite pause of confusion from Brycen on seeing that. Kyurem growled and struck the Haxorus with his meteor, knocking it out. The Beartic slashed at Kyurem, striking hard but not knocking him out.

But it was one opponent left and Mimi was quicker. "Okay Mimi, finish it off with Tail Slap. You can do it!" She held off on giving Kyurem an order.

Mimi cheered in excitement and ran over to strike with her tail. The Beartic was ready to slash, but she was nimble, avoiding his claws while hitting five times in a row. Once the Beartic disappeared in defeat, Hilda recalled Kyurem to make sure that he didn't try to throw Glaciate at the audience in confusion.

Not knowing that close call, the audience burst into applause and whistles. Mimi twirled around on the platform before running over to Hilda and raising her paws up for a hug. She was a little heavy now to pick up, but Hilda gave her the hug she wanted. "Nice finish," she said.

Brycen raised a hand, quieting the audience. Then he came forward with Drayden to meet with her. "Excellent teamwork," he said as she got back up. "You've met with every challenge we've asked of you with style and cheer, so let's give you the last badge you need to finish off that collection. Here is the Icicle Badge." He then passed over a light blue and gold medal.

"Thanks, it was a real blast," she said, taking it. "My Pokemon are the best!" She tweaked Mimi's ear as she said it.

"Cii chi!" Mimi squealed, happy to have helped.

"You've all done a great job," Drayden said. "We'll be looking forward to seeing how you fare on Victory Road."

After all the excitement after her win, in talking to the leaders, the audience members, and the interviewer from the battle show, Hilda brought her team out for an evening snack by the large windmill. "You've all done so well," she told them. "I love you guys! I'm sure we can go anywhere we want and be perfectly fine."

Most of them seemed happy to hear this, but Kyurem was serious as usual. He said, "Now that you have all eight badges, you know what we're going to be doing."

"Getting ready to take the Championship?" Hilda asked, smiling.

"Going back to your home in Nuvema and staying there for the next week," Kyurem replied. "That's the job I came here to do, make sure you are safe and that you don't die. This is exactly when we need to be most careful, so we're going home."

"Auuu chu ci da?" Mimi asked, either sad to hear that or not wanting to stop what they were doing.

"It's what must be done," Kyurem said.

Hilda sighed. "Well geez, I didn't expect to be a homebody so close to the end. But if that's your duty, I'd better not make it more difficult on you. We'll go back home."

May 1

Nuvema Town
Back at home, Hilda helped her mother around the house for a few days, letting her Pokemon take a break as well. Kyurem wasn't taking a break, continually keeping an eye out in case trouble decided to come find them. Bianca came over a few times to visit and it seemed like she had returned to her old life at times.

One day, Alder surprised them by showing up at their door. "I don't mean to be a bother, but I wanted to check up on you."

"That's fine," Hilda said, opening the door for him. "Come in and visit for a little while if you want. Mom and I were just going to watch N challenge Drayden and Iris."

"I wouldn't mind sticking around for that, thanks," he said, coming in. "I went back on duty, but there haven't been many who've showed up with a decent chance at winning. Nobody's made it past the Elites in the past month."

"Well now you've got two of us to worry about," she said teasingly. "Mom, Alder's going to visit for a little while."

"Why, hello," Leslie said, smiling and coming into the room. "Isn't every day that the League Champion just drops in."

He chuckled at that. "Got to keep an eye on the competition from younger folks, don't I?"

The battle show wasn't starting for a few minutes, so they talked while Kyurem stayed watchful.

"How are things going with Team Plasma?" Hilda asked.

"They're being as noisy as always," Alder said. "But a number of them have been seen around Icirrus and Dragonspiral Tower. When I saw it this morning, I couldn't find any ice on it. They're likely to make their move there any time now. So what are you doing hiding out way over here? We were expecting to see you at the gates."

"Apparently I'm supposed to die in the next few days," Hilda said, letting them know by her tone that she wasn't worried much about it. "Obviously we don't want that to happen, so I'm staying out of the fire for a little while. But we'll be up there sometime in May, you can count on that."

"Well that's a good reason to hide," he said. "Don't get lazy in the meantime."

"Nah, my Mom keeps me busy."

When the show came on, they went straight to Opelucid Gym. As with the time they had filmed in Castelia, there were three matches planned for that time slot. N was the highest level challenger; his match was to come last. Iris was the one on the job today, defeating her first challenger and barely losing to the second. Then N came on.

Even over the broadcast, Hilda could tell that he was annoyed at being filmed like this. His body was tense and he spoke in a slow (for him) and stern manner. "Can we not make a big production out of this travesty?" he asked. "A battle is not something to be celebrated."

"You want to honor the Pokemon that fight with you, right?" Iris asked. "But if you don't want a fuss, we'll start the battle now. Let's see how well you've trained your Pokemon!" She then started off, like Drayden, with a Fraxure.

"He really doesn't like this, but his Pokemon still work hard to help him," Alder said. "You'd think that they would be a strong argument against his crusade, since they are so close to him."
"Especially this group," Hilda said. "But they might be, in their own way."

"So are your Pokemon ready for what's to come?"

Hilda smiled. "Of course. They've got my back and I've got theirs."

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May 3

Dragonspiral Tower

N's heart was pounding. The time that he had been waiting for, preparing for, for his whole life... it was that time. He stood in front of the lake Dragonspiral Tower sat in, dressed in his formal black clothes and surrounded by his devoted Plasma followers. Beside him, the Dark Stone was floating. She had started speaking to him after he had won the Legend Badge from Iris. Nothing much, just telling him to do what he felt was right. Hearing Zekrom's voice was reassuring.

Other than last-minute nerves, he didn't let himself feel much. There were many thoughts that tried to distract him or sway him from his purpose, but he'd closed them off. On the other hand, he wasn't excited, not like he had been prior to his coronation as the Black King. It was disappointing to not feel those positive emotions either. But if pushing them aside kept the negative ones from surfacing, then that was a sacrifice that he had to make.

"I'm going," he said, before one of the Sages broke the moment of silence that had come over them on seeing the awe-inspiring (or what should be awe-inspiring) sight. "I'll come back with Zekrom at my side. Make sure that our enemies don't disrupt this ceremony."

"As you wish," Ghetsis said.

N nodded, then walked closer to the lake. At that point, he heard Zekrom again. "Don't be afraid. Just keep walking straight ahead, into the tower."

Straight ahead… through the lake? But if that's what he had to do, that's what had to be done. N didn't slow his pace and he stepped off the land, and on top of the water. That was briefly surprising, but if Zekrom said not to fear, it was simply the way to go. N walked across the lake and up to the closed off tower. They had never found an entrance. Instead, he walked straight through the wall.

It gave no resistance, just an illusion like some of the things he had seen Zane do with his powers. Or maybe it was a part of the test. The old texts said that those unworthy of being heroes would not be able to make it inside. The unworthy must find the entrance to be as solid as stone, unpassable to their corrupt hearts.

Inside, there was a stone pathway over sparkling blue water. Further down seemed to be the foundations of this place, but in back there was a staircase following the curve of the wall leading upward. That was where he had to go. Thoughts and memories passed through his mind as he went on, possibly a part of the power of this place. He recalled the Pokemon that had lived with him in Sarasota Forest, hiding out from the cruelty of mankind. He remembered when he had met Ghetsis and the other Sages who worked for him. For the Pokemon that had been hurt by humans, and for the humans who agreed that it had to end, he was following in the footsteps of history.

But, he also remembered the time he met Hilda and Hilbert. He remembered that day in the desert when he had found his twin brother, and the time that Hilda had gotten him a root beer float. There were also other people he had met on his journey, nurses, doctors, children, citizens… people who were honestly good people but still insisted on keeping Pokemon as pets, companions, and battle
partners. How would they handle the great changes to come?

But he had already decided. N did not let himself linger long on those memories and continued climbing the tower. This wasn't the time to falter; he had sorted out his thoughts before he had even entered. At least, he hoped he had. Confusion seemed to strike him so suddenly these days.

He grew tired as he got closer, still not in top condition. But that didn't matter. He pressed on until he reached the final floor. At that place, there were grand columns in a circle by the wall and an open archway opposite the stairs. There was no roof, just a large flat edge that could possibly be used as a perch by the legendary dragons. Overhead, there was a barely visible energy field that kept entrance from being gained from above. Maybe it even kept the rain and snow from getting inside, because there was no signs of weathering here. There was age, as a few of the columns were cracked and crumbling. But they didn't support anything but the ledge up there, so he felt no danger being here.

Finally. N went to the center of the room, then took hold of the Dark Stone and put it in front of him. "It's time. I thought I might feel joy at having the opportunity to prove my beliefs. But that is still elusive." He paused. When she didn't reply, he said, "Then let's begin. Zekrom, the bearer of ideals and the guardian of the land of Unova, I am Natural Harmonia Gropius, and I have come here to bring the world into a better state where the ideal is made reality. I am seeking equality between humans and Pokemon. Since the inequality is so great, I want to see both sides separated to realize how much they need to respect the other. Please, come to me and help make my dreams a reality."

A blue spark snapped off his left hand. N let the Dark Stone go. But, nothing happened.

For a moment, he watched her, waiting. "Did I… do something wrong?" He shook his head. "We got this far. It has to work. Let me try again."

That did not work either.
Visions of Another History

May 4

outside Dragonspiral Tower

The afternoon sun caused the lake around the tower to sparkle with its wind driven wavelets. Normally this would have been a quiet time, with local Pokemon going for a drink, for food, or anything else of their own business. Despite how much the humans revered this place, not many came to visit on an ordinary day. But this wasn't an ordinary day, and the local Pokemon were keeping away from the lake. There was still a crowd waiting on the southern side, waiting on their leader who had entered yesterday afternoon. No one had seen or heard from him since.

Although the humans were disrupting the local Pokemon, there was one Pokemon out in the open, flying over the surface of the water and waiting himself. With his brilliant coloration made to mark him as a significant resident of the desert, Rune stood out greatly in this wooded area. He had been taken out of N's team, as League regulations stated that teams could be at most made of six Pokemon. This didn't bother him much. After all, the Sigilyph had helped when he had first been released, and he would continue to do so now. He was waiting too, and thinking.

This day was something to consider. When he had been patrolling the ghost town of Shira, he hadn't really thought much, lost in the memories of the old kingdom. He had heard from other Pokemon that traveling with humans changed Pokemon, but all of them assumed it simply made them stronger. Rune knew he was stronger, but he was changed in other ways. For one, he was worrying about what had happened to his friends in the tower.

For another, he was concerned about the myriad of thoughts coming from the crowd of humans nearby. He used to not care about what others were thinking if it had nothing to do with him or his duty to serve Reshiram. It wouldn't be important to his immediate concerns. But now, most of them were worried about N too, but had faith to stay for his return. Rune felt glad that they cared about N too. However, it was those who had other thoughts that really concerned him. Some of the other thoughts were dangerous, wishing to cause harm to others. Not Rune himself, and sometimes not even towards N.

But there was one who was slowly getting angry that N hadn't come out yet. This one was a potential firestorm in the calm patient woods, looking to disrupt the very structure of Unova. Feeling that distressed Rune and that was why he kept away from the humans, and over the water. But worse than that, the firestorm soul was the one who held great sway over the whole group, most of all over N himself. Rune felt a sense of dread of Ghetsis, one that could destroy so much that he now held dear. Before he left the desert, he wouldn't have even made such connections.

"What should I be doing?" Rune said to himself.

Things had been so predictable and orderly in the desert. Now it wasn't and he was confused. Maybe he wasn't as intelligent as he thought he'd been. He looked over at the crowd, wondering if he should do something about the danger. But then he noticed something different. Within the crowd, there was a Pokemon. The humans wouldn't have noticed, though, since the Zorua seemed to be a child of theirs. Only, there hadn't been any children with Team Plasma, not that Rune had noticed. That Zorua could get in trouble.

It didn't have much to do with himself, or what he was troubled about. However, he knew N would have helped the Zorua not get in trouble. With that in mind, Rune flew over to the southern shore
of the lake and spoke to the hidden Pokemon. "What are you doing here, Zorua?"

What looked like a child with messy dark blue hair blinked at him. "I don't fool you, but I can fool everybody else," he said proudly, without moving the lips or changing the expression of the illusion. "I came looking for my father."

"Oh? But, I think you will be noticed, as a child in a group of adults."

The Zorua wasn't impressed. "If I am noticed, it's because you're speaking to me."

Rune cooed; he couldn't deny that. "Even so, this isn't a group for you to be around. What makes you think your father will be here?"

"Mother said so," he said. "She said that father was going to work for his friend, who was going to summon one of the great dragons here. When I heard that a summoning was going to happen, I had to see it, and meet father. I came all the way here all by myself."

It must have been Zane's cub, not too surprising. Rune descended some. "I see. I think I know who you're talking about. Perhaps, I can take you up to meet him."

"Really, would you?" the Zorua said, eager enough to yip despite his illusion. The humans around them finally realized something was off about the child with them, giving the 'child' confused looks. "I want to go!"

The Sigilyph took a deep breath. Was he doing this to help the cub? Or just to have an excuse to check on N? Humans made things complicated. "Very well. But I won't take you looking like that."

"Okay!" The Zorua dismissed his illusion, causing some startled gasps nearby. Quickly, Rune picked the Zorua up in his claws and flew him upwards, circling the tower to make it to the top level.

Up there, he found trouble. He could see a barrier keeping Pokemon like himself from entering the roof from above. He could possibly fly through an archway, even though as a spiritual gate it would feel strange. However, there was a layer of ice covering the gate, bearing a black circle. "I could get in if it wasn't for that ice," Rune said.

"What ice?" the Zorua asked. "That gateway looks spooky to go through, but you should be able to go in."

Blinking his eyes, Rune shifted his focused and realized that the ice he was seeing was spiritual too. Then he laughed at himself. "Ice that I see on another level. Well, brace yourself, cub. We'll have to pass through a strong power to get in there, but I'm sure that we can." Then he flew into the gateway.

The physical realm and the spiritual realm met at that point, such as the space deep within Relic Castle where Rune had met with Reshiram. But for being such a small area, the power here was intense and frigid. The power of lightning and fire were also strong, but not as strong as ice. The feeling was over in seconds and they were in.

N's other Pokemon quickly noticed them, although N himself seemed to be preoccupied, kneeling in the center of the space with his hands on the Dark Stone, speaking quietly to himself. Rune dropped the Zorua close to the floor, then flew up higher to shake his wings out to be rid of the feeling lingering from flying through the gate. Excited, the Zorua bounced over to Zane; the Zoroark had been lying on the ground, but lifted his head as the cub stood unsteadily on his back paws in front of him. "I've found you, father! I'm right, right?"
"Say what?" Zane said, sniffing him carefully.

"How are things going?" Rune asked Tock, settling down. If Zane was busy, then the Klang was the most reasonable Pokemon to talk to. Plus, the two ancient Pokemon were asleep. "I didn't think it would take this long."

"We did not think so ourselves," Tock said. "There is a positive charge and a negative charge about this situation."

"Oh? What's positive?" Better to hear the good news first, he thought.

Tock turned on the spot, looking at the Vanilluxe. "Pierre has been mostly sane today."

"Really? That's great." Rune hummed in good cheer, glad that a teammate was in a better condition.

Coming over from examining a column, Pierre seemed hesitant, his floating pace unsteady. "They say that, but... this quiet is unsettling. Even if my demons stayed away from my angel, I still heard them from the distance, saw them in the shadows. But ever since we entered this sacred place, there's been nothing but silence in my mind. I appreciated the peace at first, but I don't know what to do with myself now. It doesn't help that N is being strange."

"Is that the negative?" Rune asked, looking back to his friend. N hadn't moved a bit and his thoughts were strangely quiet as well.

"Affirmative," Tock said, going over to N's side. "We're concerned that he's not going to be sane. But we can't really tell that like you can. He's not responded to much."

"I can hardly feel anything from him," he said, coming to hover in front of N. "I can try to reach deeper."

"What's going on?" the Zorua asked, turning to them.

Zane sat up and put a paw on the cub's head. "It's a long story, kid."

While they talked, Rune focused on N. The human's thoughts and emotions were quiet, even hollow. Puzzling... he looked deeper and noticed that his body was in a state like sleep but was weary and weak despite that. "I hope you haven't given up," Rune said softly.

"What's that?" Tock asked.

"We tried," Pierre said. "But his mind is so far away."

Escaping from under Zane's paw, the Zorua bounded over. "Well if he's sleeping, shouldn't you wake him up before talking to him?" And before any of them could stop him from being rude, he barked loudly and got onto N's lap. Then he put a paw on N's cheek.

Startled, N nearly fell over. He looked around wide-eyed, then settled on the Zorua. "What are you doing here?" he asked.

"Waking you up," the Zorua said, licking his face. "Hello!"

"Trouble?" the Archeops asked, as he and the Carracosta woke up. The ancient bird shook itself, then hopped closer.
"No trouble," the Carracosta said, coming out of his shell.

"How are you?" the Zorua asked.

"Uuhhh," N replied, not entirely alert. But he did take hold of the Zorua as he shifted his legs out from under him. "Not so good."

The other Pokemon gathered around him too. "You should have something to drink and some rest, from what your body says to me," Rune said.

"Please don't hurt yourself," Pierre said, coming close and nudging N with one of his heads. "Even with the peace of this place, it's distressing to see you now."

"I'm sorry," N replied, with little energy to his words. He didn't even try to do anything about it, until Zane got a bottle of water out for him.

"What is the status of the mission?" Tock asked.

There was no reply, but Rune felt something troubling in N's feelings. Worse, he couldn't identify what it was. "Don't give up," he said. "But what do I feel from you? It's something terrible."

"What's wrong?" Zane demanded, twisting his ears back briefly. But he was just as worried and couldn't stay angered at N's silence.

Although he did take a good drink of water, N still didn't reply. He looked at all of them, but the troubling thing only grew. It was... fear? Still in his arms, the Zorua patted him again. "Why're you shaking? I don't see anything to be afraid of."

"Something's not right," N said finally. "I heard from Zekrom at the base of the tower; she told me to enter. But ever since we got here, I haven't heard from her again. What's going on? Why would she tell me to enter and then not respond?"

Rune looked back at the archway. "Does it have something to do with the ice?"

"What ice?" Pierre said. "There was ice here, but it's all gone."

Coming close to N, Rune brushed his wing against his friend's face. "Look at the gate, with your mind's eye. Like you saw Shira."

"I was trying to not be confused by such ghosts," N said, but he did ask suggested. Then he clutched the Zorua closer. "Ice... there's still ice there. He was right; the Kyurem I've spoken to isn't supposed to be here. The balance of having two of them is off just enough..." then he shivered noticeably, his fear growing instead of settling like it should have. "I-I should do something, but..."

"But what?" Zane asked. "If there's a problem, it should be fixed."

"I told them I would come back with Zekrom."

Tock sped up his gears briefly. "It's a problem out of your system, an obstacle you have no connection to. It's not your fault."

"N, what's wrong?" Rune asked, feeling like he ought to cry. "There's something wrong in your thoughts and I can't see what it is."

"I know I didn't cause this," N said. "But... it scares me too, but... it was something Ghetsis said to me before we came out here. I was trying to tell him how the things I've seen and heard on this
journey through Unova are still lingering, like you..." he looked up at Rune, "I let you go and you came back again, and," he looked over at Pierre and Tock, "you..."

"What?" Tock said.

"I want to hate anyone who would hurt you, but I can't hate you for hurting yourself," Pierre said. The Archeops spread his wing out. "Leader! Be brave. Leader better than fear."

"Be strong," the Carracosta echoed.

"You're helping me," N said, his eyes going watery with tears. He looked down at the Zorua in his arms, then let him go. "I don't even know what you're doing here. I've never met you before."

The Zorua wagged his tail, his red eyes bright. "I came to find my father! And to find you; I heard that you were a great person going to summon one of the great dragons. I was happy to hear that my father was with someone like you."

Although he briefly gave Zane a puzzled look on hearing that this was his cub, N didn't seem bothered by learning that. "You're helping," he repeated. "I'm not a Pokemon; I'm not a human either, really, but you're still helping me. I never figured out how to be around humans, but all of you, and other Pokemon that have been with me, you help me connect to them. But then," N paused, growing tense. "He said that if I didn't come back with Zekrom, then I might as well jump off the tower rather than continue to live."

"Noooo, don't!" Pierre cried.

"That is illogical," Tock said, although he sounded just as troubled.

Zane growled. "What kind of foolish talk is that? I'd never advise someone to choose death if they failed."

Even with them saying that, Rune could feel and know what that terrifying feeling in N was. It didn't matter what they said. If this problem wasn't solved soon, then he would choose that rather than to admit to failure. It was because the stigma of being a failure, of having his life be worthless, that was worse than having no life at all.

Rune felt like panicking. If he had been who he was back when he was patrolling Shira, he would have. But that wasn't going to solve things. "Then you need to get Zekrom awakened," he said. "If that barrier is there because of there being two Kyurems, then we need to get rid of one. Maybe if you got Reshiram and his King in here, then the power of the both dragons can overcome the imbalance. Or since the barrier is made of ice, we might need the other Kyurem here to hold it back."

"Why don't you go get them and bring them here?" the Zorua asked. Because he wasn't as emotionally invested in this, the cub managed to keep a lot calmer and cool headed than even his father. "With all three of the dragons in this place, they should be able to solve the problem better than anybody else. You and I are the only free Pokemon here, and I can't fly."

"Right, I can do that," Rune said. "I can at least find Lord Reshiram easily, and he would be able to find which one of the Kyurem could help best. I'll go."

"Thank you, Rune," N said meekly. "I've set you free twice now, and yet you still freely stick by my side."
For a moment, Rune lowered himself to below N's eyes in deference. "I admit that at first it was because I had no other purpose, and Lord Reshiram asked me to watch you. But I am not doing this for him. I am doing this for my dearest friend."

Then he flew back through the gateway, to find his old master.

Nuvema Town

"It has now been thirty-six hours since the Black King of Plasma has entered Dragonspiral Tower," the reporter said on the late night news. "Yet N has not reappeared and nothing seems to have changed. No one has been able to get in the tower after him and our cameras have been unable to view what is going on at the top level. The members of Team Plasma remain here faithfully waiting for his return. They are certain nothing has gone wrong. It has been many years since Zekrom and Reshiram were last called upon, so it is unknown if this wait is simply a part of the summoning or if something has indeed gone wrong."

"What is it?" Hilda asked, leaning back in the couch.

"It's unusual," Kyurem said, watching out the window. "If he is worthy, she would have come within the hour, at most. I thought he was worthy."

"It must be frightening for him to get silence," Leslie said. "I hope there's some other problem."

Hilda scratched Fedora's back. "Well we know that he's going to stay up there until something happens. You know what's going on?"

"My attention has been here, not there," Kyurem said, turning from the window and coming over to her. "It may be that Hilbert needs to be there, since both are expecting to be called on."

"Could be. Maybe I ought to call him and give him a poke." At that point, there was a knock on the door. "Wonder who it is now," she thought aloud, getting up.

"I'll get it," Kyurem said, going to the door and opening it. "What?"

"Oh good, you are here," Hilbert said. "Listen, we have to talk. I know you're not going to like this, but Reshiram insists on it."

"Speak of the devil," Hilda said. "Listen, we have to talk. I know you're not going to like this, but Reshiram insists on it."

"Oh good, you are here," Hilbert said. "Listen, we have to talk. I know you're not going to like this, but Reshiram insists on it."

"I'll get it," Kyurem said, going to the door and opening it. "What?"

"We were just talking about you, and about N being at the tower. Let him in."

He nodded and came in. Following after him was a Sigilyph, a Pokemon she remembered seeing with N, not Hilbert. "Yeah, I was going to wait until after all the fuss died down. But then Rune came and asked all of us to come. You too, Hilda."

"Currooo," the Sigilyph said in a sad-sounding tone.

"She shouldn't be going into Dragonspiral Tower at this time," Kyurem said sternly. "I'm not going to let her get killed."

"You can't leave her alone either," Reshiram said in a faint voice from the Light Stone. "And you must come here. Zekrom has been trying to connect to N, but we're being blocked again by the imbalance caused by having you and the normal Kyurem around. Since you can't leave this world at this time, you need to be there to pull us through the block. And Zekrom does not want to tell N that she cannot come at this time. It would be dangerous."
Kyurem fumed silently for a moment, then said, "You can't get around the block caused by our power?"

"We have been trying, but nothing has yet worked. And it is strong enough that I don't think even both of us working at it with our bodies at the tower would help."

"Fine, but the four of us will enter together," Kyurem said. "We must be careful."

Hilda felt a little nervous. But, this was getting too serious. She had to do something about that. "And we need to get properly attired!"

"Hu-what?" Hilbert asked, staring at her in confusion.

Over at the couch, Leslie laughed. "You need to be dressed right for the occasion," she said, getting up. "After all, you're going to be at this big and important moment not just to impress the masses, but to meet with legendary Pokemon. There's no excuse to go in looking like an everyday slob."

She teasingly smoothed down a part of Hilbert's jacket.

"Unless they surprise you," Hilda said, poking Kyurem in the shoulder. "You still have that crown and coat I got you, Hilbert? That should do just fine, once you brush your hair and wash your face. I think I've got something hanging in my closet that'll be great."

"Don't take too long," Kyurem said. "We don't want N going nuts while you're still getting dressed."

"Gotcha!" She started towards the stairs.

"You can use the bathroom down here, Hilbert," Leslie said, pointing him in the right direction.

"Oh, well, I guess that makes sense," he said, giving in and heading over. "But Kyurem's right; don't take too long."

Upstairs, Hilda found a dress she had gotten last spring, a white sundress that had tiny blue polka dots on the skirt and blue flowers across the chest. It was a little casual, but finding the white shoes from her Castelia outfit as well as some of her mother's clip on earrings and an ice-crystal like set of barrettes, it seemed cute and nice enough to go out with. She wore the barrettes low, though, so that she could wear a white sun hat that had a blue ribbon and a snowflake pin on it. Then she grabbed her travel bag and a white umbrella (just because it seemed to fit) and headed downstairs.

"Let's see, I think… yeah, I still has some healing stuff in case of trouble," she said, thinking aloud while checking her bag.

Leslie smiled and hugged her. "Good luck, dear. And you'd better come back alive from this."

"Thanks Mom. I'll see you again, I promise. Is Hilbert ready?" She couldn't see him, although Rune seemed to be pacing around in the air still.

She shook her head. "Not quite."

"Hilda, can we speak privately for a minute?" Kyurem asked. "Outside."

"Oh, sure," she said, nodding. "I'll pop back in when we're done, Mom."

She nodded. "Okay, I'll let him know to wait a bit longer."

Hilda headed outside with Kyurem. It was a bright night, with the full moon hanging large in the
sky. Nuvema was quiet as usual, with many of the houses lit up but few people in the old streets. Overhead, some wings from Woobats could be heard on occasion. It was peaceful here, not a night when one might expect to die.

"It seems unavoidable that we go to Dragonspiral Tower now," Kyurem said, looking around the town. "I would go alone, but those Shadow Triad are hanging around here. I don't know if they mean to kill, but the risk can't be taken."

"I'll try not to do anything stupid," Hilda said, smiling. "I trust you."

"That's good," he said, looking down. "I had hoped to know more by this point about why you died at this time. Still, I agree with Reshiram and Rune. We don't know how much power N and Hilbert truly have as gijinkas, and if he snaps in failing to call Zekrom, there is no way to know what he would do. And yet, you may… there is something I need to say to you before we go."

"What's on your mind?" Hilda asked. It was odd to hear him like this. Normally he used as few words as possible.

Kyurem looked to her. He seemed pensive, even. "I'm grateful that I got to travel with you. I've spent many centuries avoiding contact with others, especially humans, but this time has been precious to me. I know that I seem serious to you, but I have been happy."

"That's good," she said, smiling. "It's been fun having you around. It'll be sad time when you have to leave this time, but let's not think of that yet."

"Then you do trust me." He took her arm and then, to her surprise, kissed her forehead. Then he went on, telling her, "Don't worry. I'll be watching over you. What I'm leaving you with is a mark that you won't be able to see, but will allow others to know that you are under my protection. Not only that, but I'm giving you a gift that you have asked about. You'll now be able to understand Pokemon just like N can."

"Whoa, really?" Grinning, she hugged him. "Thanks Kyurem! Now I'll definitely have to be coming back in order to make full use of that."

Kyurem put his head on her shoulder for a moment. "You do that." Then he pushed away. "We need to be going. Go get the King and we'll fly over to the tower."

Fortunately, Hilbert was ready when Hilda peeked back in. She hugged her Mom one last time and said goodbye to her (making sure to say she loved her… just in case). Not that long ago, Bianca had lent her a Fly HM so that she could teach Kyurem to use Fly. He took her and Regal took Hilbert, following Rune up north to Iccirus and Dragonspiral Tower.

When they arrived at the lake, there were still a large number of Team Plasma members hanging around. Hilbert looked around, feeling determined to stop this before it turned ugly. "Okay, now we'll have to see about them letting us in."

"They're not all dangerous, but they won't appreciate you being here," Rune said. The Sigilyph were supposed to be intelligent, he reflected; Hilbert thought that was part of why he could understand him too.

"That's not a problem," Hilda said. Then she stepped forward and shouted, "Hey, move aside! We're going in!"

Some of the knights did move aside, but Ghetsis and Giallo came up to meet with them. "Why
should we let you in?" Ghetsis asked. "We have yet to hear back from N."

Going bold, was it? But, no backing down now. "That's exactly why you should let us in," Hilbert said. "We know what's going on and if you want to help Zekrom appear, then let us help N do that."

"And if you don't, I'll just freeze you all in place so you don't interfere," Kyurem added.

"You're here to help N?" Giallo asked. "And to help yourselves, it would seem. But it has been a day and a half now. Good luck."

"Thank you," Hilbert said, heading down with the Light Stone floating beside him, and Hilda and Kyurem walking behind. A part of him felt hurt about how Giallo was speaking to him as an enemy. But his uncle seemed to have closed himself off fully to him. Maybe after this was over with, he'd be willing to listen again.

As they got closer to the edge of the lake, Reshiram spoke up. "Just move ahead and into the tower. What appears is not quite what is and nothing will stand in your way."

"Okay," Hilbert said.

"It's basic if you're worthy of entrance," Kyurem said. "Stay straight and don't turn aside."

As they said, and as N had done yesterday, they were able to cross across the water itself and pass through what seemed to be a solid wall. But once they were all inside, Hilbert stopped, unsure of how to proceed. "Hey, you remember when I said this place was thick with time distortions?" he asked Hilda.

She nodded. "Yeah. They still here?"

He waved his hand in front of his face, seeing it tinted blue. "It's a total fog in here. I can hardly see a foot in front of my face now. And when I touch it, that's usually when I start seeing things."

"There's no way to know when or if you'll be alert while walking up," Reshiram said. "That's trouble."

Hilda took his hand. "Well don't worry. I see perfectly fine. I'll lead you through even if you space out."

"That's good, because there's no telling when they'll start coming." He followed her down the stone pathway, but as he thought, visions of another world passed by his eyes.

And this time, he knew exactly what he was seeing. He was seeing the history that Kyurem had come from.

May 4

another world

Hilbert stepped off the pillars and began to walk up the stairs. This second room had proven an odd obstacle, as ruins of pillars and statues made the way hard to navigate. After checking around, walking over the pillars seemed to be the only way to go.

But then, the grinding of a stone made him pause. Hilda then passed through from behind it, followed by her dark blue Sawk. "Oh hey, I caught up just in time," she said, smiling. She waved
her hand, in which she was carrying a yellow daisy.

He stared at her for a moment. "Hilda? But, how? Only one eligible to become a hero can enter this place, and there are only two heroes at a time."

She just laughed at him. "Well it seems that I'm worthy, huh? That was easy once I saw you do it; wouldn't have thought to just walk right in. Come on, let's get going." She ran up past him.

"Hey, wait!" But it took past the next level and up the next stairs for him to catch up. "What are you doing in here? Why did you come?"

"Why not?" she asked. "I mean, N's been in here for hours and hasn't come out. I'm worried about him, so I figured I'd come check on him."

A flame of jealousy burned in his heart. "Is that it?"

"I also thought it might be a good chance to see you succeed in calling your dragon too," she said, looking back down at him briefly. "What's wrong with coming to support both of my friends? Come on, no time to waste!"

"This isn't a game," he said as he ran up after her.

"Does it have to be so serious?" she asked back, although she slowed a bit so they were together. Silly... but that was part of why she was so interesting, wasn't it?

At the top of the tower, N was kneeling, both of his hands on the floating Dark Stone. He had stopped wondering why he wasn't getting a response as he was so intent on getting Zekrom to appear. In a weakening voice, he repeated his request for her appearance. He was even ignoring his other Pokemon who were nearby.

As they got close, Hilbert told Hilda, "I think that in order for Zekrom to appear, Reshiram has to appear too. I've got the Light Stone, so once we get up there, both dragons should be able to awaken."

"That's good," she said, teasingly tapping him with her daisy. "Come on, let's go! Hey N!" She ran up the last stairs.

"Wait, Hilda!" Hilbert called, running up after her.

In the final room, N heard voices but didn't comprehend what they were saying. It did distract him from his summoning. He felt anger but it was a weak emotion compared to the weariness that had a hold on his body. Without really thinking, he got up and raised his hand to stop the ones trying to interrupt him. Some power swelled within him, but he hardly realized what was going on.

N fired out a Hyper Beam and Hilda walked right into it. For a moment, there was nothing to be seen but a bright white light. Hilbert's vision cleared in time to see Hilda's body fall onto the floor. She was still holding onto that daisy, but it was bent and covered in her blood. Hilbert called out in a panic, dropping down beside her, ignoring the masonry rocks underneath him. Several feet away, N collapsed back onto the floor after exhausting himself from the attack. For a moment, death held stillness and silence over Dragospiral Tower.

But that couldn't last. "You killed her," Hilbert said, his voice shaking with anger.

N was getting back onto his feet, looking hazily at them as he realized what was going on around him. He saw Hilda, dead from a large wound to her chest, and Hilbert kneeling beside her among
the loose rocks of this place. What was he talking about? True, he didn't agree with them, but he
wouldn't go as far as murder. "I did not," he said, taking hold of the Dark Stone.

"You did, you killed her!" Hilbert shouted, getting up with a look like he wanted to kill N then and
there. "And that's the truth of it. I will swear it on Reshiram, you killed her, you deluded madman!"

"How dare you..?" N started to argue, but then the Light and Dark Stones began to glow. They
both moved away from the two boys, heading over to in front of the archway. They grew in a flash
and then there they were. Reshiram and Zekrom stood side by side, majestic in real life.

But a bitter split had erupted violently between the two heroes already.

Hilbert was having a hard time convincing people to do what he wanted today. At first, they were
cooperative. Then, looking like they were coming awake from a dream, they would treat him with
suspicion. But that didn't matter when revenge was so strongly in Hilbert's mind. He used his
popularity and clout to get into the Champion's area of the Pokemon League Stadium without
having to fight any of the Elite 4.

As he approached the main area, climbing all those stairs, it became apparent that N had defeated
Alder. Hilbert would have been glad to fight N on the spot. But instead, N called on his castle to
appear and make 'a more suitable stage'. Hilbert pursued him.

"This isn't the right time to confront him," Reshiram said. "Your anger clouds your vision; you
should step back to calm your mind."

"No, because then he'll get away!" Hilbert snapped. He continued on, further into N's Castle. The
members of Team Plasma stayed wisely out of his way.

At the throne room, Hilbert and Reshiram met with N and Zekrom. N tried to conduct the
exchange with pompous dignity, but Hilbert wasn't going to let him get away with that. "I'm not
here to challenge you for any fancy ideas," Hilbert said. "I'm here to show you how damn stupid
your ideals are, and to get revenge for Hilda's death."

"I did not kill her," N said, finally breaking his calm mask to get angry too.

"Stop being so deluded and open your eyes to your own corruption and insanity!" Hilbert
challenged, feeling a giant surge of power run through his body. He didn't care about what it was
as his focus was solely on N. The same feeling of power came out in N, who ignored it too even
though large empty crests appeared underneath both of their feet.

Zekrom and Reshiram noticed. But for as much experience as they had, neither one had a clue
about what the empty crests meant. "Wait a moment," Zekrom said as the energy turned red.

Then both crests exploded, breaking up into hundreds of red and black arms. Right as N and
Hilbert noticed that their rage had turned into an unsettling form, it lashed out towards the two
legendary dragons, taking hold of their very life force and ripping it straight out of their bodies.

The two dragons screamed, unable to resist as their souls were grafted straight into N and Hilbert.
For a moment, they were stunned by the feeling of fear and pain from the deaths of their partners.
It was soon eclipsed by the pain as their human genes, meant to be unalterable, were forced to
change and accept the incredible power of the immortals. The forms of dragon scales began to
appear over their skin, especially visible on their arms and legs; white scales on Hilbert and black
scales on N. The red crests filled in with what should have been the signs of Reshiram and Zekrom,
altered to reflect their new owners. They were turned into dragons reminiscent of the ones whose
powers they now held.

Then, the power theft was complete. The atmosphere of the room calmed down, leaving the lifeless bodies of the two elder dragons and the uncertain forms of the two newly created dragons. What was going on? Who was responsible for this?

They each felt that the other was the one responsible. Growls were exchanged and then the two began to fight themselves, causing an explosion of power that brought down two-thirds of the castle they were in. Since it was a wreck, both took to the air and continued their fight. Their hatred and confusion left them focused on each other, not realize the destruction following in the wake of their combat.

N felt a feral sense of victory, but was utterly exhausted after days of battle. As his mind began to clear, he looked around them. This had once been Castelia City; not a single building was left intact. Many were smoldering ruins. The wailing of alarms sounded in the distance, but there were no screams amid the burning of fire.

For a moment, N was confused. "What's going on?" he asked. He looked down and saw Hilbert. "What's going on? Hey, Hilbert, get up. Tell me... why do you think I killed Hilda?"

But he didn't respond. His vision cleared further but he hardly recognized the body he saw. The power of truth, once Reshiram's, then Hilbert's, and now his, awakened in his mind. With that, N saw what was going on: the destruction both had caused in their battle, the theft of power from the legendary dragons, the fact that Hilbert was his brother, how savagely he had killed his brother, how he had killed Hilda in a moment of inattentiveness, the corruption of his own ideals... one of his arms had black scales, and the other had white, permanent proof of lives he had taken.

"No, no..." N trembled and closed his eyes, but that did not block out the truth. Then he screamed in a voice that wasn't entirely human. Transforming back into a dragon with features of both Zekrom and Reshiram in a tint of green like his hair, N lashed out against his pain. In that moment, the entire region of Unova and many lands around it were devastated.

But madness had a grip on N and wouldn't let go with just that.

"N!"

That voice broke through to N's mind, finally calming him down. That voice was reassurance that things would be okay, that this moment was only a terrible obstacle on the path to a perfect world. This had to be happening for good reasons, N thought. He wasn't evil; he wasn't corrupted. He just couldn't see things clearly. But the one who called him could.

N descended as a dragon and landed by Ghetsis on top of the remains of the castle. And for once, Ghetsis was smiling for him. "Calm down," he said, although he still didn't touch him. "You've done well, N. I'm proud of you."

"Ghetsis," N said, then burst into tears. He lowered his head, not feeling worthy of the praise. And yet, he felt a burst of happiness on hearing it. He had finally done something worthy of Ghetsis's expectations of him. What it was, he wasn't sure as he had caused so much destruction and pain and death. "I'm not evil?"

"No, you're not," he said. "You're just not used to this power and you still need to learn to control it. But now there is no one who can defy your dreams."
"I don't know, I could hardly think until you called my name. And what I'm seeing now is so terrible, I can't..." he cried out again. There was too much pain in his heart and he saw no way he'd be able to ignore this.

"But that's what I'm here to help you with," Gehtsis said reassuringly. "You leave the planning and thinking to me. We'll turn this world into what it's supposed to be."

Leave the thinking to him. If he didn't have to think, then he didn't have to remember. That sounded like a good idea to N. But there was a problem in that even combined, Reshiram and Zekrom were still not whole. This led N's power to continue to destabilize as time went on, making it dangerous for anyone to stay too close. Especially when N began losing himself to his emotions. The obvious solution to that was to complete that ancient power by finding Kyurem, and stealing the power from him as well.

May 4

Dragonspiral Tower

When Hilbert's mind cleared, he found that the mist had started to clear too. Hilda was bringing him up the final set of stairs, where N was waiting. And where he would attack without realizing it, setting them down that terrible road. "Wait a minute," he said, stopping and trying not to lose his balance on the stairs.

"Oh, you finally out off dream land?" Hilda asked teasingly.

"We can't go up there, not without being careful," he said, looking up. "I know what happened in Kyurem's history, listen." He tried to tell it quickly, but they had to know how things were going to happen.

"You stole power from my siblings?" Kyurem asked after he was done, watching him intently.

"It didn't happen consciously," Hilbert said. "We both were angry and the power activated on its own... no, that's not it," he snapped his fingers. "Back when Dr. Umber had me, he intentionally goaded me until I lost my temper and a crest like that appeared and turned red. The only reason it didn't get Genesect was because Umber separated us quickly once it started to appear. We don't have control of it. But, that seems to be what this whole plan is about." He looked up the stairs.

"To mold your lives so that both of you would aim to become the heroes and call on Reshiram and Zekrom, only to steal their immortality from them," Hilda said. "That's pretty crazy, but I can see how it fits."

"And N doesn't have control over what happens next either," Hilbert said. "He just reacted to us coming up there. So we need to get in there without startling him."

"We have to be in there for the summoning to work," Kyurem said.

"It's already changed," Rune said, flying ahead of them. "N listened to us this time; you said he hadn't. I see him and... what's that?" He darted up, then turned back to them. "Come up here."

"What's going on?" Hilda asked as they came up the last of the steps to the top of the tower.

They were greeted by an immense flash of light...
Victory or Failure?

May 4

Dragonspiral Tower

For being a moment when his fate was completely out of his control, N wasn't feeling as afraid as he had been. There was still some dread of what would happen if he failed, but it no longer seemed as close. His friends were going to come soon, once Rune had found them. While sometimes he wondered if he should worry about them not coming, he felt almost certain that they would. And that gave him hope.

"I'm not sure why I want them to come," he said, rolling an empty Pokeball he had back to the Zorua. The young Pokemon was eager to play, pouncing for the Pokeball. "It's not just because it'll make this work."

"It's because you like them, isn't that it?" Pierre asked. "If I get alone, I want to see the rest of you again soon."

"You act like that if we're gone for more than a minute," Tock said. "But the idea fits."

"I'm not supposed to be liking them," N said. "Their ideas oppose mine, so we should be enemies. But Hilbert talked to me a lot and he's tried to help me. And Hilda, whenever we had a battle, I got the idea that she really loved her Pokemon and they loved her. If more people could be good like that..." his mind caught up to what he was saying, and he shook his head. "But that's a ridiculous idea, of getting to know people because you've been in several Pokemon battles with them."

"Is it ridiculous?" Zane asked. "I got to know many other Pokemon by battling them. Usually not the ones in the forest because they were easily frightened. But when I traveled around, there were others I learned to respect through battle."

The Zorua batted the Pokeball back to N. "Battles are fun! There was this one Watchog who thought I was just a foolish child, but then I fought him and he turned out to be not so bad. He even helped me out because he saw that I was determined."

"You seem a little young to be an avid fighter," N said, catching the ball before it rolled off. He got up on his hind legs, waving his paws. "Hey, I'm three months old now! And it's not like I'm obsessed with battles. They're just fun. And my friends would spar every day and we're close."

"What if you get hurt?" N asked. "Battles are a risk."

"In a good battle, you don't get really hurt," Zane said. "Sure you might ache for a little while, but it's not a danger."

To give himself a moment to think, N sent the empty Pokeball after Zane. The Zorua raced after it, even when the Zoroark sent it speeding across the room and it made him slide around as he tried to turn too fast. He smiled for a moment, but then wondered if he should be having a bit of fun in this sacred place. Was it disrespectful? The Dark Stone was quiet still, occasionally sparking repeatedly.

It was supposed to be that they were either friends or enemies. Not friends and they opposed his ideals. Then again, battles could lead to suffering and pain, and yet his Pokemon were not showing
any opposition to the Zorua's claim that battles were fun. Could such ideas co-exist? It was so
different from how he was used to thinking. Where were things certain?

That should be settled soon. "You're three months old, huh?" N asked as the Zorua chased the
empty Pokeball near him. "I'm twenty years old now."

Putting his paw on the ball to pause, the Zorua looked up at him. "Really? Wow, that's a long
amount of time."

"In the grand system, it's not all that long actually," Tock said. "I've been living for six years, nine
months, seventeen days, eleven hours, forty-two minutes, and three seconds. But that's just a tick to
the universe."

"A year is a really long time to me," the Zorua said, shifting his weight and losing the Pokeball as a
result. He pounced it and ended up tumbling onto his back with the ball in his paws.

Then the sound of shoes on the stone floor and a vague conversation caused all of them to pause.
That was surprising; shouldn't one of his Pokemon have noticed people coming into the tower? He
turned around and saw himself coming from the direction of the stairs, the one with the scaled
arms. There was some strange aura around him, so N shifted back to his mind's eye. When he did,
there wasn't a human before him, but a dragon of immense power. It was even more than Kyurem
displayed.

"I didn't want to have to come now," the other N said. "But you told Kyurem to come."

"He has to come," he said, pointing to the archway. "He should be able to take care of that."

The other N walked up to beside him, looking out there. "It's his power that caused it. I might be
able to, but my power..." he turned to him. "You made a mistake. But perhaps it is necessary."

"Maybe I did, but..." he looked at the Pokemon, who weren't sure what to make of another N.

"You'll need to destroy everything in order to create a world that you can be happy in," he said.

"What kind of nonsense are you talking about?" Zane asked.

"We don't want to destroy anything, much less everything," Pierre said.

N got up on his feet, but nearly fell off balance. A wave of tiredness came over him. Seeing as the
sky was now dark, he realized that he had been in here without really sleeping for a long time. "I
don't want that, I know for certain."

Looking down, the other N said, "I didn't want that. But I have seen how much corruption there
is... where it is. It would be better to just start over fresh," he clenched a fist to his chest, "and while
there is much I would change, my power is not yet enough."

"But your power is greater than any I've felt," N said, not sure what to make of what he was saying.

"My power?" He smiled bitterly and laughed. "Maybe. You have the potential... fight me."

His heart began thumping. What chance did he stand trying to fight him? "F-fight you? I don't want
to... I don't want to fight."

The other N raised his hand, creating a white glow. "You should fight, so that I don't feel so bad
about killing you. But that is better than letting you continue in your mistake. I'm sure you'll
understand."

"Why do you want to kill me?" N asked, bringing his hands to his chest. How was he supposed to fight? He could only think of two moves, neither damaging. Maybe one could still help.

"So that you don't suffer." He started to shift his stance, getting ready to attack.

Still, N managed to move quicker by using Flash. The bright light filled the room and for a moment even he couldn't see what was going on. Then the other N's attack went off, a violet burst of lightning that flew right by him harmlessly and hit the wall. While N and his Pokémon were able to blink and clear their vision after that, the other N was squinting, uncertain of where they were.

"N!" At that point, Rune returned, along with Hilbert, Hilda, Kyurem, and a few of the other Pokémon with them. Hilda was the one calling his name. "What're you doing fighting with yourself?" she asked.

"H-Hilda?" the other N asked, startled. "But you, no, this isn't there, but you died, and..."

"I don't know exactly why, but he wants to kill me," N said.

"At least you broke his mind," Kyurem said.

The other N narrowed his eyes and pointed at them. "Why did you bring her here?! At this time, she shouldn't be here or she will die."

"Chill out," Hilda said, shifting her hat. Being that it was a straw hat and not her usual, it looked a little odd. "I came because I wanted to. Kyurem was the one who had to come."

"He should not have come to this history in the first place," he snapped. A red aura started to show on the floor beneath him. "Why did you run away?"

"Because my siblings died and I wanted to find a way to save them," Kyurem said. "It seems that their power lies within you now, so I have no way to bring them back with you around."

"Can we solve this without anyone getting killed?" N asked. His other self was shaking with fury. Who knew what he could do if he really lashed out. Not only that, but the aura made him uneasy. Fortunately, that calmed him down, lessening the power building. "Yes, yes, if no one had to die, that would be good," the other N said, looking down. "But so many have died already. I can't control what I do and the only way for me to get control is to eliminate him."

"The only way?" Kyurem said, walking up to him.

"What's going on?" Pierre asked.

"I'm not entirely sure," Zane said.

The other N put his hand on his head, forcing a smile. "I tried to ask the others, but so many of them fell. You, you were a part of the dragon that Reshiram and Zekrom came from?"

Kyurem nodded. "True. I am the shell, the empty circle. I am supposed to be the point of balance, but it seems in a situation like this, I am causing imbalance in this world. That is why I intended to leave the world from here."

"Kyurem?" Hilda asked in concern, approaching him.
Holding a hand up for her to stop, Kyurem didn't take his eyes off the other N. "I've heard your story now. Our world changed. You were a big part of the change, but in the end, you are not the cause. Despite that, you now hold the responsibility to set the world right. And from the scent of you, only you have that power now."

"I don't know what to do," he said.

Kyurem then tapped the other N's forehead, making him wince at the contact. "You will know what to do if you allow yourself to think about it. Every legendary Pokemon has a role and they know that role always. It is linked inextricably to their power. But you do need to learn control. I will reduce your power so that you have to learn it like everyone else. Still, you need to return home. I will not be going back." A blue aura appeared beneath him, only to conflict strongly with the other N's. "Calm down."

"I'm sure he doesn't mean to hurt you," Hilda said.

He turned his head towards her, but wouldn't meet her eye. "You're... did you mean to hurt me?"

"She's not," N started to say that this wouldn't be the Hilda he knew, if he understood this right. But it was so strange. What did they mean by Kyurem's siblings dying? They were certainly alive. But this Kyurem was supposed to be from another time.

But Hilda interrupted before he could speak his mind. "No way. N's one of my friends. Yeah, I might mess with my friends a little, but I wouldn't intentionally hurt them. I'd rather make all of you laugh and have a good time."

Ghetsis wanted him to succeed, N thought. For that reason, he supported N and pushed him to keep after his goal. Too much so? But Ghetsis had guided much of his life, so if he was wrong, how much of N's life was wrong? Or was this another thing where 'all or nothing' didn't apply?

"What will you be doing, Kyurem?" Hilbert asked, well-timed to distract N from his thoughts. "Because we can't have two of you."

"There will be only one of us by tomorrow morning," Kyurem explained. The power lock seemed to have taken affect, as the other N's spirit wasn't as intimidating. "Are you ready to go?"

The other N touched the bracelet on his arm. "I'm not entirely sure how to get back. I was told that I'd figure it out, but it took me so much time to find you..."

"You'd know if you let yourself think," he said, focusing his attention to the sky above. "But I can call on one who would know exactly how to use them."

"Wait a sec," Hilda said, looking to the other N. "N, we need to ask you something. Where did you take Keldeo?"

Hilbert nodded. "Yeah, Cobalion and Meloetta have been searching for him ever since."

He seemed puzzled that they would ask. "Keldeo? I returned him to a place important to him, I told them. And I restored his power."

"What do you mean, restored his power?" N asked. And, Keldeo was missing? That was awful.

"He lost his immortality and powers for some reason," the other N said. "I tried to fix it. I... I don't know how well I really did, but he is alive and he didn't fall to my power. I would know if he had."
"If you affected his power, then where is he?" Kyurem asked. "At this moment."

"At this... moment?" He closed his eyes and thought.

In the meantime, a shadow appeared from overhead. N looked up and briefly saw an enormous dragon with four legs and a long neck; a pearl blue orb sat on its chest. Then he disappeared, reappearing in a smaller form close to them. It was much like what he had just been, only five feet tall instead of fifty. "You've found what you were looking for," he said.

"Yes." Kyurem bowed his head to the blue dragon. "Thanks for coming, Dialga. We need your help to send him back home. I can resolve the imbalance here."

"Good. But are you sure sending him back is wise?" Dialga leaned closer to the other N. "I can no longer remember what happened in that history, but the last few memories I have turned very dark."

"He's the only one that can do anything there," he pointed out.

"Keldeo," the other N said, still with his eyes closed. "I sense him in Unova. But if you were to look, you would not find him. His power is submerged as his spirit heals from what he went through. His memory should emerge naturally in a little while, at least a year. Then and only then will anyone be able to recognize him." Then he looked at them. "I hope that helps... oh?" He saw Dialga and cringed.

"It's time for you to go home," Dialga said. "We hope that you can set things right there."

"Well..." he sighed, then nodded. "Was I only causing trouble here? I wanted to make things better."

"Start at home," Dialga said, then vanished with the other N.

"What's going on?" N asked, looking at the others. "I was wondering for a while if he was just a vision I had once."

"Hilbert?" Kyurem asked, but more as a prompt for him to answer instead of an actual question. Maybe; it seemed an odd thing to do to N. Still, his brother hesitated before saying, "There was a danger in an alternate history. This Kyurem came back to make sure Hilda didn't die. It would have led somewhere terrible."

She smiled, seemingly not troubled at hearing that. "But I'm still here and alive. So Rei, this is why you said goodbye earlier?"

He nodded. "I had to leave at some time. Is it a problem?"

"Well I'm going to miss you," she said, putting her hands on her hips. "But if your memories will pass on to your other self, then you won't be entirely gone. You'd better get going so that the other two aren't kept hanging any longer."

"Oh right, I asked Rune to get you to get rid of that barrier," N said, pointing to the archway.

"That won't be an issue," Kyurem said. Strangely, his body glistened as if he had been out in the rain. "You three had best take this time to settle things between you. If you can see the barrier, then you will know when it is down. Goodbye." Then he closed his eyes, his body and clothes turning white rapidly. Before long, there was nothing but a pile of snow and a bright spirit where he had
been standing. His spirit then passed through the gate, making it shine light blue.

Hilbert then turned to him. "You look pale again. I bet you didn't bring any food or water up here, right? You've really got to take better care of yourself."

"I didn't think I'd be here this long," N said. "But I did have some water. I used up the last of it making sure all of my Pokemon were taken care of."

"I have some lemonade," Hilda said, bringing out an aluminum can and opening it up for him. "Here."

N took it and drank most of it in one go. "Thanks. But what are you doing here?"

"What do you think?" Hilda said, smiling. "I came to see you both awaken the dragons."

"Even with this talk about you dying?" N asked. Not that long ago, he had been afraid of leaving this tower.

"Wouldn't miss it for the world," she said. Then she flicked his hat back, causing it to hang upside-down by his ponytail.

"She's the one chosen by Kyurem, so she could get in here too," Hilbert said. "You had the right idea in that we needed all three of them here. I was going to just wait until you were done. Sorry we didn't figure that out earlier."

"It's good to know for certain that was why she wasn't responding," N asked, fixing his hat. "I was starting to think that, maybe I wasn't worthy." He shuddered. "But I have to be, or all that I've done, my whole life, it will be worthless."

"Aw, come on," Hilda said. "You're not worthless, even without Zekrom. I mean, you can talk to Pokemon and understand them! Do you know how many people have dreamed of being able to do that? I have, for one. There's so much you can do to help others just by using that."

"And you're smart too, so you can certainly make a difference in the world," Hilbert said.

"Maybe," he said, looking back at the archway. The ice was still there. "But since they will be awakening, we will have to fight for our beliefs, Hilbert." He looked to his brother.

"Do we have to?" he asked. "We managed to settle things with that cr...that future version of you without much violence. We can talk this out reasonably."

"Weren't you thinking all about that earlier?" the Zorua asked, coming back to N's side.

N sighed. It had to be the Zorua to say that, a Pokemon that Hilbert would easily understand. "But that doesn't count," he said. "That was just me trying to figure things out. I don't want Pokemon to be hurt by humans anymore and separating them will make absolutely sure that it no longer happens. I know that for certain, and I still believe that it will work."

The Zorua turned his ears down. "Separate humans and Pokemon? But you're so cool! I don't know about this; it doesn't sound fun."

"How many Pokemon have you asked about that?" Hilda asked. "Have you asked any of them if they'll miss bacon? Or ice cream? Or anything else that we humans make or do for them?"

While he knew Hilda was odd from time to time, this still seemed out there to N. "Bacon? That's
frivolous, small matters. We need to focus on the large issues."

"Kyurem would miss bacon terribly," she said.

"Well that might be small, but there are larger things like companionship and love that will be taken away with that kind of separation," Hilbert said.

"But talking about this doesn't prove how strong your ideas are," N said. "If we settle this matter with Reshiram and Zekrom at our sides, then it will prove without a doubt which side is better. Then everything will be clear and no one can be confused about it anymore." Especially not himself.

"Must it come to this?" Hilbert asked. Then, with some reluctance, he nodded. "All right, if that's what it will take to convince you. But not now."

"Why not now?"

"You've been up ever since yesterday morning, haven't you?" Hilda asked, checking on something in her item storage device. "Maybe you're hitting a second wind, but you and your Pokemon need to be in good shape."

"Well.." that might be. He did have trouble getting to sleep the night before he came here.

"How about we meet in one week at Victory Road?" Hilbert suggested, looking between them both. "The, the eleventh. We'll settle things then."

"That sounds good," she said, nodding. "You like that?"

They were giving him time to prepare? N hadn't wanted to waste time. But, having a certain date felt right. He would have until then to be with his Pokemon friends and settle things with them.
"That sounds good. I'll meet you at Victory Road, then... no, past it. You'll see me at the Pokemon League stadium."

"Kyurem's done breaking the barrier," Rune said, flying closer to them to make sure N and Hilbert heard him. "The other two are waiting."

"It's time, then," Hilbert said, turning to the archway. "Let's call them here by name."

"If you think only that will work," N said, glancing at the two stones. They were already moving ahead. Anticipation began to build in him again, more excited than he had been earlier. This was the moment he'd been waiting for...

"Wait!" Hilda said. Without any more warning than that, she bounded over and hugged N.

"Gah! What?!!" He wasn't sure how to respond, although Hilbert ended up snorting with laughter.

She let go of him, stepping back and giggling. "I think there's something else to be said first. Happy birthday, N!" She took out a cube-shaped tin that had a scene of Pokemon in a forest printed on the sides and top, then pushed it into his hands without letting him refuse. "I didn't know when I'd get to see you, so I got you a bunch of candy. And I got one for you too, happy birthday, Hilbert!" She then went over to him with another tin when N took his.

"Oh thanks, I'm surprised you remembered that," Hilbert said, accepting a hug from her too.

"Silly, it's on your fanpage," she replied. "Just don't eat it all at once."
Candy was really frivolous; little nutritional value and it was only for consumption. Did that kind of small happiness make for an appropriate gift? It did seem like something worthy, a show that one cared about another. "Thank you for thinking of us," N said. "I'll try at least one."

"I'm sure you'll like them," Hilda said, cheered by that.

So it didn't really take much to make another person happy. This would definitely need some consideration. But for now, "Are we ready to get back to the matter at hand?"

She rolled her eyes. "Okay, I'm done." She then turned to her Scrafty and whispered something to him. In response, the Pokemon lightly bumped her nose with his fist.

After setting the tin in his own bag, he looked back at the archway. "Then let's show everyone the strength of our beliefs." If he ignored the words of any others, even Ghetsis, and focused on wanting to stop others on being hurt, even making them happy in peace, he felt a great confidence return to him. "Zekrom, you've heard my pleas; come to me!"

"Reshiram, awaken and help me spread the truth to the world," Hilbert called.

At that moment, three spirits came through the archway. Two returned to the floating stones while the third went to Hilda's side and stayed there. The Light Stone and the Dark Stone moved away from the group, growing and changing. And then, both Zekrom and Reshiram appeared, side by side in front of the archway.

The two of dragons spoke, but to his disappointment, Hilbert couldn't understand them either of them. Although thinking on it, he shouldn't have been surprised. He hadn't been able to hear Dialga earlier.

N stepped forward to reply. "It was a lot of trouble. But it's fine. You're both here now." Then he stumbled and nearly fell over again.

"Hey N, be careful," Hilda said, catching him. "You'll get knocked over by a stiff breeze as you are. Zekrom, would you mind taking care of him? Make sure he eats something and gets a nice long rest."

Zekrom replied in a tone that seemed half amused and half concerned. After bowing his head, N recalled his Pokemon, picking up the Zorua before climbing onto Zekrom's back. She then flew off the tower with him, to the east. With him in the dragon's care, he should be fine. She might even get him to a place where the others in Plasma couldn't find him easily.

Reshiram watched them fly off, then surrounded himself in light. After a moment, he reappeared as a human. He was tall, like a brawny man with long full white hair. He wore a crisp white long coat and pants, along with a red belt that flicked like fire and faintly resembled his tail. He wore no shoes, but did have a thin scarf with winged ends. "They'll be fine," he said.

So far, so good. Feeling relieved, Hilbert came forward. "Reshiram, it's good to meet you in person. I hope that you'll be able to help me."

Reshiram nodded. "You have been faced with many harsh truths in recent days. They were not easy to face, but you have accepted them, even considering what they mean. You are truly worthy of being my hero. N's heart makes him worthy as well, however," he put his hand to his chin, "he still has much to learn, including breaking the hold of his illusions. But we have watched you both and agreed that this is for the best. He won't accept truth until we defeat him. And given the potential you both have, we are willing to participate in this battle for the sake of helping him."
"See, I told you," Hilda said to Hilbert. "It's going to be fine."

Hilbert smiled and nodded. As the dragon of truth didn't seem worried, he saw no reason to stress over it much longer. "Right."

"Although," Reshiram then turned to Kyurem's spirit. "We weren't expecting you to go as far as to destroy yourself in order to save us."

"It's what had to be done," Kyurem said, cool and practical as always.

"Which makes you the big hero this time around," Hilda said, sounding proud and happy.

"Then what will you do now?" Reshiram asked.

"It would be unwise for me to reform myself in this world," he said. "And yet, I can no longer return to my own home time. I will go find myself here and transfer my memories into him. If it works out, I will be absorbed into him, and balance will return here."

"That seems reasonable," Reshiram said. "Don't worry; we will handle things from here."

"I trust you." His spirit moved closer to Hilda. "Well, this would be goodbye, until my other self awakens and remembers me."

"I'm going to miss having you around, but I'd better not hold you back," Hilda said, staying cheerful. But Hilbert could feel her sadness at losing a dear friend. "Goodbye. I hope I do get to see you again."

"Me too." Then Kyurem's soul flew off into the night, seeking his other self.

Since she no longer had a flying Pokemon, Hilda called up her Mom on the Xtransciver to let her know that things had worked out. She then checked into a hotel in Iccirus, as she was feeling tired after going up and down the tower. Still, she was uneasy. Without the presence of Kyurem watching out for her, she felt vulnerable. But she couldn't let that get to her. It wasn't like her to be afraid of something like that. So she brought out her other Pokemon to keep her company.

"Hey guys, I've got big news for you," she said.

"What, that we get to kick someone's butt tonight?" Fedora asked.

She grinned. "No, although that would be fun. Kyurem let me understand you guys like N does."

"What, really?" Tarzan asked, looking surprised.

"That's wonderful," Olette said, sounding as soft and gentle as Hilda always imagined her 'voice' being like. "I don't have much to say, but,"

"Ooo, that's going to be lots of fun!" Mimi squealed, jumping up on the bed and hugging her. "Now you can be part of conversations for real reals!"

"So you get all Pokemon now too, huh?" Frank asked, putting his hand to his chin. When she nodded, he added, "The world's going to get a lot noisier for you, believe me. At least some sensible human can actually talk with us now."

"And we can really plot out stuff now, like bridge jumping!" Tarzan said.
Hilda laughed. "Oh yeah! But nothing that would get us all killed now, bud."

Mimi kept a paw on her shoulder, but looked around. "That's nice, but where is Daddy?"

This wasn't going to be easy, but it had to be said. Hilda took her paw. "Kyurem's gone now. He came to make sure that I would survive an important event, and that his siblings had a chance to defend themselves from danger. Since his job is done, he had to leave."

She lowered her ears and sat down. "Really, he's gone? But I was going to stay with him for adventures."

"He's not going to be gone forever," Olette said. "Your heart will find him again, in the future."

"That's right," Hilda said. "Besides, you remember that other Kyurem we met, the one that was really cranky? Our Kyurem went to meet with him and let him know everything that's been going on. And he might decide to come back to us once he's done with that. But who knows? It could be a few months wait."

"That's sad," Mimi said. "But, I can stay with you all, right? Cause I love you all too and I'd be really sad if I had to leave because Daddy's gone."

"Of course you can stay with us," Hilda said, messing with her fur. "As long as you want to stay, I wouldn't dream of leaving you behind."

"Yeah, can't leave you out of our gang," Tarzan said, nodding. "Maybe Kyurem has important stuff to do... gonna miss that big grump. But we're going to stick together to the end, right everyone?"

"That's the spirit," Hilda said, cheering up immensely as her other Pokemon agreed. "Well it's late and I'm tired. But Reshiram and Zekrom are awake now, and it's getting closer to the final showdown. We've got to really work together now and show N that it's better that we all stick together as friends should. Then we can taunt Kyurem for missing out on the big event!"

Besides, it would be a real shame if her new gift of language was rendered useless.
Emboldened by what had happened at Dragonspiral Tower, N entered the office that Ghetsis worked in at the castle. It had always been grander than his own spaces, N realized, although it was smaller. The things he had, like the engraved dark wooden chairs and matching desk, were beautiful and gave a powerful impression. Instead of being different like N's spaces, this room blended right into the castle. He wondered why he hadn't noticed that before; he had been blind to a lot of things.

"What I'm trying to say is that I don't think this is the only way to do things now," N said, standing on the other side of the desk. "Certainly I want to stop terrible things from happening, but those things are not a common as I once thought they were. We shouldn't ignore the pain of a few, but an absolute separation will cause pain of sadness to nearly everyone. I don't want to be responsible to that."

"Then what do you think we should do?" Ghetsis said, his back turned to N as he worked on something else.

He put his hand to his chest and looked down. "I don't know yet. I have learned a lot from this journey, but one thing is that I have not learned enough. We could try just talking more to people, demonstrating to them that Pokemon are also individuals worthy of respect. It used to be better known through the world, but technology has lost knowledge along with gaining it. At least, going to do that will give me more time to think, and see what affects people more positively."

He paused a moment. "You know why you can't do that. I've told you before."

"Why is that?" N said, although some things came to mind.

"People won't listen to you. If you tell them that you understand Pokemon, they'll think that you're making it up or that you're crazy. If they even believe you, you'll be seen as a freak. They won't listen to someone claiming to have such strange power. You don't stand a chance out there completely on your own, following your unearthly dreams. Since you'll be ostracized anyhow, it's safer that you keep to yourself and get help from the few who would believe in you."

"Am I a freak?" N wondered quietly to himself. He felt awful for not realizing that himself. But then... there were people who believed in him who would not believe in Team Plasma. They saw him as having great potential, even to change the world just on his natural talents. And those people... "Why did you never hug me? It's not that bad, although can be surprising when unexpected."

"Because you never liked being touched." Same answer as always.

"When did I say that?" N asked again. "I think... you convinced me that I didn't like being touched. And that I shouldn't meet with people unless you approved of them. And that the world would hate me. It's not that way. None of it is that way. Why did you do that?" He leaned forward in his chair. "Why won't you look at me and talk with me like a normal person?"

"You're not a normal person," he said, still not looking at him.

"Ghetsis..." N said, but a sadness was overcoming his anger.
He finally got up out of his seat. "I took you in when anyone else would have thought you were a freak of nature. I taught you how you could make our dreams come true. I showed you want to do, protected you from the cruelty of the world, brought others to you who could best help you. I gave up much of my time and life to bring you to this moment."

"Did you do that for me, or for you?"

"Does that matter?" He then turned to face him, but in order to fling a knife through N's chest. "If you're going to keep asking questions like this, you're too much trouble to keep around. And without me, you might as well be dead. I can take Zekrom and handle the rest."

Although N felt a horrible sense of dread, he didn't feel that surprised. Or, pain. He looked down at the knife in his chest, at the blood. Nothing. He looked up at Ghetsis, not quite seeing his face. It made him think that he must have been dreaming. If it was, what was it trying to tell him?

Or he was trying to tell himself. People kept telling him that if he listened to his heart, he wouldn't be confused on what to do. While it seemed simple, it wasn't.

N felt a paw on his face, some Pokemon trying to wake him up.

May 5

Victory Road

When N woke up, he found himself outside, on a rocky cliff where a few tough grasses grew. Where was he? He sat up and looked around, seeing cliffs going above him and cliffs dropping below him. From the reddish hue the dirt and rocks had, this seemed to be Victory Road itself. On one side, Zekrom was sitting on the ground, resting but awake. The Zorua was still with them, surprisingly; he was curled up asleep.

On his other side, an Audino leaned closer to him, listening with her sensitive ears. "Good, good, you're awake now," she said. "Come, you need to eat a good breakfast so that you'll be able to get started with your day. I found some things that you can eat." She then passed over a wrapped granola bar and an apple.

Zekrom lifted her head. "You weren't well last night, so I called for one of them to attend to you."

N nodded. "I see, thanks." He took a bite out of the apple, taking a moment to savor the flavor. It was a simple thing in this complicated piece of his life, a good distraction to the nightmare lingering in his mind.

Pleased to have been a good help, the Audino shook her ringlets. "You're welcome. Oh, but you know, when I was listening deeply to your heart, I heard something strange and familiar. You are like a human, and like a Pokemon too."

"I know, that's what I am," he said.

"Huh, so can you use moves like Pokemon?" she asked, twitching her ears.

He nodded. "Yeah, I've been able to do some things. Nothing very impressive."

The Audino chuckled. "Well the fact that you can understand me is impressive. I've been thinking, and I got a great idea. I can teach you one of my best moves."
Teach him? He shook his head. "No... no I don't want to hurt anyone."

"This move doesn't hurt anyone," the Audino said cheerfully. "Heal Pulse is what I used on you when you were sleeping last night, and it's to heal others."

"A healing move? That would be great, actually." And so much more useful than a move that hurt others.

Happy, she smiled and put a paw on his nose. "It is! And I have a feeling that you'll be really good at it, I mean really really good. Here, watch me." She used it on him again.

The power felt soothing, a touch of another's love. N put his hand on the Audino's head and focused on that feeling. With that, he found it simple to cast Heal Pulse on her. "Oh... that was easier than I thought."

The Audino laughed. "See? I was right! Now grow strong so that you may help many others. I've got to go now; I live with Terrakion and help many Pokemon deep in the caves. Be well." Then she trotted off back into the caves to get to where she lived.

"They must have nice lives," N said, watching her go. "Going around helping others, healing their wounds. Nobody could hate them, or think they were failures."

"They would sacrifice themselves in order to help others," Zekrom said. "It is an admirable devotion, if sad and unfortunate."

N looked up at her. "How can it be admirable and unfortunate?"

She glanced at her claws and started doing some grooming while talking. "It is because we admire how much they wish to help, and yet wish that they never had to go so far as to put their lives on the line to make things better. One should not have to sacrifice one's self to make things better. Better to stay true to one's heart and see the better things come to pass with one's own eyes."

"It would be a pity to never see what comes of your work," N agreed, getting up. "We're close to the end now, so we should get going."

However, Zekrom didn't get up or stop fussing with her scales. "Should we? Once you succeed, we'll have to part. I thought you would want some time to talk with me before that happened."

He hesitated, feeling torn. "Yes, I did want to... but I spent a lot of time getting to this point and I could have done it sooner if I didn't get distracted with other things. There are Pokemon out there who are suffering under this system and any time I lose is time lost to save them."

"Are you sure?"

After wondering why she was questioning him for a moment, N looked down at the Zorua. "No," he admitted. "I mean, I don't want Pokemon to be hurt. But then, I've seen that many of them could be hurt by being separated from humans, even just in being sad or lonely. I don't want to do that to everyone. But I also don't want to disappoint those who have been helping me. I'm not really sure what to do now, but I need to do something."

Zekrom looked to him. "You do have a lot to accomplish. If you're not certain, then there might be a flaw within the plan, or related to it." N's thoughts turned to himself, but then the dragon said, "It does not seem to be about you, because if you faltered in your ideals in any way or behaved in an inappropriate manner, you would not have been able to bring my spirit into the physical world like this."
That was good to hear. N started to think about what else could be the problem. Did it really have to be as drastic? Hilda and Hilbert seemed to think that if more humans heard about what Pokemon had to say, something he could help with easily, then it would cause more to rethink how they treated them. And what about that dream he had? It might not mean anything, as most dreams were. Then again, he usually didn't remember dreams this clearly, only his visions of potential futures.

Before the terror of that idea got a hold on him, the Zorua's ears perked up and he uncurled from his sleeping position, yawning and stretching. Zane came up to them. "Someone's coming this way," he said. "We've been keeping others away from this spot so they wouldn't disturb you, but you're awake now."

"Thanks for that," N said, remembering the gratitude he'd felt for them yesterday. "Who is it?" he asked, already thinking over that again. Most of the humans should listen now that he had Zekrom, but what about the Pokemon? He had assumed that they would too. Or was he assuming about the humans too?

"One of the Sages," Zane replied. "Not one I recognize the smell of entirely. I think it's the one you call Ryuko."

"Is he older than the ones you know well?" he asked. When the Zoroark agreed that was so, he nodded. "It might be him. I hope it is; he might be able to help."

"Morning," the Zorua said, sitting in his spot. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm thinking about it," N said.

Then someone came out of tunnels that made up much of Victory Road itself. Ryuko always seemed smaller when he wasn't wearing the robes he had as one of Team Plasma's Sages, thin and worn from time. But even if he was close to ninety years old, he was in great health. The fact that he was here, halfway down the cliff that made up Victory Road, was a testament to that. He did have a Golurk keeping close to him; N recognized it as having been in Rood's possession at one point. The Golurk was wearing a Repel of some kind. To N, it wasn't a bad smell (although it wasn't pleasant either), but it did carry an unspoken warning of how powerful the Pokemon was.

"Oh, there you are," Ryuko said, smiling. "Good morning, N."

He nodded. "Good morning, Ryuko." Then considering how others spoke, he added, "How are you doing?"

"Not too bad, just taking a pleasant morning walk while I was seeing if you were nearby," he replied, although he was now looking up at Zekrom. "And it's a wonder to be meeting you, Master Zekrom." He then spoke something in a language that N didn't recognize, but it sounded to be full of respect.

Surprisingly, Zekrom laughed at that, although Ryuko probably wouldn't recognize it as such. "How amusing," she said, sounding pleased. "I have not heard that tongue in many centuries. It's not perfect, but understandable. Your devotion to knowledge and wisdom is admirable, elder. I appreciate the old honor, thank you."

This seemed like a safe place to try out being an interpreter, N thought. Not like back in Nacrene, when he'd tried to translate for that group of teenagers only to get responses from hostile to thinking it was a cute trick. "She thanks you for the old honor," he said. "It's been a long time since she's heard that language, but even if it wasn't perfect, she understood it."
"I don't expect it to be exact," Ryuko said, although he seemed glad to hear of it. "I read it in old texts and had to do extra research to find out how their pronunciation worked."

"What did it mean?" N asked.

"'Dragon of lightning, may our wisdom soar as high as you'," he said. '"Bless your grand wings. We seek your power for the greater good.' It seems to have been a formal greeting within one of the kingdoms she worked with. There's another blessing that is structured similarly, but is meant to be given to others instead of the dragons." Ryuko shrugged. "With those people long gone and the language only studied scholarly, it may be only a curiosity to know."

"You could use it once, so it is a little more than that to you," Zekrom said.

N told Ryuko that. Then he added, "I hope I haven't caused trouble to all of you; I was exhausted when we left the tower."

He shook his head. "We were worried, but since you were with Zekrom, many of us trusted that you would be okay. You are okay, right? You seem dusty."

Scratching his head, he said, "I woke up not that long ago, actually. But other than that, I'm doing well today. How were things outside the tower?"

"For a long time, nothing was happening," Ryuko said. "I had to leave for a time to get some rest myself, but others stayed there the whole while as well. Then yesterday evening, Hilbert and Hilda arrived, along with Kyurem. They insisted on going inside, saying that they had to be there for the summoning to work. We agreed to that, although there were a few like Ghetsis who weren't sure it was the right thing to do."

"Sometimes I come alone, but there were extra difficulties this time," Zekrom said.

Ryuko continued speaking. "There was a while longer when nothing happened, then the whole tower iced over again. But there was no one else there who could make the entrance that the three of you did. Not long after that, the ice broke again, replaced by spirals of red fire and blue sparks. Once they faded, we saw you flying off from the top of the tower. Hilbert and Hilda came out of the ground entrance several minutes later, with Reshiram instead of Kyurem."

N looked up at Zekrom. She bowed her head. "Let them know."

Nodding, he turned to Ryuko. "There was something strange going on. I don't know the full story, but I would imagine they do. The Kyurem with them was from a darker future, it seems. He came to this time to make sure his siblings didn't die. I don't know what he really did, but he said that his job was done after he sacrificed his current body to help Reshiram and Zekrom come back. This time, he was here for good reasons."

"Really?" he asked, intrigued by the possibility. "I see. I have sometimes wondered about him. Many think he is a force we don't want around, but there were enough stories and incidents I found in my studies that convinced me that he and the others often have mysterious purposes, things we don't need to know most of the time."

"Or purposes which would be unreasonable and irrational for a mortal to follow," Zekrom added.

"Why did you study the things you have?" N asked. "How did you know you were doing the right things?"

"Oh, those are two very different questions, but I think I can answer them at once," Ryuko said,
rubbing his chin. "I came from a very religious family, so when I wanted to know why things were they way they were in the world, I was directed towards what our religion stated. I grew interested and studied what texts I could find, eventually branching out to study texts from other religions when I discovered that they stated different things.

"With all that I was reading, I found many common threads, as well as differences both miniscule and major. I considered many of them, trying to figure out what was right and wrong. I discovered where my own assumptions were and where I could see things more clearly. But you know the most important thing I found out?" He smiled and put his hand to his chest. "That I had grown old and I should have spent more of my life enjoying it, not endlessly studying what life was and what it meant to be good. I think I'm doing a lot more good for the world working with you like this, using my knowledge instead of keeping it as something dusty and scholarly. I'm certainly happier for it."

That made N worried for if he wanted to change things at this point. But then Zekrom spoke up, "Some things seemed to be learned right by doing them wrong."

Which was puzzling, but Ryuko laughed when N told him. "That's how it happens, more often than you'd admit," he said. "I try not to let myself regret it too much; that would just drag me down into negativity. I've moved on, trying to make things better instead of just watching."

"But how do you know if what you're doing is right?" N asked. "People have told me that I would just know, or with the voice of the conscience, but sometimes all choices seem to be bad, or good."

"You learn through experience," Ryuko said. "But as the lady has said, experience often comes by doing things wrong. You can watch, read, learn, and think about it all you want, but sometimes it really is unclear to tell at the time which choice is right. Not all of the consequences are immediately apparent." He paused, then added, "Is something the matter? What's troubling you that you're not sure of the morality of it?"

There was a brief thought that he shouldn't speak of such things except to Ghetsis, or else he might appear weak when the others needed him to be strong. Since even his relationship with his father was coming into question now, N felt a stronger inclination to dismiss that thought. "I'm not sure we should be acting so fast," he admitted, feeling nervous about how that would be accepted. "Ghetsis has been pressuring me for the past year that we need to hurry things up and get the separation of society done, and I agreed for a while. But with things that I've seen and heard lately, it's become more unclear how things should be handled. I feel like we need time to consider and discuss it more, like with those worried that this will disrupt society in a harmful way."

"You need to talk with a lot more Pokemon too!" the Zorua barked, wagging his tail.

"Yes, and discuss it with more Pokemon, so that they at least know what's going to happen," N said.

Ryuko became thoughtful, looking around without really looking at things. "We were counting on the sudden revelation to help others realize what needs to be done. But that time has been passed and many of the more worldly opponents have arguments that people understand better. We especially would want the cooperation of the Pokemon; as long as they stay near the communities and routes where humans live, people can use that as an argument against us. It could be better to rebalance for a possible misstep than to plunge ahead and fall."

"Yes," N said. "We'll have to discuss it with the others, although Ghetsis," he bit his lip, trying to form his feelings into words.
Ryuko put his hand on N's shoulder briefly. "I know he's done a lot for you, but in the end, you're our leader and we're your advisers. Don't let him intimidate you so much. I know it can be difficult, as he's got quite a presence, but if your conscious is telling you to slow down and reconsider everything, that's what we need to do."

"Thanks," he said. "Even so, I made an agreement with Hilbert that we would settle things in a week... six days now. That's when I need to be back here," he looked up towards the top of Victory Road. The League stadium couldn't be seen from here from the angle, even if it wasn't far away. "That's when we'll reveal the castle and I plan on addressing the whole region. I'd like to spend the week talking with Zekrom and other Pokemon, to make sure they're prepared and hear what they have to say." He turned back to Ryuko. "Still, I should come back with you for today and let everyone know that I'm fine."

"That would be good," he said. "We can head back now."

"I want to come and see," the Zorua said, following after no matter what anyone said.

Normally when he returned to the castle, Ghetsis would be the first or nearly the first that N spoke to. Today he took his time, speaking to his followers as he came across them. Zekrom came with him, having changed her size to something smaller and easier to get around indoors with. They did come across Gorm, Bronius, Rood, and Giallo; N made sure to tell them about his arrangement with Hilbert and his other plans. Including about how they might not want to be so abrupt about the separation of humans and Pokemon. Rood and Giallo seemed to be in agreement with that suggestion. On the other hand, Bronius wasn't sure that it would be as effective, and Gorm felt that giving others more time would make them more resistant.

He got invited to eat in the dining hall with a number of the regular people in Plasma, which he accepted. As he was sitting with them, he wondered why he hadn't done that much. It was a little awkward as first, since he was trying to be casual with them when his main knowledge of that was with his friends outside of Plasma, and Pokemon. Once he noticed that humans liked being listened to as much as Pokemon did and that even small subjects could generate talk, he felt more comfortable just conversing with them. They were good people, also hoping to make the world a better place.

Partway through the lunch, Anthea and Concordia came in. "May we join in?" Anthea asked.

N looked around; the table was fairly full, but he thought it might still work. "Sure, we could get some room for you both. It seems like a really long time since I've seen either of you for long. I'm sorry for not coming in."

"It's fine," Concordia said as the others slid aside to make room for the two women. "We hope you've been well on your travels."

"It's been a lot different than I expected," he said. "There's good and bad things happening out there, and some things that I won't forget. I think it was good that I went."

"Did you see the Charizard Bridge by Driftviel?" one of the men asked. "I always liked that area."

"Yes, that was a beautiful place," N said, starting to feel happy with talking with them. "There's many amazing bridges around, all made with structures to perform their purpose with ease and endure large loads and rough weather, but also made with a beauty to please the eye and compliment the landscape. The color of it was great too, a bright red to go with the blue or gray of the river below it."
"I used to take a daily jog back and forth across that bridge," he said. "And I met some great people on there." He shrugged. "I guess I never paid much attention to how or why it was built, I just knew that it's a wonderful place that I remember fondly."

"It can be important and wonderful for both reasons," Ryuko said.

The meal ended up going for well over an hour, after many of them were done eating. It was a good thing and he thought that maybe he should have done that more often. When he finally left to speak with more people and allow the others to go on with their work, Anthea and Concordia came with him and Zekrom. "You seem to have changed much since we last saw you," Anthea said.

"It hasn't been that long, but I might have," N said. "I still need to speak with Ghetsis; do you know where he'd be around this time?"

"I don't see much of him these days," Anthea said. "Although I'm mostly taking care of the team's Pokemon now, not so much the forest Pokemon. They've been taking care of their own, it seems. I see a few Pokemon the other Sages work with, but never any from him."

"He doesn't let me clean his chambers anymore, only a few of my workers," Concordia said. "Some days he's working in his office around this time, but other days I'm not sure where he goes. He might be there."

He nodded. "Okay. I usually just go back to my area and he comes to me, but I think I'll go there."

"Don't annoy him too much by interrupting him," Concordia said, worried. "That's why he told me to stop cleaning there, although I was just in at my usual time."

"I'll be okay," N said.

"Well you don't want to get on his bad side," Anthea said. "N-not that I've tried; I think he hardly knows I'm around any more."

The stumble in her words caught his attention. It seems like something he might do. "Does he treat you well, or just ignore you?" N asked.

"He took us in when we didn't have a home," Anthea said. "And he never hit us or anything like that. Sometimes he seemed to ask a lot of us, but we did it in gratitude to his help."

"But he assigned us to serve you and make sure you're okay," Concordia said. "We'll keep doing as you asked of us, because we really do care about you."

Anthea laughed a little. "Even though I will have to find something else to do. I thought that maybe I should study to be a nurse for humans and help out that way. Do you think that would be a good thing?"

Previously, he had seen them as kind women who had helped him out with his basic schooling. When he looked at them now, he noticed that they weren't too much older than him. He had met them when he was seven. Maybe they had been young teenagers then, younger than Hilda and her friends now? He wondered how Ghetsis had really treated them. Just ignoring them after they had done so much didn't seem right. "That would be wonderful," N said, hoping to encourage her in something she seemed to want.

They parted, and so it was just him, Zekrom, the Zorua, and the Zoroark. Zinzolin was in there talking with Ghetsis, but they stopped when he came in. "I heard talk that you were back in the castle," Ghetsis said. No real greeting, just a statement. Not even a comment about Zekrom,
although Zinzolin looked at her with some interest.

"Yes, I talked with many others here," N said.

But although he thought about confronting Ghetsis about his suspicions and fears, N found himself unable to call up the confidence he had in the dream to speak against him. The results of that dream might turn out a little too real. Still, he managed to tell them about what was to happen next week.
May 9

Victory Road

The major battle was going to be between Hilbert and N, but Hilda wanted to be prepared too. She had spent much of this week so far training her Pokemon in various places: Trainer hangouts in Castelia, the stadiums in Nimbasa, the Ace Trainer club in Opelucid (they were mostly fond of Triples and Rotation style, but it was still good practice). Today, she decided to try out Victory Road itself. She had heard from the Ace Trainers that the wild Pokemon tended to be very strong around there, in response to the strong Trainers that came through.

But first, there were the badge check gates. They were huge stone gates built into a crevice in the rocky landscape. On the one in front of her, there was a Pokeball symbol. "These gates won't move unless you have the appropriate Gym Badge," the gate guard said. He was wearing a dark blue uniform with a patch that marked him as a League worker. "In your case, you should be able to walk up to them and they'll automatically open."

"Can't you just fly over these?" Hilda asked, looking at the top of the gate.

The guard shrugged. "Well there's nothing stopping anyone with a well trained flying Pokemon from doing that. That won't help you get into the League stadium, though."

"True. So what's your job, then?" She looked at him. If the gates could automatically open, and they were huge yet easily passed overhead, what was the point of the guard?

"I do maintenance and make sure the gates get closed again," he said. "This road's been working like this for many years; some of the gates are aged or weathered worse than the others. If they stick or give you trouble, come back and get me."

"All right, dude," Hilda said, giving him a smile before she headed up to the first gate. It pulled itself open for her.

There was a large place with tall rock walls to match the gates, making a kind of outdoors room. It was made like a little flower garden, an unexpected place to find. Maybe they did need a lot of maintenance, not just for the mechanisms. Past the second gate, there was a rock garden, with a statue of a Furret. Each of the areas was supposed to represent one of the Gyms, she recalled. Some were simple, but then there were rooms where she had to walk across a break in the floor just by strong winds blowing up (had to be Skyla; she wondered how heavier people managed it) or where she walked between large stone dragon heads. Seeing that, she recalled what she had done in the past six months. It had been just six months since she set out, right? Hilda grinned at the thought.

Past the eight badge check gates, she came to the enormous cliff area that made up the actual Victory Road. There was a group of Pokemon there, a group of large metallic ants as well as a couple of Gigaliths. "Hey, what's going on?" she called out to them, waving.

They started to scatter, but a few of the Durants got interested in her. "She has a sign of the dragons," one said. "I don't recognize it, though."

"It's Kyurem's sign," Hilda said.
The four Durants who were left came closer to her. "Like Kyurem's hero? We heard there was one."

"We didn't hear that she could understand us too," another said.

"Not many people know about that," she told them. Wondering if her guess was right, she asked, "Who'd you hear about Kyurem's hero from?"

It snapped its jaws. "It came through the colony news; a scout came across Zekrom's hero. He was talking about his plans to make Pokemon and humans live separately, and how the heroes of Reshiram and Kyurem were working against it. Is that true?"

She nodded. "That's right. We're trying to convince him not to do that."

"The colony doesn't want that either," one of the Durants said. "We're proud to share our tunnels with humans."

"There's no good of a road that no one uses," another said.

"We decided we would help you both, even if it's not much," the main speaker for the Pokemon said. "We can give you some nice rocks we find."

"I have one." The Durant went back to a pile of rocks and pulled out a dark stone with its jaws. It then tossed it over to Hilda. "I hope it helps you."

"Thanks," she said, although she wasn't sure what it would do. "Actually, I was out here to work with my Pokemon. Mind helping?"

"No trouble!"

Later on, she was letting her Pokemon look around the cliffs to take a break from battles. Frank spent quite a while at the edge of the one they were on, looking at the uneven landscape that led back to Opelucid. He was also being oddly quiet. Hilda went over to the Gothitelle. "What's on your mind, bud?"

"The only one who could qualify as a bud is Fedora, and he's too old now," Frank said, still looking over the landscape.

"But that's not what you were thinking until I said it," Hilda said.

He put his hand to his chin. "Right. It might be something, or it might not be. Years ago, I was told that if I became a Gothitelle, I would have the power to see into the future of anyone I cared about, even what would be their end. I never thought it would be that useful as I was always more interested in the present, and trying to get the attention of lots of females rather than just sticking with one. But in staying with all of you, I decided to try."

Shrugging, she sat down on the edge of the cliff near him. "Seeing the future? Might be cool, but I've heard too much about supposedly dying to really be interested."

"I can understand that," Frank said, crouching down so he could sit there too. "Partly because what I saw didn't make a lot of sense. It was... the night sky and city lights."

She looked at him. "That was it for the future?"

He was frowning. "Not that that was it. That's the best way I can understand that. It was where we
will be, only it wasn't normal. The sky was bigger than it should be."

"How can the sky be bigger than it is?" Hilda asked, looking up. It was blue with a few clouds, good weather for being outside.

"It was. There was also something about another harsh winter influenced by Kyurem's power, where many of the cities are coated in ice."

She laughed. "That could make for some awesome ice skating. Aw, but now that you say it, it can't be anything as awesome as I imagine it."

"Humans do have quite an imagination," Frank said, amused.

Hilda punched her hands together. "Yeah, and that's what they count on with movies all the time. Put the most awesome parts in the trailer, but then it turns out that the only awesome parts were in the trailer and the whole thing is one long slog through a story you weren't expecting and don't care about. Bah. I'll take on the future when it becomes the present."

Nodding, he said, "Yeah, that sounds better than worrying about something I can't interpret. But if I do see something useful, I'll let you know."

"That'd be cool," she said.

He looked at her, indicating the direction behind her. "I can see Hilbert coming this way, but that's with standard powers. You got something earlier that will be of use to him."

"Did I?" She thought about it, then pulled out the stone the Durants had given her. It was a deep purple, black from some angles. "It's like that stone I gave Mimi, so it's probably some other evolution stone. When's he going to be here?"

"Not too long. Should I let you know?"

"When he's within throwing distance. So does your future seeing power helps you figure out how to get your girls?"

Frank rolled his eyes. "I wish! But it's about those I care about. Maybe if I did have a life mate out there, I'd see something about her. But nothing so far... then again, I haven't been interested to look for that. Hilbert should be coming out of the tunnels there; his eyes will be adjusting."

"Perfect," Hilda said with a grin. She turned around, saw him, Reshiram, and the Alomomola Loch coming out of the tunnels. "Hey, catch!" she yelled, throwing the stone at him.

"Huh?" Hilbert said, throwing up his hands and barely managing to catch it. He looked at it for a moment, "A Dusk Stone? What's this for, Hilda?"

"It's for that Dawn Stone you got me months ago," she said. "You should be able to use that."

"I can..."

"Pretty!" Loch said, swimming around Hilbert. "But I don't think it's mine."

He spent a moment trying to translate that, then nodded. "I don't think so either. But I think, who would be most fitting..." he took another Pokeball and called out his Lampent. "Madeline, you want this?"

"That's beautiful," she said, taking hold of it and causing it to float into the fire in the center of her
body. "It will help."

Getting up and away from the cliff edge, Hilda said, "It'll take a little while, at least it did with Mimi. So what're you up to?"

"Looking for you, actually," he said, scratching his head. "I kept hearing you were somewhere training, but then you wouldn't be there."

"You could've called," she said. "What're you looking for me for?"

"We have plans to discuss with you," Reshiram said. "We've been considering how to handle what's coming."

"Yeah, and we want your help with it," Hilbert said. "Are you going to be taking on the Elite 4 on the eleventh?"

"I was planning on it," she said. "Unless there isn't time with everything else."

Hilbert nodded. "I think there will be. Let me tell you what we have in mind."

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May 11

Pokemon League Headquarters

At the top of Victory Road, they were greeted with the grand stone structure that housed the Unova Pokemon League Headquarters. Next to the imposing entrance was a modest Pokecenter carved into the local stone. There hadn't been many battles to get here today, just a few wild Pokemon who wanted to test them, but Hilda's Pokemon needed to be in top shape for what was to come.

"There's already been one young man who's come in to take this challenge today," the nurse said. "It was that one who is the Black King; I remember seeing him on the news the other day."

"How long has he been here?" Hilbert asked. If N got too far ahead, then who knew what would happen. He might even attempt to force the League to shut down again, this time for good.

"Not that long; I saw him just ten minutes ago." She handed over Hilda's team. "When you get inside, there will be four ways to choose from. If another challenger is inside, the door will be shut. Good luck."

"Thanks," she said. There was a small counter for a Pokemart there too. After making sure her supplies were well-stocked (overstocked even, since anything could happen today), she, Hilbert, and Reshiram headed back out to enter the stadium itself.

The guard at the door stepped aside on seeing Hilda's full Badge box. "Once you enter for a challenge, you will not be able to leave until you win or completely wipe out," he said. "So make sure you're prepared. Oh, and I can't let you both in, unless you also are eligible to try for the Championship."

"Well," Hilbert said, thinking about how to explain this without taking up a lot of time.

"They're my groupies," Hilda explained for him. "They aren't going to fight, but they're coming with me. Besides, did you see the Black King N come through here? This is the White King Hilbert, and the legendary dragon Reshiram himself. They're here to kick N's ass and knock some sense into him, so they have to come in with me in order to get a chance to do that."
"Oh, well..." the guard looked uncertain for a moment.

While he wouldn't have thought to be a groupie to someone else, it might work. He added, "N wants to separate Pokemon and humans, and so undo the entire Pokemon League, including your job. That's why we need to go in with her."

"I see." He bowed his head. "In that case, an exception could be made. I'll make a call to confirm that. But, they cannot assist you with your challenge, Hilda, and you cannot change Pokemon."

She nodded. "Gotcha. Don't want to get a reputation as a cheat, after all."

Past the guard, there was a large circular lobby with a large statue of a Trainer and a Pokemon in the center. There were actually six ways to go in here. However, one was the way back out and another was marked off as private property, most likely the back area with offices. That left four paths to take to the four Elites, and the northwestern one was shut off.

"Do you know which one you want to take on first?" Hilbert asked.

Hilda shrugged. "Who cares? Got to beat them all in the end. I'm going this way; good luck!" She headed to the southwestern door.

"I'm the one who needs luck?" he said.

Glancing back at him, she gave him a thumbs up. "You have to deal with N. I just have to beat five of the toughest Trainers in Unova."

Hilbert laughed. "Right. Show them a good fight."

"No need to worry about that." Then she headed through the door.

Once she was gone, he turned on his Xtransciever and called up Cheren and Bianca. They had told a number of people the decided date, but he needed to tell them when they were starting so they could start their parts of the plan. While his end should work, they decided that there should be plans in case it didn't work out.

A few minutes after he got done with the call, a circle on the floor to the northwest lit up. Circles of energy surrounded it as N teleported onto that spot. It surprised Hilbert to sense that his brother was actually calm today. From what he'd talked about during their talks in the hospital, Pokemon battles made him tense. But he seemed to have confidence in his Pokemon, and the Klinklang following him around was in good shape. "Good morning," he said, waving to N. "How're you doing?"

"You did come," N said, glad to see him. "Good morning. We've gotten past two of these battles."

At least he wasn't completely done. "Your Pokemon are doing well, then," Hilbert said. "Hilda and I just got here. What do you think of the Elites?"

N looked back at the doors, thinking. "I've only met with Caitlin and Marshal. I thought I wouldn't like them; anyone who'd gotten this far with battling would have to be tough on their Pokemon. But I got here, and..." he stopped with that train of thought and looked back to Hilbert. "Not now. But once I get past this, we will settle things. I intend on telling everyone to release their Pokemon at the end of the day. If you want to stop that, you'll have to win today." Then he headed to the northeastern door.

The Klinklang paused a moment. "He's depending on you," it said, then followed after N.
"What do you think of that?" Reshiram asked.

Leaning back against the statue, Hilbert said, "He wants to test me, like you are right now. If he's counting on me, maybe he just needs to see how determined I am. But we'll stick to the plan."

"Sounds good."

Then Hilda appeared on the southwest teleport pad. "Did you get to speak with him?" she asked.

"He's on his third battle," he said. Then there was something he had to ask. "Oh, and I've been wondering... why are you dressed normally today, Hilda? After what you and your Mom said the other night about going to Dragonspiral, I thought you would have gone for something special here."

"I did," she said, tipping her usual hat. "This is what I was wearing on the day I started. That was also the day I met N, and you. Remember? I even got the Bisharp patch right, I believe."

"That was a long time ago, it seems," he said, trying to remember back then. He mostly remembered his surprise at seeing that she had Kyurem as such a new Trainer. At the time, he couldn't see how she deserved that. "I wasn't paying much attention to anyone else at the time. But that works."

"Got to remember how I started," Hilda said. "How are the others doing?"

"I told them we were getting started," he said. "Haven't heard back."

"All right. Well, got to keep moving." She headed into the northwest door, going counterclockwise.

While Hilbert was waiting, he got a call from Cheren. "A news report just came out with word from Plasma," he said. "Ghetsis said that N was going to address all of Unova later on today, but didn't specify a time."

"They're probably planning on using the Champion's platform for that," Hilbert said. "They have cameras in that area, and if N defeats Alder, then he will be able to ask for use of that space for such a proclamation."

"They're confident, but with good reason," Cheren said. "I'm getting things done, but I thought you should know about the report."

"Yeah, thanks."

Strangely enough, Hilda came back out before N did. "Man, it's almost a disappointment how quickly that went," she said, coming off the receiving pad.

"Your Pokemon do seem over-leveled for this challenge," Reshiram said.

"Really?" Hilda asked. "Well I'll definitely have to ask if they have a tougher set later on."

"If your Pokemon are over-leveled now, think of how it would have gone if you still had Kyurem," Hilbert said.

She laughed. "It would've have gone the same so far. I'll catch up at this rate!" Since N was still in the northeast door, she went to the southeast door to challenge that Elite. Shauntal, if Hilbert's guess was right.

The next wait was nearly ten minutes until N came back. He was a great deal more worried,
immediately working on healing up his Pokemon. "Tough challenge, huh?" Hilbert asked.

"I still don't like seeing them get hurt, but I feel proud of how my friends are doing." N said. "We can make this world right. But what are you doing just standing here?"

He shrugged. "Waiting. I'm not qualified to take on this challenge; I don't think any of my Gym Badges count right now. But this is the day we decided on for this duel, so I'm here."

That caused N to pause, concerned about him. That made Hilbert feel hopeful. If he cared enough to worry about him, he might care enough to really listen. "You are," N said. "Is that foolishness or determination?"

"Maybe both, maybe neither," Reshiram said.

"Now why are you being vague?" Hilbert asked of the dragon. "I can understand why Kyurem is that way, but your power is about truth and the truth is certain."

"It is true in many ways," he replied.

"I thought the truth could only be in one way," N said.

"But there are many ways to look on truth, like there are many ways to look at objects," Reshiram said. He pointed at the statue. "Like that. It looks different from many angles, but they are all true."

N looked up at the statue. "Right. Zekrom was saying something like that the other day, about how people will see the same event but think of it differently depending on how they lived. But that doesn't change the basics of morality and responsibility. I think..." then he stopped himself, looking towards the southeast door, the one fight he hadn't taken yet.

"We'll settle it once you're done here," Hilbert said, sensing a degree of fear still in N. But now it wasn't clear if he was afraid of being wrong, or of being right. Or his fear could be of the uncertain. Once things were certain by having one of them win, then all else could be explained. While Hilbert wouldn't agree that this battle would settle everything, it would be a good place to start over from.

"Right," N said.

Then Hilda arrived. "Oh hey, I caught you!" she said, smiling on seeing him. "And caught up to you. The biggest part of this challenge is just ahead for both of us. Are you and your Pokemon ready?"

"We are," N said. "But what happens if we both win?"

She put a hand on her hip and thought about that. "You think so? I think so! Well, whichever one of us wins faster in the fourth battles will take on Alder, then will be the Champion that the other challenges. But, I figure that battle is not as important as what you boys have got planned, so I wouldn't mind delaying our battle for that."

He nodded. "Very well. I'll see you both later."

Hilda's last battle had been against Grimsley, and it had been tougher than the other three. On coming out, she had to revive Tarzan, Mimi, and Fedora. But, they had done it. They had defeated the Elite 4 without Kyurem. With that done, the statue revealed itself to be sitting on top of an elevator. Reshiram, Hilbert, and the new Chandelure Madeline were waiting for her, and they rode
down to the Champion's area with her.

There was a huge amount of stone stairs waiting at the bottom of the elevator. More columns lined the way up. Cheren was waiting higher up, as a witness to the battle; he waved as he spotted them. From above came the sounds of a Pokemon battle. However, it didn't last. By the time they climbed all of those stairs, N had already defeated Alder.

And had defeated him soundly. It was hard to tell what had happened, but Alder had been knocked to the ground at his end of the battle platform. While he was sitting up, he was clutching his chest and seemed to be in pain. His wild red hair was in even more chaotic shape than usual. On the other hand, N seemed to be perfectly fine, walking to the center of the platform. "I had heard that you were a talented Trainer, but you seem to be fighting much too cautiously. How long has it been since you had a battle as the Champion? If it's because of the Pokemon you lost last year, then your heart is too weak."

"Hey, you shouldn't be harassing someone you just defeated," Hilda called over.

N turned to them. He still had that creepy fake smile, although neither his eyes nor his posture showed the expected emotions for the moment: no excitement, no disbelief, no pride. "You made it. You all came for this moment of fate." Then he paused, took a step back and pulled something out of his pants pocket. "This shouldn't take long. But, this isn't an appropriate place for a showdown between legends." He brought the device up in front of him, some kind of remote. "Let me set the stage properly." Then he pushed a button on the remote.

Then the ground rumbled as if an earthquake was struck. It was more intense than Olette's tremors, even. While one of the columns below toppled over, the main thing that happened was a building began to grow in front of them, rising up from the ground. What seemed to be open grassland rose high into the air, revealing a grand castle that had been hidden within the earth itself. After just three minute, the castle stopped growing. Nine gates then opened up in the facade of the castle, each releasing a walkway that rapidly bridged the huge gap between the castle and the Champion's battle platform.

It was a jaw-dropping sight. Once the noise died off, N slipped the remote back into his pocket. "Welcome to my castle, the headquarters of Team Plasma."

Grinning, Hilda couldn't help herself. "Wow, do it again!" she shouted.

"Uh," that threw him for a moment, but then he shook his head. "That would be a waste of time. I'll meet you in the throne room at the center of the top floor, Hilbert. Don't make me wait too long." Then he turned and walked up the central walkway.

His invitation was there. But there was something more immediate to take care of. The group of them ran over to where Alder was, still sitting on the ground by two of the ramps. "Alder, what happened to you?" Hilbert asked.

"It was his dragon," Alder said, not sounding well either.

"Zekrom used a move called Fusion Bolt that released immense electricity into the area," Cheren said, activating his Xtransciever. "That's when you started having trouble, right? You should get to a doctor quickly; just relax."

Reshiram went over and put his hand on Alder's shoulder. It glowed briefly. "That is not surprising. I can give you some strength, but you should rest now, or your body will definitely be unwell."
Alder lowered his head. "I thought I was ready to battle again... I was fine with others, but the challenge N presented reminded me. His determination and beliefs both show in how he was in battle; his bond with Pokemon is powerful. You two, if you mean to challenge him, you had better fight with all your heart, like he does."

"Don't worry about us, or I'll end up worrying about you stressing out like this," Hilda said, hoping to reassure him. "We'll handle things now."

"Bianca's end of things should be showing up soon, as well as the results of what I did," Cheren said. "Go on ahead."

"Thanks, and hang on Alder," Hilbert said before checking on Reshiram. Since he seemed to be done with what he could help Alder with, they headed up the ramp.

Hilda followed after them. "So if his determination shows up strongly enough to increase his Pokemon's confidence and faith in him, is he going to stick to his words or not? He'd have a tough time breaking such a bond."

"I don't think his ideals have changed," Hilbert said. "But he may have realized that his ways of putting them into practice are flawed. He wants to challenge us to fulfill our round of these legends, yet he does want to discuss things now."

"Can't drop the momentum in the last act, huh?" She shrugged. "I'm fine with that. Oh, but Reshiram, I want to ask you a few more things."

He nodded. "Go ahead. We have a long ways to walk."

N walked along the halls of his castle, taking an easy pace. The few knights who were in here today, as well as the Shadow Triad, might stall Hilda and Hilbert, but they wouldn't obstruct them. N didn't want to wear himself out before the battle.

Ahead, one of the Knights was kneeling by a Patrat. "Can we play a game today?" the Patrat asked, looking eagerly at the knight. "It was so much fun last time."

"What do you want?" the knight asked curiously. He turned his head on hearing N's footsteps, then got up quickly and saluted. "Oh, my Lord! S-sorry, I'm not," he glanced at the Patrat, blushing.

Was there time to deal with this? "What is it?" N asked wearily.

"Well this Patrat," he said, nervously fiddling with his armored gloves, "it was assigned to me months ago to help spread the word of your ideas. But, I think I, I mean, it's become attached to me. I've tried to turn it back in, but it keeps coming back, and well, it's hard to ignore the cute face it gives me. I don't know if I'm worthy to stay, but I really just wanted to help you."

"You..." would have trouble letting go too, N nearly said, but stopped in time. He closed his eyes. "Don't worry about that. If he likes you... well just go in the room here and keep out of the way. We'll see what happens and figure it out later." Then he headed on to the next set of stairs.

"Oh, um, thank you, Lord N," the knight said, still uncertain. He spoke quietly to his partner and left the hallway.

This was going to cause sadness even within Team Plasma? There was something fundamentally wrong with this all if that was so. However, he had come this far and he couldn't give up now. But then, the next battle would decide things for certain.
N wondered how things would turn out.
May 11

N's Castle

Hilda and Hilbert entered the castle on the third floor, where the ramp led to. Inside, they were met with six of Team Plasma’s Sages and a number of the knights. "Hold it right there," Giallo staid. "We can't let you interfere with Lord N's plans."

"Are you serious?" Hilbert asked.

"Unfortunately for you, he invited us in here," Hilda said. "And he's expecting to meet us up on the top floor. So if you going to follow his words, you need to let us through."

"Well you see," the Sage next to Giallo said.

"We ain't going to let you make excuses," a familiar voice said. Coming in the door way was Clay, along with Skyla, Burgh, Lenora, Drayden… and most of the Gym Leaders of the League, and Grimsley and the other Elite 4.

"You didn't think we were going to stand idly by while you disrupted the entire social structure of our world?" Burgh asked. "If you want to fight for your side, you're going to have to deal with us. Let them go ahead."

"If N did ask for them, we should let them go," Rood said. "But we're not going to let the rest of you disrupt things."

Hilda grabbed Hilbert's hand. "Right, then we're going!" she said, running through the crowd towards the stairs up to the next level. Reshiram quickly came after them, even beating them to the stairs.

"They came right on time," Hilbert said, smiling. He had left contacting the League members today to Bianca and Cheren, so that it seemed more spontaneous to Team Plasma. However, he wanted them to be involved too.

Hilda laughed. "Now there shouldn't be anything to delay our little appointment."

There were a few more knights, but they didn't try to disrupt them with battles. A few of them even said they didn't have Pokemon and were just doing work around the castle. This included a pair of young women who completed standouts, dressed in old-fashioned dresses unlike any of the other Team Plasma members. "Oh, we take care of the castle and the Pokemon that the team uses," the one called Concordia said.

"Yes, and we serve N himself," Anthea said. "Although, we haven't gotten to talk to him much in the past six months. He's been working so hard for us all and we've stayed in the castle and the forest."

"Have you been outside the castle at all?" Hilda asked.

Anthea shook her head. "Not since it was built and even then, we were given a house by Ghetsis and he took care of anything that require leaving. Although sometimes we came to his place and watched over N. He was a good child, if quiet and mysterious."
"But you don't seem much older than us," Hilbert said.

"We're not," Anthea said.

"Is that a problem?" Concordia asked. "Ghetsis gave us a safe home, and so we were to do whatever he asked of us. Although I wish I could have gone to school instead of the internet classes he picked out for us."

"Please be kind to the young master," Anthea said. "He's been under a lot of pressure this past year."

"We know," Hilda said. "So if you take care of the Pokemon, do you have a healing machine around?"

Concordia nodded. "Oh yes, just in here. Please, go ahead and use it. I'm sure N won't mind if it's for the good of the Pokemon serving you."

"Thanks for that," Hilda said, going into the room to make sure her Pokemon were at full strength. So N wasn't the only kid that Ghetsis had been using, although Anthea and Concordia didn't seem to be as badly off. Still, who knew how long he had had them as servants, and what exactly they did for him.

Inside that room, there was a healing machine much like what was at a Pokecenter. There were also a number of computers hooked up to a strange device, consisting of a base with several arms standing up beside it. "What's the deal with this?" Hilbert asked as Hilda took care of her Pokemon team.

"It's a transportation device, made to be more precise than most teleport systems," the brown haired scientist working on it said. "I'm just getting it ready for later." He then smiled. "Do you have any Pokemon in Storage Boxes?"

Hilbert shook his head. "No, I let all the rest of mine go months ago."

"I never used them," Hilda said.

"Well good for you," the scientists said. "Because I just got the password to the Storage Box system administrator's account from the Shadow Triad last night. Once N gives the word, we're going to pull all the Pokemon out of it and release them back to their native territory. Or close enough, since there's not enough information on many species to know where exactly to send them all."

"So you're just going to steal them all away?" Hilbert asked.

"The worse crime is the neglect these Pokemon are suffering in captivity," he said dismissively. "Now if you're done with that machine, scram out of here. I need to be ready when N gives the orders."

"Let him go," Hilda said, taking back her Pokeballs and heading out. Once they were out and past where Anthea and Concordia were, she turned to him and said, "We do need to send word that somebody needs to check on Amanita and Fennel in Striaton. They live together, so if they both got attacked, who knows when somebody will find them."

Hilbert turned on his Xtransciever. "I'm pretty sure we can send a text for a tip to the police there."

"Well do you have Professor Juniper's number?" Hilda asked. "I've had some trouble with the
"You must be glad, to see that you've come so far."

N hung his head while Zekrom clenched her fists. Ghetsis had entered the throne room behind him. "I'm not sure how I feel today," N replied.

"True, we aren't at the end yet," Ghetsis said, stopping a few feet from him. "But this may be the final battle in this region. I hear that members of the Pokemon League have entered our castle as well, and are fighting many of the knights and the other Sages down on the main entrance level."

"I didn't think my ideas would cause so many battles," N said. "They're supposed to bring peace and freedom."

"People will fight to keep what they have, no matter how wrong it is. But in the end, the righteous and faithful will prevail. Your faith is stronger now, isn't it?"

"I got Zekrom to come," N said, looking up at her.

"I came because I could see deep into your heart," Zekrom replied. "But you have nearly lost sight of the dreams there."

N shivered. "Have I?"

"You could begin your address to the region any time now," Ghetsis said. "There's no need to wait on the other two."

He shook his head. "No. I said we'd settle this here and now, and that's what we'll do."

"If that's what you want," Ghetsis said. "I'll leave them to you then, but I will be nearby. Just call me if you need help." He then walked back out to the hallway.

"How could I lose sight of what's in my heart?" N asked Zekrom.

"When forces from the outside get in your face and force you to pay attention to them," she answered. "The outside will clash with the inside, and lead to confusion. When you can see clearly, there will be no confusion."

He nodded. "Once this is taken care of, things will clear up naturally." Although he felt uneasy about fighting Hilbert as uneven as they stood. But, that was part of how he was confusing him, wasn't it?

"Sometimes it is hard to tell what is a distraction," Zekrom added. "That is why you must be observant to everything, and take nothing for granted. Deep in your heart, you know what you truly want."

"I wish I didn't have to hurt anybody for this, especially not the Pokemon."

"It will be painful. Still, don't fall to despair. You have help and the love of others, even from sources you might not expect."

The castle had been at least twelve stories tall, possibly more. But the halls inside were gigantic,
and all very similar: black marble, tall columns, large banners, many rooms. Hilda wasn't even sure how high they were, although Hilbert seemed to know something. "We've only got one more level to climb," he said as they stopped in one hall. "This is N's personal area, although it's not exactly private. He brought me here some time ago."

"That's true," a woman's voice said close to them. It turned out to be one of the Shadow Triad.

"Don't worry," another one of them said; he was on their other side. "He told us not to hurt you."

"So what are you doing here?" Hilbert asked.

"Making sure you don't miss your appointment," the third Shadow said. "And that you don't mess with N's rooms."

Hilda made a face. "What, no peeking?"

"No peeking," one of the women said seriously.

"Well if you're going to hang around and watch us," Hilbert said, "mind telling us what's up with you three? I know you were cloned from a disgraced ninja named Takumi by Dr. Umber, who also made you into gijinkas like N and I, and you're serving Ghetsis for some reason. What are you really up to?"

"You've found what there is to know," the male Shadow said.

"Takumi and Umber are dead," the woman who smelled faintly of poison said. "Not that it matters. We were worthless to them and they are worthless to us. We will do as Lord N says. But, we are loyal to Ghetsis and will follow his word."

"Is Umber really dead?" Hilbert asked. "Because he faked it before."

"He became worthless and dangerous to Ghetsis," she answered. "We took care of him personally. He is dead."

"And you don't have the mind to lie," Reshiram said.

"Correct," she said.

"So they…?" Hilbert asked Reshiram, puzzled.

"It doesn't mean I approve of them," he said. "If lying is impossible, then the truth is all there is, nothing special."

"Then we might as well continue going up," Hilda said, heading for the next flight of stairs.

At the very top floor, the hallway was even less crowded. The only person in there was Ghetsis. "Good morning," he said in a suspiciously pleasant tone. "N's waiting on you in there."

"What are you up to?" Hilbert asked, clenching a fist.

He just smiled. "Nothing in particular. N asked you to come, so I won't delay you from meeting him."

"And then you're going get some Pokemon to viciously attack us once our backs are turned on you, huh?" Hilda said, smiling back.
"And what makes you think I would do that?" he asked.

"Never trust a troublemaker when they smile," she said darkly. Then she turned perky. "I'm on to you, so don't try to get smart with us."

"Takes one to know one," Gehtsis retorted, but then stepped back and bowed to them.

Hilda shrugged when Hilbert gave her a weird look. Since there seemed to be nothing else stopping them, they headed into the throne room. N was in the back, turned away and talking with Zekrom. There was a central walkway leading up to that area, lined with pools of water and more columns. Although they couldn't see it around Zekrom, there was probably a throne in here too. "N, we're here," Hilbert called up as they continued walking.

"Yeah, you need to give us a grand tour of this place sometime!" Hilda added.

"Maybe," N said, turning around. He then noticed the white haired man with them. "Who is that? I thought he was just one of the stadium workers."

"This is Reshiram," Hilbert said.

"Did Kyurem tell you why he traveled like this?" Reshiram asked. "When moving among humans, this is simply more convenient to deal with. And we often need to do a lot of talking. Being born with a gift of understanding like yours is a rare thing indeed."

"If that's what you want," N said. "But to the matter at hand, I've made it. I will be telling people myself about what they do to Pokemon and call on them to release all Pokemon. It's not many who follow this revelation now, but as time goes on, the social pressure will build, especially now that I have authority from the League and from Zekrom. By the end of the year, I hope, there were be a full separation between humans and Pokemon put into law. But you have been pursuing your case just as strongly, so I'll give you this one last chance. The Pokemon with me know what I intend to do and they support me. Hilbert, now you must prove the worth of your bond with Pokemon, in a Pokemon battle that will prove once and for all who is right."

"You don't sound so enthusiastic today," Hilda said.

"It's been a long week, let's just get this going," N said, taking a Pokeball in his hand.

Hilbert stepped forward, pulling out a Pokeball of his own. "Right, this is the time to prove my beliefs," he said. "As I stand here now, I know that Pokemon can help humans become better, and humans can also help Pokemon become better. There's problems, but it's not enough to go so far as to separate everyone. I still have much to learn and I want my Pokemon beside me, for their love and support to get me through even the worst of times." He brought the Pokeball up, but then stepped back and put his hand down. "But, I am not ready to battle you yet."

N stared at Hilbert for a moment, speechless for a few moments. "What?" he asked weakly. "But this is... what we've been preparing to do."

"We're not on equal terms," Hilbert explained. "We weren't meant to meet on equal terms. Even from the beginning, before we could make a choice, things were made so that I would be weaker than you. I was to be less than you. I have come to realize that and I am glad that I could, because knowing my true self is better than knowing an illusion of myself. But this means I cannot adequately defend my views to you. I was able to awaken Reshiram, I love my Pokemon deeply and believe that they are capable of greatness... but as things are now, we cannot stand a chance against you and your Pokemon team. This is just a play with a predetermined ending; it matters not
what you or I believe, as I will end up losing. But in that, you may end up losing even more than I."

N was still, his lips moving as he spoke quietly to himself. Then he put his hands to his face and closed his eyes. "Are you so sure?" He put his hands down and looked back at him, desperate to hang on to the belief that he was in control. "That would require a conspiracy of unbelievable depth."

"That's what it took," Hilbert said. "But as you say, this is the moment when things must be decided. I want to prove the strength of my beliefs, but as a hero, I am not strong enough to defend them. So, I will call on another hero to fight you in my stead." He then turned to Hilda and passed the Pokeball he had been holding on to her. "Take care of Reshiram and defend the truth for me, Hilda."

Smiling, she took the Pokeball. "Alrighty then." She then turned to N and stepped forward to face him. "Listen here, N. My Pokemon are not just my friends, they're like a second family to me. We've been playing and working together for months and there's no way in hell that I'm going to just stand quietly aside while someone tries to take them from me. That even goes for you, my reluctant friend. I do believe that you can be a great person, but not in the way that you're trying to be now. Find yourself by listening to your heart and I know that your real ideals will shine through."

"Is that what you believe?" N asked.

"Fully," she said.

For a moment, he seemed to be really smiling. "Well then. This is unexpected, but if this is what Reshiram has agreed to, then so will I."

"It was Hilbert's idea, but one I can fully support," Reshiram said, right before he changed over into his dragon form.

"All right, then let the battle begin," N said. "Zekrom, use Fusion Bolt."

Hilda smiled. Reshiram and Zekrom had a move that could be linked in succession to become even stronger than normal, and Fusion Bolt was her's. When she had been talking with Reshiram on the way up here, he said that he was naturally faster than Zekrom, which made using Fusion Flare a really bad idea. "Go with Dragonbreath!" Hilda said.

The electricity in the room began to rise, enough that Hilda felt tingles all through her body as Reshiram attacked first. Little wonder that Alder had reacted badly when it had been used near him. Then blue lighting crashed down on Reshiram from a sphere above the battle. It lingered a moment after the attack was done.

Which was when she needed to take advantage of it. "Now Fusion Flare," she said.

The sphere above the battle then caused a giant plume of fire to rain down on Zekrom, knocking her out. But this time, N remained calm and brought out his next Pokemon. "Carrasota, use Waterfall."

"Back now," Hilda said, recalling Reshiram to his Pokeball. She brought out Fedora. "Watch it, then strike back at it."

The Serperior took the ramming burst of water stoically before slashing at the rocky sea turtle with his tail, as if it were a bladed weapon. That defeated it. N then tried to counter by calling on Pierre, which Hilda took care of by swapping again, this time for Tarzan. His next move was to bring out
the Archeops. But, Hilda felt suspicious and had Tarzan attack it with Brick Break. As she thought, it turned out to be the Zoroark. When N did call out his Archeops, she swapped to Olette. She took a strong hit from Stone Edge, but managed to get the better of it after that. Then his Klingklang fell to Olette's Earthquake, ending the battle.

"Wasn't taken by surprise this time," Hilda said.

For a moment, N was focused on his Pokemon. His hand glowed briefly, and then Zekrom appeared again, looking whole and healthy. "You're right, you were prepared," he said. "You both stood up for your beliefs, and you won. I can accept that."

More than accept it. He thought he might feel terrible if he lost at this stage in things. Instead, he felt like an enormous weight had been pulled off his shoulders. His team had lost, but there was no lasting harm done. He could talk with them later and make sure they knew that he was still proud of them, still loved them. Now he wouldn't need to make so many people unhappy. And, the Pokemon had fought for their beliefs too. They could be happy with humans too.

He shifted his hat. "And your Pokemon friends, they love you dearly and gave it their all in order to stay with you. I had been hearing that, but I guess I wasn't really listening. But since it is the will of Reshiram, and Zekrom… and Kyurem too, then this is how things should be. I will tell the rest of Team Plasma that we will no longer be seeking the separation. What we'll do instead…"

"Enough!" a furious voice exploded into the room. N froze mid-sentence, tension and fear filling his body. Ghetsis was storming into the room, a look of hatred burning so strongly in his eyes. Hatred towards N. "I can't believe this treachery, you miserable lunatic without a human heart. How dare you defy our dreams, you worthless sniveling monsters. You don't deserve the name of Harmonia!"

All the relief and hope and even happiness that he'd been feeling, it all evaporated into nothing. His thoughts and almost everything else about the moment didn't matter anymore. He felt like crying and asking Ghetsis what was wrong, and what should he do to make things right. But his throat was dry and his face burned in shame. This, it couldn't be happening. He shook his head, thinking that there had to be something wrong right now; Ghetsis couldn't be talking so hatefully to him. Ghetsis was his best support and most faithful adviser. This had to be some nightmare.

"You leave N alone!" Hilbert shouted, going over and punching Ghetsis in the face.

But Ghetsis just shoved him away, onto a strange empty circle that appeared beneath Hilbert's feet. "And what do you think you can do about it, weakling? If you can't compare to N, then there's no way you can compare to me. You're nothing but a coward, hiding behind some nobody girl with no power whatsoever."

"I'm not as much of a nobody as you think," Hilda said. "Hilbert, don't get mad. Go to N; I'll deal with this cliche storm of a villain."

"Cliche storm?" Ghetsis growled, tensing up in anger.

Hilda stuck her tongue out at him. "Yeah, everything about you is just some cheesy standard of TV villainy. Come on, can't you be creative and do something yourself? You're nothing but a cruel blowhard."

This still didn't seem real. N stepped back and put his hands over his ears. But this was proving impossible to ignore. Was he really nothing but a monster and a traitor? He hadn't even learned
from his mistakes and was falling to that confusion from worldly sources again. When he looked down, he saw that there was a circle underneath his feet as well, slowly turning red. What was that? It caused a feeling of panic. There had to be something to set things right, to get Ghetsis to take all that back.

However, it wasn't Ghetsis who reached out to him. It was Hilbert, taking his hands and pulling them away from his ears. "N, calm down! We need to calm down."

"How can I calm down?" he asked, tears starting to fall down his face. "What happened? Why's it gone so horribly wrong. I thought it was right but then, I don't know, am I really nothing?"

"Stop," Hilbert said his anger dying off. "N, it's going to be okay."

"It's not okay!" N said, trying to pull away. "I listened to Ghetsis and he..." he looked over and saw that Ghetsis had called on a Pokemon. He, he had Pokemon? And not just that, it was a Cofagrigus, like the one that had hurt Rood. Or, the one that had hurt Rood?

Her team would still be hurt from her battle with him. Even if not very much, it still wasn't good to start a battle like that. "Hilda!" he pointed towards her, focusing on Heal Pulse. That way, she might stand a chance of not getting hurt.

"Traitor," Ghetsis said, turning back to him.

"I want to devour the hopes and dreams of all of them," the Cofagrigus said, cackling in an evil way.

Hilda glanced at her Xtransciever. "Whoa, they're all full of energy now," she said. "Thanks! Now you're going down, you big pile of BS."

"Pokemon are not inherently evil," Hilbert said, in a tone that only N and Zekrom could hear with the battle now commencing. "But if their Trainer is corrupt and abusive, they can turn evil. I feel cruelty from that one; it's sickening."

"Ghetsis is not evil," N said, some anger trying to come out. But it was weak. "He took care of me, he believed in me, he showed me how to make my ideals become a reality..."

"He hurt you," Hilbert said. "I can see things too, you remember."

"He never hit me," N said, turning away from the battle and shaking.

"He shut you in the closet for days without food," Hilbert said, somehow knowing that. "He set his goals for you high, and if you got close to meeting them he set them higher. He cut you off from the world and controlled what you saw and heard for years. He never really thanked you, or complimented you."

N shook his head. That, that wasn't how it was. "No, no..."

"He never loved you. And he never will. You were only a tool for him, probably the same as those Pokemon." Hilbert took his hand again. "He had our mother killed. And your Darmanitan mother when you threatened to stop listening to him. And probably Pricilla too, for the same reason, just by following the pattern."

N shook his head harder. "No, that can't be, he..." but then he caught a glimpse of the battle between Hilda and Ghetsis again.
He had a Sesmitoad, one that had a familiar voice. "We can't lose, we have to win. Drop dead already, or I'll show you how horribly we'll all be punished for not living up to Ghetsis' expectations," he said in a fury that was driven by fear.

"Lucky?" N said, horrified.

And the Sesmitoad looked at him, distracted on hearing his name. He was bewildered. "N? You... aren't dead." But that moment got him knocked out by Hilda's Exadrill.

The way he had spoken, the aggressive yet fearful stance he had, the, the scars on his body, those were signs of an abused Pokemon, much worse off than he had been when N had found Lucky as a Tympole. And Ghetsis had him. Had Ghetsis been the one to terrorize him like that? N started weeping and he didn't try to stop. He didn't want to accept Ghetsis as the one who was corrupt. And, abused him as well? He didn't want to accept that, but seeing Lucky in that state was something he couldn't deny. So the rest of that could be true. No, it was true.

Hilbert hugged him. "We're here for you."

"What, what happened to make my angel cry?" Pierre said, appearing without being called.

"N, we're here for you too," Rune said. He hadn't even been in N's team; maybe he had been watching from the shadows in the room.

Hilbert then stepped back, but kept hold of his shoulders. "But you need to keep a hold of yourself. There's something dangerous we must avoid."

N rubbed his face, trying to do as told. "Something dangerous, in us? I was told something, but not what it was." Once his tears were brushed aside, he saw the red crests underneath them. They had slowed down.

"I want you to be calm," Hilbert said, his own voice calm. "It must be hard, after such a shock. But you see, if we lose control of our emotions here, especially anger, then our power activates. It is meant to steal the life and power of a legendary Pokemon."

"Steal their power?" N asked. It seemed just as hard to believe. But then he remembered meeting his other self. He had wanted to kill him before terrible things happened.

Hilbert nodded. "I hope that there's a way to get rid of it, but for now, we're just going to have to watch ourselves. We'll need all the support we can get, from each other, and the Pokemon that stay with us."

"Anything if it makes you happy," Pierre said.

"I told you so," Zane said. "You have to step away in order to prevent a disaster. But if you need help, me and the rest are here to lend a paw."

"Nothing's as I thought it was," N said. But despite that, there seemed to be some light left to find, enough to smile. "Nothing. But at least I know now who I can really rely on."

Hilbert smiled back at him and with that, the two crests vanished.

But it wasn't over yet Hilda was still battling Ghetsis. And now she seemed to be in a real bind, trying to defeat a Hydreigon that Ghetsis was using. He even took down Reshiram with a massive wall of water attack that seemed more extreme than the normal Surf. Giggling madly, the Hydreigon snapped in her direction with the heads on his hands. "Die, die, I want to see the whole
world DIE! Let me see how pretty her blood is and then she'll die!"

Gritting her teeth, Hilda released her Cinccino. "Mimi, get revenge for everyone else."

"DIE, FLUFFBALL!" the Hydreigon shouted.

"Oh, oh, take that, for my family!" Mimi called, throwing herself against the mad dragon with all her might. He screamed at her and one of his hand heads ripped part of her ear off, making her squeal in fright. Then, following Ghetsis' orders, he punched her back to collapse at Hilda's feet.

Ghetsis just healed the Hydreigon back up. "And that, little girl, is the end of the line for you."

Strangely, the first to react was Pierre. "No, not her!" the Vanilluxe called, darting closer and throwing a Blizzard attack at Ghetsis and the Hydreigon. "She was nice to me, brought me to my angel. I won't let you hurt her!"

"Now you die too!" the Hydreigon snarled, causing one of its heads to breath fire at Pierre, making it explode on contact with him and nearly knocking him out. "All of you die! No one can win against me."

"No!" Pierre said, hitting him again with Blizzard and defeating it.

"All right, great going Pierre!" Hilda said, giving him a thumbs up signal.

The hatred on Ghetsis face would have been enough to wither leaves and evaporate a pond, but Hilda was still cheeky enough to give him an insulting gesture. "What is this?" he demanded, his voice shaking in rage. "How could I lost? You're nothing, I AM PERFECTION! You are going to pay for this insult..."

Before he could do anything, he got knocked off his feet by a bolt of lightning. "For clouding the heart of my chosen hero, I would not feel shame for killing you," Zekroom said. And she said this in the language of humans, having turned from a tall black dragon into a tall black woman. Slender in shape, she had straight black hair that was highlighted with light blue and wore a long black dress that shimmered in the light. "But it would be more right to give you over to the justice of mankind."

"Zekrom?" N asked, astonished to see her like that. "Why did you change?"

"It suits your new purpose better," she replied.

"What's going on in here?" someone called out, entering the room. It was a group of people, actually. Chili, Cress, Cilan, Cheren, and Bianca were all there. Chili was the one speaking. "Did you all kill him?"

"No," Zekrom said.

"We just knocked him out so he doesn't fight back," Hilda said.

"That's understandable," Cress said. "We'll get him out of here so the police can put him under arrest." He waved to his two brothers and they began to work out how to carry the stunned Ghetsis out of the room.

Cheren and Bianca went up to join them. "Oh, that was close," Bianca said. "We were sure something was going to happen, but we didn't think at first that you all would get this far so soon."
"It did go by fast," Hilda said. "But Ghetsis knocked out most of my team. That Hydreigon was like a demon, got all of them."

"Here, I can take care of them," N said, worried about her Pokemon as well. Once he could touch the Pokeballs himself, he could use Heal Pulse to revive them to full health. "And please, make sure they know that I thank all of you for keeping him distracted. I don't know what I would have done if you two didn't come to help me."

"I can make a guess and it's not pretty," Hilda said.

Once he was alert and healed, Reshiram appeared again, also as a human. "Have things been dealt with?" he asked.

"Yeah, the battle's over," Hilda said, passing the Pokeball back to Hilbert.

"So what's the word on what will happen with Team Plasma?" Cheren asked.

What would happen to all the people who had believed in him, and followed him? "I don't know," N said. "They have... well, all have you have proven to me, in one way or another, how strongly you care about Pokemon. I don't want to make everyone unhappy. So, I would think that there is no more reason for Team Plasma to be."

"Is that how it's going to be?" Cilan asked, coming over to their group. His brothers had a Stoutland who was carrying Ghetsis out into the hallway now. "There's still a lot that needs to be accounted for, such as all of the Pokemon that were stolen."

Accounted for... and he was the leader, the one responsible for them all. "That's true," N said, feeling worried. But if they were going to arrest him, it was better not to fight it. "I can accept responsibility for all of them. We were wrong."

"Hey, N was a victim of this too," Hilbert said, stopping him from going over to Cilan. "Ghetsis controlled him for years. And I'm sure you remember how he was; he didn't realize he was wrong at the time."

Cilan nodded. "Right. We should leave him in your hands, as you're his friends. But N, you may wish to avoid the public eye for a while. We of the League will handle things with the rest. I hope you find the way you want to go." Then he headed out into the hall to get back to his brothers.

They were going to let him go? Maybe it really hadn't been his responsibility and he only had the illusion of control. But that would mean... lots of scary things. He clenched his fist. "The way I want to go? I'm not entirely sure where I stand now. I, I need some time to think about things. I need to find somewhere quiet. Maybe the more northern areas of Sarasota Forest, or even further away."

"Hey, I'll go with you," Hilbert said. "You don't have to deal with this alone. Besides, even if you do have your Pokemon around, it would help also if you spent more time with a normal human being. At least, as normal as I can get. We can leave the area for a little while."

N looked at the people around him, both the humans and the Pokemon. They were all nice, if odd in their ways and quirks. And good people. Maybe he was the same way. "Thanks, but is it all right to bring Zekrom and Reshiram out of Unova?"

"It will be fine," Zekrom said. "We need to keep an eye on you two, and properly instruct you on the powers you hold. First of all, we need to figure out how to cancel out the power-draining ability."
"It just means that we're leaving Unova in the hands of Kyurem," Reshiram said, looking to his brother. "And he has been a proper hero this time around. We'll let him know."

"I hope things will be okay," N said. Then, he went over to Hilda and offered his hand. "Hilda, thank you. For being my first real human friend and always trying to help me even when I refused."

"Glad to be of service," she said, shaking his hand. "Have fun out there, but don't be a stranger! You still have my number?"

"Right."

"You take care," Hilbert said. "And if you need help, just call and we'll do our best to be back quickly."

"Don't get hurt out there," Bianca said.

And with that, Zekrom and Reshiram reverted back to being dragons. N used his remote to open up a hatch in the ceiling, so that they could fly out freely. Then they were out of the castle and in the bright open skies. He wasn't sure where they were going, but they would find a way.

In that moment, N knew what true freedom felt like.

"Ghetsis has been captured," the male Shadow said. After having met with Hilda and Hilbert in N's area, they had retreated back to their security post.

"N's fled," one of his sisters said; she was twirling a dagger in her hand. "We can't do much about him. But we can't let them get away with Ghetsis."

The other female nodded. "The boy's words won't spread fast. Let's deal with those invaders."

After some quick discussion, the three teleported to various areas of the castle and attacked.
"Good evening, and welcome to the Unova news. The big story today is about the sudden downfall of Team Plasma at their castle headquarters, revealed to be at the same area as the Pokemon League Headquarters. It had been expected for some time that they would have a major broadcast today where their leader, the Black King N Harmonia, would give a speech pressing for the widespread release of Pokemon along with their total separation from humans. While he did prove his excellence and empathy with Pokemon by defeating the Elite 4 and the Champion Alder in a couple of hours, things did not turn out as expected after that.

"At the same time, another Pokemon Trainer named Hilda, who has become famous in the past few months for her flashy style and friendship with both of the hero-kings, was at League headquarters also to challenge the Elite 4. She managed to complete the challenge as well, even though she was lacking her most famous Pokemon Kyurem at the time. But N had gotten ahead of her and revealed his castle headquarters by causing it to rise out of the ground. Hilda went with the White King Hilbert into the castle, soon to be followed by every Gym Leader and Elite member of the Unova Pokemon League, there to protest Plasma's actions and philosophy.

"The common thought was that the Black King would challenge the White King to battle, following in the tradition of many legends of the two dragons that created Unova. However, Hilbert passed on the challenge by having Hilda fight in his stead and she was able to defeat N. Reports are not clear on what happened next, but it seemed that while N was willing to step down and stop his plans for total separation, his spokesperson in the Sage Ghetsis was not. Ghetsis apparently went so far as to attack N for his reasonable actions, as he had ambitions that many in Team Plasma weren't aware of. But thanks to the cooperation of the Pokemon there, the three were able to stop Ghetsis and put him into the custody of the Pokemon League.

"However, that was not the end of the trouble. Plasma was revealed to have three very dangerous members in their ranks, a group only known as the Shadow Triad. Not only did they take Ghetsis into hiding, but they attack humans and Pokemon alike. The Striaton Gym Leaders Cress, Chili, and Cilan were most seriously injured, currently in critical condition in a hospital in Opelucid. Others were also severely injured, including Alder who was hospitalized for a minor heart attack suffered as an indirect affect of having fought the legendary Zekrom when battling N. Several other Trainers in the area, including Hilda, were also injured.

"Ghetsis and the Shadow Triad have been labeled as dangerous by Unova police, although it is unknown where they have gone. Anyone who witnesses the four are encouraged to call police and to not confront them. A number of Plasma members were arrested, including four of the other Sages. However, the whereabouts of N and Hilbert are also unknown at this time. Police have stated that they are not interested in arresting N, as he is not suspected of having committed any crimes personally.

"As of now, it is uncertain what the future holds for the Unova Pokemon League. With so many of its members temporarily incapacitated, it would not be surprising to hear of another shut-down until things are sorted out. It is also uncertain who is the current League Champion. N defeated Alder in fair and legal combat, but he was not officially inducted as the Champion. It was recorded that Hilda then defeated N after she had also defeated the Elite 4, but as she did not defeat an official Champion, there will need to be a hearing at a later date to decide how this will be handled."
We have been unable to get a comment from her at this time.

"And now for an interview with someone who was at the event, here is..."

May 12

Sarasota Forest

Yesterday, they had taken off, intent on not returning for a long time. But something had happened, something both of them had seen in a dream and couldn't ignore. They had to return for someone, and it wasn't a good meeting. It seemed that in a fit of rage, Ghetsis had taken out his frustrations on some of the Pokemon he had. Not all of them, but this one N had to come back to see.

It took some asking around of the Pokemon in the forest, but then they were running through the trees, trying to reach the place before it was too late. In a cave that was connected to the Durant tunnels, they found a horribly disfigured Seismitoad in the care of one of the Audino. "Lucky!" N said, going over and putting his arms around the Pokemon. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean for things to end this way for you."

"N?" Lucky opened one of his eyes, then gripped N's arm. "I hoped you'd come."

"I'm here," he said. Hilbert and the two dragons stayed at the entrance to the tunnel, not wanting to interrupt, but not wanting to leave them out of sight.

"Oh, careful," the Audino said. "It's very bad. There's not much I can do."

"I'm sure you've done what you could, thank you," N said.

"I hoped you'd come," Lucky said. "I was scared when you found me in that tree, but ever since that man told me you were dead, it's been far scarier. He had those strange people in black who could understand me..."

"They could?" N asked. He'd never known that the Shadow Triad could understand Pokemon too, but he doubted Lucky would lie to him.

The Seismitoad closed his eye and gripped him tighter. "Because of them, he knew me in a terrifying way. I fought for him in fear, not enjoyment like that crazy dragon and ghost he had. I didn't know what to do. Those two would tear me to pieces if I didn't fight, and it all seemed so hopeless. It was like I had been given an angel, only to get thrown into dark torment. I kept dreaming that I'd find you again, though. And here you are now."

For a moment, he thought about saying that he wasn't an angel. He was something of a freak, not fully human and not fully Pokemon. But, this wasn't the right time for this. He'd come back to comfort one of his friends as best he could. "It's okay now," N said, although he was crying. "You'll always be in my heart. You'll be free of the darkness."

It wasn't long before that was true.

A couple of days later, in the evening when they were sitting around a campfire, N finally decided to speak up. "I'm sorry I've been delaying things."

"It's fine," Zekrom said. "You've been through a lot."

"I don't want to force you to do anything while you're dealing with the loss of your friend," Hilbert
N looked down at the ground, feeling a sense of guilt. "But it was his last wish, to see me again. He called me an angel, like Pierre does. I think he was happy; at least he seemed to feel safe. I don't know if I could really be like that. Not only that, but it seems like so many lives were lost or ruined in trying to raise me into power and keep me in control. And it could have included all of you here." He looked over at Hilbert, Zekrom, and Reshiram there. Maybe even the other Pokemon too.

"You're not to blame for all of that," Reshiram said.

"The fact that you would take all that blame speaks of your true nature," Zekrom added.

"Well it was all connected to me," N said. While they might try to reassure him, it still weighed heavily on his mind. "And when I think about that, I realize how much I was being controlled. I had even come to accept what all of you had trying to been telling me, but then I would have thrown that all away... until I saw Lucky again." A shiver passed over his skin and he felt tempted to be silent again. But that hadn't been helping when Ghetsis had encouraged him to keep secrets. "When I think about all that, especially how I felt right then, I can see how it was all decided for me when I thought I was leading. Maybe you'd think it's dumb, but it scares me now that I don't have a path. We have goals we want to accomplish, but none of you are saying 'this is what must be done and what you will do' about them. You were right, I never lived up to Ghetsis' expectations, and now I don't know if I can live up to anyone else's."

"It doesn't matter what others expect of you, or me," Hilbert said. "You're in charge of what you'll do from now on."

"That still scares me," N said.

"You'll never learn to fly unless you take that first terrifying leap into the sky," Zekrom said. "In a matter of speaking."

And there had been that moment when he first felt free of the responsibilities of Plasma, N recalled. A moment of happiness as his life had finally come into his hands and he could do whatever he wanted. Coming back on realizing that Lucky wouldn't have long to live had dampened that excitement. His friends would only be sad to know that he was sad too. He shouldn't worry them so much. "I see your point. We know what needs to be done, but where should we go? I don't think it matters as long as we're not in Unova."

"Where do you want to go?" Hilbert asked.

"I don't know," he said. "Where do you want to go?"

He shrugged. "I've been deciding on what to do in my life for years now. You choose."

"I never cared much for anything beyond Unova because that's where his plans for me were," N said, feeling frustrated at this indecision. With so many options out there, one would think it would be easy to decide. "You said that you liked Hoenn, didn't you? We could go there."

"If that's what you want," Hilbert said, in a way that reminded N a little of Hilda.

"Are you teasing me now?" he asked.

His brother smiled. "At least you recognize that. But all right, we'll go check out Hoenn. There's a lot of amazing places there, and it's so far away that most people shouldn't recognize us. We can
head out tomorrow."

"Why not tonight?" Zekrom asked.

"We could reach there before nightfall," Reshiram added.

"It is nightfall," N said, looking up at the starry sky.

"Nightfall in Hoenn," he specified.

"Well before then." Zekrom said.

"You two can fly that fast?" Hilbert asked. "That sounds really wild. Want to go now?"

"Sure, why not?" N said. He had a lot to think about, but his life was his own and he was surrounded by good friends. He couldn't be too far from leaving his tragedies behind entirely so that he would find the happy ending of a classical comedy instead.

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May 15

Undella Bay

When most people thought of Undella beach, they thought of the nice one right by town, with fine-grained sand and gentle waters. But there was a stretch of it that went north, alongside the cliffs that made up the rim to the crater of Giant Chasm. Due to the cliffs and occasional rockfalls, it wasn't as popular as the southern part of the bay. People still went out there sometimes.

Like over a dozen of the Plasma grunts. With the secluded area protecting them, they had come back together to figure out what to do. "Is it really over?" one asked. "It seems so sudden."

"It can't be over!" another said. "N's responsible for this; he betrayed his own ideals."

"Well he must have had his reasons. I could tell that he was changing, but I'm sure that he still wants the best for the Pokemon."

"That's not what matters here!"

"And why not?"

"Please, fighting at this point would be counterproductive," another person in the group said. "Perhaps all that's needed is a change in direction, something that depends less on unpredictable emotional appeals."

"You think we could still make it?"

He nodded, but soon got distracted by something further down the beach. "Certainly. After all, there's no denying that there was equally as much power and direction coming from Ghetsis, and he has thus far evaded capture. We might need to get in contact with him. Excuse me." He then walked over to check out whatever had caught his attention.

"Is he one of us? He doesn't have a uniform and I don't quite recall him."

"He should be," another one said. "I've seen him around the castle asking questions, and he wouldn't have gotten within the castle if he wasn't a part of Team Plasma. He might've been one of the scientists."
"That would explain his gizmos."

Down the beach, Colress stopped in front of a seemingly empty spot. "Is he going to make contact with the team?"

There was a shimmer of air as one of the Shadow Triad appeared on the spot. "How did you find me?" she asked.

"Technology can trump ancient arts," he said, tapping his eyeglasses. "But it can also give them a deeper understanding should the practitioners choose."

"What are you doing here?"

He shrugged. "Thinking, considering. I hold no illusions in what you were about, but whatever your master's goals are do not matter to me. Then again," he gestured to the Plasma grunts, who were arguing again, "I could use the manpower that Team Plasma had. There's only so much that could be done with lab work and calculations." Colress looked back to the ninja. "But I wouldn't dream of interfering without Ghetsis' approval. He has more claim to them than I."

She narrowed her eyes at him.

Giving a bow but not letting himself be intimidated, he added, "Although I imagine that Ghetsis is unable to fully understand or use the work Umber left behind? If he wishes to have it translated to laymen's terms or developed further, I could be willing to make a deal."

She gave him a harsh look for a while longer. When he didn't flinch, she held her hand out to him. "Come."

Colress nodded and took her hand to be teleported away. Sometimes it was simply a matter of being the right person at the right place and time.

June 3

Giant Chasm

It was said that thousands of years ago, a meteor fell out of the sky and brought the dragon that had eventually become Reshiram, Zekrom, and Kyurem. While the other two moved around the region, the last had always stayed here. It had been so long ago that the pine forest had come in and made the whole area a part of the natural landscape. But it was a good thirty degrees cooler in this valley compared to Lacunosa (which itself tended to be cooler than other towns).

A great many powerful Pokemon lived here too, but Hilda and her Pokemon had passed through without much trouble (and several fun battles). Mimi had kept ahead of the group for much of the way, but she stopped by an entrance into a rocky structure in the center. "This is the place!" she said, waving for them to hurry up. "This is where we go in."

"That's the meteor, huh?" Hilda asked. "It's big; must have been a monster to come down."

"A big monster came from it," Tarzan said in jest. "So it had to be huge."

"I wonder if it was an egg," Olette said, touching the side of the rock wall.

"That's one ugly egg if you ask me," Frank said, shifting one of his ponytails.

"Well let's go crash in on him," Hilda said, heading on inside.
There was a short hallway leading further in, but it was wide and tall, big enough for one of the dragons to fly through if they wanted. Holes in the cave led this place to be quite sunny, with pools of water gathered along the pathway. Past that, they came to a surprisingly large and bright cavern. Sunlight reflecting off the glistening walls gave the air an icy shimmer, making it look colder than it was. As expected, Kyurem was there, lying on the ground in his dragon form with his head tucked close to his body.

"Aw, how cute," Hilda said quietly. "Maybe we should..."

She wanted to say leave him be for now, but Mimi was already bounding over to him. "Daddy! I'm home!"

Fortunately, he must have been awake from how quickly he brought his head around. "That you are," he said, keeping his head low so that Mimi could jump onto his snout. "Hello. What are all of you doing here?"

"I missed you!" the Cinccino said, hugging part of his helm-like armor.

"And she's been intolerable about it," Fedora said. "Honestly, I thought I was suave enough to avoid that, but she's a sugar bomb of cute."

"You should have known it when she was sweet enough to win him over," Hilda said, coming closer with the rest of her Pokemon. "Mostly we're just dropping in to say hi. Hi!"

Kyurem raised his head, seeming relaxed that it was just them. "I appreciate that. And, I apologize for attacking you this past winter. Even though I've seen a lot in my time, I never expected to encounter myself as a result of time travel. But he allowed me to absorb his memories, so I understand what was going on. He has become me, as I have become him."

"Well you were half asleep too, so can't blame you for being grumpier than usual," Tarzan said.

Hilda nodded. "Yeah. Oh, and did you know that you're in charge of protecting Unova at the moment?"

Huffing, he said "Right, I got word from my siblings before they left the region. That's why I'm out of hibernation even though it's right at the start of summer. Not my idea of a good time, but I fulfill what need there is. I'd like it if I wasn't noticed for it, though. It would eat into my image even further if I need to be around for a time of destruction."

"Well we can hope," she said. "But Ghetsis and the Shadow Triad got away from everyone. One of them gave me a nasty dagger wound for beating him." She frowned, rubbing her shoulder. "I'm all right now. Most everyone that was attacked that day is all right now, but the Striaton Gym Leaders had to quit and some guy called Merlon took their place."

"Good to know that you're well," Kyurem said. "I've heard that they were gone, but I haven't been able to locate them. Not that I'm the best at that, but between the Triad's powers and the orbs, they shouldn't be this hard."

"Those orbs that the other N had?" Hilda asked. "I thought Dialga took them back."

"No, those were from his time line. The ones that belong to this time line are still missing, and I've felt their power from Ghetsis before."

Frank tapped his head. "I tried looking for them too, but haven't gotten a hit. They certainly know what they're doing. Although I'm sure they'll be after Hilda and the rest of us too, after we defeated
"We all got knocked out by that vicious Hydreigon he had, even Reshiram," Olette said. "But other Pokemon there were able to finish him off."

"You didn't have to tell him that," Fedora said.

"Them being after you all is unacceptable," Kyurem said.

Hilda shrugged. "We're going to have to strive to stay strong, that's what I think. But that's no fun to think about. Anyhow, I was also here to ask if you wanted back on the team. The rest of us managed to trump the top Trainers in the League, but due to what happened, we didn't get to battle Alder. He's back in shape, so I told him that I'd be back to take on the Elites and him again this month. You missed out on all the fun! Besides, I had been hoping to take on the best of the League with my starter Pokemon." She glanced at Fedora. "Both of you."

"We've already taken on most of those Pokemon without you," the Serperior said. "But sure would be a heck of a lot more fun if we completely wrecked them with you."

"That would be a good game," Kyurem said. An icy mist began to build around his joints. "But my other self came with you willingly, and mortals don't get that kind of opportunity twice. You will have to prove your worth to me."

To that, Hilda just smiled. "All right, if that's what you want. Everyone..." she looked around at the other Pokemon. The Gothitelle smirked, while Fedora and Olette smiled. "GROUP HUG!" She then ran up to Kyurem and hugged him at his chest where she could reach.

"Hugs!" Mimi echoed, hugging Kyurem's face again. The other Pokemon did the same, except for Fedora because he didn't have arms. But he did the next best thing and coiled around Kyurem's left leg.

"Gah!" Kyurem ducked his head down; the mist quickly withdrew. "What was that for? You've all heard me say that that could get you killed."

"We know," Hilda said, coming back some so that she could look at the dragon's face. "But you made sure that we wouldn't, didn't you? That proves that we conquered you with the power of friendship."

"Yay!" Mimi said.

"It's cheesy, but it's true," Tarzan said, playfully punching him in the side.

At first, Kyurem snorted. Then he broke into laughter. "Fine," he said after calming down. "Fine, it's as you say. I should have known you wouldn't go for the obvious. Striking your own path is the very reason I came to you. I do need to protect you since our enemies are still free but I had planned to come back to you no matter what happened."

"Because it's like Hilda told N," Olette said. "We're a family and we're not going to let anyone break us apart."

"Right on!" Hilda said, pumping a fist in the air. "So after we get Alder beat properly, what do you say we go ahead and take over the region? I mean, the others aren't here, and probably won't be for a while."

"Do you mean that?" Kyurem asked.
She shrugged. "Who knows? I don't. Anyhow, it was just an idea. I'm kinda thinking that it would be a lot of trouble to rule over everyone, cause people would be expecting us to make all the big decisions and fix all the problems... well, forget about that!" Then she grinned. "We can mess with Clay, though. He's a big stick in the mud and could use a little excitement around."

Kyurem chuckled at that. "Now that sounds a great deal more fun."

June 12

Aspertia City

It had been a month since Team Plasma had fell when an announcement came out about the Pokemon that Plasma had stolen and used. It came with an apology from one of its former leaders, although Hugh didn't think it was sincere. With how they were, it had to be something the police had made them do. The important thing was that they had released a list of Pokemon that had been recovered from the team. The police were searching for the Trainers they had been stolen from, in order to return them if the people wished to claim them.

He put a Trainer ID number into the system and had it search for any Pokemon linked to that number. However, it didn't come up with a match. "Figures, they probably scrambled as many numbers as they could," he muttered. He then chose to search for by species. That ought to find the right one...

"Hugh!" a girl's voice called from another room. "You're going to miss..." there was a crash, followed by another girl's giggle. "Eek!"

What now? He shook his head, but smiled as he called back, "What'd you break this time, Rosa?"

"I didn't break anything!" she protested.

"You're going to miss Hilda battling Alder for the Championship!" his sister Violet called.

"Yeah, it's going to be amazing," Rosa called, probably forgetting about whatever she'd knocked over. "You're gonna kick yourself later if you miss this one."

Hugh checked the screen, but even narrowing the search as he had gave him many Pokemon to examine. After bookmarking the page, he said, "I'll be there in a minute."

"What if it only takes a minute?" Violet asked jokingly.

After setting his computer into sleep mode (because he doubted even Hilda would take out Alder that fast), Hugh left his room and went to where his sister and her friend were chatting about the upcoming battle. Rosa had only moved to Aspertia last year, but she and Violet had become close friends quickly. She was practically a member of the family now, to the point where she tossed a pillow at him as he came in and asked, "What're you plotting now, big bro?"

Catching the pillow and dropping it onto the floor to sit with them, he said, "Stuff for my trip. I still need to get a Pokemon if this doesn't work out like I want." Because if the Pokemon he was looking for was on that list, he might not even need to leave Aspertia. Not with what Hilda had done to help break up Team Plasma.

"Oh, are you really going to go?" Violet asked. "Are you going to challenge the Pokemon League too?"
He shrugged. "It might help. Why, did you want to come to challenge the League?"

His actual little sister turned shy, fiddling with her hair. "Um, no, I don't really want to. I don't think I'd be good at it."

On the other hand, their friend brightened. "I think it'd be fun! I wasn't sure about Pokemon training myself, but," Rosa looked at the screen. The battle hadn't started yet; they were still doing the pre-talk. "Hilda is so cool. She makes it all look exciting and glamorous; I want to be a great Pokemon Trainer like her."

"You can start by not being so klutzy," Hugh said, teasing her.

"I am not that klutzy," she insisted, but struck a bowl of popcorn just right to knock a good portion of them out. "Uh, ignore that."

Violet started laughing, causing Rosa to do so as well. "I think you could be good at it," she eventually said. "Even if you are a klutz."

Hugh thought Rosa would do well with Pokemon too. After all, her mother was a Pokecenter nurse and she had picked up on many things from her. Then again, while she might be able to work around some clumsiness, Rosa was also naive. She'd get in trouble on her own and might not be able to get herself out. And Hugh didn't feel comfortable with that. "I could help you out, if you want. We could even travel together."

"Really?" she asked, her eyes widening at the offer. "But I thought you were going to leave as soon as you could."

"I could delay a little while until you're ready," he said. "It's going to take more planning and such before I could travel Unova anyhow. Wouldn't be a big deal to me to wait."

Rosa grinned. "Eee, great! Thanks Hugh! I'm sure we'll have lots of fun traveling together!"

He nodded, giving her a smile back. After all, she was like his little sister. Annoying at times, but it was worth it if she was happy.

End
These are a copy of my notes on the gijinkas of this story, for those who are curious.

Natural- these people are Pokemon that have been reincarnated as a human. It is an unusual circumstance, said to be once a generation. There are currently two living in Unova, but only one is known to the League.

Drayden- reincarnated from a Haxorus. His lifespan is extended due to his Pokemon soul, but is also slowed down. He is marked by an exceptional endurance and resistance to illness and poison.

Keith- reincarnated from a Beehyem. Don't remember him? He was the four-year-old psychic kid that Hilda helped to catch a Woobat. He sees auras and has an excellent memory.

Engineered Gijinkas- This is the group that Dr. Umber created; he had a few assistants, but much of the development and work he did himself. Most of these gijinkas are unaware of their natural parents, as Umber took advantage of needy and poor mothers, often single and young, to get the embryos he needed for the genetic work. Those that survived to two years of age were assigned a letter; the ones that died prior to that were written off as complete failures.

A- died of a heart condition

B- died during a test battle against a Pokemon

C- died of a seizure

D- Skyla. She was infused with genes from various Flying type Pokemon, so that is her predominant type. She can sense precise air conditions of thirty feet around her, further if she focuses on it. While she can't truly fly, she does have the capability to jump far better than a regular human and can slow her descent immensely. However, she has fragile bones.

E- Elesa. Although she has survived, in Umber's notes she is recorded as a failure. She was given an Electric type and does have the capability to naturally produce electricity. She has few ways to discharge this energy, though, and no way to control its production. To prevent health issues from the buildup, she has to wear something that can release the energy continually. She also has a fast metabolism.

F- Luke. He was a Steel type and managed to escape from Umber with the others. However, even then he had health problems which killed him a year after they escaped. After his death, it was discovered that tissue in several of his vital organs had started turning into steel.

G- Chili. He was given a Fire type, and was also the first to successfully be given defenses against his own power. He can touch fire without harm and can manipulate it when he has physical contact of the flame or something that is on fire. He cannot create fire energy.

H- Cress. He was given a Water type and so can manipulate water to some degree. This works better with small quantities; a gallon is usually his limit. His mood is affected by the moon, although he has trained himself to not show it outwardly under most circumstances.

I- Cilan. As a Grass-type gijinka, he can communicate with plants. This does not take a form like any known language. Rather, he can gain a lot of knowledge about a particular plant by touching it for some time, as well as affect its growth and production by his will. He is limited by what the plant can do naturally, but knowing what minerals a plant needs allows him to grow some amazing
plants. His mood is affected by the sun; more severely than Cress, so Cilan easily gets depressed during the winter.

*Note: The parents of the Striaton triplets were confirmed shortly after the group escaped, but only because their brutal murder was big news in Unova. A man named Takumi was blamed for the crime; the husband was found decapitated in their home, while his wife was found dead a few months later on a beach. Takumi was only captured a couple years back.

J- died shortly after she turned two because not all of her organic tissue was immune to the poisons she produced.

K- Marshal. He was given a Fight type from several different humanoid Pokemon. Perhaps due to this, his abilities are not as pronounced as the others in the experiments. His skill in martial arts, while learned quickly, are not that different from other human masters. He does have an enhanced reaction time and a talent for reading body language.

L- died, was an attempt at a Ghost type able to use Pokemon moves. While he had the ability to dematerialize, he was killed when he got startled while in a wall and materialized there.

M- Hilbert. A Dark type, he is the older twin. He and N were worked on more extensively than the others, including a few operations done after they were born, due to the requirements Ghetsis put down. He is a demimortal, but unless an immortal decides to make him its heir, he will age and die normally. Was thought to have an ability like Cute Charm, but it turned out to actually be Serene Grace when the 'defect' that made Attract permanently active was turned off. As of May 12th of his twentieth year, he knows Attract, Detect, and Haze.

N- N. A Normal type, also with the Serene Grace ability. Statistically, he's the strongest of Umber's gijinkas. Like Hilbert, he is a demimortal that is not an immortal's heir. However, they have a hidden power that activates under great anger and stress in the presence of an immortal which could steal the immortal's power. If an immortal is not present, the ability sometimes activates a move at random. As of May 12th of his twentieth year, he knows Sing, Flash, Hyper Beam, and Heal Pulse.

O- Iris. Umber's work on Iris got delayed when Ghetsis became involved, hence why she ended up being born shortly after he was finished with Hilbert and N. While she is a Dragon type, she cannot use Pokemon moves. She does have a lot of advantages over humans: enhanced intelligence, physical strength, endurance, and disease resistance. However, her development and growth are slowed in being a dragon.

P- Shadow Triad female. In particular, the one that was called Valerie briefly. She is a Poison type and has the best socialization capacities of the three. But when she's not acting, she and the others do not show or feel emotions strongly.

Q- Shadow Triad female. In particular, the one that was called Carol. She is a Ghost type, more controlled than her predecessor. These three have the strongest infusion of Pokemon genes, leading to them not acting human.

R- Shadow Triad male. He is a Bug type. This greatly handicaps his ability to communicate through spoken language, but he can speak if he puts his mind to it. He is the most capable of the three in battle. Takumi is their father.
Two other short scenes, to be exact. The first is a more complete version of the story behind Kyurem and Mimi. The second is a sort of trailer for ClicheStorm 2. But don't forget, trailers often lie!

It was one of the earliest wars of Zekrom and Reshiram against Kyurem, with the two dragons serving one united kingdom that was facing a terrible long winter brought about by the lone dragon. As always, the town of Lacunosa was ruled over by Kyurem, as his stronghold was closest to there. The area was rich in good earth and precious stones so many people had been tempted to stay when the ice dragon slept. Now that he was active, they were forced to make sacrifices of themselves, both human and Pokemon, to keep him from destroying them utterly.

In this town, there lived a girl who had been born with strange black and white hair. Her parents were powerful enough within the community that the others did not dare act against her, but as she grew, powers of electricity began to manifest within her. She was a gajinka, a mysterious being that is born when a Pokemon soul inadvertently is born human. It is not known why or how this is so, but it happens with incredible rarity. In many places, people do not trust gajinkas and have been known to put them to death once their powers show.

But this girl was allowed to live until she was a young woman. She was known for having a pure heart and a kind soul, so with the shelter of her family's power, no one was inclined to harm her. Then, her father died as a result of the unnatural winter brought about by Kyurem. Superstition flared up and when the time came for another sacrifice, many people said that the gajinka had to go.

After spending a night in contemplation, she agreed and set off into the forest seeking protection for Lacunosa. But on the surface of the crater, she found a sight she did not expect: Kyurem saddened by the death of a Minccino. It was strange, but the girl was touched by this and agreed to help bury the Pokemon. After that, she sang a song asking for a blessing on its soul to find a peaceful rest.

For her kindness to the Pokemon he called Mimi, Kyurem spared the girl's life and agreed to end the winter to allow spring to come. He also swore, upon his power, that he would do so again if the residents of Lacunosa agreed to honor a particular promise. The girl returned home and gave word of what happened to the people there.

From that point on, the peoples of Unova have always seen the birth of a gajinka as a lucky thing.

Aspertia City

It was raining, but Nate had to get out of the building. Being out in the fresh air was a relief. He stood under the borrowed umbrella, watching the water streaming in the gutters. Out in the cold rain... this was so ordinary. But it was nice in that way. The thing that really troubled him was, "What am I supposed to be doing here?"
"Hey!" Nate looked over and saw another teenager coming up to him. It was a boy he wasn't familiar with. Then again, he hadn't been here in Aspertia for long. "Aren't you that crazy guy who's dating Rosa?"

"I'm not dating her," he said.

"Right," the boy said sarcastically. "You shouldn't be so careless about that. There's several guys that would like to be her boyfriend; I was going to congratulate you. Don't let her get away from you."

Nate shook his head. "Did I end up in a dating sim by accident?"

"What?" the boy said.

"Never mind. Were you going to tell me something simple like how pressing the X button reads signs? No, this is supposed to be a Nintendo game. It'd be the A button."

The boy raised an eyebrow. "What're you talking about? This isn't a game."

"That's what you think," Nate said. "Or maybe it's just what I think." And maybe he should stop talking. This wasn't helping him convince the others that he wasn't crazy and could be released from the hospital permanently.

But what was he supposed to do?

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